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Lost between the Waves? The Paradoxes of Feminist Chronology and Activism in Contemporary Poland

By Agnieszka Graff¹

Abstract

The complexities of Polish gender politics can be conceptualized as a series of paradoxes. Until recently, Polish feminists had deined the very possibility of a Polish women's movement. This article argues that Polish feminism resists the chronology of "waves": it uses styles and tactics characteristic of the third wave (irony, high theory, camp, cross-dressing, etc.) to achieve typically second wave aims (reproductive rights, equal pay, etc). It then engages with a historical paradox: the phenomenon of backlash *before* feminism. Rejecting the political in favour of the personal was compatible with psycho-sexual dynamics already in progress – these were a defence against the intrusiveness of state involved in building a deeply conservative private sphere. The article then moves onto an examination of the present deadlock between the Catholic church, the post-communist government and the women's movement.

Key Words: third wave feminism, Poland, activism

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As a Polish feminist, writer and academic, I find it somewhat amusing when well-meaning Westerners, on their two-day stop in the Pope's homeland, voice their concern that, surely, feminism cannot exist in my country, because "you are all so deeply conservative, aren't you?" and "so very Catholic." The truth is that Polish feminism can and does exist, though it is often tormented by self-doubt. As a movement – cultural, political and intellectual – it is growing in numbers and becoming radicalized by the hour. Quite possibly, we are on the verge of something new, something beyond the familiar paths of Polish gender politics, something that resists the chronology of "waves" used to describe feminist movements in the West. The aim of this paper is to explore the complexities of this cultural moment in the context of expectations implicit in the wave metaphor, as well as those written into Poland's national mythology.

When Drag Queens Dress Up as Bishops

In the fall of 1996, *Pelnym Glosem [In Full Voice]*, the sole feminist periodical published in Poland at the time, featured a lively debate on the existence – or rather non-existence – of feminism in Poland. Most of the contributors, including myself, claimed that seven years after the dawn of democracy no feminist consciousness, and certainly no women's movement, could be detected in our culture. There may be a few feminists, we agreed, but they are isolated and largely ignored. We cited historical, psychological and economic explanations for this sorry state of affairs; the tone of the debate was in turns cynical, resigned and mournful. One contributor suggested hopefully that Polish feminism existed in a nascent and apolitical form: namely, the belief, secretly cherished by many Polish women, in their superiority over men, whom they perceive as childlike and incompetent (Wegierek 6). Another woman countered that this supposed "proto-

feminist” consciousness was nothing more than a compensatory mechanism typical of oppressive patriarchal cultures (Uminska 15). A third writer announced that the whole debate was pointless, because Poland – along with other Eastern European, Latin American and Asian countries – had simply missed the feminist boat. Women in these cultures, she argued, never developed a group identity, never realized they were discriminated against, never questioned their loyalty to the family as an institution (Limanowska 13). Only two contributors, both of them editors of the journal, claimed that Polish feminism did in fact exist, though even they agreed that it could hardly be called a movement (Walczewska, “Feminizm?” 25; Kozak 29).

My own argument at the time relied on a liberal account of the absence of feminism – one I would be much more wary of today. I claimed that resistance to feminism was in fact an extension of Polish culture’s profound distrust of individualism. Anti-feminism, I believed, comes out of a herd ethic which precludes the rise of ideologies grounded in such values as human autonomy, self-determination and risk-taking (Graff, “Feminizm” 21). A few years earlier a similar argument had been presented by the sociologist Mira Marody in a provocative paper called “Why I Am Not a Feminist.” Marody had claimed that the formation of identities (including gender identities) in Polish culture takes place in the context of familial collectivism, and is determined by a collectivist moral orientation which favors consensus and harmony over independence and autonomy (more or less what I called a “herd ethic” in my 1996 essay). Within such a culture, feminism is *a priori* perceived as alien and threatening. An interesting corrective to this argument was later proposed by Ewa Sidorenko, who suggests that the missing “ingredient” in Polish culture is not so much individualism as “associability,” *i.e.* an explicit collectivist orientation, a willingness to work with and for others, for people who are not members of our family. Such an attitude is associated with modern politics. Decades of state socialism, claims Sidorenko, have produced insular identities firmly rooted in values associated with the home, family and religion – *i.e.* the private sphere. This “retraditionalisation” occurred because the family provided a safe haven from the omnipresent, corrupt and intrusive communist public sphere. “Polish anti-feminism can be linked to a specific anti-modern dynamic of communism which prevents the emergence of various social identities whilst, at the same time constituting a form of individualism which is anti-political in its orientation” (Sidorenko 4).

If I cite these arguments, it is not only because I find them insightful, but also because they seem oddly dated. They all provide explanations for a phenomenon which, in my view, is fast becoming history – that is, Polish culture’s immunity to feminist discourse and consciousness. It is amusing to re-read these essays and wonder what such a debate would be like today. All but one of the contributors of the *Pelnym Glosem* exchange in 1996 are now activists of something that even right wing media reluctantly refer to as a “women’s movement.” Whatever one’s definition of feminism (and we argue over definitions no less than our Western sisters do), there is no doubt that it does exist in today’s Poland. It is a social movement, a style of thinking, a media debate, a much ridiculed stereotype, a “fashionable” topic in women’s magazines, as well as a thriving academic field. There are several gender studies programs (Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź) as well as dozens of women’s centers and NGOs. There are countless discussion circles, workshops, self-defense classes, a nation-wide coalition for bringing women into politics, a feminist bookshop on the web, a group called *Ulica Siostrzana* [“Sister Street”]

organizing summer camps for women, and a feminist theater collective. There are feminist street demonstrations attended by hundreds, and recently even thousands, of supporters, and feminist conferences to choose from almost every month. We have five feminist magazines ranging from the academic to the popular, as well as innumerable zines, websites and organizational bulletins. Last, but not least, there is a long list of feminist books on topics from women's literary history to politics – books numerous and popular enough to have triggered the appearance of shelves marked “gender” or “women” in many bookshops.

We exist – there is no doubt about it. And yet, ironically enough, for many Polish women feminist identity begins with writing an essay or taking part in a conversation of which the basic assumption is that “Polish feminism” is an oxymoron. Obviously, in 1996 we were simply wrong in our pessimism. And perhaps we had to be, having grounded our diagnoses and predictions in a firm belief that, where gender relations are concerned, mentality would not be affected by political and economic change. In fact, the years since 1989 have brought profound changes in values and attitudes, and, arguably, gender relations and women's attitudes underwent some of the deepest changes. In 1993, Marody explained why she was not a feminist, describing herself as ideology-proof and Polish culture in general as incurably family-oriented. In 2000, the same sociologist co-authored a text which tells an entirely different story. “Changing Images of Identity in Poland: From the Self-Sacrificing to the Self-Investing Woman?” is a provocative study based on a comparative analysis of women's magazines from before and after the transition to democracy. Marody and Anna Giza Poleszczuk conclude that the old model of the Polish woman as “brave victim” (the long-suffering mother, who devotes her entire life to her family) has given way to the ideal of a “self-investing woman” (a professional with a strong sense of personal autonomy). In the mid-1970s, women wrote letters to their favorite magazines “consistently portraying their role as the gentle and wise mother who rears not only her children, but her husband, too” (162). The magazines endorsed these values wholeheartedly. The self-sacrificing, resourceful wife was coupled with a husband who was really a “big child” in need of constant attention and ego-boosting (164). In 1994, women's magazines were projecting an entirely different set of gender identities. According to Marody and Poleszczuk: “Since 1989, the image of woman most idealized – and indeed glamorized – has been that of the successful professional, whose happiness is derived...from success in the ‘outside’ world” (174).

It is perhaps debatable whether this change in the values promoted by women's glossies really corresponds to a vast transformation in gender identities. After all, these magazines are in the business of selling dreams, not reporting on social change. But even assuming that the dreams reflect some sort of mental change, it is not entirely clear that such a turn to individualism and consumerism is necessarily conducive to the rise of feminism. The “self-investing woman” is a feminist only if we define feminism as a refusal to be the victim. Nonetheless, if we follow the liberal account which links women's liberation with individualism, then Polish culture should, indeed, be ready for feminism. In fact, feminist views are gaining ground mostly among young educated (usually urban) women, who barely remember state socialism, and who tend to perceive themselves in opposition to the traditional image of the “brave victim.” The danger is that a social movement which depends on an identity model accessible only to a privileged

minority might remain marginal and elitist, but then the same problem was faced, and eventually confronted, by second wave feminists in the West.

What makes Polish feminism exciting – and paradoxical from the point of view of the movement's history as it is written in the West – is its peculiar mixture of second wave politics and third wave themes and tactics. Our goals concern basic reproductive rights, domestic violence, equal pay for equal work; our street performances show the drudgery behind the domestic ideal. But this content – reminiscent of second wave manifestos, the street actions of WITCH, or essays such as Pat Mainardi's "The Politics of Housework" (1970) – is dressed in a campy form very much in tune with the third wave of feminism. Either we are "lost between the waves," or what we are building calls for a description that goes beyond the wave metaphor.

One important theme that marks the difference between second and third wave feminisms in the US is the shift from identity politics to the questioning of stable identity and subjectivity. The history of lesbian feminism – with its initially tense relations with mainstream feminism (both liberal and radical), its turn towards separatism, and its eventual move beyond identity politics into the realm of queer politics – is a case in point. Interestingly enough, Polish feminism did not go through a homophobic stage: it joined a rainbow coalition without ever considering identity politics. The first public appearance of a rainbow flag in Poland occurred at a feminist demonstration in Warsaw on 8 March 2000.

It is also striking that many Polish feminists seem to be leading several lives at once: as serious academics, as columnists in women's magazines, as grrrl-style street-performers, and as serious political organizers. Juggling identities, we are, in a sense, lost between the waves. On the one hand, much of our work is typically second wave. It focuses on building women's studies programs in reluctant academic institutions, on consciousness-raising and rediscovering women's history (*e.g.* nineteenth-century feminism and the role of women in Solidarity), and initiatives such as bringing out a Polish edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. On the other hand, our activism includes such third wave accents as a feminist hip-hop group, internet debates, and a strong presence of queer theory and camp aesthetics.

Drag queens, for instance, have been an important presence at many feminist events. One of Warsaw's most impressive drag performances (witnessed at a women's festival in the spring of 2002) involves heavy make-up, a bishop's robe and a karaoke performance of Brenda Lee's sappy, romantic song "I'm sorry" (1960). The context – perfectly clear to everyone at the time – was the scandal concerning Juliusz Paetz, the archbishop of Poznan, whose long history of sexual harassment of clerics had just been revealed by the press. Now, consider that this mock apology was performed by a cross-dressing gay man for an audience of young feminist women in a country whose laws and customs concerning sexual mores and reproduction are, to put it mildly, heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. No wonder the audience was enthusiastic. If we were to apply American chronology to this particular moment, we would probably have to call it a third wave form for a second wave content in a backlash context. But then, such moments are precisely what calls for a new analytical framework, one tuned into local specificity and political context as well as the dynamics of cultural borrowing.

The Historical Paradox: Backlash Before Feminism

If Polish feminism is eclectic, it is also hyper-aware of its eclecticism, increasingly self-reflexive and self-ironic, though perhaps less self-indulgent than the Western third wave. Public discourse on women's rights in Poland is, on the other hand, an odd mixture of backlash rhetoric, postfeminist rambling, and good old misogyny – without any self-reflection whatsoever. Admittedly, from time to time the media do make some room for feminism. We get a page or two in a women's magazine, a few minutes on a talk show, and occasionally – especially when 8 March demonstrations provide colorful images of angry feminists – thirty or so seconds on the evening news. In general, however, the Polish public is getting a clear, if contradictory message: feminism never existed; feminism is dead; feminism is a dirty joke; feminism is a threat to family values and the national tradition. At the center of all this presides a version of Polish history which denies the very possibility of a women's movement. This tale is so familiar, so rarely questioned, that it has fossilized into myth. Here are its major elements: (1) Poland never had first wave feminism – we were too busy fighting for national independence to worry about such trivia as women's rights; (2) Poland never had second wave feminism – public debate was stifled by a totalitarian system, and a decent bra was much too cherished to be burnt; and, (3) Polish women are immune to feminism today; it is much too close to Marxism, and we all know what that means. Besides, this is a land of strong, independent women – postfeminists of sorts – who know their worth and shrug at the very idea of “discrimination.” It is rather our men – the poor childlike, irresponsible dears, the big kids – who need to be liberated and empowered after the castrating years of totalitarian rule.

Announcements of Poland's immunity to any talk of women's rights can be found in publications ranging from the gutter press to intellectual journals. In fact, the *Pelnym Glosem* debate in 1996, summarized above, shows that the myth had, at least in part, been accepted by feminists themselves. At the time, we had little sense of our own history as the view of feminism as a Western import was part of what one called “common sense.” It was not until the publication of *Damy, rycerze, feministki* [Ladies, Knights and Feminists], Slawomira Walczewska's brilliant reconstruction of the discourse on women's emancipation in nineteenth-century Poland, that many of us realized there was a feminist heritage we could and should be turning to for inspiration and a sense of continuity. Meanwhile, the media continued insisting that, as far as Poland was concerned, feminism was dead before it could even be born.

American feminists have long been aware of a peculiar correlation between the intensity of negative press coverage and the actual strength, rather than weakness, of the women's movement. Erica Jong noted that by 1998 *Time* had announced the death of feminism at least 119 times since 1969. This figure is cited with obvious satisfaction by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (93), whose *Manifesta* aims to convince the American public that feminism is anything but dead. According to these and other third wave authors, a whole new generation of women's rights activists came on the scene between the 19 November 1990 *Newsweek* story “The Failure of Feminism” (Ebeling) and its 29 June 1998 *Time* version (Bellafante), which asked “Is Feminism Dead?” (and which was famous for its use of an Ally McBeal image as proof of feminism's demise). In a chapter that extends Susan Faludi's analysis of backlash into the nineties, Baumgardner and Richards describe a whole set of strategies used by mainstream media

to denigrate and misrepresent women's issues (87-125). Their point is that this is happening in a culture which has been profoundly affected by the women's movement – a fact arrogantly ignored or trivialized in backlash rhetoric.

One might expect that in Poland Faludi's *Backlash* or Baumgardner and Richards' *Manifesta* would read like tales from far away, but this is not entirely the case. Polish media employ most of the strategies described in these books, but the expected logic of anti-feminism is complicated by two factors: (1) the relatively young age of both our democracy and our women's movement, which places us in the peculiar position of dealing with backlash before having experienced any real feminist progress; and, (2) a political context in which women's rights are held hostage to national pride and the process of EU accession, owing to the real or – as I will argue – perceived power of the Catholic Church. The Polish version of backlash rhetoric relies on a blatant contradiction. Our culture is said to be unique for two mutually exclusive reasons: women's rights are a luxury we cannot afford, and we have no need for women's rights, because we live in a matriarchy. The two statements clearly cannot both be true, and yet many people – including politicians, journalists, and intellectuals – appear to entertain them simultaneously. It is an ideology which both obscures and justifies the fact of inequality, while asserting a vague sense of national pride in the face of an equally vague external threat.

The idea that women's rights are a luxury need not be explained. It is a worldwide historical pattern that women are told to wait: for the passing of a crisis or a war, for the fulfillment of other, more urgent needs. The idea of matriarchy seems a bit more culture-specific, though in some ways it is reminiscent of stereotypes applied to African-American women on the one hand, and of nineteenth-century ideology of domesticity on the other hand. The central values here are endurance, spiritual strength and nurturing love as sources of a uniquely feminine sort of power and influence. To grasp the appeal of this idea in my country, recall that Virgin Mary, repeatedly named "queen of Poland," holds a central place in our religious tradition and collective imagination. Next, consider the heritage of Polish chivalry: the daily door-opening, coat-handing, hand-kissing rituals performed with flair and overdone respect for "the ladies." Add to this the romantic myth of the "Polish Mother" – the patriotic mother of sons, who lovingly sends off her boys to die for the homeland. This silent martyr will take care of everyone, complain to no one, and weep only when alone. She is, of course, the precursor of the "brave victim" described by Marody and Poleszczuk, the resourceful and selfless female of the communist period. Where women are concerned, suffering is readily equated with strength, sacrifice is seen as a kind of victory. National rhetoric overlaps with myths about gender in a circular manner, creating an apparently seamless identity of "worthiness," "strength" and "endurance" for women who conform to traditional norms. Let us now see how this ideology was affected by the transition to democracy.

In the mid-1980s, when Eastern Europe began opening up to the West, anti-feminism became one of the most eagerly imported goods. The Polish ideology of feminine power earned through sacrifice began competing and mixing with all the standard backlash myths described by Faludi. We learned that owing to feminism women had lost their natural warmth; that a woman over thirty is more likely to be murdered than married; and, that today it is men who are really oppressed. This is not to say that Poland always remained on the receiving end of cultural transmission. On the

contrary, some of our contributions to the backlash are really quite impressive (though perhaps incomprehensible to Westerners). For instance, the enormously popular science-fiction comedy *Seksmisja* [Sexmission] (1983) offers a vision of feminism as a bleak totalitarian system. This state – with an entirely female population, males having become extinct – finally topples thanks to two hapless men, who get stuck in the women’s world by accident. The film helped to ingrain the association between communism and feminism in the collective imagination well before the watershed of 1989, and was also quite a success in the USSR and East Germany. A more recent contribution to backlash culture is another comedy, *Tato* [Daddy] (1995), a vicious variation on *Fatal Attraction*. Interestingly, the evil woman yielding sharp objects and later drowned in a bathtub is not a lover but the mentally disturbed wife of the protagonist. She gangs up with other women to deprive her helpless husband of his beloved daughter. One way to read the film’s violent “happy ending” is as belated revenge for the mythical power of the Polish Mother, a ritualistic disciplining of unruly females. The message of the movie is clear: enough is enough, ladies, now WE take over. Audiences were beside themselves with pleasure, but, as I argue elsewhere, the women’s laughter tended to be somewhat more forced than the men’s (Graff, *Swiat bez kobiet* 268-72).

Most backlash products marketed in Poland are, however, nothing more than translations and borrowings: self-help books and women’s magazines telling their readers how to win back the men feminism so recklessly scared away; pop versions of evolutionary psychology, which prove beyond doubt that men and women are an entirely different species, or indeed, that they come from different planets; familiar images of man-hating hairy-legged feminists. The Catholic Church and ultra-conservative parties serve as our version of the New Right, and in fact maintain close links with their American counterparts. Polish media delight in “statistics” showing that ordinary people have had it with women’s lib. One magazine announced that an average Pole would prefer living next door to a former communist agent than to a feminist (Skrok and Dolecki 33).

This brings us to an interesting question: is some knowledge of feminism necessary to take in backlash messages? I would claim that it is useful to have at least heard of *Murphy Brown* before watching *Ally McBeal*; to have at least entertained the idea that a healthy heterosexual relationship might be based on equality and common goals, before one joins the fans of John Gray’s *Mars and Venus* series. It does make a tremendous difference whether or not, before falling in love with Bridget Jones, you were exposed to other takes on gender politics; whether you have heard the word “gender” before reading evo-psycho-babble on “natural differences” between men and women. However great its damage, backlash is a side-effect of a profound cultural transformation that did, in fact, sweep across Western democracies. Postfeminism in America is just what its name says it is: a reaction and a postscript to feminism. But in a conservative culture that has not experienced modern feminism at all, the prefix “post” has a very different sort of resonance. Broadly speaking, the cultural impact of modern feminism consisted in shaking the belief that gender arrangements as we know them (or as Western societies knew them in the sixties) would never change, because they were “natural.” Feminism popularized the view that gender roles could be renegotiated. Now, the Polish public is being told that patriarchal gender roles are firmly grounded in Mother Nature’s plan, but without having been exposed to the opposite claim. In other words, while backlash

rhetoric is an angry reaction to women's progress in the West, it is mostly just plain old misogyny in Poland.

Part of the problem is that these are not radical times – especially in post-communist countries, whose political culture is marked by aversion to anything that vaguely smacks of Marxism. Second wave feminism owes much of its success to the explosive atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Americans and Western Europeans displayed an unprecedented readiness to hear radical messages, the feminist message among them. Thousands of women were ready to “click” to the view “the personal is political,” that sisterhood can be powerful. And personal lives did gain political meaning; the women's movement did become, for a year or two, an enormously powerful “sisterhood.” The 1980s brought a readiness to “hear” a new set of messages: sisterhood was a thing of the past; the personal was no longer political. Problems that ail individuals – especially female individuals – had turned out to be, yet again, psychological problems. If the 1960s radicals spoke of “oppression” and “resistance,” the key concepts of backlash culture are “addiction” and “recovery.”

Elayne Rapping has argued convincingly that the discourse of therapy culture, as employed in talk shows, various 12-step groups, and self-help books, is addressed primarily to women. The recovery movement employs many of the feminist strategies, depriving them of their political edge. Moreover, recovery culture has its own special message on gender, one that runs directly against feminist insight. It can be summarized in one word: difference. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus, says Gray, the American self-help guru, whose books are immensely popular in the US and have remained at the top of the best-seller list for several years in Poland. Unlike feminism, self-help culture treats gender difference as a given: it cannot be changed, but you can learn to live with it. The message is clear and optimistic: what we thought was injustice is really a set of “natural” differences between the sexes. The trouble is, of course, that Polish culture had never seriously entertained the idea of gender injustice.

In the 1960s, Betty Friedan and her readers traveled the road from “self-help” to the “women's movement” (*The Feminine Mystique* was, after all, a self-help book for frustrated homemakers). Twenty years later, American culture retraced the same path – backwards. What happens when backlash migrates to a culture that had watched feminism vaguely, from behind the iron curtain, viewing it as an exotic symptom of rich Westerners' boredom and dissipation? What happens when women who experience inequality daily, as a fact of life, but have never heard of “sexism” or “discrimination,” read self-help books that tell them feminists are to blame for all their problems? What is the meaning of “difference” in a culture which does not yet have a word for gender? One obvious answer is that pre-feminist stereotypes are simply reinforced. In Poland no mass movement has ever shaken the belief that men are (by nature) strong and competitive while women are (by nature) emotional and submissive. We have always “known” that boys are better at math and play with cars and guns, while girls excel at gossip and play with dolls. Now we can find the scientific version of these self-evident truths in Anne Moir and David Jessel's *Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men and Women*, a rather shaky summary of all the poorly documented claims sociobiology has ever made about gender difference. In the West, the book was dismissed long ago as poor journalism and a rather unimaginative attack on feminism; in Poland, it proudly parades as “science,” and is cited respectfully by everyone from high-school kids to politicians.

I would suggest that the mainstream of Polish culture was made feminism-proof owing to a historical coincidence: in terms of Western chronology, we skipped the radical 1960s and got a double dose of the conservative 1980s. While Eastern Europe was living through the final decades of totalitarian rule, Western societies covered a lot of ground in terms of women's rights and gender roles. Rapping's analysis of the recovery culture in *The Culture of Recovery*, as a turn from "the political" back to "the personal," takes on an interesting resonance in the Eastern European context. Under totalitarian rule people learned to distrust anything that came with the label "politics," because self-defense against the intrusive totalitarian state took the form of building secure and deeply conservative family structures – this is what Sidorenko calls "retraditionalisation." In this context, the very idea of feminism, with its claim that the personal is political, seemed like a form of madness. The message of backlash, on the other hand, though coming from a completely different cultural context, seemed to make an awful lot of sense. It offered a recipe for happiness which consisted of rejecting the political in favor of the personal – and this was precisely what Eastern Europeans had been doing for decades.

The idea of selective and delayed cultural borrowing may shed some light on Polish debates about so-called political correctness. Unless you count communist censorship, which was not particularly gender-sensitive, Eastern Europe was never subject to educational or social policies aimed to eliminate offensive language from public discourse on women and/or minorities. Until very recently, there had been no widely publicized lawsuits concerning sexual harassment. Sexism and racism (in particular anti-Semitism) are alive and kicking in a significant portion of Polish society and media. Still, every now and then a journalist will produce a diatribe about the demons of political correctness waiting to deprive us of our hard-won freedom of speech. In short, Polish culture is reacting against something that never happened to it – the presence of progressive attitudes in mainstream public discourse.

The misunderstandings that arise from this meeting of cultures are sometimes bizarre. Backlash can, as it turns out, be the cause of feminist awakenings. A student of mine once told me that she first heard the word "sexism" while watching an episode of *Benny Hill*, which featured Benny in drag (wig, funny glasses, dress) hosting a TV show on "sexist oppression" in the media. My student was convinced that the word "sexism" was a neologism – she had never heard it before. She also thought Benny's disguise represented a prudish right-wing lady outraged by nudity. She was watching a product of backlash culture (Benny was, in fact, mocking anti-porn feminism) but she was deprived of even the minimal cultural competence that would allow her to decode the message. Since she had never been exposed to feminist ideas to begin with, the joke was completely lost on her. Now she was interested to learn. A year later the same young woman took part in the 8 March 2000 demonstration protesting against the discrimination of women on the job market. Dressed up (wig, funny glasses, dress), she acted in a street performance on the Polish government's mistreatment of nurses. An interesting, but perhaps unanswerable, question that can be asked at this point is whether this young woman – a convert to feminism in part thanks to a product of backlash – is a member of the second or the third wave?

The Political Paradox – Feminism as Hostage to EU Negotiations

In the midst of the 1989 transition to democracy it became clear to some people in Poland that, with the Catholic Church gaining ground, reproductive freedom would soon become contested ground. At the time, however, few were aware of the determination and power of the anti-choice groups. The cold shower came in March 1990, when Solidarity – the labor movement that had won freedom for Poland – endorsed a total ban on abortion. This decree triggered dissension within the seemingly monolithic anticommunist camp: the Women's Section of Solidarity announced its commitment to women's reproductive freedom. Several months later it opposed the Senate's draft bill proposing severe restrictions and penalties for both doctors and women. In the spring of 1991, after a series of warnings, the Women's Section was dissolved. This event caused anger and bitter disappointment – it led to the realization that the new democratic Poland was becoming extremely conservative, and that in this context democracy was no guarantee of women's rights. In consequence, a feminist movement began to develop with an agenda that cut across political and historical divisions. In April 1991, the Parliamentary Women's Circle was formed, with members from several parties, including that of the former communists and the Solidarity movement (a rather shocking alliance at the time). The Circle was instrumental in blocking the anti-abortion bill in May 1991. The threat to reproductive freedom also led many citizens (including members of the newly established Polish Feminist Organization) into the streets. The demonstrators chanted slogans such as: "My uterus belongs to me", "Fewer Churches – More Nurseries" and "God save us from the Church."

Ten years have passed. Abortion is banned (except for cases of rape, incest, grave danger to the woman's health, and deformation of the fetus), and reproductive freedom remains the basic demand of the Polish women's movement. It is an issue we speak, write, dream and shout about – an issue that, to a large extent, defines our identity and our image in the public realm. It may appear that ours is a lost cause, because in a Catholic country abortion is bound to be illegal. But matters are not quite so simple. The paradox is that close to half of the Polish population supports legal abortion. Until recently polls showed about 60% support for the right of a woman to decide if she wants to terminate her pregnancy in the case of a difficult financial situation; a recent study shows that 44% of Poles would grant her this right, while 38% see a difficult "personal" situation as sufficient (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, "Opinion"). Nonetheless, the demand that abortion be made legal is perceived as aberrant – a view that should not even be voiced. Anyone who raises the forbidden topic is immediately admonished and hushed: not now, not here, let's not begin an ideological war. Politicians on both right and left (though for different reasons) help to keep the taboo firmly in place. Another paradox is that feminists are great enthusiasts of the European Union and its policy on gender equality, but one of the standard accusations against us is that we are a danger to Poland's plans of joining the EU. "Will the fight for legal abortion hurt Poland's accession process?" asked a headline in Poland's largest daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, on 5 July 2002 ("Kłopot"). The article was a response to a recent report on sexual and reproductive health rights and the accompanying resolution issued by the EU Parliament. Polish politicians and commentators cited in the text had no doubt that any talk about women's reproductive rights could hurt the accession process. This reaction is fairly typical: again and again, the EU Parliament is tactfully reminded by Polish pundits

that it should not meddle in our “internal” affairs. And Polish feminists are not so tactfully reminded to keep quiet, or else. The message is painfully clear. I had it screamed out at me and my friend, Kazimiera Szczuka, by Poland’s most celebrated female journalist, Monika Olejnik. It happened a minute before we went on air, live, on 8 March 2002, following a pro-choice street demonstration we had helped to organize. Leading us into the studio, the media star suddenly stopped and yelled: “Are you, mad? Do you want us to lose our chance of getting into Europe? There couldn’t be a worse moment than now to bring up abortion. I have a kid; I want him to be a European. You are completely irresponsible.” I have no doubt that Olejnik is pro-choice. Like most members of Poland’s political and intellectual elite, she knows that the ban on abortion is both inhuman and ineffective. And yet, she would no doubt say, we are stuck with it. Like so many others, she has given in to a skillfully orchestrated campaign of the Catholic Church – one I have difficulty calling anything but blackmail.

A few days before our TV appearance, a women’s center in Warsaw had held a press conference concerning the so called “100 Women’s Letter,” a protest addressed to the EU Parliament, calling for open democratic debate on reproductive rights in Poland, signed by some of Poland’s most accomplished women (including Nobel Prize winner Wislawa Szymborska and film director Agnieszka Holland). The document read as follows:

A peculiar agreement has been reached by the Catholic Church and the government concerning Poland’s admission into the European Union. Namely, the Church will support integration with Europe in return for the government’s closing the debate on the revision of the anti-abortion law....[W]omen’s rights are bought and sold behind the scenes of Poland’s integration with the European Union. This is accompanied by a characteristically biased way of speaking. Protection of unborn life is treated as an objective dogma, while abortion on social grounds is spoken of in quotation marks and treated as an ‘ideological’ claim made by feminists, who attempt to legalize murder. There has recently been an escalation of hate speech. Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka, the new government’s plenipotentiary for gender equality, who is considering the need to introduce reliable sexual education at schools and to relax the anti-abortion law, has been called by a high Church official, bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, ‘feminist cement which will not alter even if treated with acid.’ (“Open Letter”)

Owing to the fame of those who signed it, the media could hardly ignore the protest – but the responses were, for the most part, contemptuous. Right-wing commentators called the letter a disgrace, a call to murder, while voices from center to left suggested it was a grave strategic mistake, and clear proof that feminists have no grasp of politics and no sense of humor (the bishop’s joke about cement had not amused us).

Feminists are, of course, well aware that in Poland it will never be the “right time” to bring up women’s reproductive rights. For, as the bishops know all too well, and the politicians fail to admit, once we have joined the EU it may very well be too late. By then we will be working hard to bring about the Pope’s utopia of “christianizing” Europe. I consider the “100 Women’s Letter” to be an important achievement of the women’s movement in Poland, perhaps even a breakthrough. It is the first public statement made by famous women on a women’s issue – a sign that they care, that there is some sort of

sisterhood beyond the still narrow feminist circles. Politically, the letter called attention to what was obvious to all, but until then unmentionable. Everyone knew that there was a silent pact concerning EU accession and abortion, a “compromise” between the post-communists and the Church at the expense of women. Everyone knew – but no one said it. Attempts to deny the claims of the letter were very feeble indeed. We had obviously poked the lion in the rib.

Almost a decade ago Malgorzata Fuszara argued that “[t]he parliamentary debates on abortion in August and September 1990 and May 16, 1991, with their rhetorical maneuvers, are among the best examples of the recovery of democratic process, parliamentary life and the public sphere” (241). The debates, she argued, served as an arena in which politicians articulated conflicting values, tried out various types of argumentation, and built alliances. Women’s right to control their fertility was hardly mentioned in the process – the new political divisions concerned the fate of “the unborn.” As a poster designed by Barbara Kruger puts it, women’s bodies became a battlefield, one in which politicians carved out their identities for the new democracy.

Poland is not an exception here. As Peggy Watson has argued, the new democratic governments of Eastern Europe all began using their power by limiting women’s reproductive rights. During and after 1989 power was very clearly gendered male. Hence, it is hard to agree with Fuszara that what was recovered in the process of abortion debates was indeed a democratic landscape of public debate. I would rather claim that during these debates firm limits to democracy were set. At stake was the extent of power to be held in Poland by a single, deeply undemocratic institution, the Catholic Church, and, of course, the extent of women’s powerlessness. The ban on abortion became the symbol of this struggle. After a draft bill stipulating two years in prison for doctors and women who were involved with abortion was rejected, in 1993 the Polish Parliament settled for what is often referred to as a “compromise bill” – in fact, one of Europe’s two strictest anti-abortion laws. It was introduced by a democratically elected government, which – under the pressure of the Church – chose to ignore the will of the majority of voters, as well as 1.2 million signatures demanding a national referendum on abortion. “Thou shalt not vote over murder of the unborn,” said the Church. And we did not. “Thou shalt keep quiet,” it added. And most of us did. Thus began the rule of the lion.

The fact that women have no right to control their fertility has come to bear tremendous symbolic weight in Poland. Arguably, the ban on abortion and the existence of thriving abortion underground create a context which turns women into second-class citizens, potential outlaws, because in order to make conscious and moral choices about one’s reproductive life, one has to at least contemplate breaking the law. Moreover, ever since the failed movement for the referendum, the ban has represented the power of the Church to upset the democratic process itself, and the willingness of the political elite to give in to the pressure of clergy.

Needless to say, Catholic fundamentalists view restrictions on reproductive freedom as a cornerstone of what the Pope calls “the culture of life” as opposed to the “culture of death” supposedly thriving in Western liberal democracies. Poland is going to “christianize” Europe – whether or not Poles like the idea is clearly irrelevant. In a document entitled “Polish Bishops in the face of European integration” (21 March 2002) the Polish Episcopate explains how it views the division of labor concerning Polish presence in Europe. The government is to focus on economic and political issues,

negotiating the best possible conditions for accession. The Church, on the other hand, is to take care of spiritual and ethical aspects of integration. “The essential calling of the Church is to bring salvation. Its wish is that EU enlargement should go hand in hand with a deepening awareness that what lies at the center of all our efforts towards integration is Man, and his inalienable dignity, bestowed upon him in the act of creation” (qtd. in Dunin 32). In other words, those we elect democratically take care of cash; meanwhile, the Church will deal with matters of the soul, morality, conscience, and, of course, reproductive freedom.

It is clear to all those familiar with the rhetoric of the Catholic Church that references to “Man” and “his dignity” are code for banning abortion and euthanasia, relegating sexual education from schools, discrimination of gays and lesbians, and making divorce as difficult as possible. Let us consider a few more of the rhetorical appropriations: “human life,” as church officials use the phrase, stands for the fetal life; “human rights” are the rights of the fetus; “special dignity of woman” is synonymous with lack of control over one’s fertility; “murder of Polish citizens” is, of course, abortion. This peculiar language, with its mixture of mythical, melodramatic and nationalistic semantics, has managed to paralyze public debate in Poland. Kinga Dunin, one of Poland’s most vocal feminists, has argued that the silent agreement that values had better be left to the Church is, in fact, the result of the liberal camp’s capitulation in the face of incompatibility of discourses. We are facing a communicative deadlock which the Church deliberately prepared, and then capitalized on. According to Dunin, since the early 1990s Poland’s debates on matters concerning morality, family, and women’s rights have been marked by an ideological schizophrenia because there can be no real dialogue between liberal discourse on freedom and human rights, and because of a religious discourse the bottom line of which is the “will of God,” “absolute truth” and “natural law.” In effect, the liberal camp has simply backed out of the debate about values, leaving the scene to Catholic fundamentalists (Dunin 32-34).

Religious discourse has, of course, its rightful place in a democracy – but only in the context of clear separation between Church and the state. In Poland, thanks to a campaign that began immediately after the fall of communism, religion has filtered deeply into state structure. Crosses hanging in public spaces (including the Parliament), the presence of priests at most public ceremonies, religion taught in public schools, and “Christian values” inscribed into the constitution and media law are only the most obvious external signs of Church influence. Western observers tend to conclude that Poles must simply love the Church, share its views, and welcome religion in the public sphere. This has also been the silent assumption in Polish politics, including the accession negotiations with the EU. “Poland is a Catholic country” – the claim seems to be a truism. And yet it is interesting how much resistance there is to any efforts at verifying its truth. Polls show that a large part of the Polish population, while claiming to be Roman Catholic (95%), in fact fails to embrace the basic dogma of the Church. Only 14% describe their faith as “deep;” 40% describe themselves as “believers, but in their own way”; 24% do not believe in Christ’s Resurrection; 33% doubt the existence of hell; and, 34% believe in reincarnation (*Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej*, “Current Problems”). As few as 4% of Polish Catholics say they are guided by Church teaching when faced with moral dilemmas, and few young people agree with the Church on the question of contraception. As for politics, polls show that over half of the population

thinks that euthanasia should be legal, 91% support sex education in schools (Izdebski 60), and 69% would like to have the contraceptive pill subsidized by the state (*Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej*, "Prices"). As for sexual mores and family values, no one is surprised or shocked in Poland to see a pregnant bride, dressed in virginal white for her wedding. Divorce rates are only marginally lower than in Western democracies, and more, rather than fewer, abortions are actually performed.

These facts and figures are occasionally cited with amusement, but I have never seen them seriously analyzed in the context of the influence exerted by the Church in Polish politics. It is as if by going to church on Sunday people voted against choice or for religion in public schools. In fact, though Poles declare that they are Catholics, their attachment to the Church is shallow and mostly pragmatic in nature: they partake in the rituals, but ignore much of the dogma and the conservative politics. The role of religion in their lives is to add an aura of sanctity and solemnity to family gatherings. They may not share the Pope's views on abortion, contraception, or even heaven and hell, but they require priests at weddings and funerals, and so they prefer to keep quiet. The cost of our attachment to white wedding dresses and holy water is staggering: enforced silence, widespread hypocrisy, and the impressive success of the Church in dictating its conditions in the course of Poland's EU accession. Among recent examples are the announcements of Polish delegates to Brussels that Poland would like to see references to "God" and "Christian" in the EU "Constitution." The resistance of French delegates is easy to imagine; what is perhaps harder to picture is the state of mind of Polish post-communists defending the need for God in Europe's key document. Poland's politicians may not like what they have to say; but they will say it in order to buy the support of the Church in the accession referendum. After all, the only real price is being paid by Polish women. Underground abortion today costs about 2000 PLN (about 500 US dollars), slightly more than an average monthly salary in Poland. The estimated number of abortions performed varies from source to source, ranging from 80,000 to 200,000 annually (Nowicka, *Anti-Abortion Law*).

According to Wanda Nowicka, one of Poland's most dedicated pro-choice activists, the fruitless effort of collecting signatures on petitions for an abortion referendum in the early 1990s can, in fact, be considered a huge civil movement for democracy. Vast numbers of men and women were mobilized in defense of women's reproductive freedom against the pressure of the Church: "people understood that the struggle for legal abortion was a struggle for real democracy" (Nowicka "Ban on Abortion"). I doubt that such a movement would be possible today because many former pro-choice activists have slipped back into conformity and passiveness. Unwanted pregnancies are things that happen to "someone else," and if one happens to us or one of our friends, abortion is "arranged" in much the same way one "arranged" access to scarce goods under communism. The lack of reproductive choice is no longer considered to be a political issue as the pressure of the Church has forced unwanted pregnancy back into the realm of deeply private and shameful experiences. Many feminists, including myself, believe that no goal is more urgent for us than that of bringing the issue of reproductive freedom back into the public sphere – hence the "100 Women's Letter," and the place of choice as the central theme of the 2002 Women's Day demonstration in Warsaw.

With left-wing politicians campaigning for "God" in the EU, there seems to be little ground, politically, from which to challenge the position of the Church as an active party

in the political game. Its tactics are those of blackmail – the stake is Poland’s EU accession, and silence on women’s right to choose is the price to pay. Now, I would like to suggest that the situation is not only a moral disgrace, and a scandal from the standpoint of the democratic process, but that it is also completely unnecessary. I consider the pact with the Church to be an act of political blindness (as well as cynicism) on the part of the government, a pitiful strategic miscalculation caused by a distorted view of the role of religion in Poland. To put it bluntly, I believe that the Church’s threat that it might block EU accession is a bluff. I have three arguments to support this claim, each of them sufficient in itself: (1) the Church has very little real influence on voters in Poland. If priests could turn elections, the post-communists would not be in power today; (2) the Episcopate has very limited influence on parish priests. If they choose to oppose EU accession, they will. In fact, the priests who are still able to influence voters tend to be associated with the ultra-conservative radio station “Radio Maryja” [“Radio Virgin Mary”], and they are already notorious for not listening to their bishops. Radio Maryja and its friends will tell people to vote against EU accession regardless of orders from above; and, (3) the Vatican has already made up its mind. Pope John Paul II wants Poland in the EU; we are to bring God to the godless liberals, to “christianize” the West. The Polish Church could not reverse this trend even if it wished to do so.

In short, the deadlock we are in is unnecessary, and the fact that we are in it shows the extent of the Church’s influence in Poland (but it is important not to confuse political influence with moral authority). In managing to push reproductive freedom outside the realm of public debate, the Church has demonstrated true political genius. It has managed to terrify those in power (the left) with a weapon it cannot use (influence on voters) to get what it wants (silence on abortion).

Conclusions

I have argued that Polish feminism can be viewed through a series of paradoxes. It is a movement that began its growth by denying its own existence; it uses third wave tactics to achieve goals typically associated with the second wave of feminism; it exists in a cultural climate of backlash – but this backlash was not preceded by any feminist gains. Finally, as I have tried to show, the political position of anyone involved in the struggle for women’s rights in Poland is a paradoxical one. Feminists have invested great hopes in Poland’s EU accession, and yet we are asked to give up these hopes, to remain silent on the question of reproductive choice, so that Poland may join the EU unhampered by the Catholic Church. Clearly, the task of the women’s movement is to break this silence, and to challenge the values behind it in a lasting way. This will involve building a more effective media strategy, and will probably lead to a radicalization of the movement, *i.e.* a willingness to enter into open conflict with the Church, and a readiness to be chastised for this indiscretion by all sides of the public scene. In order to be heard, we need to take ourselves more seriously as autonomous actors on the political scene – a pressure group with a legitimate set of demands and ideals. We are beginning to realize that our efforts concern something broader than reproductive freedom. In the long run, the struggle over women’s rights is a struggle over the shape of public debate in our country and, quite frankly, the shape of democracy itself.

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