Załącznik

Cultural Studies Appendix – English Issue 2019/2

THEMATIC SECTION: ARTICULATIONS OF THE POLISH IDENTITY

WHAT TRADITION DO POLES NEED? RE-ENACTMENTS, CELEBRATIONS, PROTESTS, BRAWLS

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The title of my article clearly refers to Jerzy Jedlicki's book *Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują?* [*What Civilization Do Poles Need?*], published in 1988 – at the end of the Polish People's Republic. It was a very important publication at the time, since it raised a number of questions about Polish identity over the centuries. The moment of its publication was also crucial – it was not yet very clear how it would happen, but there was a growing certainty that something had to change, because the system was slowly collapsing, the opposition was burning out, the economy breathed its last dying breath. Starting from the 18th century, but often going even farther in time, Jedlicki reconstructed the basic pairs of oppositions that marked the European, but above all Polish discourse on the present and future. He wrote:

> The great 19th-century dispute about civilization had a certain number of problematic areas, which were distinguished by their names, made up of two opposing concepts at that time. These were oppositions such as: 'nationality and civilization', 'natural and artificial development', 'moral and material progress' (or its equivalent – 'gospel and economy'), 'Slavic lands and the West' and many more (Jedlicki 1988: 12).

This dispute has never been resolved, because it might be impossible to resolve. Its essence is the lack of equivalence between the individual elements of the opposing pairs, and even their incompatibility to a certain extent. On the one hand, this debate features very emotionally charged ideas and values, while on the other hand, there is calculated pragmatism and a rational approach to reality, devoid of illusions, requiring factual calculation and the abandonment of feelings and sentiments. Of course, for

the purposes of this sketch, I decided to sharpen and unify the presented issues, but it does not change the essence of the matter, which can be defined by going back to Jedlicki's book. Presenting the two main tendencies in Polish thinking that were finally formed in the 19th century, the author stated:

> And from that moment on, we have had two cultural histories. The sacred history of the nation, its songs, prisons and battlegrounds, and the common history of society, the history of sowing and harvesting. There was also the history of political thought, condemned to helpless struggle between the archangelic vision of the past and the future and the harsh reality of a small week of Poles (ibid.: 76).

This discourse took place with varying intensity throughout the 19th century, but it did not end when independence was regained in 1918, in fact it might have even increased in strength at that time, since it concerned a state that had emerged from political oblivion, with a nation that had to define itself in its somewhat new identity. A nation which had to resolve not only political, legal and economic issues, but also, or perhaps above all, the spiritual shape of the new state, created by the choice of tradition and implemented in social pedagogy. These were all tested by the attitudes and actions of Poles during World War II, which provided arguments to both sides of the dispute when it lasted and when it ended. The period of the Polish People's Republic, however, destroyed all opportunities for a public discourse, pushing it into the 'underground' – into the sphere of debates and choices made in families, among friends, Catholic groups, and then within opposition groups.

This telegraphic reminder is necessary here, since the ongoing choices, attitudes and fervent disputes over world views have their roots in the distant past, which also constituted all the post-war speeches and protests and, above all, was expressed during the August protests of 1980 and in the culture of Solidarity. Therefore, bearing in mind the nigh ancient origins of this dispute, I would like to focus on our current reality, which is closer to our hearts.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, there are two different founding myths in Polish culture, with very significant importance of the attitudes towards the past and the choices made on the basis of tradition. One could even say that these aspects constitute the foundation of these myths

– tradition here functions as a text that needs to be read, because depending on the way it is read, it projects the present and the future. The first founding myth concerns the protests of 1980 and the emerging model of the Solidarity culture, which will dominate the thinking, not only among the political opposition, for the whole decade of the 1980s. In the consciousness of many Poles, August 1980 is a breakthrough, the beginning of a large-scale fight against the communist system. On the one hand, this approach reveals little knowledge about earlier opposition activities, and on the other, these earlier activities are treated as a prelude to the August rebellion, which 'absorbs' and institutionalizes them in a certain way. It is then that the conviction about the dual character of the Polish community stems from – the sharp divisions between 'us and them', which endangers the unity of the community was established in the common consciousness and further emphasized by the opposition culture. This group of 'us' was made up by people, who were deprived of the possibility to articulate their feelings, views, and values in the public sphere. If they wanted to stand in the opposition to 'them' – the authorities and their supporters – they had to obtain legitimacy that gives social support to the emerging movement, and this was possible primarily by building a universe of symbols, myths, signs of tradition and cultural codes that would be universally understandable and which would not be associated either with the official culture or with the language and codes represented by the authorities. At the same time, there was this tendency to blur differences between individual opposition groups in favor of creating a monolithic model of the nation opposed to those in power.

The search for its own legitimacy took place primarily through references to the Romantic and post-Romantic traditions, and to a lesser extent through elements of other codes derived from Sarmatia political folklore or the language of revolutionary poetry; however, they were also in various ways linked to the mainstream of Romantic origin. An important feature of such an understanding of tradition was its clear ahistorical character, overlapping and co-existence of elements connected with various historical events serving as the foundation of national myths. These aspects of the attitude towards tradition and the choices made at that time were highlighted by Sergiusz Kowalski (1990: 80), who stated that:

> Tradition immerses its roots in the pre-communist past, or in more general words – in what was Polish, not 'communist'. The past is a source of knowledge about what the Polish society really is and was like; tradition conveys the timeless essence of the national community.

This 'essence' is fostered in such a way as to emphasize the otherness, difference, strangeness of everything that was proposed by the Polish People's Republic in the sphere of tradition, myths and values connected with them, and what was really understood in this respect as blurring, destroying, depriving Poles of what has always been our identity. Therefore, the process of choosing tradition by the Solidarity culture is not only a matter of choosing messages and beliefs different from those of the communist regime, but also of reminding, reclaiming, restoring areas of the past, events and related narratives, which were absent from the communist discourse or not pronounced enough, treated as inconvenient, forbidden, doomed to be excluded from social memory. Sergiusz Kowalski aptly summed up this process, stating that 'building a new society is not creating, but recreating' (ibid.: 79). The things to be recreated are usually put on the one side of the dispute described by Jerzy Jedlicki – put alongside the sacred history of the nation, its songs, prisons and battlegrounds, while at the same time defining the specificity of the Polish revolution, which does not want to start from the beginning but rather to regain the mythical order lost. It consists of such elements as Polish Catholicism with its proposed ethical canons and often supporting messianic tendencies, the history of the struggle for independence and the idea of an uprising as a way of regaining it, the myth of unity, monolithic nature of the nation, individual and collective attitudes forged into stereotypical scenarios, which are always triggered in a situation of danger. Above all, however, the dominating aspect is the conviction of the recurring events requiring the same attitudes and choices to be made, which obviously makes it impossible to think from a historical standpoint and see what is individual and exceptional, which determines the novelty in the world surrounding Poles, and what determines the ability to react to this reality in a different way than by looking for analogies in what is familiar and already known. One could compare this way of thinking and reacting to history with romantic tendencies to mythologize history, which are most fully expressed in the messianic systems, especially those proposed by Mickiewicz.

The second founding myth was the Round Table debate and the compromise worked out at that time between the existing authorities and opposition groups. Democratic elections and rapidly changing political, social and economic realities in this situation, after a moment of euphoria, caused a sense of loss, chaos and even a certain oppression resulting from the need to undertake a new type of activity. A nation that had so far identified itself primarily through the culture of defeat suddenly had to find itself in a situation of victory, define success, move to the other side of the eternal debate. In this process, it was also necessary to transform the tradition in a way desired for a new type of community. Everything that was so difficult to recover during the decade of the 1980s became, in a way, a ballast that made the transition impossible or difficult at best, so the 1990s were a period of collapse of the Romantic patriotic-independence paradigm, which of course can be seen, for example, in the literature of that time, but which is probably best reflected in the new language of the media – it brought back the Positivist term 'society', replacing more and more often the Romantic notion of a 'nation', 'homeland' disappeared almost completely, while new words started making rounds, such as: 'transition', 'democratization', 'market', 'marketing', 'political correctness' and so on.

It soon turned out, however, that it was difficult to find these alternative areas of tradition that could become the basis for a new design of Polish spirituality in the broadly understood Polish culture – new design under the banner of political transition, openness towards the world with all its diversity in all areas of life, as well as Polish spirituality in a united Europe. The issue is further exacerbated by the internal political divisions revealed after 1989, as well as the multiplicity of world views, which was pushed away and marginalized in the Solidarity culture in the name of the idea of a common enemy opposed by the national monolith. The dispute about the shape of the new Polish spirituality and the tradition supporting it ran on at least several levels, of which the most spectacular and mediatized are those represented by individual political parties. But its existence is also conditioned by – for example – belonging to various generations, individual experiences of Poles, family tradition, etc., and thus, by different resources of community and individual memory.

Thus, there is an official and party tradition, social performances taking place in the public sphere with great media coverage, as well as a different

tradition, created by smaller communities looking for justifications for their own activity and their own choices in the sphere of values. The well-known phenomenon of appropriating tradition by politics pervasive during the communist era was often accompanied by a phenomenon that some could refer to as tabloidization of the past – its simplification to an extreme extent and focus on event-based presentation with the blurring of all causal and effect relations, deeper reflection or preventing discourse. Thus, we were dealing not so much with a systemic choice of tradition that would serve as a cornerstone of the national cultural canon and foster some kind of identity order that could arise from the ruins of the communist doctrine, but with the multiplicity of choices and their criteria, causing difficulties in communication between Poles and sometimes sharp conflicts between them. One should remember about a certain phenomenon pointed out by Ewa Domańska in her introduction to the Polish translation of Hayden White's essays entitled *Poetics of Historiography Writing*:

> Every representation of the past is tainted by ideology, and researchers who point out ideology to others do so not so that they themselves can present the past in a more 'objective' way, but because they hold a different political option or a different worldview (Domańska 2000: 27).

Among the many discourses pertaining to tradition present in Poland today, I would like, for example, to present some of them that I consider most characteristic or particularly strongly present in the collective consciousness. The best way to look at them is through social performances taking place in the public space and symbolic message contained within them.

In this context, it is better to start with the official rituals and celebrations of anniversaries, unveiling of monuments and celebrations of holidays directed by the state authorities. Here we are dealing with a clear and relatively coherent choice of tradition, generally speaking, rooted in independence and patriotism, often repeating and reflecting the models developed in the opposition culture, which is now given a state significance. In this case, the series of traditions is built on the history of the uprisings – from November Insurrection to Warsaw Uprising, the cult of heroes, places, as well as breakthroughs or just important events related to them. This trend also includes workers' protests from the period of the Polish People's Republic, August protests and the period of martial law. These latter events,

as the closest in time and forming the founding myth of contemporary Poland, are particularly important, but they usually do not exist as separate entities, but rather are presented in the context of the long tradition of 'fighting for independence' and the long-lasting, praiseworthy attitude of many generations fulfilling the same patriotic duty.

The aim of the celebrations understood in this way is, of course, to gather the community around a specific concept of history – the 'heritage', which commands respect of the contemporary citizens, and which is supposed to serve as the root for the present times. It is not without significance, however, that traditional choices are always made from the point of view of the present day and are most often used by politicians to make ad hoc ideological declarations, so in a sense it is not just a specific date, historical figure or event that is important, but the way in which they are presented today – it needs to be useful to us today and it is supposed to be clear and understandable in our everyday lives. As Robert Traba (2009: 28-29) aptly stated:

> The elite create signs, symbols and anniversary rituals, which they then try to introduce into common circulation in order to foster unity of the community around them. In this sense, anniversaries are 'invented', but at the same time there must be an emotional connection with such a date, which is later perpetuated by regular celebrations. (…) It is natural that certain anniversaries are created from the point of view of the needs of the present day. When one 'writes' collective memory, it is a reflection of a certain political and social situation, and not a record of events from the past.

The author points out those choices made officially and the narratives assigned to them must cause controversy, because they usually result from the current political situation, because there is no such thing as 'objectively important' events that could be considered important by the general public in an undisputed way. And even if the majority agrees with such choices, there are always controversies surrounding the way they are presented, about the choice of a given narrative, instead of other ones. An example which best illustrates this phenomenon are the celebrations of subsequent anniversaries of the conclusion of the shipyard strikes in 1980. One might wonder whether this is still a matter of tradition and the choices linked to it, or whether it is only a matter of historical policy, which is a completely different field.

A characteristic feature of contemporary anniversary celebrations, which clearly distinguishes them from those of the Polish People's Republic, is that each time they are inscribed in a sacred context, combining patriotic values with religious ones, so characteristic of the Romantic religion of patriotism. The presence of church officials, field masses and the blessing of monuments are inseparable elements of the state celebration, indirectly elevating its contemporary organizers and participants. In this case, we are dealing with references to the Christian faith, to Catholicism as an element which cemented the community, allowed us to survive in times of slavery and defined Polish identity for centuries. It is worth noting, however, that in such a community, on the one hand there is a tendency to define Poles as Catholics, and on the other hand, directly or indirectly, exclude atheists and representatives of other faiths from the community. This in turn contradicts the officially declared pluralism, individual freedom, the European principle of tolerance and the clear separation of state and church.

However, this elevated and official nature, pathos and sacralization as a method of social pedagogy create a large distance between celebrants and other participants, who serve the role of spectators and students, to whose emotions the former group is trying to appeal, trying to convince them to remember the lessons. This distance clearly decreases or completely disappears in other forms of preserving the messages chosen from tradition, such as modern multimedia museums on the one hand, and historical re-enactments on the other. The Warsaw Rising Museum and the of Breakthroughs Centre in Szczecin, are supposed to serve not only the function of storing and presenting national relics, but above all, they are there to create an opportunity to relive the events of the past, and thus to identify emotionally with tradition. Similar aims are served by increasingly popular historical re-enactments, which are a very good example not so much of the fact that modernity is rooted in tradition or that it enters into a debate with it, but of the aforementioned phenomenon of tabloidization of the past. Once, Zdzisław Pietrasik wrote an article entitled *Jaka przeszłość nas czeka?* [*What Kind of Past Awaits Us?*], recalling subsequent examples of such re-enactments: 'Thus, we are in the theatre (sometimes in an operetta) of history, staging »live images« in which nothing unexpected can happen. The history presented in this way increasingly resembles a comic book' (Pietrasik 2005: 28).

Pietrasik also perfectly depicted this close connection between the re-enactment of selected past events and the ongoing election campaign, in which politicians of various options were eager to join the performance, played sentimental and patriotic roles and used proven props, such as the sabre used by Andrzej Lepper. On the one hand, what we are dealing here is a ludic, carnival version of tradition, and on the other, with its appropriation by politics. In both cases, emotions, sentiments and compensation for various inconveniences of everyday life remain the main area of reference, and in the symbolic plane – well-known, perfectly recognizable props from the past, which in fact cease to mean anything, when they are so far removed from their original contexts and arranged in a mosaic, which forms a set for public performances.

A slightly different model of contemporary discourse with tradition can be found in numerous protests, street manifestations and support marches, organized by trade unions, NGOs, groups of employees of specific companies or industries, as well as emerging spontaneously – in a sense – under the influence of events that shock the community. Although such actions are often – more or less officially – inspired or controlled by political groups, they generally seek to create the impression of grass-roots movements, which are the voice of society rather than of the authorities. References to tradition visible in various protests and demonstrations need to be placed in two different circles, referring to both elements of the opposition pairs mentioned by Jedlicki.

On the one hand, there is the phenomenon of creation of a completely new tradition, referring quite loosely and emphasizing the times in Polish history characterized by tolerance, aimed at opening Poland up towards worldwide standards, in a sense 'civilizing' Poles and breaking the models, values or attitudes rooted in our collective mentality. Examples include Pride parades, as well as all kinds of demonstrations of solidarity with various minorities, taking place under the banners of tolerance and equal rights. The law enforcement agencies, which are mobilized on such occasions and who are not always able to prevent attacks on such demonstrations anyway, best prove that this is not yet a tradition close to the hearts of the general public in Poland. Rather, it is interpreted as a threat to 'real' values that are revealed and defended in various protest actions. On the other hand, the community concentrates around the symbols and codes of the past,

which are considered to be ours – Polish, which nearly always present the Polish identity as endangered with destruction. Once again, we are dealing primarily with references – at various levels – to the sacred history of fighting and martyrdom, but the external enemy is often replaced by the current minister, a company's board of directors, executive, local or state authorities, and sometimes it can even be found in Brussels, which is synonymous with the European Union.

A broad range of well-known and clearly understandable symbols is used to settle short–term particular disputes and debates between interest groups, a strike to defend jobs is juxtaposed with the series of national uprisings, barricades and burning tires serve as an impromptu redoubts that can be defended, and a battle between merchants from the Palace of Culture and security guards supported by the police turns out to be a contemporary version of the national theatre. This event was reported by Juliusz Ćwieluch (2009: 12):

> And thus, on the 21st of July 2009 at 7:30 a.m., three rows of women were waiting for the bailiff, while chanting to the bodyguards: Gestapo, Gestapo! They waved Polish flags with black ribbons on them. The tragedy on the Defilad Square was supposed to be the tragedy of all Poles who are oppressed by the state – as if it was an invading force. And should anyone have any doubts that this is not about profits from the sale of jeans, Chinese textiles and shoes, but about free Poland, *Rota* was also sung by the participants, who emphasized the first and middle sentence: 'We won't forsake the land we came from', and 'Every doorsill shall be a fortress'.

There are many similar examples to be found. They show how the national and state symbolism – flag, emblem, and anthem – are trivialized and abused, to manipulate tradition in response to an immediate need. Roch Sulima (2010: 24) also wrote about 'ritual as a stolen form' and its dominance in contemporary culture, especially in this kind of public performances where spectacular gestures, clear symbols and vivid images, which are so eagerly shown in the media, matter the most. This is how the next show is built up. A media spectacle is created, the narration of which determines the way of experiencing what has been recorded by the cameras.

All the rituals derived from Romantic and post-Romantic traditions are performed in the situations of disasters and catastrophes, such as the plane

crash near Smolensk. They have already been analyzed quite thoroughly, which is why I am only pointing them out here. In the event of such a tragic event, a mechanism of tried and proven reactions is immediately triggered, defined at one time by Maria Janion as a culture of defeat. Victims of natural disasters, air accidents or road accidents are elevated, they are turned into martyrs, and the national mourning announced immediately after a dramatic event makes it a national tragedy, which is very easy to juxtapose with other national disasters that permeated our history and that are still present in our collective mythology.

Another kind of social performances – commonly referred to as 'brawls' – should be placed on a totally other end of the spectrum. These are, of course, hooligan fans, but this concept also encompasses various kinds of protests that take on the character of a direct street clash, focused on aggression, not on looking for solutions and compromise. Burning tires in front of the parliament building or ministry buildings, and – in the more local examples – in front of the seats of voivodeships or local authorities, aggression directed against the police, regular street battles that take place during protests – these are just some examples of such social spectacles. We are dealing with a mixture of different orders, including symbolic ones, but most of all with a disturbance of the hierarchy of importance and significance of events. These brawls often feature a whole arsenal of patriotic and revolutionary references, signs and symbols, which are mixed with each other and used quite arbitrarily. National colors, noble slogans, lyrics of the national anthem and religious songs appear alongside burning tires, stones, vulgar words and fighting on a regular basis, as a regular scenario of a variety of events. Such events may include both layoffs from a factory that is being shut down or fighting for a raise, as well as completely local, particular disputes based on ambitions, construction of parking lots, bypass roads and so on.

In all the examples mentioned above we are dealing with the tradition of resistance and fighting, which has been constantly present in the Polish consciousness, whose Romantic origins and post-Romantic variants are obvious. This does not mean, however, that nothing changes in the functioning of this paradigm. Everything seems to indicate that it ceases to be alive in the sense of a carrier of values truly professed and recognized by the national community. If it still somehow serves our identity, it is more

like a form or set of clear and simple forms, which are just equally effective in the absence of alternative scenarios of behavior. This paradigm often even replaces the search in the sphere of thinking about our spirituality in the contemporary world. If it is true that the post-modern world is characterized by its unique propensity to forgetting, then in the described cases we would have to deal with forgetting the messages that created the Polish form in the past, or perhaps a little more cautiously – with their invalidation in a completely different historical reality. What remained was the form itself, something like stage decorations, props and roles, played out without thinking about them. At the same time, we are hardly able to create other decorations and write other roles.

A clear answer to the question – what kind of tradition do Poles need? – is thus neither simple nor even possible. It seems that today this concept encompasses a number of issues that are articulated in different ways, but expressed in a very similar way in a familiar and unchanging language that blurs this diversity, sometimes creating the impression that we all speak with one voice, or at least that we should speak in this way. On the one hand, attempts to develop a different narrative – narrative about the past, tradition and the present – are sometimes described as a betrayal of the most sacred national interests, while on the other hand, Stefan Chwin (2010: 2), along with many other thinkers, warns that 'Poles are united only by pain'. Therefore, we still remain within the scope of the old dispute, and none of the options indicated here fully defines the Polish reality. Each of them is somewhat real and at the same time somewhat false.

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Summary

The article takes the issues of contemporary understanding of cultural tradition and ways of cultivating culture after the 1989 breakthrough. Two basic thesis were accepted, with reference to Jerzy Jedlicki's book entitled *Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują?* [*What Civilization Do Poles Need?*]. Firstly, two tendencies clash in Polish culture – the conservative and the modernizing one, both present for a long time, but crystallized mainly in the nineteenth century. Secondly, the basic circle of tradition referred to in modern Poland remains the Romantic tradition, properly converted and adapted to the reality of modern Poland. It manifests itself both in the official celebrations of national anniversaries, as well as social protests scenarios and all kinds of historical reconstructions. Romantic cultural codes, symbols, gestures and rituals are used on these occasions. The modernization trends in Polish culture come to the fore especially after the Polish accession to the European Union, but their promotion often encounters various forms of resistance, since they are seen as a threat to Polish identity, understood as founded on patriotic and religious values.

Keywords: Polish cultural tradition, Romantic tradition, protests, celebrations, rituals.