

Paper prepared for
The Fifth Euroacademia International Conference
Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

Rome, Italy
9 – 10 December 2016

This paper is a draft
Please do not cite or circulate

The Great Need of Solidarity: The Strategic Essentialism of the Black Protest In Poland

Marek Susdorf

Introduction

This essay explores the current situation in Poland as regards the recently proposed complete abortion ban. I will try to describe the mechanism of the nationalist discourse, which is increasingly popular in the public sphere of the country. According to this narrative, a woman is considered someone who reproduces race, capital and patriarchal system through her dependence, sexual and mental passivity, home-boundedness, and symbolic as well as physical isolation from other women. I will then present how strategic essentialism (Spivak: 1987) can become a useful tool against the patriarchal oppression, illustrating it with the case of the Polish Black Protest (3rd of October 2016). Taking issue with the plea for dissolution of fixed identity amongst the poststructuralist thinkers, I end this article by suggesting that in certain situations the politics of resistance need a well-established, homologable, collective Subjectivity, which enables public recognition and can bring a deep and considerable change within society.

Keywords

Solidarity, Subjectivity, Enslavement, Domestication, Nationalism, Poland, Black Protest

The current situation in Poland

Last year's Polish parliamentary election was won by a right-wing party Law and Justice (known by its Polish initials as PiS) led by Jarosław Kaczyński. Since then the leader, who actually holds no formal government office, has been aiming at a complete change of Poland's political discourse and ideological goals. The most significant of these is to establish a strong subjectivity of a supercilious Polish citizen, which would be based on Christian and nationalist values. Jarosław Kaczyński proposes to return to the xenophobic and nationalist myth of the so-called "Great Poland", proud of its history, culture, beliefs, and coal-fueled economics. Viewed in this light, the new government represents the upsurge of real anti-Europeanism. It takes advantage of the anti-immigrant and anti-liberal feelings of the citizens causing the growth of unrest, anti-democratic feelings and populist sentiments within the society.

The afore-mentioned political goals of the new ruling party are strongly connected with the general situation of Polish women. According to this nationalist discourse, a female body is considered a battleground, on which masculine powers of religion, politics and ideology mark out their spheres of influence. In September 2016, a highly controversial project concerning delegating pregnancy termination was sent to the Parliament and passed to be further debated by Sejm. This meant that the party, obedient to the greatly influential Catholic Church in Poland, aimed at stiffening the country's already restrictive abortion laws by forbidding the procedure even in cases where pregnancy was the result of incest or rape. Through banning abortion, Polish men symbolically show off "their" cultural, national and religious territory, which according to their recent nationalist rhetoric, is placed somewhere between the ultra-liberalized, Enlightened, consumerist and "demoralized" West, and the uncivilised, brutal, "ready-to-

rape-our-women” Islam. To homologise this territory, the Polish government is constantly cooperating with the Catholic Church in Poland, which is considerably involved in creating this new/old Polish identity. The signing of the concordat in 1993 and its ratification, which took place five years later, meant a complete return to the Vatican’s religious, cultural and financial supremacy over Poland after the Communist period. It also ensured the Church’s monopoly on ethical authority in the country, according to which Mary, the Mother of Jesus (who represents the holy trinity of male mythology as regards femininity: female, virgin and mother) is presented as a role model for every woman. In compliance with this logic, women should follow the template of Mary and say, “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke, 1:38) whenever a(ny) man tells her to give birth to a child. Nowadays, in Poland, this request was supposed to be legally justified through a complete ban on abortion. If the bill proposed by radical conservative organisation Ordo Iuris had been finally legislated, Polish abortion laws would be the strictest in Europe, together with those of Malta and, of course, the Vatican, and include penalties to abortion suppliers with up to five years of imprisonment. It eventually did not happen just because the solidarity of Polish women, who on the 3rd of October, 2016, left their houses and workplaces to join the so-called Black Protest and demonstrate against proposals for the new abortion law. The situation demonstrated the usefulness of strategic essentialism (Spivak: 1987). It is an act of creating a solidar and collective subjectivity by a certain oppressed and marginalized social group in spite of differences between its members, practised for specific, temporary reasons. The Polish protest was inspired by the Icelandic women’s strike of the 24th October, 1975, when approximately ninety per cent of the female population of the country did not went to their jobs nor did any housework during the whole day. This strong opposition on the side of Polish women made the government decide that the proposal ought to be rejected to be subject to further amendments. This was the first time in history when so many Polish women have marched together, arm in arm, creating solid and solidar collectivity of sisterhood fighting for the right to their bodies and autonomy.

It is worth noting here that women are frequently involved in national discourses around the world, as sex regulations have always been interwoven in the social myths concerning the nation. Imprisoned in their homes, they have always been beyond the important changes as regards the State; rather they have been passive preservers of tradition, mores and knowledge (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Notwithstanding this fact, their “womanhood” has always been the main subject of the masculine religious and political paradigm. Accordingly, through her reproductive skills, a woman becomes a useful tool to the nation and to the Power, on the grounds of the fact that she is able to create more new soldiers, priests, politicians, scientists, artists, fathers, sons, and, of course, other isolated and alienated mothers. Woman does not mean anything more than her ability to give birth to new human beings. There is no place for any autonomy on the side of a woman herself, she is supposed to be completely obedient to the needs of the society and ideology. Viewed in this light, it is unsurprising that Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the currently ruling party in Poland, called the afore-mentioned Black Protest “a threat to the basis of the being of our nation” and also “an attack against the Church”. It seems crucial, therefore, for the Polish state to take complete control over female bodies and legally force them to become muted ovens, in which men can create new citizens for their nation. In other words, the only solution is to (legally) enslave them.

The genealogy of enslavement

Now, I would like to present the main obstacles that women encounter when they think of building a solidar subjectivity that can oppose the oppressive politics of patriarchy, drawing on Andrea Dworkin’s definition that “The genius of any slave system is found in the dynamics which isolate slaves from each other, obscure the reality of a

common condition, and make united rebellion against the oppressor inconceivable” (Dworkin: 1981, p. 85). Many feminist historians, sociologists and anthropologists have tried to recreate the genealogy of this enslavement of women, which disenables them to recognise each other and their submissive position towards their masculine masters. Inspired by Engels’ theory on the origins of the family, Dorothy Ballan claims that the enslavement of women began with the development of the surplus (Ballan: 1987, p. 13). The increasingly high value of inheritance sealed a victory of the father-right system, changing motherhood into a production of future masters and slaves. The situation of women changed dramatically “with marriage and childbearing isolating (them) from social production, making her totally dependent on her husband, and reducing her to the role of procreation for inheritance, and to the role of the husband” (Ballan: 1987, p. 16). In fact, women turned into their husbands’ slaves, forced to produce children which they were coerced to give away later to the male social, political and religious Order.

In her fundamental work ‘Domestication of Women. Discrimination in Developing Societies’, Barbara Rogers explains how the domestic enslavement of women works and what results it brings for women themselves. She proves that the work of women, including giving birth to children and nurturing them, is seen by (masculine) society as: “not-work or at best very light work”, because “this is closely linked with the identification of women’s place as the domestic sphere, as wives and mothers: the home is presented to them as their primary occupation even if they take a second, salaried job outside the home” (Rogers: 1981, p. 14). The patriarchal myth describes a woman as the guardian of the hearth, the transhistorical Vestal, who is enslaved in her (husband’s) house and separated from other women as well as the public sphere of the society. This is why any nationalist discourse always emphasises the importance of maintaining the so-called traditional division of labour and the conservative way of socialising men and women. Its greatest aim is to continuously recreate the myth of the family hearth, to which a woman, presented as the priestess of home, is tethered symbolically and physically through being everlastingly preoccupied with “her” domestic chores only. Krystyna Pawłowicz, one of the most famous conservative activists in current Poland, commented on the Black Protest that a normal woman “would not spend her free day on something like this; rather she would spend the time with her children and husband”. This means that women should comprehend the importance of the social duties imposed on them, they should know what they are supposed to do in their free time. A woman should stay where she belongs – at her (husband’s) house. According to the patriarchal logic, completely un-Reason-able, presented as a half-human worse-version-of-the-man, a woman is also completely unable to be decisive within any fields, thus she should be fully dependent on the will of (her) man. As an object, she ought to be obedient towards the Knower. This is precisely what the Polish government and the patriarchal apparatus called the anti-choice movement, both assisted by the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, want to do – to maintain the enslavement of Polish women by coercing them to give birth to other generations of Polish masters and slaves.

The politics of a cavalier

Correlatively, thanks to Andrea Dworkin’s genealogy of the notion of “rape” (Dworkin: 1981), we learn that this crime is nothing more than theft: a situation in which a man steals from another man his property, namely, his female slave, that is to say either his daughter, sister, wife or mother. This is not the kinship that is relevant here, but the sex of the property. And this belief is strongly embedded in the loud and widely published exclamation of the White European Christian man, Polish included, which can be heard nowadays from every corner of the continent, calling to protect “our” women, that is to say, our property, from the barbarian invader of the Dark-Skinned Eastern Muslim man. There is this special kind of identity of an ideological cavalier becoming more and more powerful and frequent in Poland, as in other increasingly nationalist or pro-fascist countries within the so-called West. It is a subjectivity of a

model righteous white male citizen who boasts his protective but arrogant attitude towards (his) women. The Polish cavalier, for instance, asserts that he will do everything for his lady. He will make every decision for her, especially those concerning her own body, will, morals, health, knowledge, income, et cetera. He says that he will defend her against the coming Muslim invasion and the compulsion to wear a burqa, since he believes that the high rates of domestic violence, mobbing and general gender inequality in Poland are just sufficient for her. The Polish cavalier also makes sure of his lady's salvation and outlaws emergency contraception because according to his beliefs, it equals murdering babies. The Polish cavalier always takes care of his lady's mental health so he preventively prohibits abortion under all circumstances because he feels certain that she will suffer less if she gives a birth to a child of her rapist than "kill her own baby". This was all evocatively depicted when the public debates concerning the Black Protest used to take place on television, when even in the left-wing programs only men were invited to discuss this new bill which practically concerns only the health and free choice of the female part of the society. Many Polish women begun to be genuinely afraid that they would have to give birth to children of their potential rapists if the bill passed. One of the most famous Polish cavaliers, archbishop Henryk Hoser, on the day of the Black Protest tried to calm them by explaining in an interview, that it is really rare to become pregnant after a rape: "the stress is so strong that it is uncommon (for a rape – MS) to result in pregnancy". Another specialist in the morality of women is Polish gynecologist Bogdan Chazan, notorious for his denial of providing legal abortion to a woman whose foetus had many genetic defects, who considers the morning-after pill "the pill of death". In support of this perspective, a writer and a Roman Catholic activist Tomasz Terlikowski claims that the pill is nothing else but Zyklon B, a pesticide used by Nazi Germany to murder approximately one million people in gas chambers in their concentration camps. The aforementioned leader of the currently ruling party in Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński, said in an interview, that although the government finally rejected the bill proposed by Ordo Iustus shortly after the strike, the party will work on their own version of the anti-abortion project. It would aim at the situation in which every pregnancy would be completed successfully, "even when the baby (=the foetus, MS) is condemned to die or heavily deformed" in order for it "to be baptised, buried, have its own name". By saying that, Kaczyński proved that the pro-masculinist government remembers to pay its due to the patriarchal Roman Catholic Church in Poland, which had helped the party to win last year election. Accordingly, within this narrative of a cavalier, the voice of women as regards their own body and autonomy is treated with disdain and must remain completely unheard. There are only men who can debate over the ties thanks to which they will be able to enslave women even stronger.

The Call for Solidarity

The recent situation in Poland proves that a great, collective subjectivity is needed for women to oppose the man's politics of nationalism, to stand for themselves and to protect their full autonomy. Margaret Sanger once said that "no woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body" (Sanger: 1919). Luce Irigaray agrees with it by asserting that a "woman is, from birth, a slave until she is able to decide for herself as a civil person" and "remains a slave of the civil power insofar as the decision to have a child is concerned". (Irigaray: 2000, p. 44). Everybody who is deprived of making the decisions as regards his or her body is enslaved within some discourse or power. This is why Polish women objected so strongly to the proposed new abortion outlaw. It was only thanks to this collective, solidary act of the Black Protest, which women rapidly and successfully undertook, that the bill was finally rejected. It is certain that this could not have happened without the great ideological fundaments that feminism had built for women. Feminism is a political and intellectual movement, which enables us to read the dialectics of masculine power. Therefore, to be prepared for the present and the future, there is a great need to follow the patterns created by feminist thinkers and activists as regards how to produce feminist knowledge, to practise the ways of effective resistance and

find new methods of mutual recognition between women. This is pivotal especially now, in the times of another strong backlash on the side of the patriarchy, misogyny and xenophobia. Andrea Dworkin reminds that

“There is astounding feminist literature to educate you (...). There are feminist philosophers, poets, comedians, herstorians, and politicians who are creating feminist culture. There is your own feminist consciousness, which you must nurture, expand, and deepen at every opportunity”. (Dworkin: 1981, p. 25)

We are thus well-equipped with tools needed to defend women from the backlash. The most important thing is to feel responsibility for and accountability to other women; to recognise other females from the past, the present and the future in order to build the strong woman-woman nexus which may oppose the masculinist politics. Therefore, the feminist knowledge and practice should be fostered and shared with others around us to change the general attitude towards the movement. The strategic tool of collective feminist subjectivity is definitely needed here, if not obligatory.

When a political identity is created, it can encounter many potential dangers, such as falling prey to essentialism, determinism or becoming commodified and marketed, to name but a few. Having said that, I share with bell hooks this sense of distrustfulness towards today's politics of difference when she poses the following question: “Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the *subject* when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?” (hooks: 1991) Because of the fact that the feminist discourse, especially within the academia, has become so entangled into this postmodern, post-structural sophisticated and complex rhetorics of relativism and pessimism, it becomes harder to build bridges between women real problems and theoretical ones. When thinking about postmodernism, one question remains: Whose Subjectivity do women want to deconstruct? Because, actually, they have never had their own subjectivity. Rosi Braidotti rhetorically asks in her article on post-secularism whether European women and other minorities had their Enlightenment (Braidotti: 2008). I would like to paraphrase the question and ask if women had their (efficient) structuralism to be able to become post-structuralist? Are they really in own of the subjectivity which they want to dismantle? For women, postmodernism can mean a continued diffuseness and enforcing the sense of alienation, both of which disenable them to invent effective strategies of collective resistance. To oppose “the politics of difference and otherness” (hooks :1991), which may be considered another patriarchal approach to dismantling the movement of women, I consider Spivak's “strategic essentialism” (Spivak: 1987) a much useful tool as regards this question. In order to fight for certain fundamental rights or to achieve a concrete aim, women should build a strong, common subjectivity to speak and act in unison, putting the differences between them aside. I think this form of activism gracefully and adroitly places itself between the quicksand of essentialism (which can be very exclusive and too universal) and the tenuity of over-relativism. It is crucial to know that togetherness means recognising others and becoming recognisable. The case of the Black Protest shows it is possible to do it: to fight together with other women against the patriarchal system which enslaves them. We should all take advantage of what feminism made women capable of: the possibility to recognize each other, to speak in unison and to take to the streets together to defend their rights.

Conclusions

What I want to argue for, then, is comprehending that the Great Masculine Subject, which is allegedly successfully fought by the postmodern paradigm, has not been deconstructed; rather it has been under reconstruction. It is also true that the Subject has become so strong that it makes us believe there is no need of fighting against it anymore. Is it not true that we have already internalised it (Him?) so deeply that we think we made it disappear? The dissolution of

Subjectivity takes place in the framework of patriarchy, within the discourse of the Subject itself. What I tried to present with this essay is the great need of strong and collective female Identity based on their aims and needs, through which they can oppose the masculine Power which has been enslaving them for so long. In countries like Poland, there seems to be no other method of resisting this strong combination of masculine Order embodied by the currently ruling party and the Roman Catholic Church. The Black Protest is a good example of showing what women can do when they gather together and collectively fight against their common oppressors. I plea for taking the present political situation of Hungary, Poland and the United States as a lesson that if we do not act united, we miss the possibility to be recognized and represented, and this is the first step to losing the fight against nationalism, xenophobia, supremacy and the rule of violence.

SOURCES:

Ballan, Dorothy. 1987. *Marxism and Feminism*, New York: World View Publishers.

Braidotti, R. 2008, *In Spite of the Times: The Post-secular Turn in Feminism*, Theory, culture & society, 25 (6).

Dworkin, Andrea. 1981. 'The Rape Atrocity and the Boy Next Door', 'Our Blood: The Savery of Women in Amerika'. In *Our Blood. Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics*. New York: Perigee Books.

hooks, bell. 1990. 'Postmodern blackness. In *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press

Irigaray, Luce. 2000. *Democracy Begins Between Two*, London: The Athlone Press.

Mosse George. 1985. *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and AbnormalSexuality in Modern Europe*. New York: Howard Fertig Publisher.

Denise Riley. 1987. *Does a sex have a history? 'Woman' and feminism*. In "New Formations", 1(1).

Rogers, Barbara. 1981. *Domestication of Women. Discrimination in Developing Societies*. New York: Routlege.

Sanger, Margaret. 1919. 'A Parent's Problem or Woman's?'. In "Birth Control Review", 6-7. Available also here: [<https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/webedition/app/documents/show.php?sangerDoc=226268.xml>].

Spivak. Gayatri Chakravorty. 1987. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. New York: SAGE Publications Ltd.

[<http://www.wsensie.pl/polska/18181-kaczynski-czarny-protest-grozny-dla-narodowego-jestestwa>].

[<http://www.fronda.pl/a/krystyna-pawlowicz-dla-frondy-ciemny-strajk,79486.html>].

[<http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/abp-henryk-hoser-o-ciazach-z-gwaltu,681067.html>].

[<http://wpolityce.pl/spoleczenstwo/241092-stop-pigulce-smierci-prof-bogdan-chazan-apeluje-do-premiera-i-ministra-zdrowia-wideo>].

[<http://www.newsweek.pl/plus/spoleczenstwo/terlikowscy-cel-pigulki-i-cyklonu-b-jest-taki-sam-zabijanie-artykuly,355338,1,z.html>].

[<http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20826949,kaczynski-chcemy-by-kobiety-rodzily-dzieci-skazane-na-smierc.html>].

Marek Susdorf is a research master student in Gender Studies at Utrecht University. Before coming to the Netherlands, he completed with distinction Postgraduate Gender Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and also graduated with MA degree from Slavonic studies at the University of Gdańsk, Poland. He is also a writer and has published two novels in Polish: 'Dziennik znaleziony w piekarniku' (2012) and 'Dziennik znaleziony w błękiecie' (2014). For more than five years now, he has been working for Polish director Marta Górnicka as her assistant, travelling around Europe with her three performances of The Chorus of Women.