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**“POSSIBLE WORLDS”
OF THE POLISH SOCIO-POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION.
A STUDY OF NARRATIVES BASED ON PREMODERN, MODERN,
AND POSTMODERN DISCOURSE RESOURCES¹**

Three types of narrative discourse are considered: premodern, modern and postmodern. As the basis for differentiation a single criterion of psychological nature is used: the degree of narrator's centration/decentration on his/her own perspective. These discourse types can be assigned three different positions on the centration – decentration continuum. Narrators (aged 19-30 years) participating in the study are from the following groups in Poland: Roman Catholic, international economy students, milieu of anarchists. Narratives in each of these groups exhibit in different sets of characteristics. Analyses show that subjects are fluent users of the narrative forms that are specific to groups in which they participate (on a regular basis and for a sufficiently long time).

The social construction of reality, or how social phenomenology can inspire psychologists

Narrative – another way of thinking

One of the main advocates of the narrative approach, Jerome Bruner (1986) distinguishes two basic modes of thinking: the narrative mode and the paradigmatic mode. Simplifying things a bit, the paradigmatic mode (whose domain is constituted by theoretic entities such as concepts, inferential rules, folk naive theories, etc.) can be said to describe and explain the world of objects, while the narrative mode is a way to understand the world of subjects, and – as the title of Bruner's book emphasizes – their personal “possible worlds”. Unlike the paradigmatic mode, the narrative mode does not aim at establishing “objective truth” and is not governed by any rules of logical validity or rationality, but appeals to the sense of “subjective truth” in constructing stories that make experience meaningful. The ability to arrange one's private experiences into a coherent story is an

¹ The study was done as part of the research project “Perception and interpretation of the actual socio-political situation in Poland” (grant P 106001 07 from the State Committee for Scientific Research). I am very pleased to have the opportunity here to thank the Coordinators of this project: Professors Ida Kurcz and Jerzy Bobryk for their stimulating support and constructive criticism of my ideas.

important element of cognitive control. What is more important for our purposes, however, is the property of narratives that has been particularly stressed within the framework of social constructionism (Hermans & Kempen, 1995; Mancuso & Sarbin, 1983; Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Bruner, 1986): their cultural and social origins. Narratives are not out-of-the-blue creations by isolated individuals but are constructed in dialogue with others. The ontogenetic origins of such processes can be excellently envisaged when looking through reports on research in the co-construction of narratives by children (Bokus, 1991), child discourse and development of “structures of participation” (Shugar, 1995), or, more generally, studies on the role played by the language communicative function in the development of linguistic competence (Halliday, 1975; Bruner, 1975). In social phenomenology terms (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1953), these processes can be characterized as instrumental in the social construction of reality.

The existence of collective narratives, which uphold a commonly shared consensus reality, is of crucial importance for the sustenance and functioning of social groups. Not only do these stories constitute group identity but they also provide mutually comprehensible and acceptable explanations for the behaviors of its members and approved action programs that follow from an individual’s social role – or positioning (Davies & Harré, without date) as it is rather understood in discursive terms – and from his/her identity viewed as a product of that role or position. Hence, collective narratives determine and justify social practice and internal order within groups.

Consensus reality and experienced reality

From the viewpoint of social phenomenology, consensus reality relies on the existence of an underlying collective frame of reference for the interpretation of subjective experience (learned and used every day by members of a particular community) in order to make it intersubjectively meaningful, intelligible, and acceptable to others. This interpretation is sometimes instantaneous and “natural” (in the sense of Schutz, 1953), but sometimes it requires the negotiation of meanings with partners in commonly shared and mutually involved narratives. Viewed in this way, making experience meaningful is sometimes possible only at the cost of repressing or dissimulating actual individual experience. Psychologists usually talk in such contexts about the effects of defense mechanisms of the ego. But viewed from the perspective of social phenomenology, at least some such cases seem to be better explained as “collective defense mechanisms” whose role is to protect the “collective” rather than the individual ego: group identity, its consensus reality and the internal order that is dictated by it. The approach outlined here corresponds to the postmodern claim about the equivalence of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1972).

A distinction proposed by Szkudlarek (1993) between “ontology of appearance” and “epistemology of elusion” seems very pertinent in this context. The appeal to the Hegelian category of appearance highlights that aspect of consensus reality which is a product of social construction: it’s not the empirical world as it is given in sensual experience, but an ethnoontology of the apparent world that has been created and is “inhabited” by members of a specific community. As confronted with experience, the appearances need to be continuously defended against counter evidence, not an uncommon occurrence. This involves the necessity to develop some complementary “epistemology of elusion” which consists of common procedures that can be used to disregard or mystify experience and uphold a shared perception of the world. This view corresponds to the conception of the “dialogical

unconscious” (Billig, without date) in which the unconscious is convincingly described as an internalized product of collective conversational rules, not of individual personality dynamics.

Cultural narrative patterns

As commonly pointed out in the narrative framework, socially constructed auto-narratives constitute the fabric of individual identity. However, as Gergen & Gergen (1983) argue, a person has not much freedom in constructing her/his narrative identity, because there are quite specific constraints, the inventory of narrative forms available being culturally predetermined. Each narrative form can be thought of as a routine for the construction of narratives in such a way as to make them intelligible, “meaningful,” and acceptable to other members of the same cultural community. Although the inventory of available narrative forms can be potentially unlimited, actual cultures offer only a restricted number of such forms. Gergen and Gergen offer the following argument on this point: “For example, consider the person who characterizes him/herself by means of a stability narrative²: life is directionless; it is merely moving in a steady, monotonous fashion neither toward nor from a goal. Such a person might seem an apt candidate for psychotherapy. /.../ We simply do not accept such life stories as approximating reality. In contrast, if one could make sense of one’s life today as ‘a long struggle upward’, ‘a tragic decline’ or a continuing saga in which one suffers defeats but rises from the ashes to achieve success, we are fully prepared to believe. One is not free simply to have any form of history he or she wishes. Cultures invite certain identities and discourage others.” (Gergen & Gergen, 1983, p. 17).³

These theoretical considerations raised the question, which Gergen and Gergen tried to answer empirically (Gergen & Gergen, 1983) of just how people in different social groups tell their life stories. Do such stories exhibit variations that can be attributed to different narrative forms available in the inventory of cultural patterns within a given community? On the basis of their study, Gergen and Gergen answered yes to this question. Adolescent Americans create narratives that are almost exactly opposite (in terms of changes in evaluating events along the time axis) to life stories reported by elderly people.

It might be interesting to examine types of narratives developed within groups that differ with respect to something more culturally specific than just age. These should be groups whose internal coherence results precisely, as discussed theoretically by Gergen and Gergen, from the fact that mutually involved narratives of their individual members have their origins in a common consensus reality. Are there any group differences that are exhibited across groups by private narratives of their members in terms of structure and content? Pursued further along these lines, the proposal raises the following question: are different consensus realities equally “friendly” versus “repressive” towards diversity of individual experience? Restating Greenwald’s metaphor (1980), the question can be put as follows: is the “collective ego” of some groups more “totalitarian” than that of others? These questions were a starting point for the research reported briefly in the next part of this paper.

² In the classification proposed by the authors, the stability narrative is distinguished from regressive and progressive narratives by lack of directionality in changing evaluation of events along the time axis.

³ Page numbers and quotes according to an unpublished version of the manuscript (forthcoming) in the private possession of the author of this paper.

Discourses in a culture of transition: the idea of the study

The theoretic independent variable in this study is socially negotiated consensus reality or, more specifically, the discursive resources, i.e. narrative forms, used for its collective construction. Since however this kind of variable would be difficult to manipulate directly, an *ex post* design was chosen for the research. Therefore the groups should be selected such that the following can be assumed: /1/ each group has already developed its own “consensus world” where its members phenomenologically “live”; /2/ each group is characterized by distinctive discourse resources (including narrative forms); /3/ differences between the “worlds” that specific groups “live in” and the corresponding discourse resources are sharp, and involve socially important properties.

Since the dependent variable in this study is, most generally speaking, a narrative picture of social reality, namely, the contemporary reality in Poland, it is desirable to choose such groups whose characteristic cultural features are probably broader in scope than the groups themselves. This renders it more likely that the outcome is not just a case study of a particular small group, but a miniature portrait of one among many “possible worlds” that exist within contemporary Polish reality. Now, the question is: what exactly are those cultural features?

The emerging postmodernity

Social and political transformations that are currently taking place in Poland can be characterized along various dimensions, but that of specific interest to us involves changes in social mentality which, viewed from the theoretical standpoint of this study, can be characterized as changes in the inventory of cultural narrative forms (patterns) and other consensus resources. As reality changes, so do the types of stories that people tell about it and that they consider “meaningful” and “true.” Theorists appeal, in this context, to the notion of discourses, which are taken to be social modes of describing experience and making it meaningful.

Parallels between the notion of “discourse” and the concept of narrative form in the sense of Gergen and Gergen (1983) seem quite clear. The difference between them can be taken to be largely a difference of scope: a given discourse allows for the use of one or another form among the narrative forms that belong to the class corresponding to that discourse, but all the forms are related by “family resemblance” which results precisely from the characteristics of that discourse.

What kinds of discourse occur within the context of Polish popular culture of the 1990's? Like other countries, Poland has witnessed processes that are referred to by theorists of culture as the formation of postmodern society (see, for instance, Bauman, 1995). At the same time, modern transformations are not yet completed in some social circles. Therefore, manifestations of three kinds of discourse – premodern, modern and postmodern – can be expected in contemporary Polish culture. The former two are probably well established within traditional collective narratives that have been around and negotiated for quite some time, and that adults pass on to the younger generation both through institutionalized channels and in informal accounts. It won't be doing injustice to the facts to say that Polish public life – from school curricula through to the programs of political groups competing for power – are dominated by these two kinds of discourse, while current cultural changes in Poland still consist, to a large extent, in replacing premodern by modern discourses. Postmodern dis-

courses, on the other hand, though present in the narratives of numerous separate individuals and informal groups, do not play any significant role in the public social dialogue.

Premodern, modern, and postmodern discourses in a psychological perspective

The basis for the following characterization of discourse types is a single general criterion that is psychological in nature: it is the degree of narrator centration/decentration in respect to his/her own perspective. In his well-known “three mountains” experiment, Piaget (1956) demonstrated what difficulties the child has to overcome in order to understand that the perception of an object is determined by the observer’s point of view. The child’s inability to abstract away from her momentary unique perspective, known as centration, is gradually replaced by the decentering capability, i.e. the ability to take into account and understand other perspectives that result from different relative dispositions of subject and object in space. The idea of centration/decentration has inspired numerous studies on the social dimension of these processes (see, for example, Doise & Mackie, 1982; Feffer & Suchotliff, 1973; Jarymowicz, 1994). And today the notion of perspective will be usually taken to mean a subject’s point of view as determined by her/his location not only in physical but also in social space.

The three types of discourse under consideration can be assigned three different positions on the centration – decentration continuum, their other characteristics falling out as derivatives. Accordingly, premodern discourses will be characterized by the narrator’s total centering on his/her own perspective with no awareness that there are other perspectives possible. In the case of modern discourse, I suggest that the distinctive feature is that its subject is aware that there exist other perspectives than his own but considers them wrong (or otherwise devalues them). The dominant tendency to center on the subject’s own perspective is accompanied here by a moderate degree of decentering ability whose sole underlying motive, however, is to strengthen one’s privileged perspective (like getting to know other people’s views just in order to argue against them more effectively). Postmodern discourses, by contrast, are characterized by a high decentering ability, while disparate perspectives are not subject to evaluating judgements, since they are considered incomparable.⁴ Consequently, the specificity of the subject’s personal perspective can only consist here in the fact of its being personal – it is bound to the specific point within the socio-physical space that is actually occupied by the subject.

To detail the characterization of the three discourse types it will be useful to introduce some additional derivative criteria:

- attitude towards truth
- problem of method
- attitude towards “strangers”
- objectivist vs subjectivist orientation
- actualization of truth as a value.

Premodern discourses are based on the assumption, following from mindless centering on the subjective perspective, that “there is only one Truth.” “The only Truth” determines the ontology of the resulting consensus reality, and its dramatized description is

⁴ The intended sense is close to the “incommensurability” of scientific theories that has been discussed by Feyerabend (1963). One consequence of this assumption is that it is not possible to determine which of the discourses is more “true” since each is based on a unique internal system of references.

contained in an indispensable “Grand Narrative,” which constitutes the stemming point for all narrative forms that are available within a given discourse of the premodern type. The question of method or other epistemological problems do not arise at all within premodern discourses. It is not only that “there is only one Truth”, but it’s taken for granted that the truth is “obvious to everybody.” It could be said that premodern discourses are also pre-Cartesian in the sense that doubts and the quest for a right method of knowledge validation are not present in them at all. There is no awareness of other perspectives, which implies absolute lack of tolerance: people who advocate different truths are looked upon as enemies who are deliberately seeking to distort “the Truth” and prevent it from being actualized in life. Lack of any epistemological awareness implies that the subjectivist vs. objectivist orientation criterion does not apply, being precluded from operation by what can be called naive realism. As regards the axiological dimension, premodern discourses can be considered fundamentalist: universal enforcement of “the Truth” guarantees an ideal social order at costs which are unanimously considered “just” and must be borne by advocates of this and different truths alike.

Modern discourses, though also based on some “Truth” and some accompanying “Grand Narrative,” recognize other perspectives together with the “truths” that they imply. With possible alternatives in view, the question of validation for one’s own “Truth” becomes of crucial importance. Hence the ubiquitous problem of the right method of cognition which, within modern discourses, is given particular attention. While the modern “Truth” is not “the only possible”, it is still “the only valid” one, for it follows from “the only objective (logico-empirical) Method”. The selection of “the Right Method”⁵ is related to another property of modern discourses – the objectivist orientation: focusing on the object of knowing while relatively disregarding the role played in cognition by the subject. As in premodern discourses, putting “the Truth” into practice in real life is an unquestionable value, but the pervasive concern with the method is manifested here, too, in the form of the imperative of tolerance and the principle that “the end does not justify the means”. Viewed from this standpoint, modern discourses can be classified as democratic. Advocates of different “truths” are considered “mistaken” rather than “evil,” and the relevant rhetoric is educational rather than militant, offering various cognitive tools for developing complex explanatory narratives about why the mistaken have made the mistakes they have, and what programs should be implemented with a view to their “enlightenment.” Modern interest in these issues, together with an interest in the method, results from a moderate decentration ability, which raises the awareness and recognition of other perspectives. Following Bauman (1995), one may say that modern social structures are precisely where “the problem of strangers” arises, becomes visible and is articulated most acutely.

Postmodern discourses contrast with the foregoing two. Firstly, they do not center around any “only one truth.” Quite the contrary, by recognizing and focusing on the subject’s role in cognition (subjectivist approach), they make an assumption (not always explicitly stated) that what is considered true depends on the perspective of the subject. And since there are innumerable many possible perspectives, each truth is subjective and incomplete, and none can claim to be deemed universal (“everyone has his/her own truth”). Consequently, there is no need for any “Grand Narrative” that would represent the meaning and telos of individual experiences or macro-social processes. Contingency replaces a

⁵ The literature on the subject is so extensive (cf. e.g. Amsterdamski 1983; Feyerabend, 1963; Paszkiewicz, 1983) that it can be safely glossed over below.

goal-oriented order as a basic explanatory category. Granted these assumptions, there are no grounds for devaluing any alternative perspectives. Therefore advocates of different truths are not looked upon as “evil” or “mistaken”, but are thought of as simply “different”, while the focus of attention is on understanding (or not understanding) their position rather than on arguing for or against their views. Another distinctive feature of postmodern discourses that sets them apart from the forementioned is that practical realization of “the truth” in life (outside the private life of its “carrier”) is evaluated negatively rather than positively. Viewed from that standpoint, postmodern discourses are liberal or outright anarchist (“no one should tell others what’s right to do”) and do not provide a fitting framework for developing broad projects of an ideal social order. Wherever such issues are raised in postmodern narratives, the emphasis is put on concrete individuals implementing the project in actual circumstances rather than on the ultimate goal to be achieved.

As the degree of decentering away from the subject’s perspective increases along the way from premodern, through modern, to postmodern discourses, the subject’s representation of his/her own perspective changes accordingly from the only possible, through the only valid, to one among many mutually incomparable (incommensurable) perspectives. This is also how ways change in which advocates of different “truths” are represented – they are, respectively, “enemies,” “strangers,” and “others.”

We may return now to the questions implied by the ideas of Gergen & Gergen (1983) as they were discussed (in the previous part of this paper) in the context of Greenwald’s metaphor (1980). Clearly the three types of discourse are not equally “friendly” towards the diversity of human experience and towards plurality of possible points of view that represent it. The higher the degree of decentering that a particular discourse allows, the more complete and more adequate can be the representation not only of “other truths”, but also of the individual experience of the subject. This is because centering can precisely be thought of as emphasizing, if not totalizing, some facets of experience (which are clearly seen as prominent from a particular perspective) at the cost of others, which – being invisible from the current perspective – are excluded or distorted (even though they exist and may be made available to apprehension when the perspective is shifted). Hence, a strong centering (premodern discourses) entails inadequacy or lack of representation for those subjective experiences that are invisible from the central perspective. A moderate decentering (modern discourses) makes more room for grasping one’s experiences adequately without impairing “illusions that let live” (Kofta & Szustrowa, 1991) while a high degree of decentering (postmodern discourses) results in these illusions being demystified in the process of explicitly representing individual experiences to the most minute detail. Accordingly, premodern discourses are likely to support “totalitarian collective ego” and offer only very narrow frames for constructing individual identity of its participants, while postmodern discourses are conducive to articulation of individual rather than group identities and do not constrain them with the demand of “fitting the Truth” (with modern discourses in between).

Idea of the study

Group selection

For the purpose of the present research, groups should be selected such that for each of the three discourse types discussed above one group can be expected to exhibit prevalence of that type. Now, where do we look for such groups?

Premodern discourses are, I think, most likely to be found among local religious denominations, where trust in truth believed to have been revealed by God makes the truth unquestionably exclusive, privileged, and immune to doubt. The question of which method best serves the truth does not apply in this case: with no alternatives available, the “method” of revelation is considered exclusively right. Ideally, the denomination subject to inquiry should be rooted in a faith which has a full-fledged well-established social doctrine, ensuring that its revelation has far-reaching tangible consequences for everyday life and substantially influences the picture of contemporary reality. Neocatechumenal Catholic communities seem to provide a good example of an environment that satisfies these criteria.

Modern discourses, on the other hand, are likely to occur within the context of the logical-empirical model of contemporary science and its applications. This should be a “science” in the sense that is close to the traditional English meaning of the word, i.e., one that is free from postmodern doubt and offers a valid scientific method as a guarantee for the truth of its results. The context of an economy students’ organization seems to offer the right environment to satisfy these criteria.

Postmodern discourses, by contrast, will be easiest to find on the fringes of the mainstream culture, possibly even among counter-cultural groups, spheres where the influence of well-established premodern and modern discourses has weakened. An informal milieu of people of anarchist views seems to be a good candidate.

Finally, subjects from the following three groups participated in the study:

- Roman Catholic denomination (below abbreviated to “C”);
- International economy students’ organization (below abbreviated to “E”);
- Milieu of anarchists (below abbreviated to “A”).

The assumption that each of the groups should exhibit prevalence of a specific discourse type was verified against the study outcomes (on the basis of the estimated degree of narrator centration and other relevant features of the stories related by subjects) and were considered plausible.

In all groups subjects were aged between 19 and 30. We made sure that group meetings indeed consisted in negotiating individual experiences: they were not lectures on abstract topics, but rather involved informal discussions concerning the business of everyday life. This allowed the assumption that subjects are fluent users of the narrative forms that are specific to groups in which they participate (on a regular basis and for a sufficiently long period of time). Each group was known to substantially influence its members’ social identity. But, obviously, it would be naive to expect that people’s narratives are influenced by patterns acquired in one group only. Therefore the initial part of the study included an instruction that was aimed at actualizing subjects’ group identity⁶.

Procedure

The dependent variable in the experiment was the narrative interpretation of social reality and individual social experience. In particular, we were interested in some specific facets of a narrative picture of reality, hypothetically dependent on the degree of centration and the type of discourse. In cognitive framework terms, such facets can be captured as a

⁶ “We’re interested in what people from various social circles think about the current situation in the country and about life in Poland in the 1990s.” Then the experimenter added that the person was asked to participate because he/she was representative of a given group (C, E, or A).

distinction between explicit and implicit social knowledge (Greenwald & Banaji, 1996). Implicit knowledge (or subjective experience that lacks explicit intersubjective representation) requires indirect methods of inquiry (see Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Granted this, and in view of the fact that the narrative was where we expected to find these entities, a technique modeled on Murray's Thematic Apperception Test seemed the most suitable method to choose (Murray, 1943).

Changes to the original TAT procedure were introduced which affected materials, method of analysis and interpretation of outcomes. Subjects were exposed to a series of 10 photographs that were selected from press materials and their task was to make up 10 stories. Then they were asked to take part in a brief standardized interview (concerning basic personal information such as family and professional background). The procedure lasted about one hour and was repeated individually with each of the 18 subjects (6 per group). The stories were tape-recorded and subsequently retyped for further analysis in light of various criteria. In addition to an analysis of narrative formal features that were susceptible to quantitative treatment, qualitative interpretation of narratives was carried out. Finally, a number of statistical analyses were conducted and 18 case studies were prepared.

The limited frame of this paper does not allow a full description of the methods of analysis adopted in the study, nor a complete presentation of the results (for details see Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 1997). Only general results and the main conclusions of the study are presented below.

Summary of results

Narrative forms

Narratives produced by subjects in the same group exhibited recurring specific narrative features which, in light of the preceding theoretical discussion, can be explained as resulting from group-specific socially constructed discourse resources.

Premodern patterns. Narratives in group C are characterized by:

- Frequently deriving protagonists' characteristics solely from their social roles, where the roles are used as mere labels and understood in a stereotyped way. Many characteristics lack a subjective dimension (no descriptions of internal world, no subjective feelings).
- High frequency of simple script-like narratives that describe typical social interactions in a stereotyped fashion without going beyond ready-made commonly negotiated descriptive categories.
- Strong emphasis on the moral dimension manifested in the narrative content and in characterizations of protagonists. Based on this dimension is the assumption that human endeavors and the whole world are inherently meaningful, and that their meaning follows from moral evaluation.
- Rigid identification and strong narrator centration: numerous subjective states and experiences which, though apparently familiar to the narrator, are distorted or excluded from the scope of possible explicit identifications.
- Low frequency of metanarrative comments.
- Lack of cognitive means for representing authority and people in power – such

figures are obliterated, excluded from the “field of vision”. No characterizations of authority figures, subjects confining themselves to enigmatic labels (“someone”, “the other party”, etc.). This results in an apparently “universal” nature of any rules and standards that are laid down by authorities.

- Tendency to optimize data, to develop happy endings, to seek positive solutions, and to justify phenomena that are perceived as unjust or “problematic”. Apparently, these are various manifestations of an underlying need to defend authority figures which is satisfied through defending the vision of reality that they have created (“power equals knowledge”).

Modern patterns. Narratives reported by group E subjects share some characteristics with narratives in group C, but differ in a number of respects:

- Protagonists are depicted as independent individuals who are driven by personal, frequently hedonist, motives. Characterizations are usually structured around the focal point of socioeconomic status which appears to be a dimension of central significance in group E narratives.

- Descriptions of social situations frequently contain long comments that present “scientific” analyses or narrators’ opinions on a broader social or economic situational background.

- Narrators demonstrate constant awareness of the presence of their addressee as a definite person, an experimenter with whom they keep in contact. (Readiness to negotiate the narrated material with the partner in interaction directly, at the time of relating).

- Moderate narrator centration, limited flexibility of identification.

- Clear references to the “Grand Narrative” of progress (civilization advancement) that started in Poland in the wake of political transformations and the introduction of Western fashions (new goods, professions and lifestyles, internationalism, etc.).

- Limited means for representing authority figures, who are depicted in two forms: as “Them”, criticized and made responsible for the old order; and as representatives of newly emergent elites who are characterized with sympathy bordering on familiarity and are objects of conscious identification. Authority figures, however, are relatively rarely explicitly represented. It is more common for E to unconsciously identify with indefinite authorities and, apparently, to speak in their “voice” (e.g. making judgements, presenting complex “scientific” explanations). Sometimes the authority figure is “concealed” in a way that very closely resembles group C narratives, including the tendency to isolate the “disobedient” and to defend authorities.

Postmodern patterns. Narratives reported in group A regularly exhibit a completely different set of characteristics:

- The characteristics of protagonists are constructed on the basis of their subjective needs, thoughts and feelings. The subjective dimension is extremely richly structured and intricate with occasional descriptions of such minute details as momentary feelings. It is common for A narratives to distinguish between protagonists’ social roles and their private selves that take on the roles. There are no depersonalized protagonists. On the contrary, all characters are depicted with empathy.

- Social situations are commonly narrated in a way that defies stereotyped beliefs, abounds in shocking or provocative details, and astonishes with frankness. Narrators consciously make

use of exaggeration or dramatization, often structuring their story around a clash of disparate perspectives on the same event(s). There are recurring themes of death and violence.

- High degree of narrator decentration is manifest in the narrator taking over subjective perspectives of various protagonists. The range of subjective states available for identification is extremely varied.

- Personalized, subjectivist description is applied to all protagonists, including authority figures. Narratives not only do not exclude authority figures from the “field of vision” but also highlight their “human” traits (e.g., “the Pope with his buddies”).

- A characteristically mocking and grotesque narrative style largely results from assuming – at the outset of the narrative – the subjective perspective of the protagonist and subsequently exploring, in minute detail, discrepancies between the consensus reality that the character lives in and the reality as he/she actually experiences it, a device with comic effect.

- There is no tendency towards optimizing endings and sometimes narratives lack any “endings” in the traditional sense (the plot does not resolve denouement, the protagonist fails to achieve his/her goal, etc.). Neither do narratives exhibit any tendency to find solutions to “problems” or, at least, to justify their existence, point out blame or, conversely, vindicate the persons responsible or people in authority. Such narrative patterns can only be based, it seems, on a representation of reality that lacks the assumptions of fundamental significance to other groups – the assumption about the meaningful and orderly nature of social reality and about the existence of an agency that controls the order and encompasses it in its totality.

Subjective representations of the world and the place in it of the Self

From the analyses there emerges a pattern of contrasts and similarities between the groups. In an attempt to capture that pattern, I will intentionally assume some idealizations and generalizations:

Groups C and E see the transition of 1989 as a definite turning point that marks a clear division into the “old” and the “new” worlds which are evaluated in different ways and form the reference point for social identifications of their members.

C are concerned about the emerging “new world” that has just begun to reshape the Polish reality. They tend to see it as dangerous to traditional values together with the order that they constitute, which they consider to be good and universal. C identify with the “old world”, while their “WE” is intended to mean “those who do not depart from the true values only to achieve temporary, materialistic, and egoistic goals,” which is precisely what “THEY” do, i.e., “those who bow down to new fashions and trends.”

E people, on the other hand, welcome the emergence of the “new world” with optimism, identify with it, and are not sorry for the “old world” to go. Their “WE” is intended to mean “those who are the avant-garde of progress and enjoy a privileged social and material standing that they derive from this role,” while “THEM” means “those who are not capable of actively changing their own position and are hopelessly entangled in the remnants of the old system.”

Although social identifications of subjects in each of the groups are opposite in terms of content, they are functionally parallel: collective identity is in both cases relatively rigid with a lot of individual content excluded from its scope. Put in other words, “collective ego” is in both groups “totalitarian,” and their consensus “worlds” are accompanied by vast “underworlds.”

When compared with A, groups C and E turn out to have, in spite of all apparent or actual differences, quite a lot in common. The consensus worlds “inhabited” by each of the groups are in a sense the same world: one that is divided by a thick line that marks absolute distinction between “the old” and “the new”. This is a world in transition where two “Grand Narratives” clash and compete for influence, and the distinction between C and E subjects boils down to the question of which side of the conflict should be supported. By contrast, group A subjects are equally reserved towards both the worlds, and, into the bargain, show equal commitment to deconstruct whatever “Grand Narratives” they come across. While C and E can be said to phenomenologically “inhabit” essentially the same world, with the distinction between them residing only in choices they make within its boundaries; the world “inhabited” by A is a “meta-world” in relation to the former, since it comprises one additional dimension, one which makes it possible to extend the field of vision from a negotiated consensus to negotiating processes themselves. As a result, world A comprises both the elements that constitute the world inhabited by groups C and E and whatever has been dismissed from it to the “underworlds”: subjective experiences of the individual – an actor who makes “presentations of Self in everyday life”. To stretch Goffman’s (1971) metaphor still further, the world known to groups C and E is confined just to the “stage,” while world A can be said to extend further to include the audience, backstage, and the art of play writing itself. The “underworlds” of world A are accordingly different in character: rather than involving the material of experience, whether negotiated or not, they concern individual participation in negotiating processes, sharing collective delusions, and feeling collective emotions.

Viewed from the A standpoint, the system transformations that are currently under way in Poland bring about nothing but substitution of one “Grand Narrative” by another. Despite the change, people still remain enslaved and their existence, being based on the denial of subjective autonomy, is equally absurd. Both old and new ways of “escape from freedom” (Fromm, 1941) alike end up in absurdity and the grotesque. The real changes – according to what A openly declares – pertain to the essence of power as such rather than to the question of which particular group of “buddies” wields power and imposes its “narrative” on others (A themselves consider their milieu just another “group of buddies”). However, as is best witnessed by the accompanying irony and auto-irony, A do not identify heart and soul with their feelings or verbalized beliefs.

(translated by Jacek Szafrński)

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