

# The Classless Left. On a Certain Tradition of Politically Engaged Criticism from the Turn of the Century\*

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How to discuss a notion which does not exist?

This seems to be the fundamental issue with considerations regarding the class category in the Polish critical-literary discourse of the 1990s and the 21st century. Reading critical works from that period, including those which are explicitly engaged and leftist, it seems clear that the notion of class is rarely discussed – even when the problems with and abuses of capitalism, late capitalism, or neoliberalism are rightfully highlighted. And even when it does appear, it is reduced to the question of identity, next to gender, sexual orientation, religion etc.<sup>1</sup>

However, how can we confirm these intuitions, and how can we identify the reasons and processes behind this state of affairs? On the one hand, we do not have hard, statistical evidence regarding a dictionary of Polish literary criticism, and on the other – the very explanation why a given notion is no longer used will inevitably be speculation: how to explain an empty space where we are dealing with a plethora of vivid idioms based on a variety of stylistic, philosophical, political choices?

<sup>1</sup> The irreducibility of class to a type of identity is obviously an important, broadly discussed topic in the tradition of socialist/leftist philosophy of politics and literary criticism, see e.g. Walter Benn Michaels, *Kształt znaczącego* [The Shape of the Signifier], translated into Polish by Jan Burzyński (Kraków: Ha!art, 2006).

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Obviously, the problem with erasing class from various public discourses of present-day Poland is well-known – and it is simultaneously a major topic itself. 1990's Poland saw a mass escape from the idea of class, although its beginnings probably date further back<sup>2</sup>. One could even risk a statement that the history of People's Poland, at least from 1949, is a history of the advancing process of abandoning the notion of class, or diluting its meaning – in the name of various, more universal subjects, which were supposed to prove that Polish society was classless, whereas in fact they largely concealed class antagonism<sup>3</sup>. One could even suggest that a similar process, but in slightly changed forms, constituted a fundamental problem of 20th-century socialisms in general: how to accept the class character of political conflicts within a society that has been building socialism for ages? Paradoxically, the history of escaping from class might prove far simpler in capitalist countries: it would gain momentum with the collapse of the Keynesian consensus in the early 1970s, it would be closely connected with capital's fight against the political position of trade unions, and it would accelerate with the growing popularity of the Thatcher-Reagan ideology<sup>4</sup>. The fact that the socialist left eventually – and enthusiastically – agreed to reduce the significance of the class category also played its role<sup>5</sup>.

I mention this – putting forward a number of potentially controversial theses, which in no way can in and of themselves constitute a foundation of a literary studies article – in order to highlight the inevitable entanglement of further considerations in a broader, historical context. The erasure of class is not an autonomous phenomenon in the critical-literary discourse, and probably external phenomena are largely responsible for the critics having ultimately abandoned the category of class. Pressure from the broader Polish public discourse must have been accompanied by pressure from within, i.e. academia absorbing a number of theories and intellectual projects from Western humanities, which – though ostensibly associated with left radicalism – nonetheless encouraged thinking in allegedly post-class terms. There are good reasons to assume that abandoning the category of class by “engaged” literary critics was just one form of the process taking place within “engaged” humanities in general.

However, even if we are to accept that leftist critics (and this paper focuses on one selected tradition of leftist literary criticism) responded only to pressures which were external to and independent from them in their escape from class – they internalized and absorbed methods of that escape rather than drew its trajectory – they still had to follow some imagined logic of non-class or post-class vision of the world: adapt it to their own critical projects, justify

<sup>2</sup> See especially: “Rzeczpospolita klas. Z Kazimierzem M. Słomczyńskim rozmawiają Staś Chankowski, Stanisław Zakroczyński” [People's republic of classes. An interview with M. Słomczyński by Staś Chankowski and Stanisław Zakroczyński], *Magazyn Kontakt*, 27.01.2015, <https://magazynkontakt.pl/prof-slomczynski-rzeczpospolita-klas/>; Piotr Żuk, “O aktualności pojęcia «klasa społeczna» w społeczeństwie i analizach socjologicznych” [On the timeliness of the notion of a «social class» in society and sociological analyses], *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny* 3 (2008); Jacek Tittenbrun, “Death of Class?”, *Przegląd Socjologiczny* 2 (2014); Katarzyna Janicka, Kazimierz Słomczyński, “Struktura społeczna w Polsce: klasowy wymiar nierówności” [Polish social structure: class dimension of inequalities], *Przegląd Socjologiczny* 63 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> On this issue, see Paweł Kaczmarzki, Marta Koronkiewicz, “Literatura ludowa jako projekt” [Folk literature as a project], *Mały Format* 7-9 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/10/literatura-ludowa/>.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Bill Mitchell, Thomas Fazi, *Reclaiming the State* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> See a classical discussion in e.g. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class* (London–New York: Verso, 1986).

in terms of ideology, harmonize it with their aesthetic diagnoses and demands. The present paper is an attempt at reconstructing this logic – an analysis of the structure and implications of a certain critical-literary standpoint rather than a cross-sectional review of all factors and processes which may have influenced the critics' erasure of class.

Or we could put it slightly differently. Different types of metacritical reflection can be conventionally and provisionally divided into approaches focused on the *h i s t o r i c a l* reconstruction on the one hand, and those mostly interested in a *s t r u c t u r a l* analysis on the other. The former describe the development of a critical-literary tendency over time; the latter disassemble the network of theses and assumptions of a critical-literary standpoint or debate, revealing how they are mutually conditioned, how they imply one another etc. To some extent, it would be justifiable to describe the difference between those two approaches using a classical structuralist differentiation into a diachronic and synchronic order. One would also have to stress that in practice both types of reflection will inevitably permeate each other and merge – rather than some fundamental, methodological differences, what divides these two approaches is a certain shift of emphasis. Nonetheless, the difference between them – even if purely analytical – allows us to articulate better the aims of specific metacritical studies. Thus the aim of the present paper is to provide something along the lines of a structural analysis: a recreation of the imagined logic governing the post-class vision of the world – as it was proposed by selected critics – rather than a cross-sectional discussion of each event and statement that contributed to the gradual erasure of class from the critical-literary discourse.

The stake of this effort – an attempt at understanding, how (and why) the critical-literary left abandoned the idea of class – is not political; non-exclusively, and not even predominantly. Obviously niche discussions of literary critics have no significant impact on class awareness of any segment of society. Meanwhile, the major consequence of abandoning the concept of class is forgetting – or rather conscious unlearning – of notions, tools and analyses which allow us to understand important works of Marxist literary studies, both historical and contemporary. Erasure of class terminology may be at least partially responsible for the fact that Fredric Jameson is virtually absent from Polish literary studies (his latest texts having never even been translated), and authors such as Nicholas Brown or Roberto Schwarz remain absent entirely; not to mention that Raymond Williams's seminal *Marxism and literature* is available in Polish only in an absurdly poorly translated, literally illegible version<sup>6</sup>. Many similar works are rendered incomprehensible without a proper understanding (which does not necessarily mean embracing) of the Marxist conception of class and class antagonism. The fact that these are either misunderstood or absent impoverishes not only the "left-leaning" part of Polish literary studies (whatever one may understand by that), but Polish literary studies in general. Ignorance of basic terms of the Marxist tradition renders reading works like *The Political Unconscious* by Fredric Jameson<sup>7</sup> pointless. In turn, ignorance of concepts such as the political unconscious makes the vast resources of western literary studies inaccessible to us, including some of their most exciting new fields – even those that more orthodox Marxists may disap-

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxizm i literatura* [Marxism and literature], translated into Polish by Antoni Chojnacki, Edward Kasperski (Warszawa: PWN, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1981).

prove of. Without understanding what class is, it is impossible to capture the Marxist category of alienation – and its criticism within the so-called “new materialisms”<sup>8</sup>. The erasure of class can further limit our access to important historical works of Polish literary criticism as well: from the early writings of Stanisław Brzozowski, to Ignacy Fik, to various debates initiated by the journal “Kuźnica”, and more.

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Naturally, a metacritical analysis of a notion that no longer exists requires a clear delimitation, and a careful narrowing down, of the possible source material. It is unsurprising that we will not find references to class struggle in short book reviews in “Polityka” [Politics], or in the foreword to an anthology of explicitly right-wing poetry. The absence of such references in the critical-literary discourse of the liberal center or conservative right is somewhat obvious, a given – and as such it should not be seen as a symptom of some broader phenomenon or historical shift.

My considerations are thus limited to one tradition of leftist literary criticism, associated mostly with names such as Maria Janion, Kinga Dunin and Igor Stokfiszewski. Alongside Przemysław Czapliński (whose works, due to their vastness and theoretical variety, requires a separate analysis) they laid the programmatic foundations for the literary criticism of the “Krytyka Polityczna” [Political criticism] circle (the influence was direct in the case of Dunin and Stokfiszewski). It was (as we shall see) openly non-Marxist criticism in terms of its methodological or political assumptions, based primarily on politics of anti-discrimination and new social theories which stemmed from western liberalism (e.g. Rorty), rather than on elements of socialist tradition.

However, it was this circle that at the turn of the century defined the default meaning of “the left” in Polish literary criticism – “leftist criticism” referred to (at least in the modern rather than historical context) the ideas more or less accurately associated with “Krytyka Polityczna”; this seemed to be the case especially with those critics who saw themselves as non-leftist. This led to interesting reevaluations and various thought-provoking – not to say: confusing – metacritical analyses. For example, a paper by Magdalena Hoły-Łuczaj *Czy “zwrot polityczny” to “zwrot marksistowski”? Projekt “Krytyki Politycznej” a marksistowska tradycja literaturoznawcza*<sup>9</sup> [Is “the political turn” a “Marxist turn”? “Krytyka Polityczna’s” project and Marxist literary studies tradition], published in a specialist, academic journal, should be read today as a surprising testament of the period. Hoły-Łuczaj argues that on closer inspection the works of literary criticism associated with “Krytyka Polityczna” reveal their Marxist provenance, although it is never openly admitted. At the same time, she understands Marxism very broadly – and in such a way that those who identify with the historical-materialist tradition would not necessarily subscribe to her understanding of the term. The issue with Hoły-Łuczaj’s definitions becomes clear as soon as she introduces the notion of the “political turn”:

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Jason Edwards, “The Materialism of Historical Materialism”, in: *New Materialisms*, edited by Diana Coole, Samantha Frost (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Magdalena Hoły-Łuczaj, “Czy «zwrot polityczny» to «zwrot marksistowski»? Projekt «Krytyki Politycznej» a marksistowska tradycja literaturoznawcza”, *Literaturoznawstwo* 6-7 (2012-2013).

Following the political turn, literature and literary criticism are supposed to focus not on the analysis of “experiences”, emotions and fantasies of individuals, but orient themselves towards the supra-individual sphere, a way of thinking, and as a result – understanding ourselves better. Hence from the onset the political turn takes a stance which is almost identical to Marxist anthropology<sup>10</sup>.

In other words, what is Marxist about the “political turn”, is the general turn towards politics (as a “supra-individual sphere”); it is easy to notice that in this situation any “political turn” has to be Marxist simply by definition. Moreover, “engagement” as such is also Marxist by definition:

Thus the political turn “took place via art, which again started to show alternative codices of values and started to participate in the shaping [highlight by MHŁ] a new map of the individual and universal”. This statement directs us towards the leading assumption of “Krytyka Polityczna’s” project, according to which engagement – well-known to us from the Marxist paradigm – constitutes the central issue in the discussion about literature.<sup>11</sup>

...and so is the idea of conflict as a foundation of politics:

The idea of conflict as “the only social constant” is another assumption shared by “Krytyka Polityczna” and the Marxist paradigm<sup>12</sup>.

Obviously, a gradual yet drastic loosening and expansion of the understanding of “Marxism” is taking place here. This definitional slippery slope – on which Hoły-Łuczaj steps, assuming that Marxism is some sort of sensitivity, or a way of adding value to certain “categories” rather than a specific academic orientation, method, or historical theory - leads her to considering “reality” as an inherently Marxist term:

The demand for literature to orient itself towards reality seems to be among top reasons for which “Krytyka Polityczna’s” project can be considered convergent with the Marxist paradigm. The expectations of this environment regarding modern literature focus on the relationship with reality, i.e. the need to refer to it, to notice the ideological discourses governing it, and critical responses to them. The realism proposed by “Krytyka Polityczna” is basically the same as one of the major categories of Marxist literary studies<sup>13</sup>.

Although many Marxists would likely agree with Hoły-Łuczaj’s acknowledgement of reality’s inherent leftist bias, she herself focuses on identifying all categories which potentially might connect “Krytyka Polityczna” with Marxism, rather than on verifying whether there is actually any meaningful connection. After all, realism - although indeed important for Marxists - has been claimed as their own by many political and academic orientations.

However, the point here is not to complain about the methodological hodge-podge in Hoły-Łuczaj’s paper, where even a meeting between Sławomir Sierakowski and Bertolt Brecht is pos-

<sup>10</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 18.

<sup>11</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 18.

<sup>12</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 19.

<sup>13</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 21.

sible under the umbrella of “heterodox Marxism”<sup>14</sup>. Rather, that paper seems to be a telling testament of the epoch. Published in 2013, it stemmed from a moment when the “political turn” – now made tangible by Stokfiszewski’s book of the same title, as well as a guide to engaged literature by “Krytyka Polityczna”<sup>15</sup> – presented itself as a major, default form of the left-leaning literary criticism in Poland, virtually unchallenged in terms of visibility, systemic character, and institutional support. It would seem that in a post-socialist state such a status must have given at least a *suspicion* of Marxist provenance of the whole enterprise, its hidden or implicitly (and not necessarily overt even to authors themselves) communist character. Hoły-Łuczaj’s paper was thus an attempt at verifying those suspicions, burdened mostly not even by bias, but by her poor knowledge of the Marxist tradition. From the perspective of our discussion, what is significant is precisely the fact that Hoły-Łuczaj *fails* – what her paper proves (against her original intention) is that classifying the new, critical-literary left from the turn of the century as “Marxist” requires an absurd extension of the definition. If the connection between the two traditions is based on such general categories as “orientation towards reality”, then it is clear there is no actual convergence of intuition, method, or interpretation.

Hoły-Łuczaj is so determined to prove that there are connections between Marxism and the “political turn”, that ultimately she does not even draw conclusions from her own, correct observation regarding the place of the category of class in texts by leftist critics:

However, for “Krytyka Polityczna”, “classes” in their strict – Marxist – meaning are not the subject of the conflict. The representatives of “Krytyka Polityczna” refer to conflicts between different social groups, whose identities are defined by rather than economic factors. In this sense, “Krytyka Polityczna” takes a typically post-Marxist position<sup>16</sup>.

It is worth noting that Hoły-Łuczaj’s reconstruction of the Marxist understanding of “class”<sup>17</sup> is erroneous, and later in her paper she openly admits that she is not interested in the differentiation (previously introduced by herself) between post-Marxism, neo-Marxism, and Marxism as such; nonetheless, she correctly identifies the key characteristic of the critical-literary project of “Krytyka Polityczna”: its rejection of the category of class (or at least depriving it of its central, analytical function that it has in Marxism).

Perhaps treating Hoły-Łuczaj’s text as symptomatic of a broader phenomenon – which one could as a forceful “extension” of leftist criticism from the turn of the century so that it encompasses Marxist traditions – would be unjustifiable if her ideas were not shared by so many people, as evidenced by the reactions to Stokfiszewski’s famous polemics. And it is not just a case of the “ArtPapier” reviewer, who established Stokfiszewski’s alleged Marxism *exclusively* on

<sup>14</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 21.

<sup>15</sup>See Igor Stokfiszewski, *Zwrot polityczny* [Political turn] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009); *Polityka literatury. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej* [Politics of literature. A guide by Krytyka Polityczna], edited by K. Dunin et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009).

<sup>16</sup>Hoły-Łuczaj, 19.

<sup>17</sup>She derives social difference from “the way of dividing profits”, and class antagonism – not from exploitation, but from abstract “inequality” and the fact that “the privileged class is trying to uphold it” (Hoły-Łuczaj, 13); in general, Hoły-Łuczaj proposes a rather typical, liberal – and erroneous – reading of Marxist class theory.

the basis of his general appreciation of the social role of conflict<sup>18</sup>; Karol Maliszewski, an influential critic of modern poetry wrote, unironically compared Stokfiszewski to György Lukács:

I do not claim that poetry does not benefit from immersion in earthly life and its capricious shapes; it stems from earthly life, striving towards eternity. But without exaggerating, without turning a poem into a journalistic commentary, put together for the sake of socially-oriented critics. Prose might be content with that, but for poetry it is just a basic level. The realism of small things, topography, experience, or a social characteristic (according to individual wishes, these can be politically engaged, and not necessarily in Broniewski's style) serve as a stepping stone, they create a transfer space, among many other – also metaphysical. I do not understand why this young critic only cares about the first level, limited to producing political postcards. Is this a return to Lukács, or maybe socialist realism à rebours (capitalist realism)? How can one talk to poets, while suggesting a selection of topics for them to use?<sup>19</sup>

A bit earlier Maliszewski also mentions that in new poetry “what escapes qualifications, especially Marxist ones, is the most alluring” – suggesting that Stokfiszewski sides with those “qualifications”. Realism and a certain authoritative attitude, which Maliszewski associates with the figure of a people's commissar, are supposed to form a bridge between Stokfiszewski and Marxism. This loose approach to definitions allows Maliszewski to identify Stokfiszewski's perspective as “mercantile and media-oriented” – apparently there is no contradiction between Marxism, reduced now to general demand for realism and a certain stylistic manner, and free market “mercantilism”. Maliszewski's and Hoły-Łuczaj's generalizations thus prove the same thing: there is no link between Marxism and the “political turn” which would go beyond style or rhetoric.

Joanna Orska's paper, *O «lewicowej» strategii współczesnej krytyki literackiej wobec wolnego rynku mediów*<sup>20</sup> [On the “leftist” strategy of contemporary literary criticism regarding the free market of media] offers a far more interesting and detailed picture of the relationship between these two. Although Orska identifies different representatives of the “leftist strategy” than Hoły-Łuczaj (Orska's list includes Przemysław Czapliński and Agata Bielik-Robson; today the latter distances herself from the left, but in 2007, when Orska's paper was published, she was associated with “Krytyka Polityczna” – whereas Kinga Dunin is treated as opposed to them due to her criticism of the “dominating media discourse”), she nonetheless ultimately associates the “left” literary criticism with the same, general program approach – simple realism, the need to impact reality, explicit engagement, etc. The difference between Orska and Hoły-Łuczaj or Maliszewski lies in Orska's nuanced insight – by decomposing the “leftist strategy” into prime factors: focus on the political effectiveness of literature, attachment to political correctness, populist rhetoric, romantic egalitarianism – but also (and crucially) in the fact that Orska aptly highlights the differences between the new left and the Marxist tradition, rather than blurs it. All this is not explicit in her article – Marx appears here only once – but her observations are based on Theodor Adorno's writings on the cultural industry, the devastating effect of the logic

<sup>18</sup>Ryszard Knapek, “Ustanowienie uniwersalizmu” [Establishment of universalism], *ArtPapier* 5 (2010), <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=102&artykul=2370>.

<sup>19</sup>Karol Maliszewski, “Czkawka po Lukácsu” [An aftertaste after Lukács], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 13.03.2007 [online version].

<sup>20</sup>Joanna Orska, “O «lewicowej» strategii współczesnej krytyki literackiej wobec wolnego rynku mediów”, in: *Dyskursy krytyczne u progu XXI wieku* [Political discourses of early 21st century], edited by Dorota Kozicka, Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski (Kraków: Universitas 2007).

of the market on art, and the resulting alienation. The general tone of the paper is clear: it is not so much an attack on the left from the non-left, as it is a critique of a certain type of romantic left - its fascination with the market, its obsession (disguised as populism) with simplicity and accessibility – using selected tools borrowed from western Marxism.

Orska consciously and consistently proves what Hoły-Łuczaj and Maliszewski proved unintentionally with their own *i n c o n s i s t e n c y*: the critical-literary left from the early 21st century, the “political turn” left, had little to do with any diagnoses or tools characteristic of historical materialism.

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It is difficult to examine a non-existing notion based on the interpretations of texts in which it could appear, even though it does not. Ultimately the fact that the category of class appears in such program works as *Czytając Polskę* [Reading Poland] only occasionally, next to considerations about the language of Stalinism<sup>21</sup>, is in itself an interesting observation – but it is hard to clearly see what its implications are. Perhaps we can draw more conclusions from the fact that in *Zwrot polityczny* class – apart from several references to the lifestyle of the “middle class” – appears exclusively in a longer quote from Nancy Fraser, where the aim is to draw analogies between anti-discriminatory social struggles of sexual minorities, and class struggle<sup>22</sup>. However, even this observation is limited: we can see that Stokfiszewski requires the notion of class first and foremost in order to describe the mechanisms of identity/cultural exclusion, whereas Dunin – in order to clarify the difference between the public discourse in Poland during the socialist period and post-1989; however, this does not explain why class seems to serve these purposes *e x c l u s i v e l y*.

Thus, what seems more productive is to turn towards texts that outline general foundations of their authors’ worldview, explaining how they understand such makeshift totalities as culture or society; program articles which lay down a general, theoretical *b a c k g r o u n d* of the actual critical-literary work, and reveal a general worldview of a critic – as well as reasons behind perceiving the category of class as unnecessary or peripheral for considering those totalities.

In early the 1990s Maria Janion wrote about the relationship between economy and culture:

Ideas rule the world, and democracy needs the richness and greatness of ideas. The intelligentsia elites will thus serve the ideological role even more than before, they will work on creating a market of ideas. However, we must not forget that ideas must refer to economy. The wheels of the mechanics of economy can spin and function only when they are supported by some culture, by its style. If a given culture rejects them – they stop working, or they malfunction<sup>23</sup>.

Present-day readers won’t find anything particularly controversial here. It is an obviously and openly idealistic vision, and the mention of “a market of ideas” may seem somewhat embarrassing

<sup>21</sup>Kinga Dunin, *Czytając Polskę*, Warszawa: WAB 2004 [epub; chapter “PRL. W szponach systemu” [PRL. In the claws of the system].

<sup>22</sup>Stokfiszewski, *Zwrot polityczny* [epub; subchapter 2. in chapter “Inne rytuały” [Other rituals].

<sup>23</sup>Maria Janion, “Szanse kultur alternatywnych” [Chances of alternative cultures], *Res Publica* 3 (1991): 108.

today, but Janion starts from an attempt at reasonably balancing the relationship between culture and economy – in such a way as to make them mutually supportive, creating feedback. However, her conclusions are far from obvious:

If this is how we present this problem – economy taking root in culture, the two forced to cooperate, then we need to rethink the extent to which Polish culture – symbolic-romantic – can accept free market. If this is impossible, then we also need to rethink where a conflict between this culture and free market may lead us, and whether it would not result in social disintegration and economic inconsistency. We need to consider whether this conflict is inevitable, or whether we should simply come up with a concept of culture which would meet the economic challenge better, which would be something – I don't know – supportive of the new economics<sup>24</sup>.

The feedback suggestion disappears: we should invent the new Polish culture in such a way as to support the new Polish “economics”. Specifically – free market economics, which to Janion seems to be something obvious and given. The only significant antagonism appears between “economics” and culture – but we do not get any suggestion of fundamental conflicts (e.g. class culture) within cultural, social etc. life.

This shift or harmonisation is not involuntary however, it has a specific aim – designation of a new dedicated space for romanticism and those who study it, or, more generally, cultural studies as such, culture activists, and social movements in general. This space becomes known as “alternative cultures”:

We also need to think about what Marcin Król wrote about in “Res Publica” – the middle class culture. Practicing the so-called tragic irony does not benefit the creation and development of the middle class. This is not to say that this irony, after its historical functioning stops, cannot become an aesthetic value for the middle class. [...] Perhaps there is even some chance for the romantic culture to become one of alternative cultures. [...] The chance of romanticism as an alternative culture can lie in the fact that it contains unusually rich existential issues<sup>25</sup>.

Thus we are encouraged to give up on the economy – which has a given, obvious, unambiguous form – and maintain a culture – which also needs to be constructed around one, consistent “idea”, defined (if we want to avoid social disintegration) by the “new economics” – only in order to find an area in which the more profound truth of the romantic culture (or any other alternative culture) could directly impact the mentality or ethos of the new, crucial class. On the one hand, in *Szanse kultur alternatywnych* we can find a mood of resignation, characteristic of Janion's 1990s texts<sup>26</sup>; Janion seems to have given up on the possibility of a deeper political change. On the other hand, her surrender is supposed to secure for culture as a field a particular kind of autonomy – one that would provide culture with political relevance. This relevance would supposedly stem not from the participation of cultural critics and activists in the fundamental conflicts of the new, capitalist reality, but from their ability to resist “economics” as such.

<sup>24</sup>Janion, “Szanse kultur alternatywnych”, 109.

<sup>25</sup>Janion, “Szanse kultur alternatywnych”, 109.

<sup>26</sup>See e.g. Maria Janion, *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś?* [Will you know what you have lived through?] (Warszawa: Sic!, 1996).

It would seem that this observation says a lot about how the possibility of escaping from politics in the new, free-market reality was perceived in 1990s: Janion quite evidently does not believe in the general possibility of depoliticizing romantic culture; she does understand that being apolitical is a political choice, but she seems to distinguish two separate levels of political action: the level of “economics” (about which nothing can be directly done), and the level of “alternative culture”, at which admittedly nothing can be done directly, but which is nonetheless very political, as it shapes not only the broadly understood “values”, but also whole “new” classes. We would thus be seeing not the unconditional surrender on behalf of the left, but rather a tactical retreat and an intentional change of front.

However, this change of front entails a profound shift in what one might call the foundations of the political imaginarium (in fact, that shift was foreshadowed in Janion’s earlier texts). The market of ideas, on which alternative and non-alternative cultures will be competing, requires a new, market-based subject – the mythical “middle class” which transcends the previous class oppositions. The class conflict thus disappears completely, replaced with the idea of natural social stratification. Another conflict from Janion’s vision which could potentially be problematized in terms of dialectic contradictions – one between economy and culture – is meanwhile reduced to a technicality. As far as adjusting culture to the “new economics” efficiently goes, technocrats (i.e. people able to recognize the essence of the new economics and design a new culture for it) on both sides should be entrusted with key roles. What is left? A vision based on a contradiction between the center and the periphery, between culture and alternative cultures. While in a capitalist conflict between classes exploitation (extraction of surplus value from labour) and strike (refusal to work which makes the said extraction impossible) are two basic, characteristic forms of violence, in a world based on a conflict between center and periphery exclusion is a key issue. Exploitation assumes the existence of classes (the dominating class exploits the working class), exclusion assumes the existence of identity (not every identity has the right to be truly, fully oneself, to be seen and heard). Classes can obviously coexist with identities, mechanisms of exploitation exist next to mechanisms of exclusion – however, they are driven by different logics. In simple terms, accepting the primacy of class antagonism over mechanisms of identity exclusion distinguishes the Marxist perspective from the liberal-progressive one.

Curiously, when in a 2009 interview for “Gazeta Wyborcza” [Election gazette] Janion discussed the influential series “Transgresje” [Transgressions] which she edited in 1970s and 1980s, she commented on this exact issue:

We wanted the understanding humanities to use social categories, including class or gender, although perhaps class was not such an important category in “Transgressions”. The category of the excluded, also due to social reasons, was more important there<sup>27</sup>.

Of course, Janion was not the only person responsible for the shift towards the center-periphery opposition as a basis of literary scholars’ political imagination; however, it seems that her role may have been quite significant. In any case, over the next decade or so this opposition was

<sup>27</sup>“Studenci to nie jest niższy personel. Z Marią Janion rozmawiają Kazimiera Szczuka i Sławomir Sierakowski” [Students are not lower-level staff. An interview with Maria Janion by Kazimiera Szczuka and Sławomir Sierakowski], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 226 (2009): 20-21.

to dominate the vision of the world of many important literary critics, especially on the left – this is how Czapliński conceptualized reality in *Powrót centrali*<sup>28</sup> [The return of the central], this is what Dunin did in *Czytając Polskę* and in her earlier *Karoca z dyni*<sup>29</sup> [Pumpkin carriage], outlining her concept of the “Dominant Discourse” (abbreviated as DyDo) or “Dominant Media Discourse” (DDM). The latter was aptly criticized by Krzysztof Uniłowski<sup>30</sup>, who pointed out that DDM conceals more than it reveals: who creates the dominating discourse? On whose behalf and for whose benefit? How is it upheld, and by whom? We do not know; today we could suggest that due to how the problem is presented, in fact we c a n n o t k n o w, for in a vision of the world based on the center-periphery opposition, the center itself seems to be given and uniform, just like in Janion’s works. It becomes an almost metaphysical force (Dunin literally personifies it as a “prince”<sup>31</sup>), whose impact is equally menacing and n a t u r a l; DyDo does what he does not for anyone’s benefit, but because it lies in his nature. All niches and margins, in fact anyone affected by censorship and exclusion; anyone who would prefer varied, innovative, dynamic culture; anyone who dislikes the “dominating media” message, would be DyDo’s opponent. Presenting this issue in such a way does not leave any room for class antagonism – this is a vision of the world based on collective resistance against one, abstract “power” for whom censorship is not a tool for gaining some material interest – this power is defined by censorship.

In *Karoca z dyni* the part where Dunin develops the concept of “prince DyDo” is preceded by a less known, but perhaps more telling chapter, in which she approvingly comments on *The Future of Capitalism* by Lester Thurow<sup>32</sup> and *The Global Trap* by Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann<sup>33</sup>. Dunin, clearly fascinated, borrows a vision of society from the latter; in that vision only 20% of the working-age population is enough to sustain global economy, which renders the remaining 80% redundant. Why is this vision not completely apocalyptic, why does it not assume the extermination of the redundant population? According to Dunin, because capital requires consumers – which is why the redundant should be given some money for expenditures.

According Dunin it is access to consumers rather than to workforce that constitutes the basic condition for sustaining the capitalist economy. The entirety of politics is thus about redistribution – such a way of dividing value produced by the small, undefined group of the “productive” so as nobody lives in poverty, and the world does not fall into resentment and fascism. Access to some abstract machine which generates wealth – and e x c l u s i o n from participating in that wealth rather than e x p l o i t a t i o n of those who produce it - is the key political issue here. Of course, Dunin is mostly interested in the exclusion of women, but not only women – for example, she derives an abstract concept of “global exclusion” from the “logic of capitalism”.

<sup>28</sup>Przemysław Czapliński, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości* [The return of the central. Literature in a new reality] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007).

<sup>29</sup>Dunin, *Czytając Polskę*; Kinga Dunin, *Karoca z dyni* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2000).

<sup>30</sup>Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Chcieliśmy rynku...” [We wanted a market...], *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2002).

<sup>31</sup>Kinga Dunin, “Kopciuszek, księżę DyDo i wolność” [Cinderella, prince DyDo and freedom], in Dunin: *Karoca z dyni*.

<sup>32</sup>Lester Thurow, *Przyszłość kapitalizmu. Jak dzisiejsze siły ekonomiczne kształtują świat jutra* [The Future of Capitalism: How Today’s Economic Forces Shape Tomorrow’s World], translated into Polish by Lech Czyżewski (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1999).

<sup>33</sup>Hans-Peter Martin, Harald Schumann, *Pułapka globalizacji. Atak na demokrację i dobrobyt* [The Global Trap: Globalization and the Assault on Prosperity and Democracy], translated into Polish by Marek Zybura (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1999).

However, nowhere can we find workers treated as workers; the world consists of consumers and “voices” struggling to be heard. Value and wealth result from abstract operations of a unified, anthropomorphic “center” rather than from the labour of one class or another.

It is thus not surprising that Dunin looks favorably upon soft eurocrats such as Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann. Edward Palmer Thompson, a major socialist eurosceptic wrote that the common European market is a huge stomach for the bourgeoisie: although it has room for different divisions, regulations, interventions, only one process takes place in it: consumption, digestion<sup>34</sup>. Dunin, similarly to Schumann, cares about equal access to this digestion.

At the same time Dunin goes one step further than Janion in her acceptance of capitalism as the only possible mode of production; in early 1990’s texts by Janion capitalism is presented as a fact against which it is pointless to argue (if only for tactical reasons), whereas Dunin generalizes capitalism to a broadly understood “dictate of economy”. Thus, capitalism is where people think about economy either exclusively or too much, for the laws of economy are the laws of capitalism. In other words, capitalist ideology is not “a certain way of thinking about economy”, but rather “a certain way of thinking: about economy”. What can balance it? First and foremost, focusing on values of groups or discourses which have been historically excluded from the market. This is where Dunin discovers a role for new literature and its criticism.

Dunin actually puts forward the same vision of the world as Janion, but in a militant or radicalized version. At its basis there is the opposition of economy and culture – capitalism and values – which is potentially dialectic, but deprived of a dialectic character by the assumption that the laws of capitalism are the same as the laws of economy in general, and thus remain fundamentally unchangeable. Dunin, unlike Janion, does not argue for aligning values with the market, to the contrary – she emphasises the conflict between them. The center-periphery is another opposition, this time non-dialectic in principle – minority discourses, marginalized or excluded, struggle for access to the “center”. Similarly to Janion, here this struggle is in fact purely symbolic or cultural in the sense that production in capitalism is supposed to take place in the mythical, inaccessible center (the “productive” 20%), with just the redistribution of its fruits as the stake. However, while in Janion’s vision “alternative cultures” are supposed to compete for the mentality of the newly formed middle class on the “market of ideas”, Dunin does not really believe in that market; she does not design space for minorities, she calls for it and expects them to demand their own visibility – not based on their own market “attractiveness”, but on non-economic, basically ethical legitimation. To put it simply: women’s voices should be heard better not because it is important for the well-being of the middle class, but because it is just.

Stokfiszewski elaborates on this in *Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury*<sup>35</sup> [Pragmatic criticism of culture], which may be seen as a kind of theoretical or philosophical background for his slightly later, better known polemics about the state of new poetry<sup>36</sup>. Dunin constitutes the most

<sup>34</sup>“E.P. Thompson on Europe, from 1975”, <https://kmflett.wordpress.com/2019/09/09/e-p-thompson-on-europe-from-1975/>.

<sup>35</sup>Igor Stokfiszewski, “Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury” [Pragmatic criticism of culture], *Ha!art* 21 (2005).

<sup>36</sup>Igor Stokfiszewski, “Poezja uników” [Poetry of dodges], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 33 (2007); Igor Stokfiszewski, “Poezja a demokracja” [Poetry versus democracy], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 10 (2007).

important point of reference for Stokfiszewski. The left's escape from economy to culture here is an "obvious", default tactic, justified with western theories:

It is rather obvious that for the left the emphasis has shifted from economy to culture, which can be summarized with Nancy Fraser's "redistribution or recognition" dilemma. A large group of leftist intellectualists (including Fraser) believes that cultural acceptance of communities functioning outside the margin of the dominating consensus will find recognition also in matters of economy as soon as equal members will enter that margin<sup>37</sup>.

The choice is thus clear – recognition followed by redistribution; economic transformation fuelled by the power of minority identities rather than the working-class majority. In Janion "culture" was supposed to adjust to "economics" due to various necessities of the Polish "transition to democracy" (mediating its social influence in the formation of a new class); in Dunin social justice required cultural voices of the excluded to resist the "dictate" of economy; and Stokfiszewski develops the same intuition even further (perhaps even somewhat dialectally?): the goal is not simple adjustment or simple resistance, the goal is to fight for recognition which would then lead to redistribution.

Also, institutions which belong to the center-periphery opposition are transformed. In Stokfiszewski's program article exclusion of identities and marginal cultural voices is the basic problem – just like in Janion's and Dunin's texts; however, here we are dealing with a certain reduction, elimination of mediation – it is the very idea of majority, the very majority thinking that is responsible for the constant exclusion rather than some mythical "central" (like prince DyDo):

Triumphant return of the "truth". This is probably the most adequate way of defining what our culture has been struggling with for the past few years, and what results from the need to define identity and community. In this case, "truth" is nothing else than ideology. Ideology of the cultural majority, which in the name of stabilization and good mood forces it as the "truth" upon minority, which would also like to build a community, but on different fundamentals<sup>38</sup>.

Such a presentation of the problem excludes the category of class even more directly than Janion and Dunin did it. Stokfiszewski openly rejects the possibility to imagine a universal class, which is just as significant in the Marxist concept of class as its very relational and antagonistic nature. Universal subjects either do not exist at all, or – what is perhaps closer to what Stokfiszewski believes in – these are all minority subjects in principle – for every inclusion of the excluded benefits the whole community. Either way, without the possibility of a universal class the vision of class antagonism as historically progressive is obviously impossible. In order to strive towards social progress, a given class needs to function as an excluded, minority identity rather than the working, exploited majority, whose interest is in principle aligned with the interest of the whole community.

<sup>37</sup>Stokfiszewski, "Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury", 22.

<sup>38</sup>Stokfiszewski, "Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury", 19.

If the demands put forward by Dunin in *Karoca z dyni* constitute (in a way) a radicalized version of Janion's ideas from *Szane kultur alternatywnych*, Stokfiszewski's *Pragmatyczna krytyka kultury* would be – so to say – a more self-conscious version of the same theses. For example, it seems that Stokfiszewski understands that capitalism is not a natural, trans-historical necessity – he just assumes that leftist politics is more effective at level of culture (he even assumes that his strategy of “recognition before redistribution” may not work, so he proposes that we should act as if it works, and if it does not, we should revisit it in a few years). Stokfiszewski also understands that different abstract figures of a “central” are not functional in the long term – he thus openly states that the problem lies in the very notions of “majority” or “truth”. Nonetheless his general vision is the same as Janion's or Dunin's: it is no use questioning economic “laws” ruling the world, it is better – easier – to handle culture; in this area the left is supposed to fight for minorities which demand to be part of some broader community, and when they become included – they generally benefit said community as well. In this strategy, there is room for new literature and a job for engaged criticism. The assumption that class struggle has to give way to cultural recognition is thus ultimately not an autonomous, theoretical demand resulting from e.g., reading Fraser's texts, but a natural consequence of Stokfiszewski's strive towards clarifying intuitions which are already present in a certain critical-literary tradition to which he belongs.

In Stokfiszewski, a certain tradition of “leftist” criticism thus finds a moment of self-awareness, self-reflection; it is forced to play open cards with itself and with us. We do not necessarily need to assume that this moment exhausts that line. However, one could suggest that Stokfiszewski brought an end to a grace period of sorts; a version of nominally engaged and leftist literary criticism in which the world consists of identities rather than classes on a basic level, has been led to its natural consequences; and Stokfiszewski explicitly articulates the difference between the two approaches – in this sense he creates space for disagreement, dispute, or a possible invention of a different leftist “strategy”. This would explain why it was only when the discussion about *Zwrot polityczny* quieted down, that – especially in poetry criticism – did voices demanding (more or less explicitly) the return to class emerge<sup>39</sup>.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Zuzanna Sala, “O tym jak szlachcic rabację wywołał” [On how a nobleman started a slaughter], <https://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/artykuly/o-tym-jak-szlachcic-rabacje-wywolal/>; Zuzanna Sala, “Eternit i wiśnie, czyli o zadupiach w poezji polskiej” [Asbestos and cherries, i.e. on the backwoods of Polish poetry], *Czas Kultury. Dwutygodnik 2* (2021), <https://czaskultury.pl/artikul/eternit-i-wisnie-czyli-o-zadupiach-w-poezji-polskiej/>; Paweł Kaczmarski, “Trzy opowieści o awansie klasowym” [Three stories about social advancement], *Mały Format 6* (2019), <http://malyformat.com/2019/06/opowiesci-o-awansie-klasowym/>; Łukasz Żurek, “Drugi modernizm” [Second modernism], *Dwutygodnik 2* (2018), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artikul/7643-drugi-modernizm.html>; Jakub Skurtys, “Bywa rewolucyjna. Podsumowanie roku 2019 w poezji” [It is sometimes revolutionary. A summary of 2019 in poetry], *Mały Format 12* (2019), <http://malyformat.com/2020/02/bywa-rewolucyjna-podsumowanie-roku-2019-poezji/>.

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# KEYWORDS

Marxism

*class*

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper identifies (selected) reasons and strategies of removing the notion of class from Polish critical-literary discourse after 1989, especially a certain tradition of non-Marxist leftist criticism defined by Maria Janion, Kinga Dunin and Igor Stokfiszewski. The paper shows how a general vision of the world and politics implicitly outlined in the works of those critics excludes the possibility to meaningfully use the notion of class.

## THE LEFT

## political transformation

## LITERARY CRITICISM

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