

Concerning Elitism. Three Case Studies

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Rafał Matyja, the author of *Wyjście awaryjne* [Emergency Exit],¹ an interesting study on the political crisis in contemporary Poland, has stated that the manipulated concept of the political elite is the “founding lie” of this crisis:

The Polish political scene has been shaped by two parallel processes, namely, two wars. In Wałęsa’s words, there is a “war at the top” between two leading Polish political parties, PO [the liberal-centrist Civic Platform] and PiS [the right-wing Law and Justice], and a “war at the bottom” between two fractions of Polish society shaped by the “war at the top.” Showing both conflicts as one war – society against the elites, those at the bottom against those at the top – is the founding lie of PiS’s political agenda.

¹ Rafał Matyja, *Wyjście awaryjne. O zmianie wyobraźni politycznej* [Emergency exit. Change in political imagination] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter, 2018).

The right-wing PiS party, self-proclaimed “steadfast opponents of the elite,” has accumulated political capital and won voters over by standing up against the elites of the Third Polish Republic (accused *en bloc* of upholding the corrupt system) and appealing to the “good, uncorrupted people.”² However, as PiS pushed its political agenda, elite theories have become obsolete, and the former elites have been discredited in the social consciousness. The conservatism of the 1990s failed because it was based on opposition rituals inherited from the 1980s, and its representatives had no ideas for a new Poland. Matyja thus argues that thinking in terms of elitism does not make sense today; in other words, he argues that elite theorists were wrong to see elites as something permanent – that this phenomenon turned out to be important only for a certain moment in the history of modernity. Therefore, he apparently agrees with Christopher Lasch’s observations discussed in his influential book, *The Revolt of the Elites*.³ Lasch argues that American elites failed because they failed to accept responsibility for the world; they have become, Lasch writes, well-organized groups of particular interests and social control, accelerating the processes of globalization and neoliberalization. And yet, in *Wyjście awaryjne*, Matyja repeatedly refers to elitism, also after he announced its death. On the one hand, the new elite (or rather a group trying to benefit from the elitist tradition) suffers from the “oblivion syndrome:” it is passive, nostalgic, or tries to gain prestige by adhering to old principles. On the other hand, “the elites’ systemic suspiciousness, paired with a sense of responsibility for institutions which are hundreds of years old” is a source of hope for the world.⁴

Even if today elites and elitism are in decline, we still need these concepts – the critics of the elites need them. They are often used as arguments in disputes with political and ideological opponents or with people who compete with us for power or prestige.

Different definitions of elitism prove this. From a neutral category, as defined in elite theories, it has evolved (I refer here to the broad meaning proposed by Wikipedia) into a term that describes the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a small, privileged group which possesses financial resources and political influences (in a given region, state, part of the world). According to Lasch, elitism effectively propels neoliberalism.

This is neither the only possible, nor, as I believe, the only desirable position in the contemporary debate on elitism. Let me briefly recount the history of the concept.

Almost everyone agrees that every form of social organization is based on hierarchy, and the negative effects of elitism are and have been “acceptable,” at least since the beginning of the 20th century. It is true that not only the ancients, but also Vilfredo Pareto, the founding father of elite theory, believed that individuals who have the highest indices of excellence in any particular activity (intelligence and skills) hold the most power, and that this is the

² The fact that the anti-elitist strategy continues to set the tone for the Polish government’s policy is evidenced by one of Mateusz Morawiecki’s latest podcasts (January 14, 2022). The prime minister argues that those who criticize the “Polish new deal” are “mainly financial elites; they are detached from reality; they live in big cities and do not understand the needs of normal people.”

³ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1996).

⁴ Matyja, 159.

natural order of things.⁵ Respectively, Robert Michels and Charles Wright Mills pointed to the degeneration of the power elite.⁶ One of the most important, and the most disillusioned, observations on this subject is Michels' iron law of oligarchy.

Positive, neutral, or negative references to the concept of "elitism" are dependent on changing elite theories, which usually correspond to current social needs. Although the word "elite," contrary to its French origin, is not encumbered with value judgements, the axiological contexts of its use have been and still are dominant. Admittedly, some articles which promote elitism have recently been published in Polish sociological magazines, exemplifying a non-evaluative, technical, and descriptive approach to the problem of the elites, but politicians, culture at large, and the media rely on classic, that is negative, elite theories. Supporters of "positive" elitism argue that it endorses (or at least does not affect) procedural democracy, while critics of "negative" elitism emphasize the essentially anti-democratic inclinations of the ruling elite. On the one hand, there is a lot that proves that elitist democracy is but a dream, *vide* the neo-liberal order of the modern world. On the other hand, classic elite theories seem to be outdated; the so-called new politics needs new concepts, and the idea of more diverse heteronomous elites seems interesting.⁷

Although elitism, be it in the negative or positive sense, does not imply thinking in terms of social classes, it is usually assumed that the higher the position in the hierarchy of power, the higher the percentage of people with high social status (although status also concerns prestige, position in the power structure, and wealth).⁸ This does not mean, however, that we must recognize social conflict as the "natural" context of elitism.

Below I analyze three different uses of the term "elitism" in the wider context of Polish post-1989 literature. I am interested in the understanding of elitism that goes beyond class and is closer to Max Weber's, and not Marxist, understanding of social structure. My point of reference is Pierre Bourdieu and his followers.⁹ I have the impression that the three analyzed case

⁵ See: Małgorzata Stefaniuk, "Vilfreda Pareta rozważania o elitach i demokracji" [Vilfredo Pareto's reflections on elites and democracy], *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, sectio G, vol. 45 (1998): 231–249.

⁶ In *The Power Elite* (1956), Mills analyzes American society governed by the owners of large industrial corporations, politicians, and military decision makers who all have similar interests (see: Charles Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956]). Respectively, Robert Michels writes about the so-called iron law of oligarchy, which states that any organization will eventually develop oligarchic tendencies, asserting its power (see: Robert Michels, *Political Parties: a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, trans. Edan Paul, Cedar Paul [New York: The Free Press], 1962).

⁷ The shortcomings of modern democracy, its inability to face economic crises, the decline of traditional political parties, the growing role of populist leaders, the growing power of technology and the media, and the overproduction of ideas do not necessarily mean that the elite is no longer needed (or that the elite should disappear), but they certainly call for its re-structuring, re-definition and greater diversification. On the elitist contexts of contemporary democracies see: Jacek Wasilewski, "Demokratyczny elityzm: geneza i podstawy paradygmatu" [Democratic elitism: genesis and foundations of the paradigm], *Studia Socjologiczne* 3 (2020): 5–30.

⁸ This is Putnam's law of increasing disproportion. See: Robert D. Putnam, *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 33–37.

⁹ For example, Ralf Dahrendorf, who describes the elites as groups of people occupying the most important positions in socially important structures, be it political, cultural, economic, religious, educational, military, etc. See, for example, Ralf Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

studies prove not only, in a broad sense, that the understanding of the very term “elitism” have changed, but also, specifically, that the field of literary criticism has been transformed in recent years.

1.

Discussing “negative” elitism in the context of so-called Polish contemporary literature may be considered banal. Elite poetic circles have been discussed, more or less fiercely, a number of times and these disputes have already been summarized in different publications. Of course, this does not mean that we will not return to this question in some other form.¹⁰ The structuring of the literary market along the vertical axis, i.e., the high and the low, the elite and the popular, has long since become obsolete. The horizontal axis, based on the categories of centrality and peripherality (in other words, the mainstream and the margins), still appears to be valid: it is, arguably, better suited to describe the situation of literature on the neoliberal market. From today’s perspective, the above-mentioned ways of structuring the literary field, contrary to what Krzysztof Uniłowski argued in *Kup pan książkę* [Buy a book],¹¹ are not mutually exclusive; most of all, however, they do not seem as operationally useful as several years ago. Uniłowski’s line of thought, one can probably assume, goes hand in hand with Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, based, broadly speaking, on the assumption that social status and social class correspond to cultural practices and preferences. Still, Bourdieu postulates, or rather presupposes, transparent rules which organize cultural circles (insofar as class affiliation and lifestyles and the rules which govern cultural circles reinforce one another).

Let us add that Bourdieu links his elitist disposition with the understanding of a literary work (and a work of art in general) rooted in Parnassianism and high modernism, emphasizing its autonomy and self-sufficiency (distance, disinterestedness, indifference, lack of commitment). “Popular taste,” respectively, affirms the continuity between art and life, and therefore postulates an affective or ethical involvement, unrefined gullibility, naiveté, and innocence.¹² Since, as Bourdieu argues, only the upper classes have a tendency to take risks in terms of aesthetic (and not only aesthetic) choices and other classes choose proven solutions, the elites effectively are “the chosen few” who hold the (aesthetic) power.

Uniłowski distinguishes between the aesthetic order (in his classification: the vertical axis) and the societal order (the horizontal axis): he imposes onto the rules of elitism (high – low) the criteria of market or media presence (the mainstream – the margins). While he proves that these are two separate systems, he exceeds the limits that he imposed.

Let us take a closer look.

¹⁰See: Dorota Kozicka, “Poezja w klinchu (z)rozumienia” [Poetry in the clinch of understanding], *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka* 26 (2015): 51–72.

¹¹Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi” [Elite and popular, mainstream and niche], in: *Kup pan książkę* [Buy a book] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 2008), 204–219.

¹²See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4–10.

Specifically, Uniłowski discusses Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało's review of Agnieszka Drotkiewicz's novel *Paris London Dachau*, which is in fact a pretext for criticizing Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz's publishing strategy. Wolny-Hamkało writes that Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz's publishing house, *Lampa i Iskra Boża*, is no longer "elite" but populist. According to Uniłowski, the mistake lies in the confusion of orders: Dunin-Wąsowicz has never aspired to elitism, although his early texts might have suggested this. In the elitist (that is avant-garde, counter-cultural) order, Dunin-Wąsowicz's gesture was, similarly to Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades*, unparalleled. Dunin-Wąsowicz's artistic "policies," though not elitist, were niche (elitism is but one of the "niches"). However, when Dorota Masłowska's *Red and White* became a best-seller, with the help of a new pop-culture version of the once niche literary magazine *Lampa* [Lamp], Dunin-Wąsowicz became concerned, Uniłowski writes, only with popularity (a large target audience). And he succeeded. Thus, the separate orders began to overlap: the "popular," initially treated by Uniłowski as a synonym for "low" (and the opposite of "high," "elite"), points to a wide target audience – it is "non-niche." For the time being, however, this is only a terminological convergence.

Uniłowski appreciates Dunin-Wąsowicz's early niche artistic "policies" and his subsequent critical gestures. Dunin-Wąsowicz has managed, the critic writes, to refresh the discourse of literary criticism; talking about literature in a way which had been previously associated with popular music challenged the outdated forms of "celebrating literature's authority in such publications as 'Res Publica Nowa,' 'Plus Minus,' and 'Tygodnik Powszechny.'"¹³ However, just as it is impossible to maintain the critical potential of early artistic gestures, it is also impossible to maintain the critical potential of Dunin-Wąsowicz's anti-celebratory approach to literary criticism. Transitioning from the counter-cultural niche to the popular center inevitably is, by definition, counter-elitist. In other words, "niche" does not have to mean "elite" but "popular" certainly means the opposite of "elite." When Uniłowski writes about other forms of cultural democracy, first and foremost about the disappearance of artistic strategies in favor of pursuing "a love affair with pop culture,"¹⁴ he appears to miss traditional hierarchies, he appears to miss elitism. In other words, Uniłowski would gladly uphold Bourdieu's distinctions in the field of literary criticism. He knows that they are becoming outdated, but he nevertheless uses these traditional criteria: he consistently separates the order of values from the order of popularity. Thus, he appears to guard the system, whose shortcomings, perhaps unknowingly, were pointed out by Wolny-Hamkało.

I do not wish to imply that Wolny-Hamkało turned out to be more insightful; Uniłowski accuses her, and rightly so, of misreading the orders and inconsistency – Wolny-Hamkało judges Dunin-Wąsowicz's transition to the mainstream from a mainstream position: she published her text on Polish Radio's website. If we assume that she did it intentionally, then we should call her out on her hypocrisy, but that is not the point. As this example shows, ten years ago it was possible to defend Bourdieu's distinctions in Polish literary criticism, even though so-

¹³Uniłowski, 216.

¹⁴He writes that the writers and critics associated with HA!art pursued this love affair because they "lacked useful patterns" (Uniłowski, 217). Respectively, he observes that the people behind the magazine "Meble," together with the people behind HA!art, ended up editing the self-advertising and gossip blog kumple.blog.pl (Uniłowski).

cial changes had already triggered the process of their deactivation. Uniłowski distinguishes between the aesthetic order and the “popular” order and sees this gap, but most critics (like Wolny-Hamkało) do not.¹⁵

One of the most important reasons behind the changes in how the concepts of status and elitism function is “*omnivorousness*,” or cultural mobility, discussed by Bourdieu’s Western followers. In Poland, this process only just began in the 2000s.¹⁶ In fact, Uniłowski studied it and was one of the first to notice that high culture ceased to be a marker of social status in post-transformation Poland. In 2005, when his essay *Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi* [Elite and popular, mainstream and niche] was published in “FA-art,” this process could not be fully comprehended. After all, it began around 2002, even though it had been discussed for some time in the West. Richard Peterson questioned the functional and structural relationship between social status and lifestyle, including cultural preferences and choices, as early as 1992, but he described a reality that was different from ours.¹⁷ In his opinion, at the beginning of the 1990s, the ties between cultural choices and cultural capital clearly loosened, and the only regularities in this respect concerned the fact that high-status persons were more likely to be involved in a wide range of cultural activities, both highbrow and lowbrow. Thus, we can talk about a change in the field of cultural tastes: the vertical system, with popular tastes at the bottom and elite tastes at the top, transformed into an inverted pyramid, where the broad upper part represents the eclectic tastes of the globalized “elite,” and the narrow bottom part represents more homogeneous and coherent cultural preferences of low-status individuals. High and low statuses are no longer synonymous with Bourdieu’s categories, i.e., they do not refer to people with high or low capitals, be it social, cultural, or economic, but to cultural mobility – “*omnivorousness*” (high status) and “*univorousness*” (low status). High status is usually associated with young age, higher education, higher income, and higher professional position, but in the understanding typical of the middle class and not the upper class. Secondly, the loosening of the ties between cultural capital and cultural choices is evidenced by just how openly “high-status” people talk about their varied cultural tastes; perhaps it is this openness and not the nature of cultural practices which proves that Bourdieu’s categories have become obsolete.¹⁸

¹⁵Another example of blurring the distinctions between different orders, Uniłowski writes, is the popularity of the postmodern trend of “small homelands.” It cannot be described as elitist, because it was a simplified and, above all, popular version of mythographic prose. Thus, although the old elite tradition of literature adds some “validation” to the trend of “small homelands,” it is nevertheless popular. Importantly, according to Uniłowski, the best examples of postmodern prose, as well as the best examples of academic criticism, can be described as elitist. And Uniłowski was particularly partial to postmodern texts. Indeed, postmodern prose perfectly corresponds to the determinants of elitist literature / art defined by Bourdieu (autonomy, disinterestedness, lack of commitment). Respectively, as Uniłowski ironically observes, engaged prose, literature which meets some social expectations, is not elitist.

¹⁶The magazine “brulion” was omnivorous, but mostly because of its strategic use of scandals. This notwithstanding, provocation, when viewed from the perspective of artzine traditions, is connected with counterculture, and it is celebrated in equal measures by high culture and pop culture.

¹⁷Richard A. Peterson, “Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore”, *Poetics* 21 (1992): 243–258; relations between social status and lifestyles “after Bourdieu” are discussed by Konstanty Strzyczkowski – see: idem, “Szlachectwo nie zobowiązuje. Zmiany we wzorach konsumpcji kulturowej” [Nobility does not obligate. Changes in patterns of cultural consumption], *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, vol. LXXI, no. 1 (2009): 195–219.

¹⁸Bourdieu’s followers noticed other regularities, e.g., in some countries high social status does not translate into increased participation in culture, but only into greater material consumption. See: Strzyczkowski, p. 204–205.

If we were to classify Uniłowski, he would turn out to be an upper-class individual who believes in cultural mobility. I would say that he in fact renounced Bourdieu's distinctions before he renounced them de jure. He was an unpretentious self-proclaimed omnivore (which is confirmed by his wide and varied literary interests, discussed in his reviews and essays). When he "defended" elitism in *Elitarni i popularni, głównonurtowi i niszowi*, it had nothing to do with class snobbery; rather, it was ethical – Uniłowski, as he put it, tried to defend the ethos of the counter-cultural idealist.¹⁹ Besides, he did not do it "at any cost." After all, Uniłowski did not criticize Dunin-Źasowicz for abandoning counterculture for the sake of the mainstream (the critic thought that "Lampa" could actually help literature, because it discussed it using more accessible and "fashionable" language). What Uniłowski did criticize was the lack of moral values exemplified by people aspiring to mainstream privileges (their ironic distance disappeared when they were invited to big mainstream events). "Collaborating" with pop culture in itself was not as compromising. Of course, the very fact that Uniłowski wrote about "a love affair with pop culture" (in 2005) means that he was not a fan of pop culture. He did not treat pop culture like post-Bourdieu researchers, who suggested that due to the transformations it had undergone we should no longer think of it as "easy culture." Instead, Uniłowski points to threats, which Mark Fisher had discussed before him: there is no place for the alternative and the independent in the system because, even when it appropriates potentially subversive content, the mainstream prefabricates it in accordance with the needs of capitalist culture.²⁰ Perhaps, however, young literary circles, which Uniłowski criticizes (they are not consistent; at times, they are even opportunistic), should not be judged according to the old distinctions. Perhaps, they simply (as post-Bourdieu sociologists claim, the change in distinction is primarily a generational change) responded to new circumstances. Either way, they too were subject to double standards. These "new circumstances" allowed them to broaden their aesthetic choices, but the old elitist bonds imposed a self-ironic distance on some of them. The two versions of the transition phase thus are: Uniłowski's old-school attachment to elitism and "classic" distinctions, as if in defiance of the observed disintegration of this system, and the (then) young generation of critics' omnivorousness, restrained by declining but still active socio-aesthetic orders.

2.

Some time ago, the papierwdole publishing house (specifically, Konrad Góra) and the Dzikie Przyjemności publishing house (specifically, Dominika Łabędzie) joined forces to publish *Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści* [The day stayed in the night. Poems of love and hate]. The activist poet Konrad Góra and the graphic artist Dominika Łabędź worked on the book together. Each hand-made copy is different; it is like a work of art and only 100 copies were made. Some were sold at auctions, and some were distributed using social media.

¹⁹While it may seem to be a joke, Uniłowski discusses generational differences not only in the approach to pop culture but also in Polish criticism. He writes that it is easy for him to criticize because he has never been part of to big mainstream events: "from the moment the almanac *Tekstyli* [Textiles] was published, the people born in the 1960s, apart from the one and only Paweł Dunin-Źasowicz, were considered old pricks. So, I should be quiet ..." Uniłowski, 219.

²⁰See: Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2009), 9.

The whole action, which looked suspiciously elitist, confused some critics (although tangible traces of this confusion will be difficult to find). The very idea of putting a book of poetry up for auction and its price, initially PLN 200 (sic!), was not consistent with Konrad Góra's poetic and non-poetic actions. It is true that in some cases the poet lowered the price (he waived his fee), but it did not change the fundamental facts concerning the whole situation.²¹ Góra was aware of the speculations. At a publicity event during which he promoted the next "normal," or "non-artistic," edition of the book (the first, or in fact the "zero," edition was the elite edition), he said that he could finally explain what this project was all about. The money raised at auctions was used to pay for the "non-artistic edition," the price of which was lower than the average price of a book of poetry – it amounted to PLN 15. *Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści* is thus Góra's most expensive and cheapest book.²² Unfortunately, I was not able to buy either one – I borrowed both. The "regular" edition is unavailable (you can only borrow it from someone); online stores which sell books published by papierwdole either do not offer this particular title (Bractwo Trojka) or the product is unavailable (Ogniwo). The price is PLN 20.

Konrad Góra's project does encourage speculation. It would probably be easier if, instead of an auction, a simple crowdfunding campaign was started (they are popular on the literary market, also among authors published by papierwdole: currently, a fundraiser for the publication of Robert Rybicki's book is advertised on the publishing house's Facebook account). If a non-commercial publishing house wants to publish a book for which it has no funds, and this book is then to be sold at a very low price, raising money among the publishing house's "followers" seems logical. When he chose auctioning instead of crowdfunding, Góra problematized the class aspect of his project. He chose elitism instead of egalitarianism – his project met all of Bourdieu's criteria (auctions, usually of works of art, are snobbish events aimed at the upper class – specifically, the people with money). The poet, however, did not "lose control" over his project, he "called the shots" (he was in charge of everything, including the price, which he controlled, etc.), which seems quite important in this situation.

One possible explanation behind the game played by Góra is that the poet takes money from the rich and gives it, in the form of a cheap edition of his book, to the poor. Such a strategy makes sense in terms of class conflict. The auction appears to be a neo-liberal event, but in fact it is an anti-neoliberal Robin Hood-like project aimed at undermining the existing hierarchies. Unfortunately, this is not true. And not because representatives of the upper class do not buy Góra's books, even the expensive editions (it would be interesting to analyze who bought the books and for how much, but I do not have access to this data). In fact, Góra's friends and acquaintances, or, more broadly, people associated with the papierwdole publishing house were the target audience. Some of them, I believe, are not even middle-class, not to say upper-class. Thus, reading Góra's project in terms of class conflict would be unreasonable.

²¹All my knowledge on this subject is obtained from my colleagues; in a word, it comes from "word of mouth." I do not have a Facebook account.

²²The meeting took place on September 11, 2021. The recording is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=248288233841937>, date of access: 13 Nov. 2021.

Obviously, Góra's project defies the logic of capitalism. Neither does it appear to be egalitarian, although it appears to toy with this idea. Indeed, Góra had long wanted to publish a book bound in sandpaper, but the publishing houses refused because of the high costs.²³ The book, bound in used sandpaper, embodies the idea of recycled writing and living; unfortunately, its production, like the production of any handmade product, is expensive. Thus, the concept of a cheap book inevitably turns into the concept of a work of art. It is difficult to say whether the price suggested by Góra (PLN 200) reflected the work invested in creating the book. At "ordinary" auctions which take place on capitalist terms, the capital, the author's prestige, is monetized. So, if we add to it production costs, the question of price becomes more complicated – it would differ depending on the tastes of the public, i.e., target readers. After all, today it is difficult to unequivocally determine which "works" are, as Bourdieu put it, valid, that is, expensive. Paradoxically, people who value Góra do not value capitalism. In other words, this community can "buy" the idea of other auctions, for example, charity auctions or auctions whose purpose is clear and corresponds to the system of the shared expectations and values (similarly to crowdfunding). However, as I said, Góra disclosed his motives after some time and potential buyers had to rely on their intuition, i.e., they had to trust the author and his anarchist authority. Alternatively, perhaps, they acted as actual bidders and simply paid for the prestige of the author they valued (which, however, contradicts Góra's anti-capitalist logic). As it turned out, those who "trusted" Góra were right. Still, eight copies of the book which had not been auctioned off and which Góra wanted to sell on similar terms (which he announced during the publicity event during which he promoted the "cheap" edition of his book) prove problematic. These "similar terms" in no way resemble the original plan. Still, they could be sold at an "ordinary" charity auction: buyers already know what the money is for (Góra's book was published in a set number of copies but the publishing house can use the money to publish other books) and contribute; in return, they receive a "better" edition of the book, which they would buy anyway.

And the last speculative question: why is Góra playing a game with the rules of the capitalist market, if it is limited to his Facebook friends? The answer "so that he can test them" seems quite alluring to me. It is easy for me to imagine that a possible reaction to Góra's project would be accusations – of embracing capitalism, or at least of turning "less" anarchist. Because Konrad Góra, this is at least my impression, is one of those people in the Polish literary world who does charity "for us;" it is a simple psychological mechanism: if he were to change, we would have the "right" to feel disappointed, or perhaps even deceived. Had these been Góra's intentions, he should have extended his campaign and tested his readers' patience and ethics in a more demanding manner.

Regardless of the poet's intentions, his actions can be read in the anarchist context of the economy of symbolic goods. This is where Pierre Bourdieu meets David Graeber.

In the dominated part of the field, Bourdieu writes – and avant-garde cultural production functions in the dominated part of the field – opportunities have to be created.²⁴ The balance

²³Góra talked about it at meetings with his readers.

²⁴See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Randal Johnson et al. (Cambridge: Polity University Press, 1998), 37.

of forces established in the field of production must be transformed; one must fight to occupy a new position and new rules of the game in this field must be created. The distribution of symbolic capital must be redefined. This is the difference between occupying a dominant position and fighting for it. What possibilities does one have? Bourdieu presents the fight against the subfield of dominant production as a struggle for autonomy, almost as “art for art’s sake,” insofar as producers produce for other producers. In *Practical Reason*, where he outlines the principles of this strategy, he no longer thinks only in terms of social classes (or in terms of hierarchies) and tastes which correspond to them or tastes which were developed within them (so this space is not reserved for the upper class). Of course, he still fails to discuss the precariat, which would complicate his “class” argument. Bourdieu talks about pure art, that is, art which defies market economy. This new logic turns out to be the old pre-capitalist logic, transforming economic acts into symbolic acts. While for Bourdieu this mechanism is not a “way out” of capitalist structures, but merely invokes a universalist logic, it can be used in this way. Attempts to bypass the economy, to create a “non-economic economy,” essentially activate the mechanism discussed by anarchists: a return to the exchange of gifts.

In terms of “non-economic economy,” Góra is fighting for his position: he is trying to create new rules in the field of production and exchange, turning the mechanisms of capitalist economy against themselves. Transforming “economic economy” into the economy of symbolic exchange is always problematic, and may even, Bourdieu argues, seem contradictory, because this is how the gift economy works: thinking in terms of debt and repayment must be “suspended;” one cannot think that a gift is a debt that must be repaid. Góra’s project is problematic in different terms. It can be said that the poet reverses the gift economy: he does not reject the logic of price, he does not render it taboo. On the contrary, he turns the price into an auction fetish, but he does it so that he can invalidate it, so that he can capitalize on it *à rebours*: he transforms the capitalist economy into the gift economy. The logic of debt/repayment is not suspended – the logic of the gift is, and it ultimately prevails.

Contemporary anarchists also refer to the gift as one of the human foundations on which our societies are built. David Graeber draws on Marcel Mauss in his project of contemporary anarchist anthropology;²⁵ respectively, Paolo Virno speaks of an “engaged withdrawal” (or civil disobedience), a form of popular resistance which involves abandoning institutional practices *en masse* and creating in their place new alternative forms of social life which can be defined as a gift.²⁶ In all gift economies and grassroots social actions in general, as in the case of Góra’s project, not only specific artifacts or new types of services are created, but, and perhaps above all, social bonds are forged. They initiate the process of changing the *status quo* in the field of production.

The game with elitism which Konrad Góra plays has been part of his artistic strategy for a long time. Although Góra’s poetic language refers to (elitist) avant-garde traditions, his social strategy, the strategy of being a poet and understanding the roles which poetry plays,

²⁵See: David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, (Cambridge: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004). Jadwiga Zając analyzes the anarchist contexts of Konrad Góra’s works (she writes about in her doctoral dissertation; I would like to thank Jadwiga for helping me analyze the anarchist aspects Góra’s works).

²⁶On these and other practices of the anarchist exodus see: Graeber, 60-64.

contradicts the avant-garde, because anarchism and the avant-garde contradict one another. Perhaps it should be said, however, that what matters are not (stable) strategies but tactics (always developed at the spur of the moment and always temporarily), invisible practices which help protect the “temporary autonomous zone”²⁷ (co)created by the poet.

3.

The comparison between the “discourse of elitism” in literary criticism in the 2010s and literary criticism in the 2000s, as exemplified by Krzysztof Uniłowski’s works, shows that it has lost some of its appeal. Respectively, the very term “elitism” has been used in a more deliberate manner in the 2010s and the 2020s. In the 2000s, “elitism” was either a neutral or a positive term. For critics and poets who valued tradition, especially the tradition of high modernism, elitism determined modernism’s sphere of influence. In the avant-garde circles, as exemplified by Uniłowski, elitism referred to the level of cultural competences and expectations towards art that was experimental in terms of form. And such art connoisseurs corresponded to Bourdieu’s notion of the elites, as they took the risk of investing, aesthetically and intellectually, in the unknown, in unconsecrated literature and art, which were yet to be recognized. Obviously, Bourdieu’s classifications are based on, and require, a transparent social structure with its divisions into the lower, the middle and the upper classes (and fractions of these respective three classes, which only slightly complicate the entire picture). In the new reality, however, the situation did not develop as one might have expected, at least considering the diagnoses of Bourdieu’s followers and their focus on omnivorousness. When class transparency, which we never achieved in Poland, was disturbed by the emergence of the precariat, the reaction to which was the strengthening of the anti-neoliberal discourses, elitism, both the word and its connotations, stabilized as a marker of capitalism. This question is, of course, complicated. The precariat is fundamentally different from the lower class, especially the lower class which possess high cultural capital (we can say that then it is actually closer the middle class). In the eyes of the former, however, the latter is the elite. In a society where the order of social classes is disturbed, conflict-based class concepts appear to be more useful. And it seems that conflict has governed the Polish literary scene in recent years. The words “elite” and “elitism” have occasionally been used in debates, essays, and reviews: either in relation to high-status individuals who are supported by institutions (this type of conflict, of course, resembles a generational conflict) or to describe attachment to highly theoretical issues, which could be associated with the increasingly self-centered cultural capital (young critics engage in such discussions). Still, even if no explicit references to elitism are made, the conflict still exists. And it often resembles the good old rules of power struggles, or, for that matter, other types of struggles.

²⁷This is how Hakim Bey describes the goal of the anarchist movement. It is an eternal insurrection, whose goal is not to introduce a new order desired by the revolutionists (whose goals are not the same as the goals of anarchists). The TSA is endowed with a stable, though always temporary, subversive potential; all revolutions eventually lose their momentum and give rise to the new *status quo*. See: Hakim Bey, *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Williamsburg: Autonomedia, 2009).

We have always known that ideological struggles are accompanied by “ordinary” power struggles. Let us again refer to Bourdieu, Graeber, and Fisher. Bourdieu says that if the field is oriented towards change, and not the status quo, the majority of agents are *trying* to occupy dominant positions. The nature of the fights in the field depends on its structure and on the external context – if the new system of social forces supports you, you win. According to Bourdieu, two conflicts develop concurrently: the advocates of pure art and the supporters of commercial art fight and the old avant-garde and the new avant-garde fight. And this fight is always between title holders (writers, critics, scholars) and “challengers” (who aspire to hold these titles).²⁸ It is not hypocritical. Agents usually fight for the highest (in their opinion) goods, and, sometimes, they are ready to die to achieve their goal. What they win is not material: it is a game of recognition and acknowledgment. Recent poetry debates revolve around social exclusion, inequality, and other problems of contemporary capitalism, so it should not come as a surprise that the same problems are addressed by literary critics, although in such a critical context they appear to be, I dare say, less compelling. I do not want to repeat the clichés about the hypocrisy of the left-wing and its need to demonstrate its moral superiority – that would be a simplification. My point is that there are different types of conflicts. And not all conflicts are class struggles as defined according to Marxist criteria. Today, most struggles resemble conflicts described by David Graeber, who argues that Marxist politics is modeled on, on the one hand, an academic discipline and, on the other hand, on how radical intellectuals communicate:

From the perspective of the academy, this led to many salutary results – the feeling that there should be some moral center, that academic concerns should be relevant to people’s lives – but also, many disastrous ones: turning much intellectual debate into a kind of parody of sectarian politics, with everyone trying to reduce each other’s arguments into ridiculous caricatures so as to declare them not only wrong, but also evil and dangerous – even if the debate is usually taking place in language so arcane that no one who could not afford seven years of grad school would have any way of knowing the debate was going on.²⁹

Many metacritical debates which, at the beginning, were triggered by some “issue,” for example, poetry, ended with the participants critiquing one another, calling one another out on their wealth, and accusing one another of gatekeeping, which resembled political disputes. I refer to, among others, the debate devoted to the “New Languages of Poetry” that took place on Biuro Literackie’s website. “New languages of poetry” were silenced by personal resentments.

The agonistic logic behind the academic and the critical field is of course not unusual; in fact, it can be very productive, especially if the goals of the fight are universal. This is where Bourdieu and Fisher meet: they both consider the goal of art, criticism, and science universal. The more universal the goal, the more common good.

²⁸See: Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 34.

²⁹Graeber, 5.

Earlier (in *Distinction*), Bourdieu suggested that, and many would still agree, universal values are imposed by the upper class and as such they are elitist. Anarchists, like Graeber, argue that there are no universal goals – there are only temporary goals. But Graeber would also agree that some of these temporary goals (like, for example, taking action to end the debt crisis) are universal. Elitism seems to be the opposite of universalism (and in recent years it has been treated as the opposite of all, please excuse my corporate language, “good practices”), but it is only true if we assume that it is based on anti-democratic premises. If, on the other hand, we assume that the elites can, and should, be democratically elected so that they may care for the common good, elitism and universalism cease to be competitive values. The rhetorical adventures of this concept should probably be watched more closely today. This is because elitism is a disturbingly capacious category, and as such it may be, as I hopefully have managed to show, easily weaponized in a fight against one’s opponents inside the field, including both opposing fractions and fractions which are close to my own.

For Krzysztof Uniłowski and Konrad Góra elitism remains an ambiguous category; it is an element of social status games, differ as their rules might today. Their goals may be assessed differently, but we cannot say that they are self-serving.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines literary criticism in Poland after 1989 from the dynamic perspective of elites and elitism. Drawing on various elite theories, mainly the more contemporary ones, for which the most important point of reference is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction, the author shows how these concepts function in relation to the aesthetic and social dominants of the Polish literary scene after 1989. The author analyzes three "critical case studies:" Krzysztof Uniłowski's article from 2005, a Facebook event related to the "auctioning" of Konrad Góra's book of poetry in 2020, and recent trends in the language used by the young generation of critics. The author is interested in the relationship between literature and criticism and the dominant aesthetic tendencies and the socio-political context, especially the use of the concepts of elites and elitism, be it analytically or persuasively, consciously or unconsciously, positively or negatively, etc.

socio-cultural distinctions

social status game

anarchism

CULTURAL CAPITAL

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