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# Somewhere In Between.

## Poland Within the Discourse of Secularism

Marek Susdorf, Utrecht University

### Introduction

In this essay, I attempt to describe the past and current situation of Poland as regards its relationship between the state and religion. My core claim here is that many countries in Europe, although lastingly interwoven in the general history of the continent, cannot be inscribed in some of its allegedly common rhetorics, especially these concerning the terms of ‘modernity’, ‘secularism’, and so-called ‘development’. I would like to focus particularly on the case of Poland and prove that Polish experience of the ‘secular’ cannot be equated with its Western European version. I argue that the difficulties, which our continent encounters nowadays, should not be explained through the monolithic universalism of the ‘(post-)secularist’ vocabulary, but ought to be described from more individual and bifurcated perspectives.

### Keywords

Secularism, The Enlightenment, Eurocentrism, Poland, Nationalism

### The fraud of the alleged universal Enlightenment

It seems really difficult to find an accurate adjective that would describe Poland in terms of its current official division between the polity and religion. As we will see it from the short description of its political and historical context, it would be imprecise and inaccurate to name the country really or fully ‘secular’, although this state of things is guaranteed by its Constitution. Many contemporary intellectuals now criticise secularism, arisen from the much-glorified, allegedly universal Enlightenment, of being used as a weapon of discursive colonisation, through which the West imposes its vision of the world on others. As Joan W. Scott puts it succinctly, ‘secularism is usually the unquestioned standard of judgment’ (Scott: 2009). This means that if a country can call itself secular, it embodies positive values of liberalism, tolerance, modernity, development, and equality. On the contrary, the other states are presented as non- or pre-modern, belated, conservative or even uncivilised. On the other hand, Rosi Braidotti rhetorically asks whether European women and other minorities had their Enlightenment (Braidotti: 2008), which proves that this notion can be very inaccurate and also exclusive, even in a state that considers itself ‘enlightened’. Judith Butler in her famous text entitled ‘Sexual politics, torture and secular time’ (Butler: 2008) argues secularism might often be used as a method of subjugating and oppressing other subjectivities. Whereas by the Western countries the so-called missionaries of the civilisation are presented as liberty-bearers, they, in fact, colonise other discourses. It may be clearly seen in the case of the French ban on headscarves worn by Muslim women. Here, the Western rhetorics of liberty enslaves the free will of a woman, whose freedom of conscience is guaranteed by the Constitution. Viewed in this light, the Enlightenment and its official values of *Liberté, Égalité and Fraternité*<sup>1</sup> managed to create more insidious and imperceptible methods of Power to structure other societies, in opposition to the foregoing more apparent approaches of violent wars and forced christenings. This enabled the unremitting colonisation of the land and cultures of the non-North-Western world and also facilitated the free flow of the Western capital throughout the whole world. Against this backdrop, it seems obvious that *Encyclopédie* and the Internet simply took place of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Fraternité* – French for *brotherhood*, which is not without importance here.

foregoing sword and Holy Bible. As mentioned above, this is assisted by the total power of capitalism (Adorno: 2002, p. 94), as well as the Western 'democratic', ultraliberal, globalized and globalizing pop-'culture infecting everything with sameness (since – MS) film, radio, and magazines form a system' (Adorno: 2002, p. 94). The Enlightened plea for the homogenisation of culture and the secular standardisation of morality force the other societies to climb the mountain of so-called progress by following the template of the West. In fact, it lets the political and economic supremacy of the latter everlastingly perpetuate. These politics ensure that everybody can feel equal in the face of the Western capital based on the physical enslavement and discursive subservience of the rest of the world.

Now, I would like to turn my attention to Jurgen Habermas and his claim that to consider a state post-secular, its policy should have been secular in its past (Habermas: 2008). Having said that, one should probe about the term 'secular' itself. In my view, the notion appears so vague and non-measurable that it becomes scarcely impossible to be used without falling into politics or/and ideology. Many countries within Europe have been – mostly involuntarily – too often presented against the common sociopolitical backdrop of the North-Western, white and masculinist dialectics of the so-called civilizational progress, and coerced to use the language of the Western European dominator to describe their experience. Viewed in this light, the term 'secular' can no longer be thought through universal values and common standards; rather it should be carefully described in the individual context of the policy and history of a certain society. The 'modernity' – yet another watchword of the Enlightenment, so deeply intertwined with 'secularism' that it can be used as its synonym – as Talal Asad puts it, 'is a project – or rather, a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve' (Asad: 2003, p. 13). Therefore, it should be viewed more as a virtual term than a ready-to-use signifier. If one wants to avoid inaccuracy and obscurity, the notion of 'secularism' should be actualized against a certain backdrop, or as Asad wants to see it, through its genealogy (Asad: 2003). The general understanding of 'modernity' and 'secularism' has been so far developed exclusively through their Western actualizations, therefore the Western Europeans are constantly presented as the leaders of modernisation, advancement and civilisation. Viewed from this perspective, Poland as never-Western-European-enough is supposed to look up to the West and treat it as its template of development, following its *Lumières*<sup>2</sup> of super-modernity. Therefore, the country is placed somewhere in the middle of the civilisational tracks of progress, between the two endings of the advanced West and the backward Rest. In his analysis of the writings of Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha introduces the notion of 'modernity' as 'opening up a time-lag to the point of which we speak of humanity through its differentiations – gender, race, class' (Bhabha: 2000, p. 356). Through this specific 'time-lag' we should understand the constant belatedness of the Rest towards the West, and also the will imposed on the previous to climb up the mountain on which top the post-secular, post-colonial, post-modern White Western world of the future turns on its tempting charms of development, equality and (sexual and capitalist) freedom.

## **The Situation of Constant Suspension**

In this regard, I believe that this is here where the failure of the European Union project lies. The creation of the EU was an idea to unify and standardise the continent to bring the European countries together under the banner of the modern Western discourse of so-called solidarity, of the politics of liberalism and the collective glorification of the allegedly universal and non-exclusive 'European' Reason. But it should be stated here that underneath these slogans the Western Europe masked its will to wrest the economic, political and discursive control over the countries on the other side of the iron curtain, which for almost fifty years remained within the Russian area of influence. And this is precisely how the Western 'liberation' looked like right after the dissolution of the Eastern Block, when Polish people

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<sup>2</sup> *Le Siècle des Lumières* is the French equivalent for the Age of Enlightenment.

finally were able to buy bananas and Coke in their own shops, and later on when they could afford travelling to this better world of the West to work there as cleaners, dishwashers or caregivers. This lopsided international economic situation is also evocatively reflected in the modern Western Imaginarium as regards the Eastern Europeans, who are predominantly described as low-paid workers (instead of the foregoing 'slaves', cf. 'Slavs'), heavy-drinkers (hitherto: the uncivilized barbarians from the East), and religious fanatics in the times of *Reason* (for the previous 'pagans' who did not know the real Christian God). The European Union project was planned as a method to help so-called 'other countries' to modernise, to liberalise, to develop through opening them to the capitalist market and Western-Europeanisation. It emphasised the role of Europe as the knower and the discourse-maker, the definition-forgers, the language-producer, in which the post-Enlightenment politics and academy are equally involved. It can be explicitly seen in the reaction of Western medias towards the unsettling current pro-nationalist situation in Poland, which describe the country through the terms of 'provincialism',<sup>3</sup> 'parochialism',<sup>4</sup> and 'regression'.<sup>5</sup> This in conjunction with the rise of the anti-Polish discourse in the United Kingdom after the Brexit vote also proves the great failure of the European Union project. Thus, Poland is frequently identified by the Western discourse as a backward state suspended in its belatedness, mainly because of the Communist occupation, thus it is viewed as a land to be modernised, liberalized and involved in the machinery of Western capitalism, or, to put it simply: to be colonised.

Poland, like the other countries with which it shared the common experience of Communism, has been therefore politically situated between Scylla and Charybdis of two great imperialistic discourses of the modern West and the Communist East. The time of the Second World War and the Communist period in Poland left the society completely insecure about its own identity and deeply divided into many fragile subjectivities. It has to be also taken into account that both of the ideologies, the German Nazism and the Soviet (quasi-) socialism, which controlled the country for fifty years, were deeply antireligious and fought much violently with Polish Catholic intellectual elite. Polish Independent Self-governing Trade Union "Solidarity" under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa, which is said to begin the dissolution of the Eastern Block, was treated as a great victory of Poland over the thread of atheistic state of Communism. The dissolution of the Eastern Blok caused complex sociopolitical situation within many countries in Europe as regards their national identity. It was responded with the violent breakup of Yugoslavia and the current nationalism in Hungary and Poland, to name but a few results. The Eastern countries, always interwoven in politics of dominant empires and their discourses, now struggle for their own identities; remaining in a constant state of emergency they want to quickly produce some subjectivity through which they could enunciate themselves and stand in opposition to their (ex-)oppressors. Thus, Poland (as many countries from the Eastern Bloc after its dissolution) has been facing the increasing implementation of the power of religious fundamentalism into the society. Nowadays, especially in the face of coming waves of Muslim immigrants from the East, demonized by the Church and right-wing parties, the fragile subjectivity of the citizens is again put to the test.

Therefore, the current Polish ruling party, very conservative Law and Justice, is known to be constantly cooperating with the Catholic Church in Poland, which plays the main role in creating the new/old Polish nationalist identity, especially after the period of the 50-year-long Soviet communist governance and in our times of the – highly mythologized – migration from the so-called East. The concordat between the Vatican and Poland, signed in 1993, meant an absolute return to the Vatican's religious, cultural and financial authority over Poland after the Communist

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<sup>3</sup> 'Law and Justice's conservatism is essentially provincialism', [<http://www.politico.eu/article/poland-democracy-failing-pis-law-and-justice-media-rule-of-law/>].

<sup>4</sup> [<http://www.iwmat/transit/transit-online/polish-presidential-election-victory-radicals/>].

<sup>5</sup> 'Kaczynski's insistence to look backward is a disservice to a great country that has come a long way' in [<http://www.theglobalist.com/poland-future-politics-eu/>].

period. It also ensured the regaining of the land by the Church (which is now the greatest landowner in Poland), launching free courses on the Christian religion in schools, as well as the monopoly of ethical supremacy and also some special tax exemptions. It should be mentioned here that the Church receives funds directly from the state budget to 'finance Catholic universities, about 40,000 catechists, and salaries of priests employed by the state, for example as chaplains in the army'<sup>6</sup>. The now ruling government with the great help of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland is preparing the ground for de-secularisation of the country, whereas on the other hand, it is working on a so-called complete de-communisation of the public sphere. The party has also promulgated the official refusal of taking in thousands of asylum-seeking refugees from the Middle East and Africa, notwithstanding its previous promises to the European Union. While fighting with the demons of our past and the arrogant cultural and moral colonisations from abroad, the Polish government is monopolising the discourse in the country, which can result in a future dictatorship of 'dividing and ruling' and a literal return to the Church's economic, moral and intellectual supremacy over the society.

## Conclusions

In this essay, I tried to prove that the terms as regards 'secularism' or 'modernity' are not verifiable and adequate enough to describe the diversity of discourses, which can be found in Europe. The meanings of the mentioned notions differ according to an individual context and situatedness. I also attempted to show, through the case of Poland, how a religion by constant influencing a government is able to re-establish its ruling position within a society. It has been proven here that because of its historical and sociopolitical backdrop, the country has not got a chance to create its own vision of what can 'secular' and 'modern' mean.

Through this essay, I do not call for the isolation of Poland nor do I claim my support towards the now ruling government. Quite the contrary, I plea for diversification of the discourses within Europe and the country, in order to make them less linear and less hierarchical if we want to speak to each other and understand our different positions. Not taking into account our failures as regards solid imperialistic identities and colonializing discourses would only extend the gaping abyss between our societies. Therefore, it is crucial to be more critical towards others and ourselves and to try to listen to the discourses based on particular historical, social and political contexts. The difficult position of Poland cannot be explained through the vocabulary of the Western (post-)secularism. We have to think of different terms to describe its difficult socio-geographical situatedness, which could help lessen the unsettling increase in power of the patriarchal Roman Catholic Church and nationalist government of the now ruling party in Poland.

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<sup>6</sup> From the interview with Dr. Pawel Borecki, a religious law expert from Warsaw University. The conversation is available on-line here: [<http://www.concordatwatch.eu/topic-37751.834>].

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