

**Dominika SŁOWIK**

### **Empathy Politics**

Polityka tożsamości. Identity politics. Oh, I have heard those two words so often during the last few years in Poland that in a way they have lost their original meaning to me, as if a child was repeating them on and on, becoming a senseless rhythmic wave of sound. I was tired of them being misused cynically, in politics and media, so as to create conflict and disagreement.

Yet when given the list of proposed panel topics to select what inspired us most, I went straight for this one. Why would I do such a thing to myself? I have no idea. Well, maybe I do. While I was writing, the parking lot behind the library was filled with the gold and black of the Hawkeye fans. I could see them very well from the fourth floor, barbeque and beer, tents and pick-ups, everybody unified within this greater-than-just a “favorite sport” identity. And the game was still to be played (congratulations, by the way!) when I was trying to disentangle this knot within me, to speak clearly to you about what identity politics means when you live and create in Poland.

Modern Poland is a predominantly white, Slavic, monolingual, and (in theory) Catholic country. However, for most of its history, Poland had been known to be a multicultural, multinational, multiethnic, multireligious, and multilingual state, with significant minorities of varied origins: Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Germans, Russians, Czechs, Slovaks, Lithuanians, Romanis, Silesians... I could go on and on. It was a complex (and, unfortunately, very often turbulent) mixture of rich and diverse identities. Then, the tragedy of the Second World War happened.

The Holocaust, war atrocities, forced resettlements, and displacements in accord with the newly established borders were forced upon Poland during the 1945 Yalta conference. Decades of the Communist regime whose one of utopian purposes was to create universal *homo sovieticus*. Finally, the harsh economic transformation of the 1990s, based on the neo-liberal values of Thatcherism and Reaganism, left us divided into those able to profit from the change and those left behind.

I have an intuition that democracy in the so-called “western world” (I do not want to generalize, but Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world are what I know best) was driven into this conflict of values, vigorously used by politicians so as to create the feeling of a continuous crisis (we know the keywords here: religion, race, gender...) and to inspire hate and fear, shifting the social attention away from the economy, from the shortcomings of the capitalist system and from the failure of the current politics.

There is a rift dividing my country that you might find familiar (by the way, the Polish right-wing derives much of its inspiration from America’s right-wing ideas): liberal versus conservative, church-goers versus atheists, anti-migrants, pro-migrants, anti-maskers, pro-vaxxers, meat lovers, vegans, make-Poland-great-again and pro-Europeans, eco-freaks and climate change denialists. And so on... It could very well be a list of the topics prohibited during a family’s Christmas dinner, if you want to eat peacefully, without starting a civil war as soon as the first dish is on the table.

Nevertheless: even if the crisis is hyperbolized (and induced) by the politicians, it DOES harm real people.

Even as we speak, the president of Belarus Lukashenko is pushing migrants toward Poland’s eastern borders and so the right-wing conservative Polish government has decided to exercise a so-called “push-back.” When the Polish border guards encounter migrants—most of them sick, tired, hungry, cold, almost dying—they transport them back to the border line, abandoning them in the depths of the cold dark forest:

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ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 15, 2021

Edwige Dro (Côte d’Ivoire), Dominika Słowik (Poland); Muthi Nhlema (Malawi)

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children, teenagers, men, and women. Those are areas of wild forest, covered with swamps, impenetrable primordial vegetation. The official narrative is filled with empty, aggressive words—you probably know these all too well in light of what’s happening on the border with Mexico. And there another split is added to the list of identity politics wars—those protesting and helping, and those fearing and rejecting.

So, who are we now? Who am I now? What is my identity if it is subject to politics? And why have I, after all, chosen this topic to speak to you about—instinctively, without any hesitation?

As you can see, I am standing in front of you in a t-shirt with a rainbow flag on it; the words in Polish saying, “I am against homophobia.” A poster child of a progressive identity, a right-wing Polish politician would probably say, readily sarcastically. Maybe I am, as I bought that ally t-shirt with the sheer purpose of wearing it to official presentations, television interviews, readings, and finally, for the trip to the University of Iowa in the USA, so I could use all those occasions to manifest my support for the Polish LGBTQ+ community, discriminated against, in my country.

I write about feminism. My protagonists are of different sexual identities. I care for a beyond human point of view. I search for voices of animals and plants. I believe in empathy as the most basic tool in both art and life.

My writing is political. I am political.

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