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The Return of the Real Man:

Gender and E.U. Accession in Three Polish Weeklies

In the period preceding and immediately following Poland's accession into the European Union (01.05.2004) Polish media were overflowing "gender talk." On the radio one would hear randomly placed banter about "natural differences between the sexes" (in fact, a new station (FM 94), was established in 2002 with "real men" in mind). Almost any event discussed on the evening news could be commented with a "this is what women are like" or "men cannot help but be men." Magazines and newspapers provided an abundance of images featuring manly men and womanly women, as well as departures from such norm (most notably drag queens from gay pride parades in Western Europe). What follows is a reading of a selection of gender-focused cover stories published by three mainstream political weeklies – *Polityka*, *Wprost*, and the Polish edition of *Newsweek* between spring 2003 and the summer of 2004. My aim is to suggest a link between the intensity of "gender talk" in the media and Poland's E.U. accession.

The three weeklies ask a number of more or less worried questions concerning gender roles, sexuality and reproduction in Poland. Here is a representative sample of cover stories: "What does a man want today? To remain themselves, men increasingly take up femininity" (*Newsweek*, 21.04.02); "She works, he does not. How the shock on the labor market destabilized the traditional Polish family" (*Newsweek*, 01.06.2003); "How to raise a child on weekends. Working mothers besieged by good advice" (*Polityka*, 07.02.2004); "Special protection for women. Who needs the government gender equality program?" (*Newsweek*, 07.09.2004); "More freedom – but what about sex? New research on the erotic life of Polish women" (*Wprost*, 30.05.2004). In the spring and summer of 2004 the spotlight was on reproduction: "If we want to be a healthy society – let's make children" (*Polityka*, 14.08.2004); "The last parents. Dramatic decline in Poland's population." (*Wprost*, 11.04.2004). In the summer of 2003 the largely progressive *Polityka* wrote about the intolerance towards sexual minorities ("Homo-condemnation. The debate on homosexuality," 09.08.2003), and a year later it turned its attention specifically to lesbians ("When a woman loves a woman," 04.09.2004). In March 2003 the magazine went so far as to feature a group of feminists on its cover ("Women's rebellion. Polish feminists take to the streets (...)") *Polityka*, 08.03.2003). *Wprost*, the most conservative of the three magazines was, on the other hand, concerned about the way sexual minorities and feminists "terrorize" the heterosexual

and largely traditional majority of “ordinary” people (“The terror of equality” *Wprost*, 13.06.2004). On a more optimistic note, the magazines were preoccupied with the prospect of Poland’s having a female president (*Polityka*, 13.09.2003), and with Polish women’s skills in various lines of business – vastly superior, according to the magazine to those of women in Western countries (*Wprost*, 30.11.2003). Finally – a theme to which we will return – soon after Poland’s E.U. accession, *Wprost* reassured its readers that real masculinity was on the rise (“The return of the real man,” *Wprost*, 30.05.2004).

The intense gender talk had its visual equivalent, since cover stories went with images on the. In each case Poles were confronted with photographs of (mostly anonymous) men and women, ultra-masculine and ultra-feminine respectively. Obviously, these images were displayed on newsstands the week a given magazine came out, and lingered for months afterwards in various waiting rooms. But they also occupied public space, especially in urban centers, as the images often became billboards and city-lights advertising the weeklies. What does this deluge of stereotypical gender imagery signify? The easy answer is that the magazines in question compete for mainstream readership, and everyone knows that sex sells. One might also suggest that the magazines are simply providing a representation of social reality: Poland is going through a major shift in gender relations, a “renegotiation of the sexual contract” as one sociologist has called it (Fuszara). But given the intensification of gender-talk in period of E.U. accession, these are hardly satisfying answers. Moreover, the articles are only marginally concerned with facts. For the most part, they engage in myth-making, i.e. with uncovering “eternal truths” about men and women. Many (perhaps even most) pieces of “gender news” in Polish media of 2003 and 2004 are actually repetitions of similar fad-driven stories from Western, mostly American, media of the last three decades. The narratives behind the titles mentioned above will no doubt sound familiar: women want to have it all, but can’t; men are embracing equality, but women really desire to be dominated; women decide to have babies when it is too late; equality is a great thing, but children suffer; motherhood is in fashion again, etc., etc. Why would so much of this “news” end up in print before and after May 2004? This paper argues that Poland’s E.U. accession and the media’s preoccupation with gender difference are inter-related in a complex way, which requires a reading of cultural myths, not just realities. “The return of the real man” announced in May 2004 by *Wprost*, is no more and no less a “reality” than “the masculinity crisis” which troubled *Newsweek* two years earlier. Both stories are symptoms of a process which is not really, or at least not primarily, about gender.

The narrative that emerges from the mass of articles I have examined is highly formulaic. It unfolds as follows: (1) things used to be “normal” and “natural,” men and women used to know who they are, but (2) sex roles in Poland (and indeed, worldwide) are in crisis today, so that (3) the future looks bleak. Nonetheless, (4) we are sure that the natural order will be restored. I want to argue that we are dealing with a collective fantasy which has a lot to do with Poland’s encounter with the West, or rather the encounter between our fantasy of the West and the reality of E.U. integration. In other words: without denying that “the sexual contract” in Poland is undergoing a real process of re-negotiation, I suggest that the media representations of this shift are also, and perhaps primarily, an expression of hopes and anxieties concerning Poland as a nation in transition. The consoling narrative about an orderly past, a present crisis and an imminent restoration of order in the realm of gender relations is a displaced narrative about collective identity: an effort to dispel, or contain, collective ambivalence and anxiety concerning European integration and globalization, and the resulting diminution of Poland’s autonomy as a nation-state a mere decade and a half after this autonomy was restored.

My argument is inspired by feminist work on gender and nation, most of which was conceived in the context of the post-colonial (rather than post-communist) condition (see for example: Yuval-Davis; McClintock). There are important ways in which the two situations do not match, but my focus here is on promising points of overlap which make insights arrived at in the post-colonial context applicable to post-89 Poland. Recently, Polish intellectuals have also begun to conceptualize our gender mythology in terms provided by post-colonial theory (Janion). The basic idea can be summarized as follows. Nation and gender are both culturally constructed; moreover, they construct each other, via notions of what is “natural” and what is “cultural.” The negotiation of gender difference and the advancement of nationalism are parallel processes, because ideologies which naturalize gender tend to naturalize race and ethnicity, as well. Finally, in a variety of ways women are positioned as the bearers of culture, while the nation itself is often represented in collective imagination as a woman’s body (whether this body is young or old, healthy and fertile or sickly and on the verge of collapse, says a lot about a given ethnic group’s self-image). McClintock, following Elleke Boehmer, states that “the male role in the nationalist scenario is typically ‘metonymic.’” Men are examples, contiguous with each other, parts of whole called nation; women, on the other hand, are placed in a “metaphoric,” or symbolic relation to nation. “Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit” (McClintock 261).

My own observations of Polish media lead me to suspect that often it is not just “woman” that serves as metaphor for nation, but rather woman as half of a couple, where the other half might be present, implied, or conspicuously absent. In this context it is useful to call up Joan Scott’s argument that at the center of French identity resides the idea of complementarity of the sexes, an image of a heterosexual couple in erotic tension, with the woman available and responsive to the desiring male gaze. Scott argues that the French preoccupation about headscarves in schools, and the tendency to call them veils, is in fact a product of such a gendered (and sexualized) construction of French national identity. I wish to suggest that a similar dynamic is at work in the fantasy about the “Polish gender order” – its orderly past, its present crisis, and its imminent restoration. Polish “gender talk,” however, places more emphasis on fertility and reproduction, while the French version is focused on eroticism.

A few years ago I proposed an account of the link between gender and transition from communism based on a reading of a particular cultural text, the film *Sex-mission* (Machulski, 1983), a popular Polish S-F comedy (Graff, 2001). I argued that our recent history has been told through an extended gendered metaphor. State socialism was imagined as a totalitarian matriarchy with no private sphere and no intimacy, a world of castrated men and overbearing women. *Sex-mission* is merely the best known representation of this fantasy. The movie is a political allegory with the communist state represented as an underground world inhabited solely by women, ruled by means of an absurdly inept feminist/totalitarian regime, and held in place thanks to a lie – the claim that the earth above is uninhabitable due to nuclear radiation. The woman who rules this state, known as Her Excellency, later turns out to be a homosexual man who had resorted to a life of cross-dressing due to his terror of females. The “normal” (i.e. heterosexual and male dominated) world order is restored by two brave males from the past, who happen to infiltrate the land of feminists. Their struggle – clearly coded as “dissident” – is the plot of the film, and the source of its humor. Victory comes when the heroes seduce two of the women, and sabotage the feminist baby factory so that it produces a male infant. The natural (heterosexual) order is restored, and all ends well. The underground world – a sort of undifferentiated subterranean womb – can be abandoned, and life can begin above-ground, with the two sexes in their proper spheres. The film’s closing frame is a still: the new-born male’s sexual organ in close-up.

Sex-mission is by no means the sole example of the gendered narrative of Poland’s recent history. Transition to democracy has established itself in collective consciousness as the re-masculinization of national culture, supposedly feminized by state socialism. The logic

of this cultural myth required women's contribution to Solidarity to be forgotten, so that transition to democracy could be coded as restoration of a patriarchy. Throughout the 90s, backlash against women's rights was legitimized within a narrative of return to normalcy and national sovereignty, traditional gender roles serving as a guarantee of stability.

To some extent, the myth of "Sex-mission" is being recycled yet again the period of E.U. accession. This time it is not communism but the influence of the European Union that, in the eyes of a large part of the media, represents the reversal of gender roles in need of masculine intervention. At times, the E.U. itself is explicitly coded as "effeminate," due to E.U. legislation on gender equality and sexual minority rights. More often, it is suggested that our (Polish) attitude towards the E.U. should be more manly. Let me provide some hard evidence of the sexualization of Poland's role in the E.U. The following quotation comes from a *Wprost* editorial, printed a month before accession. It is a scathing criticism of those who will deal too softly with the E.U., i.e. support the draft of the constitution then under debate:

I have the impression that the great love of the members of the Party of the White Flag for the real Europeans (those based in Paris and Berlin) is a lot like sex performed without a real partner. (...) The Euro-constitution and the European lobby in Paris and Berlin are very much like orgazmotrons (devices for reaching orgasm). In contact with them the Polish hiper-Europeans are achieving virtual orgasms, i.e. they are really Euro-masturbating. (04.04.04, p.3).

This bizarre extended metaphor, opposing excessive love for the E.U. (masturbation) to a tough position in negotiations (real sex? marriage?) comes from an issue of *Wprost* which featured a piece on "sex without partners" as its cover story. Westerners, it appears, are all but addicted to the use of the Internet for sexual pleasure. The title of this article, "E-Sexfilia," is an obvious allusion to *Sex-mission* the movie, and the editorial links both to Poland's E.U. accession.

The link is rarely as direct as this, but most images in my collection project a disrupted gender-order, inflected by anxiety about both hierarchy and reproduction. Let us consider more closely several images featured on covers of the three weeklies:

- Woman in business suit with child, but no man (*Polityka*, 07.02.2004);
- Man with a baby, but no woman (*Newsweek*, 21.04.2002);
- Many babies, no parents to be seen (*Polityka*, 14.08.2004);

- Man, woman and plastic doll (instead of child) at breakfast table against a sickly green background (*Wprost*, 11.04.2004);
- Tall woman dressed for success towering over a casually dressed stay-at-home man (no child) (*Newsweek*, 01.06.03).

Also worthy of special mention are two images (not from covers) of gender-reversal. They speak particularly well to the notion of the matriarchy as presented in the “Sex-mission” narrative: an “unnatural” order in which men are both smothered and made ridiculous by women’s political/social ambitions:

- The presidential couple portrayed with swapped bodies. The result clearly more catastrophic for him than for her – the first lady looks quite attractive, if a somewhat bulky with a male body clad in a suit; but the president looks ridiculous as a woman, complete with a woman’s sexy legs and shoes (*Polityka*, 13.09.2003);
- A somewhat dazed looking woman nursing a grown man who is shrunk to fit in her arms (*Wprost*, 09.03.2003). This illustration went with an article called “Women’s republic,” which warned about the excessive power of Polish women in society. The image can be read on its own, or as part of a series images (one we may refer to as dazed-women-holding-something-that-is-not-a-baby). I have traced its predecessor in *Time* magazine, in a feature on infertility (22.05.2002 – dazed woman nursing a briefcase); a third one appeared in *Wprost* just a month after the “Women’s republic,” in an article on childlessness (13.04.2003 – dazed woman nursing a handbag). What the three have in common, besides the conspicuous replacement of a child with something (or someone) else, is the peculiar expression of the woman. In two cases the eyes are downcast to the point of seeing closed; in the third, there is an almost drugged quality. Clearly, the women have been misled, brainwashed, drugged into believing that their role might be something other than motherhood. They are miserable, but (as yet) unaware of that misery.

Clearly, these are representations of departure from an implied norm. They are anxious, worried images, which speak of lack, dissatisfaction, imbalance, yearning for a natural order – and they rely on the addressee’s readiness to call up such an order or norm. We are sked to entertain a fantasy of familial bliss, to envision a heterosexual, clearly differentiated and hierarchical couple with many children as our ideal.

A series of such reassuring images is presented inside the cover story on childlessness and imminent demographic catastrophe in the 11.04.2004 issue of *Wprost*. We are to accept

the large Polish family as the healthy alternative to the man-woman-plastic-doll trio on the cover. The article itself draws a clear link between having many children, being a Polish patriot, and faring well in the capitalist market. According to the author, the traditional family – stay-at-home-mom, dad driven to succeed by the need to “feed” his brood, numerous children educated to be real patriots – constitutes “the best capital” and a “perfect micro-market” which serves one well in “liberal economy.” Enemies of such a family are named: Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot (24), as well as socialists, and “feminist ideology.” Today, we are told, the family remains under threat in Europe (as opposed to the U.S.A.) due to high taxes and the excesses of the welfare state (which makes reliance on loved ones redundant). In a turn towards a pro-natalist neo-liberal happy ending, the final paragraph muses:

it is heartening that almost 99% of young Poles claim that happy family life and having children is of greatest importance to them. In 2001 professional careers were abandoned in favor of child-rearing by 61 thousand university-educated Polish women. (...) The only way to avoid a demographic catastrophe is to return to the family the autonomy it has enjoyed for many thousands of years, before the hostile welfare state began to disrupt it. (26)

Significantly, this article appeared in *Wprost* three weeks before Poland’s E.U. accession. “The autonomous family” – resilient, capable of reproducing itself “as capital” – is clearly a metaphor for the desired state of the nation. Selfless motherhood, relegated to the private sphere turns out to be the sole guarantor for community, patriotism and national survival. When women work, warns the author, the family is in danger of being ruptured by “internal competition, which often leads to conflict” (25). References to the U.S.A. as beacon of traditionalism and economic health help construct a fantasy of Poland’s “healthy independence” within the “unhealthy” body politic of the E.U.: we will maintain our prowess (and perhaps avoid Euro-masturbation...) thanks to a sturdy alliance with conservative forces in America. Arguably, the America *Wprost* turns towards with hope, is a deeply anachronistic vision, a “happy housewife” post-card from the fifties. But “feminine mystique” is equally anachronistic with regard to today’s Poland: a country where a vast majority of women (71%) agree that to work for pay is to have more social respect, while a mere 2% believe that homemakers are respected (Fuszara, 17), and almost half the population names “partnership” as the preferred model of marriage model (18).

Wprost provided an even happier ending to its gender drama in the last issue of May 2004 (i.e. four weeks after E.U. accession). The cover story – “The return of the real man” –

takes us on a speedy tour of world history typical of the poetics of “Sex-mission”: from the Amazons, through feminism, parthenogenesis and cloning, to “newest research” which proves that “serious problems are caused by ignoring the role of sperm in procreation,” and to the recent realization that claims about the “weakness of the male sex” were actually false. Experts are now unanimous: it is women’s emancipation that causes grave health dangers. But help is on the way. A Belgian theologian is cited as saying: “It is important, and healthy for women, for families, for societies that we are dealing with the return of the human male, almost from the dead” (80). The cover features a heterosexual (though as yet childless) harmony. The man, placed well above the woman, looks proudly and sternly ahead, into the future; the woman, her teeth bared in a submissive smile, directs her happy gaze up towards her mate. No wonder she is submissive: as the subtitle on the cover tells us, “The male of the *homo sapiens* is again becoming male.” We may be in the sickly, gender-troubled EU, but we remain a Land where Men are Men, and Women are Women.

Admittedly, *Wprost* is the most conservative of the three magazines: it promotes a mixture of neo-liberalism, nativism and ethno-nationalism embraced by neither of the other two. Nonetheless, the structure of gender-tales featured in all three magazines is common. It tends to take us into the past, to a blissful era of order, makes us pause in wonder over the crisis/reversal in the present, and finally offers a promise of a restored gender order thanks to the fortunate choices that Polish men and women will make: the former stepping forward, the latter receding into the background. Gender is given an aura of newsworthiness in these stories, but the aura of change is undercut by the conclusion that, in the end, men are men and women are women, for gender roles have an eternal, timeless nature. There is a tension between the making gender seem dynamic, and insisting that it is not, and cannot be. If we agree that gender and nation are closely related, then this tension can be read as a coded articulation of anxiety or ambivalence about Polish national identity in the period of E.U. accession: the need to imagine a constant, timeless (national) spirit, while accepting dramatic (political) change. It is important to note the political context in which mainstream (i.e. pro-E.U.) media operated in this period. Ambivalence about accession was largely unacknowledged, because there was need to mobilize readers in the face of a rising anti-E.U. sentiment on the populist and nationalist right. Weeklies such as *Newsweek*, *Polityka* and *Wprost* simply could not afford to endanger the accession process. In effect, in its coverage of E.U. accession, the mainstream press was carefully self-censored. Before the may 2003 Accession Referendum newspapers and magazines were simply urging their readers to vote and to say “yes.” During the crisis in negotiations that followed the referendum they insisted

that – whatever the glitches – accession will still benefit everyone. Dissent was only heard on the far right. Given this self-imposed censorship of mainstream media, the narrative of “gender crisis” followed by the “return of the real man” seems highly functional – not as a statement on gender, but as an effort to construct a workable notion of national identity in the face of E.U. accession. It seems to me that this function has, in fact, been fulfilled. All three magazines – even the notoriously conservative and Euro-skeptical *Wprost* – enthusiastically supported Poland’s “YES” to E.U. membership. Whatever reservations they had, were displaced onto, and resolved within, the arena of “gender talk.”

To conclude, let me restate my argument: I believe that ambivalence about Poland’s political transition was displaced onto discourse about gender and sexuality, and contained within this discourse by recourse to notions of “tradition” and “nature.” “Polishness” on its way to “Europe” was represented metaphorically as “traditional family life” under threat from the degenerate European (especially German) “liberals” (often represented by drag-queens in the Berlin Love Parade). Our true allies were the family oriented Americans. Homophobia and resistance to gender-equality became the trademarks of our “national character.” In the end, we were told, we could safely join the E.U. while retaining our true (i.e. patriarchal) identity. Anxiety about history was dissolved by means of a supposedly timeless truth about gender. Such a conservative gender message in mainstream media is hardly good news for the Polish women’s movement. But then again, it is not news at all: as feminists writing about the post-colonial condition have shown, the consolidation of traditional gender ideology is quite typical for societies in transition.

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