BUILDING THE PAST, FORGETTING THE FUTURE: IS POLAND A HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE BASED SOCIETY?

Radoslaw Poczykowski

University of Białystok, Institute of Sociology,
Plac Uniwersytecki 1, 15-420 Białystok, Poland
E-mail: poczykowski@gmail.com

The article attempts to analyze the public debate in a present day Poland focused on the country's recent history and memory (or memories). The author believes that among other lines dividing Polish society, the cultural line separating opposing "communities of memory" is of special importance. The political and public life of the country is facing a paradox: the media and several political leaders view the past as the last potential platform for a national unity and a source of commonly shared values and ideas. They treat the past as the support for gaining publicity and political capital. But this past orientation causes further division and conflict since, instead of a single past, participants in the public discourse view several competing pasts. The author proposes two ideal types of historical narratives in Poland: national and civic. Turning points, the pantheon of heroes, and modes of narration are sometimes mirror images of one another. Since recently the "national" paradigm is prevalent the author believes that the new European identity (or plurality of collective identities) of Poland can be successfully built only on a civic, not a national, platform of historical narrative.

Keywords: civil education, collective memory, historical politics, nation building public discourse, social memory.

DOI: 10.3846/2029-0187.2008.1.22-31

On the 2nd of February 2007, the evening news on the first channel of Polish public television presented very peculiar information. The Polish tabloid *Fact* had discovered a short film made by future officers from the military school in Wroclaw. The film shows a man in the uniform on his knees and another one pretending to shoot him in the back of the head with a handgun. The "shot" person falls on the snow. In the commentary following the film, the speaker calls it a scandal. Why? Because (the journalist comments) shooting in the back of the head was a favorite method of the nation's enemies. The next scene shows a fragment of the film about an Armia Krajowa officer shot in the back of the head by a Secret Police agent. Than, historical black and white scenes from Katyń, where The Soviets killed almost 20 thousand Polish officers using the same method. Finally there is a daughter of the Katyń officer, who comments on the behavior of the officers from the Wrocław school as immoral and who asks rhetorically if they have a conscience.

Source: Wiadomości TVP 1, 2 February 2007

The scandal in Wrocław. The historicisation of the mediascape

I conducted a small experiment in which I showed the clip to my students and asked them to comment on it. More or less half of them agreed that the whole clip is a misuse of the media, while the second half of the group did not see any signs of such misuse. Does this mean that at least a part of the (young) public have got used to such media messages? For the author of the clip, the behavior of the officers is the scandal not because someone is playing with a gun, but because he does it in the same way our enemies treated our nation in the past. Why does the author of this short clip put the historical and national frames of interpretation (in Erving's Goffman's (1986) sense) onto something that can be viewed (using another frame of interpretation) as just a stupid behavior of young future officers?

In my opinion the example given above is a symptom of one of the most important cultural trends in Polish public discourse. It shows how the public life of Polish society is deeply rooted in the past. In recent years, the public and media discourse have become more and more past-oriented. A large part of Polish *mediascape* (Appadurai 1996: 27–47) is built on historical decorations. We have really come a long way from Tadeusz Mazowiecki's idea of the "thick line" cutting away from the communist roots and the communist past is out of fashion. Being up to date today means to carefully look into the past. The message from the side of politicians is clear: the past matters.

There are plenty of other examples of the "historicization" of the evening news. Secret police agents, files, tapes, or old photographs are presented as "hot" topics. Half-century-old stories like uncovering facts from the Post-War Stalinist terror or the denouncing of a public figure as a secret police informer, is quite often the information that opens the evening news.

Poland has never had such a great chance to become a knowledge-based society. But this will be the knowledge-based society of a special type – a society based on historical knowledge. The nation has even institutionalized its memory by creating IPN – The Institute of the National Remembrance – a large and powerful institution which plays an important role in Polish political life. It is used as a tool by politicians, not only to explore the recent past but most of all to judge present-day political enemies. For the opponents of the IPN it is obvious that such judgments are designed for the contemporary, political purposes.

To understand the situation of the country today, we should return to history (how else?) for a while. The Republic of Polish Peoples was a time of two layers of memory. The official, dominant memory was a large narrative celebrated in state-organized events, presented in museums, and taught at schools. The learning of "proper" history was an important factor of ideological socialization. Each larger city had a Museum of the Revolutionary Movement, which, after 1989 was turned into a historical or local museum – or was simply closed. Teaching about medieval societies was viewed through the scope of the class struggle theory. As Barbara Szacka has noted (Szacka 2000b: 24), the battle of Tannenberg was anachronically presented as the victory of Poles against their eternal enemies – the Germans. The "official" layer of memory was full of paradoxes, blank pages, anachronisms and examples of "invented traditions", but in some sense it was coherent and stable. The other layer of memory existed under the surface of the political and cultural life of the society. It was unofficial memory, not one but several narratives where such words as Piłsudski, the Wisła Miracle or Katyń had their own deep meanings. Interest in local or oral history was, from the point of view of the regime, very suspicious activity because sooner or later the enquiry would lead to the "forbidden" past. That is why the counter-memory, in a Foucaultian sense (Foucault 1977), was carried along by oral histories, jokes, and gossi p.

The transformation of 1989 caused the pluralization of memories. Minority groups with their suppressed memories were finally able to express their visions of the past. They gained the support of NGO's and other institutions of a democratic, civil society. The transformation was a time of revival of interest in local history, minority history, traditions, and "local pride". The pluralization made memory and history alive again, but this also resulted in the emergence of conflicting memories on different societal levels – from the local to the international.

One of the most broadly discussed memory conflicts was the case of Jedwabne. It started locally but soon became the subject of "hot" international debate. Jedwabne is a small town in Northeastern Poland, today quite sleepy, and now culturally homogenous (the citizens are almost 100% Polish Roman Catholics). Before the war, half of the population were Jews – Jedwabne then was a typical *shtetl* (Yiddish – town), where Jews owned most of the shops, workshops, inns, and small manufactures. The Second World War brought an end to this and a thousand other small Jewish communities.

In May 2000 a Polish sociologist living in New York, Jan Tomasz Gross, published a book "Sąsiedzi" (Neighbors). While analyzing documents as well as oral – and written – testimonies, he reconstructed the tragedy of the Jedwabne Jews. In July of 1941, after Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the Jews of Jedwabne were murdered by their Polish neighbors. They were gathered, brutally beaten, and burned in a stable outside the city. A few days later there was a hunt for those who had escaped burning.

Actually Gross was not the first to uncover the Jedwabne crime. Shortly after the war there was a legal trial. A few of the leaders of the *pogrom* were sentenced. But for decades the crime was known only to a small group of scientists from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and a few historians, and was a "public secret" or a part of the "collective unconsciousness" of the Jedwabne community.

The publishing of the book started a debate in Poland on Polish guilt, amnesia, Polish attitudes towards the holocaust, and Polish involvement in Jewish extermination. For many, the book was a shock. They started asking, how could such horrors be caused by Polish people? Why was public opinion, for decades, not informed about this? Could it be truth? The Jedwabne case was decidedly a threat to the Polish positive self-image. One of the ways of dealing with it was to change it, to admit that the nation's past consisted not only of glorious moments. Another way was denial and hiding in a fortress of traditional heroic or martyrological self-imagery. The Jedwabne case played an important role in the public discourse and was the turning point of the debate on the national curriculum.

Nowadays we are witnessing another cultural turn in Poland. It corresponds to the switch of the political pendulum to the right (and populist) side, but it goes far beyond the political situation. It is a change in culture and mentality – not only in politics. This change is being strengthened by other "soft" cultural trends, usually associated with post-modernity: museum-mania, interest in genealogy, the collecting of vintage objects, "conspicuous traditions" (as Thorstein Veblen would probably call it), and other forms of commercial and non-commercial uses of history. But of course the political context is the central core of this change. To illustrate this switch, which more or less happened suddenly in Poland, let me quote Paweł Pacewicz from *Gazeta Wyborcza*. He has made a short frequency analysis of the opening presidential speeches of two Polish presidents. The results are presented in this Table 1.

Table 1. Opening Presidential Speeches –frequency of selected expressions

Expression	Aleksander Kwaśniewski	Lech Kaczyński
Modernity, Future, XXI Century	9	1
Tradition	1	4
Nation, Independence	7	11

Source: Piotr Pacewicz, „Kwaśniewski i Kaczyński o Polsce i Polakach", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12/2005.

Many independent thinkers in Poland warn that the country is going through a strong wave of the rebirth of national rhetoric, deeply rooted in Polish romantic, post-romantic, and "endecja" (National Democracy) traditions. In this historical context, it is natural that the past has a greater meaning than it did just a few years ago.

Why do we countenance this return of history? Is it a natural stage that a post-communist society has to go through after half a century of the "frozen" discourse on memory? Or is it a part of the broader, global process – the wave of memory that haunts today's world as Pierre Nora and many other thinkers believe?

This return to the past might be viewed as the answer to the serious political, cultural, and social crisis. Polish political life is facing the problem of legitimization. The society, as it had during communist times, still views its political leaders as "them". Possible ways of integrating society onto a platform of civic values has failed. Politicians have turned to history as the last possible common platform of social unity. The populist

rhetoric presents the national past as a source of values that can unite the whole nation (such rhetoric was especially visible in the media soon after the death of John Paul II).

It seems that Polish society faces the following paradox. The political elites perceive the past as a source of commonly shared values and a platform for potential national integration. Other potential sources of national mobilisation are (in their perception) exhausted. But this past-orientation is causing new divisions and deepening already existing memory conflicts. In post-communist society the past and memory is never neutral; they are what strengthens, not weakens, the memory conflicts.

Those conflicts have split the society which has become an entity composed of opposing "communities of memory" (Szacka 2000a: 53). The main division lines in Polish society correspond with the different attitudes to the past[1]. The winners and losers of the economic transformation, the majority and minorities, the nation and society – they have all developed their own image of history from pieces of the past.

The policy of the "thick line" *versus* the prosecutor's attitude

After the 1989 breakthrough, the majority of the intellectual elites agreed that in the name of national reconciliation the communist past should be isolated from the present with a thick line. This meant that building a strong, independent state on the one side and a strong civil society on the other should be not based on divisions from the past. This paradigm has failed. The political elite of the so-called 4th Republic view it differently, as if they had internalized Orwell's slogan from 1984 "whoever controls the past, controls the future". The re-modeling of recent history is one of the priorities of their policy. Historians play a special role in this project, quite often mixing their competences with the duties of prosecutors. This might be called the prosecutor's attitude. In their opinion, the past should not only be carefully studied, but most of all it should be judged (glorified or criminalized).

The dominant national discourse *versus* counter-memories

To illustrate this division line I will use the following example: after the end of the Second World War in Poland, part of the resistance movement did not stop fighting, treating the newly created communist regime as a continuation of the country's occupation. In the Podlaskie province there were numerous hiding in the forest anti-communist partisan groups who continued fighting and committing acts of sabotage. One of them was the group under the command of Romuald Rais "Bury". His squad was a part of the anti-communist resistance army, the National Army Union, created after the dissolution of the Armia Krajowa. The squad was active on the territories of the new Poland – the USSR borderland, populated by Polish, Belarusian, and Ukrainian people. The second two national groups were accused of pro-communist and pro-soviet

---

1 The idea of memory division lines splitting society was borrowed from chapter titles of Nora, P. (ed.). 1996. *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past: Conflicts and Divisions*, vol. 1, New York: Columbia University Press.

sympathies and were often attacked and persecuted by the resistance movement (especially the leaders of those communities, the biggest enthusiasts of the new regime). In the winter of 1946, Romuald Rais group killed 28 Belarusian men, not involved in any political activity, only used as wagoners (to carry goods), then shot in the back of the head. After the self-dissolution of the squad in 1946, "Bury" hid, and, expecting the further consequences, did not emerge when the amnesty in 1947 was proclaimed. In 1948 he was arrested, sentenced to death, and executed.

After 1989, many members of the anti-communist resistance movement, with death, or years-long sentences, were vindicated, as victims of the communist terror legal system. One of them was Bury – for some people, still a heroic partisan. But his crime was remembered by members of the Belarusian minority, who protested against his absolution from guilt. They wanted to commemorate "the crime on the wagoners" (as the massacre was called) by erecting a monument with the inscription naming the killers and the organization they belonged to. This started a very hard discussion involving the representatives of national groups and many institutions, including a presidential commission. The Belorussian minority fought for the right to commemorate the truth of the crime. A few representatives of the majority perceived it as an attack on the resistance ethos and its heroes. Finally the monument was erected. It stands at the same cemetery, very close to the old communist monument commemorating the Security Police officers who fought with the resistance movement shortly after the war, and near a recent monument devoted to the soldiers of the resistance. But the physical proximity of these monuments does not mean that the plurality of the "paths of remembering" has been accepted. It rather symbolizes the divisions and conflicts of memory.

Minorities quite often represent a sort of inverted (in comparison with the majority) vision of recent history. The heroes become felons (as was the case with Romuald Rais "Bury"), the occupation becomes liberation, and the act of commemoration becomes a scandal.

The strengthening of the main, national, state-supported vision of the past may result in the fact that many cultural groups will be alienated from it, because their visions of the past may not fit into the larger ideological project. In many aspects this would be a return of the situation from before 1989, when cultural minorities had no opportunity to express their right to remember and to commemorate their history.

Memory conflicts are natural in a democratic society. In cases when they are suppressed or denied by the state, the groups (the carriers of memory) may be marginalized, but their counter-memories may be strengthened.

Communist nostalgia *versus* the criminalization of the Republic of Polish People

Each past produces certain nostalgia – even one that at a first glance seems to be not attractive at all. Such is the memory of the Republic of Polish People. Research suggests (Kwiatkowski 2005: 7–91) that there are large segments of Polish society living with an idealized image of communist times; from the stable work situation, social security,

and cheap credit to the better quality of TV series and popular songs. All this produces a nice, sweet, and nostalgic image of the "good old times". In peoples' consciousness it is strongly contrasted with the time after the 1989 transformation – a period of dynamic change and uncertainty.

The second attitude, shared by a majority of the present day ruling class and those who voted for them means that the biographies of those representatives of the political, economical and cultural elite who lived in the PPR should be carefully studied and judged – and in the end eliminated from public life in case any act of collaboration with the "criminal state" could be proved.

I presume that as long as the second paradigm (the criminalization of the Republic of Polish people) dominates public discourse, the nostalgic groups will suffer from large cognitive dissonance. "That is not the PPR I remember" – they might say.

This division line may serve as a model situation: it clearly shows how social memory works. In contrast with history, it is not sensitive to slight differences, to shadows, to a plurality of positive and negative aspects of the same fact. It views the certain period, process or person in black or white colors. The Polish communist past, being more and more distant becomes viewed in a simplified way: as a happy arcadia or an empire of absolute evil.

National *versus* civic models of historical narratives

Summing up, the division lines noted above have caused the dramatic split of the two competing models of historical socialization and historical narratives which have existed since the 1989 transformation. This is the nation which in many ways continues the tradition of the PPR on the one hand, and messianism and martyrdom on the other. The second paradigm might be named a civil narrative. They both have their own turning points and their own pantheon of heroes. It means that sometimes one interpretation of a historical fact is the reverse image of the other. Such is the case with the Round Table of 1989. Was it a triumph of democracy or an unforgivable compromise with the reds? The answer to this question for either model would be extremely different.

There are very visible attempts to take control over the past by the state institutions (including administration, schools and, most of all, Institute of National Remembrance). The perfect example might be Roman Giertych, the minister of education who, during his commemorative speech on the 1st of September, said that "history has to be carefully built". In some sense, those attempts might be a return of the situation from before 1989. Minority histories and the civic, pluralistic memory might be suppressed in the form of symbolic violence by the national, state-controlled history. The following table compares both models and their possible consequences for society.

What is the possible cure for this situation? In the ideological project of the so-called 4th Republic there is a disproportion between two flows of memory, which Barbara Misztal calls bottom-up and top-down memories (Misztal 2003: 61). Top-down memory, spread by the state institutions and the media, tends to dominate the popular image of the past. It seems that there is an urgent need to deeply rethink the national curriculum, to ensure that the story of the society – civil society – not the Polish nation – is

being told. This implies stressing on the civil resistance over the historical monopoly of the state. This resistance might be achieved through education and the activities on the grassroots level of local communities.

Table 2. The two competing pasts

National paradigm	Civil paradigm
Rhetoric of resistance. The main goal of historical socialization is to defend "our" version of history. State support to the initiatives of commemoration of Polish martyrdom is the answer to the activities of other states ("They, Germans, have their centre of Expulsions; We, Poles, will count the material losses of Poland during the 2nd World War") The historical narrative is the story of Polish martyrdom or victories.	Rhetoric of emancipation. Historical socialization is an important part of civic awareness and the core of identity building. The narrative is focused on the democratic traditions of Poland and the history of culture (longue durre instead of political curriculum).
State monopoly and control over the images of the past. The version of history presented by minority cultural groups is marginalized and suppressed.	Plurality of historical narratives. Even marginalized social individuals and collective actors have right to express their vision of the past.
Memory conflicts are viewed as a threat to the official version of history (as a disfunction) or a threat to the nation's self image.	Memory conflicts are a natural part of public debate.
History gives support to current political needs. The Institute of National Remembrance is an important tool in the ideological war. (As in the case media's so called "file game").	The agendas of historical socialization are an autonomous but not dominant element of public life.
The Polish history narrative is contrasted with the European memory and the memories of other nations.	The Polish history narrative is complementary to the European memory (or plurality memories).
Memory is legitimized by the authority of the state.	Memory does not need legitimization.
Historians act as prosecutors. They view their role not only as an act of exploring the past but – most of all – judging it.	Historians act as scientists.
The main subject, the carrier of collective memory, is the nation. The strong state is viewed as a support to the nation building on the platform of national history.	The society is viewed as a plurality of the communities of memory (from the individual to the societal level). Pluralism of memories implies constant meta-reflection on the mechanisms of social remembering and forgetting.

Conclusions

Local history, the narratives of minorities, oral histories, and personal stories might be difficult to fit into the ideological project of a united national history. That is why they should be supported and developed as a sort of counter-balance. They might also raise the level of self-reflection in the realm of social memory. A self-reflective society and self-reflective cultural groups are better prepared to resist the "historically obsessed" decision makers supported by the media. Can a crisis of memory be overpowered by the institutions of civil society? It has to; otherwise we will become another bitter lesson for Polish history.

References

Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, M. 1977. *Language, Counte-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews.* Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.

Misztal, B. A. 2003. *Theories of Social Remembering.* Maidenhead, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Goffman, E. 1986. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Northeastern University Press.

Hobsbawm, E.; Ranger, T. (Ed.). 1983. *The Invention of Tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kwiatkowski, P. T. 2005. "PRL w pamięci społeczeństwa polskiego: Wobec przeszłośc", in *Pamięć przeszłości jako element kultury współczesnej,* ed. by A. Szpociński. Warszawa: Instytut im Adama Mickiewicza, 74–91.

Nora, P. (Ed.). 1996. *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past: Conflicts and Divisions*, vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press.

Szacka, B. 2000a. „Pamięć społeczna", in *Encyklopedia socjologii*, vol. 3, Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 52–55.

Szacka, B. 2000b. „Pamięć zbiorowa i wojna", *Studia Socjologiczne* 2: 12–27.

KURTI PRAEITĮ, PAMIRŠTI ATEITĮ: AR LENKIJOS VISUOMENĖ GRINDŽIAMA ISTORINIU PAŽINIMU?

Radoslaw Poczykowski

Straipsnyje apmąstoma nūdienėje Lenkijoje vykstanti viešoji šalies istorijos ir atminties (atminčių) diskusija. Autoriaus manymu, šiandienėje lenkiškoje kultūroje atsiranda itin svarbus „atminties bendruomenių“ fenomenas. Šalies politiniame ir viešajame gyvenime iškilo tam tikras paradoksas: paskiri žiniasklaidos ir politikos atstovai praeitį supranta kaip vienintelį galimą tautinės vienybės ir tautinių vertybių pamatą ir šaltinį. Senosios tradicijos čia traktuojamos kaip galimybė siekti viešumo ir politinio kapitalo. Ši pozicija iš esmės prieštarauja kitai, kuri viešajame diskurse praeitį traktuoja kaip daugybę tarpusavyje besivaržančių praeičių. Straipsnio autorius skiria du idealius istorinių naratyvų šiuolaikinėje Lenkijoje tipus – tautinį ir pilietinį. Herojų panteonas ir tam tikri naracijos būdai neretai gali būti suprantami kaip vieni kitų veidrodiniai atspindžiai. Dabartinė „tautinė“ paradigma yra itin plačiai paplitusi, todėl, autoriaus manymu, naujojo Lenkijos europietiškojo tapatumo (ar kolektyvių tapatybių daugumos) pamatu gali tapti ne tautinis, o pilietinis istorinis naratyvas.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: pilietinis švietimas, kolektyvinė atmintis, istorinė politika, socialinė atmintis, tautą formuojantis viešasis diskursas.

Received 26 September 2007, accepted 15 April 2008