

“Chamophobia”¹ as an Element of Polish Culture: Outline of a Theme

Paweł Wiktor Ryś

The notion of “chamophobia” referenced in this article’s title appears, according to Henryk Domański, “as a lack of respect or perhaps even disdain toward those perceived as inferior. This inferiority is tied to their socio-economic status [...], which becomes associated, for instance, with a lack of cultural competence or lower level of education.”² The term is usually used to describe contemporary as-

¹ “Chamophobia” refers to the Polish word “cham” – a pejorative term (formed from the name of the Biblical Ham) that may map onto the English phrase “peasant,” although it lacks the geographical specificity of this term. – Translator’s Note.

² *Gdy czujesz się lepszy. Z Henrykiem Domańskim rozmawia Mateusz Luft*, “Kontakt” 21/2012, p. 24.

pects of social life tied to symbolic violence, but confined to the context of the so-called "bridge and tunnel"^{3,4} folk.

Yet another timely example pertaining to this category is Anna Szulc's now widely known article "The Huns are Coming" (*Najazd Hunów*), published in Newsweek.⁵ The text describes Poles vacationing at the seaside from an elitist perspective of presumed superiority. Szulc makes an explicit link between an alleged lack of culture she observes among the tourists and their lower socio-economic status.

Sure enough, the author's discriminatory language quickly caught the attention and scorn of right-wing journalists and the online community, although I think it is safe to suggest that these "interventions" were less of a social character than they were political and ideological. In this sense, they came to resemble the message of the article they condemned. The infamy of Szulc's article, therefore, reveals more than the repercussions of the individual choices she made as author. The outrage was mainly provoked by the fact that Szulc associated the titular "Huns"

³ In Polish, the term used is "słoiki," meaning "mason jars." The phrase refers to "townies" who move to urban centers for work but remain attached to their home villages and return their often. The word "słoik" refers to the mason jars used by their families to send them back to the city with homecooked food. (Translator's note)..

⁴ It is difficult to pinpoint who first coined the Polish term "chamophobia." The first time it appeared in print was most likely in a piece by Anna Tatariewicz (*Chamofobia w kraju chamów*, "Przegląd" 34/2011), and since 2011, it has been referenced by many, including Teresa Smolińska and the editors of "Kontakt." It is worth pointing out, however, that a similar term – "peasantophobia" ("chłopofobia" has been in circulation since the 1990. The term was referenced by Grażyna Pomian in her review of the book *Gra w inteligencję* (Białystok 1994) by Anna Tatariewicz. See also: G. Pomian, *Chłopofobie i chłopotomanie*, "Kultura" 1-2/1997.

⁵ See: A. Szulc, *Najazd Hunów*, "Newsweek" 32/2016.

with beneficiaries of the 500+ program (and by implication, with Law and Justice voters). The conservative media rushed to the defense of the “common citizen” (with VP1’s *Wiadomości* taking the lead), quickly yielding a defense of the party’s own constituency, helped along by strategic appeals to social sensitivity.

Szulc’s article and its blowback reveal the recalcitrance of the elite class toward the broadly conceived “cham” through an ideological and political game that exploits that very recalcitrance. The dichotomy between the “landowner” and the “cham” demarcates two separate cultural spheres (as Szulc seems to imply), or even two races (for this difference is often rationalized by appealing to “nature”). This dichotomy can be traced throughout Polish culture from the fifteenth century onward. In fact, one might say that relatively speaking, it is our culture’s most consistent motif. A motif – it must be said – that has so far been inadequately researched.

The approach proposed here relates to chamophobia as a problem of social life that is by no means exclusive to the present. On the contrary, I see chamophobia as being at the very roots of the tradition of the nobility/intelligentsia believed to be so instrumental to Polish culture. Moreover, I argue that chamophobia has historically been invoked to legitimize the supremacy of privileged social tiers (and retains this function today) and as a tool for indoctrinating society – its common majority notwithstanding – with disdain and disregard for their own identity.

In this article, I attempt to outline this idea with the help of methodologies borrowed from cultural studies (such as concepts introduced by Michel Foucault and Antoni Gramsci). To illustrate my argument, I offer a brief overview of Polish literary texts from diverse eras to demonstrate the continuity of the phenomenon in question without eliding those features that differentiate its various iterations. This article, then, is an attempt to outline (on a theoretical level) possibilities for studying the Polish cultural elite through the rubric of chamophobia. This attempt takes the form of an ideological critique, and since a this type of critique is never ideologically neutral, as Michał Wróbelki has recently suggested,⁶ I will specify that my analysis is grounded in the methodologies of cultural studies mentioned above (methodologies that, in part, grow out of a post-marxist framework).

Subjectivization as Self-Regulation

To fully grasp the essence of chamophobia and to demonstrate the scope of its reach, we must first consider the status of what I referred to above (for lack of a better term) as the tradition of the nobility/intelligentsia. Here, we are not dealing with an exclusively dominant heritage (this would be no different from any other culture, although dominant narratives often have a more "democratic" tone). As Przemysław Czapliński has observed, the vast majority of our society "references external cultural traditions [while] [...] the identity [...] of the common folk has

⁶ See: M. Wróblewski, *Hegemonia i władza. Filozofia polityczna Antonia Gramsciego i jej współczesne kontynuacje*, Toruń 2016, p. 156.

been colonized by the noble mythos.”⁷ This mythology never represents the “plebeian” social tiers in a positive light, for it traces all culture, history, science, etc. back to the singular perspective of the (colonizing) elite. To make matters worse, in the process of subjectivization, the commoner (through assimilation, education, cultural interaction, etc.), by adopting this heritage (or its lack), internalizes a specific way of thinking and vision of reality, as well as a disdain toward his or her own background – an “inferiority complex.”

However, while the tradition of the nobility/intelligentsia has always (even during the socialist period, to some extent) been strictly tied to the elite class and mobilized by this class to consistent ends, it would be misguided to draw a direct line of continuity between the different privileged groups throughout the ages. Although the elite of the Sanation regime and the elite of the Third Polish Republic both mobilized this heritage (one that they themselves had fabricated), the interests of these social groups (at least in terms of their distinct sociohistorical conditions) differ widely. With this in mind, we must ask ourselves if there is any concept capacious enough to describe the tradition of the nobility/intelligentsia in its entirety, from its origins to the present day, while accounting for the variations in cultural and economic supremacy throughout different periods and among the different hegemonic groups. I believe there is such a concept, and it is no other than Michel Foucault’s concept of power-knowledge.

⁷ P. Czapliński, *Horror Polonicus*, [in:] *Kim są Polacy*, Warsaw 2013, p. 97.

This term appears throughout Foucault's work. It expresses the belief that "power produces knowledge [...] [and] power and knowledge directly imply one another [for] there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."⁸ In other words, power-knowledge has a primarily discursive character, for it constructs "regimes of truth"⁹ (concepts, classification systems, modes of thought and perception) and thereby sets the status of reality and interpolates individuals as subjects. One can only "become a subject" within the framework of an established discourse that will inevitably transmit a specific complex of meanings and beliefs.¹⁰ At this point, I should point out that in the Foucauldian analysis of discourse, one does not "adopt" or "reject" discourse, for one is formed by it. Power-knowledge is therefore embedded within the language we use to speak and think within its system of concepts and values.

It is therefore no coincidence – to draw an example from our own backyard – that in the Polish language everything associated with common village folk is synonymous with primitivity and backwardness, while everything associated with the aristocracy connotes nobility and culture. The power-knowledge complex means that ideas,

⁸ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York 1995, p. 27.

⁹ See also: idem, *Truth and Power*, [in:] M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, trans. C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham, K. Soper, New York 1980, p. 133.

¹⁰ See: C. Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, New York 2011, p. 211.

concepts and terms produced within the discourse of the nobility/intelligentsia and serving this discourse are accepted as “objective truths.” At the same time, the homophobic nature of this “regime of truth” means that the “subaltern” thinks in terms that implicitly denigrate his or her own identity. This has many consequences, including the emergence of origin complexes, both historically and today. The mechanism of subjectivization signaled above is at work here – a mechanism that Foucault refers to as “self-regulation.”¹¹

To return to the initial question of the status of the nobility/intelligentsia, we might therefore define this tradition as the power-knowledge of Polish culture. As such, it is discursive and is not the property of any single individual. Specific social groups entering the field of domination can (and simultaneously must) operate according to the dominant discourse, but they can never take ownership over it, or at least not in full. After all, they are no different from the oppressed groups in the sense that they, too, are formed by this discourse. As I have already suggested, this Foucauldian category can be mapped over the heritage of the nobility/intelligentsia as a whole. The same cannot be said of categories such as ideology or hegemony, for these notions are strictly bound up with the particular interests of the subjects involved. Moreover, this category also allows us to consider historical periods when a dominant discourse reigned despite the lack of nationhood proper (and by implication, the lack of the various ideological ap-

¹¹ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish...*, p. 237.

paratases that come with nationhood) – which is to say, the period of the Partitions.

Ideology and Hegemony

All this is not to suggest, however, that to study the chamophobic nature of the nobility/intelligentsia's legacy, we should do away with terms like ideology and hegemony. On the contrary, these concepts are relevant to the analysis of specific historical intervals. Foucault may not have approved of such a statement, for he rejected outright the concept of ideology (at least according to one of its many definitions). Foucault believed that the fundamental problem is "the truth" (conceived precisely as power-knowledge) and not an "erroneous" worldview. In other words, Foucault's disapproval of this term is tied to the claim that the moment we recognize the discursive character of reality (thus foregoing convenient dichotomies between truth and falsehood), the notion of ideology ceases to be useful.¹² This assertion, however, is premised on a vision of ideology that is fundamentally narrow (defining ideology merely as "false consciousness"), while in reality, the issue has proven to be more complex.

In order to veer toward a generalized schema (that nonetheless is commonplace in writing by scholars engaged with this term, such as Raymond Geuss¹³ and Andrew Heywood¹⁴), we can outline three fundamental approaches

¹² See also: idem, *Truth and Power...*, p. 118.

¹³ See also: R. Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory. Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge 1981, pp. 4–25.

¹⁴ See also: A. Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, London 2012.

to ideology. The first is the pejorative perspective, which describes ideology as a system of beliefs that mask the reality of society (this is the definition originally proposed by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* and later, referenced by Foucault). The second approach is descriptive and simply analyzes the worldview of a given group without bringing in the criteria of truth and falsehood. The third approach is a positive one, which treats ideology as a set of ideas, values and beliefs mobilized to produce an intended effect.

In this text, I relate to ideology as a hybrid between the second and third definitions, or, to put it differently, I relate to this term in the spirit of Antoni Gramsci.¹⁵ I will therefore treat ideology as the worldview of a specific social group (although not necessarily a privileged one) understood descriptively, without presuming a positive or negative judgment from the outset. By promulgating and popularizing specific customs, modes of behavior, and mindsets, this worldview strives toward its own ends. According to Gramsci, the dissemination of ideology makes use of “[e]verything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly [...]: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets.”¹⁶ If the worldview succeeds in popularizing its own ideology and power, then we are dealing with a cultural hegemony. Hegemony is therefore a situation where the majority within a social group (or at least a substantial portion of that

¹⁵ See also: M. Wróblewski, op. cit., p. 140 et seq.

¹⁶ A. Gramsci, *Collected Works*, ed. D. Forgacs, New York 2000, pp. 380-381.

group) adopts the worldview of a specific faction within the society (thereby promoting that faction to a position of dominance) as the official interpretation of reality. In this sense, we cannot say that hegemony is a consistent entity, for the arrangement of forces within it are subject to change. As a result, power relations must be continuously fortified and intensified.¹⁷ A crucial element of ideological struggle is the power to "win consent." "Hegemonic blocks" internalize, at least superficially, elements of diverse worldviews, but in practice, will only make concessions on issues of minor importance.¹⁸

By turning again to the Newsweek article, we can illustrate the ideological conflict of the hegemony. The community affiliated with this weekly magazine represents a liberal ideology that has emerged in Poland since 1989. This ideology links the elitist, nobility/intelligentsia identity model with the ideals of capitalism, a liberal worldview, and liberal economic policy. It is in part due to this coupling that the alleged victims of the transformation period were portrayed for so many years as *homo sovieticus* (people shaped, to their detriment, by a Soviet mentality, who are incapable of adapting to the new, enlightened system). Since these people were often manual laborers and rural farmers, the province (broadly conceived) functioned as a site of "orientalism" and the proper domain of the "inferior" "Other."¹⁹ This liberal mindset is vividly

¹⁷ See also: M. Wróblewski, op. cit., pp. 388–389.

¹⁸ See also: A. Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, [in] *The Gramsci Reader*, ed. D. Forgacs, New York 2000, pp. 238 – 243.

¹⁹ See also: M. Buchowski, *Widmo orientalizmu w Europie. Od egzotycznego Innego do napiętnowanego swojego*, trans. M. Golinczak, "Recycling Idei" 10/2008, p. 100 et. seq.

conveyed in *The Huns are Coming*, which sets up a dichotomy between landowner and “cham” that correlates to a socio-economic disparity. At the same time, ideologically speaking, this Orientalized “Other” has ceased to be a village “townie”, and has instead become the Law and Justice constituent. In other words, the article becomes wrapped up in a struggle of opposing worldviews between privileged liberal society (which does not, however, currently hold a position of dominance and supports only particular political subjects) and the social group that is the acting hegemony – the conservative constituency of the Peace and Justice party. Both groups were, of course, shaped by the power-knowledge discourse of the nobility/intelligentsia, and their ideologies are rooted in this “one proper” tradition (to invoke a post-Sarmatian, Peace and Justice-oriented vision of culture and history), although in both cases, this tradition is exploited to entirely different ends.

As a caveat, I would like to emphasize that while Polish history has been dominated by diverse ideologies that are noble in origin (traced back to the noble gentry, the land-owning intelligentsia, and so on), it would be misguided to uniformly apply the concept of hegemony to all these phenomena. The term is only relevant to specific historical periods.

Chamophobia in Polish Literature

I will now try to illustrate these ideas with examples from Polish literature, rendering a brief and necessarily

arbitrary overview of chamophobic literary texts. Chamophobia can essentially be traced to the very origins of Polish literature. Its dramatic founding text might be the anonymously authored *Satire on Lazy Peasants* (*Satyra na leniwych chłopów*), written circa 1483. The poem describes peasant farmers who sabotage the work they perform for landowners (by deliberately breaking equipment, avoiding work when unsupervised, and through simple negligence). The peasant is portrayed "to your average man" (one can presume this means "to the aristocrat") as "a real hunk of beef" (or "a real cow"). On the other hand, he is cunning and nefarious, for he is able to outwit "his good landowner." How might we describe the ideological tenor of this satire? The poem justifies particular economic practices on a symbolic level (expanding the acreage of the estate by constructing new "folwarks" – farms tended by serfs).²⁰ The text transmits (rather subtly, to be fair) an impression of the distinct (animalistic) nature of peasants, and this claim serves to reinforce the nobility hegemony and to rationalize the nobility's material losses by blaming them on the deceit of their serfs. The claim therefore becomes a central postulate for rationalizing the expansion of control to produce efficiency.

The vision of the common folk's particular character as depicted in *Satire* takes on a more refined form in direct proportion to the widening disparity between the nobility and their "inferior" subjects as more and more privileges were consistently granted to the former. The fortification

²⁰ See also: M. Włodarski, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Polska poezja świecka XV wieku*, oprac. M. Włodarski, Wrocław 1997, p. XXIII.

of noble exclusivity that began in the mid-sixteenth century and was so instrumental for the power-knowledge discourse meant that peasants and townspeople were suddenly perceived “as a threat to the pure bloodlines of good lineage.”²¹ The worsening situations of both social groups meant that “common folk” attained noble status with more and more regularity, much to the disgust and contempt of the aristocracy. This reaction is expressed in a passage from *I Know You by Your Hide* (*Znam cię po sierci*) by the seventeenth-century poet Waław Potocki: “A horse you can know by its hide and its nature: under the skin or under the hide, will he turn out to be more capable? [...] a peasant or townsperson will fool no one with their crest, / try as he might, for at the end of the day, he’s a sow.”²²

Similarly to Walerian Nekanda Trepka’s work and the “erudite” treatises of Father Wojciech Dembołęcki, Potocki’s poems convey chamophobic feelings toward some “essential” difference (rooted in a natural or divine order) that elevates the nobility above the masses. These sentiments come across as racist and are often rather vulgar. At the same time, they serve to validate the dominating ideology and give impetus to subsequent “turns of the screw” at the expense of the deplored common folk.

²¹ S. Baczewski, *Obraz plebejusza w literaturze szlacheckiej. Rekonesans*, “Napis” 15/2009, p. 11

²² W. Potocki, *Dzieła*, ed. L. Kukulski, vol. 3, *Moralia i inne utwory z lat 1688–1698*, Warsaw 1987, p. 141, cited in: S. Baczewski, op. cit., pp. 14–15.

While this anti-peasant smear campaign seems to reach its apogee in the seventeenth century, the biological line of reasoning alluded to above is also present in much later works of literature that are integral to the Polish canon (and to that canon's implications for the social imaginary). In *Pan Tadeusz*, we encounter the following view voiced by Gerwazy: "the peasants proceed from Ham, the Jews from Japhet, and we gentry from Shem; / hence we are lords over both, as the elder brother" (Book XII, lines 541-543).²³ Mickiewicz represents this sentiment as the property of a generation regressing into the past (although the idyllic character of the nobility's relationship to peasants conveyed in Mickiewicz's work serves to conceal actual exploitation in the name of "national ideology"). To our dismay, however, we also encounter lines such as: "Are we to blame that God made us noble and them peasants?"²⁴ These turns of phrase offer an apology for Sarmatism, which functions within the discourse of power-knowledge as the Polish essence.

The chamophobia expressed in these quasi-racist narratives comparing social classes to animals is not limited to early and pre-modern literature. Allusions to the animal nature²⁵ of the "cham" expressed on the

²³ A. Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, or: *The Last Foray in Lithuania*, trans. G. R. Noyes, London-Toronto 1917, p. 319.

²⁴ H. Sienkiewicz, *Ogniem i mieczem*, Wrocław 2000, s. 504.

²⁵ The consistent usage of animal similes in chamophobic prose also betrays the extreme anthropocentrism of Polish culture. For this reason, research on the discourse of the nobility/intelligentsia might benefit from perspectives borrowed from the emerging field of animal studies.

level of physical appearance (as in Potocki's work) can also be found in twentieth-century and even contemporary texts. As a case in point, we might take Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski's three-volume novel from the interwar period, titled *Mateusz Bigda*.²⁶ The book is set just before 1926. Kaden represents the physical attributes of his eponymous hero in an animalistic light. The protagonist is a peasant activist modeled after Wincenty Witos. Bigda has eyes "wide to an extreme, like those of an animal," and speaks "in a hoarse voice, with the huff of an animal" and even sighs "like an animal."²⁷ As a literary expression of the ideology of the Sanation-era landowning intelligentsia, Kaden's work functions as a pamphlet of sorts for the political opposition and rationalizes the May Coup, while defending antidemocratic actions tied to this political stance. The first printing of the novel in the pages of a magazine coincided with the conclusion of the Brest trials staged by the Sanation regime.²⁸ The trials took a stance against the leadership of the Cenrolew party – a group that included Witos, who was subsequently sentenced to eighteen months in prison.

Legitimizing Social Difference

What is consistent throughout the examples cited above (examples I could add to ad infinitum, expanding the field of research to film, theater, music, academic scholarship,

²⁶ Another telling example that doubles as a poetic expression of anti-communist ideology would be Zbigniew Herbert's *Potęga smaku*. For more on this text, see: P.W. Ryś, "Potęga smaku" Zbigniewa Herberta w kontekście dychotomii "pana" i "chama," *Konteksty Kultury* 1/2015.

²⁷ J. Kaden-Bandrowski, *Mateusz Bigda*, vol. 1: *Grunt*, Warsaw 1933, pp. 15, 35, 199.

²⁸ See also: J. Kwiatkowski, *Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne*, Warsaw 2008, p. 299.

and so on) is the relationship between the cultural elite broadly conceived and power. This relationship becomes manifest, first and foremost, on the level of the discourse of the nobility/intelligentsia, which has been so dominant in Polish culture. Secondly, it appears on the level of ideologies imposed on society by specific groups of influence. By appealing to tradition, these ideologies tend to reinforce the oppressive power of the dominant discourse, as demonstrated in the examples outlined above (although theoretically, they could also be used to mitigate this force). Chamophobia is deeply embedded in our tradition and is exploited as a tool for obtaining specific ideological and political ends; it has been, and still remains, a method to produce and legitimize social disparities.

Translated by Eliza Cushman Rose