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Responsibilisation of Heteromasculinity in Poland in the Transition Era: Sexuality in Men's Magazines (1987–1993)*

In a widely discussed article on Poland's 1989 transformation, Agnieszka Graff claimed that the Solidarity movement was broadly perceived as a chance for Polish men to regain their lost masculinity in a new fight for democratic freedom (Graff 22–23). Importantly, while men turned from powerless hen-pecked handymen to romantic freedom fighters, women had to accept their role of silent supporters, sidelined from democratic processes. Their activity in Solidarity did not translate into political power, and Polish liberal democracy consequently turned out to be univocally masculine. Graff's claim has been broadly debated and developed (e.g., Janion 1999; Kościelniak; Mrozik 2012). Wojciech Śmieja has unpacked the late state-socialist crisis of masculinity, which the 1989 transformation was supposed to overcome. He has proposed three aspects of it: the crisis of military masculinity associated with the introduction of martial law, when the army turned against the citizens; the crisis of the project of socialist advancement, as higher education became less open to the working class and the class structure solidified; and, finally, the crisis of gender relations, expressed in growing discontent over women's emancipation (Śmieja 283–299).

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It is this third crisis—the crisis of gender relations—that I explore in this article through the analysis of two men's magazines published in Poland in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I assume that this crisis functions as a discourse aimed at consolidating masculine privilege in times of socioeconomic changes (Robinson 9–10). No data support the existence of an actual crisis: women tended to be made redundant earlier than men; women's reproductive rights were curtailed; women's involvement in politics plunged; finally, divorce rates dropped at the turn of the 1990s (Desperak 178–179; Siemieńska 58–59). Still, the discourse of masculinity in crisis was rhetorically employed both in state-socialist discourses and by the pro-democratic opposition. Its analysis can be revealing in establishing the nuances of the gendered ideologies of the turbulent transition time.

In the article, I ask how this discourse of crisis-ridden masculinity intersected with discourses of neoliberalization. Particularly, I employ the concept of neoliberal responsibilization to show how discourses of masculinity in crisis legitimated socioeconomic transition and how neoliberalism provided new discursive repertoires that enabled men to reclaim patriarchal power after the 1989 political change. Assuming that responsibilization is an important aspect of neoliberal policy and ideology (Brown; Mounk), and that neoliberalism is a "cultural logic" that has permeated all spheres of life (Harvey; Sandel), including intimacy (Hochschild; Illouz), the study will explore the discursive sphere of man's accountability, as depicted in men's magazines. Does the sphere of man's accountability indeed expand with the 1989 economic transition, as Western theories would suggest? Can state-socialist masculinity be described as less responsibilized than early neoliberal masculinity? My findings confirm the connection between neoliberalism and responsibilization. I show that late state-socialist intimate masculinity enjoyed a privilege of unaccountability that stimulated discourses of masculinity in crisis. In men's magazines, capitalism was framed as an opportunity to regain true manhood, characterized as having more agency in, among others, sexual life. The responsibilization of masculinity worked to safeguard dominance over women so that gender imbalances remained in place.

1. Neoliberal responsibilization and gender

While responsibility—understood broadly as the ability to foresee and accept the consequences of one's actions, trustworthiness, and accountability—is a virtue important across time and space, its importance is claimed to have intensified under neoliberalism. Neoliberal economic and political arrangements supposedly grant individuals more freedom – from governmental constraints and an intrusive welfare state, as well as freedom of consumer choice

epitomized by tax cuts – but they also demand greater responsibility, including personal responsibility for one's health, education, and retirement pension. This logic is reflected in policies favoring private health insurance over national systems, student loans over free tuition, and individual investment accounts over state-sponsored pensions (Cooper; Harvey). Indeed, Mounk shows that in the political rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Leszek Balcerowicz appeals to personal responsibility proliferated. The new citizen was urged to decide for themselves and instructed to interpret success and failure as outcomes of free choices, grounded in individual personalities, talents, and skills, which ultimately legitimated growing economic inequalities and cuts to the welfare state.

Responsibilization of subjectivity requires self-monitoring and self-assessment. Drawing on Foucauldian theory of governmentality, Nikolas Rose shows that the process of responsibilizing a subject is executed via what he terms psy-industries, which encourage individuals to understand their lives as the outcomes of autonomous choices oriented toward self-realization (Rose 230–232). Following Rose, other scholars have shown how contemporary discourses function as "technologies of the self," producing neoliberal subjectivities inclined to rationally upskill, strategize, and assume full responsibility for domains such as education (Olssen), marriage (Leonard), sexual life (Barker, Gill, Harvey), and happiness (Cabanas, Illouz). Western women have been addressed as entrepreneurs of intimacy—agentic and empowered consumers expected to strategically manage their sexuality to achieve personal goals (McRobbie). More limited scholarship on intimate masculinity suggests that heterosexual men are also encouraged to apply neoliberal principles of self-improvement, confidence, and self-management to gain greater control over their sexual lives and enhance their status among other men (O'Neill; Rogers; Taylor).

2. Methods and sources

The article draws on perspectives of Foucauldian discourse analysis and critical media studies (Foucault; Howarth; Ott, Mack) to explore responsibilization of masculinity in Poland. I believe that the rapidness and intensity of the Eastern European transition from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism at the turn of the 1990s offers a promising stage to analyze changes that may have been more gradual and thus less tangible in other liberal capitalist contexts. Thus, the relatively short, seven-year time span of the study makes it possible to track substantial changes in discourses on heteromasculinity. Following poststructuralist approaches, I assume that "masculinity" and "femininity" are fluid and incoherent categories, negotiated by individuals (Beasley), and

discourses—especially expert discourses—shape subjectivities and practices, influencing how people make sense of their lives. Gender and sexuality are crucial sites of discursive production, and since they are mediated, media analysis offers important insights into how people understand their intimate lives (Barker, Gill, Harvey; Gill). Particularly, lifestyle magazines have been indicated as important platforms to construct and disseminate discourses about gender and sexuality, including masculinity (Kluczyńska; Waling et al.; Zierkiewicz).

To research intimate masculinity of the transition era, I have analyzed two monthlies targeted at urban heterosexual men of the intelligentsia/middle class: *Pan* (*Sir*) and *Sukces* (*Success*). *Pan* was the first Polish lifestyle magazine for men that combined mildly erotic materials with journalism on conventionally masculine topics: cars, electronics, sports, sex. Anna Dobrowolska interprets its emergence in 1987 as part of a political trade-off, in which the state offered an escapist opportunity to consume nude images in the face of the economic recession and everyday hardships (Dobrowolska 438). In its 1987–1989 issues, *Pan* provided space to share anxiety over the economic crisis and the ongoing transition, when class structure tottered and hierarchies of privilege were being reshaped. After 1990, *Pan* endorsed new masculine virtues of self-reliance and entrepreneurship, and sought to shape readers' tastes and aspirations, instructing them how to dress and behave to fit the imagined Europeanness. In turn, *Sukces* was launched in 1990 as a new magazine suited for the emerging capitalist reality, focused on Western lifestyle and conspicuous consumption (Szcześniak 120–124). As its publisher Joanna Stolarska declared in the first issues, it would include photos of "pretty girls" as a "normal" Western magazine supposedly did (1990, 7, 2), thereby contributing to Polish media catching up with the West (1990, 8, 2)[1]. In this way *Sukces* framed female nudes as a signifier of newly gained political freedom and Westernization. Both *Sukces* and post-1989 issues of *Pan* posited businessmen and managers as role models for men, while for women, a career in show business, especially erotic modelling or beauty contests, was projected.

The researched materials include 66 issues of *Pan* (1989–1993) and 44 early issues of *Sukces* (1990–1993). For the analysis, I selected content—editorials, articles, opinion pieces, and letters—that explicitly dealt with masculinity or heterosexual intimacy. Looking for recurrent patterns of meaning, I aimed to

1 Since the authorship of the majority of quoted magazine content is irrelevant—and also dubious in the case of letters or reader's opinions—I will reference the primary sources in the following way: year, issue, page, proceeded with "P" for *Pan* and "S" for *Success* if clarification is needed.

establish what is presented in the magazines as men's personal responsibility, and what is discussed as beyond their control. In particular, I traced how sexual matters are framed as men's responsibility, choice or burden, or as a sphere where men have constrained agency that is dependent on luck, fate, or other people's choices.

3. Intimate unaccountability

The magazine *Pan*, especially in its 1987–1989 issues, tends to complain about the state of masculinity and heterosexual relations. Instead of discussing economic and political hardships openly, *Pan* turns to the hardships of heterosexuality. It explores various ways in which men are discriminated against and victimized: in family courts, by female bosses, by wives and lovers, even by the few female politicians of that period. Sometimes the problem lies in difficult times, "We, men and fathers, are on the defensive. Life has defeated us," a journalist claims (1987, 2, 14). Another problem is women's emancipation: "in families, the man has less and less to say," a reader complains (1987, 2, 2). Partnership in marriage is regularly attacked in the magazine as an assault on men's rights, and women's involvement in politics is mocked (1989, 1, 2). The magazine often refers to the idea that men have become too feminine, and women too masculine, but no remedies are proposed. "Men of the country—unite!" (1988, 4, 62), a columnist cries satirically, but before the transition the magazine focuses on listening to men's complaints and comforting readers rather than giving advice on how to subordinate women and regain male entitlement, supposedly curtailed.

In early issues of the magazine *Pan*, men are presented as victimized and helpless also when it comes to controlling their own sexuality. *Pan* frames erectile functioning as the quintessence of sex and male self-esteem, but various experts in the magazine simultaneously blame women for male impotence: too passive or too domineering, or just too scruffy and grumpy, women are held responsible for men's sexual functioning (Janion 2024: 735). For example, sexologists Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz and Wiesława Rucińska criticize women who expect orgasms as "castrators" (1988, 2, 26; 1990, 11, 34). Ultimately men could enjoy a sexual privilege of unaccountability: in the end, any problems with sex are not their fault, and women's demands are illegitimate. In *Pan*, sexological experts sooth men's anxieties over sexual performance and techniques and instruct women to change their "demanding attitudes."

Lack of accountability is also prevalent in discussions of heterosex in other contexts. Male sexuality is framed as fragile regarding extramarital relations or one-night stands. Clandestine sexual infidelity, often unofficially called "a leap to the side" (Pol.: skok w bok), is accepted, even encouraged in *Pan*.

Simultaneously, the magazine tends to use language that limits men's agency in this regard. "I ended up in the tent of a young woman. That's all," one reader says of his marital infidelity. In the rhetoric of *Pan*, men in unsatisfactory marriages are "as it were, compelled to cheat" (1989, 8, 24), especially considering their natural "tendency to polygamy" (1991, 7, 37). They might also be provoked to cheat by attractive women or do so only reluctantly. Gender roles make it even harder for men to resist sexual infidelity. A reader confesses: "In my case, it was even an obligation towards the woman.… I started to cheer her up, advise her, and we found ourselves in her apartment. I was not even in the mood for infidelity… A man has less room for maneuver in these situations" (1989, 9, 4). Here, the norm according to which men are always willing to have sex, together with the code of chivalry that prescribes comforting women, supposedly coerced the man to having intercourse—he feels victimized by sexual mores. Also, pregnancies tend to happen by chance and surprisingly (P, 1989, 7, 25), and either women or bad fate are blamed (P, 1988, 2, 21). *Pan* shows that men have little sexual agency, and when the situation gets out of control—the lover gets pregnant, the wife finds out, the secretary threatens to sue—men feel deceived, trapped, and helpless.

One letter in the section of legal advice is especially suggestive in this regard of limited responsibility. "I'm 22 years old and I'm easily sexually excited," the letter starts.

> I met my acquaintance's daughter, a girl who excited me to the level of emergency.… The affective temperature of this relation rose—on both sides. One afternoon, her father came home and found us in an unambiguous situation. He announced that he would bring me to criminal liability for "seducing" a minor under 15.

The language of the letter suggests that there was no agency on the side of the writer—it was the girl who made him excited and triggered the sexual behavior, which led to the "critical" situation (P, 1989, 3, 29). The initial self-diagnosis that the author is "easily sexually excited" shows that he knew the sexological discourses of the time that naturalized male sexuality as unstoppable and sexual intercourse as unavoidable, at least after reaching some level of sexual excitement—here referred to as "the level of emergency." The young girl is no victim, but an active agent who is equally, if not primarily, responsible for the situation. Her age is not a factor. The letter and the magazine's answer are in line with Polish sexological discourse, in which women were supposed to control and steer male sexuality (Kościańska 159–184; Mrozik 2022: 285–286). Importantly,

women were expected to accept their subordination but also actively manage male sexual desire. Kościańska shows that, as a result, they were burdened with a very problematic fake agency that was used against them in courts in cases of sexual violence. The letter reveals the consequences of such discourse for masculine subjectivity: the letter writer embraces his masculine unaccountability to prove his innocence, but the cost is projected helplessness—he believes to be the victim of the situation. The late state-socialist masculinity turns out crisis-ridden and helpless.

4. Responsibilization of heteromasculinity

The socioeconomic transition is depicted in men's magazines as a chance to regain masculine power. Neoliberal discourse instantly entered the men's press. As Małgorzata Szpakowska, Magda Szcześniak, and Wojciech Śmieja have demonstrated, "success" became the key word of Polish early neoliberal capitalism; indeed, in *Pan*'s editorials after 1990, masculinity becomes an arena of competition, risk, and fight for success. "The age of manhood does not have to be the age of defeat," publisher Jarosław Duszewski opens his 1991 editorial, paraphrasing one of the most famous lines of Polish romantic poetry, "It can and should be the age of greatest success" (1991, 11, 2). Emblematically, the national tradition of masochistic remembrance of masculine and national failures is replaced with individualism and a new self-confidence. After the transition, men are urged to be self-reliant, take risks, and overcome difficulties. Competitiveness and entrepreneurship become the new virtues, explicitly linked with masculinity. "Running your own business can be a manly adventure," the editorial states (P, 1992, 1, 2). And while "business is not for innocent ladies" (P, 1993, 11, 3) as "a woman has no skills to run a big business" (S, 1990, 10, 33), "the current time is favorable for real men" (P, 1992, 7–8, 2). The idea that state socialism was feminine and effeminizing, while neoliberal capitalism is masculine and thus gives new chances to men is apparent in the men's magazines of the early nineties (Graff; Śmieja).

The responsibilization of masculinity is visible in the repeated calls that men stop whining and take matters in their own hands. "You want to be successful, then stop thinking that you deserve anything," *Sukces* admonishes its readers (1990, 5, 39). In these magazines, new hierarchies between men are created, with femininity, puerility, and laziness functioning as the epitome of the unmanly. Capitalism requires Poles to man up: "Today, the state is too weak to lead its citizens by the hand," *Pan* explains (1992, 4, 2). A tendency to complain is believed to be a Polish national flaw that should be replaced with American cheerful optimism (S, 1991, 9, 54–55). *Pan*'s editor in chief instructs

the readers: "It makes most sense not to look for the culprits of this state of affairs, not to look back, but—as befits a real man—use experiences, good and bad, as a springboard that allows you to soar higher and bounce back stronger" (1991, 12, 2). Neoliberal capitalism means increasing competition that entails instability, uncertainty, and the risk of failure, in the face of which men are instructed to act with confidence and resilience. Other virtues that almost instantly appear in *Pan* and *Success* include personal development, positive thinking, and "ambitions to become a Rockefeller" (P 1993, 4, 14). "Nothing in life can be achieved without work, and above all, without working on yourself," an expert announces, "Sluggards will always lag behind, they will always lose" (S 1993, 5, 36). Men's magazines show that journalists and experts quickly learn and eagerly repeat the clichés of neoliberalism.

The change towards responsibilization does not evade sexuality, and new discourses appear instantly with the matters of sexual pleasure and the diversity of sexual techniques. They contrast with the early issues of *Pan*, printed under state socialism, which depicted sex as a simple and uncomplicated aspect of life that didn't demand any special skills, effort, or discipline. Sexologists and other experts focused more on addressing issues such as impotence or homosexuality than on improving sexual experiences. The woman's orgasm was not a concern—Polish sexologists criticized the focus on woman's orgasm as an American import that spoils intercourse (Janion 2024: 736). After the transition, sexuality started to be discussed in a new language, typically imported from the West. Advice about how to please women appears in articles that are mainly translations from Western bestsellers. In January 1991, a fragment of Alex Comfort's *Joy of Sex* was printed—"Women's letter to men," which, in quite vague ways, explains "women's" views on sex. In November 1991, passages from Graham Masterton's *How to Drive Your Woman Mad in Bed* appeared. Here, for the first time in *Pan*, a reader gets a few technical tips on how to excite women. These are (announced as) easy to introduce, supposedly universal instructions to quickly enrich and diversify sex life. The articles offer a new perspective in which the male reader is encouraged to become self-confident and inventive, take the risk ("no risk, no fun," the author argues), and strategize to improve his sex life. The new masculine subject is individually responsible for his and his partner's satisfaction and is willing to upskill to reach this aim. Importantly, expectations also rise. The aim is no longer to have sex—or, as Polish state-socialist sexologists wanted, have healthy sex: the aim is to "drive her mad in bed"—a phrase repeated thrice in the two-page-long article (1991, 11, 36–37). Similarly, *Sukces* translates or adapts its first content on sex from Western magazines, British, American, and German; these articles are not written by sexologists, as was the case with

Pan before 1989, but by anonymous journalists. Interestingly, articles on sex make the huge majority of translated content in these two magazines. It seems that sex-related topics were assumed to require the most immediate and direct intervention from the West.

This new neoliberal language of ambition, inventiveness, and personal responsibility corresponds with rising consumer capitalism. Higher expectations and striving for perfection create markets for new products. An advert printed in the last issue of *Pan* (1993, 10, 57) illustrates this shift. The text takes an entire page and resembles an article: it starts with a heading "Sex anew," followed by a lead; it includes passages that emulate objective reporting, and then an interview. A picture of an orgasmic woman illustrates the text. Only the small font below explicitly states it is an advert—a maneuver that might have been confusing for many readers, as yet unused to the selling practices of capitalism. The new marketing strategy is thus mixed with a well-known form of sexological advice. The reader learns about a new therapy that was invented by "Eastern" doctors and refined by French sexologists; it cures impotence and premature ejaculation, strengthens libido and orgasms, and allows for "as frequent intercourse as you wish." Unlike recipes for homemade aphrodisiacs printed in *Pan* in the 1980s, which always included phrases such as "believe it if you want to," or "trust in this treatment is half the battle" (1987, 2, 75; 1988, 1, 28), here the success is guaranteed by scientists. This article/advert attests to the new discourses of sex: now, orgasms are hierarchized, and the aim is to enhance sex—make it "more frequent and more intense" with "the highest levels of arousal ever" and "unbelievable orgasms." The distinction between cures for sexual problems and enhancement becomes blurred. Moreover, the treatment is supposed to give men "full control" over sex. Men take all the sexual agency. In the advert, women are expected to be impressed and pleased in sophisticated ways—the substance works when a woman "screams with joy" several times per night. Thus, in the domain of sexual prowess, neoliberal calls for ambition, self-development, and resourcefulness catch on instantly. Men are interpellated to expect more from sex and take more responsibility for its quality. The men's magazines of the early 1990s participated in the discourse of stimulating desires and raising expectations, typical of neoliberalism according to many scholars (Bauman; Musiał).

5. Conclusion

The 1980s discourses of masculinity in crisis intertwined with the 1989 socioeconomic transition, and consequently neoliberal capitalism was understood in men's magazines as a chance for men to regain their position of power over their own fates—and over women. This change included sexuality. Before

1990, *Pan* constructed masculinity that lacked responsibility for sexual life. Consequently, it was privileged—remaining beyond scrutiny, accountability, and blame—and could lay claims to victimization. Post–1989 men's magazines called for new models of masculinity that were more responsibilized and agentic. As dry advice from Polish sexologists was instantly replaced with anonymous content translated from foreign glossy magazines, heterosexuality became a sphere where men had to upskill and buy new products to enhance their sex lives and impress women with sexual techniques and stamina. In this way, men were told to establish their dominance in a new heterosexual environment of competition, risk, and constant need for self-improvement.

A focus on the responsibilization of intimate masculinity sharpens our understanding of the gendered dynamics of the 1989 socioeconomic transition. Alongside dominant images of victorious men—fighting for democracy, building careers, consuming Western goods, and embracing the influx of erotica—it brings into view discourses that showed men gaining greater agency in their intimate lives and sexual advantage over other men. Yet, whereas earlier crisis discourses emphasized the unfavorable systemic conditions shaping men's lives, responsibilization redirected attention toward individual effort and self-management, and thus obscured the inequalities produced by the new political and economic order. Other ways in which gender inequalities, Westernization, and neoliberalism worked together in Central Eastern European states to reassert masculine privilege after 1989 and legitimate rising structural inequalities remain to be scrutinized in future research.

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| Abstract

Responsibilisation of Heteromasculinity in Poland in the Transition Era: Sexuality in Men's Magazines (1987–1993)

Due to the economic and political crisis of late communist Poland, discourses about the crisis of masculinity gained popularity in the 1980s. In this article, I ask how this "masculinity in crisis" intersected with neoliberalization. Using the methods of Foucauldian discourse analysis, I analyze two men's magazines (1987–1993) to show that the heteromasculinity of late state socialism enjoyed the privilege of unaccountability, which stimulated discourses of masculinity in crisis. Capitalism, on the other hand, was presented as an opportunity to regain true masculinity, characterized by greater agency, including in sexual life. Using the contrast between declining state socialism and early neoliberalism, the article discusses the effects of neoliberal responsibilization on gender politics.

Keywords: heterosexuality; masculinity; Poland; responsibilization; sex; transition

| Bio

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