Memory of Political Transformation as Memory of Slow Change

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Despite the many changes that memory studies have undergone in recent years, we still usually link memory, especially national memory, with major political events, not gradual, slow changes. However, memory oriented towards events is inherently selective and susceptible to a specific narrative mode in which little or no attention is paid to what lies between those great events. The aim of this article will be to analyse the memory of the political transformation in Poland, treated not as a political breakthrough that took place within a few months between 1989 and 1990, but as a slow, ongoing change whose effects are still felt today. Adopting this perspective will allow to capture at least two separate memory perspectives on the political transformation: the first one, which treats the political transformation as a wasted opportunity or – at best – a process which is still unfinished, and the second one, which perceives the transformation as a task that is still open in the positive sense of the word, that is, as a task not only for the broadly defined present, but also – for the future.

Keywords: slow memory, political transformation, Poland, future, processual change

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1. Introduction

Despite the many changes that the field of memory studies has undergone in recent years, we still usually associate memory, especially collective and national memory, with major political events, not gradual, slow changes. There was no shortage of such

events in the twentieth century, the most important ones would be the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the war in the former Yugoslavia, and – for Central and Eastern Europe – the period of communist regimes. However, memory oriented towards events is inherently selective and susceptible to a specific narrative mode in which little or no attention is paid to what lies between those great events and – even more interestingly – what happens after them. The result of such a point-based perception of the past was, among others, the belief, shared by numerous historians and memory scholars, that we are now living in a new regime of presentism or in the fluid present (Gumbrecht, 2014; Hartog, 2016, 2022; Huyssen, 2000), as the future no longer holds either grand opportunities or great, collective threats.

The end of the Cold War and the political upheaval that tore through Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) during the late 1980s and early 1990s not only brought fundamental socio-economic changes but also toppled the then firmly established ways of thinking about history. As Francis Fukuyama, among others, pointed out (1992), the end of history entailed the adoption of a de facto uniform value system and of a correspondingly uniform economic model across societies. The theses put forth by Fukuyama, though widely criticized (e.g. Fuller, Satter, Stove, Will, 1989; Huntington, 1993), have had a fundamental and lasting effect on thinking about Europe as a project wherein the diverse history of individual nations should not stand in the way of building a common future. Attempts to bring this project to life can already be seen clearly in the 1980s turn towards memory, conceived as a way of concurrently taking responsibility for the troublesome past (Assmann, 2011) and turning it into a solid foundation for a common present and future.

In light of the above, the way the dynamics of European memory were perceived could be described as movement in roughly the same direction, though occurring at different speeds for particular nations. Without challenging these assumptions outright, this paper highlights the work of memory (and, more broadly, on defining temporality) in Poland, treated as an example of a regional CEE memory (Lewis, Wawrzyniak, 2022), and asks whether the specificity of changes occurring in this part of Europe around and after the political breakthrough of the 1990s truly adheres to this pattern.

The aim of this article is therefore to analyze the memory of the political transformation in Poland, treated not as a political breakthrough that took place within a few months between 1989 and 1990, but as a slow, ongoing change whose effects are still felt today. Adopting this perspective will reveal at least two separate memory perspectives on the political transformation: the first one, which treats the political transformation as a wasted opportunity or, at best, a still unfinished process (which corresponds, among other things, to the right-wing rhetoric favoring the creation of the Fourth Polish Republic), and the second one, which perceives the transformation as a task that is still open in the positive sense of the word, that is, as a task not only for the broadly defined present, but also for the future.

Treating the political transformation as a slow change will demonstrate the challenges faced by memory focused not on remembering events, but on political,

social, and economic processes. One of these is, undoubtedly, the greater flexibility of memory frameworks and stronger dynamics (and antagonism) of diverse versions of memory regarding specific processes. The second is the more complex relationship which this kind of memory forms with the past, present, and future. Remembering slow changes and processes involves not only recalling past events, but also imagining the future as a horizon of expectation (Koselleck, 2002, 2004), and therefore links the work of memory with the work of collective future thought (Szpunar, Szpunar, 2016).

The working hypothesis of this article assumes that the political breakthrough was neither the beginning of the end of history, as Fukuyama predicted, nor – as many intellectuals, politicians, and ordinary citizens in Poland expected (Kwiatkowski, 2008) – did it initiate a completely new opening for countries that were slowly emerging from political and economic dependence from the USSR. Instead, it ushered in a fluid, gradual change that was based both on negotiating visions of achievable futures and on negotiating memories of the past.

2. Slow Future...

To explain the dynamics of this change, it is worth first describing the idea of the chronotope and its specificity in the context of Central and Eastern Europe around the political breakthrough of the 1990s. Many of the previously mentioned concepts regarding temporal changes in the twentieth century (Assmann, 2020; Gumbrecht, 2013, 2014; Hartog, 2016, 2022) clearly draw on the experience of Western Europe, for which there was a certain continuity between the end of World War II, the fall of communism, and the end of the Cold War. Francis Fukuyama's (1992) intuition that the end of communism is also the end of history (understood in Hegelian terms), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's (2014) thesis about the beginning of the era of domination of the broad, extended present (which came after the time of the domination of the past, initiated after World War II by the collapse of future-oriented collective projects, like communism or fascism), as well as François Hartog's observations regarding the development and consolidation of the presentist regime (2016), draw from the same collective experience: the experience of normalization and the sense that war(s) and its (their) legacy had finally come to a close. An orientation towards an 'extended' or 'broad' present was therefore a defining characteristic of a contemporary chronotope (as Gumbrecht would call it) or a point of interest for a current time regime (as Hartog might define it). This feeling was, in fact, accompanied by a rather optimistic belief that the present is plastic and fluid (Bauman, 2000), but at the same time quite safe – it is no longer fraught with great national conflicts or disasters on an unpredictable scale. This kind of present was a direct outcome of a new approach towards the future: the future now imagined was not as exciting, novel, or filled with opportunities as it used to be; instead, it was even a little stagnant, but it had become safe, predictable, and easy to navigate.

However, these beliefs, which became the basis for the functioning of the current chronotope, are characteristic mainly – if not only – of Western Europe. The socio-political reality, as well as the CEE chronotope, was fundamentally different. The end of the Cold War – simplifying things somewhat, for the sake of brevity – marked the end of a certain period for Western Europe, but it was not perceived as an opening of a completely new era, as it was in the case of CEE. Entering the post-communist period, CEE countries faced not the end of history, but its opening: opening to a new future and new memory. At that moment, which at first glance should be unifying for European memory frames, CEE memory began to experience very different needs from those of the rest of Europe. On the one hand, it became necessary to face the traumas of the past, including each nation's own involvement in war crimes (Czapliński, 2016b). On the other, the great return of the past and its memory was not the only challenge facing the collective identity of individual CEE countries: an even greater challenge was navigating the changing and discontinuous present. To take the example of Poland: the social mood in the first years of transformation was extreme: from optimism accompanying the political changes, especially the first free elections in the postwar period and regaining full political independence, through disappointment with the lack of a radical improvement in living conditions (and even their deterioration, related to the sudden increase in unemployment between 1990 and 1993 – Kaliński, 2009), to anger and rage, caused by disappointment with both the imperfect present and the increasingly disappointing prospects for the future (Czapliński, 2016a). These social mood swings resulted to a large extent from the clash of social expectations with the reality of Polish early capitalism, which was based on a rushed transition from a centrally planned economy to a capitalist economy. The rapid privatization of state-owned enterprises led to a significant increase in unemployment and radical social change, including a huge increase in social stratification (Leyk, Wawrzyniak, 2020) and the construction of new class divisions, which in turn contributed to the increase in xenophobia (Buchowski, 2017). This specific temporal-affective mix was not only associated with the clash between excessive social expectations and real opportunities, but also with the need to rework the tangled affects connected to opportunities that were already lost (for example, the post-war reconstruction of Eastern Europe with the aid of Marshall Plan funds). To explain the complexity of this situation, I will refer for a moment to three concepts regarding the relationship between ideas of the future, the functioning of the past future, and the operation of affects, that is to Brian Massumi's category of the past future (2015), Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism (2011), and Sarah Ahmed's theory of happy futures (2010). The category of the past future concerns visions of the future created at a certain point in time, which although never realized, are still remembered as possible and therefore felt as a true alternative to what has occurred. Such visions include, for example, the development of Europe undisturbed by the outbreak of World War II, or – as in the discussed case – political transformation that takes place without an economic crisis. In this regard, the never realized visions of

future past, expressed in different ways (from political manifestos, through wishful thinking, to alternate histories and political essays regarding possible versions of reality), can infiltrate both the memory of the past and the imaginations of currently anticipated future. The concept of the functioning of past future as influencing current social moods is particularly useful for analyzing the memory of the political transformation in Poland, if we combine it with the aforementioned categories of cruel optimism and happy futures. Berlant observes that optimism is the conviction that what we want is available to us and we can get it, and every object of desire is perceived as a system of promises that can become possible for us to realize. Cruel optimism is therefore an attachment to things, ideas, or people that can impede our development or flourishing, irrespective of how we judge them ourselves. Similarly, Ahmed points to the negative aspect of attachment in visions of a happy future. She argues that a vision of future happiness creates a specific reference point for the future, meaning that if any other than a completely happy vision of what is to come is fulfilled, then disappointment is sure to follow. The more detailed this vision of the future is, the more disappointed we will be when we are confronted with what has come about.

It is worth underlining the value of these theories for analysis of the 1989 political breakthrough. In this context, the events of 1989 brought with them something that we could characterize as a promise of happiness. The future was to be a space of fulfillment for the recently dreamed hopes and promises. Bad things – that is poverty and all the limitations of centrally planned economy, as well as the accumulated restrictions of social, political, and economic freedom – were all to disappear. In CEE memory (Czapliński, 2016a, 2016b; Nijakowski, 2008; Kwiatkowski, 2008; Mihelj, 2017; Pradetto, 1992), this was a highly optimistic moment, unfortunately followed by huge disappointment – the hopes of living in a developing, democratic, and at the same time socially coherent state disappear after the confrontation with the harsh reality of unemployment and economic stagnation. This kind of transformation therefore entails some of the 'ugliest' affects (Ngai, 2005) – disenchantment and resentment, which were even stronger than the previous hopes. The expectations regarding an optimistic future clashed with the harsh reality in which some changes were too dynamic, too unexpected, and too fast to be successfully dealt with by the majority of society (like the transformation of the economic model from a centrally planned to a free market one – Kołodko, 1992), while others were too slow, too hard to notice, and not as liberating as expected (while Poland regained full independence in 1990 and aspired to be a part of the European community immediately after that, it took nine more years for it to join NATO and another five to become a member of the European Union).

3. Returning Past and Complex Temporality of the Present

The future, which was far from perfect, was just one of the problems unveiled by the transformation. Political breakthrough provoked a triple temporal confrontation:

first, the confrontation with the imaginations of the future, which were created either before the breakthrough, or right after it, but secondly with the past, and thirdly with the present.

The confrontation with the future and present was, to some extent, expected and desired by society, as the need for change was one of the main forces driving it in the 'Solidarity' era. The confrontation with the past was something quite different: when censorship was lifted, society expected to be able to speak freely about certain events from the past (including the Katyn massacre or the Warsaw Uprising), maybe some groups were aware of the Polish involvement in the Holocaust, but the complexity of Polish history was significantly greater than a large part of society would like to accept, while the newly established official politics of history became very nation-oriented and one-sided. At the same time, in Western Europe the last decade of the twentieth century was a time of the 'memory boom', which was mainly oriented towards researching the memory of the Holocaust and accepting responsibility for the atrocities of World War II.

The timeline of the memory boom in Western Europe was completely different to the memory processes that took place in Poland. Polish politics of history's adapting or reinforcing the position of the victim (mainly of World War II, but also of the communist regime) and hero (by, for example, strengthening the memory of the Warsaw Uprising as a heroic and collective act – Kobielska, 2016) was a clear reaction to a dual memory conflict that occurred after 1990: the conflict between Polish (and broader, Central and Eastern European) and Western European memory frames, and that within Polish memory frames. The first conflict is based on two issues: on the one hand, on the memory of the Holocaust, which in the early 1990s was very reluctantly incorporated into the framework of Polish collective memory (Czapliński, 2016b), and on the other, on the memory of communism, which – in contrast to the hopes of CEE countries – never became a universally recognized memory framework or even node (Clarke, 2014; Pakier, Stråth, *Eds.*, 2010). Therefore, while, as Przemysław Czapliński (2016b) pointed out, becoming aware of the global framework of memory about the Holocaust and recognizing one's at least partial responsibility for the crimes committed during World War II became the price of belonging to the European community, the attempt to transform the memory of communism into something more than just local or regional memory never succeeded. Regardless of the assessment of this memory conflict, it is not very hard to notice its specific asymmetry: the memory narratives of the nations involved in the communist regime, as well as those that suffered the greatest human losses during World War II, including the worst possible outcome of the Holocaust (Snyder, 2010), were more or less directly forced to comply with the frameworks of European memory shaped **before** the Iron Curtain fell, and therefore **before** any of the CEE countries could have a real influence on it (Törnquist-Plewa, 2024). Without justifying the obvious attempts to manipulate the politics of memory in the case of Poland, it is worth bearing in mind that the clearly antagonistic position of Polish

national memory towards the framework of European memory is at least partly the result of the closure of the latter. The negative reaction to the low flexibility of the framework of European memory and its clearly normative character results, at least in part, from the mechanism I have briefly described for the functioning of versions of the past future as a reference point for current affects. The fall of communism was supposed to mean liberation from the domination of the Soviet empire, which meant, by default, becoming an equal part of this other, better Europe. However, as it soon turned out, the status of a post-Soviet country brought not a sense of guilt-ridden sympathy on the part of Western countries, but distrust.

The Polish internal memory conflict was (and still is) also related to the memory of the Holocaust and, more broadly, to memory of every event from the past in relation to which Polish society cannot claim a position of either a victim or a hero. Although the Holocaust is the most vivid example of the memory clash within national frames of memory in Poland,[1] it is not the only one: we can find traces of such conflicts regarding the memory of the so-called 'recovered territories' (the former eastern territories of Germany which became part of Poland after World War II) (Siewior, 2018), the eastern borderlands and the Polish-Ukrainian relationship (Syrnyk, 2018), or even the class conflict between the intelligentsia and working class (Leder, 2014), as well as the relationship between peasants and gentry in the time between the fifteenth and twentieth century (Pobłocki, 2021). These memory conflicts concerned a quite distant past, but the year 1989 and the political transformation itself became a major memory knot, tangled in the far from clear memory of communism – perceived by some as a time of terror and political regime, and by others remembered as a time of stability and growth (Tatarenko, 2019; Szpociński, *Ed.*, 2009; Mrozik, 2016).

The divided memory of 1989 is the direct outcome of its complex temporality: the clear disappointment, leading to a resentment towards the new reality, which is still observable today, over thirty years after the transformation, was combined with an even deeper anxiety about the present. Even those who perceived the present as a time of growing opportunities were not free of fear: is the change going to last? Is the CEE region freed from external threats? For others, the situation was even more complicated: the time after the political transformation indeed sped up, bringing with it revolutionary economic changes, but were these changes really what was expected? After all, in accordance with the principle of cruel optimism, changes for the better

1 On the expulsion of the topic of the Holocaust from Polish collective memory, see especially Jan Tomasz Gross (2000), Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (2008; 2012; 2022), and Elżbieta Janicka (2015). Although many researchers claim that the Holocaust is (or at least was, until the last decade or so – Bilewicz and Babińska, 2016) almost completely forgotten, the number of books, articles, feature films on the subject, as well as research and studies done in this area suggest that the memory of Holocaust, including Polish involvement in the atrocities, is now being remembered and dealt with. Of course, this does not mean that, for example, the Polish responsibility for massacres (e.g. the pogrom in Jedwabne) is unanimously accepted.

were of course expected, especially the full economic and political freedom combined with a clear improvement in the material condition of society, but not changes for the worse. In other words, the socio-economic changes took place **too quickly** (this, in my opinion, is well described by the acceleration metaphor): a change from the model of a centrally planned economy to a free market economy in the country, which, compared to most Western European countries, was poor, with a backward economy, was perceived not as revolutionary, but threatening. Despite attempts to introduce at least some social programs aimed at helping underprivileged groups, the transformation came with uncertainty about the future for the vast majority of society, and for unprivileged groups – with a very real threat of a sudden decline into extreme poverty. Although the phenomenon of 'transformation orphans' is quite well researched in Poland (Mikołajewicz, 2003), its connection with the social stratification and clear political divisions that have been progressing since the fall of communism is still poorly explored (Smoleń, 2006).

While the economic changes were rapid and transformation into a capitalist economy was perceived by the majority of society as quick and poorly prepared (Chodkowska, Kazanowski, 2018), the hoped-for optimistic future came too slowly: in a sense, it can be said that society paid the economic price for political freedom, but did not receive the expected reward of living in a fully democratic, efficiently managed, and socially just state. The expected future – the future of life in a society that was supposed to be not so different from the societies of Western Europe – came too slowly and was much more complicated than initially expected. The sudden loss of stability did not bring with it as many opportunities as expected. In my opinion, disappointment with social reality quickly became the dominant social affect, even in the first five years after the transformation of 1989, which was, on the one hand, influenced by the lack of political stability (for example, the position of prime minister changed hands six times between 1989 and 1995). On the other hand, meanwhile, the rapid political changes can be treated as a sign of collective social disappointment (Lech Wałęsa's spectacular defeat in the second round of the 1995 presidential elections is the clearest example of society's fatigue).

The tension between openness to the future and a turn to the past that characterized the present opened by the political transformation is well reflected in the discussion – which began well before the political breakthrough and is still far from being finished – regarding the question of what should be done with the activists of the communist regime. One answer to that question was the 'thick line' policy, in which the need for a new opening was placed above the need for a political or juridical settlement. The other was the policy of strict settlements and zero tolerance for those implicated in the communist regime. If we look at Polish politics from this perspective, we will see that none of these political options actually ever won: although at first the 'thick line policy' was officially announced (the term was coined by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the Polish prime minister, in 1989), at the same time the issue of lustration (the process whereby individuals performing public functions were

to disclose the fact of work or service in state security organs or cooperation with them in the years 1944–1990) showed that there was no social or political consent to make a complete cut from the past.

To take the metaphor of acceleration and slowness again, therefore, we can say that the past rapidly accelerated, caught up with, and colonized the present, adding new challenges to the economic problems of the country in the period of transformation, while the future, which was anticipated with so much hope, either did not come or came too slowly. Changes for the better seemed slow (too slow) also because real progress began to be compared with the expectations formed in the time immediately preceding the transformation and the period immediately after it. This contributed to the development of what I call an affective difference (the gap between what might have been and what actually occurred, or between our expectations of the future and its actual shape): the memory of the 1989 political transformation depends not only upon what really happened but also that which was, at the time, anticipated as the possible future of the country, the way that the current socio-political situation is being perceived, and how the future of Poland is imagined nowadays. If the prevalent visions of the future are not realized, then the affective difference becomes an additional element of memory and influences how the society perceives itself.

4. Future Past of the Transformation

Disappointment regarding the 1989 breakthrough is noticeable not only in relation to political and economic changes, but also to cultural ones. In the early 1990s, Polish culture was dominated by an optimistic belief that the year 1989 would serve – like the year 1918, that is the end of World War I and, for Poland, independence regained after 123 years of partitions – as a new cultural and social opening and contribute to a flourishing of new aesthetic and artistic trends (Czapliński, 2004). The perception of the year 1989 was therefore premediated (Grusin, 2010) by a specific memory cliché that had developed since 1918. It is worth emphasizing that for the functioning of this cliché it does not matter whether the year 1918 was actually experienced as such a joyful time; what is important is the durability of the framework of memory of the interwar period as a time of new opportunities, the full implementation of which was prevented by the outbreak of World War II (on the critical interpretation of this phenomenon see Szczerek, 2013). According to this frame of memory, 1989 was supposed to be not only a repetition of 1918, but even its correction: the beginning of a new period of reforms, opportunities, and possibilities of development, which this time would no longer be interrupted by any negative event.

This rhetoric of optimism and returning to seemingly lost opportunities was also visible in those discourses that are usually skeptical about an overly optimistic view of the future. This was easy to notice in both the economic and political context: for

example, in the early 1990s, President Lech Wałęsa coined a metaphor that cast Poland as 'a second Japan' which would, in the near future, make a huge economic leap and become an economic 'European tiger'. I briefly describe this expectation here, because I consider it to be, in a sense, symptomatic of the shaping of social moods after the political transformation: the durability of an assessment of reality rooted in dreams about the future is exemplified, among other things, by the concept of the Fourth Polish Republic. The idea that Poles should form a fourth republic is based on the need for a new opening, which, in turn, is a direct outcome of the belief that the previous one (that is – the Third Republic of Poland, created after the transformation of 1989) was completely unsuccessful and thwarted by specific political forces. One of many examples of harsh critiques of the political transformation are books by Andrzej Nowak (see especially Nowak, 2014), in which the Polish historian argues that only total independence from any international or supra-national power will best serve Poland's development. Nowak sees the political transformation of 1989 as one of many events (going at least as far back as the eighteenth-century partitions) in consequence of which Poland lost the chance for a bright future by being too submissive to the needs of other countries or international organizations. The idea of the Fourth Republic is therefore based on the need to fix the mistakes of the past by doing everything right this time (preferably: by creating a new beginning through total 'political cleansing').

Even more interestingly, the political program of the Fourth Polish Republic intends to be a continuation of the political programs created in the interwar period (Włodarczyk, 2013). The very idea of the Fourth Polish Republic combines two memory clichés. The first concerns the happy breakthrough of 1918, and the second the unsuccessful breakthrough of 1989. The clash of these memory clichés results in an affective difference on which the program of the Fourth Polish Republic was built – one which on the one hand is supposed to be a continuation of changes or projects started in the interwar period, but on the other should serve as a correction of 1989 and bring with it the changes that should have occurred then, but never did.

It is worth emphasizing the temporal complexity of this idea: it goes back twice – to 1918 and 1989. In the first case, processes that were initiated more than a century ago are still considered valid, despite the changing geopolitical reality. Slow changes, initiated in 1918, are therefore perceived as still important, still worth continuing. In the second case, the transformation of 1989 is perceived as rotten, because changes introduced by it were too slow and Poland did not turn into an ideal state in the first ten years after the transformation. The vision of the Fourth Polish Republic, clearly based on disappointment and resentment, is therefore in fact a vision of a past future that has never been realized and which should be realized now.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, the complicated status of the memory of the political transformation of 1989 and the negative assessments of the contemporary political situation in Poland (including the project of replacing the Third Polish Republic with the Fourth Polish Republic) are directly related to the perception of the changes taking place after 1989 as too slow and not revolutionary enough. The peaceful revolution and gradual change turned out to be a greater challenge for the work of memory than the 'great events' of the twentieth century, including the two world wars. Researching how processes are remembered in opposition to great events may not only contribute to expanding knowledge about memory mechanisms and creating diverse memory frameworks, but it can also have a positive impact on untangling various knots of memory, including the one regarding the Polish political transformation of 1989.

The analysis of the political transformation of 1989 allows to capture the complex temporal and affective status of slow, processual changes and to underline three main characteristics of processual memory, that is, firstly, its often heterogeneous and complicated state (resulting only in part from the existence of antagonistic versions of memory regarding given process), secondly, its tendency to form hot versions of memory about certain aspects or outcomes of remembered processes, and thirdly, its inclination to create not only diverse versions of memory of past events, but also to confront these versions with the different ideas and imaginations regarding the future. Moreover, treating the memory of the political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe as the memory of slow change allows us to look at the conflict between the Western and Eastern European memory frameworks from a different angle and to question at least some theses regarding the universality of the contemporary change of the chronotope to a present-oriented one by emphasizing why ideas and imaginations about the future are of great importance for the memory of processual changes.

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