

## Semi-peripheries as us-ness

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### 1. The maturation of local communities

In the age of globalisation, the importance of nation states is irrevocably decreasing, which arouses satisfaction in some and panic, if not anxiety, in others. Financial markets have become extra-territorial, and the sovereignty of territorial states is more a nostalgic ideology of the politically frustrated than a viable reality. States thus become only slightly larger neighbourhoods, with ineffectively protected borders. The role of states seem, however, to take over local communities, making quasi-local politics, but above all, separating 'us' from 'them'. Tensions between 'us' and 'them' are transferred to the national level, it is even there that they are generated, leading to the logic of neo-tribalism (Maffesoli 1988). The quarrelling parties avoid mutual contact, resigning from persuasion, preferring to resort to insults, believing that the defects of 'strangers' are not only obvious and misleading but indelible. Efforts to mitigate differences are therefore doomed to failure, as the opponent is seen as the enemy, especially if (s)he is under the influence of fear of incomprehensible changes that undermine the existing social order, which are considered not only obvious but also natural. The future is not therefore viewed optimistically.

If we have to survive not only as a nation, but also as a society, it is necessary to look into the future, and perhaps even to accept the notion of the unjustly ignored Karl Marx, whose predictions after a hundred years become more and more clear that freedom is a conscious necessity. Because the freedom of my fist should end in front of my neighbour's nose.

Hopes are related to local communities, under certain conditions, however, i.e. that the identification of 'us-ness' is done at different levels: of our local community;

our regional community – still weak in Poland, except for a few regions; our national community, understood, however, in terms of the – recently ignored – constitution ('We, the Polish Nation, all citizens of the Commonwealth'); our European community; and our human community. Territorial communities, are, however, less and less obvious. The further from the past, the fewer 'natural' communities there are and more numerous are the voluntary associations based on a community of interests. Virtual reality in the internet era reinforces this rule considerably. Let us therefore try to identify the conditions for the realisation of these common interests of associations seeking to play the role of quasi-communities.

Referring to the present author's discussion with Jan Szomburg on the basis of his text (Szomburg 2016), these conditions can be described as follows:

- (1) The understanding of the self as a community in all its diversity.
- (2) Self-acceptance of changing collective identity instead of fear of it.
- (3) The acceptance of freedom as the basis of subjectivity.
- (4) The responsibility for oneself and others, reliability and commitment.
- (5) Farsightedness in anticipation of the results of our actions and omissions; the need for strategic planning for generations rather than in the near term.
- (6) The rationality of thinking based on facts rather than myths, but also the appreciation of emotions in social life as a social fact.
- (7) The openness to criticism (and self-criticism) as a challenge rather than threat.
- (8) Openness to difference, and the difference as value.
- (9) The ability to compromise as a basis for communication rather than a threat to identity.
- (10) Respect for the natural and cultural environment as an expression of concern for future generations.

When treating these conditions as goals to achieve, it is also necessary to identify the ways to achieve them. Loosely referring to Timothy Snyder (2016), these methods can be represented as follows:

- (1) Disobedience of thought is the foundation of civil society and its freedoms. Authoritarianism is based on forward-looking obedience, as people do what they believe they are expected to by repressive governments before they demand it.
- (2) Defending institutions is taking care of one's own safety. Without institutions, the citizen is alone to face the government's powerful tools of oppression.
- (3) Caring for professional ethics is the basis for defending citizens from authoritarian practices derived from the government's corruption of elites.
- (4) Sensitivity to the terminology used by the authorities is a fundamental element in the self-defence of citizens from authoritarianism. It is advisable to be vigilant when the authorities – as Julian Tuwim (1929) put it – 'start drumming into all our noggins the "Fatherland"' or refer to these or those vague 'values'.
- (5) Sensitisation to the reversal of the meaning of words 'altered craftily by the prevaricators' (Tuwim 1940-53) is of crucial importance. Here the reading of George Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (1949) is highly instructive.
- (6) It is important to be attached to the classical definition of truth: true is a clause consistent with reality. Other definitions of truth have often led mankind astray.
- (7) It is worth remembering that truth is a process rather than an act. The 'truth' of the TV screen should always be treated with the highest scepticism.
- (8) Iconography has a contextual significance. The ancient symbols of the sun or of prosperity have, in modern times, often appeared as the symbols of the extreme failure of many.
- (9) Monism is dangerous to the citizens. One party, one leader, one prophet, etc.

- (10) In exceptional circumstances, common sense should not be discouraged and excessive restrictions accepted, imposed allegedly for one's own good.
- (11) One must stand out, giving testimony with oneself, and not be subordinated to the cult of mediocrity.
- (12) It is worth being brave. Maybe one will not have to die for one's country if, at least, one has the courage to tell the truth.
- (13) Financial support for the needy is at the heart of civil society and community building. It is not inconsequential whether institutions are supported with a transparent system of accounting, or secret or obscure ones, even if hidden under 'authority' and 'values'.
- (14) It is worth respecting privacy. Facebook is a great tool for overt, covert and secret services.
- (15) It is worth being open to the outside world. Broad knowledge not only facilitates understanding of the world but also hinders enslavement.
- (16) It is worth being sceptical about easy access to arms. Shotguns hanging on the wall will run out of ammunition sooner or later.
- (17) It is worth being a patriot of the homeland and fatherland. Even when, and especially when, those who pledged their fidelity, betrayed her for a few tertiary positions.

In this way, communities can mature, if it is possible at all. For the time being, however, this maturation is not obvious; and this matter is developed below.

## **2. A regional metropolis vs its most famous countryman**

The city of Białystok, with an approximate population of 300,000, is a regional metropolis on the semi-periphery of semi-peripheral Poland, at the crossroads of Latin and Orthodox Christianity. Until the Second World War it was a town of many ethnic cultures. The only local person who may be known extra-regionally is Ludwik Zamenhof – the creator of the Esperanto language. No other artificial language is as popular as Esperanto, spoken by two million people in 120 countries (Hlebowicz

2016). One could be forgiven for thinking that L. Zamenhof's name would be an excellent one to promote Białystok.

April 2017 was the centenary of the death of Ludwik Zamenhof. This anniversary was solemnly celebrated by the UNESCO. In 2016, the mayor of the city of Białystok proposed that the most famous person of Białystok would be its patron for 2017. Yet the councillors of the right-wing party currently ruling Poland and having the absolute majority in the City Council unanimously rejected the draft (Hlebowicz 2016). The pretext was that the 150th anniversary of the birth of Marshal Józef Piłsudski falls in the same year. The latter person had no significant relations with either the city or its region, he is therefore more 'deserving' of the honour.

The idea of Esperanto, grew from the observation of the ethnic reality of Central and Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Observing not only ethnic feuds, but also pogroms, L. Zamenhof came to the conclusion that their source is a misunderstanding of the *other*, who is perceived not only as *alien* but also as *hostile*. L. Zamenhof assumed, perhaps naively, that disposing a common language would overcome such hostility. It was important that this common language would not be the mother tongue of any competing ethnos because otherwise the hierarchy of majority and minority languages in the sociological sense would arise, as observed in the real world.

During the debate in the City Council to commemorate the centenary of the death of Ludwik Zamenhof, the opposition pointed out that the jubilee would be a good symbol of Białystok eschewing xenophobia (Hlebowicz 2016), violence and ethnic hatred. The right-wing ruling majority was, however, of the opinion that these issues no longer concern Białystok, which, as the only city in the world, has its centre in the name of L. Zamenhof (*ibidem*). The optimism of the representatives of the ruling party was, however, surprising for observers of political life in Poland, as both Białystok and its region were recently the scene of xenophobic demonstrations by extreme right-wing organisations. These demonstrations were directed against current, former and potential ethnic and religious minorities. Yet according to the ruling party, the issue of xenophobia in Białystok is a non-issue, and Ludwik Zamenhof 'did not deserve anything' (Hlebowicz 2016) from the city, and hence 'he is not wor-

thy of being the patron of the year in Białystok' (Chołodowski 2017). As they noted: 'not everyone who was born in Białystok deserves to be [...] honoured' (Hlebowicz 2016). Besides, 'resurrecting the idea of Zamenfo[f] is a dangerous utopia' (ibidem), and 'the idea of building the identity of Białystok, promoting it in the world on the basis of Zamenhof's ideas is a curiosity' (Bendyk 2017). The ruling party, therefore, in the jubilee year of the patron, liquidated – without any moral dilemmas – his name for the centre (Hlebowicz 2016), amalgamating the centre into the Białystok Cultural Centre (Chołodowski 2017).

It is difficult not to notice, however, that what is more or, rather, less subtly emphasised by right-wing circles, is the question of Ludwik Zamenhof's Jewish heritage (Bendyk 2017). Contrary to the decisions of the Białystok City Council, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland adopted the resolution on 7 April 2017, expressing respect for Ludwik Zamenhof (ibidem), emphasising his connection with the 'circles of the multicultural community of Białystok' (ibidem). Information on the website of the Sejm, on the other hand, defines him as an 'outstanding Pole' (Bendyk 2017). This statement raises some doubts, if not emotions, because in East-Central Europe nationality is still interpreted more in ethnic than political terms. One 'representative of the Jewish community' (ibidem) commented harshly on this statement as another attempt to ignore terms 'Jew' and 'Jewish' in public debate in Poland.

Contrary to its Polish-language counterpart, the English-language version of Wikipedia presents L. Zamenhof's ethno-cultural entanglement in some detail. 'Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (Polish: *Ludwik Łazarz Zamenhof*, [...] usually credited as L. L. Zamenhof, was a Polish-Jewish medical doctor, inventor, and writer. [...] Zamenhof was born [...] in the town of Białystok, Poland, at that time in the former Russian Empire as a result of the 18th-century partition of Poland. His parents were of Polish-Lithuanian Jewish descent that inhabited the central part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He appears to have been natively bilingual in Yiddish and Russian (the Polish language was restricted and forbidden in public conversations by the Tsarist authorities), presumably the Belarusian language of his home town, though it may have been only his father who spoke Russian with him at home. From his father, a teacher of German and French, he learned those languages and

Hebrew as well. Despite this he spoke Polish, one of the major languages of Białystok alongside Yiddish, Belarusian, and German, and it was Polish that was to become the native language of his children after settling in the Kingdom of Poland. In school he studied the classical languages: Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. He later learned some English, though in his own words not very well, had an interest in Lithuanian and Italian, and learned Volapük when it came out in 1880 [...]. In addition to the Yiddish-speaking Jewish majority, the population of Białystok was made up of Catholic Poles and Belarusians, with smaller groups of Russians, Germans, Lipka Tatars, Lithuanians and others. [...] Apart from his parents' native languages Russian and Yiddish and his adopted language Polish, his linguistic attempts were also aided by his mastering of German, a good passive understanding of Latin, Hebrew and French, and a basic knowledge of Greek, English and Italian' (*L.L. Zamenhof*, n.d.).

Contrary to the temperate attitude of the mentally parochial Białystok councillors towards their most famous countryman, the proposal to declare 2017 as Ludwik Zamenhof's Year was approved unanimously by the councillors of the city of Słupsk. Interestingly, the latter had no political or even ethnic ties with Poland for centuries, but has a vibrant Esperantist environment today (Chodołowski 2017). Equally importantly, the inhabitants of Słupsk are open-minded, one indicator of which was the election of a mayor who is openly gay and who has a left-wing worldview. In justifying their resolution, the councillors emphasised the role of L. Zamenhof as 'a great advocate of intercultural dialogue' (Chodołowski 2017) and as a symbol of brotherhood. It was also stated that 'the Esperanto language, initiated by [L. Zamenhof], has gained [...] an extraordinary popularity worldwide. This is the most common international auxiliary language – neutral and easy to learn [...]. According to linguists, [it] is ten times easier to learn than any other language' (Chodołowski 2017).

### 3. The Senate vs a lyric poet

2017 was also the 140th anniversary of Bolesław Leśmian's birth and the 80th anniversary of his death. For the present generations he is, above all, an innovative and original lyric poet, the author of the most beautiful erotic poetry ever written in Polish. 'His style is also notable for numerous neologisms, many of which are still in

use in everyday Polish language. Since his death, he has been called *one of the greatest Polish poets ever* and certainly one of the most interesting artists of the interwar period. He was also the creator of a unique stylised Polish folk ballad and personal lyrics' (Bolesław Leśmian, n.d.).

It was therefore proposed that B. Leśmian should be declared a patron of 2017 in Poland. The Senate, however, objected to this idea. The right-wing majority of senators recognised that 'perhaps [...] the greatest of Polish poets of the past century [...] who feels Polish like no one else, and who left so much in it for posterity [...], is unsuitable as the patron of 2017' (Padoł 2017). One suggestion for the senators' reluctance to acknowledge the poet comes from the fact that one of his poems presents a fictional figure who is all too reminiscent of the leader of the current ruling party (Skarżyński 2017). One may be afraid, once more, that the ethnic origin of B. Leśmian is of consequence to the right-wing senators (Leśnodorska 2016). The point is that Bolesław was born in a Polonised Jewish family of the Lesmans, and his father converted, together with his sons, from Judaism to Catholicism when Bolesław was 10 years old. In addition, Bolesław began his poetic work in Russian, and the linguistic innovations in his Polish poetry were criticised in interwar war right-wing circles, unjustifiably accusing him – from the lowlands of their own ignorance – of insufficient knowledge of Polish. The Senate decided that, in place of Bolesław Leśmian, 2017 will be patronising the coronation of a certain Ruthenian icon, worshiped by the Catholic Church in Poland, on the tercentenary of the event.

In opposition to the Senate, the Zamość City Council has almost unanimously adopted the resolution that 2017 will be devoted to Bolesław Leśmian in the city (Leśnodorska 2016). In their justification, they noted the poet's relations with the city and his merits were recognised, even though B. Leśmian, who had worked in Zamość for 13 years as a notary, did not like the city and liked the work even less. The councillors did not show any pettiness, appreciating the fact that during their stay in the city the poet wrote two important poetry volumes (*2017 rokiem...*, 2016). 'When he was returning from his vacation in 1925, he wrote how great the drama was to return here, but he spent years in Zamość, so he is ours' (ibidem).



#### 4. Conclusions

Parochial megalomania and xenophobia result in miserable ends for their adherents. In the interwar period, France rejected – with acute diplomatic pressure – the idea of recognising Esperanto as the official language of the League of Nations, believing in her conceit that the language of international diplomacy would be forever French. By rejecting the idea of international recognition for the artificial, but mainly Romance, language, she soon lost the status of being the international language not only of diplomacy, but also of science. Once the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, the main working language of the Union will be a language which is not the first official language of any member state, while French has no chance of occupying this place.

The events of 2017 in Poland showed that when the national level is confronted with neo-tribes, local communities mature, although not everywhere and not always. The prospects of the appropriation of the local by centralism are not good, however.

Who would I be if I did not read, recite and sing Bolesław Leśmian's poetry to my own melodies? Nobody. Like the 'patriotic' senators, who – in their littleness – cannot appreciate the magnitude that surpasses them.

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Wpłynęło/received; 14.10.2017 poprawiono/revised 31.10.2017