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Socialist Realism in a New Perspective

A Proposal of Literary History Analysis

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Abstract: This article offers an attempt to look anew at the infamous phenomenon of socialist realism. The author describes the literature of the period and the debates that revolved around it at the time, as well as the new, Marxist criticism and history of literature. An examination of the existing research paradigm leads her to note the need for its expansion and propose an analysis of socialist realism applying Pierre Bourdieu's categories of distinction, symbolic capital and habitus.

Keywords: communism; Polish history; habitus

1. The Problem with Socialist Realism

The problem with socialist realism is that it does not pose any problem at all. It has been examined in detail and comprehensively analyzed as a literary style and as a period in the history of literature. Libraries are full of reliable studies of socialist-realist phenomena in literature, architecture, visual arts and other domains, written in nearly all European languages, and supported by studies on Stalinist newspeak and propagan-

da. These studies reveal a surprising agreement or at least compatibility, not only regarding their subject or their research paradigm but most of all – regarding their anti-communist perspective, to which, it seems, there is no alternative. Paradoxically, it is this agreement of opinions that results in cognitive discomfort even on the part of traditionally-oriented researchers. As far back as almost two decades ago Mariusz Zawodniak wrote:

I do not know whether we can welcome the fact that Polish studies on socialist realism have not occasioned practically any disputes; there has not been practically a single issue that would stir a *serious* polemic or just a discussion. What aroused much interest was only interviews, various sorts of memoirs and repeated justification attempts. It seems that we have become specialists in persistently asking “why” (Zawodniak, 2000, p. 141).

This lack of debate or controversy, or even significant differences of perspectives, is also related to the fact that today socialist realism is dead and buried, it is a period that has become devoid of inner stakes and motivations. As Zawodniak aptly observes, today it can only serve as a basis for reconstructive analyses that aim to be objective but in fact result in objectification; analyses which not only pass value judgments on socialist realism but also annihilate it in moral and aesthetic terms, seeking to answer questions that can be paraphrased as “how could they do it?” and “how was it possible?” However, on the other hand, and in a different sense, socialist realism is still very much “at work,” and has been so especially from the 1980s on.¹ In the social perception, it remains a metonymy of communism and communist Poland: the quintessence of political, historical and social evil in general, and of bad taste in particular. As such, it is an important figure of social and cultural consciousness, a figure of a monster, or an aberration, which constitutes both a warning and an insult. Socialist realism is an active element of the current social and aesthetic imaginary, where it functions as the exact opposite of art and culture as such; an act of categorizing any text, monument, sculpture or building as socialist-realist holds a destructive power and brings to an end any discussion of its aesthetic value.

Zawodniak’s analysis, as well as other studies published in the same 2000 issue of the journal *Teksty Drugie* [Second Texts], was a harbinger of a sense of exhaustion with the approach applied so far, a sense that it had already fulfilled its potential and that all that remained was a repetitive, laborious exercise in filling gaps in an essentially complete picture.

1 I return to this issue further on in this article.

2. The Paradigm

The key features of the dominant paradigm, or rather its key assumptions, can be summarized easily. Firstly, socialist realism constitutes an *anti-culture*: it cannot be treated as a cultural period or direction, as it did not create culture, but became a symbol of its decline. Secondly, it is essentially *alien*: not only did it adopt patterns developed elsewhere (in the Soviet Union), but it also introduced and enforced them disregarding fundamental and natural trends in Polish culture. Thirdly, it is *inauthentic*: it is a sign of subjugation, a symbol of Soviet domination and Russification; its typical features include proclamations of self-criticism and allegiance to the communist party, and hysterical, although justified, fear of any deviation from orthodoxy – consequently, artists did not speak in their own voice. Fourthly, it constitutes an *anti-aesthetics*, an evidence of bad taste elevated to a binding principle, of common schematism peppered with naïve didacticism; it is a collection of petrified, tired patterns of thought and language, poor literature and ridiculous, pushy, black-and-white ethics. In short, socialist realism is embarrassing. Fifthly, it is *anti-nature*, also in the sense that it reversed the natural hierarchy, disrupted the eternal order, undermined the position of established authority figures or of authority figures in general. Socialist realism was a display of incompetence or servility of artists. In the case of renowned authors that are otherwise regarded as cultural authority figures (e.g. Jerzy Andrzejewski, Tadeusz Konwicki, Adam Ważyk, Wiktor Woroszyński and others), it is sometimes viewed as a manifestation of a relatively brief period of madness. As it turns out, then, socialist realism is something obvious and predictable on the one hand, and irrational on the other. It is considered the literary exponent of Stalinism.

The above paradigm has developed over a long period of time. Although first prompted by a reckoning with Stalinism in the wake of the Polish October of 1956, it came to flourish only in the 1980s, in underground periodicals (the so-called *drugi obieg*, second circulation) and publications issued in émigré circles. In terms of theoretical apparatus, the paradigm has relied on the use of a category of totalitarianism, defined as a mode of organization of social life whereby the state is in control of all aspects of public and private life of citizens, the political system is a single-party and autocratic one, and unanimity is imposed in the sphere of political and cultural convictions. The 1980s brought studies of this kind by Janusz Sławiński (Sławiński, 1985/1990 [English edition: Sławiński, 2016]), Zdzisław Łapiński (Łapiński, 1988 [English edition: Łapiński, 2016]), Edward Balcerzan (Balcerzan, 1988 [English edition: Balcerzan, 2016]) and Michał Głowiński (Głowiński, 1990 [English edition: Głowiński, 2016b], 1992),² the leading figures of structuralist thought in Polish literary studies. No longer subject to institutional

2 Cf. in particular Głowiński's essay entitled "Don't let the past run wild": *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* as Mythical Narrative" (Głowiński, 2016a).

constraints, the paradigm developed after the political breakthrough of 1989, when a number of studies analyzing various aspects of socialist realism were published also by other scholars, including Zbigniew Jarosiński (Jarosiński, 1991, 1999 [English edition: Jarosiński, 2016], 2009), Jerzy Smulski (Smulski, 1996, 1998, 2002b, 2016), Leszek Szaruga (Szaruga, 2006 [English edition: Szaruga, 2016]) and Wojciech Tomasik (Tomasik, 1988a, 1988b, 1999 [English editions: Tomasik, 2016a, 2016c, 2016b, respectively]), and others.³ It is also important to mention *Słownik realizmu socjalistycznego* [A Dictionary of Socialist Realism], a fundamental work edited by Zdzisław Łapiński and Wojciech Tomasik (Łapiński & Tomasik, 2004).

Two basic varieties of the discussed paradigm can be distinguished, offering various focuses: the milder liberal variety, and the harsh rightwing-nationalist one. The liberal model of anti-communism focuses on the limitation of liberties in socialist realism, on the way it imposed its worldview and suppressed the freedom of public debate. The nationalist variety, in turn, emphasizes the destruction of national tradition, brutal Russification and imposed foreign rule. Importantly, however, differences between these two variations do not undermine the essential coherence of the paradigm itself: its core features remain valid in both varieties despite the discrepancy of worldviews and descriptive categories. The shared dominant narrative of decline, subjugation, alienness and poor literary quality has consolidated the conviction of literary scholars that socialist realism never had any internal stakes and neither did it have symbolic capital in Pierre Bourdieu's meaning of the term (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) – a power to create legitimate cultural order, legitimate imagery, biographical narratives, etc. (I return to this issue further on in this article). As mentioned above, this paradigm turned out to be particularly prolific, and so far has not encountered any significant alternative, despite the before-mentioned symptoms of its exhaustion. Indeed, we can endlessly turn to further elements of this thoroughly investigated research field and reproduce the underlying story, but this activity will not reveal new dimensions of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

3. My Assumptions and Proposals

My modest proposal consists in accepting the achievements and findings of the dominant paradigm but at the same time shifting the perspective to place socialist realism in a context that is able to reveal its new features and elements and allows for producing its somewhat different picture. I do not engage in a fundamental dispute

3 See e.g. Śnieżko, 1994 (English edition: Śnieżko, 2016); Wołowicz, 1999a (English edition: Wołowicz, 2016), 1999b; Kłak, 2001 (English edition: Kłak, 2016); Mazur, 2011 (English edition: Mazur, 2016), 2013; Bates, 2000 (English edition: Bates, 2016); Zabierowski, 2001 (English edition: Zabierowski, 2016); Wilkoń, 2016; and a study concerning film: Hendrykowski, 2015.

with particular statements of previous research but I put different focus both on socialist realism itself and on the previous findings. I am not alone in making such shift: a new approach and a broader perspective can be identified in a number of studies, often ones focusing on visual arts or architecture rather than literature, e.g. the volume edited by Tomasz Załuski and Aleksandra Sumorok (Załuski & Sumorok, 2017), as well as some English-language studies on Soviet Russia and the Stalinist period, e.g. works by Sheila Fitzpatrick (Fitzpatrick, 1999, 2008).

With my background in history of Polish literature and culture, I focus on the Polish language area, primarily on literature. Unlike most scholars, I perceive socialist realism as part of local history rather than a transplant from foreign reality which had no local predecessors and brought no outcomes, although it needs to be admitted that socialist realism's unique character may make it seem to constitute an exception in that regard as well. Also, my project is not a comparative one, and thus I do not refer to other models of socialist realism, like the Czech, German or, most importantly, Soviet one. Consequently, I do not analyze socialist realism solely as a Soviet import, even though certainly its Soviet model was supposed to be binding: it was a constant point of reference and had a decisive impact on all discussions and actions. The assumption that "socialist realism on Polish ground was merely a weed transplanted here from foreign soil" (Łapiński, 2000, p. 6) forecloses understanding of its significance for Polish culture, as it invalidates the issue altogether.

Socialist realism constituted a leap, a radical change, and yet its arrival was not unprepared: the prewar activity of *Miesięcznik Literacki* [The Literary Monthly] testifies to the continuity of certain cultural and social strategies. This continuity is also clearly apparent in 1944–1948, the period directly preceding socialist realism, when a tactical approach, identifiable later, was developed. Further on in this study I discuss the common thread of those strategies: their focus on a project of egalitarian culture that relied on the use of Enlightenment ideas but attempted to introduce radical practices.

This leads to my third key assumption: *I perceive socialist realism not as a style, and not as a literary style in particular, but as a strategy*; I will develop this idea below with the use of previously mentioned Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, alongside his concepts of habitus and distinction.⁴ While I employ Bourdieu's categories here, I do so largely against Bourdieu's theory itself. Broadly speaking, his theorization does not refer to social change (which in his framework is essentially impossible) but focuses on discussing the illusory character of such change, which in fact only amounts to cultural reproduction at a different level. Using the same categories, I make an attempt to describe a radical break in culture.

4 I discuss my understanding of these terms further on in the present article.

4. Revolution and Socialist Realism

The postwar years were an intense, turbulent, ambiguous time, yet one characterized by clear, albeit sometimes inconsistent, modernizing tendencies.⁵ The period certainly had its internal dynamics and thus reducing it to a story of hammering in a foreign transplant is an oversimplification. In the literature on the subject, in both literary and historical studies, a divide became established between the first postwar years (until 1948), with their relative freedom and limited pluralism, and the “dark night” of Stalinism in 1948–1956. While I am aware of considerable differences between these periods when it comes to institutions, practices, and conditions of life, I would nevertheless like to point to the continuity of certain cultural tendencies and strategies concerning the transformation of society, principles of cultural production and participation in culture.⁶

Although, as mentioned above, the patterns of socialist realism were obviously Soviet in origin,⁷ what requires a closer look is the specificity of its Polish experience, as Polish socialist realism developed in a context different from the Soviet one. In Poland, socialist realism arrived at a different historical moment– it appeared shortly after the introduction of socio-political changes (four years after the war, and three years after the seizure of power). In the USSR, it had arrived earlier, but also “later” in a relative sense; 1934 was 15 years prior to Polish socialist realism but many years after the Soviet Revolution.

As a matter of fact, then, Soviet and Polish socialist realisms were proclaimed at different points, and with a different goals (in the Soviet Union: in a function resembling that of the Thermidor Revolution) (Jarecka, 2019)⁸ – even for this reason alone the Polish experience can be treated in its own right rather than as a local variety of Sovietization. Socialist realism arrived at various moments of a revolutionary change of the

5 From today's perspective, these contradictions are easily noticed in the inconsistent emancipation of women – the sphere of the family and reproduction remained subject to conservative models and practices. The same was the case with struggle against antisemitism and with narratives concerning ethnic minorities – they were stranded in the vague, non-emancipatory strain of universalization and struggle against racism, without describing the actual course of the Holocaust, not to mention Operation Vistula (Akcja Wisła, resettlement of the Ukrainian population from south-eastern Poland in the late 1940s).

6 The same can be observed in the case of Soviet Russia: the early post-revolutionary period and the traditions of the Soviet Proletkult tend to be separated from subsequent periods, particularly that of socialist realism, which did arrive later but displayed a similar drive for equality.

7 But not only Soviet: it is also worth noting here Bertolt Brecht and his engaged plays.

8 Jarecka stresses that in the USSR, socialist realism came about “as a Thermidor,” a movement countering the revolutionary energy of the avant-garde art and based on resentment against it. Polish socialist realism, on the other hand, as an externally-derived package implemented “from above,” according to Jarecka, had much less destructive power and was a part of an altogether different historical process (cf. Jarecka's presentation at a December 2019 seminar of the Center for Cultural and Literary Study of Communism (Institute of Literary Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences) and the doctoral thesis she is preparing at the Institute, entitled *Lewica komunistyczna (w Polsce) i sztuka w latach 1944–1948: Surrealizm, realizm, marksizm* [The Communist Left (in Poland) and the Arts in 1944–1948: Surrealism, Realism, Marxism] (Jarecka, 2019)).

state and society – and in this context revolution is to be understood in the literal sense: as a sudden turn exerted by means of coercion and violence, a radical change of the social and political system as well as of the cultural order. This revolution proclaimed equality but it had little to do with the liberal understanding of revolution as an act of freedom and an act leading to freedom. It would seem a banality to mention that the communist societal order aimed for the emancipation of vast social groups rather than for freedom in the liberal sense, yet in the heat of the debate many cultural historians seem to forget this. Polish socialist realism (anti-avant-garde art that was rather conservative in taste and prone to pathos) became part of this revolution – it came to be used as a tool in the equality project and thus found itself poles apart from the classical values of the art field: creative freedom, the quality of aesthetic experience, and a requirement for artistic innovation.

The Polish communist project of the postwar period displayed certain culturalist features: it contained an assumption that rules of social (and economic) life depend on patterns of culture, and vice versa, that society and economy reproduce patterns of culture, often in the form of models perceived as natural, obvious, eternal and self-evident. It is worth noting that from the very beginning, even before the war was over, the new Polish authorities were hard at work building the material and institutional base for culture workers (such as writers' residency centers and new publishing houses, periodicals and cultural institutions); the establishing of such infrastructure in the face of severe war damages and general impoverishment indicates the importance of culture for the entire project (Fijałkowska, 1985). Indeed, for communism, the sphere of culture was not just like any other field of struggle over power and legitimization (Zaremba, 2001; English edition: Zaremba, 2019). Yet the awareness of its significance for the revolutionary project is easily lost in narrowly themed studies, particularly those conducted from the anti-communist perspective focused primarily on propaganda and agitation, and thus losing sight of the social and cultural context of revolutionary action.

5. Counter-Distinction as a Cultural Strategy in the Early Postwar Years

I want to stress that *within the new, Marxist-communist approach, for the first and the only time in Polish history, culture was supposed to overcome the principle of distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), that is, overcome such organization of society and culture whereby differences in social and symbolic capital and in embodied socio-cultural practices engender a strict hierarchy and contribute to actual and symbolic violence. Socio-cultural structure shaped by the rule of distinction aims at the cultural reproduction and legitimization of social divisions or even social contrasts, and preserves social stratification and the underprivileged status of the social strata perceived as inferior. Distinc-

tion, then, performs a peculiar translation: it translates social exclusion into seemingly neutral aesthetic categories, at the same time naturalizing these categories by locating social exclusion and violence in the sphere of under-culture, a sphere of revulsion towards popular taste and folk practices. Consequently, within the communist project, the abolishing of cultural patterns based on distinction had to involve the overcoming of the associated aesthetic criteria – criteria which were deeply ingrained, embodied and internalized.

Any analysis of this problem must proceed in two directions. An inquiry is needed, firstly, into how postwar Polish Marxists (such as Stefan Żółkiewski,⁹ Maria Janion¹⁰ and Tadeusz Kroński¹¹) developed the concept of emancipatory potential of culture. Secondly, we must ask how they attempted to overcome the pre-existing symbolic monopolies.

Regarding the first direction of inquiry, one of their strategies consisted in a critical approach towards the literary canon of the Polish humanities, particularly of traditional Polish literary studies and history of philosophy. Both of these fields, which were previously characterized by distinctly idealist orientation, now became a target of criticism and an object of reconstruction. A new attitude also emerged towards the sanctified and taken-for-granted cultural canon, as exemplified by the famous dispute over the literature of Polish Romanticism.¹² What was at stake here was not only a change of the literary canon but also a change of hierarchies, of value judgments, and of the entire approach to the field of literature. It was an attempt to develop an emancipatory culture.

As for the second direction of inquiry, one exemplary strategy was a public campaign aiming at the transformation of the social field. This campaign, however, was not uniform or unequivocal, as it involved a struggle between two visions: of upward social mobility on the one hand and, on the other hand, of a total transformation of the social structure towards a classless society (which would include also challenging the key

9 Stefan Żółkiewski – literary critic and historian; editor-in-chief of the journals *Kuźnica* [The Forge] (1945–1948), *Polityka* [Politics] (1957–1958), *Nowa Kultura* [New Culture] (1958–1961), *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* [Culture and Society] (1959–1968); founder of the Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Sciences, and its first head (1948–1952); member of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (KC PZPR) until 1968; head of the Department of Education and Culture of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party (KC PPR) (1947–1948), and the Department of Culture (1948–1949) and Department of Science (1955–1956) of the KC PZPR; minister of higher education (1956–1959); cultural policy-maker and author of numerous works in literary criticism and cultural theory; removed from the KC PZPR after March 1968.

10 Although the first postwar years were just the beginning of Maria Janion's career, her scholarly activity was, nevertheless, important for literary studies at the time.

11 Tadeusz Kroński – philosopher and historian of philosophy; renowned specialist in German classical idealism: Hegel and Kant; author of *Rozważania wokół Hegla* [Reflections on Hegel] (Kroński, 1960b). He taught Marxism at the Training Institute for Academic Cadres (Instytut Kształcenia Kadr Naukowych, IKKN) at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (KC PZPR), and worked at the University of Warsaw. His students (Leszek Kołakowski, Bronisław Baczko, Krzysztof Pomian and others) were the founders of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas.

12 The culmination of the dispute was Żółkiewski's study *Spór o Mickiewicza* [Controversy over Mickiewicz] (Żółkiewski, 1952).

role of the Polish intelligentsia). This conflict resulted at times in contradictory actions and practices, though in the end the strategy of social mobility turned out to be far stronger and more effective. Constantly in the background of these activities and practices was the category of violence – both actual and symbolic – of Polish communism, which tried to develop orthodox patterns of thought and action in the field of culture with the support of the state apparatus and a system of repression, including most notably censorship.

6. Struggle for Control over Symbolic Capital

The task of overcoming the pre-existing economy of cultural and symbolic capitals was an exceedingly difficult one. Communism was encountered with widespread and profound animosity: particularly during the first postwar years, it was treated as an alien invention (Prokop, 1995, 1997, 1998), a part of Soviet invasion or simply as destruction of culture.¹³ In essence, this was the narrative that Polish Marxists initially faced. The same narrative, which fostered a backlash at a later date, did not disappear even in the Stalinist period.

During the first postwar years, and also later, until 1956, communist actors identified the complex habitus of the Polish intelligentsia, and diagnosed it as a significant element of the social structure, one that gave basis to the cultural reproduction of social divisions (Zawadzka, 2018). The self-critical literary genre of “intelligentsia’s reckoning” (*obrachunki inteligenckie*), popular at the time and viewed today as an irrational aberration and a reversal of the natural hierarchy – can well be described in Bourdieu’s categories. Polish Communists clearly noticed the significance of differences in social and cultural capital, and believed that the key to their success lay in abolishing this imbalance. It needs to be emphasized that this was the first practical and factual attempt at counteracting cultural reproduction of the social structure and of distinction in the cultural field; an attempt that was practiced both institutionally, from above, and on a grassroots level, one that transcended the sphere of social and philosophical ideas, micro-practices and experiments, and became a large-scale movement.

13 As discussed in scholarship, the vision of entire Polish society unified in resistance against the new order does not correspond to the historical reality of the period, see e.g. Zaremba, 2012; Kersten, 1985 (English edition: Kersten, 1991). At this point, it is worth referring to Andrzej Paczkowski’s findings on the actual results of the 1946 referendum: the abolition of the Senate, the upper chamber of parliament, was supported by 26.9% of the voters, the land ownership reform – by 42%, and the Oder-Neisse border with Germany – by 66.9%. Of course, the official results were rigged, but the actual data do not indicate an utter isolation of the new authorities or a complete lack of social support (Paczkowski, 1993, p. 159); based on: Central Archives of Modern Records, Warsaw (Archiwum Akt Nowych, AAN), Bolesław Bierut papers (Zbiory B. Bieruta) II/29. This support increased along with the increasing levels of upward social mobility.

Agata Zysiak (Zysiak, 2016) observes that – despite immense and effective emancipation work and considerable institutional changes, and despite the actual social advancement of the working class and the peasantry – the academic field in fact preserved its potential for cultural reproduction, that is, potential to reinstate and maintain the prewar intelligentsia's habitus, cultural hierarchy, its hegemonic social position along with the power to assign meanings and create socially recognized narratives about the past and the present.¹⁴ This observation also applies to the field of art. The emancipating individuals transformed the reality which they entered, but they also struggled for recognition and thus conformed to the existing models, norms and hierarchies. Polish Marxists were certainly aware of this trend.

Stefan Żółkiewski emphasized the passive resistance of the Polish intelligentsia, including its sections considering themselves liberal, leftist, or progressive. He analyzed the conservative traits of the intelligentsia's habitus, which before the war had allowed intelligentsia's members to somehow accept the anti-Jewish "ghetto benches" at Polish universities or far-right student fraternities – but which made it difficult for them to accept the postwar change of socio-political order. As he observed in his "Próba diagnozy" [A Diagnosis Attempt]:

I am a member of the intelligentsia writing about the intelligentsia. But let's be honest: quite a large proportion of the intelligentsia are undecided; distrustful, they remain passive, reluctant, expectant. And they are by no means reactionaries. They aren't servile elements of the big capital or big landowners [...]. It's simply inner emigration (Żółkiewski, 1945b, pp. 1–2).

As reasons of such state of affairs, he pointed to the intelligentsia's social alienation and its surrendering of the monopoly on Polishness to nationalists. "An average member of the Polish intelligentsia cannot think in political terms [...]. Our intelligentsia is not fascist, but a certain proportion of its members became desensitized to reactionary toxins." Żółkiewski emphasized that the wartime merger of the far-right National Armed Forces (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, NSZ) into the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK) provoked no protests or outrage: it proved acceptable to the intelligentsia's imagination. "The presence of reactionaries did not cause astonishment or worry, reactionaries were ordinary, casual, they were encountered on a daily basis, [...] the far right student was a familiar type." "What aroused nervous suspicion and instinctive xenophobia was the sight of a progressivist. He was a stranger, a supposed foreign agent" (Żółkiewski, 1945b, pp. 1–2).

Żółkiewski also pointed to what Bourdieu described as the habitus of the privileged classes: what was most beneficial socially was not the actual skills and competences, but social attractiveness, eloquence, and the ability to improvise and to switch codes of conduct which was unintelligible to people who had advanced socially: a superficial

14 Piotr Hübner (Hübner, 1992) makes similar observations, although in different categories.

literary culture held more importance than thorough education. “Here lies the root of the dismissive attitude of some of our intelligentsia to the systemic changes; that is why they underestimate the decisive role of these changes for the inner transformation of the individual, for the transformation of the entire style, taste and content of cultural life” (Żółkiewski, 1945b, p. 2). Clearly, such a profound cultural change went beyond the social imaginary of the intelligentsia (Salmonowicz, 1999).

This interference between institutions and habitus was also noted by Tadeusz Kroński. In a letter to Czesław Miłosz, he wrote: “Personally, I’d prefer the struggle against Catholicism in Poland to be more effective, and I’m not sure if it wouldn’t be necessary to close all university faculties of the humanities and replace them with other institutions” (Miłosz, 1999, p. 313). Later on, Kroński’s iconoclastic comment did not remain unnoticed: it came to confirm communism’s image as barbarism. What remained unnoticed, however, was Kroński’s rationale of a rebellion against inherited cultural capital, which remained at the core of social and cultural reproduction and of the entire conservative and anti-revolutionary formation as such.

Breaking the habitus thus required changes at the societal level, including the introduction of a new type of institutions, focused not only on increasing the social diversity of the intelligentsia or providing access to higher education to young people of working-class and peasant backgrounds but also on implementing a new model of education and new methods of the production and transfer of knowledge. A flagship initiative in this respect was the new university in Łódź, a working-class city with no previous academic traditions – a move envisioned as a great social experiment (Zysiak, 2016).

The dispute between the liberal vision of the university (represented by Tadeusz Kotarbiński) and the social vision (of Józef Chałasiński) was in fact a conflict over the project of modernizing the Polish society. The liberal university was supposed to be apolitical, independent and non-engaged. Chałasiński’s concept, on the contrary, emphasized the levelling of cultural potentials, included preferences for underprivileged groups, and relied on connecting the university with the social revolution that was concurrently taking place in Poland. The social university, then, aimed to provide a practical basis for overcoming cultural reproduction. In this context, the period of Stalinization that followed, putting an end to free discussions and introducing actual and symbolic violence, can be viewed in terms of intensification – as an attempt at seizing and holding a hegemony required in order to overcome the resistance of the social matter, to consolidate the emancipation project and to ensure its advantage and victory. Cultural hegemony was to be seized by means of officially proclaimed adherence to Soviet orthodoxy and the introduction of the Soviet model (allowing for some local modifications), with all connected social and legal sanctions, including censorship, self-criticism, self-control, control of the individual by the collective and the risk of being dismissed from a position or employment (cf. Goban-Klas, 1992).

Another flagship institution of the discussed period was the Institute of Literary Research (Instytut Badań Literackich, IBL), established by Żółkowski in 1948. The Institute's aim was not only to carry out comprehensive literary studies, publish dictionaries and encyclopedias and coordinate the activity of other centers of literary studies, but also, and most importantly, to implement Marxism in literary studies as a new framework that would inform the new social project. The focus of the Institute was on transforming the cultural paradigm in order to allow releasing culture's emancipatory potential, to allow for the inclusion of the marginalized groups, to reevaluate the national literary canon and to introduce a new mode of understanding literature. A researcher particularly worth noting here is Maria Janion, who became emblematic for the new type of literary studies scholar in social, generational and gender terms (Chmielewska, in print). The Institute promoted the young generation of researchers in a bid to break the pre-existing academic hierarchy and to undermine the position of such established authorities of Polish literary studies as Stanisław Pigoń and Wacław Borowy.

What mattered, however, was not only the generational or the gender change but also the full overthrow of the traditional stratification of the scholarly field. Already in 1945, Żółkowski declared, with top figures of Polish academia in mind: "We are sickened by the stuffy atmosphere of intuitionism and irrationalism, all kinds of emotional, qualitative thinking that held lordship in the realm of thought for the last four decades" (Żółkowski, 1945a, p. 2). A year later he emphasized that the prewar educational system had been an instrument of class selection, and that universities still required a reform in this respect, since the young generation of the intelligentsia kept reproducing prewar class divisions (Żółkowski, 1946). He accused the intelligentsia of lacking a vision of culture that would correspond to the new social reality:

They need to know what culture they aim for; to abandon the prewar baton-wielding type of student, and to develop a new type – a student who is thoughtful, inquisitive, an enthusiast of progress. [...] A transformation needs to be made in regard to the social composition of academic youth, who need to be extracted from their familial and ideological settings [...] in order to revitalize the atmosphere of our universities. The youth have to stand against tradition – in favor of inquiry and a critique of the old ways (Żółkowski, 1946, pp. 1–2).

The entire educational system, including higher education, was intended to fill gaps in the education of the masses and to "shape a new type of youth."

7. Changing the Literary Canon

Overcoming the power of the pre-existing monopolies needed to be followed by a change of meanings, and of the literary canon in particular. This process progressed at a variable pace, as conflicts emerged between various concepts and evaluations.

Kroński remained an uncompromising rationalist, an enemy of cultural messianism in all shapes and forms, and of the culture of Romanticism, which he viewed as conservative, religious and anti-revolutionary (cf. Kroński, 1949, 1954–1959, 1960). What he identified as truly revolutionary was the cultural framework of the Enlightenment, historically regarded inferior in the Polish literary tradition because of the Romanticism's dominance. Kroński called for a revaluation of this hierarchy.

Although Żółkiewski's attitude to historical past and literary tradition was more complex, he also called for a revision of the literary canon, as well as for a new scope of tasks for literary scholars, which he described as follows:

to highlight all texts within literary criticism, philosophy and literature proper that should be read, discussed and studied by the entirety of cultured Polish public of our generation, so that an intellectual movement with the desired direction and sympathies is fostered, a movement that would be becoming of people's democracy in the making (Żółkiewski, 1945a, p. 1).

He argued that the new literary criticism would require “an adequately sharp style, theoretical integrity, revolutionary courage and apt thinking.” The task ahead in the new times was “to create a model of culture that will be inclusive for the masses” (Żółkiewski, 1945a, pp. 1–2). Culture was to focus on new participants, which required a new model of literary and artistic communication.

When it came to Romanticism, however, his views were different from Kroński's. While Żółkiewski condemned the culture of the late nineteenth century, he viewed Romanticism as a revolutionary stream *per se*, albeit not in its entirety and not in all its aspects. He perceived the revolutionary democratism of the mid-nineteenth century and the critical realism of the same period as traditions closest to his contemporaries. In his debates with the established scholars of Polish literary Romanticism (Stanisław Pigoń, Juliusz Kleiner), Żółkiewski focused on the realist, critical and rationalist aspects of Adam Mickiewicz's writings (Żółkiewski, 1952), opposing the view that Mickiewicz's literary evolution culminated in religiousness.

Yet the point of contention with the liberal academia which was of key importance was transforming the categories employed in literary criticism. The two Marxist scholars opposed the allegedly neutral method of literary analysis, as well as the evaluation of texts based on purely aesthetic criteria, which they perceived to be a part of the previously discussed habitus of the intelligentsia. Kroński declared: “today, ‘good style’ is indeed utilized by the enemies of the regime, the regime which I myself will support with all my strength for the sake of goodness, truth, and beauty” (Miłosz, 1999, p. 316). Neutrality of analysis and description stood in conflict with the program of revolutionary engagement. Subscribing to the revolution meant an abandonment of the principle of objectivism and of literary form development analysis in favor of relative, or rather perspectivist, historical analysis. Culture, Żółkiewski and Kroński insisted, always sides

with someone and against someone else. Now it should reveal its emancipatory potential.

As both Kroński and Żółkiewski declared, literary criticism could not be regarded a sufficient tool, so a new narrative model and a new type of literature were required, ones that would allow for a breakup with the dictates and the obviousness of aesthetic criteria. This brings us to the project of socialist realism as a style that was to correspond to the new era, the new human, and the new subject of history,¹⁵ a style that was supposed to destroy the habitus of the intelligentsia. As Kroński wrote,

today's Soviet literature is bad, I take your word for it. What does that mean then? It means that we should carry a fight, but not a fight done by opposing bourgeois abstraction with Marxist abstraction, but: (1) by writing well [...], (2) by attacking bad literature in criticism, and preparing for a general attack at some point in the future. But what needs to be remembered when attacking and ridiculing is that it may and should be done without weakening the system, without making any sort of alliance with the intelligentsia. And this is because [Władysław] Tatarkiewicz and those alike him are greater enemies of art than poets who praise the construction of W-Z Freeway [in Warsaw], even if Tatarkiewicz's style of writing isn't bad and he's generally cultured. And this is so because Tatarkiewicz is a Catholic, he uses his mental clichés in defense of social absolutization and alienation, in defense of the Aristotelian-medieval structure of society, which prevents the victory of the concreteness (Heraclitus!) (Miłosz, 1999, p. 317).

Żółkiewski added that "literature is part of the general work of the proletariat engaged in building a new world order. New literature is in the service of this task" (Żółkiewski, 1948, pp. 1–2).

8. Socialist Realism Revisited

Socialist realism did not appear in void: its way had been paved by the earlier attempt to break the symbolic monopoly of distinction-based culture, undertaken in the early postwar years. An enormous effort of acculturation was carried out during the first postwar decade, resulting in the elimination of illiteracy among the adult population, the introduction of obligatory school education, an increase in readership, and creation of a network of libraries, including public, workplace-based, and school ones. This meant not only allowing access to culture in formal terms, but also the transforming of the habitus, of patterns of participation in culture, and of its circulation.

A question particularly worth exploring is whether socialist realism did in fact correspond with popular taste, whether the new model of fiction writing and of literature

15 This style had already been proclaimed in the Soviet Union. In Poland, it first appeared in the press, cf. Żółkiewski, 1948, 1949. On the founding congress of Polish Writers' Association (Związek Literatów Polskich, ZLP), held in Szczecin in 1949, with Żółkiewski's keynote speech, widely considered a harbinger of socialist realism in Polish literature see e.g.: Knap, 2016; Dąbrowska & Michałowski, 2002; Zawodniak, 2004; Smulski, 2002a, 2002b.

in general was well received by new and old workers, by emancipated peasants, by the new and old intelligentsia. If not, in what ways was it accepted or rejected? Since the runs of particular titles were subject to central planning and control, they are not very helpful as data (Kondek, 1999). Unfortunately, there are no empirical studies of the reading choices of specific social classes. Some scarce information can be found in peasant memoirs,¹⁶ but it is only fragmentary and does not refer to all emancipated lower classes, and therefore only covers a fraction of cases. We can safely guess that nineteenth-century popular classics such as Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Trylogia* or Helena Mnisek's *Trędowata* [The Leper] remained largely popular, which nevertheless does not mean that the literature of socialist realism did not find its readers, or that the work of acculturation and of overcoming sharp cultural divisions was carried out in vain. In this regard, literature was considerably helped by socialist realist movies (e.g. *Przygoda na Mariensztacie* [An Adventure in Mariensztat], 1954), as well as architecture, newsreels and a comprehensive historical policy (Stobiecki, 1993) of the first postwar decade (cf. Chmielewska, 2018).

If we approach socialist realism not as a style but as a strategy, one notices the essential continuity of its anti-distinction approach, which strives to overcome the monopoly of good taste, of refinement, of formal novelty, the requirement for avant-garde development of the art field, and of a drive to overcome the horizon of expectations or fully convey the existential experience. The previous generations of scholars have depicted the poetics and the qualities of style and form of socialist realism in a rather accurate way:¹⁷ as a style, socialist realism was schematic, monophonic, and tendentious; it adopted a priori assumptions and value judgments, and harnessed literature into politics. However true and obvious this description may be, it does not look into the internal stakes of socialist realism, and does not show its specific significance.

To go back to our point of departure, that is, to the characterization of socialist realism from the perspective of the contemporary, dominant paradigm: it is a description that has to be accepted, but also requires an expansion. Socialist realism did indeed establish an anti-aesthetics, yet it did so exactly because it was directed against the aesthetics that carried distinction and social stratification and at the same time wanted to appear neutral. Despite its anti-avant-garde, traditionalist and often pompous inclinations, socialist realism succeeded in making a cut through Polish culture, a breach,

16 Cf. *Pamiętniki chłopów: Wybór* [Peasant Memoirs: A Selection] (Stróżecka, 1955); *Miesiąc mojego życia: Wybór pamiętników z konkursu Polskiego Radia i Tygodnika Kulturalnego* [A Month in My Life: A Selection of Memoirs from a Competition of the Polish Radio and the Cultural Weekly] (Chałasiński, Jagiełło-Łysiowa & Sobierajski, 1964); *Od chłopca do rolnika* [From Peasant to Farmer] (Jagiełło-Łysiowa, 1968); *Młode pokolenie wsi Polskiej Ludowej* [The Young Generation in People's Poland's Villages] (Komisja Badań nad Pamiętnikarstwem PAN, 1967); *Gospodarstwo i rodzina: Pamiętniki* [Farm and Family: Memoirs] (Gałaj & Jakubczak, 1968).

17 To be more precise, it is worth noting that scholars tend to make these judgments on the basis of poor literary texts, overlooking those that were outstanding or treating them as an exception to the rule; one case in point is Igor Newerly's novel *Pamiętka z Celulozy* (1950; first published: Newerly, 1952; English translation: *A Night of Remembrance*: Newerly, 1957).

a radical reversal of the art field. The change it brought can be perceived as violent and destructive towards the pre-existing hierarchies, but its arrival was not unprepared.

Socialist realism tore down the established orders of good taste and refined culture, but its anti-distinction qualities were broader. It disrupted the established order by envisioning the experience of social change at the level of its representation, it pointed out model paths for social mobility and set a design for a new human. It thus depicted emancipating workers and peasants, encouraged its audience to make the effort, while also showing emancipation's costs and obstacles that, in accordance with the empowering narrative, were to be overcome thanks to the inevitability of emancipation itself and to the determination and persistence of its subjects. Socialist realism encouraged overcoming the class habitus by supplying narratives in which members of new emancipating classes could recognize themselves and their own biographies – stories of the builders of cities, of factories, of the new state. Clearly and effectively it established the image of the *homo faber*, an object of self-recognition of the new human. Narrating the origins of the postwar workers' movement, the novels of socialist realism treated the 1930s as a negative reference point, a period of definite degradation, of atrocious conditions of alienating work, and social abandonment that could and should be overcome. In this way, then, socialist realism offered a kind of *Bildungsroman* for the new social classes, an attempt to transform symbolic capital by transferring it from the realm of the intelligentsia, where it traditionally belonged, to the new emancipating classes. New novels minimized and criticized the role of the intelligentsia, portraying it as a group not trustworthy when it came to emancipatory strategies, focused by nature on its own cultural reproduction. Importantly, the same diagnosis was also extended to certain parts of the lower classes, and such extension reflected the socialist-realist authors' awareness of the nature of symbolic violence, which relies on imposing the dominant narrative that serves the interests of the privileged classes also onto the dominated groups, and this includes imposing patterns of thought, needs, life choices, ambitions and modes of participation in culture that come to be perceived as natural and obvious practices. It was the awareness that cultural reproduction is a process which involves not only the dominant classes but, in fact, the dominated ones as well that motivated socialist-realist authors in their efforts to oppose this by countering the symbolic monopolies of taste, albeit as I argued above, these particular efforts proved to be rather unsuccessful in the 1950s, and decidedly unsuccessful in the context of later history.

Even if socialist realism succeeded in developing its own symbolic capital, with political transformations of October 1956 this capital lost its productivity: it no longer generated new visions or ideas, and it did not have a power to convince. The reckoning with Stalinism entailed this capital's suppression; socialist realism became an object of shame and guilt, a symbol of senselessness and decline, an object of repulsion and ridicule. While a broad consensus was established that it failed to create noteworthy

works which had literary qualities and would stand the test of time,¹⁸ socialist realism can certainly be interpreted as a gesture of transforming the cultural reality, a cultural intervention that, although anti-avant-garde itself, undermined the foundations of the art field. Socialist realism would thus amount to a performative act in the sense that it proves incomprehensible, ridiculous and unimaginable beyond its own context, even though its artistic means are perfectly clear, since it applied broadly recognized realistic techniques and did not shy away from monumentalism.

9. Archeology

Literary historian Zdzisław Łapiński was right in commenting that:

Cultural remnants of socialist realism in today's Poland are like archaeological relics: their functional sense requires painstaking reconstruction, and their emotional aura can only be evoked by authors that are either particularly long-lived or gifted with exceptional historical imagination (Łapiński, 2000, p. 6).

If read in the context of the contemporarily dominant poetics of liberalism, the semiotic signs of socialist realism are indeed mute and refer to nothing. The reckoning with Stalinism meant also the burying of the cultural capital and the symbolic potential of both socialist realism and the entire anti-distinction movement. The political changes introduced during the Polish October of 1956 carried with them promises of restoring normality, which in this case meant a restoration of traditional forms of social hierarchy,¹⁹ of art understood as a field of internal social reproduction, as well as restoration of high taste. What October of 1956 also brought was a promise of return to discontinued developmental trends in Polish culture.

I leave open the question whether socialist realism – for all its use of domination such as censorship, political pressure, institutional support, repressing other forms of art (Kondek, 1994) – managed to achieve the dominant position, and therefore whether

18 However, in some cases it could be argued otherwise, for example when it comes to the artistic merit of such novels as *Pokolenie* [A Generation] by Bohdan Czeszko (Czeszko, 1951), or *Pamiętka z Celulozy* (1950) by Igor Newerly (see note 17 above). Negative assessment most certainly does not apply to some film productions of the period, which were to be remembered for decades to come, including *Celuloza* (A Night of Remembrance, 1954) by Jerzy Kawalerowicz, and *Pokolenie* (A Generation, 1954) by Andrzej Wajda.

19 With its characteristic domination of the intelligentsia. Although new members were admitted to the ranks of the intelligentsia, the group reproduced its traditional habitus. Even mass-scale social transfer did not undermine this traditional structure.

it managed to establish a *doxa* (Bourdieu, 2002).²⁰ While it did make the claim of being without alternative, in my judgment this ambition remained unfulfilled.²¹

Gaining an insight into this closed period requires carrying out archaeological work, excavating fragments and signs that have been altered, concealed, taken over, or rejected, signs that have been deemed repulsive. The application of Bourdieu's theoretical toolbox could uncover a new image, that of a movement which allowed for going beyond the patterns permissible within cultural reproduction.

Conclusion

The emancipatory practices and theories of communism were crowned with only partial success. Upward social mobility, the levelling of class structure and mass-scale social transfers became a fact in spite of partial reconstruction of hierarchical society after 1956. Especially culture and academia (Stobiecki, 2006, 2007) were restored as fields of cultural reproduction surprisingly soon, if indeed they had been effectively transformed at all (Zawadzka, 2018).

As was discussed above, the first postwar decade in Poland saw the only attempt in Polish history to implement a project of radical abolition of distinction, of overcoming the aesthetic horizon in a radical project aiming to create a new human and a new society. In this sense, communism can be viewed as a performative practice that created social categories with the use of narratives, a practice that focused on oriented sequences of ideas rather than on alternation of forms, and that made great efforts to overcome the horizon of social imagination.

Since 1956, socialist realism has been broadly criticized for primitive didacticism, oversimplification, poor means of expression as well as for being a source of bad literature in service of communist ideology. As such, it was considered dead and buried – yet, for a deceased idea, it has since been surprisingly productive. This is so because the discourse on communism and socialist realism remains at the core of the anti-communist paradigm, which has dominated Poland for decades. Since communism remains

20 Bourdieu used the term *doxa* on many occasions, sometimes with modifications as to its meaning. In general, *doxa* can be viewed as a complex and (owing to its covert assumptions) coherent system conditioning knowledge, that is to say, conditioning what we can and should think and say. It amounts to a social framework modelling the emerging social images and practices, shaping the sense of appropriateness. Arbitrary by nature, it functions as a natural system with no alternatives, whereby each case that is contrary to it is treated as a transgression or an offence.

21 Contrary to the totalitarian perspective, according to which there was no alternative to either communist or anti-communist way of thinking, Polish society was quite diverse, and therefore difficult to describe in terms of two opposites, as is often the case: either as levelled and subdued or as heroically resisting communist invaders. Neither of these co-existing visions is true. Admittedly, though, some circles of the Polish intelligentsia legitimized the anti-communist narrative, which was also supported by some workers and peasants and, very strongly, by the Roman Catholic Church. Cultural monopolies and *habitus* are extremely difficult to overcome.

a strongly guarded social taboo, archeological work on socialist realism carries various risks, including accusations of naivety,²² of a lack of basic historical knowledge or, even worse, whitewashing evil, justifying crimes, or praising enslavement. I believe that such potential objections would be inaccurate in regard to my analysis, since it is not disjunctive from findings of the previous research, and it does not overlook violence or radical changes in culture. What it does entail, however, is an attempt to perceive socialist realism in a broader perspective: in the light of the discussions of the early postwar period, and within the framework of Bourdieu's categories. If we do not aim to content ourselves with ritual agreements that perpetuate worn-out categories, and if we are to continue the discussion, we need to take the risk of looking at socialist realism anew, of confronting the specter that continues to haunt the modern Polish history.

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22 In a softer version, accusations of this kind would involve the so-called “grace of late birth,” which implies that the young generation of scholars has no idea about the realities of the past and therefore may sometimes be prone to denying obvious facts.

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Realizm socjalistyczny w nowym kontekście: Projekt badania historycznoliterackiego

Abstrakt: Tekst jest próbą nowego spojrzenia na niesławne zjawisko realizmu socjalistycznego. Autorka odnosi się do literatury tamtego czasu oraz dyskusji wokół literatury, nowej krytyki marksistowskiej i takiej historii literatury. Analizując dotychczasowy paradygmat badań, dostrzega potrzebę jego poszerzenia. Skupia się na strategii realizmu socjalistycznego, nie zaś na stylu. Proponuje jego analizę w kategoriach francuskiego socjologa Pierre'a Bourdieua z charakterystycznymi dla niego pojęciami dystynkcji, kapitału symbolicznego i habitusu.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: komunizm; polska historia; habitus



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