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History as Trauma

There is nothing more conspicuous today than the fact that thirty years after the Round Table, we have not addressed the most crucial issue of identity: What kind of Poles are we supposed to be in a new Poland? Put another way: Should the entire transformation period be treated as an identity crisis that has not been resolved positively? Agata Czarnacka, a political philosopher and publicist, once wrote in a Facebook post: “The notion of Polishness has been poorly constructed and is still stuck in the 19th century. Sure, in 1918 and 1920, when people born under three different Partitions had to fight arm in arm in the name of something, Polishness had to be quickly patched together out of something... ‘How did we win it? With blood and scars’ sounds like a description of a Caesarean section performed prematurely, poorly equipped for growth and change, desperately clinging to petty, inconvenient forms that helped us survive trauma a long time ago.” It is worth considering whether in our reflections on the various economic, social and political aspects of the transformation, we have not omitted a stage, which could be viewed as reflections on our “symbolic situation.”¹

Is Polishness well-constructed? This is a question that has never been sounded out fully and meaningfully. It ought to be completed with some thought on what it means to experience history in the modern epoch in our geographical region. At least since the loss of independence – that is, partitions, which were a catastrophic result of the abuses of the Sarmatian democracy and its compensatory myths – history has aligned more with trauma than any kind of positivity in our collective experience. Viewing history as action and agency, which made the events of 1918 possible, is eclipsed by a series of historical disasters that render experiencing the course of history as an incapacitating power. The interwar period was the first modern attempt at statehood and ended with an authoritarian rule and a strong wave of antisemitism as well as the tragedy of the Second World War – the biggest genocide of Jews in the history of mankind, designed by the Nazis, performed primarily on Polish land, with the active participation of Poles. This was followed by half a century of totalitarianism under secular control. Hence, the year 1989 should elicit a question: What kind of Poles can we finally be? However, the discussion over identity has taken place only intermediately. The language of trauma dominated the possibility of creating a modern project of national identity. History as an experience of immense pain and annihilation, enhanced by a strong sacrificial martyrdom complex that had been developed during the epoch of Romantic epigonism, forwarded all the questions about the symbolic identity to the political

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/roztargniony/posts/10156678089301740>. The author's post was part of a discussion about who is a Pole and who a Pole must be.

control of the Catholic Church. The myth of martyrdom can be traced back to the period of Sarmatian culture, whose deficits in the development of a modern statehood gave rise to the topos of a Catholic Pole. This topos was amplified in the 19th century, when Romantic historiosophical concepts that tried to imbue the loss of national sovereignty with a deeper sense, transformed into a thoughtless and essentially simple conviction about the exceptionality of Polish suffering and fate. This erosion of meanings unfolded in the domestic poetry that verged on graphomania. It converted Romantic emigrant myths into the poetics of rhymes designed for a barrel organ that were supposed to be uplifting. A growing attachment to the “shrinking” forms that exempted one from the efforts to confront oneself with the historical tragedies was followed by a cult of compensatory “shortcut” visions. After the period of the partitions, that trauma did not subside; looking back today, the interwar period was a time of insurmountable social inequalities thriving in the shadows of exuberant gentry mythology. That period also witnessed considerable strides towards modernity, including discussions about women’s and minorities’ rights, social and political exclusions, and the notion of a secular country. However, these aspects of the interwar traditions became particularly marginalized.

After 1989, it was often repeated that “normalcy” had returned. Polishness was supposed to be equated with “normalcy.” And yet, this “normalcy” was again dominated by the historical trauma that made us avoid answering the question about our part in modern Poland. The political gestures symbolically funding the transformation included a ban on abortion and the introduction of religion to schools. This marked the postmortem triumph of the tradition of the Sarmatian conservatism combined with an epigonic Romantic thought. These political decisions stemmed out of a more or less conscious choice. Out of the entire tradition of Polish political and cultural thought relating to modernity, one fragment was selected – it was the most recognizable because it had been simplified and entrenched. Hence, the transformation was an identity triumph of a Catholic Pole, with all of its consequences. The Polish iteration of liberal capitalism was essentially a deepened reflection on the infrastructure of the transformation, and, as an extension, on the modernization of the fundamentals of social life (highways, hot running water, stadiums). The issues of symbolic identity have been completely neglected, instead taken hostage by the language of trauma.

The French neuropsychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik argues that the categories with which we describe the dysfunction of an individual may also be applied to collective identities. In this sense, having experienced trauma, a collective or a group subject undergoes an identity crisis, much like an individual would. And similarly to an individual, a collective may overcome that trauma, gaining resilience in the process of returning to a balanced state. In the modern history of Polish political sovereignty, the periods of balance have been extremely short and volatile, while trauma has accumulated with an increasingly thicker layer.

One aspect of experiencing trauma is splitting, broken into two, and the inability to become whole again. The transformation was also marked by a strong sense of the division of Polish identity. The metaphors such as “Poland A and Poland B”, “the Polish-Polish war”, “the worse sort of Poles” revealed other faces of this phenomenon. The founding gestures of the new Poland have fundamentally produced phantasmic frames of the new community based on exclusion. The anti-women

and pro-Church transformation alliances pushed an important part of the history of the underground into oblivion, an underground which had been formed and developed by women during the absence of the interned men. It was women who also revealed that the new freedom was emerging at the expense of women's and other minorities' rights, that it brought forth and affirmed the hierarchy-oriented and exclusionary matrix of Polish culture which, steeped in its trauma, had never been open to otherness in the first place.

The latter is not entirely true, though. Since the 19th century, in the Polish modern tradition, there has been a permanent alternative discourse that goes beyond the limited matrix of a Catholic Pole, and was even formed in opposition to it. It is worth highlighting here not only those aspects of the Romantic historiography which sympathized with other politically oppressed nations ("for our freedom and yours!"), but also those which opened up to the minorities living in Poland (for example, Mickiewicz's Jewish Legion). The Romanticism of Lelewel, Mickiewicz or Kościuszko has nothing to do with the graphomaniac songs about uhlans,² nor with the epigonic Romantic model of national superiority, which the far-right populists are continuing to employ today in Poland. We must not forget about the immanently Polish emancipation thought that organically developed through out the entire 19th century. There was a long and rich political tradition that is little known today and sorely unappreciated – from the symbolic contribution of Narcyza Żmichowska, through the suffragists and feminists of the first wave, all the way to Irena Krzywicka. Thinkers such as Stanisław Brzozowski, Ludwik Krzywicki and Boy-Żeleński were the reformers of Polishness that became steadily supplanted by those "owners" of the public discourse who are macerated in the epigonic model of vulgarized martyrology, which has transformed today into a vile blackmail against thinking and sensitivity.

Trauma is governed by relentless laws. Untreated and unchecked, it morphs into a false victim complex and collective delusion with *ersatz* truths. Building resilience to trauma as well as regaining judgment capabilities that allow us to adjust to reality require time and self-awareness. Perhaps it is not too late for that. What will modern Poland be? How will it cope with its two hundred years of trauma? How can the country address the traumas to which it contributed? One example of this that ought to be worked through most urgently today is the participation of Poles in the Holocaust or the colonial hegemonization of the Borderlands. How can the country confront its own exclusions and abuses? How can we build a Poland that promotes equality, openness and diversity? We have to activate a consistent political thinking which does not avoid but rather answer the question: What will Polishness be and how can we extract it from trauma?

² Polish light cavalry – trans. note.