

i polityka

Paweł Śpiewak

PAMIĘĆ PO KOMUNIZMIE



słowo/obraz terytoria

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PROBLEMS WITH THE MEMORY OF COMMUNISM

Overview

Paweł Śpiewak. 2005. *Pamięć po komunizmie* [Memory of Communism]. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria. 270 pp. ISBN 8374536004.

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Paweł Śpiewak's book *Pamięć po komunizmie* ("Memory of Communism") published in 2005 in Gdańsk by the publishing house *słowo/obraz terytoria* has been discussed and reviewed several times in Poland (see for example Wojciechowski 2005; Kowalski and Kraśko 2005; Wołek 2005; Beylin 2005; Wigura and Kuisz 2006; Lisiak 2006; Nowak 2006; Fordoński 2009). One review in English was also published (Lisiak 2019). It is worthwhile, however, to look at Śpiewak's book in retrospect when reflecting on politics of memory and history, especially since many of its ideas are still relevant. Such an approach is particularly worth considering given the fact that the book has not yet been translated into any foreign language.

The focus of the book is not Communism *per se*, but rather the memory of it. As the author pointed out in an interview given shortly after its release:

“This is a summary written from the perspective of public discourse. In this book, I ask myself about the consequences of the unwillingness of Polish intellectuals to discuss Communism, and not about the nature of Communism”. (Śpiewak and Dorosz 2005, p. 7).

Paweł Śpiewak, sociologist, and historian of ideas, analyses statements from the times of the Third Polish Republic, both of former members of the opposition and people associated with the power elites of the Polish People’s Republic. He attempts to show how solutions for dealing with the communist past of Poland were sought in public discourse in the first few years after the regime change. His analysis covers the years 1989–1995. The author aims to explain the process of development of the collective memory of Communism. He presents the changes that occurred in the evaluation of Communism and social reality. On numerous occasions, he draws the reader’s attention to the linguistic strategies used in the public debate. To a much greater extent, however, he focuses on analysing the content of individual messages. He discusses with both the defenders of the old system and its opponents. He analyses how both the collective and individual memory of Communism have changed since 1989, why they have weakened, deformed, or even disappeared. Contrary to his declarations, he engages his personal views in the polemical and descriptive sections.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first chapter, *Totalitarny Żywioł* (“The Totalitarian Element”) offers an introduction to further considerations. The author analyses the harbingers of the upcoming systemic change, which were already visible before the outbreak of World War II. He presents the views of academics and artists who predicted the collapse of the Second Polish Republic. He points out that they noticed not only the threat from its neighbours, but also from the ideologies that were the basis of totalitarian regimes. As he writes:

“Poland was coming out of Communism with a wealth of difficult experiences, but also with a unique knowledge of

what the Soviet regime was, what reforging of people's souls—*perekovka*, and language destruction were all about.” (p. 15).

The author indicates that the purpose of his book is to

“show how the problem of the legacy of real socialism was present in political speeches, outlines, journalistic notes and dissertations of these very authors who had already given evidence of their commitment to democratic and independence ideas.” (p. 16).

He also points out that he is not interested in

“an image of the past created by former activists and intellectuals from the circle of the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR).” (p. 16).

As he explains:

“It is not my job to decide whether the knowledge about Communism gathered for several generations has been properly used. What is important is to show how the socialist past was coped with (or not handled with) in the Polish public discourse in the first years after regaining independence.” (p. 16).

In the following chapters, the author presents the course of ideological discussions about the evaluation of Communism. In the second chapter entitled *Budowanie polskiej demokracji* (“Building Polish Democracy”), he describes the beginning of the changes in Poland that led to the fall of Communism—the opposition talks with the authorities at the 1989 Polish Round Table (*Okrągły Stół*); the situation that accompanied the establishment of Tadeusz Mazowiecki's government; and disputes that appeared among the leaders of the Solidarity movement (*Solidarność*), labeled as “the war at the top” (*wojna na górze*). Śpiewak points out that

“disagreements between political options have from the beginning been caused by the problem of the legacy of Communism. This was connected not only with ethical issues, but also with practical matters, namely the question of



whether PZPR property should be nationalised; institutional and personal changes in the government apparatus; control over »state power« ministries (above all the Ministry of the Interior), and, what turned out to be extremely politically significant, enfranchisement of the *nomenklatura*.” (p. 65).

At the same time, it should be clarified that the enfranchisement of the *nomenklatura* is a colloquial term for the process of privatisation and taking over of public property by some activists of the party and state *nomenklatura*, which started in the period of political changes in 1989 in Poland and other countries of the Soviet Bloc. This term became popular in the political and media discourse in Poland in the 1990s. It was usually used in the context of a critical assessment of its underlying processes. However, there were suggestions that the takeover of public property by some former communist party activists is a necessary element of the peaceful nature of the political transformation, and that it will ensure the inclusion of the elites of the former *nomenklatura* in the process of building a new Poland, the so-called Third Polish Republic. As Jerzy Szperkowicz explained in *Gazeta Wyborcza*:

“In order to make deep and irreversible economic reforms, it is worthwhile to involve people of the *nomenklatura* in our economic activity so that they would be personally interested in the success and sustainability of reforms. Besides, if the energy and undoubted abilities of the *nomenklatura* could be used to launch dead or semi-living elements of national wealth, it could pay off, also materially. I do not mourn for the undervaluation of assets passing into the hands of *nomenklatura* companies. They can eventually be estimated. That it will be a form of credit? It will be. Let us treat this as severance pay for the *nomenklatura*, which performed duties for the society. It did not make a name for itself, but losing the privileges of honour, it feels expropriated from the achievements of two generations.” (Jerzy Szperkowicz, “Uwłaszczać i nie żałować”, [“To endow and not regret”], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, September 25, 1989).

In addition, as written by another journalist of the same newspaper, Ernest Skalski:

“This must be an offer for the whole apparatus. It is necessary to allow these people to apply for ownership of a part of the property they manage if they offer no worse warranties than others. Certainly, they should be promised at least one year’s notice with the real value of earnings preserved, comprehensive assistance in taking up new occupations or independent business activities. Perhaps they should also be granted early and sufficiently generous retirement pensions.” (Ernest Skalski, “Wielki kompromis,” [“The great compromise”], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 31, 1989).

The author of “Memory of Communism” does not agree with the group of intellectuals who, at a meeting in Cracow in early May 1990, announced a publication of an extensive memorial on Polish public life, in which nationalism, intolerance towards minorities, demagoguery, and party favouritism were recognized as the main problems. According to Śpiewak, what is important in this document is its hidden dichotomy. In other words,

“the message of the Solidarity movement, *Solidarność*, with its vision of civil society, pluralistic and communitarian, the principles supported by the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki are contrasted with the generally weak ethical condition of Polish society—the latter of which is allegedly ready to obey a »strong-arm« repressive policy, succumbs to nationalistic stereotypes, eagerly reaches for the slogans »Poland for Poles« and, what is even worse, becomes a victim of incomprehensible party conflicts.” (p. 68).

As believed by Śpiewak, intellectuals consider society to be immature, but they cannot lead it through the transformation period by themselves. He notes that:

“there is no substantive reference in their speech to the necessity of settling accounts with the legacy of Communism [...] and to the need to clean up state institutions and dismantle the communist system. The only necessary thing is the need for an unambiguous naming of past offences and crimes, but without drawing any practical consequences from it.” (p. 69).

The third chapter is devoted to the issue of lustration. The author describes the anti-lustration campaign conducted in the pages of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the disputes between the supporters and opponents of lustration. He also points out that prior to the adoption of the lustration law of May 28, 1992, proposed by Janusz Korwin-Mikke, this topic had not been present in the public debate. In the opinion of Śpiewak,

“...lustration was reduced to another »war at the top«, a game for power that supposedly had nothing to do with social expectations [...], and lustration was not linked to an assessment of the state security. The historical truth was not mentioned at all, and there was little room for evaluation of the Communist system.” (p. 133).

Considering the statements of the opponents of lustration, he comes to the conclusion that

“they consistently refuse to discuss the real effects and legacy of Communism, treating all analyses concerning the companies of *nomenklatura*, agents of the SB [*Służba Bezpieczeństwa*, the secret service of the communist regime in Poland], and decommunisation not only as non-existent problems but as matters which are not worth and should not be discussed.” (pp. 159–160).

He also reminds us that

“only a few voices have been heard here and there, that anti-lustration or pro-lustration hysteria is one thing, whereas a reliable assessment of the archives’ condition and a lustration law based on solid foundations are another thing.” (p. 161).

In the public discourse on this subject, no attention was paid to the fact that settling accounts with the past is not an act of revenge, but, as can be seen from the very definition of lustration, a way to purify political and public life. At the end of the chapter on lustration, Śpiewak concludes:

“The memory of the communist times is particularly affected by this, and the loss of memory is one of the keys to

understanding the rapid return of the PZPR-rooted formation to power.” (p. 161).

There is no doubt that knowing the truth about the past of people exercising the most important functions is essential for the proper functioning of a democratic state. Its citizens have the right to be aware of the past actions of people representing them and holding prominent positions.

The fourth chapter *Nienawistnicy i moralści* (“Haters and Moralists”) presents examples of “moral aggression.” The author argues that the majority of columnists tried to act as mentors concerned about the moral integrity of society. As he says,

“Tracking the enemy is as much a way for the press to identify more or less realistic threats, to draw a line of conflict, as it also involves the question of power over the language of public discourse.” (p. 172).

He concludes that the dispute in the press over an open and closed society, the place and role of the Catholic Church, the dispute over lustration and the quality of Polish society was not so much about “convincing, winning, criticising, but only about overcoming and humiliating the enemy competitor.” (p. 172).

In the fifth chapter, the author reviews press discussions on the history of the Polish People’s Republic. He notes that apart from articles condemning Communism in all its dimensions, there were also publications that pointed out its mistakes while the same time trying to demonstrate its achievements or presenting this period as a gradual transition from a socialist state to a market democracy. The author invokes arguments given in the discussions about the totalitarian or non-totalitarian character of the communist state. He confronts the statements of Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, Andrzej Rychard, Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń, and Wojciech Roszkowski. He draws attention to what publicists have pointed to as “the link between the current moral chaos and the blurring of meanings in the past” and the role of postmodernism, which former communists “eagerly used, among other things, because it makes any judgment over the past impossible.” (pp. 200–201).

As he concludes:

“The dispute over the past, settling accounts, decommunisation is an important global dispute. This makes it even more expressive and uncompromising.” (p. 201).

The sixth chapter devoted to the relations between intellectuals and the communist regime is particularly interesting. In this part of the book, the author describes both the reasoning behind those who supported “socialist realism” and those who did not, or even held the opposite position. He refers to an interview with Zbigniew Herbert conducted by Jacek Trznadel and published in Trznadel’s book, *Hańba domowa* (“Domestic Disgrace”, first published 1987 in underground). As Śpiewak writes,

“Communism gave intellectuals not as much a sense of purpose, but rather accommodation, position, power, and a certain economic standard. It was not necessary to join the party or write poems in honour of Stalin. Nobody forced anybody to do it. It was the writers themselves who made a choice to do wrong, and nothing can justify them.” (p. 207).

Śpiewak recalls that Herbert’s statement was misunderstood and sometimes even condemned. He was accused of trivialising the problem, failing to understand the post-war situation, and, above all, of being too harsh and moralistic in judging the attitudes of his fellow writers. The author of “Memory of Communism” states that “reducing the whole matter to greed and vanity also seems to be excessively simplistic.” (p. 207). It is worth noting that this dogmatism of judgments in some circles contributed to the growing popularity of Herbert—one of the most notable Polish poets of the 20th century, who did not compromise or make deals with communists.

Śpiewak admits that Communism had its roots in history and triggered genuine involvement. As he says,

“Communism has the potential to attract followers, and that is why settling accounts with communist tradition, and ideology is urgent and necessary.” (pp. 207–208).

He believes that

“the poor reflection on the »captivity of minds« may be surprising for at least two reasons. Firstly, because one of the most extraordinary phenomena in the history of culture, the internal degradation of people who, one might think, were fully aware of what Communism is, has been cognitively wasted. Moreover, as it can be assumed, their departure from Communism, or more generally, progressivism, was partial and incomplete.” (p. 210).

Analysing Zbigniew Herbert’s letter to Stanisław Barańczak, another Polish poet known for his oppositional attitude towards the communist regime, Śpiewak points out that moral judgments cannot be relativised. As he points out,

“Evil, even if it takes the form of silent approval, is evil, and we are responsible for it. Just as evil is to avoid responsibility, to hide behind oblivion. Even taking up opposition activity does not take away the faults once committed.” (p. 211).

No matter what justification we adopt for the evaluation of attitudes, “injustice, corruption must not be overlooked”. Śpiewak considers a self-delusional attitude of self-justification to be extremely reprehensible. According to Śpiewak,

“people who »wipe out traces« and present themselves as »innocent victims«, even if their mistakes or wrongdoings are incomparable to the crimes of security officers or higher party *nomenklatura*, give arguments to these worst criminals. They can also invoke some principles of higher necessity, ascribe to themselves rightful moral intentions, use arguments of *raison d'état* or a Soviet threat. In this way obvious moral principles are undermined, the responsibility for guilt is blurred, and none of the crimes can be assessed (if not brought before a court). The past is becoming grey, and the whole sense of historical experience is distorted.” (pp. 211–212).

The author of “Memory of Communism” expresses the conviction that Communism is “a creation, if not of a national

betrayal, then of a national disaster.” Therefore, the entire PZPR bears full responsibility for its rule, “both when it used open terror and when it went into the phase of soft autocracy.” As he points out,

“Even if there were different phases in the history of the Polish People’s Republic, the political order was not legitimised during all this time. Neither social, nor legal, nor moral. That is why the PZPR and its members are responsible for their mistakes, lies, chicanery or violence.” (p. 212).

He also draws attention to the “unspoken” (in his opinion) issue raised by Herbert that

“the intellectual elites that have moved from supporting the regime to the opposition are not interested in a clear and decisive assessment of the past”

and therefore they

“obscure the role that they played until recently and are willing to avoid a clear assessment of the PZPR. Not only did they act as if they did not want to or could not break away from the past, but they also helped the former Party members to find their place in the new system.” (p. 213).

After all, the former communist leaders “can say the same thing about themselves: »we did not know, we meant well, we had noble dreams and intentions«.” Śpiewak observes that such reasoning

“leads to the fact that all the former »red« people are treated in the same way and neglects obvious things, such as the fact that social, ideological, and economic ties can last long after the Communists announced that they have nothing to do with Communism.” (p. 213).

In the last chapter, *Przeciw zniżaczeniu* (“Against Dullness”), the author announces that while in the previous chapters he tried to “present the language, arguments, and rhetorical tricks used in the press in a relatively reliable, though not

uncritical, way,” in this chapter he will present his position. He polemicalises with Andrzej Walicki, who never belonged to the PZPR, but defended it. Śpiewak does not agree with most of the arguments given by Walicki. He admits, however, that the settlements with Communism cannot be decided only by politicians:

“Walicki is right in one thing: such delicate matters cannot be left to politicians alone. Reconstruction of memory is, or can it be, primarily a social process, in which simple justice is as important as restoring the basic moral order.” (p. 241).

Many statements and conclusions from the book are correct. The author states:

“Amnesia, or perhaps falsified memory, is a fact confirmed by opinion polls, press releases and for the fate of the new state and the democratic system a fact of fundamental importance. According to many publicists, historians and priests, the effect or simply the correlate of oblivion is chaos in the ethical sphere. They will not be able to judge and understand the actions and words of the people of the past, and we lack moral categories to evaluate today’s actions.” (p. 174).

It is difficult not to agree with this thesis. Without memory and elementary knowledge about past events, passed on to the next generations, it is impossible to understand the processes taking place in the following years. The validity of Śpiewak’s theses is confirmed by the research conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) in connection with the thirty-fifth anniversary of the introduction of martial law (December 13, 1981) in Poland. They show that more than 50% of Poles do not even know the date of the declaration of martial law, whereas 44% of respondents remember it. At the same time, two-fifths of respondents (41%) believed that the decision to impose martial law was right, and one-third (35%) believed that it was wrong. The remainder of the respondents abstained from taking part in this assessment (*Polskie Radio* 2016).

The author of “Memory of Communism” proves that the consequences of collective amnesia and not settling

with the old system have far-reaching consequences. As he explains,

“It is not just about the ethical and social consequences of not settling accounts with the past. After all, political decisions are closely linked to this. Parties, trade unions, and social organisations from the Polish People’s Republic were allowed to retain a significant part of their wealth, which often stemmed from fraudulent sources of enrichment. The communist party and the security forces were not recognized as criminal organisations, even though, as Jan Nowak-Jeziorański wrote, they »committed crimes before the very eyes of the whole society.« The criminals of the communist era were not brought to justice. The judicial staff was not cleaned up.” (p. 175).

First, the slogan “thick line” was announced. This catchphrase comes from Tadeusz Mazowiecki’s parliamentary *exposé* given when accepting the office of the prime minister on August 24, 1989. Mazowiecki said:

“The government that I will form assumes no responsibility for the mortgage it inherits. However, it has an impact on the circumstances in which we have to act. Below the past, we draw a thick line.” (*Stenographic report August 23–24, 1989*, p. 86).

Initially, these words meant that the government of Mazowiecki had separated itself from responsibility for the state of the economy. Later, the “thick line” was interpreted with reference to the problems related to the failure of the state to account for the Polish People’s Republic system and its authorities. Then, the former communist activist Aleksander Kwaśniewski announced his electoral motto “Let’s choose the future” during the presidential campaign in 1995. These slogans, the promoted “black vision of decommunisation” as well as the break with the past made the differences between the perpetrator and the victim blurred. Therefore, as Śpiewak postulates in his conclusions, “Reconstruction of memory is, or can be, primarily a social process, which is as much about simple justice as it is about restoring basic moral order.”

The book “Memory of Communism” is undoubtedly crucial in the public debate on settling accounts with the past. It may also be a point of reference in research conducted by historians. The lack of full decommunisation and lustration in Poland has its consequences. Not only is the memory of Communism blurred, but also the attitudes are relativized. Moreover, even the crimes are justified. This may all lead to the falsification of history. Accounting for the totalitarian past is not an act of revenge, but of historical justice. Communist criminals never took responsibility for their actions—and had never been brought before a court. Punishing them becomes unrealistic and sometimes even impossible. The battle for memory continues. It is about presenting a real picture of history, showing how it really was, who was the victim and who was the perpetrator, and not how its participants and observers remembered a given event.

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