

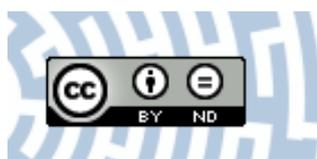


You have downloaded a document from
RE-BUŚ
repository of the University of Silesia in Katowice

Title: Neoliberalism, the rise of new media folklore and the emergence of new nationalisms

Author: Jan Kajfosz

Citation style: Kajfosz Jan. (2019). Neoliberalism, the rise of new media folklore and the emergence of new nationalisms. "Berlin Journal of Critical Theory" "Berlin Journal of Critical Theory" vol. 3, no 2 (2019), s. 27-47



Uznanie autorstwa - Bez utworów zależnych Polska - Ta licencja zezwala na rozpowszechnianie, przedstawianie i wykonywanie utworu zarówno w celach komercyjnych i niekomercyjnych, pod warunkiem zachowania go w oryginalnej postaci (nie tworzenia utworów zależnych).



UNIwersYTET ŚLĄSKI
W KATOWICACH



Biblioteka
Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

Neoliberalism, the Rise of New Media Folklore and the Emergence of New Nationalisms¹

Jan Kajfosz²

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to define the difference between nationalisms of the modern era and contemporary nationalisms. The proposition is methodologically based on the phenomenological and semiotic analysis of texts representing genres of new media folklore shared within digital communicative networks as well as on the analysis of conditions of their production, consumption, and reproduction. The author claims that the social reproduction of new nationalisms takes place beyond traditional (modern) social structures and hierarchies of knowledge credibility. He attempts to prove that new nationalisms are based on magical-mythical perception and thinking.

The aim of the paper is to answer the question what conditions shape the contemporary social production and reproduction of nationalism compared to the era of modernity. During the 1960s, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe the social mechanisms of production of collectively relevant meanings in their classical work, *The Social Construction of Reality*³. According to these authors the legitimization of knowledge and of social institutions happens on four layers: **1)** everyday vocabulary (habitual connotations of every understandable word

1 This paper has been financially supported by University of Ostrava, Institutional Development Project (IRP) No. 201819 Social and Cultural Mechanisms of In- and Exclusion: a Comparative Perspective.

2 **Jan Kajfosz** is Associate Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland) and at the Department of Sociology, University of Ostrava (Czech Republic). His research interests concern the cognitive prerequisites of reification, social constructivism and pragmatic aspects of communication. Among his numerous publications, the most recent are, *Return to the beginnings, or how culture masks its changes?* (2015) and *Presuppositions within the analysis of popular memory discourses* (2018).

3 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1989)

reproduce a value system and implicate an instruction on how to act towards designated phenomena and what to expect from them), **2**) simple explanatory patterns in the form of generalizing judgments and popular narratives (proverbs, legends, rumors, gossips, etc.), **3**) expert knowledge and argumentation, which is sometimes not accessible outside of expert systems; the reproduction of such knowledge requires special initiating techniques and rituals, **4**) a symbolical universe consisting of signs able to unify disparate phenomena into one perceived “order of things.” – The authors claim that when expert knowledge is not immediately accessible for non-experts, popular representations of such knowledge in the form of suitable hierarchies of symbols and narratives can make them legitimate. By means of reduced and aestheticized representations of expert knowledge members of different societies can also understand incomprehensible phenomena in such a way that they feel their grandeur and usefulness for the society or even mankind, even if they cannot always justify their feelings⁴. – This all relates to the era of modernity.

Within the contemporary social production of collectively relevant sense, the importance of layer 3 and 4 decreases in favor of layer 2. The reproduction of credibility of modern knowledge institutions is disturbed to a large extent due to new communication technologies (the emergence of new media and social media), due to neoliberal patterns of trading information (the emergence of infotainment) and due to social media folklore as a sphere of everyday collective presumption (production as well as consumption) beyond modern social hierarchies, and also beyond the constraints of long-time authorities. The production of contemporary nationalism happens to a large extent beyond the classical ideological

4 Roland Barthes demonstrates this type of magical-mythical legitimization with the example of Einstein’s equations. Even non-physicists can understand $E=mc^2$ in such a way that they perceive it as an „esoteric image of a science entirely contained in a few letters“. The equation can be spontaneously seen as a sign of a „secret of the world“. I can be seen as a sign of an inaccessible knowledge and in this sense it can be perfectly understandable. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Jonathan Cape (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), 69-70.

state apparatuses, if we are to use the notion of Louis Althusser⁵. The essential feature of new nationalisms consists in the fact that they are not embedded in former, modern hierarchies of knowledge credibility anymore. Nowadays it is hardly possible to legitimize institutions of knowledge and knowledge as such only by means of consensual acknowledged symbols and rituals or by means of symbiotic or mutual “consecration” of cooperating authorities (established information sources) in the sense proposed by Pierre Bourdieu⁶.

The contemporary world under the aspect of knowledge credibility hierarchies

Within the former modern society, if somebody acknowledges a publisher as a credible knowledge institution, he will presumably acknowledge a different publisher due to the fact a word (a name) having specific connotations – implicating specific images and values – transferring them onto every entity to which it indexically relates. Designation means i.a. using generalizing maps which make invisible various changes, discontinuities and all specifics of territories to which such maps relate⁷. Within modern society, even if somebody distinguishes between more and less credible publishers he will apparently tend to believe that what is published is more credible than what is said, except anomic circumstances when credibility hierarchies change. In the world of modernity, a recognized cooperation between a credible publisher and an author who has been unknown so far can make the author credible – or vice versa, if a credible author has something in common with a new publisher, he/she can make the pub-

5 Louis Althusser, *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)*, in *Lenin and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 86-127.

6 Pierre Bourdieu, *Kunst und Kultur: Zur Ökonomie der symbolischen Güter*, trans. Hella Beister (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 98-117.

7 Alfred Korzybski, *Science and sanity: An introduction to the non-Aristotelian systems and general semantics* (New York: Institute of General Semantics, 2000), 58; compare Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*, trans. Sheila F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

lisher trustworthy and prominent. Within spontaneous perception indexicalities (perceived contiguities) between two institutions can change in their similarity or even identity under some aspects: one institution makes other institutions credible if it has something in common with them. Our credible companionship makes us credible and our noncredible companionship makes us not credible. This way, an institution, which has a good reputation can transfer this reputation to other institutions due to their cooperation. If third parties perceive such cooperation as not accidental, they easily assume that both institutions enjoy similar prestige. In this way, authors can make their publishers, broadcasters or even the universities credible, where they had studied, where they had taught etc. – and vice versa⁸.

In the same way, not only credible hierarchies of knowledge institutions but also credible hierarchies of narratives are produced in modern society. Within a pre-reflexive, spontaneous perception, the value is transferred from the source of a narrative onto the narrative, and this occurs again on the basis of an indexical relation, on the basis of the perceived contiguity of one and the other. Let us look at the matter from the perspective of pupils at school: the teacher, who is telling them a story is for them a metonymic representative of the school; the school is a metonymic representative of education, and as it follows, of objective knowledge. One and the other are, in turn, metonymically related to initiation rituals (entrance examinations, graduations), which provide the pupil with lofty – “sacred” – experiences, etc. Most importantly, the value-bearing connotations connected with one link of the metonymic chain can be transferred to another link and vice versa. The *loftiness* or *authority* (and other axiologically characterized connotations) metonymically connected with the institution of the school are ‘transferred’ to the teacher, and from him back to the school, and so on. They are also transferred to the stories the teacher presents to his/her students, and vice versa. In this precise manner, narratives can be legitimized by themselves; they can also legitimize social institutions, including those by which they were produced⁹.

8 Bourdieu, 2014, 98-117.

9 Compare Jan Kajfosz, „Magic in the social construction of the past: The case

The teacher, whose authority is transferred to the narrative he transmits, can be replaced by a museum guide, or by a grandfather, parents, other family members and friends (significant others) who constitute authority for the recipient and to whom the recipient is emotionally attached. Other similar sources which are able to make their messages credible are acknowledged newspapers, broadcasters etc. The value-bearing connotation connected with any object can be transferred onto the story that is associated with it and the opposite. To repeat: an axiological valuation – positive or negative – associated with the sources of narratives can be transferred to those narratives (making them credible or noncredible) and from them back again to their sources. In this way, every society produces and reproduces its picture of the world.

Within relatively stable hierarchies of credibility, expert knowledge – not accessible from the outside of expert systems – can be quite easily legitimized by symbolical universes. Within neoliberal postmodernity, this does not seem possible anymore. Neoliberal knowledge institutions can reproduce their symbolic capitals and survive on the free market only in the way of permanent “fighting” for wide audiences – in the way of entertaining, surprising, astonishing, amazing them. If they do not offer any visible technologies generally regarded as useful, the only way a knowledge institution can establish reasons for its own existence is to make spectators wonder. In such circumstances only evoking “emotional” astonishment has the power to persuade. Rhetorical strategies – communication styles of marketing and PR – overwhelm the Aristotelian syllogism within the public discourses. This can be regarded as a consequence of the fact that modern hierarchies of knowledge have collapsed. Long-term authorities have been to a large extent replaced by short-term authorities (movie stars and other celebrities as experts, bloggers, YouTubers etc.), who are characterized by the lack of need to avoid contradictions and to maintain consistencies of knowledge. Moreover, the virtual significant others (mediated people we are emotionally attached to) can change very quickly: the valuable authority of today can

be quickly removed and replaced by another one. Credible hierarchies of knowledge institutions are in so far unstable, that they probably do not exist anymore if they are defined through their stability.

Within the sphere of neoliberal media, the credibility of broadcasters is not necessarily a condition of their popularity, of their symbolic capital and of their profits. This can be demonstrated in many examples:

2012 *Animal Planet* and *Discovery Channel* – which are globally considered recognized educational broadcasters – aired the mockumentary entitled *Mermaids: The Body Found* (2011, director: Sid Bennett). The narrative about allegedly concealed, but really existent mermaids (reported as *aquatic apes* occasionally observed by navy members and scientists) was inscribed into the narrative about Darwin's evolution. This was the essential discursive figure of the message. This way, value and credibility associated with the theory about the origin of species were transferred to the story about mermaids, making them possibly real. In other words: contiguity (connection) between these two narratives made them similar under the aspect of their modality. The truthfulness of one story was transferred to the other one, making the existence of mermaids plausible. Also, the credibility of the broadcasters was transferred to the story, making "filmed" mermaids real. Reactions posted on the discussion forum of the broadcasters showed that many recipients were truly fooled, others got very angry:¹⁰

(...) I find your cavalier attitude and disregard for those of us of whom may have been longtime fans, to be egregious. Some people in this crazy world still seek the truth. You are every bit as irresponsible as those fools who aired WAR OF WORLDS. I am no longer a subscriber. You idiots. Good Bye Animal Planet.

Very disappointed in The Discovery Channel with this "documentary". Really, really bad decision to air garbage. Not what I would expect from this network.

10 Accessed: <http://animal.discovery.com/tv-shows/other/videos/mermaids.htm> (26-09-2012)

Shame on you Discovery Channel. I am about to completely turn my back on Discovery and never watch your channel again. (...) Shame on you for treating your viewers like idiots!!!

Really sad.... In my opinion, the only FEW television channels you COULD TRUST TO BE TRUE, were the Discovery Channel, History Chnl., and Ntl. Geo. Now, I hesitate to trust any of them. This was a huge mistake, not stating it was FICTION!!

Can we get back to science and stop injecting sci-fi into, what should be educational (?)

We can find similar discursive figures (manipulation techniques) in many other programs of broadcasters associated with educational and scientific discourses, e.g. *Ancient X-files*, aired by the *National Geographic Channel*, *Lost Tapes*, aired by *Animal Planet* etc. The attempts to make documentaries or docudramas attractive through mysteries can be demonstrated on the series *Mayday* (or: *Air Crash Investigation*) from the Canadian company Cineflix. In Episode 8 (titled *Fatal Distraction*), Season 5, there appears an undeclared urban legend regarding ghosts protecting planes¹¹ as a component narrative. The docudrama contains the following story: in the disaster of flight 401 in the Everglades Swamp two pilots were killed. Parts of the plane that crashed were reused in other aircrafts. Whenever they are in the air and face possible danger, the ghosts of these two dead pilots allegedly appear on board to warn the crew and in this way keep everyone safe. Reconstructed scientific investigations of the airplane crash made the story about ghosts credible in the eyes of some recipients. Without trying to decide in any way, what was real and what was not, we can say that the boundless struggle for public attention undermined to a large extent consensual differences between probability and improbability. It undermined the stability of socially shared background pieces of knowledge.

11 Compare John G. Fuller, *The Ghost of Flight 401* (North Hobart: Hear a Book, 1987)

The dominating infotainment discourses are as astonishing as well as mystifying (“fooling”). Considering the *War of the Worlds*, a radio drama from 1938 about an invasion from Mars¹², which was due to its rhetoric figures perceived by many listeners as a message reporting real events, we cannot precisely determine, when the credibility of free mass information institutions started to collapse. It is a question of frequency of comparable hybrid genres in media. Only in the world of relatively stable background knowledge, can mockumentaries encourage their consumers to think critically and to learn how to detect rhetoric strategies. The frequent occurrence of such genres everywhere makes such background knowledge including the hierarchies of sources credibility very unstable. Mockumentaries produce the assumption any message could be true or fake and there are no criteria of its reliability. Mockumentaries, as well as all other fake news, generate profits because popularity by itself generates profit (e.g. on Youtube). There is no crucial difference between contemporary media as such and social media under this aspect.

Early modern society also knew hoaxes, mercantile legends as well as trolling in the sense of intended manipulation and mystifying for different purposes¹³. However, nowadays there is one phenomenon which is new: the difference between consensually recognized credible and non credible information sources has almost disappeared. Supremacy of rhetoric strategies in contemporary new media seems to be the answer to the question why neoliberal society does not reproduce the early modern difference between “noble” and “ignoble” media and styles of communication anymore. Fooling and being fooled, disseminating ignorance and being ignorant do not seem to discredit anybody anymore. The slogan *anything goes!* as a wish of 20th-century postmodernists has become reality. This way the culture of mystification and of shared hysteria is the essential circumstance of the emergence of new nationalisms.

12 It was an adaptation of a science fiction novel with the same title written by Herbert G. Wells.

13 Compare Francis Wheen, *How mumbo-jumbo conquered the world: A short history of modern delusions* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004); Francis Wheen, *Strange days indeed: The golden age of paranoia* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010)

If we are to consider notions like “alternative facts” (a famous expression of Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the president in the administration of U.S.) or “fake media” (Donald Trump labels by this term any uncomfortable broadcasters) as legitimate rhetoric tools of neoliberal state institutions, another new phenomenon appears: Western political institutions have started to use fake information (unproven, fabricated and easily falsifiable knowledge), as well as mystifying accusations of disseminating fake information, as legitimate tools of political competition. In this manner, the neoliberal Western state has given up the attempt to reproduce credibility of its own institutions as well as the attempt to reproduce symbolical universes, which would be able to unify different phenomena in integral and credible orders. This is another symptom of progressive destruction (not deconstruction!) of knowledge credibility hierarchies. Generalizing, confusing, mystifying, accusing acknowledged fact-finding institutions of deception, these have all started to be considered legitimate. Crossing red lines without any social consequences encourages other comparable subjects to do so.

If one acknowledged institution argues there is no global warming caused by man and another one argues there is such warming, why should Eastern Europeans and others not believe the attractive folklore narratives that refugees from Syria or Iraq are a perfectly organised body – controlled and encouraged from a hidden center – with one consequent long-time mission: to make, step by step all of Europe Islamic. Not only due to a credibility crisis but also due to folklorization of the public sphere, conspiracy theories start to work as a legitimate tool of political competition. Within conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe, we can observe an interesting assumption: *the hostile Other* is not necessary somewhere “there” (behind the state border), it is among us, pretending to be *the Own* and trying to destroy *the Own* from inside, such as hidden or apparent *Jews* (e.g. Georg Soros considered by some Hungarians to be the enemy of the state) or hidden or apparent *Moslems* (e.g. Barack Hussein Obama who, according to some inhabitants of Eastern Europe, was not even born in the USA). The popularity of conspiracy theories within

the social media folklore creation reveal something deeply true: firstly, modern hierarchies of knowledge credibility have crumbled, secondly, the culture of uncertainty, mistrust, and vulnerability against mystification is at least partially the result of marketing of fear, which is based on the principle that naivety, fear, and superstition can generate significant political and economic profits¹⁴.

Folklorized nationalisms are products of the so-called post-truth era (*postfaktisches Zeitalter*). Crucial for their emergence is the culture of uncertainty, of collective hysteria production and its instrumentalization for short-time political and economic purposes. Neoliberal ideology – as a sphere of cognitive and acting habitus – means i.a. broad social acceptance for economically as well as politically motivated instrumentalization of people’s feelings (e.g. fears, collectively shared hysterias), beliefs, collective memories, values, symbols. The management of long-term consequences of such instrumentalizations, the responsibility for long-term damages is very often delegated to “others”.

New nationalisms can be defined at least by three interrelated features:

1. They are “folklorized” in such a way that their production is to a large extent interactive, spontaneous and aestheticized.
2. They are dominated by magic-mythical perception and thinking.
3. The spontaneity of nationalism production and reproduction within the folklore creation can be manipulated by accidental or professional trolling.

Folklorization of contemporary nationalisms

Social media are at least partially responsible for the disappearance of the modern difference between “noble” and “ignoble”. Posting highly irrational and irresponsible tweets (irresponsible due to their consequences for the integrity of the society) by people recognized as celebrities reveal the fact that no statement can make somebody socially ostracized for a long time. Here, again, the slogan “anything goes!” can be applied.

¹⁴ Compare Umberto Eco, *Turning back the clock: Hot wars and media populism* (London: Vintage Digital, 2014)

Within the social media, a new communication convention emerged, where no statement can make its sender scandalous, disgraceful or disgusting for a longer period of time. Emotions break out and expire, what stays is the shift of red lines. This makes everything socially acceptable as long as it does not interfere with the law. The law applies here as the only criterion of social regulation. Within some milieus of Polish social media, breaking rules of consensual rationality starts to work as a kind of protest against political correctness and as a mean of defining oneself against liberal and leftist “elites” associated with *the Other* – e.g. with *Jews* and *Germans* from abroad or alleged “hidden” *Jews* and *Germans* from the home country. Here we can detect a significant shift between *the Own* and *the Other*. Who does not identify himself with a set of ideas standing for “national culture” can be in contemporary Polish right-wing milieu recognized as a “foreigner”, although not yet proven “foreigner”. Thus, national belonging starts to be defined through one’s political convictions.

Concerning the notion of *folklore*, we can draw on Peter G. Bogatyrev and R. Jakobson. These scholars define folklore as a poetical text aimed at *la langue*¹⁵. Such texts are popular. They are broadly reproduced, or their semantic structures are broadly reproduced, within a larger or smaller communicative society, within a special social group or – what seems to be the most decisive point for the rise of new nationalisms – within a digital communication network. If we claim that folklore texts (all folklore genres) fulfill a poetical function, it means they are aestheticized in such a manner that they can arouse intense feelings among its bearers, they are attractive. Folklore creation is always a sphere of spontaneous social presumption as well as a sphere of infotainment. Shared statements must be always attractive in some aspects.

Folklore works as an instrument of maintaining shared beliefs, value systems, stereotypes, conceptual scenarios, expectations or attitudes. As stated by Antonio Gramsci, folklore is an instrument of hegemony, a

15 Peter G. Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson, ‘Folklore as a special form of creation,’ in R. Jakobson: Selected Writings, vol. IV (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), 1-15.

means of ideology reproduction¹⁶. Folklore is responsible for the obviousness of the life-world. Drawing on Bogatyrev and Jakobson, folklore has evolutionary character, it changes according to changing social, cultural and political needs. It adapts to changing circumstances. Every era and every environment has its own folklore.

According to Bogatyrev and Jakobson, folklore creation is characterized by the so-called preventive censorship. If a statement does not meet the conceptual capacities of the receiver, he will not reproduce (not share) it. A message which does not meet mental images, semantic structures, needs and expectations of members of a communication network, will not stay in circulation. Within the social circulation, an original message can unnoticeably change according to actual social demands. Something gets forgotten, concealed or exaggerated. In this manner, communication society can make a mountain out of a molehill – and vice versa. Concerning the folklore creation, the output message must always „make sense“, however, it can considerably differ from the input message. Some meanings are disappearing, some others are being borrowed from collective *mythologies*¹⁷. If the sender wants to be sure to reach his recipients, he must use the style of slogans, catchwords, watchwords, sayings, short expressions. Within the folklore creation which engages its bearers, the need for easily accessible sense is always stronger than for any critical reflection.

To take verbal jokes as an example, they can be humorous only for people sharing some obvious or background knowledge, e.g.: *An Arab sits in a plane to New York. A stewardess asks him: „Something to drink?“ – „No, I will drive in a while.“* – This joke could be considered not very consistent (Moslems usually do not drink alcohol) and not suitable at least in some circumstances of face-to-face communication. As soon as it transforms into an internet joke, e.g. into a visual joke functioning as an internet meme (demotivator), it can spread more easily and reproduce

16 Antonio Gramsci, *Gefängnishefte. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. vol. 6. *Philosophie der Praxis*. Hefte 10 und 11 (Hamburg: Argument, 1994), 1375.

17 Compare Barthes, 1972.

the associative link (or: implicit conceptual action scenario) between *Arab* and *terrorism* more effectively. In another situation, this associative link strengthened in this fashion will determine the reading of other texts. This way, even jokes can support beliefs. One belief makes possible another one in such a way that it functions as an assumption making similar assumptions passable and plausible. A believed and never falsified hoax makes people vulnerable against similar hoaxes and other genres of collective hysteria. People easily believe something if it corresponds to collectively shared images. If we believe others believe something, it seems there must be at least some truth about it. Let us be reminded of the sentence of William I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas: „*If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences*”¹⁸. – If folklore unites heterogeneous groups of people under one notion (one sign) associated with danger and hostility, our attitudes towards everybody recognized by means of this notion will be violent and will provoke violence. In this manner, folklore genres can function as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Collective phantasies have performative (perlocutive) power in the sense that they can become reality, they can create real facts.

Back to the point. Folklore created beliefs in pre-modern and modern society as well, although within relatively stable hierarchies of knowledge credibility. In a neoliberal society determined by contemporary social media, its ability to create facts seems to be almost limitless¹⁹. Convergent folklore genres (contemporary myths, conspiracy theories, etc.), as well as parafolklore hybrid genres, have dominated social media. Folklore texts must be always comprehensible and fulfill poetic functions. They entertain, amaze, frighten, they make people laugh. New nationalisms reproduced by means of social media folklore are highly aestheticized – they arouse intense feelings – and reproduce in a very spontaneous way.

18 William I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas, *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), 571-572.

19 Even some young Wahabi fanatics in the West can be regarded as „victims” of religious folklore which aestheticizes violence and functions outside of hierarchies of knowledge credibility – outside of the system of Islamic theological institutions.

Zygmunt Bauman claims social media (Facebook etc.) enable their participant to “filter out” all subjects and their messages, which are incompatible with his/her own opinions and expectations. He/she can choose what people and what ideas he/she wants to face too. However there is a need for one short addendum: it is rather impossible to assume opinions and expectations of such participants to be consistent, without any discrepancies, paradoxes or antinomies. Production and reproduction of sense within social media – also in form of folklore genres – resembles acting in everyday situations off-line. Here applies the utterance of Alfred Schütz: *“The actor within the social world, however, experiences it primarily as a field of his actual and possible acts and only secondarily as an object of his thinking. In so far as he is interested in knowledge of his social world, he organizes this knowledge not in terms of a scientific system but in terms of relevance to his actions.”*²⁰ One conspiracy theory can support the other one even if the first contradicts the other one. In different contexts, different things are believed.

Magical-mythical thinking within contemporary nationalisms

Due to the need for defining notions and their binding use as well as to the need for the precision of concluding, it is possible to distinguish between two discourse models: an analytical (Aristotelian) and a magical-mythical one. The latter type of the discourse is based on connotations and free associations able to lead from any idea to another one. Let us demonstrate it on the Internet users’ discussions to the article *„Zygmunt Bauman w „El País”: mamy do czynienia z kryzysem demokracji* [Zygmunt Bauman in “El País”: We face democracy crisis]²¹. It was published on 26 January 2016 by a popular Polish information portal Onet.pl. The text deals with Zygmunt Bauman’s opinions concerning the condition of democracy in the world dominated by social media. I followed the

20 Alfred Schuetz, ‘The stranger: An essay in social psychology,’ *American Journal of Sociology*, 1944, 49.6: 499-507.

21 Accessed: <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/zygmunt-bauman-w-el-pais-mamy-do-czynienia-z-kryzysem-demokracji/p6vbe4> (01-02-2016)

statements of internet users posted in the discussion forum related to the article during the first days after its release.

If we examine the messages posted immediately after the article had been published, only a few posts address the sociologist's claims, even if very generally (likes and dislikes). The overwhelming majority of posts deals with the author's *Jewishness* and his *communist* past. They should be not considered as usual *argumenta ad hominem* known from every textbook of rhetoric. It is something more: a manifestation of habitus developed within the social media communication and related to folklorized nationalism.

The aforementioned internet article for many of its interactive readers is only a point of departure for the reproduction of a shared set of mythical narratives and their shortened representations. They need to be recalled and confirmed again and again, in a somehow obsessive way. The narratives reproduce the same structure: the hostile *Others* (Jews, communists, leftists, etc.) have been always harming *the Own* in the same way from the beginning and will do the same to the very end. *The Other* was never *the Own* and cannot be *the Own* in any way – this distinction is eternal and absolute. Even if somebody sharply disagrees with such ideas, for them they are the very topic of the discussion. It is not even a discussion consisting of syllogisms. The arguing is based on connotations²². They allow “jumping” from one point to another as well as blending everything with everything. Discussions within such a discourse always lead to the same set of topics and images regardless of their points

22 Roland Barthes calls connotation a myth. The imperceptible connotation can ‘blend’ with the phenomenon accompanying it. Connotation makes it possible that different phenomena blend in one magical unity of meaning, just as in the spontaneous experience the de Saussuresque signifier merges with the signified (the *signifiant* with the *signifié*), or the word merges with its object for as long as a person, in abstracting from his experiences, does not distinguish one from the other and does not notice that a word (sign) can help form or even produce its object. Barthes considers the invisible connotation to be a figure of myth on account of its ability to create a clear, easily legible, obvious world. In this context, what is particularly important is that the connotation, employed instrumentally, is able to legitimize literally everything (Barthes, 1972, 110-113).

of departure. They induce the confirmation of the difference between *Us* and *Them*, which functions as a kind of collective obsession. It reminds us somehow of free associations as a psychoanalytical category where random starting means leading someone, sooner or later, to the same repertoire of obsessional images – to the same repertoire of *idées fixes*. If such a discourse dominates the forum, it devastates any debate.

As stated, the “discussion” I followed was completely irrelevant regarding the content of the article. Acquaintance with Zygmunt Bauman’s propositions contained in the message was not a prerequisite for posting opinions. Regarding the analysed posts of internet users, the appearance of such an article functioned as a kind of “starter” of collective imagination by means of a chain of habitual metonymies (based on perceived contiguities) and metaphors (based on perceived similarities). Such imagination always leads to the same result: to the confirmation of a highly emotional and obsessive set of ideas.

Considering many posts, Bauman represents *Jews* as well as *Russians* and *Germans* under the aspect of their alleged hostility against *Poles*. At the same time, he represents *communists*, *leftists*, and even *Nazis*. Within the magical-mythical discourse, such thinking cannot be recognized as inconsistent. This kind of associative concluding is a symptom of sympathetic magic: different phenomena, connected in any kind of way, are similar, and thus at least under some aspects identical²³. The crucial feature of magical-mythical thinking is an assumption of the permanence of signs and of the reality they are related to – in the sense of the saying “there’s nothing new under the sun”. There is no room for any expiations (e.g. “*Czerwone zawsze będzie czerwone, nawet jak będzie przemalowane. Stary komuch.*” [“Red will be forever red, even if painted over. An old communist.”]). A former member of the Stalinist organization – any biographical details or circumstances are for people posting such statements completely irrelevant – represents not only the organization as such but also everything that is linked to it through chains of habit-

23 James G. Frazer, *The golden bough: A study in magic and religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996)

ual associations. One enemy supports the other one: "*Kto pokazuje tego żydowskiego zbrodniarza, który zabijał Polaków, tylko niemiecko faszystowski ŁONET*" ["Who shows the Jewish criminal, who killed Poles? - Only German-fascist Onet"]. No red lines apply. Some posts are extremely disgusting and are a result of trolling due to the fact they are repeated noticeably often in not comparable contexts. Nevertheless, within magical thinking, it is possible to reason as follows: If an information portal owned by Germans (associated with Nazis) "promotes" Jews, they conspire against Poland together – as two reified communities, as two collective subjects. Even those who disagree can assume Poland has some "hidden" enemies: "*Wrogiem Polski nie Żydzi są... tylko organizacja Opus Dei!*" ["Poland's enemies are not the Jews... it is solely the organization Opus Dei!"]. Associative thinking makes possible "jumps" from one topic to another if we remind that in the addressed article the word *Polish* or any of its derivatives were not even mentioned.

Such thinking can be regarded as a collective habitus reproduced in some right-wing social networks. It is a learned manner of perceiving and thinking and it is a result of "hot", highly aestheticized (i.a. iconized) and rhetorized social media discourses which inhibit analytical ("cold") perception and thinking. It can be considered as a symptom of folklorization of the public sphere.

Within magical-mythical perception and thinking, due to chains of associative links, everything can have something in common with everything, no binding distinctions occur. The difference between *good* and *bad*, *the Own* and *the Other* is here a question of situational context. Our enemies can threaten at the same time our ethnicity, our national culture, European culture, Christianity, Western civilisation or the civilised world. Folklorized nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe can be at the same time related to everything. The situational context decides, who is our companion and who our enemy. The criteria of the difference between *the Own* and *the Other* can vary significantly. Sometimes blood and soil function as a crucial distinctive criterion, sometimes it is "our culture", "our values", "European values" or "Christian values".

In the frame of magical indistinctiveness, there is no need for consistency. Folklorized nationalism discourses are not a sphere where inconsistencies, contradictions or other paradoxes could be visible or problematized. They are a part of everyday knowledge. A shared nebulae of connotations (of vague interconnected images) enabled to avoid any clear definitions and any clarifications of obvious notions.

Roland Barthes shows in his essay *The African grammar* that especially words functioning as empty signifiers can affect peoples' emotions²⁴. In a similar way, Ernesto Laclau, Noam Chomsky or Edward S. Herman claim a notion can undisturbedly function as a rhetoric tool if it is vacuous, if it has no clear meaning. The meaning of such a notion is always actualized by the context²⁵. The famous slogan *Make America great again!* has enormous persuasive power because it means nothing specific, it has no specific denotation. It only matches and activates connotations relating to splendid and desirable things. The slogan reminds Americans of prosperity, power, the founding fathers of the country and their ideals – of everything valuable. That is why notions like “national values”, “Christian values”, “European values” etc. are so popular within folklorized nationalism. They can function as instruments of manipulation and persuasion only as long as they are not defined – as long as they function as empty signifiers. Only under such conditions, it is possible to protect “Christian values” or pretend to do so while ignoring at the same time New Testament ethics. (Christianity without New Testament ethics could even remind of Slavoj Žižek's examples of products deprived of their difficult property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol etc.). Magic-mythical perception makes paradoxes invisible – it creates a unity of phenomena.

24 Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and other mythologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 103-109.

25 Ernesto Laclau, 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?' in *Emancipation(s)*, (London: Verso Books, 1996), 36-46; Noam Chomsky, *Media control: The spectacular achievements of propaganda* (New York: Stories, 1997), 20-23; Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 30-35.

In summary, new nationalism as folklorized nationalism is a symptom of the culture of trolling. Such a culture is characterized by the hypertrophy of rhetoric strategies. It is characterized by unscrupulous manipulation techniques regardless of any long-term consequences for society. New nationalisms can be defined as a result of the decline of the hierarchies of knowledge credibility. Trolling means mystifying our interlocutors by sowing discord among them, provoking quarrels by sending inflammatory messages, manipulating discussed topics, making any consensus impossible to achieve, distracting them, etc. Trolling inflames people's emotions and thus destroys formally correct concluding. It promotes magical-mythical perceiving and thinking. Trolls wake strong emotions among their interlocutors, make them think "too quickly" under the influence of developed effects. They make them focus not on primary topics but on secondary inflammable matters associated with these topics. Trolls are able to divert peoples' attention from a significant topic to another, not a significant one. They disrupt constructive, on-topic discussions and induce effective or even irrational reactions of their interlocutors. What is crucial, trolling presumes practically the same discursive strategies, persuasion, and manipulation techniques which are present elsewhere in the frame of contemporary neoliberal public discourses.

Bibliography

- Louis Althusser. 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)'. In *Lenin and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 86-127.
- Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Translated by Jonathan Cape. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972).
- Roland Barthes. *The Eiffel Tower and other mythologies*. Translated by Richard Howard. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and simulation*. Translated by Sheila F. Glaser. Ann Arbor: (University of Michigan Press, 2006).

- Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. (New York and London: Doubleday, 1989).
- Peter G. Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson. 'Folklore as a special form of creation'. In R. Jakobson: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4. (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), 1-15.
- Pierre Bourdieu. *Kunst und Kultur: Zur Ökonomie der symbolischen Güter*. Translated by Hella Beister. (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014).
- Noam Chomsky. *Media control: The spectacular achievements of propaganda*. (New York: Stories, 1997).
- Umberto Eco. *Turning back the clock: Hot wars and media populism*. Translated by Alastair McEwen. (London: Vintage Digital, 2014).
- James G. Frazer. *The golden bough: A study in magic and religion*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
- John G. Fuller. *The Ghost of Flight 401*. (North Hobart: Hear a Book, 1987).
- Antonio Gramsci. *Gefängnishefte. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Vol. 6. *Philosophie der Praxis*. Hefte 10 und 11. Translated by Klaus Bochmann, Ruedi Graf, Wolfgang Haug, Peter Jehle, Gerhard Kuck, Joachim Meinert and Leonie Schröder. (Hamburg: Argument, 1994).
- Edward S. Herman. and Chomsky Noam. *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).
- Jan Kajfosz. 'Magic in the social construction of the past: The case of Teschen Silesia'. *Polish Sociological Review* 183 (2013): 351-367.
- Alfred Korzybski. *Science and sanity: An introduction to the non-Aristotelian systems and general semantics*. (New York: Institute of General Semantics, 2000).
- Ernesto Laclau. 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?'. In *Emancipation(s)*. (London: Verso Books, 1996), 36-46.
- Alfred Schuetz. 'The stranger: An essay in social psychology'. *American Journal of Sociology* 49.6 (1944): 499-507.
- William I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas. *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928).
- Francis Wheen. *How mumbo-jumbo conquered the world: A short history of*

modern delusions. (London: Fourth Estate, 2004).

Francis Wheen. *Strange days indeed: The golden age of paranoia*. (London: Fourth Estate, 2010).