

# **Producing Homogeneity as a Historical Tradition. Neo-conservatism, Precarity and Citizenship Education in Poland**

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, I am interested in exploring citizenship regimes as they emerge from the interplay of neoliberal and neoconservative developments in contemporary Europe. I am particularly interested in the connections between different types of contemporary precarity and citizenship imaginaries as they transpire at the historical nexus of a transition between state socialism and neoliberalism. I will use Poland as an example of a post-transition neoliberal economy, where the new political leadership took up criticism of precarity, making it an important public idiom through which the interplay of predatory neoliberalism and national neo-conservatism can be viewed. I will address implications of these trends for education.*

**Keywords:** *citizenship, precarity, Poland, citizenship education, neoliberalism*

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The writing of this paper is inspired by the rather dramatic historical situation in Poland brought about with full force after the Fall 2015 elections which resulted in the sweeping victory of the populist national conservative party, Law and Justice. The winning political cohort now rules through a parliamentary majority and the President, making it possible to enforce its will without entering into negotiations and coalitions with other political allies or opponents. The new Polish Parliament is composed of 460 MPs who all represent right of the center political spectrum with no left-wing representation. This is an unprecedented situation in post-1989 Poland, which has generated an entirely new way in which political decision-making proceeds. During night-time Parliamentary ‘debates’ resolutions were passed that disempowered the Constitutional Court, curtailed the independence of the media, proposed an extreme restriction of abortion policies and expanded surveillance rights of the state secret service. Contemporary Poland has thus joined the family of states that though officially democratic, exemplify the fragility and limits of contemporary parliamentary democracies ruled exclusively by those brought to power by the will of the voting majority (Zakaria 1997).

What is of particular interest to me is the way in which the leaders of the Polish state have hijacked critical and progressive concepts related to economic and social justice and used them in their propaganda of anti-immigrant, anti-feminist, anti-gay, anti-abortion, anti-Other politics. There are some instructive lessons that emerge out of the current situation in Poland, which I view as a struggle for the production of new neoconservative citizenship regimes. These citizenship regimes are not entirely new and they have been in the making for at least two decades. However, what we are seeing is a solidification of neoconservatism on the level of state politics exemplified in the geopolitical contexts of Hungary, Turkey, Poland, the United States, the Soviet Union or the United Kingdom and citizenship politics plays a key role in this process. The biopolitical goal of the new neoconservative regime is the production of docile citizens – hyptonized and dulled into compliance by neoliberal consumerism, the TINA logic of global capitalism and nationalist and patriarchal fantasmagorias. The force with which these states are launching attacks against critical scholars is really a sign of the threat that critical ideas represent to them. In Turkey, academics are being investigated and imprisoned and in Poland the cabinet recently approved a new legislation intended to “defend the good name of the Polish nation.” The new law foresees prison terms of up to three years for those “who publicly and against the facts, accuse the Polish nation, or the Polish state, [of being] responsible or complicit in Nazi crimes committed by the III German Reich.” (Grabowski 2016) The policy was initiated in connection with the erroneous but commonly used discursive conflation of WWII German Nazi concentration camps with Poland. Instead of saying “Nazi/German concentration camps located in Poland,” the unwarranted expression “Polish death camps” was often employed, even in diplomatic discourse, most notably and unfortunately by President Barrack Obama during the ceremony awarding Jan Karski with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012. As the Polish historian Jan Grabowski remarked, however, while the law seems restricted to those who talk about the “Polish death camps,” in reality “the new law, with its ambiguous and imprecise wording, is meant to freeze any debates which might be incompatible with the official, feel-good, version of the country’s own national past.” (Grabowski 2016) My starting point is the view that these repressive measures are really a proof of the potential strength of critical scholarship, which needs to focus its attention on how the socio-economic categories of progressive provenance (including class and citizenship) are currently manipulated by power in the production of docile, precarious and potentially perilous bodies of the new citizens which are being militarized against the Other.

In the Polish case, one of the key categories, which are called upon in the production of citizenship, is that of class performed through the official populist discourse on economic precarity. This discourse builds its legitimacy on the justified critique of neoliberal politics of the post-1989 era. In order to understand how strongly this

discourse resonates in Poland, we need to keep in mind that since 1989, Poland – a socialist country for more than four decades prior - has witnessed one of the most predatory forms of global neoliberal capitalism, which has generated deep differences in wealth through immiseration. After twenty-five years of neoliberal capitalism, Poland is now a country with one of the highest discrepancies of income in Europe, reflected also in the differential access to basic services, such as health care or education. In today's Poland, as one of the leaders of the pre-1989 opposition, historian Karol Modzelewski sadly remarks, “[e]quality of opportunity remains in the realm of dreams. Most of the children and grandchildren of those left behind by the ship of neoliberal modernization will never be able to get on board” (Modzelewski, 2013, p. 405-406). One of the dominant features of this process has been its TINA (There-Is-No-Alternative) character, which is especially striking and unfortunate considering how much (good and bad) could have been learned from the legacy of the Communist era (Koczanowicz 2015).

As we argued elsewhere (Cervinkova and Rudnicki, forthcoming), the detrimental effects of predatory economic neoliberalism have been strengthened through its coupling with another development - the reliance of all post-1989 Polish political players on neoconservative ideologies tied strongly to the Polish historical national imaginary. Anthropologist Michal Buchowski refers in this respect to the persistence of three notable legacies: Patriotism/Nationalism, Catholicism, Consumerism a’la Communism, which according to him shaped Polish opposition to the totalitarian system and made Poland “the most reluctant and rebellious member of the Soviet Bloc” (Buchowski, 2001, p. 78-91). After 1989, he argues, strengthened by their most recent historic role, these legacies continued to prevail to the detriment of cultural, economic and political pluralism.

The intertwining of economic neoliberalism with national on neoconservative ideologies tied strongly to the Polish historical national imaginary is at the core of the official discourse on economic precarity, which is heavily racialized, gendered and grounded in the historically produced national imaginary. Schools as sites for the state-production of citizens (Levinson, Foley, Holland 1996, Levinson 2005, El-Haj 2015, Rubin 2012) are foreseen by the state to play a role in the production of citizenship, a process to which I refer as the production of homogeneity as a historical tradition. I will now outline these two basic ideas, which play important roles in the production of the citizen – the relationship between precarity and citizenship as they are manipulated by the neoconservative power, and the production of homogeneity as a historical tradition through education.

## **Precarity and Citizenship**

The official Polish discourse on precarity focuses on the criticism of low job quality and job market security in Poland as a legacy of the previous post-1989 governments. Skillfully taking up the social justice discourse of the left, the conservative establishment makes criticism of precarity, through such discursive tropes as “trash contracts” (*umowy śmieciowe*) that refer to temporary employment conditions of many Poles, one of the central elements of its populist nationalist rhetoric. This rhetoric keeps expressing the concern for the Pole/the Poles/the Polish nation who has suffered – throughout its history in general and the most recent post-1989 history in particular – drawing clear boundaries that leave multiple Others outside of the sphere of possible suffering and hence – the imaginary of the national community and citizenship. Shortly after it came to power, the new Polish government translated this discursive critique into action through fiscal measures that include monthly financial contributions to families with two or more children as a part of its pro-family and pro-reproductive policy (this leaves out single mothers with one child and others who are not considered family in the conservative sense), increase of minimal wage limit, the lowering of retirement age and the planned increased taxation of banks and foreign companies. While some of these measures truly may have as their goal the improvement the situation of the disadvantaged, it is important to look at the ways in which these measures, which grow out of the critique of precarity (in discourse and practice) are linked to conservative social and cultural politics in the production of neoconservative governmentality through citizenship. What is ultimately at stake, I want to suggest, is a new neoconservative governmentality – which can be explored at this nexus of precarity discourse and citizenship.

The somewhat paradoxical nature of the citizenship – precarity linkage lies in the way it challenges the traditional understanding of these categories, whereby citizenship is largely valued as something positive (Fudge 2005, Fudge 2014), while precarity carries mostly negative connotations (Standing 2011). In the traditional scholarship on these topics, precarity refers predominantly to economic insecurity linked to employment and the labor market (Standing 2011), while citizenship is seen in the context of an existing or aspirational belonging to a community and includes notions of self-governance and rights or entitlements (Barbalet 1988). The citizenship entitlements usually include civil, political or social categories (Marshall 1950) with the civil dimension being tied to individual freedoms (freedoms of speech, faith, property ownership, justice), the political dimension connoting the right to participate in the exercise of political authority, while the social entitlement of citizenship refers to the right to economic and social security and welfare. Recent literature has expanded this understanding of citizenship to include other types of citizenship, particularly interesting for our discussion here being the concept of industrial citizenship, which

Judy Fudge (2005) defines as “status limiting commodification and conferring rights to influence terms of employment” (635), whereby “workers’ rights are enforced by the state and do not depend simply upon market power” (636). Industrial citizenship, she argues, is “inextricably linked to the growth of the welfare state and social rights and it is an element in the attempt to build a bridge between citizenship and class.” (632)

But citizenship has always been closely tied to racialized, gendered and class-based exclusions and critical scholars have been instrumental in pointing to these limitations and contradictions, which make citizenship “both the engine of universality and a break or limit upon it” (Bosniak 2006, p. 18). Similarly, scholars of precarity have been challenging the predominantly economic understanding of precarity, suggesting the need for its more expansive definitions pointing to precarity being synonymous with uncertainty and unpredictability more generally and in important ways related to violence and terror (Ettlinger 2007). But unlike vulnerability and uncertainty, they suggest that the significance of precarity as an analytic concept lies “in the way in which it connects the micro and the macro, situating experiences of insecurity and vulnerability within historically and geographically specific contexts” ... requiring “the study of broader political and economic shifts, and how they reshape the relationship between individuals and groups on the one hand, and capital and the state on the other.” (Paret, Gleeson 2016, 280) They also challenge the predominant view that limits precarity to the neoliberal historical condition, arguing that precarity has a much longer trajectory and it has for long defined the human condition of the underprivileged.

There is no doubt that globalization and transnational neoliberalization have produced different forms of precarity, which is transborder and transnational in nature. In fact, the migrant/refugee embodies the expanded notion and intersectional form of precarity. Temporarily or permanently stateless, unwanted and disposable, the precarious situation of the migrant points to what Petryna and Follis (2015) refer to as the “radical decoupling of citizenship and biological self-preservation” – whereby the EU member states are fortifying their borders with barbed wire while debating the implementation of “no rescue” maritime policies, leaving the “problem” of the refugees to the Turks, the Greeks and the Italians. They argue that citizenship today emerges as an unstable concept: “In the age of risk, citizenship provides no exemption; it is fundamentally at risk.” (402)

But the history of ethnic minorities and stateless people should make us cautious of deeming the current situation unprecedented – it is certainly unprecedented in terms of the specific geopolitical circumstances that define the historical moment, but one

could say that the citizenship of the Other has always been precarious. Living within the borders of empires and nation states, the citizenship of minorities has always depended on the geopolitical circumstances and the will of the representative majority beyond their control. The precariousness culminated in the 20th-century paradigmatic tragedy of the Holocaust, which, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, was conditioned on a three stage process of annihilation, which began with the dehumanization through racial discrimination and ended in the physical extermination, conditioned however on the intermittent step of taking away of people's citizenships, depriving them of any and all rights and protections that citizenship offers (Arendt 1968). The crucial role of the historical experience of the Holocaust is often brought to the fore in public discourse in Poland in which the real and unquestionable suffering of the Poles is promoted, downplaying the suffering and martyrdom of the minorities (who were, however, also Polish citizens). A similar twist is at play when the critique of precarity as exclusively an issue of economy and social class, is used by the conservative Polish government as an element of citizenship discourse, which excludes the Other from the national imaginary - both the refugee/migrant who is refused and the internal Other. The historical resemblance of the blaming of the Other for the economic trouble of the majority is troubling and worrying – especially from Central European situatedness.

#### Production of homogeneity as a historical tradition

One of the most intriguing qualities of the neoliberal educational project has been the way in which it relies on increasing individualization and destruction of social solidarities on the one hand (through high-stakes testing and growing individual disparities in the competition for lessening public resources) while on the other hand boosts affective group (national) essentialisms (through school curriculum and practices designed to build ethnically/religiously homogenous forms of citizenship and belonging). In the European context, this paradox overlaps with another set of contradictions - the discourse and policies of European integration with its goals of creating a shared “area of freedom, security and justice”, which is, however, demarcated by secure borders (Follis 2006, 2012) and which seems to leave exclusivist nation-building projects within individual EU states largely undisturbed. While many European states that are experiencing high levels of immigration are pressured to develop some educational policies and solutions and take the immigrants' presence into view, the situation is very different in the case of those EU countries (especially those of the "New Europe") that are largely culturally homogeneous and that have not experienced large-scale immigration since after WWII.

Such is the case of Poland, with a little over 38.5 million people one of the largest member-states of the European Union and one of the buffer countries of the EU with highly guarded borders against immigration from the East into the free-movement

zone. Poland is a country with a negative net migration rate, which means that there are more people leaving Poland than moving into the country. Only 1.55% inhabitants declared in the 2011 census a different single ancestry than Polish, which makes Poland one of the most culturally and ethnically homogenous countries in the world. It is important to stress that in this respect, today's Poland is very different from what it was before WWII when it was a home to one of the most multicultural societies in Europe with over 30% of the population being minorities living within its borders. Most notably, Poland was the home to the second largest Jewish diasporas (3 – 3.3 million) in the world and the largest in Europe. The WWII, the Holocaust and ethnic cleansings that accompanied the re-divisioning of the European continent during and after WWII destroyed much of this diversity and cultural legacy.

However, based on my ongoing research on historical memory and citizenship, I want to challenge this popular view, which attributes present-day lack of diversity in Poland exclusively to historical events of WWII. While WWII with massive ethnic genocides and cleansings many of which took place on the territory of today's Poland was certainly the most significant cause, I argue that the continued cultural and ethnic homogeneity of today's Poland is a result of two major tendencies: 1. The gradual process of ethnic cleansing that continued after the war until the end of the one-party rule in 1989. The most notable example of post-War ethnic cleansing is both the grassroots and government-sponsored anti-Semitic campaigns that forced the overwhelming majority of Polish Jews that survived the Holocaust out of the country (in places such as the city and region where I live - out of the more than 200,000 surviving Jews that settled there after WWII, only several hundred remain today). 2. The post-1989 politics on difference of the Polish state supported by the outside border protection policy of the European Union and more recently to the anti-EU anti-immigrant stance of the Visegrad alliance. In the modern democratic era, Poland's homogeneity, I argue, is being produced by an intriguing interplay of state ideology (deeply tied to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church) channeled through state educational institutions including public schools, museums and other research and cultural institutes and the impact of EU immigration policy which allows Poland as a buffer country to reject a vast majority of applicants for immigrant visa from entering. Most recently, a new element of enforced homogeneity has been added through the official anti-immigrant stance of the Visegrad group, which broke the EU policy built on the solidarity principle to help alleviate the effects of refugee crisis through country-based quota for granting asylum.

In my ethnographic work, I focus on Polish schools as sites in which homogeneity is produced through both the curriculum and concrete cultural practices, which nurture the culturally and ethnically uniform notions of citizenship. In the Polish school

curriculum, citizenship education is officially promoted as a key tool of democratization and integration of Poland into the European Union and has been a compulsory school subject for grades IV-VI (year-long compulsory school subject called - History and Society) continued through middle and high school years (Knowledge about Society as well as History). As a part of these subjects, knowledge about Poland is promoted in the context of the country's integration into the European Union and through the curriculum focused on patriotic education. The citizenship, which is being produced through patriotic education, relies on a particular historical narrative that builds the image of the ideal historical Polish citizen, stressing the heroism suffering of Poles. Interwoven with the gendered, militarized and religious underpinnings of the historical narrative of patriotic education is its racialized character, which largely leaves out the suffering of various Others who have historically lived on the Polish territory (Ambrosiewicz-Jacobs 2011; Ambrosiewicz-Jacobs and Szuchta 2014, Chmura-Rutkowska, Głowacka-Sobiech, Skórzyńska 2015).

Nowhere is this silencing of history more pronounced than in the treatment of the WWII and the Holocaust. While the suffering of Poles in the hands of the Nazi and Soviet occupiers is stressed, the annihilation of the Jews, the Roma, the disabled and the homosexuals as victims of ethnic genocide is downplayed or repressed all together. The participation of ethnic Poles in the pre-war and war-time pogroms is also left largely untouched. Thus, the historical narrative of Polish patriotic education relies on the silencing of the suffering of Others who in many cases died fighting for the Polish state or who (the case of the unspoken of 10% of Jewish officers who were killed by the Soviets in the Katyń Massacre which is one of the foundational events of Polish patriotic narrative) or who were shot by the Nazis or murdered by them in extermination camps or who were murdered by Poles themselves (such as the case of the massacre of Jews by their Polish neighbors during the Nazi occupation in the town of Jedwabne). (Gross 2001, Tornquist-Plewa, 2003) In its content and effects, the historical narrative of modern Polish patriotic education relies on the silencing of the historical multiculturalism of Poland and nurtures a concept of ethnically homogeneous Polish citizenship. In my work in which I analyze school textbooks and curricula, I focus on the dynamics to which I refer as memory containment whereby contentious issues over historical responsibility tied to violent conflicts in the country's past (e.g. the Holocaust, Ukrainian Ethnic Cleansing, post-WWII anti-Semitism) become diluted in the global policyscape of democratic European citizenship education. I focus on how the intertwining of transnational and national policies represented in these texts and curriculum help reaffirm the leading Polish national idiom of heroic martyrdom, which excludes the Other from the confines of collective imaginary (Pasięka 2013, Porter 2001), posing questions over the possibilities of creating more inclusive notions of citizenship (Abu El-Haj 2007,



Rubin 2011) within the ongoing process of European integration. Beyond the level of policy, homogeneity of citizenship is enforced through school-based daily practices. Reports issued by Polish non-governmental organizations document the discriminatory practices of symbolic and real violence with which religious, ethnic, disability or sexuality-based difference is repressed in Polish schools. (K. Gawlicz, P. Rudnicki, M. Starnawski, 2015)

In June of this year, the new Polish Minister of Education has announced an upcoming educational reform, whose overtly most important features are the restructuring of schools from the three-level system of elementary, middle and high schools to the two-level system of ground schools and high schools. While these structural changes have drawn much of the attention, more important changes concern the level of curriculum content, especially in historical education and reading. “The pupil should have certain competencies, have great knowledge of mathematics, a foreign language, information technology. We are adding two more competencies – knowledge of literature and the history of his nation in order to become an economic patriot.” (Dziennik Zachodni, 2016) In order to achieve this, the Ministry will implement a program “a book in every home” to support poor and precarious families and increase the number of history classes and providing funding for schools to take pupils to sites of memory. It is clear that the content of these changes is the struggle over the soul of the nation through the mobilization of patriotic and national imaginary. The instruments in this battle for citizenship is the critique of precarity and the historical and memory politics that help define the citizen and the non-citizen as a subject of state’s welfare and care.

Who belongs to this national imaginary of the Polish citizenship was subsequently made quite clear in a prime-time TV interview, when the Minister was asked by the journalist about her plan to increase the number of history lessons in schools and how she believes schools should teach about difficult moments in Polish-Jewish relations. The Minister replied: “Let us teach youth to remember and honor these events so that the Holocaust would never repeat itself.” The journalist asked her about who she believes is responsible for the massacre of Jews in the Polish town of Jedwabne in 1941, when Poles burned alive more than 300 of their Jewish neighbours in a barn. While Polish historians had described these terrible events after the war, the public debate ensued only after the publication of a book, “Neighbors,” in 2001 by Polish-American sociologist Jan Tomasz Gross, which resulted also in official state apologies. The Minister avoided the answer saying: “Jedwabne is a historical fact, which has been ridden with many misunderstandings and many biased opinions. The journalist countered: “Poles burned Jews in a barn.” To which the Minister said: “That’s your opinion repeated after Mr. Gross.” When asked again, she said: “The

dramatic situation which took place in Jedwabne is controversial. Many historians, great professors, show a completely different picture. Let us leave it to historians and historical books” she appealed. When asked who was responsible for the pogrom of Holocaust survivors in the town of Kielce in 1946, she said: “There were various historical complexities.” When asked again who carried out the pogrom, she said. Polish people must decide and make up their mind.” To which the journalist said. “But you are Polish, so I ask you, who murdered the Jews in Kielce?”. The Minister responded: “Anti-semites.” The journalist said – “They were Poles.” And the Minister said: “One cannot say that a Pole equals an anti-Semite. Those were particular historical and political circumstances.” (TVN 24, 2016)

### **Conclusion**

Nation states depend for their existence on the ongoing maintenance and production of borders and border regimes (Anderson, Sharma, Wright 2011), enforced through citizenship biopolitics. In some ways, the right to grant and take away citizenship and the modes of producing citizens are at the core of state governmentality as we know it. The importance of citizenship politics for states is enhanced in the current situation of the general weakening of their economic and political powers due to globalization and transnational neoliberalisation, which lead to the shrinking of public resources and the disempowerment of the political capacities of the state through privatization. Citizenship politics remains one of the last strongholds of the state and is a key instrument of its control. It is therefore not surprising that the neo-conservative governments focus much effort on the reconfiguration of the citizenship imaginary through the struggle over historical and memory politics, seeing schools as important sites for the production of the new citizen. The lesson of Poland for us as critical scholars, I believe, is in the need to pay attention to the ways in which concepts and categories of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and others – inextricably interlinked in the production of social inequalities – are being separated by political power in the production of citizenship regimes. Our job is in bringing them back together, not allowing for the conditions in which the “good citizens” can be mobilized against the Other.

### **Notes**

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