

# Postcolonial Central Europe. Between domination and subordination.

## The example of Poland

**Monika Popow**<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract:**

The aim of this paper is to analyse contemporary Polish postcolonial experience in the context of East and West European influences. In particular, it focuses on the historical reconstruction of the discourse of Central Europe, postcolonial interpretation of Polish history, as well as on contemporary processes of shaping identity and the creation of new dominating and subordinated groups in Polish society. Furthermore, discursive processes of exclusion represented in public discourse, media and policy documents are analysed.

It may be said that the role of Europe in colonization processes is remarkably complex. European economic and cultural influence can be observed all over the world. As Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo put it, European colonization has been supported by a developmental mission and the idea of modernity as a weapon against barbarism (M. Tlostanova and W. Mignolo 2009). However, Europe is also extremely heterogeneous. It has been symbolically divided into North and South and between West and East. In both cases the division is characterised by dualistic, phantasmatic opposition. In the case of “East and West” the dichotomy has been cast as “democracy vs totalitarianism”, “development vs backwardness”, “capitalism vs socialism”.

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<sup>1</sup> **Monika Popow** holds a PhD in Education Studies. She works at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. Her research interests include: the question of race and racism in Central and Eastern Europe, citizenship, development, national identity. Research Fellow at Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbooks Research (2012). Her doctoral thesis was devoted to representations of Polishness in textbooks in grammar school in the light of postcolonial theory and Ernesto Laclau theory.

The East/West divide in Europe has been one of the most pivotal factors for European identity construction processes during the twentieth century, but in terms of its imagery its roots can be traced much further back. The identity oppositions are commonly assumed to be real. Polish sociologist Jan Sowa states that although the antagonistic division does not describe reality, it actually responds to our desire to perceive ourselves and ‘the others’ (Sowa 2011). Nonetheless a vast part of Europe is often perceived, and perceives itself, as an in-between area. This particularly relates to the region called Central Europe, and, within its framework, Poland. The fall of the communist system in Poland in 1989 re-oriented its political compass, and commenced the process of economic transition. However, despite its improving economic situation, similar to other post-communist countries, Poland still undergoes economic and cultural transition, this time related to a desirable catching up with the biggest players. It may be assumed that the dualistic West-East opposition remains a significant part of the national Polish imaginary. As I am going to show in this article, it still serves as a useful framework for creating binary oppositions in terms of national and citizenship discourse.

What is more, power relations are dividing Polish society into various dominating and subordinated groups in terms of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and social class. In terms of postcolonial theory, it can be argued that Polish society is creating and re-creating its new subalterns. The purpose of this essay is to contribute to theoretical understanding of European postcolonial experiences and coloniality in Europe. It consists of three parts. First, it discusses the discursive creation of Central Europe. Next, the paper deals with the issue of Polish postcolonial experience, and with the ‘modernisation’ after 1989. The third part is devoted to the issue of provincial identity and the creation of imaginary others. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the described issues for identity creation processes.

### **The creation of Central Europe**

The concept of Central Europe gained popularity among intellectuals from Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland in the 1980s. It played an important role in the process of economic and political transition. Although there is no specific definition of Central Europe, it is worth recapitulating that the concept comes from the German term, *Mittleuropa*,

and has been applied to describe cultural identity of those nations, and to refer to common cultural heritage and national uniqueness of the countries. It supported the aspiration to escape from the Soviet sphere of influence, and was opposed to official socialist identity discourse. Milan Kundera, in his famous essay *The tragedy of Central Europe*, argued that Central Europe was a forgotten part of the West (Kundera 1984). These ideas have been shaping the Central European imaginary for many years.

Central Europe, as a discursive construct, was based on a historical discourse. As Taku Shinohara puts it:

one of the themes of Central European discourse is composed of references to certain historical "traditions". By confronting this discourse of Central Europe with the present and historical "reality" of "Central Europe" or mentioning the total destruction of Central Europe, during and after the second World War, one could simply declare that Central Europe does not exist and is only an imaginary construction (Shinohara 1996)

Furthermore, the discourse of Central Europe was strongly related to nation and nationalism. It was developed to support emerging post-socialist nations on their way to independence and international recognition. In other words, it was supposed to legitimize their existence (Shinohara 1996: 33).

The concept was widely used in the region in the 1990s and gradually lost its popularity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Over the time the discourse has been redefined and has become influenced by a neoliberal discourse. The dominating economic discourses on Central Europe usually indicate the defeat of communism and final return to Europe. As Alison Stenning and Kathrin Horschelmann put it, the orthodox version of this view 'expects the east to shape up and play the game, and be judged with the west since "there is no alternative"'. The more oppositional version also locates the east within the globalised, capitalist world, but stresses its position as subordinate and powerless' (Stenning& Horschelmann 2008: 320).

Today the label of Central Europe has been widely used to describe modern capitalist nations in this part of Europe. Central Europe is discursively constructed as different from Eastern Europe, which means that, due to cultural similarity with the West, it successfully went through economic transition, and naturally, adopted Western values in terms of social organisation and economy. While the neoliberal discourse of Central Europe highlights economic success and opportunities given to the region by the global market, the critics of neoliberalism indicate the hierarchical relationship between a 'core' consisting of the old EU countries and a periphery consisting of so-called new member states (Stockhammer 2014). Taking into account the normative character of the centre-periphery concept, the process of discursive construction of Central Europe should be subjected to critical analysis. As a key postcolonial category, the notion of 'centre' describes one of the most important postcolonial binary oppositions – imperial centre and colonial periphery. Historically the centre of Europe is better described as an elusive and unstable phantasm, than a category assigned to a particular nation or state. The mythical centre has always been contractual and has depended on emplacement of power relations. It has been an object of desire, and, simultaneously, expression of cultural superiority.

The discursive creation of Central Europe invites the location of this region in the imaginary centre of European culture. It may be assumed that this discourse was an integral part of nation-building processes and, symbolically, reflected a desire to define a new non-socialist identity. However locating oneself in a centre means also building new hierarchical relations between oneself and the peripheries – the East. As Said showed, the notions of East and West are discursively constructed as contradictions. Said described its characteristics: irrationality, traditionalism or conservatism, despotism, primitivism, compliance versus rational, progressive, democratic, and modern (Said 2008). Today in Poland this discourse is being directed at former USSR countries. Although, nations that label themselves as Central European, keep being perceived as East in Western Europe, they represent themselves as different from a geographical East of Europe. Being non-East is still an important feature in identity building processes in this part of Europe, which shows the strength of the ideological, political or identity purposes needed to create a binary image of the world.

## Postcolonial Poland

Post-socialist countries have often been objects of postcolonial studies. In 2000 an American based Professor, Ewa M. Thompson, devoted her book *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* to the analysis of imperial discourse in Russian pre-revolution literature (Thompson 2000). Poland was presented as a victim of colonization, rebelling against imperial influences. For many years the book has been indicating direction of postcolonial interpretations in Poland giving rise to discourses of victimization of the Polish nation. Early Polish and foreign research focused also on a general interpretation of Polish postcolonial experience, for example, through the analysis of Polish cultural violence towards Ukraine and Lithuania (Bakuła 2006). Only recently have efforts been made to explore processes of construction of minority identities, including sexual minorities and other non-normative identities, or processes of social stratification and marginalization (Kochanowski 2011). Research examining the processes of creation of new social divisions has been conducted, analysing orientalization, subordination and racialization processes inside Polish society (Buchowski 2008; Bobako 2011).

Polish culture has been historically described as Western European, often with reference to a shared Judeo-Christian tradition. For centuries western Roman Catholicism has coexisted with Eastern cultural influences in Poland. Nonetheless, Polish western aspirations were hardly reflected in centuries-old political orientation, which concentrated on eastern borders, and led to actual cultural, military and economic colonization of Western Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. Despite a belief that in its history Poland played a role of martyr, there were long periods of Polish domination, particularly in the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, established in fourteenth century, and covering the territories of present day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. Polish cultural supremacy was considerable, and generally regarded by the Poles themselves, as “self-evident, and suitable for the purpose of fostering a sense of a civilizing cultural mission” (Fiut 2009).

Although the Commonwealth was a dualistic state made up of Poland and Lithuania, ruled by a common king of Poland, with ethnic diversity and religious tolerance guaranteed by state documents (1573), it was actually dominated by Polish cultural patterns. The Polish cultural

domination was based on a discourse of cultural and civilizational superiority, and a more advanced state organization. However, Polish domination should not be analyzed in terms of ethnicity exclusively. It was also based on class domination. Until the end of the nineteenth century Polish culture was based on a gentry culture. The Commonwealth economy was relying on a serfdom system, which became the dominant form of relationship between peasants and nobility. The peasants rights were gradually limited, including tying to the land, forced labor and coercion of living in noble manorial estates, known as folwarks. What is important in the context of my study, Polish gentry owned huge areas of land in the east. The class stratification, which developed from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century was strongly related to ethnic diversity, with upper levels of society following Polish cultural patterns. Around this time the discourse of Polish gentry nation emerged, identifying nobleness with Polish culture exclusively. Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belarusian cultures were discursively associated with peasantry. The stereotype is still often used in Poland. According to Jie-Hyun Lim, the concept of gentry nation supported Polish nationalism among gentry, especially after the loss of independence in 1795 (Lim 1999). The class stratification based on ethnic difference can be identified as a racialization process. It was supported by biological and psychological difference discourses, indicating social problems, addictions and violence as natural features of lower classes. The famous Galician Slaughter may serve as a good example. This peasant uprising in 1846 was directed against manorial property and oppression and led to many deaths. It has often been presented as evidence of peasants inborn cruelty and brutality. Monika Bobako indicates that the racialization process was repeated during Polish transition in 1989 (Bobako 2011).

In parallel fashion the discourse of Poland as intermediary between East and West appeared. In 1683 Polish poet Wespazjan Kochowski, referring to the Battle of Vienna in his *Polish Psalmody*, wrote about the special role of Poland as a bulwark of Christianity and the superiority of the Polish political system. The idea of Poland as bulwark of Christianity, defending Europe against the Islamic Ottoman Empire, became one of the most important symbols and phantasms in Polish culture. It was repeated frequently, and was developed in nineteenth century in the metaphor of Poland as Christ of Nations, losing independence and suffering to save the world. Besides the obvious nation-building roles of this metaphor, it

should be mentioned that the idea of bulwark of Christianity and Christ of Nations expressed Polish nationalism and sense of cultural superiority as one of the oldest elements of Polish oriental discourse. It was also placing Poland between West and East, and assigning to it a special role.

Polish thinking about nation and society is, in other words, strongly influenced by binary oppositions. I have identified at least two of them: West vs. East and gentry vs. peasantry. Although a dualistic world vision is characteristic of most European nations, in Polish historiography its permeation became an important nation-building element, and metaphor, around which national imaginary and self-image were built. Placing itself in a leadership role in Central Europe after the collapse of communism is intimately linked to traditional mythical and ideological representations of Poland. The redefined ideas of Poland as intermediary between West and East, as well as of bulwark of Christianity, were used during the transition after 1989 to promote new economic and military alliances. Below I am going to present selected discourses, chosen on the basis of its representativeness for the expression of West-East metaphor in Polish public discourse.

### **Modern Poland - a new civilizational project**

As the authors of *Domesticating neoliberalism. Spaces and economic practice in post-socialist cities* indicate, debates about post-socialism have been centred in large part on the discursive power and political economy of neoliberalism. The early debates revolved around ‘shock therapy’ and ‘gradualism’ and the perceived ‘failure’ of the state to effectively manage political-economic life (Stenning et al. 2010). A huge influence of mass culture occurred almost immediately after the collapse of communism. Mass imagination was kindled by pop-culture and soap-operas, telling about lives of multi-millionaires, who, as Blake Carrington, a fictional character on the American TV series *Dynasty*, were leading a comfortable life and benefitting from economic prosperity. Leading neoliberalism through cultural models is a well-known phenomenon, which is aimed at including national economies into a global market system, with the help of mass culture, which is known to be a useful ideological tool, helping organize society and create identities (Gill 2008). Economic transition was

accompanied with neoliberal reforms, which entailed precarisation of labour and deepening of social class differences.

Poland's accession to the European Union not only required systemic changes, but also necessitated other methods of describing Poland's place in Europe. In the pre-accession period the European Union was present in the Polish public discourse mainly in the form of the metaphor of the 'return to Europe'. It was supposed to denote a return to the path of modernisation, understood as westernisation (Cichocki 2011). Politicians and mainstream media focused on the creation of Poland as one of the leading countries in the region, with stable economy and political and military alliances with Western Europe and United States. European identity was presented as a higher civilizational standard identified with wealthy society and modern technologies applied to everyday life (Cichocki 2011).

In contrast to the discourse of modernisation, as a reaction against the embracement of the West and neoliberal cultural patterns, the right-wing parties tended to highlight heritage of conservatism, traditional patriotism and Catholic values. The list of Poland's historic achievements included the nineteenth-century metaphor of Poland as the bulwark of Christianity and a Christ of Nations figure. The supporters of that vision of Poland were sceptical about European integration, and stipulated the necessity of preserving Polish national identity. In the post-accession period, the division between Euro-enthusiasts and Euro-sceptics became blurred, however it did not disappear completely. Polish philosopher Monika Bobako points out that the transition in Poland involved the discursive formation of new categories of people, which are presented as opposites: those, who were presented as useful and adaptable to a new capitalist reality, and those, who were not (Bobako 2011). Indeed, the public discourse of the transition period often presented particular groups of society as flexible, individualistic or rational, while others, who failed to follow the new path, as passive, backward or socialist.

From the very beginning of Polish transition, the public discourse was shaped by entrepreneurship discourse. In today's Poland entrepreneurship keeps influencing vision of citizenship. The relation is emphasized in official Polish documents. *Poland 2030* –



*Developmental Challenges*, an official report launched by Polish government, is an illustrative example:

If, given increasing competitiveness in the global economy, Poland wants to avoid the threat of a developmental drift, the determinants and instruments of development policy should be defined in a new way. It is urgent and critical, as in these matters the future starts today, even if world's actual state is shrouded by ongoing crisis. In brief, Poland needs a new civilizational project (Poland 2030).

Here integration with western culture and global economy is presented as part of modernization and a new civilizational project. Thus, on the one hand, in official documents Poland is presented as part of globalized world, a modern country with a knowledge-based economy. On the other, the nineteenth-century vision of Poland, in accordance with traditional doctrine is still present in media, as well as in mainstream discourse, which is clearly represented in Polish eastern politics. While Russia is presented as antagonistic to Poland, the other post-Soviet countries, especially Georgia and Ukraine, are perceived as able to follow “the Polish path”. The analysis of policy documents reveals that Poland is created as a leader in the region that may become a teacher for the post-Soviet region and intermediary for the West (see: *Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 1 July – 31 December 2011*).

The report indicates goals for the Polish Presidency: supporting democratic transitions and building modern state structures, supporting economic growth and mobility in East and South (10-11). It can clearly be seen that discourses of globalization, nationalism and neoliberalism mix in mainstream discourse. It repeat also the East-West frame, additionally including North Africa, which in all likelihood is related to undertaking Western discourse on Africa. In today's Poland the divided public discourse and attempts to combine contradictory positions are still widely observed. The national strategic documents mentioned above indicate the need to foster new citizens, for example:

So that democracy, free market economy and cultural pluralism – having been set in motion under transition – could function in a correct, stable and productive way, a trigger in a form of adequate level of social capital, or, more simply, trust between people, ability to cooperate, creativity and change of individual attitudes is needed (...). The increase of social capital should be conducted in such a direction so as to enable Poles to supplement their capital of survival and adaptation, allowing effective cooperation and development in the modern world, where the only constant element is change. Post-materialist values, concerning quality of life, emancipation of social minorities and possibility of individual expression, should be added to traditional values, such as family, solidarity and work (Poland 2030)

Here social capital, consisting of values related to work, is believed to support social development. Its aim is to prepare Poles to function in the modern world, and, not explicitly, in the global economy. Relation to a neoliberal discourse, which is represented by such a features as individualism and flexibility (constant change) may be observed. It should be noticed that elements of the discourse of tolerance are included into neoliberal citizenship discourse. Being tolerant is often presented in public discourse as part of modern citizenship discourse, while lack of tolerance is attributed to traditionalism and backwardness (Popow 2014). While being tolerant is perceived as a modern feature in official documents and mainstream media, rejection of what is called “Western customs” remains an important part of nationalist discourse.

Similar to most European countries, right-wing movements play an increasingly important role in public discourse in Poland. Perceived as populist in mainstream media, they refer to traditional and, often, nationalist values, raising the issue of negative economic effects of joining the European Union, criticizing neoliberalism, but also pushing the idea of Russian conspiracy against Poland. The discourse of right-wing movements may be described as cultural nationalism. It refers also to the idea of social justice, attracting young precarious workers, elderly people, tenants of public housing, and others economically excluded groups. It also uses anti-gender and homophobic discourse. The right-wing movements, supported by some politicians, act against the feminist movement, who they accuse of destroying traditional Polish family and promoting what they label ‘gender ideology’ and ‘gender education’, coming from West and aimed at sexualisation of children. Despite the fact that gender is a

well established concept in Poland, widely used in academic discourse and in feminist and LGBT movements, the “gender hysteria” became a hot topic in 2013.

Poland has also been experiencing the increased popularity of nationalist movements of a military nature. The organizations, which attract mostly young males, refer to the concept of the outstanding role of Polish nation, and promote nationalist, patriarchal and homophobic ideology. The marches of independence, organized by them annually, are actually riots. In November 2013, demonstrators attacked the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Warsaw and set fire to “The Rainbow” artistic installation considered as symbol of LGBT movement. The increasing popularity of conservative and nationalist movements, emphasising conservative moral issues, may be understood as a means to express discontent with neoliberal reforms. It attracts mostly groups excluded from benefiting from capitalism. However, what is interesting in terms of my analysis, is that the right-wing movements often use postcolonial terms. The biggest oppositional party’s leader calling the ruling party, Civil Platform, “a German-Russian condominium” may serve as a good example.

The supporters of right-wing movements often express the experience of being colonized by neoliberalism and western culture. Simultaneously, they indicate the necessity to resist the power of Germany and Russia, by which they invoke the traditional West-East orientation in Polish politics. The citizenship model promoted by those groups usually present a romantic, chivalric model of patriotism. Nevertheless, this citizenship model indicates the role of social solidarity, embedded in the tradition of Catholicism. However it does not change the fact that the resistance towards neoliberalism through the language of postcolonialism is accompanied by xenophobia, homophobia, and other exclusions.

### **Provincial identity and creation of the imaginary Other**

According to Etienne Balibar, the end of the Cold War re-opened the question of meanings associated with “Europe”. He claims that military conflicts inside Europe, as well as constant divisions and partial integration among European countries, need a particular postcolonial view, and deconstruction of European universalism. It may be assumed, that, similar to the discourse of European identity, the European narrations should be subjected to critical

analysis (Balibar 2003). As we can see, public discourse in Poland is clearly divided into modernism and traditionalism. The simultaneous sense of cultural inferiority and superiority, as well as the search for its own place in Europe, may be interpreted as part of a postcolonial reading, according to which subordinates resist, elevate their own culture, but also want to become part of the world of the colonizer. In the case of Poland, the ‘modernization’ plan aimed at political and economic development collides with the fear of losing identity and becoming dominated by the phantasmatic West and East.

Taking into account that in Poland, both discourses of coloniality and postcoloniality are present, I would like to propose an interpretation based on the category of provincializing, introduced by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Chakrabarty argues the division into centre and province serves to construct a totalizing model of colonial modernity. With such a division in place, there will always exist the less and the more advanced side, the latter being of course “civilized” in the colonial sense of the word. Consequently, the weaker side will have to adopt the path of modernization in an attempt to equal the stronger side (Chakrabarty 2009). The situation in Poland illustrates the thesis of Chakrabarty. In Poland the mainstream citizenship identities include a strictly defined model of citizenship and political activity. The discourse of citizenship is shaped mainly by elements of the republican tradition, in which the citizen takes responsibility for fulfilling his or her obligations towards the country and acting for the common good.

Identity models presented in the public discourse can be considered as shaping a positive image of citizenship, ascribing to it qualities such as tolerance, entrepreneurship and creativity. In fact, however, these models can be oppressive as well, limiting citizenship to a set of particular features. Certain social groups are discursively excluded from the citizenship image. They are either absent or presented as a populist group, differing from the preferred image of citizenship. Citizenship seems particularly important in the context of collective identity creation processes. According to Chakrabarty ‘concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history. One simply cannot think of political modernity without these and other related concepts.’

(Chakrabarty 2000: 4). As I have shown in the Polish context being a modern citizen means becoming Western. Modernity is identified with political emancipation. However, it is emancipation structured by exclusions of particular social and cultural groups from mainstream national and citizen discourse. In a postcolonial reading they are silenced and orientalist. Whereas the marginalised groups evidently create contradictory citizenship discourse, devoted to defence of national identity and the assigned values. In this context, the resistance against values associated with the West, such as gender equality, calls upon our attention. According to Chakrabarty provincializing means resistance against the colonizer's values, often through nationalist ideology or by presenting one's colonized group or nation as superior. Being provincial means the feeling of simultaneous desire and reluctance. The colonized wants both - to become part of culture of the colonizer and to preserve his or her identity.

The social change that occurred after the collapse of communism has brought a significant shift in women's rights discourse, which became an integral part of public discourse. Moreover as a European Union member, Poland is formally obligated to follow a gender mainstreaming policy. Although gender equality has always been considered a controversial issue, sudden resistance against "gender ideology" allows us to assume, that it is identified with modernization and West. This is highlighted by the fact that the opponents of "gender ideology" claim that it is alien to Polish culture. The "gender hysteria" in Poland resembles anti-European and anti-modernization resistance in former colonial countries. In both cases, the progressive ideas of women's rights were rejected due to fear of losing identity and control (Spivak 1988). Being provincial involves the creation of a subaltern. As poststructuralist theories have shown, identity creation processes always require 'an Other', a metaphoric mirror reflecting everything that is perceived as different from us. Othering takes various forms. As Michał Buchowski puts it:

shifts in collective identities and the meaning of 'the Other' have become a part of the transformations in Europe after 1989. The degree to which various countries, authorities, social groups and individuals have embraced the free market and democracy has become a yardstick for classifying different regions, countries and groups as fitting more or less

into the category of 'us,' i.e. (post)modern-Western-liberals. (Buchowski 2008).

According to Buchowski during the Cold War period, seen from a Western perspective, the Iron Curtain set a clear-cut division between 'us' and 'them' which was reduced, in fact, to geography. The two systems' border was inscribed into the mental map in which two distinctive tribes appeared: the civilized 'us' and the exotic, often 'uncivilized' Others (Buchowski 2008). The internalised projection refers to a division between a Polish middle class and the lower classes: unemployed, elderly people, poor rural residents, migrants. The division is not only economic, but also political. Buchowski in his work analyses the practice of 'nesting orientalism' in Poland. He points out that in most places in Central Europe this is not yet the question of immigrants settling down in localities, but assumed others living among 'us'.

The phenomenon described by Buchowski is easily observed in public discourse, where Polishness is connected to centre-periphery relationships in terms of geography (metropolis vs. rural areas), and social relations. The most visible social opposition is the relation between those who benefit from a free market and those who remain on the margins of economic prosperity. Simultaneously, the analysis of media discourse shows that representations of poor people are limited to the images of social assistance recipients and delinquency. The critical analysis of newspaper articles devoted to the issue of poverty and unemployment, published in the post-accession period (2004-2014), in the biggest daily newspapers and weeklies (Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita, Polityka, Wprost, Newsweek), shows that the image of the poor has been permanently orientalized and pathologized. Due to the fact that the analysis covers over 500 articles, I am going to present only some general conclusions, which I think clearly illustrate my thesis.

The poor described in the analyzed material are mostly presented as passive and silenced. They rarely express their opinion, rather illustrating the thesis on pathology of poverty, and accompanying phenomena such as unemployment, hunger, loneliness, social assistance, single parenthood, and prostitution. The feature mostly ascribed to poverty and unemployment is laziness:

People are rotten to the core. Waiting for manna from heaven. Deprive them of benefits. Maybe they will lift a finger – Janusz Glinicki, a businessman from Wierzbica near Warsaw gets nervous when he listens about unemployment (...). Despite supposed 16,6 percent unemployment in the legionowski area, there is no one to pick strawberries (...). Even paying 100 zloty per day, it is difficult to find a good fruit picker. A person works 35 days and does not want to work more (...). To produce on a large scale, one has to hire workers from Ukraine, but here the administration operates slowly. We order employees on June 1, and due to the bureaucracy in the consulates, they arrive only in the middle of the month. (Molga 2013)

In the analysed piece, Polish unemployed, not willing to work under conditions proposed by employers, are presented as ungrateful and with a demanding attitude. What is more, none of the workers speak in the text. Consequently, their arguments are not presented and remain unknown. Instead individual moral judgments are presented. Additionally, the process of dis-subjectification of workers may be observed, as the Polish fruit pickers are said to be replaced by Ukrainians, who, in turn, are ordered like a commodity.

The psychological condition of the poor is described as distorted. Much space is devoted to the issue of depression and social problems:

Depression, redundancy, poverty, isolation, domestic violence – these are five sisters of unemployment. They act faithfully, slowly damaging body and soul. Three or five years later destruction is ready. One is no longer able to work, even if he or she will find job. One becomes ‘professional unemployed’ (Pietkiewicz 2006)

Although analysed articles raise issues of psychological consequences of unemployment, the consequences are limited to personal issues and individual social maladjustment:

The paradox, which consists in maintaining or even expanding of areas of poverty under economic development and growth of income. Growth is stimulated by competition. But the same competition makes everyone to overcome the bar, which is being set higher and higher. People with low qualifications, "psychosocial deficits" - a tendency to depression, inability to establish contacts, and "coping with life", addicted to alcohol or drugs - are pushed to the margins, that it is very difficult to escape from (Gadomski 2004, author's translation)

The passage quoted above represents the discourse of pathologization and orientalizing of the poor. Due to the fact that participation in economic development is presented as a social and psychological norm, those who do not fit in the desirable reality are described as unhealthy, addicted and unable to achieve higher state of development. The features attributed to the poor are presented as a cause, rather than a consequence of social marginalization. Poverty is represented in terms of a scientific and medical discourse:

In the manorial system the peasants were made to work, so consequently they did not care about their work. Something like that "could have remained in their genes" (Podgórska, Dubiniec 2004)

The argument about genetic predisposition to be poor and shiftless resembles colonial discursive practices of creating pathologized images of native people in media and anthropological discourse, for instance the stereotype of Native American drinking (Quintero 2001). According to Quintero presentation of native people as dysfunctional, pathological, or weak is aimed at disempowering the colonized. Here the representation of rural residents as biologically predisposed to pathology serves as explanation of their poor condition. An argument that suggests the naturalness and inevitability of their situation.

Lately one of the most striking examples of nesting orientalism was the case of 'the cunning old woman from Radom'. In December 2012 during a public Christmas party organized by authorities of the town of Radom, the people attending the event took away food products from the Christmas table. The incident was filmed and posted on the internet. One of the women appearing in the film quickly became an object of jokes and mockery. She was called



‘the cunning old woman from Radom’. She became a symbol of the Polish province (commonly referred to as Poland B), ignorance and backwardness, appearing in thousands of internet mems.

Monika Bobako claims that in public discourse orientalization can be supported by racialization. It involves essentialization, reification or naturalization of features, attributed to particular social groups, with the aim of justifying power relations. According to Bobako discursive racialization occurring in Polish transition discourse legitimized inequality and exploitation, and resulted in the discursive creation of economically handicapped social groups so as to justify the need of transition (Bobako 2011). The process could have been observed in case of ‘the cunning old woman from Radom’, to whom stereotypes associated with old females and inhabitants from the provinces had been assigned. The internet mems presented the woman as biologically, and most importantly, psychologically different from other, by implication, normal citizens. The discourse, indicating backwardness, greed and brutality, resembles the one historically used towards peasants. However, the economically excluded are not the only groups subjected to violence. Due to migration the structure of Polish society has been rapidly changing. The number of migrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, South America and Asia, who choose Poland as their country of destination increases. The biggest migrant group in Poland are Ukrainian females, however there is also an increasing number of women from Asia, who perform care work in Poland.

The Ukrainian migration of care workers may be compared to the position of Polish females in the UK. The phenomenon is connected to displacement of reproductive work in Europe. Nowadays a significant shift in European internal migration can be observed. While workers from new EU member countries come to Western Europe, an increasing number of Eastern European and Asian migrants perform low-paid jobs, and care work in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. In Poland it leads to actual changes in social structure, due to the fact that in the socialist period of its history, Poland was ethnically homogenous. As Lise Widding Isaksen shows, countries hosting economic migrants create ethnic hierarchies of workers according to the dominant representations regarding gender and culture (Widding Isaksen 2009: 107). This process occurs also in Poland, where migrants mostly work illegally, taking care of children and elderly people. Performing low-paid jobs, they have become an important

part of the economic system in Poland. They are often discriminated and subjected to violence and abuse.

The appearance of migrant workers in Poland is also related to the displacement of work in global capitalism. It is a consequence of including Poland into the global market. The work of migrants is indispensable to assure the functioning of the system. Female migrants perform work traditionally related to women's responsibilities. However, the neoliberal changes in terms of care work and increasing social divisions allow some women to pay for the work, and hire a migrant to perform it for her. This creates new social divisions, appearing on the intersection between gender, ethnicity and social class, and leads to European societies being split into various dominant and subordinated groups. It is related to the process of creation of structural distance between men and women of different social and ethnic groups together with coloniality of labour (Gutierrez – Rodriguez 2013). Migrants, and particularly females from East, in other words, became the new subalterns of Polish society. Working in the grey zone, in the private sphere, they remain both indispensable and invisible. Their ability to act is limited. In terms of Gayatri Spivak's theory, they cannot speak, cannot articulate their claims, thus they remain at the margins of Polish society. Power relations inside society are built on the junction of class and ethnicity, and evoke radical exclusion from public discourse.

### **Between East and West**

The aim of my paper was to investigate the issue of postcolonial Central Europe using the case of Poland. Despite political divisions, former socialist countries adapted the Western model of modernity and civilization, becoming subaltern to the West and creating, at the same time, its own forms of colonization. Nowadays, after the collapse of Soviet Union and economic transition, presented in Central and Eastern Europe as a necessity to catch up with West, the question of European postcolonial experiences seems to be particularly relevant in the context of European integration and creation of common European market. Furthermore, cultural and economic changes are accompanied by new divisions, related to social differentiation and migration. The Polish postcolonial condition, although often regarded as subordinate to political and military rule of Russia, and later, USSR, manifests likewise a

complex relationship between dependence and supremacy, leading to actual development of slavery system, and divisions on the junction of social class and biological difference.

Central Europe as an idea or imaginary place is still present in public discourse in Poland. Although as a label it is mostly used in economic analysis, as an unspoken name, it fills a symbolic space between West and East. The well-known symbols are being used to facilitate neoliberal transition, as well as to organize society. What is more it remains an important element in identity creation processes. Jan Sowa, quoted at the beginning of my paper, indicated the significant role of West-East opposition in Polish collective imaginary (Sowa 2011). East and West play simultaneously the role of the Other in the process of articulating a Polish national identity. It is literally reflected in public discourse, where Poland is presented as part of the West, while the East is limited to Russia and Soviet Union, and identified as barbarian and less civilized. This opposition becomes the basis for a quasi-postcolonial discourse, created as an analogy to anti-colonialism, presenting Poland as victim of Russian colonization (Thomson 2000). In Polish public discourse this opposition is repeated by both supporters and opponents of modernization.

The results of my analysis indicate that the aftermath of a Polish postcolonial experience is still perceptible. The interpretive frame involved dualistic opposition between East and West, which has been considered to be significant historical symbol in Polish national imaginary. The East-West orientation remains the axis around which social structures have been built. It is present in political debates, educational discourse and, in ordinary people's consciousness, becoming symbol of a desperate search for identity. Both, East and West are rejected and desired. It may be assumed that they play the role of Other. The contemporary mainstream Polish national discourse promotes models of national and citizen identity limited to particular sets of features. The mainstream models of citizenship and patriotism are built on imaginary European identity understood in terms of civic nation discourse.

In contrast to these a discourse of cultural nationalism is formed. It is also formed on a peculiar understanding of Europe. Poland is represented here as an in-between area, whose historic mission is to resist to Russian colonization. Despite using the idea of social solidarity, the issue of violence and hate, appearing in the cultural nationalism discourse, as well as violent mechanisms of discrimination of particular social groups in both discourses, indicate

radical exclusion from the national discourse. It may be assumed that it is a response to identitarian fear and uncertainty. In addition to divisions in public discourse, actual divisions on the junction of social class and ethnicity are created. In processes associated with neoliberalism historically rooted metaphors, stereotypes and representations are used to create new divisions and power relations. As far as migration from the former USSR countries is concerned, symbolically the power relations are also built on a West-East axis. Undoubtedly, processes corresponding to the described ones can be located in other Central-European countries. It is representative of the whole region, consisting of post-communist countries which have been going through the subsequent process of transition now aimed at obtaining desired Western identity.

The question arises if a Central European framework is still useful and opportune for this type of analysis? Contemporary neoliberal displacements in terms of power and work prove that we can still consider an East-West axis in Europe as an important symbolic tool in organizing society. Doubtfully, the neoliberal order is produced differently in Western Europe and in post-socialist countries. What makes Poland an interesting example is that in Poland national imaginary and the historical sense of superiority towards its East plays a significant role in this process. The Polish postcolonial and colonial condition is thus related to both historical dependence and contemporary colonization processes. It seems that the Polish experience may be complementarily interpreted in terms of Franz Fanon's theory, which suggests that "the native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor" (Fanon 1963: 93-94). As Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2011) puts it, postcolonial violence is able to reproduce itself, and, what is more, the continuation of violence indicates continuation of coloniality even after the end of colonization. On the basis of the above mentioned, it may be assumed that, although Poland has adapted all formal requirements to become European, it still cannot deal with unequivocal definition of its identity, excluding the Others, resembling everything Poles are afraid to be. The situation of being in-between, uncertainty of one's own place in Europe indicates that being postcolonial in Central Europe, and in Poland, means being the victim and perpetrator of violence at the same time. It clearly shows that after the empires, the aftermath of European self-colonization is still perceptible.

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