

A Solitary Sisterhood. On a Certain Individualistic Community

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- *Why then should we go straight and not turn right?*
- *Aho asked.*
- *It's because we have to keep together, as I told you.*
- *Then let's both turn right.*
- *But we cannot turn right together.*
- *And why not?*
- *Because if we keep together, we have to go straight¹*

Bikes lined the corridor walls which led to a small room, wallpapered with the Green party election posters, where a meeting was being held. A nook of counter-culture in the very center of crowded Poznań, housing a wobbling wardrobe and a bunch of women who in just a month will

¹ L. Kołakowski, *13 Fairy-Tales From The Kingdom of Lailonia for Little and Big Folks*, Warsaw 1998, p.87

hit the headlines in the domestic newspapers. For the time being, however, the Console Association of Women (Console for short) was having its meeting there. The girls were getting ready for the Days of Prevention of Violence against Women and I was watching, listening and could not decide on what my research should actually focus. At that moment there was virtually nothing we had in common. In feminist papers and the Console's leaflets, I had read that theirs was a well-ordered world – they had known each other and met regularly for the past several years. They had been fighting together for gender equality and they all spoke the same language which had developed thanks to the numerous books they had read and which allowed them to faithfully convey the surrounding reality which posed so many limitations on women in general. I felt embarrassed and waited for that one question: “Will you help us?”

It seemed to me that this was exactly what feminist activists should say. I wanted very much to be able to give a positive answer – that I would help, that I would be happy to hand out leaflets, make a placard or even take out the rubbish – if that only could make me part of their world. The question, however, never came. Though at one point I did not understand yet why questions like that were not asked – as I was to find out later, it was I who should declare what I wanted to do and then just start working based on a plan I drew up myself. A moment later and I already followed precisely the pattern – I announced that I would take part in the charity fundraising drive for the Equality

March and that I would join the Console online discussion group and that I could take out the rubbish – I just did not know yet where the rubbish bin was.

When joining a new group, each of us in a quite non-reflective manner tends to ascribe his or her worldview and ways of thinking to that group. That very first contact happens in “the reality of everyday life” (Alfred Schuetz) which is our basic reality where we meet new people and which allows us to communicate with one another. It would be a waste of time to go on with systematic and methodological deliberations on the object and subject of such encounters here – we always get to know each other, one human being meets another human being – we can simply use more or less complex words to describe such a phenomenon.

As long as I am here, spending time with these women, together we form one reality. The moment I close the door behind me, I can start thinking “I and them”. Without “being together” which manifests itself in a joint effort, it would be impossible for any human group to arise. “Though it is important to hold some values, there is no need to realize those ideals as we’re expected in our everyday life to simply act appropriately.”² When writing about everyday life, Schuetz emphasizes several aspects including: the focus on one concrete aim; experiencing other people through cooperation; and eliminating any doubts concerning the reality of the world.³ Everyday life

² J. Filias, *An Abstract Community. Outline of the Sociology of Nation*, Warsaw 2004, p.28.

³ W. Pawluczuk, *The Daily Life and The Transcendent*, Kraków 1994, p.121.

is constructed as if individual people do not ponder its meaning. “Researchers” on the other hand, are supposed to rise above daily life and occasionally make judgements about it. What they comment on then is not “the reality of everyday life”, but rather some form of abstraction based on that reality.

I never revealed to the group of feminists who I was or why I came to the meetings. There must have been many guesses – if I am not overestimating my presence there – after all, they might have just as well not payed much attention to me. I did not take any formalized interviews with them either. During the hours we spent together, we observed each other and talked about things important to the group. I did not become friends with any of the girls. Despite all the time I spent there, I still felt strange in their company. Anthropologists “seek strangeness” – so the situation looked indeed very anthropological in that sense: Me versus them, with the wall of values and customs between us that were quite incomprehensible to me. What else could I do but try to explain them?

My idea of the feminist world was based on feminist books that I had read and the *Zadra* feminist magazine. What I expected to see was a world in which women cooperated and were friends with one another and for whom the word “sisterhood” – understood as emotional closeness and a sense of common goals – was always the basis for their actions. Sisterhood, as Magdalena Środa writes, “is not a direct counterbalance to brotherhood then, but

rather a specific name given to friendship in its political dimension.”⁴ And this is exactly how I envisioned the Console Association of Women – a small group of politically-engaged women citizens, a Greek polis (somewhat a *rebours* in this case), where joint efforts for the common good (and precisely, friendship) were at the basis for its existence. A manifesto for building such groups can be found in a number of feminist work – these would be “communities of choice” that come close to the communitarian ideas. Not all feminists are in favor of such an idea, however. After all, feminism is a very diverse movement which is still evolving. What I remembered, though, were exactly such demands. What we retain from reading books depends largely on the reader’s interests – that is to say, on their previous knowledge and preferences. I realized that my original idea of a community was identical to that of the concept by Aristotle, to the communitarian ideas and to the works of feminists that I had read. That is why I was surprised when the group did not react the way I expected them to. And this seemed to be – when I look at it from some emotional distance and after some time has elapsed – the source of the difference in our cultural languages (or rather idiolects) that had made communication so difficult. A “community” does not necessarily mean the same to everyone.

What is a community for the feminists from the Console group then? This became a key question for me. I decided to search for the answer, though initially I failed to rec-

⁴ M.Środa, *Individualism and its Critics*, Warsaw 2003, p. 343.

ognize the two existing parallel realities. First, the community existing as an abstraction in the feminist papers and lectures – that one can be examined in detail by reading their texts. Second was the community that is formed through everyday activities; while spending time together and preparing the next pro-woman actions. One reality influences and permeates the other – the way we act depends on the way we think and the other way round – but these are not necessarily identical (which happens very rarely, actually). The women intellectuals who form their manifestos most often act before they think, just like the rest of humanity. No one would have as an aim maintaining the community life or activism of a group like the Console during its meetings and campaigns. Reflections and theoretical constructs can at best be expressed in the statute passed by the group. “The reality of daily life” is built based on well-taught roles (acquired through acting rather than talking) that are at times derived from cultural models that we openly reject when asked to express our opinion. What people say is as important as what they do – regardless of the fact that we would rather change their behavior without thinking; we are conscious beings – let us leave purely behavioral observations to biologists.

The event to support the Equality March was held in a club with a huge screen on which a film featuring masked policemen was being shown. After a while I realized that it was the coverage from the previous march, when there was a violent clash with Poznań hooligans, or to be more precise, with young men whose faces were covered with

scarves. The boy who commented on the event precisely divided the world into “us and others”. The “others” here were the members of The All-Polish Youth and some young men throwing eggs; at that point in the film the policemen remained neutral. Two nice girls behind the bar were selling “homemade” apple cake which smelled of cinnamon and was quite tasty. After the film, there was an auction of “antykaczy” (for anti-Kaczyński) items,⁵ feminist and other objects sold to support the Equality March. The prices were going up and the competition was getting intense – it would be impolite to leave empty-handed. The organizational efficiency of the group was admirable – self-financing will always impress me as it shows that members are deeply committed to the activities (though, it has to be added that self-supporting is much easier in a group that has relatively good financial status). When the auction was over, the time came for partying, chatting and drinking beer... “Perhaps for making friends as well?” And yet another disappointment for me – nobody wanted to talk to me here! When I asked questions, I was given only trite answers, everyone sat down joining one of the many small groups, the sense of community was

⁵ The word “antykaczy” is derived from the surname Kaczyński (which in turn derives from the word for “duck” in Polish) and can be used to describe anything that stands in opposition to the Kaczyński brothers and their party. The word has become incredibly popular among the adversaries of Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński and their ruling party, Law and Justice. When we type it into a search engine, we come up with a number of compound words, like: “anty-Kaczyński poem”, “anti-Kaczyński front”, “anti-Kaczyński myth”, “anti-Kaczyński comic strip”, or even “anti-Kaczyński folk”. The group that was the object of my research uses that word as well. The “anti-Kaczyński” items that were sold at the auction were mainly badges with a little yellow duck on them and a caption that read: “Beware of the Duck!” or mugs and hand-painted glasses decorated with an image of a duck. This nice little creature, well-known from poems or songs for children (which for that reason are very popular in the feminist circles – one of them is a song called “A Duck-Freak”) suddenly became a symbol of resistance against the authorities.

lost somewhere. They do not even know one another – I thought. I stayed for a while and left.

According to communitarianism, among the major characteristics of any community are: high sensitivity to the needs of its members, norms and values shared by the group, a common identity and traditions, and relations within the group that are mutually strengthening.⁶ It seems that the only community having these features is “a living community” – that is, a small group of people where it is possible for all its members to stay in contact with one another, to adopt the same behavior and share emotions. The Console in that sense is a living community as it fulfills all the criteria. It is not, however, a community as defined by communitarianism: joint efforts do not here mean that all members are unanimous; the emotions they all share have not led to creating any common traditions and it is not well seen to show too much engagement in the lives of the individual members. In the Console, a greater value is placed on being yourself than being part of the group – what was emphasized when defining the mission of the association was exactly a struggle for personal freedom of the individual, and all the actions taken by the group have as its aim the liberation of the latter. As John Stuart Mill once wrote: “That the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection; that the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any

⁶ M. Środa, op.cit., p.257.

member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others”.⁷

For the members of the Console group the freedom of speech is theoretically unlimited (as a value) but practically controversial themes are not discussed at all (“We’ll be fighting again, like when we discussed abortion”). One can still sense some tension between various declarations and the practice aimed at greater uniformity.

The long-awaited demonstration called the Equality March was at the last moment banned by the mayor of Poznań. Justifying his decision the mayor quoted some regulations regarding the protection of property (several months later the court pronounced that the decision was illegal). Emotions boiled among the girls from the Console. The placards with painted flowers and colored slogans stood there waiting, leaned against a wardrobe. Hand-written words called for freedom, equality and solidarity for everyone and for all... In spite of all, regardless of what might happen, we decided to start the march anyway at the Old Brewery – we would not accept restrictions from anyone!

Both the Console group and the other organizers of the March failed to see a certain ambiguity present in the slogans they wrote on the white sheets of paper – being different and being equal is not the same thing and reconciling these two antinomies, after all, would require

⁷ J.S.Mill, *Utilitarianism. On Liberty*, Warsaw 1969, p.130.

from the authors of the “liberation” ideology to use a lot of mental effort. The praise of dissimilarity is an incentive to be unique, to rebel against well-known patterns and imitation. It is a catchy slogan for those who do not like to obey social norms. “Different” are those who oppose the collective and accentuate their individuality – more often intentionally than not. They place value on dissimilarity of each person – this is what gives life its meaning. That otherness is what creates their autonomy in relation to the uniformity of a crowd. The “different” do not take part in demonstrations, large gatherings or marches. They march to a different tune. They do not belong to associations; they are only interested in expressing “themselves”. “I am owner of the world of things, and I am the owner of mind.”⁸

Equality, on the other hand, assumes that there is a relation between at least two things, in this case between people. One cannot consider equality of oneself towards oneself – it has to be done in relation to the “other”. If we are equal, then we share at least one characteristic that could be claimed by that equality – and thus we become uniform, we become alike. “The equal” will consider precisely the same feature that destroys “otherness” a great value. Most often that feature is called humanity and is supposed to be granted to every person by virtue of birth and carry with it the rights and responsibilities of every human being. This is the contradiction that can be found in the slogans: “Different yet equal” This takes two separate individualisms under one wing, namely the

⁸ M. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, Warsaw 1995, p.77.

difference and the equality.⁹ It is the dream of many modern “liberation” activists (the Console members among them) to combine the two into one coherent idea.

When I arrived at the Old Brewery several minutes before the agreed time of three o'clock, the whole Półwiejska Street was already surrounded by police wearing helmets and carrying riot shields, some of them on horseback. They waited the illegal march and most probably expected some street clashes. Fear is a very good term expressing exactly what one feels when they join a crowd of strangers shouting crude, aggressive slogans. The fear was enhanced by the presence of armed police. The information about water cannons and tear gas was spread by word of mouth – “they are going to dispel us, it's not legit after all”. In situations like this a group becomes consolidated, finds its strength in the rebellion and opposition, in outshouting its adversaries and in the rhythm of the marching step. It is in the middle of the crowd that one feels secure – after all, eggs and horse manure reach those standing on the margins or those carrying the banners. The placard I made was carried by some girl I did not know; I did not demand to take it back – later I saw an egg yolk trickling down it. We kept walking in circles as the police surrounded us with a tight cordon (or was it a cocoon?). There were riot shields around us and literally nobody behind the policemen – our opponents had been dispersed by the police. We wanted to set off towards the main Market Square. It is then that the police lost its previous neutrality and took up the position held previously by our enemies. Now the po-

⁹ M. Środa, op.cit.

lice did not want to let us through. The protesters sitting on the street started to shout “Zomo!” (a name for Polish riot police during the communist time). A while later I sneaked between two rows of policemen, leaving the place of the illegal gathering. I did not share that bench in the police van with the other girls or the moments they spent at the police station, for that matter. I chickened out.

After the march, a heated debate began in the media: who was for and who was against the Poznań police actions and who supported promoting homosexuality, equal rights, the freedom of assembly, etc. I saw now familiar faces of the Console leaders on the evening TV shows and listened to them excusing themselves for their worldview. The girls were publicly complaining about the police, the authorities and Poles. They were concerned about how they were going to pay the fines (up to 5,000 zlotys). The whole community stood united and its solidarity once again came as a surprise to me. When the tensions died down, it was next brought to the court and then the case was dismissed. The Console members could return to their normal activities – the spontaneity during their meetings was once again replaced with routine, and passionate discussions gave way to discussing lists of things to do (or to be more precise, a long list of almost unanimously voiced complaints about the reality of living in Poland). For a short while, the emotions they shared turned the community which I had come to know into a typical traditional communitarian group. For that short moment, solidarity and mutual responsibility towards each other

lost their restrictive power, unanimity turned out to be the only way for temporary unification – “sisterhood” became the Console’s everyday life. Each of the members was willing to listen to others, though the story told was basically the same. Everyone was offered help, regardless of their position on abortion. There was one common enemy. Informal leaders emerged who managed contacts of the Console members with the outside world. And that world heard a unanimous message from the association.

When the emotions died down and the threat diminished, everyday life once again took the shape of an individualistic community, based on agreed principles and cooperation rather than experiencing the world in the same way. There was no permanent metamorphosis that the group went through. I did not even want to look for its symptoms. Like sociologists following the development of the John Paul II generation, I concluded that everyday life can present completely different behavioral patterns. The ideology of a group and its everyday life do not always square; the reality of a Tuesday does not need to be identical with the reality of a Sunday. “What’s more, there are certain circumstances under which a given form of behavior will be used precisely to hide its content. They usually appear in communities that adopted many of the structural ways in which other communities manifest themselves – at the same time, however, it still aims at retaining a strong sense of its uniqueness.”¹⁰

¹⁰ A. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, [in:] M. Kempny, E. Nowicka (ed.), *Researching Culture. The Elements of Anthropological Theory*, Warsaw 2005

What Anthony Cohen had in mind when writing these words were traditional ethnic communities. When it comes to communities such as the Console Association of Women, the research involved mainly sociological questionnaires where the content of statements expressed by the members was of most importance, regardless of the form it took. The way in which the feminists from the Console think of themselves as a group (that would be their “imagined community”) is close to the communitarian concept of community, or sisterhood (in its original form) where the “I–you relationship” is based upon the model of individualist-equality. This idea is juxtaposed here by a real individualistic community (or, in other words, the individualism of difference) as it has formed during the Console meetings and in the course of the group’s activities. At the same time, to avoid excessive dogmatism, I wanted to present the moment of change of this “community’s option” which took place during the Equality March and other associated events. I would like to mention yet another type of community which according to feminists is in contradiction to their ideals. Namely, a conservative community, or the ideal proposed by “the church, the patriarchal system, and the rightwing” as the girls from the Console would put it. I will pose provocative questions here: Is the sisterhood not really close to the idea of a conservative community? And further - is it possible to build a community based on the principles shared by the Console members and other liberation movements?

I think that among conservatives, the term “community” is used even more often than in the environment where I conducted my research. The communities formed by the former are “traditional communities, nationalist communities, or faith communities”. The communities that were discussed earlier in this paper are considered “communities of choice”; in other words, being a member of such a community is voluntary and not determined by birth. These are egalitarian communities. A conservative community can be seen as an elitist community as the membership is closed to people who are not a part of the group (or otherwise dependent on going through complicated initiation ceremonies). Its members are also very limited in their freedom to join alternative groups. A good example of a community like that is a nation – understood as a group with a common origin (or even of “the same blood”), sharing the same culture and traditions. Under normal conditions, the membership in this sort of community cannot be changed or denied. One can become a member of a nation only by birth and by being raised in its culture and customs. At the same time, a nation is huge (and because of that an inevitably diversified community) and it always remains solely “an imagined community”, never forming truly “a living community”. An individual does not really have any influence upon the choice of their nationality as it is inherited from his or her ancestors; hence the great significance of history in the nationalistic ideology. The value of such membership is based upon the conviction that what is ours and familiar is good – as opposed to the unfamiliar which usually

poses a threat to the nation (ironically, today we know most of our tribemates from the media). Among the civic duties are then guarding one's cultural identity and emphasizing the nation's borders so as to retain its unique identity.

Historically, the simplest way to achieve a similar effect was by creating an enemy or enemies. For feminists this whole concept is the embodiment of patriarchal prejudice and an example of totalitarian thinking that denies individual freedom. Their ideal of community is formed in opposition to the one presented above. This is how Andrzej Szahaj describes such a kind of community: "A community like that would not be directed against other communities; its existence would not be defined by having an external enemy; it would not be formed on the basis of hate or dislike of what is outside this community. It would not protect its borders from those who do not live within them but rather encourage others to accept the rules and values adopted within this community and become its members. Finally, it would be a community where the autonomy of an individual is highly valued and for that reason, the situations when an individual is left with no choice and has to submit to the will of others imposed on him or her, would be avoided. And that is why any decisions affecting an individual's life could not be taken without prior debate among the community members who would first have to be provided with all the essential information. Within this type of community, differences would not be created in the areas where people do not

want to see them or, on the other hand, blurred in these areas where they seem essential to people.”¹¹

The spirit of such a community can be found in feminist writings and discourse. According to some, it is the manifestation of organizing a society in a women’s way, a way that is typical of women’s sensitivity that is supposed to aim at agreement rather than at competition and fighting. The conventionality of action and the lack of true emotion on the one hand (“How can one love such a thing as a nation?! And if they do, then it’s probably done for show only – just to help one’s political career, or for money”) is juxtaposed with friendship and deep mutual understanding. So much for the theory – we have already learned a little bit about the practice.

The Console group had been in conflict with the Greens over the place where the former rented (namely, the room that was mentioned at the beginning of this text) for quite some time. Finally, the situation got so tense that the girls had to move out. Meetings were now organized in private flats and the association’s activism more and more resembled that of the political underground. My last visit to a Console meeting when they still rented from the Greens ended after several minutes. I was turned away because I happened to come to a closed meeting – the existence of such I did not even know. I felt excluded – my “liberation” group had its secrets that were shared only by the top administration to which I did not belong. I was left

¹¹ A. Szahaj, *An Individual or A Community? The Fight between Liberals and Communitarians and 'The Polish Cause'*, Warsaw 2000, pp.171-172

with speculation (as to why I was not let in) and (can I say it here?) with a bad aftertaste.

The very last meeting of the Console that I attended was almost entirely dedicated to reading out the list of outstanding and urgent things-to-do. (Later I took part in the Manifa – a march for women’s rights – but I did that just to show my solidarity and attachment to the group and its ideals). Slowly all the girls present at the meeting were becoming tired. There were several points on the agenda, each of them had to be discussed in detail. That unbearable atmosphere of the world in which one needs to do what’s fitting and not what one really feels like doing. The more determined girls wanted to make the atmosphere more relaxed by telling the latest anecdotes – but that would have prevented the effective work in the group. Aside from that, not everyone has the same sense of humor – the story of someone’s boss who was a fanatic Catholic and whose daughter found herself “in a delicate condition” could be taken as a contradiction to the idea of sisterhood, rather than a good joke. The woman who was in charge of the meeting quieted down the giggling and ordered a return to business. “Point seven on the agenda – the accounting issues.”

Feminists dream of an individualistic community. It is an ideal that in my opinion cannot possibly be achieved. Magdalena Środa uses the term “dissenting community” instead (the term is borrowed from Jean-Francois Lyotard) and considers that to be the unattainable model for

all post-modernistic communities,¹² the implementation of which could lead to a dangerous anti-utopia. My observations prove that the very existence of a community and invariability of its daily life is, to a large extent, independent of the underlying ideology. Theoretical models are selected depending on the prevailing conditions in which a given community happens to function – or, to word it differently (and possibly more accurately too), the theory concerning long-lasting human groups called communities is based on the manifestations of this phenomenon in the world and is an idealized version of these communities. There are not any conservative communities or dissenting communities, it is not feasible to observe a feminist community in its pure form – each of them is in the constant process of formation and restructuring. After all isn't it just (and as much as) a series of intentional and incidental interactions between people? Any attempt at the accurate reproduction of an ideological model in reality could bring nothing but pitiful results. It would be difficult to imagine a community without any borders or enemies (the Console is not one of them either in theory or practice) or such where all the members were successfully made to yield completely to their leader. It is not possible to form a community that is devoid of emotion and it is also impossible to abandon any regulations in favor of spontaneity. The basis of our existence (let me quote Schuetz once again here) is our everyday life where only that present moment in which we coexist matters. The growing awareness that people have along with their dreams and

¹² M.Środa, op.cit., p.21.

needs as well as constantly developing self-knowledge of an individual in the Western culture (and feminism certainly represents the latter) seem to indicate that the local communities will be more and more open to recognizing the subjectivity of their members. Yet “consent” will always be accompanied by “dissent”.

This time at the Manifa march I did not spot any members of the All-Polish Youth – the men dressed in black coats who usually oppose the colorful crowds. They always form neat rows, standing up straight, almost as if they were standing to attention and they shout in unison. They are less numerous than the Manifa participants, yet they are still able to outshout us. Good organization and order is evident among them. They protest against people like us who overuse terms like “relatively”, “it depends”, etc. and who have weird hair-do’s and wear colorful scarves. They dream of a world that is as orderly as their ranks. They are not hesitant to discipline those who stick their neck out; theirs is a perfectly well-coordinated team. They all love their nation and defend the eternal truths. That is what one can read in the articles written by them, at least.

Translated by Agnieszka Rubka-Nimz