

Populism or Capitalist De-modernization at the Semi-periphery: The Case of Poland

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Those who are against fascism without being against capitalism, who lament over the barbarism that comes out of fascism, are like people who wish to eat their veal without slaughtering the calf. They are willing to eat the calf, but they dislike the sight of blood. They are easily satisfied if the butcher washes his hands before weighing the meat. They are not against the property relations which engender barbarism; they are only against barbarism itself. They raise their voices against barbarism, and they do so in countries where precisely the same property relations prevail, but where the butchers wash their hands before weighing the meat.

—Bertolt Brecht, “Five Difficulties of Writing the Truth” (1935)

It was in autumn 1990 that Poland experienced a pivotal moment in its modern political history—for the first time the president of the country was to be elected by a popular vote. The top job was finally claimed by Lech Wałęsa, the iconic leader of Solidarność trade union and Peace Nobel Prize winner. As is often the case with fundamental breakthroughs, however, there was something much darker and disturbing lurking in the background. Wałęsa’s victory did not happen without a fight. He was challenged by another prominent center-right politician with a long history of anti-Soviet activism: Tadeusz Mazowiecki. The latter got the support of elite intellectual circles, marking the final cleavage in the previously united opposition that throughout the 1980s had fought under the banner of Solidarność. It hardly was a surprising course of events as it closely followed class divisions: Wałęsa, a simple worker turned revolutionary, enjoyed the support of Polish liberal intellectuals as long as he was useful, even crucial, in the fight against Soviet domination. Once that fight was won, class divisions, especially those dictated by cultural capital, reemerged as an important—even if not the only—line of political division. But what *wassurprising* and shocked all pundits was the fact that it wasn’t Mazowiecki whom Wałęsa had to face in the run-off ballot. Another candidate claimed second place: Stan Tymiński, an obscure and completely unknown figure.¹

Tymiński only appeared in Polish public life right before the election, coming back from decades of emigration spent in Canada and South America. He presented himself as the anti-establishment candidate of “the people.” He had no support from either ex-communists or Solidarność and he underlined his independence. He also advertised his personal material success: a Polish-Canadian businessman, well-travelled and experienced in the mythical West, doing business across North and South America. He campaigned against the entire political establishment, maintaining that all politicians were corrupt and controlled by the secret service and claiming to possess many proofs of this collaboration, which, however, he never revealed. He also passionately denounced the suffering of the poorer part, who had been deeply harmed by vicious neoliberal reforms undertaken with the support of IMF and the World Bank a year earlier (reforms devised, as it happens, by no less a figure than the famous neoliberal prophet himself, Jeffrey Sachs). To these impoverished masses, Tymiński promised material prosperity and symbolic dignity, and, despite the fact that he had zero political experience and was unanimously lambasted by intellectual establishment, he managed to secure the second place in the first round of the elections, winning 23% of the votes, more than Tadeusz Maowiecki who had served as Polish prime minister from 1989 and was probably the best qualified candidate to ever run for the office of president in Poland.

A reader following the 2016 US election—and who has not?—may start to see an uncanny resemblance: yes, Stan Tymiński was, *toutes proportions gardées*, Polish Donald Trump and he defeated the politician who was the closest equivalent of Hilary Clinton in Polish political life: a very well educated and well prepared political professional (a lawyer for that matter) discredited for many voters by his links to the elite of neoliberal establishment. Tymiński did not win the presidency, but

the shock that followed his victory over Tadeusz Mazowiecki was very similar to what the US experienced in 2016.

This is a fact worth remembering given the more recent populist turn in Polish—and not only Polish—politics: populism did not appear in the last years solely as the result of the 2008 financial crisis. In the Polish context at least, it is as old as neoliberalism and constitutes its somber counterpart.² Despite Tymiński's defeat in 1990, it has remained a constant element of our political life, enjoying in various institutional forms between 15 and 20 percent of electoral support. Tymiński disappeared from Polish politics as quickly as he entered it, but just a year later, in 1991, another popular figure was born: Andrzej Lepper.³ A home-grown, rural populist, he rallied farmers to oppose the government after a wave of bankruptcies and unrest provoked by the shock of neoliberal therapy applied to Polish society after the fall of the Soviet bloc. This time a political organization was born: Samoobrona (meaning "Self-defence"), first as a movement, then a political party.⁴ After more than a decade of lurking in the shadows, Lepper entered government in 2005, becoming deputy prime-minister in the cabinet of...Jarosław Kaczyński, the well-known leader of the Law and Justice party that currently holds power in Poland. At that time they only ruled for two years, falling victims to their own infighting and intrigues; however, that coalition, as well as the early developments that I sketched above, is crucial to understanding the present political situation in Poland. Before it happened Law and Justice was just an ordinary neo-conservative party: they affirmed nationalism (labeled "patriotism" according to the rules of political correctness), opposed women's emancipation and gay rights, proclaimed their religious faith etc. When it came to the economy, they were just as neoliberal as the liberals: they lowered not only the taxes for the rich, but also mandatory contributions to healthcare and social security that companies are supposed to pay and they completely scrapped the inheritance tax. But in the course of these two years of coalition government, Law and Justice devoured Samoobrona, which never rose to power again, and they captured its electorate, slowly turning from a standard conservative to the populist-conservative party that they are today. What helped this development was, of course, the success of Hungary's Victor Orbán who provided a blueprint of how to legally bypass the law in order to construct the bizarre hybrid of authoritarian parliamentarism that we are experiencing today. Many Polish liberals are disgusted by the fact that so many Polish voters "betrayed the values of democratic society" and "sold" their allegiance to Constitutional Court or the separation of powers for \$150 a month child bonus introduced by the Law and Justice government. This is, however, a fundamental misconception. Celebrations of democratic values come very easily to those who do not need to worry about how to feed their kids and whose class egoism has been ruthless during the last three decades of neoliberal rule. I'll go back to this issue in a moment, but before that I'd like to ponder a while more upon the genealogy and dynamics of Polish populism.

Despite the fact that populism has been with us since the very moment when the Soviet Bloc crumbled, there has been surprisingly little knowledge and understanding of it in the mainstream of public discussion. That discussion was dominated by culturalist explanations. We were told that the reason behind the rise of populism in Poland was our political underdevelopment: Poland due to its historical trajectory—the "analysis" goes—lacked political culture, traditions and institutions that emerged and became well established in the West. People supposedly did not understand what liberal democracy was about and did not become modern enough in their heads to be good citizens of a democratic state. Pundits invented a lot of pseudo-scientific constructions to back this claim. Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka talked about a "civilizational competence" that Poles allegedly lacked and needed to acquire in order to debarbarize our savage political and social life.⁵ Józef Tischner, philosopher and catholic priest, popularized the "concept" of *Homo sovieticus*—a supposed relic of the Soviet past, a lazy and resentful creature who was spoiled by the socialist state and did not understand the workings of modern, democratic and capitalist societies.⁶ All this "thinking" was very much in line with the notion of cultural adjustments that neoliberal scholars put forward as a prerequisite for social, political and economic development in the 1990s. It was very well epitomized by the volume *Culture Matters* edited by Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington and published in the year 2000.⁷ Political developments of 2016 such as the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US gave an ironic ending to this liberal illusion. Many things may be said about Great Britain or United States, but not that they lack "political culture, traditions and institutions." As a matter of fact these are the countries that have always been put forward by conservatives and liberals—from Alexis de Tocqueville to Fareed Zakaria to Samuel Huntington and Francis

Fukuyama—as the very example of political development. After all Magna Carta is the root of modern political representation, the US Congress is the oldest modern parliament in the world and the American Constitution—a blueprint of an enlightened political culture. So what? Well, actually, very little. Not only have these countries fallen to the populist disease, but even more: they are nowadays much more destroyed by populism than Central-Eastern Europe. It goes without saying that Law and Justice did a lot of damage to our political system and some of it will be difficult to reverse. It is however not as fundamental as the harm that Brexit will mean for the UK or the presidency of Donald Trump for the US (and for the rest of the world given the fact that the Trump administration is currently turning the U.S. into a rogue state with the biggest destructive potential on the planet). None of this should have happened had political culture and traditions really been so fundamental.

What is equally symptomatic for the intellectual failure of (neo)liberalism is that Polish liberals like Adam Michnik and the like-minded group gathered around the main Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* (think of it as the Polish *New York Times*) have drawn little or no conclusions from this development. Faced with the populist uprising in 2015 they have chosen a naïve and dysfunctional strategy of political struggle: they made themselves defenders of civil society and freedom. That was the main slogan of the so-called Committee for the Defense of Democracy that formed after Law and Justice won the 2015 elections.⁸ The problem is that freedom—as important and fundamental as it is—represents little value for those who lack resources to put it to any practical use. It is just an empty, formal possibility not actually fulfilled in the lives of those who barely manage to attain even the level of material subsistence.

This disconnect is well exemplified in the discussions surrounding Poland's position and membership in the European Union. Polish liberals fear some kind of Polesxit—either by choice or by expulsion due to the undemocratic policies of the populist government. So they point to the fact that the European Union with the Schengen Zone agreement gave us an incredible freedom of movement in Europe. Of course, factually it is true. Being born in 1976 I'm old enough to remember what it meant to live behind the Iron Curtain. We were not allowed to keep our passports at home and we had to apply for them every time we intended to leave the country. We needed a visa to enter any Western state. Visas were difficult to obtain, cost a lot and covered short periods of time like two weeks or a month. Crossing the border was a stressing and humiliating experience for us: we were suspected of being spies or smugglers, interrogated and checked for hours. Today all I have to do is take my national ID, a driving license and a credit card and I can go three and a half thousand kilometers from Warsaw to Lisbon crossing half a dozen national borders without being checked even once. What used to be border checkpoints are now parking lots on the side of highways. Police booths I remember from my teenage years are turned into hot-dog stands. As citizens of a EU country I am entitled to live, work and buy real-estate in any member country. It really is great, but with one *caveat*: you need to have resources to be able to profit from this exceptional and remarkable freedom. What good is the ability to travel to Lisbon to a person who can hardly afford a train ticket to the nearest town? Even worse: there may be no train to the nearest town because Polish neoliberals decided that public transportation is *passé*, that it belongs to the old and obsolete socialist past, so they neglected a lot of local connections in favor of promoting car ownership. If you cannot buy a car? Well, it is your fault, because you are not entrepreneurial enough. So you get stuck in some grey, crumbling and aging peripheral town or hamlet. The only thing you can afford is a TV, where you watch the lavish lifestyle of cosmopolitan elites. And, suddenly, here's this populist government which does not tell you that you are a savage and maladjusted *Homo sovieticus* who lacks “civilizational competence”, but rather treats you as a dignified subject who deserves attention and—what a formidable turn of events!—they give you a child bonus, so your kids can go for holidays for the first time in their lives. What would you say to the liberals who come nagging you about how much you betrayed democratic values and how urgently we need to defend the freedom and civil society we were so desperately fighting for in Soviet times? And these are the very same people who ruled your country for eight years, denying you both dignity and welfare while constantly bragging about fabulous GDP growth and the incredible economic miracle that they created.

Well, if you have any brains left, you would say just one thing: “Fuck off!” And this is precisely what Law and Justice supporters are saying. Contrary to the liberal narration their support for populism is not an irrational eruption of barbarism and resentment, but rather the opposite: a proof of their rationality and sober thinking. A quick glance at the opinion polls shows that almost none of the most

controversial policies enacted by the Polish populist government enjoys widespread public support, even among Law and Justice voters. Two thirds of Poles do not like what is happening with Constitutional Court, an overwhelming majority is against logging in the primordial forest in Białowieża and does not support the government's obsession with keeping the Polish economy addicted to coal. The conspiracy theory, advanced by some prominent politicians of the ruling party, that the airplane crash in Smoleńsk in 2010, where Lech Kaczyński (the twin brother of Jarosław Kaczyński and the President of Poland at the time) died along with 100 other prominent politicians was an orchestrated attack, is believed by only 14% of the population. The reasons why people support the government have little to do with all those ridiculous and harmful policies. Parliamentary politics in a bourgeois state is very much like cooking with limited supplies: you may have a bowl of hot oil and you may think that tempura would be a great treat, but if all you have are potatoes, you will most likely settle for fries.

But, wait, isn't it a dangerous normalization of right-wing populism that I'm advocating here? After all we saw what happened in Warsaw on November the 11th this year, when the Independence Day parade turned into a neo-fascist festival of hatred, xenophobia and racism. Shouldn't we be more concerned or even alarmed? There are for sure, reasons for concern and alarm, but if it is ever going to be politically fruitful, we need to have a good understanding of what is going on. To understand does not mean to justify let alone praise or support. Polish conservative populism is not fascism. Only a small minority of people who marched on November the 11th in Warsaw were actual fascists. But, of course, there is a risk of sliding towards fascism. The government is turning a blind eye to the fascist excesses, because they do not want to have a more radical right-wing formation emerging on the right side of the political spectrum. So they are keen on letting the right-wing extremists know that they somehow include them under their political patronage. This surely is playing with fire and should never take place. An outright ban on any kind of fascism is the only acceptable way to go and the only way to avoid a repetition of horrors that Central-Eastern Europe experienced in the past century. What is, however, equally urgent is addressing the root of fascism and countering the force behind the fascist awakening. Just to denounce right-wing populism and the drift towards fascism it entails is going to get us nowhere unless we understand the reason why they are occupying a place closer and closer to the mainstream of political life.

It's here again, that we encounter the basic flaw of liberal common sense, with its fixation on cultural factors and the importance of ethos. What they neglect is an element that was entirely wiped out of both public and academic discourse in Poland as well as elsewhere, for example, in the US: the issue of class and its indelible materialist component. Populism is a kind of displaced and perverted class revolt. It derives from an oppression of double kind: material for the poor and symbolic for the lower-middle class. The former strives for material redistribution, the latter—for symbolic recognition, for something to be proud of and for the feeling of dignity they are deprived of. Polish populists have found a way to cunningly combine the support of the two into a coherent political force and it has allowed them to win elections. Now, fulfilling their electoral promises grants them the ongoing legitimacy that they clearly enjoy in the eyes of a large group of Polish society.

Looking from the other side of the Atlantic, I would venture a hypothesis that the same is at least partially true for the American society. Walter Benn Michaels has talked for more than a decade about how much the US political orthodoxy has been the politics of identity and recognition above material redistribution. What this means is not just that a great many people have become the victims of growing inequality but that a large group of them—white people and especially straight white men—have come to understand themselves as doubly victimized. They have very little resources as they get nothing from material redistribution (because there is virtually none), and they get nothing from symbolic redistribution (since that goes precisely to people who are not straight and white). One may say: rightly so, why should they? Given the racist and patriarchal society that we live in, this is the group that does not deserve recognition for what they are. But as true as this diagnosis may be, it does not change an obvious political consequence: this is the group that occupies the position that Ernesto Laclau called pure heterogeneity; or *caput mortuum*, using the Lacanian-chemist term—a leftover, a sedimentation on the walls of the sample tube where the chemical reaction is taking place.⁹ This is the most unstable and dangerous element as it does not take part in the normal political game, but being exotic (i.e. positioned outside) to the system it only disrupts the process. Laclau describes it with a metaphor: as we sit around a table playing a board game, they are those who were pushed aside—thus

they are heterogenous to the very process of the game—and they cannot be a player in the ongoing match. This is an utterly painful and humiliating position and it can hardly be enjoyed by anyone who happens to occupy it. These people may not have any means to enter the game, but they can do a different thing: kick the table, so there will be no more playing for anyone. This is what they did in many places around the world in 2015 and 2016. And, as long as they remain in the position of pure heterogeneity, they'll keep on doing it, no matter how much we denounce and demonize them. As a matter of fact, the more the liberals whine about the destruction of state institutions and irreparable harm done to political order by those actions, the more enjoyment the supporters of populism will get from kicking the table. After all, this is what the so-called protest voting is all about.

As a matter of fact, this is not the first time we are witnessing a similar development. It was beautifully captured 70 years ago by Karl Polanyi in his remarkable book *The Great Transformation*.¹⁰ Capitalism produces impressive amounts of wealth, it happens, however, at tremendous social costs. One needs to understand—as Polanyi argues—that labor is not a standard commodity like tomatoes or cars. Labor is just a name for an ability of human beings to transform the world around them and it can be only formally separated from actual persons. In real life, the fate of labor is the fate of the human beings who happen to be the bearers or operators of this labor. The idea of a self-regulating labor market imperils those individuals whose labor does not find a buyer or sells for a very low price. It is not only naïve, but extremely cruel to think that these individuals would accept passively their peril in order to allow the market economy to regulate itself in a frictionless way. If pushed beyond a certain limit, they would rather actively oppose their fate and rebel against the system. They will not only fight back, but they will look for some kind of collective form or “scaffold” for their struggle. If they are unable to organize around their class positions, they will look for what they have at hand and in the contemporary neoliberal world that means mainly: identity—religious, racial or national. It is worth noting that all populist mobilizations refer strongly to this kind of collective identities. The same stands true for fascism—even the very term derives from the Italian word *fascio*, “a bundle.” It is a vivid proof that the human world cannot be built just from individual atoms engaging voluntarily only in activities of their choosing in the sphere of civil society as the liberals claim. To hijack the famous quip of Margaret Thatcher, if there is no society—i.e. established and universal mechanism of interindividual solidarity—there will be only nations and religious or ethnic communities.

There are countries in Europe—like Spain and Greece—where a particular political development allowed for the progressive left to retain some legitimacy throughout the entire 20th century. These are countries which went through brutal right-wing dictatorships that vastly undermined the appeal of right wing ideas and notions. Their experience was thus different from Central-Eastern Europe, the UK or the US, where a diluted McCarthyism with its anti-revolutionary paranoia gained a hegemonic position in shaping public discourse and where it was the left that experienced various kinds of defeats. The social and economic meltdown that followed the 2008 financial crisis produced different political outcomes in those two groups of countries: one is being devoured by populism, while new progressive, left wing parties—like Podemos or Syriza—are emerging in the other one. This is the contemporary meaning of the famous slogan “socialism or barbarism”: either we establish some forms of inclusive welfare state or those in the position of pure heterogeneity will turn to the most destructive forms of collective identity and drown us in the toxic sea of nationalism and the bigotry of fascism.

There's one more, very interesting thing that the populist revolt may teach us. Throughout a good part of 20th century, academic development studies were dominated by what was called modernization theory.¹¹ It claimed that all countries move along the same trajectory of social change, where some—mainly the West—are more advanced than the others. It had a right-wing and a left-wing version and culminated in the (in)famous declaration of the end of history made by Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s. What we are witnessing right now is a precise reversal of this alleged pattern: the peripheries of capitalist world-system have become some sort of perverse avant-garde of reaction. What we have experienced in Poland since early 1990s, as I showed at the beginning of this text, has not been a glitch provoked by cultural factors but a reaction to neoliberal austerity. It took neoliberalism some time to destroy core societies to the same level, but when it started to get there, strikingly similar formations appeared first in the UK and the US, precisely the most neoliberal countries in the center of the capitalist world-system. It should not come as surprise that France is the place where politics may

still seem “business as usual”: Emanuel Macron looks like another Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroder or Bill Clinton. France is, after all, the number one public spender in the OECD and still maintains one of the most generous and inclusive welfare mechanisms on the planet. What the liberals fascinated by Macron do not get is that the neoliberal reforms he is undertaking are destroying the very *status quo* which he got elected. The advancement of the Front National in France, just like the electoral success of Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, are visible signs of what we may very well face in a not very distant future. I would dub the phenomenon “de-modernization” as it is reversing both the conquests of liberal modernity (not only in the political sphere, the same is true when it comes to secular state or labor conditions) as well as the relation between the center and the periphery postulated by the modernization theory. The future of Berlin, Paris or Washington is in Warsaw and Budapest, not the other way around.

Looking at this uncanny development from the perspective of the Polish semi-periphery I cannot but marvel at an incredible irony of the situation. I grew up in the last years of Soviet regime and I remember quite well the dreams and aspiration that followed the system change in 1989. The key ambition of liberal elites was for Poland to come back to the mainstream of Western politics and to become “a normal, European country.” And it was firstly and mainly the Anglo-Saxon political world that captured the imagination of Polish liberal elites as a noble example to follow. When I look today at the chaos and indolence of the Trump administration or the mess that Brexit generates in the UK I cannot help but think of it as a bizarre “polonization” of world politics. I’ve seen this before! Steve Bannon looks, talks and acts (including the red nose and generally alcoholic look) as if he were an advisor to the Polish right-wing government of Jan Olszewski in 1992 not to the US president in 2017. Poland—and the entire region of Central-Eastern Europe—is undeniably in the mainstream of European and world politics. Even more: we are a kind of avant-garde! Not because we have advanced so high, but because capitalism in its neoliberal incarnation has brought politics so low.

Now, probably the most important question: how and where does the Polish progressive left find itself in this weird maze? Institutionally, we are at a moment of crisis, especially if you use the term in its etymological sense, as “a moment of judgment.” The same 2015 elections that brought the populist right to power also swept the traditional, post-Soviet left (the Democratic Left Alliance party) out of a parliament that currently is composed of MPs from the ruling Law and Justice party, another even more radical right-wing populist Kukiz ‘15 party, two (neo)liberal parties—Civic Platform that ruled Poland between 2007 and 2015 and Nowoczesna—and a handful of politicians from a traditional Polish Peasants’ Party. This defeat of the “left” comes as no surprise. As a matter of fact the Polish post-“communist” left has behaved like a text-book example of neoconservatism: they have been economically neoliberal (advocating, for example, against progressive taxation and in favor of a flat tax rate), hostile to the emancipation of women and sexual minorities and neo-imperial in international politics (it was a post-“communist” president and his government that sent Polish soldiers to Iraq in 2003 and welcomed the CIA prisons in Poland). Actually, their evolution in this direction had started already in the 1980s, before the formal regime change. In this period, they abandoned any left-wing idealism and opted for Deng Xiaoping style reforms: liberalizing the economy without giving up political power. Even though it did not work and they had to accept a power sharing deal by the end of the decade, none of them was willing to defend any socialist ideas even in the most limited extent. But there is a new left-wing political formation that emerged during the last electoral cycle—Razem, a party that resembles very much Spanish Podemos or Greek Syriza. (I’d like to conscientiously inform the reader that I am a member of this political formation so my judgement of its condition and functioning may not be objective.) Razem scored around 3.5% in 2015, not enough to enter the parliament (there is a 5% threshold), but sufficient to receive public subsidies until the next election (it is allocated to every party that gets at least 3% of the votes). Razem is, basically, everything Jeremy Corbyn stands for in the UK or Bernie Sanders in the USA. I’m perfectly aware of the limitations of bourgeois parliamentary politics so I do not intend to hail this kind of formation as the pivot of political vanguardism, however I also do not believe in the famous Maoist quip “the worse—the better.” If that were true, neoliberalism should have provoked a wage of revolutionary struggles, while it actually has meant a step back in revolutionary politics compared to the social-democratic decades of 1960s and 1970s, when the left was much more radical than today (both Corbyn and Sanders would have been labeled moderate social-democrats at the time and could hardly have grasped the imagination of radical youth to the extent they do today). I actually believe the opposite to be true:

social-democratic rule makes radical politics easier, because it provides stability and thus make people less anxious and more willing to engage in radical struggles without being afraid to lose their jobs and default on their debts (the latter only emerged as the major problem with neoliberalism itself and is, as a matter of fact, a tremendous pedagogical tool directing individual and collective efforts away from radical agenda as it was pertinently diagnosed by Jeffrey Williams).¹² So, to cut the long story short, it makes sense to support social-democratic formations even from more radical left-wing positions.

We all ask ourselves what chances Razem may have in the forthcoming wave of elections that include local government elections in 2018, both national and European parliament elections in 2019 and presidential elections in 2020. There are some promising developments and a lot of energy being invested, however, there are also obvious and serious obstacles. Left-wing ideas still exist in the shadow of the Cold War period. When you start talking about social justice let alone class struggle, very often someone rises to tell you that “we have already known that and it ended in the Gulags,” a predicament well known to my radical friends and comrades from the US. (By the way, Polish society in many respects resembles American society much more than it does the French or the English: there is a strong dedication to religion, traditional family, to a rural way of life, and there’s a big love for guns; many Poles believe that death penalty should be reintroduced into our legal code.)

What is even more difficult for Razem as a new left-wing organization is the character of class divisions within Polish society. Cultural capital plays an enormous role in shaping them. Material distinctions are, of course, very important, however, the troubled history of Central-Eastern Europe marked the shape of class divisions in a crucial way: the many wars the region endured provoked streams of migrations, dispossessions and property destruction. Warsaw was literally burned to the ground after the 1944 uprising and the country shifted westwards as a part of the post-war reorganization of the continent. Polish propertied elites had their enormous land estates in the East—today’s Belarus and Ukraine—that was cut off. The rest was nationalized by the first Bolshevik government. Continuous transmission of material capital was very difficult in these circumstances, which made cultural capital the most important class division. It falls very much along the line separating intellectual elites in big cities and lower middle as well as popular classes in smaller cities and countryside. Not unlike the division between the coasts and “fly-over America” in the US. But, due to the relatively small size of our cities, our urban culture is weaker than in the West. Poland is a country of almost 40 million people and our capital does not even have two million inhabitants. Razem may be very similar to Syriza or Podemos in its ideas, but it functions in a radically different social reality, where its actual base—young, well-educated city dwellers—is much smaller and the differences in what Pierre Bourdieu would call *habitus* between the city and the countryside is much stronger. Of course, as the party of radical hipsters as it is sometimes portrayed (it is a tendentious description, however not entirely unfounded), Razem can never succeed. How to get to the mystical “people”—the victims of neoliberalism from the lower classes who voted for the populists? This is the million dollar question nobody really knows the answer to. What makes the situation even more difficult is the fact that—as I argued above—unlike in the UK or the USA our populists have actually adopted numerous and important materially progressive policies, so the traditional left-wing rhetoric of social justice has only a limited force. After all, why would a conservative society vote for the left if the right promises—and delivers—redistributive politics and on top of that it guarantees refugees will be kept out of the country while women and sexual minorities remain in their traditional positions, not annoying religious people with their constant ambitions for more emancipation?

A possible and tested strategy for linking with the popular classes is for a political party to go through the unions. It is what Razem is attempting to do, forging a partnership with All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ).¹³ What makes this strategy problematic in the Polish context is that the biggest and the most important trade union—Solidarność—is one of the main right wing, highly conservative forces in contemporary Polish society and is not a member of OPZZ. This situation—which dates back to late 1980ties and early 1990s¹⁴—is extremely ironic, given the fact that Solidarność had been a genuinely progressive workers’ mobilization in early 1980s, as Lawrence Goodwyn brilliantly shows in his *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland*.¹⁵ Its radical legacy remains difficult to recover nowadays and working with OPZZ seems a more viable option despite the fact that this organization originated within the old Soviet regime while Razem is trying to deliberately distance itself from the legacy of that period (if the latter is the best way to go is being intensely debated within the party it is, nevertheless, the official position). Razem is also focusing on directly linking with

social struggles undertaken by the workers, which means being there, on the spot, when nurses, postal workers, taxi drivers and any other group protests on the streets or goes on strike. It reflects the belief that a true alliance with popular classes cannot be forged by purely discursive means and needs to be constructed as a concrete partnership in actual struggles.

One would say, here's the proof in favor of the so called Old Left and against what has been labeled "cultural left" born in the 1960s and 70s—let's abandon the questions of discrimination or recognition and concentrate back on exploitation. I do not believe it is a viable option. The very distinction between material/real/old left and cultural/new left is very much only formal/theoretical/analytical or even academic. When it comes to the actual political practice creating a radical cleavage between the two is pragmatically counterproductive given how much our societies have changed in the last five decades. In bourgeois parliamentary politics, where the MPs represent the citizens on a wide gamut of issues and these issues are discussed *via* the media, there is no way not to have an opinion on every single question in the political debate. You may try to avoid it in your manifesto, but when it comes to actual campaigning, every politician is faced with questions regarding both economic and social or cultural agendas (abortion, gay marriage, drugs, minorities etc.). To reply "I have no opinion" or "I decline to answer" makes a candidate unreliable and untrustworthy because when elected she or he will have to vote and thus decide on those issues. Distancing oneself from the agenda of the so called cultural left also means cutting yourself from a large portion of electorate. Saying that one would not allow Syrian refugees to enter Poland—the Polish equivalent of the American border wall controversy—just to gain the sympathy of traditional working class is not only an unethical act, but also political suicide. People who do not support minorities, but want some redistribution are already voting Law and Justice. As much as it is true that thus far the symbolic/cultural issues linked with recognition have too much dominated the discourse of the left, the actual political challenge is not to replace them with the agenda of material redistribution, but to combine both, showing, how, for instance, class is always operational in establishing identity—be it racial or sexual—and how it is impossible to resolve the problems of discrimination without material redistribution.

There is, finally, one more reason why only a unified front of "Old" and "New" Left may be successful in countering both neoliberalism and populism within parliamentary politics. An important—I'd say even the largest—part of progressive political mobilization is nowadays done by women. At least that is the situation in Poland. It is obvious that women would not give up women's causes and fight just for redistribution under the banners of the Old Left. We do not need, however, to treat this as a limitation or predicament. As a matter of fact, the women's struggle is undoubtedly the biggest and the most important single positive factor in contemporary Polish politics, a fact that was very well epitomized in autumn 2016 by the so called Black March and women's strike in opposition to the possibility of further restrictions on a Polish abortion law that is already one of the most restrictive in the EU. In the last two decades, I've taken part in various street protests in Poland: against the invasion of Iraq, anti-globalization, ecological, anti-summit (NATO, European Economic Summit), anti-CETA, anti-TTIP, etc., but I've never witnessed anything as puzzling and amazing as the Black March last year. The size of the crowd was absolutely unexpected to anyone. And, what is maybe the most important element, it happened not only in Warsaw and other big cities, but also in small towns where there has been no progressive mobilization whatsoever. All that took both us and the government by surprise. After the 2015 elections there have been countless demonstrations against the government as well as many interventions of the EU institutions (European Commission, European Council, European Parliament) against the policies enacted by the populists, but Law and Justice never paid much attention to them. We thought the so called conservative revolution would just roll and roll and would consume the entire social field. The Black March proved it was not true—Polish conservative populists actually hit the wall and for the first time they backed off: within days, they withdrew the proposed legal changes regarding abortion from the legislative proceedings and never ever raised the issue again.

That is not yet the entire picture. The importance of women's mobilization goes beyond their own cause. A lot of opinion polls shows a visible and troubling tilt of Polish society to the right. As opposed to many Western countries, it is more pronounced in a younger generation that is not progressive as it is in the USA or the UK, but rather reactionary and conservative. A more detailed investigation undertaken by social psychologists reveals a more complicated and interesting development: when the gender factor is introduced in the picture, it turns out that racism or

homophobia applies more to men than to women. Women are more open, more tolerant, less racist and less inclined to use hate speech and to accept it.¹⁶ It reveals a crucial aspect of contemporary populist mobilizations not only in Poland, but also elsewhere: right-wing populism belongs to the group of “male fantasies,” to use the term of German sociologist Klaus Theweleit.¹⁷ The same is true for more radical, neo-fascist political articulations both in Europe and the US (just think about the misogyny of Donald Trump, about Zoë Quinn and gamergate that was so instrumental in the rise of the alt-right and its internet trolling culture¹⁸ or about Milo Yiannopolous with his crowd of teenage male followers¹⁹—all these phenomena seem to be happening in the “manosphere” as Angela Nagle describes various developments linked with the apparent crisis of Western manhood).²⁰ For this very reason the women’s cause is a universal cause—it has a potential of transforming society as such and not just women’s position in it.

It is difficult to sum up this article and draw general conclusions as we are facing a fast evolving and ever-changing social and political landscape. What seems to me pertinent in the Polish case and important for developments in other places is the fact that the populists react to the material predicaments of lower classes as well as to changing patterns of gender roles and positions. Hatred towards refugees and immigrants constitutes another element that was operational in Poland in 2015 elections as well as in the UK (Brexit) and the US (Trump). As I argued above, the class element—understood in materialist terms—is an undeniable component of populist uprising, but it cannot be understood without any reference to symbolic and cultural issues. It appeals the most to those who suffer from a double exclusion: the groups that get no redistribution and no recognition. What we need to do is to construct the common front in such a way as never to exclude the materialist, class factor. Putting any of these causes out of the political picture and focusing solely on the Old Left or New Left struggles would be counterproductive and even suicidal for any progressive politics. We need a political sublation: a dialectically constructed synthesis of the two. This is the challenge for the progressive left in Poland and elsewhere.

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^{1.} See “Stanisław Tymiński” on

Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanis%C5%82aw_Tymi%C5%84ski. [↑]

^{2.} The history of populism in the United States goes even further in past. See Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). It should come as no surprise that it developed in the period called “first globalization,” in many ways similar to what the neoliberals established in 1980’s and 90’s. [↑]

^{3.} See biography on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrzej_Lepper. [↑]

^{4.} The webpage does not have an English version, however the visuals convey quite well its character: <http://www.samoobrona.org.pl/>. The main slogan reads: “Human being—Family—Labor—Dignified life.” [↑]

^{5.} See Piotr Sztompka, *Civilizational Competence: A Prerequisite Of Post-communist Transition*, Universities for Democracy Alliance, <http://www.friends-partners.org/newfriends/audem/audem92/Sztompka.html>. [↑]

^{6.} Józef Tischner’s book dedicated to the subject, *Etyka solidarności oraz Homo sovieticus* (Kraków: Znak 2005), is not available in English. [↑]

^{7.} See *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, ed. Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington (New York: Basic Books, 2000). [↑]

^{8.} See <http://www.kod.ngo/>. Do not be misguided by “equality” on their main banner. It refers to the liberal formal equality before the law, not to any kind of social justice. [↑]

^{9.} See Ernest Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2002). [↑]

^{10.} See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* [1944] (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). [↑]

^{11.} For its classical and genre-defining example see Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958). [↑]

^{12.} See Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Pedagogy of Debt,” *College Literature* 33: 4 (Fall 2006): 155-69. [↑]

^{13.} See <http://www.opzz.org.pl/en1>. [↑]

^{14.} It was well captured by David Ost in his *Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). [↑]

15. See Lawrence Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press 1991). It is worth noting that Goodwyn is also the author of an insightful account of the populist movement in late 19th century United States (Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1976]). †
16. Mikołaj Winiewski, et al. *Contempt Speech, Hate Speech. Report from Research on Verbal Violence Against Minority Groups*, http://www.ngofund.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Contempt_Speech_Hate_Speech_Full_Report.pdf. †
17. See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). †
18. See Zoë Quinn, *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017). For a brief overview of the gamergate see Wikipedia article “Gamergate controversy”: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_controversy. †
19. Laurie Penny, *My night out in Cleveland with the worst men on the internet*, *The Guardian* (July 26, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/26/my-night-out-in-cleveland-with-the-worst-men-on-the-internet>. Penny did a lot of outstanding reporting for *The Guardian* on the issue and other problems of contemporary male-dominated societies: <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/laurie-penny>. †
20. See Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-right* (Winchester: Zero Books 2017), 70-80; the link between alt-right online activism and misogyny is also explored in chapter 1, 13-25. †

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