

Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, Authoritarianism. The Politics of Public Education in Poland

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Abstract

We focus on describing some of the effects of austerity capitalism in the public educational sector in Poland, a country that was a part of the Soviet bloc from WWII and experienced dramatic transformation after 1989. This transformation from “communism” to “democracy” involved all spheres of the life of society and individuals and meant a dramatic re-orientation of the social, political and economic imaginary. We see the current post-transformation moment in Poland as characterized by the dominance of three fundamental tendencies: predatory neoliberalism, creeping authoritarianism and nationalist neoconservatism. For the purposes of this text, we will begin with a short discussion of neoliberalism as it took over post-communist Central Europe during the last decade of the 20th century and onwards. We will focus especially on privatization as a key dimension of neoliberal transformation intertwined as it was with strong neoconservative tendencies, centering in our discussion on the effects of these trends on Polish public education.

Keywords: *Poland, public education, neoconservatism, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, nationalism*

Introduction

The writing of this text takes place in a difficult period in the modern history of Poland. A little over three years ago, on August 6, 2015 Andrzej Duda, the candidate of the right-wing nationalist party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) took over as the Polish President. His victory paved the way for the party's triumph in the general elections in November 2015. As a result, Law and Justice now rules Poland with an overall majority that allows them to enforce decisions without entering into negotiations and coalitions with other political allies or opponents. The new Polish Parliament is composed of 460 MPs who all represent right of centre positions on the political spectrum with no left-wing representation. This is an unprecedented situation in the country in the period since 1989, one which has generated an entirely new way in which political decision-making processes proceed. Many of us watched with powerless astonishment night-time Parliamentary 'debates' which ended up passing resolutions that disempowered the Constitutional Court, curtailed the independence of the media and expanded surveillance rights of the state secret service, enforcing an authoritarian control of the state in key arenas of political life.

On the international arena, government policy has been directed toward a confrontation with the European Union, resulting in the historically first activation of Article 7 of the EU Treaty, a procedure which can lead to the suspension of certain rights from a member state. Of particular concern to the EU are actions of the Polish state deemed illegal according to EU legislation, especially those in the judicial sphere (the political subordination of the prosecutor's office to the Minister of Justice and the devastation of the Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court), and those related to environmental protection (concentration of the state's energy policy on fossil

fuels, limitation of focus on renewable energy sources and the destruction of the Białowieża Primeval Forest by wood mining).

It is important to stress that the discourse of those in power is strongly grounded in nationalist and religious sentiments, relying on anti-immigrant / anti-refugee, anti-German, anti-European rhetoric and a populist claim to support the underprivileged. What we are seeing is a neoconservative backlash (Frank, 2004; Hochschild, 2017) carried out in the name of a “positive change.” This change is for the benefit of “good Poles” who are presumed to be socially excluded, devoted Catholics and *really* Polish. These imagined good Poles are pitted against the other Poles of a “worse sort” whose views are pro-Europe, pro-pluralism, pro-gender equality and pro-ecology. The divisive governmental discourse and actions are reflected in the streets of Polish cities that have experienced a massive growth in public demonstrations. On the one hand, these have been led by nationalist movements, such as the National Rebirth of Poland, which organized highly visible and internationally commented events, including an anti-refugee demonstration that was concluded by the burning of an effigy of a Hasidic Jew bearing a European Union flag in the historic centre of Wrocław (Haaretz, 2016; Harulkowicz, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Sokol, 2015). On the other hand, people have expressed mass support for various anti-government grassroots initiatives, including mass demonstrations organized by the Committee for the Defence of Democracy, the Citizens of the Republic of Poland or the All-Poland Women’s Strike. In addition to these mass demonstrations, Poland has seen other powerful opposition activities led by excluded social groups, including the long-term occupation of the Polish Parliament by people with disabilities and their families as well as the powerful general teachers’ strike, which paralyzed public schools during the 2019 spring exam period.

We want to argue that the current ultraconservative takeover of the Polish state and the ensuing sociopolitical predicament is not sudden and unexpected, but an outcome of the historic process of post-communist transformation, which has been characterized by three fundamental tendencies – predatory neoliberalism, nationalist neoconservatism and creeping authoritarianism.

i) The first and foremost is *predatory neoliberalism*, which has generated deep discrepancies in wealth through immiseration. Karol Modzelewski, a prominent historian and one of the leaders of the pre-1989 anti-government movement, summarized the quandary:

Poland was modernized through transformation, but its social costs turned out to be very high, and even more importantly - very permanent. The income discrepancy is one of the highest in Europe. These inequities are permanent, inherited from generation to generation. The inequities of income are reflected in the access to health care, education and chances of advancement for future generations. [...] Equality of opportunity remains in the realm of dreams. Most of the children and grandchildren of those left behind by the ship of neoliberal modernization will never be able to get on board. (Modzelewski, 2013: 405-406)

ii) The second, closely interrelated tendency has been the reliance of the post-1989 political leaders on *neoconservative ideologies* tied strongly to the enforcement of the nationalist historical imaginary. Anthropologist Michal Buchowski refers to “three notable legacies: Patriotism/Nationalism, Catholicism, Consumerism à la Communism” (Buchowski, 2001: 79-81), which had shaped Polish opposition to the totalitarian system and made Poland “the most reluctant and rebellious member of the Soviet Bloc” (Buchowski, 2001: 78). After 1989, strengthened by their most recent historic role, these legacies continued to persist in the post-1989 era to the detriment of cultural, economic and political pluralism.

iii) The exclusion of alternative visions has been one of the most persistent phenomena of the post-1989 sociopolitical and economic reality, and expressed itself in the growing culture of containment that came to dominate the public sphere (Cervinkova, 2014), paving the way to renewed *authoritarianism*. By containment, we refer to practices whose goal it is to exclude the conditions of possibility for public debate, which is key to participatory democracy. Containment - the silencing and repression of alternative voices - has been a key instrument in realizing the neoliberal and neoconservative vision for Poland as a newly democratic and capitalist country of national harmony. These containment practices have for long characterized Polish public discourse, contributing greatly to the drawing of the limits of Polish democracy. Today, it is clear that Poland has joined the growing group of countries, whose political system is defined by the rule of the majority brought to power through free elections, but not characterized by freedoms ensured by constitutional democracy. Polish sociologist Maciej Gdula sees this new form of authoritarianism as defined by the “undifferentiation of difference” (Gdula, 2018) – the political tendency to create one-dimensional polity unified in the realm of culture, politics, religion and sexuality. This system paradoxically relies on democratic instruments to introduce and maintain undemocratic order:

Today's authoritarianism is also distinguished from the former one by its attitude to democracy. In the past, authoritarianism directly targeted the democratic rule and was supposed to be an antidote to degenerated parliamentarianism. Today, it benefits from the democratic imaginary and seeks legitimacy through broad mobilization and elections (Gdula, 2017: 38).

As we are writing this article, the parliamentary majority is continuing in its offensive against democratic institutions, solidifying authoritarian rule, which

builds on the conditions of possibility created by the neoliberal and neoconservative politics of post-communist transformation.

Containment is also an important element of neoliberal and neoconservative education (Popen 2002), which suppresses critical thinking to maintain “the social universe of Capital” (Malot, Hill, Banfield, 2013: 13). Curry Malott, Dave Hill and Grant Banfield point to the repressive and controlling ways through which neoliberalism is enforced with the help of neoconservatism through pressures on education, educators and students (Malot, Hill, Banfield, 2013: 6). Polish educational theorists and researchers described the deployment of these mechanisms in Poland (Kwieciński, 2012; Szkudlarek, 2005; 2010; Michałowska, 2013; Rudnicki, 2016; Potulicka and Rutkowiak, 2012). An important feature of the process whereby neoliberalism and neoconservatism came to dominate social life and education in Poland, has been its TINA (There-Is-No-Alternative) character and the inconspicuous way in which it has been accepted and promulgated. The critical media commentator Jacek Żakowski claims:

In Polish politics [TINA] has become so omnipotent that even elementary political questions (“how much private and how much public,” “what kind of stratification,” “what role of the state,” “how to protect public interest in the economy,” “what kind of society are we trying to build”) have been effectively excluded from the debate. Where there is no alternative, there can be no discussion! (Żakowski, 2005: 9).

The Mimetic Inevitability of Neoliberalism

In an illuminating political economy of urban education, Pauline Lipman speaks of neoliberalism as a new social imaginary, a way that people have come to think of the way that the world is and should be organized. The power of neoliberalism, she says, “lies in its saturation of social practices and

consciousness, making it difficult to think otherwise” (Lipman, 2011: 6). Postcommunist transformation must thus be seen as the reordering of the social imaginary facilitated by a concrete set of policies and institutionalized changes. It is a process of change which Hana Cervinkova, in her ethnography of the changing imaginary of the Czech military officers during the post-socialist era, referred to as *mimesis* (Cervinkova, 2006, 2009). She argues that the reorientation of the Czech military following the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact and the expansion of NATO, involved a radical reorientation of the objective of the human and social capacity and urge to imitate, from the Soviet to the Western style military discipline and the related geographic location of the enemy from the West to the East. A similar lens, we argue, could be applied to transformation as a whole, which in the case of Central European satellites of the Soviet Union involved a 180-degree reorientation of the objective to be imitated from centrally planned socialist economy to neoliberalism.

One way to illustrate the speed of this mimetic change is through the Polish ‘career’ of the writings of Peter McLaren. When McLaren’s text *Language, schooling, and subjectivity: Towards a critical pedagogy of experience* (1988) first appeared in the Polish translation in 1991, most readers who were not familiar with the Western neoliberal experience read the text as a work of science fiction. The language and the categories McLaren used were very distant and foreign to the Polish imaginary, at the time still grounded in the socialist experience. McLaren’s text was saturated with Marxist terminology that for Polish readers was the language used (or rather misused) by the previous regime. It was also critical of a reality toward which people’s mimetic faculty was now reoriented and striving. The critical language and perspective that McLaren used to describe the world of Western neoliberal education was at first well-received only by a rather small group of Polish academics. Now, more than twenty years later, the situation is radically different. When Peter

McLaren's book *Life in Schools* (1994) was published in Polish in 2015 at the occasion of the V International Conference of Critical Education in Wrocław, it became an instant bestseller. Twenty years into the neoliberal transition, McLaren's book was describing a world people in Poland have come to experience first-hand and which has now become painfully easy to 'imagine'.

Privatization, Marketization, Austerity

A key category that embodies the process of neoliberal and neoconservative change in post-communist Poland is privatization. Between 1990-2011, 7551 state businesses were privatized and by 2012 the Polish state was the owner of only 83 remaining enterprises (Central Statistical Office, 2012: 28). The swiftness of privatization was staggering - most of it was concluded in the 1990s, when state businesses were still in poor shape and did not dispose of modern technologies, which impacted their sales value and the professional trajectories of workers. While privatization was presented as the sole rescue mechanism for Polish companies and Polish economy as a whole, from today's point of view it is difficult to fully justify its speed, reach and the lack of accompanying regulatory mechanisms. Qualitative studies of privatization of Polish firms following their sale to foreign companies showed its detrimental effects, especially in the area of social and human relations, employee rights, gender equality, trade unions prerogatives and general social equity and justice (Dunn, 2004; Hardy, 2009) But privatization in the 1990s was not limited just to the sphere of economy. Instead, it is safe to say that privatization touched all areas of life and constituted the basis of people's shared social experience in the first decade of the new regime. It deeply affected people's imaginaries and identities. Polish intellectuals such as Karol Modzelewski who were once deeply involved in the anti-totalitarian struggle, reflected on the transformation of workers' consciousness and the dissolution of working-class solidarity, observing with sadness how the proud Polish workers who built the Solidarity

Trade Unions that brought down the totalitarian rule, were transformed by the market economy into employees with fragmented loyalties and broken social ties (Modzelewski, 2013: 375-425).

The transition to neoliberalism in the case of post-communist societies was especially drastic. This is because, unlike in capitalist societies where neoliberalism replaced older forms of capitalism, in the post-communist world the TINA neoliberalism was the immediate successor of state socialism under which property and property relations were under state's control. What is probably most surprising is the unquestioned automatism with which the transition from state socialism to neoliberalism was implemented. Economic transition followed the logic of war - "the victor takes it all," transforming Central European countries with long socialist history into neoliberalism's global strongholds. The chief economists of the new national governments opened their post-socialist markets to free market economy through privatization coded in national laws and policies. These neoliberal transitions, however, were inspired by and overseen by transnational bodies, primarily the IMF. These international institutions not only supported the privatization and marketization of economy, but they were also the primary guardians of austerity as a necessary accompanying measure. Poland, like other post-communist economies, was propelled from the socialist welfare state to the global neoliberal order. It is important to note that in Poland, the shock-therapy reforms were one of the most sweeping in the whole post-communist bloc and their radicalism produced social, economic and political results whose effects Poland still faces today (Klein, 2008: 97-125) In Poland, the shock doctrine was referred to as the Sachs-Balcerowicz plan, after the last names of its chief architects – the American / Polish team of economists – Jeffrey Sachs and Leszek Balcerowicz. But while Sachs has since come to criticize the predatory nature and radicalism with which Polish neoliberalism had been engineered

(Żakowski, 2009; Kołodko, 2007: 9), Balcerowicz has never expressed regret (Jabłoński and Stankiewicz, 2014).

Privatization and the introduction of the market economy produced entirely new experiences for Poles. Chief among them was unemployment, a concept that has not (at least officially) existed in post-WWII Poland (hence the first annual measurement of the unemployment rate by the Main Statistical Office did not take place until 1990). The rise was astounding - from 6.5% (1.2 million) in 1990 to 20% in 2002 (3.2 million). The incremental tendency was somewhat halted after Poland's accession to the European Union and subsequent work-related emigration, bringing unemployment down to 9.5% in 2008 and 9.8% in 2015 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2015: 18-19).

In addition to emigration, the rates of unemployment have been lowered by the great rise in the number of university students. The emergence of higher education as a major area of the neoliberal market economy is tightly interwoven with European Union policies and associated promotion of the market value of higher education (Grollios, 2018). It is worth illustrating this exponential trend with concrete numbers. In 1989, the number of graduating university students in Poland was 50,000. In 1996 the number rose to 116,000, in 2004 to 304,000 and in December 2011 it was 498,000 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2015: 45). The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in Poland was 12% in the academic year 1990/91, 22% in 1995/96, 48% in 2005/06, 52% in 2010/11 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2015: 44). Associated with the rise in student numbers has been the development of the private and semi-private higher education business. In 1989/90, there were 92 institutions of higher education registered in Poland (an overwhelming majority of them public). In 2010/2011 the number rose to 480, out of which 330 were private

institutions educating 33.3% of students (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2014: 30-33).

Privatization, Marketization and Austerity in Poland's Educational Sector Educational Reforms of 1991, 1999, 2016

There were three major Polish education reforms after 1989 (1991, 1999, 2016), which reflected the larger political agendas of the country's leadership. The first reform of 1991 was a part of the general decentralization trend and was set on removing education from the sole control of the state. During this time, we see a rise in the number of community schools as well as soft developments which included bottom-up curricular innovations, parent-school collaborations and efforts to introduce school-based democratic decision making (Rudnicki, 2016; Skura, 2013; Śliwerski, 2013).

The second reform was introduced in 1999 by the conservative government and reflected the neoliberalization of the Polish economy, subordinating education to competition-driven efficiency indicators and neoconservative cultural programming. This reform introduced a new systemic structure of compulsory schooling (6 years of elementary education + 3 years of middle school + 3 years of high-school or vocational school) and a conservative curriculum resulting in the parametric increase in the quality of education (measured by PISA tests), and economic immiseration of schools through cost reductions (Białecki, Jakubowski and Wiśniewski, 2017; Chomczyńska-Rubacha, 2011; Herbst, Herczyński and Levitas, 2009; Suchecka, 2013; Zamojska, 2011).

The latest reform of 2016 restored the pre-1999 educational system structure (8 years of elementary school followed by 4 years of high school/vocational school) and introduced a new curriculum, which reflects the state's neoconservative agenda (especially in the human and social sciences). The

effects of this reform on teachers, pupils and schools were drastic. Many teachers lost jobs due to the liquidation of the middle schools. The extension of elementary education resulted in infrastructural problems, with schools working in multiple shifts to accommodate increased number of classes and students. Most importantly, while the length of schooling remains the same (12 years), the abolishment of the 3-year middle school is likely to have a negative impact when it comes to the equality of access of students to further education. The role of the middle schools, which were obligatory after 6 years of elementary school, was to equalize educational chances for pupils from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. After the newest reform, which lengthens the time of elementary schooling to 8 years followed by 4-year high-school reserved for those who score high on centralized exams is likely to stream socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils to vocational training. Moreover, the school reform, which was introduced without sufficient preparation and without any transition stage, furthered the precarity of teachers' situations and careers and because of the speediness with which it was implemented, stretched the limits of the teachers' and schools' ability to manage the permanent state of emergency. (Sadura, 2017; Sikora, 2017; Suchecka, 2017).

Austerity in Education

Privatization and marketization have touched all levels of education in Poland, shrinking the role of the public sector, turning education into a key commodity of the neoliberal economy. It is important to stress that commodification of education concerns the Polish educational sector as a whole and is by no means limited to private institutions (Kwiek, 2014). The process of education's neoliberalization was enabled by several interlinked dimensions/strategies. The first one concerns the change in the structure of financing, whereby budgetary responsibility for pre-primary, primary and secondary education was transferred from the state level to the local governments (beginning of the 1990s).

Currently, local governments receive annual subventions for education from the central government, but this money is not sufficient to finance the cost of public education. Wealthier towns and cities frequently co-finance public education from their own funds, while in other cases (especially in poorer regions) central subsidy is often misallocated by the local administration to compensate for shortages in other areas (e.g. infrastructural investments). This, of course, generates further discrepancies in wealth and educational levels between regions, individual schools, and pupils.

Linked with this limiting of financial resources is the restructuring of schools by local governments, which act under increasing financial pressures. These are especially hard on small rural administrations with limited income (from taxes, projects and subventions) even though even large and relatively wealthy agglomerations have adopted emergency mechanisms due to the neoliberal budget optimization strategies. These measures take on the form of liquidation, consolidation or hidden privatization of public education. Supported by new legislation, such as the law of 2009, local governments can close down schools which have fewer than 70 pupils (Dziemianowicz-Bąk and Dzierzowski, 2014: 14-30). The way this usually happens is that, at the beginning of the school year, the local community receives information from the mayor that their school will be closed (liquidation) and pupils can choose to be transferred to a larger regional school (consolidation). Alternatively, parents and teachers can decide to create a non-governmental organization, which can open a school in the same building, with the same pupils and many of the same teachers. These newly established schools are officially called non-public schools to avoid the word “private,” hence we speak of “hidden privatization” (Obidniak, 2014). Teachers work under different contracts than in the public sector, without employee rights and protections, generally earning 25% less money, working on average 30% more hours than in the public sector, with contracts often limited to 10 months a

year from September to June (Rzekanowski, 2013). Between 1995/6 and 2011/12 school years, the number of primary and elementary schools run by NGOs tripled (from 187 institutions to 681 and from 18845 pupils to 38657). Most of these new schools are very small, with an average count of 55 pupils studying in classes 1 - 6. The number of such non-public secondary schools has risen from 219 (7132 pupils) in 2000/01 to 397 (24,514 pupils) in 2011/12 (Rzekanowski, 2013: 195-196).

It is important to note that many of the school closures occur in small rural communities where the local school functioned as one of the few centres of local cultural life (Dziemianowicz-Bąk, Dzierzgowski, 2014: 31-50). Consequently, school closures have wider negative social impact. There are now communities in Poland where there are no public schools left and under austerity measures the local governments channel subventions to non-public (private) schools.

The neoliberalization of Polish schools through austerity measures touches all aspects of the schools' functioning and includes the privatization of school canteens, security, cleaning services, extra-curricular activities for children, class materials and utensils, school trips. The financial burden of austerity measures is increasingly transferred onto parents, deepening social inequalities and access to education. Inequalities are furthered strengthened by another important aspect of neoliberalization of Polish education - the introduction of mechanisms of accountability of pupils, teachers and schools through high stakes testing. First implemented in 2002, tests are now the norm in Polish schools on all levels, contributing to the culture of rivalry and the destruction of social solidarities. High stakes testing produced competition between individual schools and has been linked to deepening institutional differences and school closures (Lipman, 2004).

Apart from parents and pupils, it is, of course, teachers who carry the weight of the austerity measures and immiseration. According to 2015 OECD report, the salaries of Polish teachers are among the lowest in the European Union with the starting salary of 15,000 USD and the maximum on the scale of 26,000 USD per year (OECD, 2015, pp. 440-444). The conditions of teachers' work and advancement have been under permanent political attack - especially the guarantees of permanent employment, required levels of qualifications, workload, and social security. Teachers have combatted these attacks primarily through trade unions, which belong to the most active trade unions in Poland (Smak and Walczak, 2015). Most notably, building on the historical legacy whereby Polish teachers were one of the groups most strongly represented in the Polish trade unions - Solidarność - that eventually led to the negotiations of the Round Table and the first semi-free elections in June 1989, the Polish teachers organized an all-nation general teachers' strike in April 9, 2019.

Neoconservatism in Education

As Malott, Hill and Banfield argue, "neoliberalism is accompanied, enforced, by neoconservatism in its repressive and controlling forms. This control is asserted increasingly strongly over education, educators and students." (Malott, Hill and Banfield, 2013: 6). Education in post-communist Poland has been equally transformed by neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies, both of which took education by storm, marginalizing alternative visions and perspectives. The neoconservative change has been enabled by the implementation of conservative national ideologies through the curriculum and the subordination of the educational sector to the Catholic Church.

Legitimized by its historical role in bringing down the one-party Communist rule in Poland, the Catholic Church has been a key player in the post-1989 Polish politics. After 1993, when Poland signed the Concordat with the Vatican,

religion became an official school subject at all levels of primary and secondary education (grade 1 through 12). The introduction of religion in schools opened them to the direct influence of the Catholic Church which is in charge of religion as the subject, operating beyond the jurisdiction of the school Principal and public educational authorities. While, nominally, religion is not obligatory and parents should have a choice between classes in religion and ethics, the reality is different. Most schools did not offer ethics until 2014 (Biuro Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich, 2015: 34-48) when it became somewhat obligatory to have at least a limited number of ethics classes. Social pressures have led an overwhelming number of parents to enrol their children in religion classes (Dziwisz, 2012), taught by priests, nun and teachers appointed by the Church. The presence of the Catholic Church in schools has been a source of symbolic violence (crosses decorating classrooms, the presence of Church officials at school ceremonies, ostracism against children who do not attend religion, lack of alternative spaces/classes for those who do not attend), creating a hostile environment to difference (Stańczyk, 2011).

Church influence imbues Polish neoconservative curriculum in deep and hidden ways. The areas which have raised most attention among critical scholars are stereotypical visions of gender and family roles, and of ethnic and religious minorities. An important interrelated focus in critical educational scholarship has been on the nationalist historical curriculum, which enforces gender and ethnic stereotypes and militarism (Chmura-Rutkowska, Głowacka-Sobiech, Skórzyńska, 2015; Chomczyńska-Rubacha, 2011). For many years, feminist scholars have also criticized the lack of modern sex education in Polish schools and stereotypical visions of family life promoted under the school subject *Life in the Family* (Izdebski, Żak 2014: 4-11). The effects of neoconservatism in education are staggering: beyond the results of scholarly analysis of curricula and textbooks which reflect the neoconservative political agenda, we are

observing a rise in extreme nationalist attitudes among youth who participate in hate movements that openly promote anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, anti-left, anti-gay, anti-Other politics. Hate speech and xenophobic and racist violence entered Polish public spaces, gaining coverage in both official and social media. Ethnographic research shows how teachers and youth struggle to navigate this deepening nationalism permeating both curriculum and public sphere (Rubin and Cervinkova, 2020). It is also important to note that official curricula as well as extracurricular activities set on promoting open attitudes and visions of the world introduced before 2016 are being eliminated from the spaces of Polish schools (Gawlicz, Rudnicki, Starnawski, 2015; Cervinkova, 2016).

Conclusion

In this text, we have described how immiseration capitalism has impacted the Polish educational sector. We have tried to show the current situation as an outcome of the historic process of post-communist transformation characterized by predatory neoliberalism, nationalist and religious neoconservatism and authoritarianism, which has been creeping into Polish public life through mechanisms of containment. As an outcome of this historical process, Polish education finds itself in a quandary. Pressured by austerity and accountability measures and smothered by neoconservative ideologies, the spaces for nurturing critical thought and the value of social solidarity and civic courage are constrained to a critical point. But this critical point is also a moment of hope. As we are sending this article to publication on April 21, Polish teachers are in the 13th day of a national strike. The teachers' strike is taking place during the exam period in an overwhelming number of public schools on all education levels in Poland (from kindergartens to high-schools), providing a powerful example of resistance to the injustices of educational austerity through collective organizing.

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