

The Roots of Polish Culture-Centered Politics:

Toward a Non–Purely Cultural Model of Cultural Domination in Central and Eastern Europe

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This article's main aim is to propose a novel model explaining the continuous domination of identity issues in modern Polish political discourse. The model proposed here may also appear useful as an explanation of similar tendencies in some other Central European countries. It is based on a specific reading of the modern history of the region—one relying on a structural perspective and specifically using Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a "field of power." In conclusion, the article suggests that the perspective it proposes may challenge what it calls simplistic accounts of processes of long duration.

Keywords: *intelligentsia; citizenship; field of power; cultural capital*

Introduction

There is a commonly held thesis that Central and Eastern Europe is obsessed with culture and its diverse forms (e.g., nationalism, identity politics, historical memory). Some see these forms as tensions that often dominate local polities as self-sustaining "ghosts" haunting this part of Europe,¹ and as constant sources for most of the conflicts in the region. Poland is one of the countries perceived in such terms, both in popular and academic discourse. Several scholars have noted that Polish political discourse, and Polish politics in general, are dominated by cultural themes and cleavages, which include questions of national identity,² the role of the Catholic Church in the symbolic and political sphere,³ or attitudes to symbolic others such as Jews,⁴ Russians,⁵ or Westerners. David Ost has critically assessed the striking absence of economic disputes in the Polish political scene.⁶ Jasiewicz,⁷ in contrast to the common assertion that political cleavages in contemporary European democracies are focused on class interests, has demonstrated that a socio-economic explanation is of limited relevance in Poland. Similarly Markowski,⁸ Kitschelt et al.,⁹ and

Smoczyński¹⁰ have argued that political action in post-communist Poland, especially in the early 1990s, was underpinned by broader symbolic commitments. Many analysts of the current state of the Polish political scene and the discourses that dominate it refer to diverse historical explanations. However, the dominant type of historical explanation is also culture-focused. Typically, it is based on the assumption that some cultural patterns possess historical inertia—in particular, discourses, narratives, or myths, which, once introduced into the public sphere, keep reproducing themselves over generations. One such model is Robert Brier's thesis that many current Polish political debates are largely defined by the cultural legacy of the so-called First Solidarity.¹¹ This legacy, as Brier suggests, has sustained its capacity to endow social reality with meaning since the early 1980s.¹² Other scholars go further back in history and try to explain the particularities of the Polish political scene by older legacies, including those of the interwar period or even of the nineteenth century. However, most researchers accept the above-mentioned model of self-reproduction of cultural patterns. Moreover, they focus closely on the historical process of evolving definitions of Polishness in relation to Poland's significant others. Such studies, as for example Rogers Brubaker's seminal work¹³ or Brian Porter's books,¹⁴ emphasize the centrality of national and religious questions in Polish political discourses and identity politics. What they neglect, however, are other non-purely cultural processes, in particular, the evolution of social and economic hierarchies. When they look into questions of specific models of citizenship of national identity, they tend to interpret them as tools of state-building, developed in particular by intellectual elites, but not so often as processes of internal social structuration, reproduction, and legitimization of social hierarchies. Below we will propose an interpretation of the persistent centrality of cultural issues in Poland's political debates that will attempt to go beyond both short-term interpretations that emphasize, for instance, the constraints of post-communist transitions and EU accession processes as well as several long-term interpretations including those essentializing cultural legacy or focusing on the agency of intellectuals, in particular, historians or literati seen as key national myth makers¹⁵ without taking into account the wider context of their position in the elites of the region and the broader configuration of international economic and political relations. The proposed model will link interpretations of Poland's recent history to recent analyses of colonial politics and suggest a more general model for comparative analysis of Central and Eastern European politics.

The Field of Power Concept as a Theoretical Tool for Analyzing the Peculiarities of Peripheral Politics

Thus, in this article we propose an alternative explanation for such path-dependent patterns of reproduction of political discourses and, more generally, for the centrality of cultural issues in the political arenas of the countries of the region. Our approach is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's study of social fields and their

transformations, in particular, by the application of his approach to historical analysis through the lens of critical sociology.¹⁶ What we assume, specifically, is that dominant political discourses in any society are negotiated in what Bourdieu calls a “field of power.”¹⁷ A field of power is the dominant social arena of struggle among the different power fields where all types of elites in a given society meet, battle, and negotiate their interests legitimizing, in effect, the common, unconscious national frame of social relations in any society, which can be called, following Bourdieu,¹⁸ a *doxa*. Such a national *doxa* is, of course, produced by a wider social network of actors involved in the production of a common set of national ideologies. One could note that in a typical Western context, it is the state that introduces and legitimizes most of the elements of the *doxa*, especially through the bureaucratic field, which assumes the key role of regulating struggle within the field of power. In the context of a colonial periphery, however, this might not be so obvious, as the elites of a dominated nation or region may be able to enforce their autonomous national *doxa* through mechanisms and institutions not necessarily controlled directly by the bureaucratic field, in particular through national literature, other forms of culture, independent educational institutions, and/or churches (Catholic, or national protestant churches). They may also attain a certain degree of autonomy from state institutions in a given region of empire, which was, for example, the case for the Austrian province of Galicia after 1848.

The field of power is a crucial concept introduced by Bourdieu to comprehend power relations in general (instead of “ruling class”). According to his own definition, it is “the space of the relations of force between the different kind of capital, or more precisely, between the agents who possess the sufficient amount of one of the different kinds of capital to be in position to dominate the corresponding field.”¹⁹ Bourdieu shows that in Western (core) countries the main struggles (and, paradoxically, cooperation) take place between economic and cultural capital, temporal and spiritual power, and capitalists (industrialists) and intellectuals (or artists). In other words, the field of power is a field extended between the upper parts of the economic and cultural fields (i.e., their dominant parts) and other fields in the middle—political, bureaucratic (administrative), juridical, scientific (academic), artistic, etc. In such a view, power itself is relational; it is not a thing held by a given class or the elite. Thus, as Bourdieu has suggested, social positions in any field, and especially in the field of power, can be built on different types of capital, including economic, social (political), and cultural. It should be noted that the notion of a field of power should be distinguished from the notion of a field of politics (as well as other specialized social fields, such as an administrative field or the field of cultural production).²⁰ Bourdieu writes about the homology between the field of power, which has a central position in any society, and other fields. The closer a given field is to the field of power, the greater the homology between them, which is usually displayed in a similarity of basic field structures. In the Western European context, the mechanism of homology typically translates the basic structure of the field of power, which Bourdieu identified as based on an opposition between economic and cultural capital, into the classical opposition

of left versus right in the field of politics. The left pole of the political field is homologous to the cultural capital pole of the field of power, while the right pole is homologous to the economic capital pole in the field of power.

In this work, we would like to suggest that much of the long-term specificity of the politics of the region could be interpreted through an adaptation of the theory of field of power to the context of Central and Eastern Europe societies. The dependent or peripheral status of the region allows us to relate this analysis to approaches relying on the colonial and postcolonial paradigm. In this way, the proposed adaptation of the theory of field of power may also constitute an attempt at supplementing the emerging field of interdisciplinary research known as sociology of empires²¹ and a comparative analysis therein.²² In this text, in particular, we propose a tentative sketch for a theory of a peripheral field of power. The main assumption of this theory is that such a field will be typically divided by a cleavage based on attitude toward an imperial center. Thus, the main poles of this field could be defined as anti- and pro-center (or anti- vs. pro-core), but in different contexts they would rely on different types of capital, depending on the nature of the dominant logic of domination of the core. As we posit, the buildup of the autonomy of the peripheral field of power is usually based on the accumulation of specific types of resources, which can be viewed as compensatory capital. In the Polish case, this was cultural capital first, but the autonomy of the national proto-field of power in the second part of the nineteenth century was built not only on the basis of the cultural capital provided by the imperial school system but also on the basis of economic capital (of both landowners and the emerging bourgeoisie) and social capital, in particular, the social capital of Polish nobility and aristocracy. These groups (aristocracy, landowners, and bourgeoisie) were not so willing to participate in the construction of a completely independent national field of power, but as we will discuss in more detail below, the intelligentsia was able to force them to participate by means of what Lech Mazewski called “patriotic blackmail.”²³

We would like to refer, in this context, to the work of George Steinmetz on German colonies and their social structures.²⁴ Steinmetz suggested certain key differences between the metropolitan social space (in his case that of Germany) and the colonial social space (in his case that of Namibia). While the former was primarily organized according to class relations, the latter was organized around relations between colonizers and colonized. We propose to generalize this observation and argue that the key axis of the colonial or peripheral field of power is defined by different reactions to, or different roles played by, given factions of elites in the process of colonization, or more generally, external domination over given peripheries. Steinmetz points to the role of *Bildungsbürgertum* in the colonies—a group whose field in a colonial state typically dominates over native nobility and capitalist bourgeoisie. Such domination is based, in Steinmetz’s model, on the *Bildungsbürgertum*’s superior resources of what he calls symbolic capital specific to the colonial state field. Such symbolic capital could be considered as a typically compensatory resource of the peripheries.

As we also argue, an analogical configuration of the field of power emerged in Poland in 1918. The Polish equivalent of colonial *Bildungsbürgertum* was the intelligentsia; of course, Poland was not a colony after 1918, and in the interwar or post-communist periods it should rather be described as a peripheral state in terms of world-system theory.

In the more general context of broadly defined peripheries, the colonial colonizers-versus-colonized cleavage can acquire the form of an internal split of the native elite into, on the one hand, a “collaborative” camp representing or working in the interest of the external dominant actors (e.g., the Soviet nomenklatura in the communist period or the Western capitalists in the post-communist period) and a resisting camp on the other hand. Such a cleavage, based on attitude toward external domination, is very apparent in the post-communist Polish field of power²⁵ as well as in the period of the so-called partitions (until 1914). This remains true even if the presence and the role of the “colonizers,” that is to say, the representatives of the dominant empires, was much more restricted than in typical colonies. For instance, in the case of Russian Poland, in contrast to German Africa, most of the jobs within the state apparatus and public institutions were filled by Poles rather than Russians, although it must be recognized that these organizations were functionally integrated into the structures of the Russian state. Thus, the contrast between the colonizers and the colonized was not as obvious (this was also due to the lack of racial differences and to the comparable status of Polish and Russian cultures) as in the colonial states. It was, rather, overshadowed by the tension between the cooperative (pragmatic) faction of the elite and its more rebellious anti-Russian faction.

In striking similarity to the processes discussed by Steinmetz, we clearly observe a process of autonomization of a colonial (or peripheral) field of power and the emergence of its own hierarchies based on symbolic capital specific to a given peripheral region. In the case of the Polish peripheries of the Russian Empire (as well as those of the Austrian and German empires), that local symbolic capital had the nature of a national cultural capital. The entire nineteenth century can be seen as a period of emergence of the autonomous Polish field of power where the main stakes were gradually transformed from economic into cultural ones. The Polish uprisings, the fall of the Russian Empire, and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 can be perceived in this perspective as crucial moments in the history of the Polish field of power. Following them, in structurally rearranged conditions, a new Polish state emerged in which the domination of the intelligentsia over the nobility and bourgeoisie was obvious and formalized by several regulations. These regulations included the abolishment of noble titles and agrarian reforms introduced partly in 1919 and also in subsequent years.

However, the fact that the Revolution of 1917 was a decisive moment does not mean that the reconfiguration of the national field of power happened overnight. It was a long process in which material and institutional changes were as important as symbolic ones. It must be emphasized that in the struggle for “dominant principles of

domination” (economic vs. cultural capital), the intelligentsia was able to impose its effective principle of legitimization. Namely, instead of direct transmission of economic capital, which is the general form of gentry reproduction, the intelligentsia reproduced itself indirectly, mainly through the educational system. Cultural capital transmitted in intelligentsia families was consecrated (legitimized) by school (initially mostly Austrian and Russian) and, in this way, it became a universal resource, allegedly available to all. Consequently, the particular interests of the intelligentsia became misrecognized and the group was able to play the role of a carrier of meritocracy, justice, and modernity, while publicly condemning the particularism or even “egoism” of the gentry.

Thus, the intelligentsia, in the process of reproducing and consecrating itself, used state institutions—first those of imperial states (especially Austrian and Russian), then, following 1918, those created by independent Poland, including leading high schools and universities as well as public administration institutions. One could argue that the intelligentsia, while filling the ranks of administrative elites in the new state, was already a dominant actor in the field of power in which the state was in fact a relatively weak structure playing partly a service role for the intelligentsia. Such interpretations could be again related to Steinmetz’s observations of the colonial context. Let us note that he questioned Bourdieu’s cursory speculations about the state as a central bank of symbolic credit. As Steinmetz argued, “the state may well have the ambition to become a meta-field governed by a meta capital, but this does not distinguish the state from economic or religious fields, from which similar encompassing ambitions also arise.”²⁶ Steinmetz has also noted that

the state contributes to the emergence of literary, scientific and professional fields by officially consecrating their members but these fields may themselves contribute to state formation, as shown here. Field theory explains why peripheral governments sometimes become fields in their own rights, developing specific internal criteria for judging representations and practices and generating new ideas-forces and policies. By doing this, field theory sheds light on the ways colonial states and local or regional governments resist the centralizing effect of the state sometimes breaking away altogether. This theory may also illuminate the centrifugal tendencies and the breakup of non-colonial empires.²⁷

As we will argue, the history of Poland from the late nineteenth century until today, if seen as a nation developing its own field of power first under conditions of imperial domination and then later as a dependent state, may be seen as a case that generalizes Steinmetz’s approach to a much wider spectrum of cases of peripheral nationalism. In particular, the Polish case illustrates very well the inability of imperial states to subordinate all of the social fields in a peripheral region. Until the outbreak of the First World War, for example, the field of economy in Poland appears to be relatively well integrated into that of imperial economies (which is also an important reason for the fall of Polish economic elites after 1918). The fields of culture and

religion, however, remained highly autonomous and allowed for the emergence of several autonomous proto-fields of power at the imperial peripheries. Such a configuration of a field of power, with a strongly dependent and unstable field of economy and a field of culture as the most stable and autonomous sector of the elite, is, we will argue, still in place today and may be seen as the key factor behind the persistent centrality of culture in national politics.

The Intelligentsia in the Polish Proto-Field of Power

The model proposed here can be also related to the work of Gil Eyal, Iván Szelényi, and Eleanor Townsley who argued that elites of Central and Eastern Europe can be theorized by referring to Bourdieu's model.²⁸ One of their key arguments was also that Central and Eastern European countries, especially Hungary and Poland, can be characterized by the traditionally dominant role of cultural capital in their social hierarchies, and that although the privileged role of cultural capital has been largely restricted during the communist period, especially in the Stalinist decade, it was clearly eminent before and continues to be so after the communist rule in the region. In this article, we seek to extend their model.

As we argue, the special role of cultural capital in the region could be seen as increasing in the second part of the nineteenth century. The main manifestation of this process took place in the emergence and strengthening of the stratum commonly known as the intelligentsia.²⁹ We note that the intelligentsia was to a large extent the product of modern states and their growing bureaucracy. A major part of the intelligentsia was in fact employed in the public sector, which often provided more employment opportunities than other sectors, in particular in less developed regions where an increasingly high share of the Polish petty nobility were sending their sons and sometimes daughters to universities. At the same time, the Austrian and Russian empires were lacking educated cadres of German and Russian identity to fill all the managerial posts in their Polish provinces. The resulting domination of Poles in the Austrian and Russian administration is largely overlooked in contemporary discourses on the intelligentsia in the region, as the intelligentsia is quite often imagined as being alien to or at least critical of the state. The main reason for this tendency in perception could be attributed to the fact that the empires controlling the region were, and, moreover, continue to be considered foreign, alien to the nations which formed their nation-states around 1918.³⁰ However, this perception makes it difficult to notice that the functioning of the intelligentsia, which we can observe up until World War I in the region, bears a resemblance to the relations between the state and the intellectuals or the field of cultural production, to use Bourdieu's terms, in the contemporary Western core. As we will show, however, relations between the intelligentsia and the state were considerably altered after 1918. Moreover, we can talk about important differences between Western intellectuals and the Eastern European intelligentsia, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The interval between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in particular the First World War, is often labeled as the period of the “end of notables” in Western Europe.³¹ What was happening in Poland at the same time can also be seen as part of such a transformation of mechanisms of political representation. The key difference is, however, that while in most Western countries the economic and old feudal elites generally retreated from direct participation in politics, they managed to retain a major part of their resources. They were forced to change modes of legitimization. In particular, the representation of their political interests became more indirect. Political scenes became populated by professional politicians and intellectuals. Some of them were oriented more toward populist politics, other related more to the redefined interests of the economic elites. At the same time, the crisis of the economic elites was much deeper in Poland, where, after 1945, they disappeared completely (in the Soviet Union this had already happened in 1917), than in most Western countries where the old economic elites managed to retain their key assets. Some landowners retained parts of their estates in interwar Poland, but, by 1945, only peasants were allowed to possess farms. Meanwhile, after 1918, the political scene and the field of power of the newly established Polish Republic appeared to be dominated not so much by professional politicians and intellectuals as in the West but by members of the intelligentsia.

There are several key differences between intellectuals and the intelligentsia that are important in this context. To be sure, in countries with a strong intelligentsia, practically all intellectuals are part of that intelligentsia. However, “intelligentsia” is a much broader category and may be seen not just as a social group, but rather, an independent class or stratum. Its coherence is based on the possession of a large amount of elite cultural capital. At the same time, it shares a specific post-gentry ethos that may not be restricted to the valuation of formal education. The Polish intelligentsia, in particular, maintains a strong family continuity with the nobility, most notably among the petty gentry. However, with time and gradual impoverishment, most aristocratic families also joined the ranks of the intelligentsia, the latest just after 1945. The intelligentsia was at the same time relatively inclusive, accepting new members of Jewish, working class, or peasant origin, but on a rather limited scale. It can be noted that the influx of peasant sons was greater in Galicia than in Russian Poland.

At the same time, while the role of an intellectual is usually an individual vocation, the intelligentsia forms a dense network of family, friends, and other informal relations that are a key factor in early socialization. The stability of intelligentsia networks is based on a combination of high resources of cultural capital, in particular, in the form of the specific habitus of a “cultured person” usually, but not necessarily, with a university education, either humanist or technical (scientific), and with strong social capital.³² These networks form the basis of what can be called a strategy of multi-positioning that involves employment and activity in multiple formal and informal institutions at the same time. As the well-known student of the Polish intelligentsia Janine Wedel argues, the basic form of intelligentsia self-organization is a

“social circle” (*środowski*).³³ Here we can see a clear contrast between a Polish intelligentsia member and a typical German bourgeois or member of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, for whom membership in an informal social circle or gentry genealogy is not nearly as important as formal education and material wealth.³⁴

On the other hand, there is also a clear contrast between Polish intelligentsia and the intelligentsias of other Central and Eastern European countries, with the main exception being Hungary, which is similar to Poland. Thus, while members of the Czech or Lithuanian intelligentsia were mostly products of the educational system of the empires, those of the Polish intelligentsia were also the products of a new incarnation of the old nobility, as the continuity between the intelligentsia and the gentry on different levels in Poland is pretty strong (e.g., family memory, genealogy, group identity, values, and cult of aristocracy). In other words, in the Czech lands or in Lithuania, the Austrian and Russian empires produced an educated group that seized the opportunity to form nation-states and become its elite. The strategy of this new faction of the elite or middle class can be seen as an unintended consequence of modernization. In the Polish case, empires helped to modernize the old elite of nobility, which was quite an active actor for most of the nineteenth century, as the Polish national uprisings show. For this reason, models of the rise of nationalism in Central Europe such as Miroslav Hroch’s ABC model³⁵ may not necessarily be the most adequate in Poland’s situation. In the Polish case, national demands were present throughout the nineteenth century and intelligentsia cultural activity was not so much laying the foundation for a national identity as it was rewriting some of the national myths and forming them into a new popular Polish identity based on memories of the greatness of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The intelligentsia, eventually (as we move toward the end of the nineteenth century), has unquestionably become the dominant actor on the scene of cultural politics in the region and, moreover, on that of national politics. However, before 1918, when it assumed what we consider a hegemonic position, the intelligentsia was not the sole actor in what could be called the proto-fields of power of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) nations. Its main opponent in the nineteenth century was the nobility, which was largely allied, or even partly merged, with the slowly emerging national bourgeoisies. As is well known, the bourgeoisie in the CEE region remained relatively weak, given the region’s poor economic development in comparison to that of the Western core, and especially considering the delay in the development of the CEE region’s industrial and financial sectors.³⁶ The other reason is connected to the economic dependency of the entire Central and Eastern European region, where a considerable part of invested capital was foreign (mostly Western) and large sectors of the economic elite were of non-native origin.³⁷ This weakened the presence of the bourgeoisie, both in relation to the emerging intelligentsia, as well as to the old elite of the landed gentry. In effect, in the second part of the nineteenth century the bourgeoisie, rather than challenging the position of the landed gentry as in the classical French model, allied with it and became the main opponent of the emerging

intelligentsia. One could note, however, that the uniqueness of this configuration of Central European fields of power is sometimes contested. Balázs A. Szelényi, in particular, argues that the alliance of the Hungarian bourgeoisie with the landowners was comparable to similar alliances between the old feudal and new economic elites in countries like France or England.³⁸ In his reasoning, he refers to the “revisionist” school of Western historiography that argues about the hybrid nature of French and English nineteenth-century elites. This can be contrasted to the German case, where there was a separation of the old aristocratic elites and the new bourgeoisie, in particular the *Bildungsbürgertum*.³⁹

At the same time, the landed elite and the bourgeoisie appeared to be much closer to the ruling strata of the empires dominating Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, the Austrian and the Russian Empires.⁴⁰ Such relations determined the initial makeup of the national proto-field of power divided into the heteronomous pole (occupied by the gentry and the bourgeoisie) and the relatively autonomous pole in which the intelligentsia was located. The basic structure of this field of power was thus defined by a classical opposition of economic capital (of landowners and the bourgeoisie) versus cultural capital (of the intelligentsia). This social division followed a symbolic division—though now often ignored, the pre-1917 history of the intelligentsia is marked by clear, often emotional, critiques of landowners and the aristocracy.⁴¹ This conflict was manifested in classification struggles, in which the culture of nobility and the entire old Polish elite were represented both by left wing supporters⁴² and by thinkers with a nationalist orientation.⁴³ The economic elite comprised of landowners and bourgeoisie was depicted as being backward, feudal, and undemocratic, while the intelligentsia defined itself as future-oriented, modern, and pro-democratic.

It needs to be emphasized, however, that the interplay between the intelligentsia and the gentry, although marked by a severe criticism raised by the former toward the latter, remained nevertheless profoundly ambiguous. For instance, some segments of the intelligentsia, including its vocal representatives during the Second Republic, held active familial/social ties with the gentry, while the nobility’s lifestyle constituted an object of fascination and imitation for a significant part of the intelligentsia. In addition, the legitimacy of the nobility legacy was disputed among its different factions.⁴⁴ This ambiguity was primarily caused by the fact that the major part of the intelligentsia (in particular in the Russian zone) was itself of gentry origin. Composed mostly of members of the impoverished and usually poorer nobility, this intelligentsia was forced to settle in the towns as a result of the economic crisis that fell upon their estates.

Consequently, the tension between landowners and the intelligentsia could be seen in terms of the Bourdieusian heteronomous versus autonomous division (economic vs. cultural capital, material vs. spiritual power)—one which implied the struggle between particular and universal, “interested” (private) and “disinterested” (general interest, common good); even mundane, down-to-earth and extraordinary, heavenly

(which explains why the intelligentsia had a penchant for sacrifice, even sacrifice of life). The critical pose toward the gentry in the identity building of this emerging group was also characteristic for the Russian intelligentsia. There was, however, an important difference between the Polish and the Russian intelligentsia movements, namely, their attitudes to the roles of national tradition and religion. As Andrzej Walicki put it, “a Polish ‘intellectual’ could be a moderate, or even a conservative, deeply religious, attached to national traditions and horrified by the manifestations of Russian ‘nihilism.’”⁴⁵ As Walicki pointed out, while the Russian intelligentsia was historically socially radical, totally alienated from the historical structures of society and actively hostile toward conservative and bourgeois values, those characteristics did not fully apply to its Polish counterpart. This important difference was reinforced by the Polish national uprisings, in 1831 and, particularly, in 1863.⁴⁶ The acts of resistance toward Russian rule clearly strengthened the national (“patriotic”) orientation of the petty gentry, who, due to the confiscation of their property by the tsarist regime, gradually moved to towns where their sons started to attend high schools and in this way filled the ranks of the emerging stratum of the intelligentsia, which also reinforced its position in the growing national field of power. An important but mostly overlooked aspect of these revolts was a tension between the landowner-bourgeois camp, on the one hand, and the petty gentry camp, on the other.⁴⁷ These camps could be related to the poles of economic and cultural capital respectively. As mentioned above, their early configuration, with the inferior position of the intelligentsia, dominated by the economic elites of the gentry and the bourgeoisie, seems similar to the one that Bourdieu identifies in his schemes of the French field of power.⁴⁸

An important difference between the Polish and the French models already emerges, however, at this point. While in the classic Western configuration of the field of power it is the economic capital-oriented camp that is dominant and the cultural capital pole appears as subordinate, in the peripheral conditions of the Polish part of the Russian Empire, these relations were slowly reversed. It was the “revolutionary” camp, led by descendants of the petty gentry who were deprived of their economic capital and feudal privileges and who were slowly transforming into the urban intelligentsia, that gradually gained the upper hand. The economic elites, led by the aristocracy, the rising bourgeoisie, and landowners, fell under its growing domination, at least in the symbolic dimension. At the moment of the outbreak of both key uprisings (of 1831 and 1863), the economic faction were forced to take part in them by the cultural faction (mainly represented by the petty gentry deprived of land ownership) by means of what Lech Mażewski has called “patriotic blackmail.” The uprisings themselves could be seen as events clearly moving the balance of power from the economic pole toward the cultural one. Although the impoverished petty gentry-intelligentsia factions were more militant and had suffered greater casualties and material losses, as a group they had much less to lose in economic and political terms. In fact, their sufferings could be seen as a disinterested act of self-sacrifice and, in this way, became the fuel supplying the engine

producing the heroic narrative of the emerging intelligentsia as the nation's moral elite. The economic capital faction, mostly centered around the landed aristocracy and newly established bourgeoisie, paid for its participation in the anti-Russian revolts both in terms of economic sanctions, resulting mainly in the confiscation of land, and in terms of politics, that is to say, in the form of loss of the privileges related to positions in institutions dissolved after the uprisings, as well as in the disappearance of personal connections with the political elite of the Empire. However, the main blow to the economic faction of the Polish field of power came during the two world wars, which brought both destruction of the economy and huge recurrent waves of dispossessions and nationalizations. The single most important event in a series of developments was probably the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia, resulting in the loss of a major part of both land and financial resources owned by the Polish economic elite. The final act of this process came with the Second World War and the imposition of communism on Poland as well as on the other countries in the region. From this moment on, the economic pole practically ceased to exist in the Polish field of power.

1918 as the Silent Polish Revolution

In this context, we assume that since the turning point of 1918, politics in Poland has largely been dominated by the intelligentsia as the main actor in the field of power. Beginning with this critical moment, the intelligentsia has not been confronted since then by any powerful economic elite and only occasionally by a strong political elite (as during the Stalinist period). Instead, the main conflicts on the Polish political scene could be seen as "wars" between diverse intelligentsia factions, factions whose nature may change depending on the configuration of the national political scene and geopolitical agreements, but will necessarily be framed in cultural terms. The state, the Catholic Church, and foreign partners (including states, parties, or economic interest groups) appear as key allies to particular factions of the intelligentsia at particular times, but none of them seems to have an ability to gain a dominant role in Poland's field of power in the long term. Indeed, this specific arrangement of the field of power may explain why, as a consequence, Polish politics has been culturalistic over the last one hundred years.

The achievement of the dominance of cultural issues in Polish politics during the early twentieth century could be defined as a separate but silent period of a "Polish revolution," parallel to the Russian revolution. In fact, both the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the Polish revolution of 1918 could be seen as intelligentsia revolutions (in contrast to the February Revolution of 1917 which was much closer to a bourgeois revolution). The Russian October revolution was much more radical in its anti-capitalist orientation than the Polish revolution, which only jostled the balance of power between economic capital and cultural capital elites—giving privileges to the

latter at the expense of the former. In Russia, the cultural capital elite was soon overtaken, primarily by the political capital elite, while in Poland the national aspect of the revolution was much more pronounced than in Russia.

Rogers Brubaker has distinguished four dimensions of the French Revolution, which included a bourgeois revolution aspect, a democratic revolution aspect, a national revolution aspect, and a bureaucratic, state-strengthening revolution aspect.⁴⁹ The first of Brubaker's four dimensions is almost absent in the Polish case, as the question of consolidation of legal rights of private property has maintained only marginal significance for the Polish intelligentsia, which largely ignored the economic aspects of the Treaty of Riga in 1921. The fact that the Polish–Soviet treaty sanctioned the nationalization of land and capital in historical Polish territories which were transferred to the Soviet Union, was only criticized by solitary voices from landowners' circles.⁵⁰ This does not mean that the revival of the Polish state in 1918 did not stabilize property relations, after the war years brought about a general weakening of property security. In particular, many Poles had assets that held liabilities for the vanquished powers (war bonds etc.) and after the period of general insecurity and instability, subsequent state consolidation and reparations were beneficial for property rights in themselves.

All other aspects of the French Revolution, as identified by Brubaker, were clearly manifested in the Polish Revolution of 1918. However, most of them had a strong intelligentsia-influenced nature. Namely, the process of democratization of 1918 took place under the ideals of the intelligentsia rather than those of the bourgeoisie. Interestingly, the intelligentsia adopted many of the symbols and values of the Polish gentry and the aristocracy. This process could be interpreted as defining the citizenship status of the new state, which drew on the ideals of noble status and universalized them. The symbolic reference to the so-called First Rzeczpospolita, or the Noble Republic, took on many aspects in the arrangement of the new state. These included its very name "*Rzeczpospolita Polska*," the crown being retained in its coat of arms, and the introduction of the universal use of the expression "Sir" (*Pan*) when addressing strangers.

Interestingly, the noble-bourgeois faction of the pre-1917 Polish field of power also promoted its own mode of universalization of the heritage of the pre-partition noble republic. This was based on the idea of extending symbolic noble status, redefined and gradually introduced into modern citizenship, to all landowners. The concept was known as that of a "landed citizen" (*obywatel ziemski*)⁵¹ and was related to two parallel processes. First, there was an increasing ownership of land and estates by people without gentry roots and, second, there was a tendency among new landowners and emerging bourgeoisie to adapt gentry lifestyles and sometimes even buy noble titles. In this economic model of citizenship, the democratization of noble status was thus based on the criterion of property possession, which made it very similar to the French model. However, as mentioned earlier, the transformation during the period 1917–1918 led to the victory of an alternative mode of universalization of gentry

status, one that could be called the intelligentsia model of citizenship. Here, the ideal citizen was not seen as possessing or being able to gain land or economic capital but as one aspiring to or already possessing symbolic cultural capital, related both to education and to the specific moral qualities typical for the intelligentsia. While in the former (economic) model of citizenship, the ideal citizen acted as an entrepreneurial landowner respecting (or also possessing his own inherited) gentry traditions, in the latter (cultural) model, the ideal citizen was an educated and morally sensitive intellectual respecting (or also possessing his own family) gentry traditions. Although it is widely assumed that it is the gentry alone who played a major role in impacting the intelligentsia's *modus operandi*, we should acknowledge that the Second Republic also witnessed the reverse movement in this class interplay. Namely, the gentry during the Second Republic commonly declared that their collective identity comprised three necessary components required for the self-perception of being eligible for inclusion into their strata—a noble pedigree, land ownership, and a higher education obtained at a (possibly) well-renowned university.⁵² In contrast to the first two elements, which traditionally cemented noble identity, the last element was incorporated into the gentry's imagination in the late nineteenth century, and its emergence might perhaps be attributed to the influential agency of the intelligentsia.

We can thus conclude that the contest between these two models of Polish citizenship can be related to a struggle in the broader field of power. One of its permanent effects was the institutionalization of gentry traditions as a part of the *doxa* of Polish civic culture. One could refer here to Jeffrey Alexander's model of a civil sphere that functions as a secularized moral frame in contemporary societies.⁵³ While the role of the Second Republic established in 1918 was crucial for its institutionalization, the development of this Polish intelligentsia-dominated civic sphere started much earlier, and it proved resistant to the subsequent disappearance of Polish statehood during the Second World War, and its later transformations. In any case, the structure of the Polish model of the civic sphere, both at the institutional and discursive level, as it emerged after the period of its formation before the First World War, was thus marked by a strong reliance on an idealized intelligentsia figure imagined as the heir to the tradition of the Polish gentry. In effect, the main binary symbolic axis on which the meaning of citizenship in Poland is based is the Lord-Boor (*Pan-Cham*) opposition. Since that period, the ideal citizen is an intelligentsia member of gentry origin, or one who fully adopted the idealized gentry ideals and post-gentry lifestyle, a democratic nobleman with social sensitivity and a sense of patriotic duty. This basic symbolic structure can be seen as one of the key determinants of the culture-focused nature of Polish political life up to today. One of the central stakes of this game relates to the question, Who is the most legitimate heir to the elite of the patriotic post-gentry intelligentsia of the nineteenth century? The few politicians who directly ignored that contest, such as Andrzej Lepper, appear to have been sooner or later marginalized on the Polish political scene and consequently, in symbolic terms, these public figures are most often imagined as true anti-democratic *profanes*. Representing incarnations of

the populist, non-intelligentsia Boor (*Cham*), they show, in reverse terms, what constitutes the *sacredness* of democratic society and what a true citizen should look like.

Concluding this point, it must be stressed that the universalization of the intelligentsia ethos, which became the basis of the Polish model of citizenship in general, was possible primarily through a reliance on state institutions. The Polish state which emerged in 1918 was vulnerable and dependent, but strong enough to create an administrative field (filled mostly by members of the intelligentsia) and, consequently, a relatively autonomous civic sphere. However, because of the fact that the relations of economic power were largely hidden, exercised “from afar” (by international companies and Western governments), the civic sphere was (and still is) overwhelmed by cultural matters. Thus, instead of a Western tension between *bourgeois* and *citoyen*, in Poland (as a semi-peripheral country) citizenship is defined almost exclusively in cultural terms, best manifested by the tension between the symbolic figures of the *lord* and the *boor*. It means that even economic questions are socially “translated” into cultural differences, especially those that concern identity issues.

The Development of the Political Field

It is interesting to look at the dynamics of the development of the Polish political field over the same period. The emerging field of power, because of its largely informal nature, could be seen as the most coherent of all transborder social realms of Polish society until 1914. It was based on the frequent social contacts of the Polish elite from the three empires and the intensive transborder circulation of the Polish press and books, in particular in intelligentsia milieus. Political life was, however, more fragmented because of its dependence on different institutional contexts. In Prussia, most Polish politicians formed a marginalized Polish minority fraction in the Reichstag. They were earlier allied to a conservative “Center Party.” In contrast, in Austria, representatives of the Polish landowner elite were for a long time an important element of the ruling conservative establishment in Vienna, and their numerous members occupied high positions in the Austrian bureaucratic field. In the Russian Empire, Poles were present in a wide array of political movements; they were active most prominently in the bourgeois liberal parties. However, even as members of the Russian political parties, or as deputies to the Duma, they were under the pressure of the Polish field of power to defend Polish “national interests.” This often led to internal tensions with their Russian fellow party members and the formation of tactical alliances with representatives of other national minorities of the empire, including Jews.

Thus, as of the late nineteenth century, the Polish political field, especially as far as the Russian sector was concerned, was divided by a cleavage pitting conservatives (closer to the imperial elites) against liberals (more autonomous but still loyal to their respective empires). The Revolution of 1905, however, transformed the Polish political scene considerably, in particular by giving an upper hand to mass movements led

by intelligentsia activists who had attracted lower-class support under slogans of social revolution and national revival. In interwar Poland, the field of power was already dominated by the intelligentsia, with its former left sector much more successful in taking control of the state apparatus. Interestingly, part of the former left intelligentsia elite built an alliance with the aristocracy and proposed a strong program of state building. It was known as “Sanacja” and, in particular after its successful May Coup of 1926, could be seen as attempting to build a dominant political capital elite. The project however collapsed with the destruction of the Second Republic in 1939. Its right opponents (the so-called National Democracy) mobilized popular support using nationalist slogans, which were later also gradually adopted by the Sanacja. The elites of the National Democracy could be seen as closer to the petty bourgeoisie of the period. However, they were also mostly composed of the typical intelligentsia, and it would be difficult to interpret the differences between the two political camps in terms of a clear opposition based on the nature of the capital possessed by their elites.

The outbreak of the Second World War destroyed the Polish state and, in effect, its bureaucratic field disappeared, although its shadow persisted in the form of the underground Polish state and the government in exile. The political field functioned much more clearly, relying on politicians who found refuge in Western Europe and Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it underwent a dramatic transformation during the war. After the establishment of communism in Poland, the new political capital elite (including mainly the communist bureaucratic apparatus) and the cultural capital elite (represented by different factions of the intelligentsia) became the two major actors remaining in the game. These were rarely the same intellectuals who dominated the interwar or post-communist period but they had not undermined the key role of intelligentsia identity as the model of the ideal Polish citizen, even if communist Poland was established under the slogan of a classless society. First, a major part of the political and intellectual elite was recruited from the prewar leftist intelligentsia. Second, the communists declared that they were building a specific social system composed of two non-antagonistic social classes: the working class and the peasantry as well as one further stratum: namely the intelligentsia or “*the working intelligentsia*.” In this indirect way the privileged role of the intelligentsia was institutionalized, even though its more conservative members had been marginalized. In effect, the intelligentsia identity also became a key political stake, and most of the political tensions of the communist period could be interpreted in terms of the conflicts over rights to be regarded as the “true” intelligentsia elite. The emergence of “Solidarity” is one of these examples. The anti-communist elite’s success at that moment could be seen not only as the effect of its alliance with the labor movement and the Catholic Church but also as a function of its successful delegitimization of the claims of the communist apparatchiks to represent the ethos and identity of the intelligentsia.

With time and subsequent waves of liberalization in Polish communism, gradual accumulation of economic resources was allowed (particularly from the mid-1980s onward); however, its scale remained relatively small and the emerging economic

elites were strongly dependent on communist bureaucracy. What is even more important is that at the moment of the fall of communism in 1989 the group of “socialist entrepreneurs”⁵⁴ was much too weak to become a major independent actor in transforming the field of power. Even though the first post-communist period saw the process of a massive takeover of state property by the former communist *nomenklatura*, the emerging “political capitalism”⁵⁵ nevertheless assumed quite a different path in Central and Eastern Europe than in most of the countries of the former Soviet Union.⁵⁶ While in the latter key economic assets were more or less successfully transferred to the new economic elite born out of selected factions of the former communist *nomenklatura*, in the former, CEE case, this did not happen. The communist *nomenklatura* appeared too weak in comparison to the forces of anti-communist opposition, which were united in their attempts to block the full implementation of the “political capitalism” scenario in CEE. Thus, the efforts of the former *nomenklatura* at consolidating their economic position were stopped, while in the absence of alternative potential players on the economic scene, dominant shares in major parts of the economic fields have been taken over by Western investors.⁵⁷ Their advent in CEE was welcomed both as an alternative to “political capitalism” and as an engine of modernization and a source of investment capital. One could note that intelligentsia members dominating the field of power not only had an advantage over the national bourgeoisie in terms of capital, but they actively legitimated the foreign direct investment–based economic model that favored foreign capital in economic life.⁵⁸

In effect, the field of power of post-communist Poland seems to bear a basic resemblance to its earlier incarnation in the interwar period. In particular, it is characterized by a weak pole of local economic capital related to the underdeveloped, peripheral nature of the economic system and the large scale of foreign ownership in most sectors of the economy, mainly in industry, finances, and commerce.⁵⁹ In such a system, where the state (the administrative field), in contrast to the situation in the Soviet Union, was and is a rather fragile actor, it is the intelligentsia or the elite of cultural capital which has assumed the central role in the field of power. This situation seems even more acute in post-communist Poland than in the Second Republic of the interwar period, as the position of the indigenous economic elite is currently even feebler. Most Polish-owned businesses are small or middle-sized, while the few large companies are mostly state-controlled.⁶⁰ The business class is thus insignificant in terms of numbers and poorly organized in political terms. The ownership of key sectors in many branches of the economy by foreign investors simultaneously increases the effect of depoliticization of economic issues. Foreign owners function in the contemporary Polish field of power as relatively passive and anonymous agents. While having an important impact on the economic and social system, they do not, with few exceptions, participate directly in Polish political life, and their demands might be perhaps presented as the objective demands of “the market.” The weakness of the native capitalist class makes the role of the managerial class much more pronounced. What is important in such a configuration, however, is that the

cultural and political legitimization of the privileged position of the managerial class appears to rely on the values of the intelligentsia as a means of shaping their upper-class status and distinction.⁶¹ The field of power is, therefore, dominated by the cultural capital elite, which is divided internally in particular by the previously discussed orientation toward external powers. With Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, and gradual integration into the global economic system, the split in the field of power based on attitudes toward the Western core has become more and more evident. It is also clearly manifested in the political field, which, since 2005, is no longer divided by the so-called post-communist cleavage⁶² but by the conflict between euro-skeptical and euro-enthusiastic forces.

Conclusions

Robert Brier, in attempting to explain the persistent centrality of cultural issues in Polish politics, noted that "politics in established democracies, where economic interests predominate, do not lack a symbolic dimension. Rather, the systems of meaning that organize political action in such societies have ceased to be the objects of political struggle and so their role is less obvious, but not less important."⁶³ What such explanations suggest is that the role of cultural conflicts on the political scene should decrease as democracies get stronger. We argue instead that the prominence of cultural cleavages may also bear the traits of the fields of power, which should not be understood uniquely in terms of consolidation of a democratic system. Of course, such structural determinants will have a key role, as long as we do not witness a replacement of the native aspects of civil tradition with their classic universalized Western forms. However, even that may not be a sufficient condition for their marginalization, as the hegemony of cultural issues may be related to a weakness in both native economic elites and state structures, resulting in specific configuration of the field of power.

In any case, the dominance of Polish politics by cultural questions seems to be predominantly conditioned by its symbolic heritage, expressed by framing the code of civil society in terms set by the intelligentsia and by giving preference to cultural capital over economic capital, in contrast to systems where the bourgeois ideals of democracy have been adapted. The other long-term aspect of the specificity of the Polish system may be elucidated by the configuration of its field of power which emerged after 1918. This aspect entails marginalization of native economic elites and imposes a secondary role on the tensions between the poles of cultural and economic capital. They are replaced by internal tensions between elites of cultural capital ally-ing in different ways with and using the state, the Church, as well as foreign actors. The explanation we offer here seems to challenge most dominant models of Polish and other Central and Eastern European polities relying on the assumption of self-reproduction of cultural tensions. What we emphasize, in particular, is that the

reproduction of the specific nature of a political scene may not necessarily be a result of the mere reproduction of its cultural patterns. Instead we posit that such processes of path-dependent development may be relying on much wider structural contexts, including not only political and cultural but also economic and other spheres and the relations between them.

In this article, we also try to show the relevance of the field-analytical perspective in such a context, which brings us to an understanding of contemporary Polish politics that is missing in other approaches, such as those emphasizing the agency of key intellectuals or the European Union, historical national or post-communist continuities. Field analysis, as demonstrated here, brings into consideration a broader context. It stresses intra-elite struggle over different types of capital and transnational field relationships analogous to forms of colonialism, first by the former USSR and more recently by Western capitalists. This allows us to move beyond essentialist cultural arguments such as those suggesting that the Poles may be more religious, more nationalist, or more preoccupied with their cultural identities than others, in particular Western nations. Such a field analysis, with a special emphasis on the suppression of the autonomous economic field, shows, in a comparative perspective, that the cultural character of contemporary Polish politics needs to be understood as one that reflects the subordinate position of the economic field rather than essentialist cultural factors. Such a perspective seems to have a wider comparative potential that might challenge the dominant view of politics in other countries, including Hungary, which seems to share many similar traits with Poland, or Russia, where a strong position of the state elite is often interpreted in one-sided, mostly culturalist terms.

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