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Splendid Isolation. Reframing National Identity Through Political Populism in Poland

Abstract. *The paper tackles the issue of current wave of political populism that is visible in the public sphere on many countries, including Poland. This phenomenon is being presented through its relation to the issue of national identity. The identity discourse which we might observe nowadays in Poland clearly raises the question of a shift in national culture's axiomatic basis and the alleged crisis of traditional national values. This serves as an ideological leverage for many politcal actions and movements claiming that Polish culture is being threatened by outside and inside factors, like migration for example. I contributes to the process of a specific paradigm shift, rejecting modernization and many of contemporary political ideas and visions of communality. This paper highlights the most significant aspects of the said phenomenon in relation to other fields of the public domain. The main thesis of the paper claims that the current discourse uses and instrumentalizes well kown historical traits in which national and loacal identities were useally set.*

Keywords: *political populism, nationalism, Polish politics, Polish history, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Mitteleuropa, cultural discourse*

It is worth noting that in his novel *Drach* (Dragon/Kite) renown polish writer Szczepan Twardoch delivers a thrilling description of a fragmentarized and troubled Silesia and the fate of characters bound by Silesian identity.[1] This region located in between the borders of Poland, Germany and Bohemia reflects in a large extent

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[1] See S. Twardoch, *Drach*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Warszawa 2014.

not just the regional history of that particular part of Poland, but gives us insight in the cultural and historical complexity of the nature of Mitteleuropa and modern Europe in general. It's hybrid cultural characteristics are being portrayed well in Twardoch's novel through distinctive silesian language and a very local way of dealing with things. As the novel's plot location is grounded in Lower Silesia it is also notable, that this small region depicted in that book plays a significant role in the main characters motivations and a specific sense of belonging. This feeling of "being rooted" is here not just emotionally relevant, but also deeply grounded in a historical setting of the 20th century as the novel's events take place between the years 1906 and 2014. It reflects pretty much the essence of local silesian selfidentification with all of its complexity and unique nature changing over the years. Thus we might regard this literary example as an interesting point of reference in the context of the debate on the transition of modern cultural idenities, especially in the case of nowadays Europe.

When speaking of identity in a cultural sense it is still common to put the term in a framework consisting of specific associations, like the nation state or ethnicity. This turns out to be a significant epistemological move, as it affects further inquieries in fields other than culture. Today's politics, both global and local, seem to embrace these terms again after a period of distrust and perceiving them as inadequate and basically as not fitting into the context of modernity. In effect, we witness a deep polarization of ideological stands and worldviews, where cultural wars are being fought with fierce determination from radically different positions. The participants of those clashes of ideas are taking the nation state and ethnic identity mostly as granted and proliferate certain social attitudes based on the view that national interests are at stake in the cultural battle of values, traditions and morals. In fact, cultural wars are always taking place, more or less expressed openly, in the field of morality.[2] This helps to exaggerate the issues critical to particular group identity structures. However, taking those morally discussable issues and placing them in the registry of political agenda creates a space for populism in its most vulgar form, as it is being followed by extremism and radical political movements.

Political populism certainly cannot be brought today to narrow understanding of the phenomenon, suggesting its limited influence and reducing it to its regional forms. It has become a global problem and as such it must be tackled with methodological caution. Nevertheless, the problematics of contemporary populism relate to specific ways this issue is being expressed through language and political imagology. We have to acknowledge the fact of the socio-cultural consequences and the impact of the entanglement of populist rhetoric and media imagery in current discourses. By doing so, it is also necessary to give some insight in the transformation of contemporary populism. While still being a sort of "thin ideol-

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[2] W.J. Burszta, *Kotwice pewności. Wojny kulturowe z popnacjonalizmem w tle*, Wydawnictwo Iskry Warszawa 2013, p. 145.

ogy" to quote Ben Stanley, populism brings the division between elites and the common folk into a new dimension of reactionism, this time exemplified through modern nationalisms or political movements based on an anti-elitist sentiment.[3] Movements and organizations like Pegida in Germany, Golden Dawn in Greece, or National Radical Camp in Poland are on the rise when considering their popularity and growing presence in the main political scenery in those countries. It becomes quite clear that these movement's agency contributes to a dangerous shift in the level of public acceptance for radical ideologies. Although different in many stances, the views shared by their members have one thing in common, i.e. there reoccurs a persisting thought, that the cultural tissue of modern European societies had been torn apart by alien influence and this process has to be either stopped or reversed. It is also a renewed interest in culture though, which fuels such views with dubious content. Cultural difference becomes a significant element of their political ideology and is pictured through the semiotical figures of immigrants, leftists and Muslims put in a binary axiological context. The main narrative based often on a "us vs. them" worldview, creates room for further radicalization and deeper isolationism. What is interesting in this case, is also the topic of identity. German, Greek or Polish identity is put here into conditions of ethnic and communnitarst understanding, as it is portrayed as deeply rooted in history, but at the same time not bound by historical processes of change. Its monolithic nature is founded on particular national myths and the vision of nontransformative ethnic integrity. It is worth noting that these dialectic local visions of identity are becoming more widespread and visible in the media, but it remains an open question if they are in fact still just marginal when speaking of their social impact.

The case of contemporary debates on national identity in Poland resembles the reality presented in Twardoch's novel in the sense of it's fragmentation and brutalization of the related public discourse. It took in recent years the shape of a dychotomy of opposite fractions clashing together on various levels. Interesting enough, what we witness today in observing that very discourse is not the emergence of a completely new form of the national sentiment, but a renaissance of well known cultural traits in dealing with transformation of the socio-economic environment. We might observe a turn towards the past in its most simplistic shape, not just towards the politics of history but formostly in the field of cultural onthology. The possibility or the lack of human agency within this onthological order is being defined by cultural belonging reduced to objectified critieria like etnicity, language, religion or race. The feeling of national strenght is being derived directly from the maintaining of integrity of those criteria and keeping them untouched by procesess of transfomation and foreign influence; all of it within the borders of the nation state. As a known Polish ethnographer Jan Stanisław Bystroń states,

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[3] B. Stanley, *The thin ideology of populism*, "Journal of Political Ideologies" Vol. 13, Issue 1, 2008, p. 95.

the faith in one own strenght is a necessary condition in succeeding of individuals but it also is being followed by national megalomania.[4] This phenomenon reaches out to history as a tool for justfing current actions and as an anchoring ground for national group identity. National megalomania seems to be one of those cultural universals which are not restrained to any particular nation or ethnic group, nor time or historic period. Bystroń points out that the polish variant had reached its peak in the moment of restoring the country's sovereignity.[5] The political *rite de passage* into gaining independence needed its symbolic recognition through the firm grasp of polish national mythology, religiosity and historical claims for territory. Coming from the philosophy of romantism, this approach had led to the emergence of a messiah-like picture of Poland, revealed mostly through romantic literature earlier in the mid 19th century. Nevertheless, the specific narrative of the past has been established in literature and in those of the sciences which had delt with the nation's cultural tradition, like archeology and ethnography for example. Later on, after WW2, science has been made to serve the purpose of delivering proofs in polish-german disputes over the character of archeological cultures of Biskupin or the ethnicity of the prechristian cultures. The unification of science and ideology in the 1950's has to be certainly looked upon in the context of the political situation in that time. However Bystroń makes a logical remark here that national megalomania had led to the fall of science, morals and religion. It is the consequence of turning back to the order of tribalism and radical ethnocentrism.[6]

This sort of neotribalism is taken by Michel Maffesoli as a contemporary *signum temporis* of the ongoing social transformation processes. According to the French sociologist new kind of tribes emerge along the disintegration of social patterns, as we lean towards a more primordial types of relations despite the existence of modern social structures and institutions. The source of this phenomen comes from an emotional nebula identified by Maffesoli with the process socialization.[7] It is based on experiencing the other (even if it means an experience of conflict), as this very experience makes the foundations of every community through a logic of integration. However deep social integration does not come easy. It requires constant effort from the side of individuals as well as groups. With other words, it favors social agency and gives the social subjects tools and space to persuade their own way in this matter within the given framework of culture. Neotribalism on the other side basicly denies this and suggests that it is possible to live continously without any constraint to reflexivity. It promises however a feeling of unity with the group integrated through objectified but still elusive criteria of belonging, like

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[4] J.S. Bystroń, *Tematy, które mi odradzano. Pisma etnograficzne rozproszone*, PIW, Warszawa 1980, p. 277.

[5] Ibidem, p. 280.

[6] Ibidem, p. 307.

[7] M. Maffesoli, *Czas plemion*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2008, p. 116.

race for example. The logic behind this new tribal identity remains fluid, while in the globalization age we can change often the groups with belong to on the fly. It is, like Mafessoli expresses, "being together without a purpose."[8] The proliferation of neotribalism leads to atomization of social structures constituted by modernity and turning the clocks back to a time when many local folk communities were well established, although they had not built anything above regional power structures deriving their strenght from mass accepttance of the people in charge, general conformism and maintaining group authority over the individual by force. This past community model had also highly ritualized everyday practices, as it had to constantly reassure its members in their conviction of belonging. Thus, in many cases religion was the main narrative of questions of higher nature. It is notable that today 's new tribes also take a quasi-religious character when it comes to ex-plaining the facts usually beyond the control of the particular group and, as Jurgen Habermas says, religious thinking returns to the public sphere.[9]

The phenomenon of hiperparticularization of contemporary identities is being tackled by many scholars and it not my intention to deliver a detailed reconstruction of that problem. What becomes significant however is the character of the cultural environment these identities are being put into. It is defined by diversified processes of change occurring in a global scale. That constatation leads us to a straightforward statement on the nature of modern socio-cultural changes. The transformation of social and cultural patterns takes place today in a hybrid framework, consisting of many different sources of symbolic content that circulates and is constantly on the move. These diversified meanings make it impossible now to comprehend identity in a language typical to the former orders of things. In a global interconnected system of exchange these meanings gain sometimes new definitions and become glocalized. The category of locality thus isn't gone, but still remains an important factor to consider. We also have to remember that the mobility of meanings implies also the mobility of people as their carriers. We also have to agree that the world had distinctively moved and this fact is being acknowledged by some as tautology. The issue of identity in the context of migration makes it difficult to hold onto those of the bases of autoidentification which were obvious and non-negotiable in the past. Borders become obsolete and the authority of the state in a neoliberal under-standing turned into an obstacle in the execution of freedom of movement of people and signs. What is striking in this light is a reactionist nature of the phenomenon described above as neotribalism. We witness how modern societies revoke cultur-al particularism in a most reductionist manner. Manuel Castells insists therefore that even in the information society aspects like ethnicity are still one of the basic features of contemporary social relations, but pure ethnicity itself doesn't make

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[8] Ibidem.

[9] J. Habermas, *Religion in the Public Sphere*, "European Journal of Philosophy" Vol. 14, No. 1, 2006, p. 2.

the community. It rather reorganizes religion, nation or locality.[10] These domains remain their cultural character, however in a much different sense as a reaction to the accelerated change and turn often into fundamentalism. According to Castells these specific defence reactions are becoming a source of identity and meaning through constructing of new cultural codes out of the fabric of historical narratives[11]. These new/old stories of us are a sort of a reverse information built solely to countermeasure the hegemony of the incoming transition and terms like God, Nation and Community deliver infinite codes which seem to be immune to any change.

As political populism steps in, these terms of infinite existence find a further dimension not just in politics, but also in social attitudes and eventually also in actions. In the Polish case we might recall the outcome of the recent research conducted by Maciej Gdula, Katarzyna Dębska and Kamila Trepka aimed at delivering an comprehensive explanation to the electoral succes of the conservative right in Poland[12]. The research had been conducted in a middle sized town in Masovia wojwodship two years after the parlamentary elections of 2015. The town was given a fictional name of Miastko (Smallville/Städchen). Giving a general picture of an average voter of the Law and Justice party Gdula's research team uses the category of neoautoritarianism to express the essence of the problem in question. Therefore Gdula points out the need to change the definition of modern populism as it does not fit any longer the given understanding of the socio-political reality. Neoatoritarianism is a model of socially accepted governing system simplified and narrowed to elementary dualisms. It "connects diverse classes promising to get rid of the establishment, creating a proud national community and contributes to a rise in the feeling of agency towards the elites, as well the weaker groups like refugees for example."[13] The object of the research was the lower and lower-middle class inhabiting Miastko, so the social groups thought to be affected by economic change of the last two decades the most. An *a priori* assertion would take this social classes as the hotbed of conservative attitudes, but the reality is far more complicated. People interviewed by Gdula and his team represented a variety of views on topics like political and legal changes introduced by Law and Justice, immigration, current social protests or economic profites that go along the social support project "500+". A common denominator was made here by a specific view on the position of Poland and the Polish society within a wider international context. It stood out that Poland was represented in the interviews as an lone island of "how things should be" in the sea of uncomrehansable transformation of the rest of the world. People generally expressed a critical opinion towards political

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[10] M. Castells, *Społeczeństwo sieci*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2008, p. 73.
[11] Ibidem.
[12] See M. Gdula, *Dobra zmiana w miastku. Neoautorytaryzm w polskiej polityce z perspektywy małego miasta*, Warszawa 2017 (online report).
[13] Ibidem, p. 3.

opposition, immigrants, LGBTQ and groups outside of not specifcally defined "normality." This state of normality is being composed out of culturally defined criteria reagrding general onthology, sexuality, religiosity etc. What is striking here, is the line of argumentation of many respondents did not deliver any logical arguments in a eretristic sense, but rather they had put themsleves in the postion of an underclass (common folk) who's both – did not shared the worldview and the way of life of the big city dwellers, nor accepted more moderate ideas associated with the elusive but also hostile elites.

This very way of thinking leads to the question of its cultural and historical foundations. Ethnographic research suggests that tribal relations based on kinship, social integrity based on religiosity and a socio-economic position on the bottom of the hierarchy are often attributed to small peasant communities found in the past in most of the contemporary Europan societies. These communities were characterized by isolation in the spatial and social meaning of the term as peasants were often forbidden to migrate and were excluded from social mobility. They constituted small pockets of locality, living basicly within its own micro-universe. The Polish peasant, recalling Florian Znaniecki, is a special case of folk isolationism. One hand the feudal social order forced this reality to continue, on the other local culture contributed to the anchoring of this sort of mindset. According to Ludwik Stomma polish folk culture favoured the worldview, in which what belonged to the category of "us" was also associated with unification of life styles and worldviews, where nothing really stands out as distinctively different.[14] The feeling of being at home within the narrow borders of the village was usually perpetuated by beliefs and pictures of aliens and foreigners, often demonized within the folk religion, which in case of the polish folk Catholicism differed immensely from the official theological interpretation and understanding of religious practices. These enclosed communities were however also a place of identity shaping in a national sense. A good example might be the case of the 19th century peasent communities in austrian part of partitioned Poland. According to Keely Stauter-Halsted these people functioned in a situation where the peasants although "were experiencing the benefits of modern civic life, their cultural outlook remained rooted in the rituals, customs and beliefs of 'premodern' agricultural communities."[15] It is significant that despite this cultural boundaries a public sphere emerged that had led in effect to the creation of an identity structure that went beyond locality, went towards a wider view of social reality and embraced change to a certain point. It is also worth noting that Galician peasentry represented many levels of attachment and identity as such has to be considered multidimensional.

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[14] L. Stomma, *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX w.*, PAX, Warszawa 1986, p. 25.
[15] K. Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Polish Peasant Identity in Austrian Poland 1848-1914*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 2001, p. 3.

In the light of the above we might come to the conclusion that contemporary political populism in Poland takes the peaseant roots of Polish culture and emphasizes the selected features of the folk worldview typical for 19th century rural communities. Among the most notable of those features we may point out four basic cultural distinctions: 1) spatial and ideological isolation, 2) rejection of cultural transformation, especially in regard to values, 3) mythological thinking about the past and 4) lack of agency and fatalism in regard to a wider socio-cultural context. Thus what we witness in the public sphere today looks and feels familiar in a very peculiar way. The populist rhetoric finds this very familiarity useful and instrumentally reorganizes well known symbols and cultural metaphors in new permutation of the existing structure. Topics like migration for example, are being considered as a imminent and serious threat to not just national identity, but the ongoing identity politics. As Rene Girard stresses out, a similar view of strangers is to be found in European folklore, where a person or a group outside of the small society was usually playing the role of a scape goat and blamed for the disasters happening. The effect of this approach is to be found in a nationalistic isolationism. This approach is not new by any means. The splendid isolation politics of Great Britain in the midst of the Great War and forthcoming European revolutions justified not only the withdraw from international affairs but also fueled the late imperial system focused on its own further existence and profit making. Thus modern right wing populism is tackling the issue of continuance of the governing forces or, on other occasion, points out individuals, groups or institutions that are an obstacle in the process of enfolding the true value of what Gdula calls neoauthoritarianism.

In conclusion, we might come to the idea that modern forms of political populism use as the basis for their rhetoric certain well known cultural traits in order to settle down within local and national identity discourses. That very move of "restoring the past" is being observed in many countries, not just in Europe. Nevertheless in Poland the identity issue is being followed by a strongly emphasized political agenda. The dychotomy of the conservative national and moderate social worldviews is being presented in the Polish public discourse in a simplified way in which national issues are associated with the first and global and cosmopolitan life style with the latter. This situation makes it difficult to come with a solution for a ideological clash fought on both – the media and the social level. Being politacally absent the Polish socialdemocratic left is thus struggling to overcome the boundaries of the national identity problematics at it has left this issue aside for many years. The emerging new identity debate is hijacked by the political right, and what is more significant, it is based on a specific national sentiment linked to the folk culture and the past rural structure of the Polish society in the 19th century. The peasant roots of Polish culture serve here as a vehicle and source of symbolic content fuelling the contemporary debates on national matters.

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