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Trauma of the Polish March

Trauma of the Polish March. The events of March 1968 are usually shown as a type of cataclysm, affecting the whole society, caused by a single agent — the Communist authorities — without the participation of this society. At the same time, it is a founding cataclysm, as it is the starting point of the history of the Polish opposition and the universal resistance against the authorities. The word "trauma" becomes the key word for the description of the events of March, as it is used not so much in the context of the experience of those facing repression and their relatives, but the entire society. The abundance of the trauma discourse prompts its perception as a symptom and raises questions about the hidden Real, i.e. about who suffered the trauma and what this trauma consists in. We propose an analysis of the trauma discourse that takes into consideration the image of the social field created by this discourse. We want to describe games between the individual actors of the events as well as the emerging tensions and stakes in these games. We analyze the image conveyed by the historical discourse about March 1968, established after the Turn of 1989.

Keywords: March 68, the trauma of March 1968, historical discourse

The 1960s was a period of solstice in Poland. The collapse of Stalinism led to the appearance of some new opportunities. On the one hand, a more intensive search for alternative left-wing projects was possible; on the other hand, a return to a national-defined community and strong nationalist tendencies occurred. Władysław Gomułka, the party leader who had been imprisoned for "rightist-nationalist deviation" in the first half of the 1950s, gained power and public support while pledging to follow a "Polish road to socialism." His critics — including intellectuals like Leszek Kołakowski and leaders of the student movement[1] — were looking for new forms of

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[1] Such as Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń, and Karol Modzelewski.

a socialist state and social life by referring to the leftist notion of workers' self-governance and the criticism of tradition. Many writers, filmmakers, and artists followed a similar path. Projects alternative to Stalinism and critical towards nationalism soon began to lose impact. Young intellectuals and activists lost their influence on the course of events and the discourse.

The symbolic and political representation of society became matter of a national, or even nationalist, dispute. The main actors of this clash were the Church, under the leadership of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, and the Communist Party, supported by nationalists gathered around Mieczysław Moczar. The Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy led by Moczar referred to the tradition of the struggle for independence, winning support of not only veteran leftists. The national-patriotic language also attracted people who so far had been reluctant to support the new government, as well as people tormented by it. The Church contradicted the idea of a Catholic nation with the historical policy of the Communist Party formulated around the idea of the struggle of Slavs, especially the Polish, with German imperialism. In 1966 a spectacular confrontation emerged between the Communist Party and the Church during the celebration of the Millennium of the Polish State, which the Church described as the Millennium of Polish Christianity. The letter of the Polish bishops to the German bishops triggered a serious disagreement. Both sides of the conflict combined recognition of nationalism as a platform for social[2] communication and an obvious tool of legitimation. This process was sealed by the events of March '68.

In the collective memory promoted by the authorities and the media since 1989, March '68 is of particular importance in the history of modern Poland. It is the moment of establishing the democratic opposition and its definitive separation from communism. In the dominant narrative, the decision to depart from the leftist project is explained as a way of discrediting the leftist government (and thus the entire leftist project) by the alliance of nationalism and anti-Semitism. At this point emerges the concept of trauma experienced by Polish society as a result of the collision with nationalism and anti-Semitism of Moczar and Gomułka.

Even the most general view of the history of the late 1960s and the history of the democratic opposition proves that nationalism was not compromised. It was strengthened on the side of the authorities, although after the excesses of 1968 and at the beginning of the 1970s it was discreetly softened and exchanged for a policy of modernization, economic growth, and improving standards of living. However, it is worth paying attention to the changes in various currents of the opposition in the 1970s, 1980s, and after 1989. Starting from the 1990s, the national rhetoric, often national-Catholic, has gained momentum. Resistance and a new proper social order were built around the national rhetoric. At the same time anti-communism and a specific reserve against any leftist projects, turned out to be the norm of the Polish

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[2] See *Rok 1966. PRL na zakręcie*, ed. K. Chmielewska, G. Wołowiec, T. Żukowski, Warszawa 2014.

transformations. The sources of this state of affairs can be traced back to the 1960s. Therefore one may assume that the trauma of March '68 was not about a brutal collision with nationalism which lost (also morally).

We must therefore ask the following: what is the trauma of March '68, who experienced it and what that experience was based on? Earlier findings bid to suspect that contemporary representations of trauma hide the actual trauma — resulting from the defeat of the leftist projects and terror of the force of nationalism in society. We will start with examining the category of trauma, the ways it is used, and the way we understand it.

It is worth referring here to the concept of trauma and post-traumatic history, and the associated mechanisms of suppression, transference, re-acting, etc. Trauma is defined as a powerful experience destructive to the identity, which the subject cannot transform into discourse. Its true meaning remains hidden from the subject, and inexpressible, but is constantly "displayed" in projections and fantasies, obscuring this essential lack. The meaning of trauma manifests itself through symptoms, messages that simultaneously reveal and conceal its, overwhelming for the subject, meaning.

This classical Freudian significance of trauma[3] as a permanent injury violating the creation of self is commonly known. We constantly hear about the trauma of childhood, historical traumas, and personal traumas. Nowadays nearly every unpleasant experience that has any formation meaning is called trauma. Thus it is a formula borrowed from Freud, but greatly modified, expanded in meaning, and flattened in scope, although important for the social functioning of the concept. The category of trauma also plays a significant role in humanities — it inspires the theory of art, history of literature, theater criticism, and so on. Moreover, it affects social sciences; it has had a substantial impact on the creation of new research turns. We will be interested in the use of metahistorical and historical turns[4], especially in the study of the Holocaust[5] and post-colonialism[6]. Trauma is combined here with the notion of identity, as well as with collective, generational, and cultural memory. It is always a correlate of a collective being. The category of trauma used today in the humanities

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[3] See S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. C. J. M. Hubback, London and Vienna 1922; idem, *Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. J. Strachey, London 1957.

[4] See C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Expirience. Trauma, Narraitive and History*, Baltimore and London 1996; eadem, "Doświadczenie niczyje: trauma i możliwość historii (Freud, Mojżesz i monoteizm)", trans. K. Bojarska, *Teksty Drugie* 2010, no. 6; A. Bielik-Robson, "Słowo i trauma: czas narracja tożsamość", *Teksty Drugie* 2004, no. 5.

[5] See D. La Capra, *Historia w okresie przejściowym. Doświadczenie, tożsamość, teoria krytyczna*, trans. K. Bojarska, Kraków 2009; idem, *Writting History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore and London 2001. See M. Hirsch, "Żałoba i postpamięć", trans. K. Bojarska, [in:] *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na tle współczesnej humanistyki*, ed. E. Domańska, Poznań 2011; J. E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1988; A. Ubertowska, *Świadectwo — trauma — głos. Literackie reprezentacje Holocaustu*, Kraków 2007.

[6] See works by E. Domańska, H. Gosk, B. Bakuła, E. Kraskowska.

has been greatly enriched by the ideas of Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Zizek, Melani Klein and other psychoanalysts. We think that the concept of Lacan is especially helpful: trauma as not symbolized and resisting any representation, silent and at the same time producing its own discourse which covers it, and perhaps, moves it. The image of meeting with the Real, which has to be overshadowed by the discourse, wrapped by false interpellation, will also appear in our consideration[7].

It should be emphasized that we do not use only the aforementioned academic approaches towards trauma, though undoubtedly they have a profound influence on the social ideas. We focus on analytically extracting the concept of trauma from its public use, we reconstruct its pragmatics and rhetoric, we analyze the discourse and the historical poetics[8]. We are primarily interested in the internal logic of social narrative, in its inconsistency, cracks, caps, and overrides; we want to analyze the strategies of talking about trauma and the discursive, social and imaginative discourse on trauma.

Traumatology

In the Polish public and academic discourse the March events are most often portrayed as a disaster affecting the whole society, caused by a single agent (the Communists, power struggles between the Puławy and Natolin groups) and taking place in a social vacuum. However, it is also depicted as a foundation cataclysm, the starting point of the history of the opposition and civil society. According to many historians, it was more of a symbolic beginning, as attempts at rebellion were socially isolated, resistance was limited to narrow sections of the intelligentsia and quickly suppressed[9]. Again, we can identify a clear metonymy, transferring the image from a social part to the social whole. According to this message, the society suffered a trauma and strengthened its anti-communist resistance[10].

The year 1968 marks a formative stage for the opposition. Krystyna Kersten wrote: "the March marked a breakthrough in the thinking and behavior of that intellectual formation who gradually moved from the delusions characteristic to the

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[7] J. Lacan, "The Unconscious and the Repetition", [in:] *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J.-A. Miller, New York 1973; J. Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955–1956*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. R. Grigg, New York 1993.

[8] R. Koselleck, *Dzieje pojęć. Studia z semantyki i pragmatyki języka społeczno-politycznego*, trans. J. Merecki, W. Kunicki, Warszawa 2009.

[9] "The March events did not produce economic slogans: they were a rebellion against the limitation of freedom, the falsehood of the world of words. This problem concerned, it seems, limited groups of the society. Many years were needed in order for the social, cultural and political to meet on the same plane". B. Brzostek, "Życie codzienne w przeddzień marca", [in:] *Marzec 1968 trzydzieści lat później*, ed. M. Ball, P. Osęka, M. Zaremba, Warszawa 1998, p. 38.

[10] This image is in conflict with the accounts by Tych and Krzemiński.

whole formation towards active political opposition to the system"[11]. This perspective emerges ex-post, to depict the genealogy of the democratic opposition which took power in 1989 and which is retelling its own story, strengthening its heritage and identity. Kula talks in a similar vein: "In March 1968, communism antagonized a significant part of the intellectual elite […] and also put off students who were, in the future, to become (and who have become) the intellectual elite"[12]. Here, too, a certain historical transposition occurs. The history of the 1968 generation becomes, in fact, the history of the heroes of the 1989 transformation. Transposition and metonymyzation mean that the victims of the March are identified with the political opposition, and their experience becomes the history of the whole society, which awakened to resistance, separating itself from the ideas, or rather the delusions, of the Communists. "Trauma" becomes the key word in the description of the March events and, again, it is not a description of the experience of the oppressed and their families, but of the entire society.

As already noted, "the trauma of the March" is most often seen as a trauma of the whole society. The society went through a paroxysm of anti-Semitism and exclusion from power, a shock from which it was difficult to recover. Dariusz Gawin says: "defining the March as 'a shock' explains well the lack of texts created during the course of events — in a state of shock the terror 'robs us of speech' — shock forces silence or screaming, a loud protest"[13]. The year 1968 thus marks the end of the revolutionary faith, and thus the end of the left-wing myth. "The Commandos" (Komandosi) had to leave the Left, although it was still difficult for them to identify with the Right. This foundation shock was the beginning of the civil society, which found its fulfillment in "Solidarity" of 1980–1981 and, eventually, in liberal democracy. Gawin also notes that the March has become a myth into which new narratives could be written.

The earlier silence is therefore overshadowed by a multi-voiced discourse on a new beginning, which makes one wonder whether the abundance of utterances is not a trauma-related symptom, redirecting the attention. The dominant image can be reconstructed as follows: the society and the decent people in the Party suffered a trauma as a result of anti-Semitic and anti-intelligentsia purges. This trauma caused a rapid disillusionment in society, a mass condemnation of the Party, and an exodus from its ranks. The Party lost not only "morally", but also effectively ceased to embody the mirages of social justice, emancipation, combating anti-Semitism. The communist government lost its social and ethical legitimacy. This image, however, is far from true.

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[11] K. Kersten, "Marzec 1968 a postawy intelektualistów wobec komunizmu", [in:] *Marzec 1968 trzydzieści lat później*, p. 78.

[12] M. Kula, "Marcowe błoto", [in:] idem, *Uparta sprawa. Żydowska? Polska? Ludzka?*, Kraków 2004, p. 192.

[13] D. Gawin, "Potęga mitu. O stylu politycznego myślenia pokolenia Marca 68", [in:] *Marzec 1968 trzydzieści lat później*, p. 287.

Images of the March

The inconsistencies of this narrative became obvious at the time of its appearance in the late 1960s, displaying the unsaid reality and the actual source of the sustained shock. At the same time they reveal the hidden picture of the events.

The object of the March narratives is to define the causal agents of the events. Combining communism and nationalism diverts attention from all the actors on the social scene and the games they play. Three strategies of removing the society from the image can be identified in the narrative.

1. "This is an internal matter for the Party"

The writings of Cardinal Wyszyński, who in the Polish historical consciousness embodies resistance against communism in the 1960s, contain a telling passage:

> a) There is no national or social anti-Semitic movement in Poland nowadays, as there was before the war;
> b) while within the party there are disputes, affecting Jews from the administrative apparatus of the Party and the state, where there were quite a lot of them; consequently, Jews belonging to a certain category are leaving Poland;
> c) Polish society accepts it with relief, though without hate towards the Jews, in fact Poles are helping out[14].

We are at the center of the discourse on the year 1968. The text diverts the focus of interest away from Polish society as a whole. The actions of the society are not discussed, only its assessment of events or its reactions to the matters external to itself. For the March of 1968 was an internal affair of the Communists/the Party/the Jews excluding each other. There was no reason to get involved in this kind of politics. Some Jews/Communists who had been in power until then, and "there were quite a lot of them" (here emerges the image of "Jew-infested government") had to give way to those who had been seeking power or had exercised it partially, but had only just grasped it fully. Wyszyński carried out a purge, a backstage coup, to say bluntly: they finished each other off, but none of this should have concerned Poles.

Cardinal Wyszyński's notes emphasize that this was not in any way a matter of concern for the whole society, because anti-Semitism did not exist (in its pre-war form), neither in a political nor social dimension! Moreover, it was only "a certain category of Jews leaving Poland", not Poland's full citizens. The whole incident had, therefore, nothing to do with anti-Semitism, which, after all, had vanished. The society was free from any responsibility for the March events.

This narrative develops the script of the anti-Semitic Judeo-Communism (Żydokomuna) myth and as such speaks from inside the anti-Semitic perspective. Like any

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[14] The Primate's note dated 14 November 1968, [in:] P. Raina, *Kardynał Wyszyński*, vol. 8, Warszawa 1998, pp. 217–218.

statement of this kind it does not have to be consistent (and indeed it is not), which does not diminish its rhetorical or pragmatic power. The paradoxes are blindingly obvious: there was no anti-Semitism in Polish society and March of 1968 was about infighting among the Jews, i.e., the Communists. However, Polish society — and it is not clear why — gladly accepted emigration of Jewish citizens (cf. point c) above). The departure of Jews brought relief, but "the society" could not be accused of anti-Semitism, because it was "helping out" the Jews, although it is not clear what this help would have consisted in. And thus "the society" appears in a double image. In the foreground, it disappears as a significant actor; in the background it identifies itself as a benevolent helper. Despite everything, though, Wyszyński's statement clearly reveals that those who "left" had been excluded from the community in advance, as a foreign body, and that their exclusion was enthusiastically welcomed by the society.

2. "Demons were awakened"

The strategy of protecting the society from the accusations of anti-Semitism often focuses on the course of political events, repression and forced emigration. The social and cultural processes shaping the field disappear with the disappearance of the actor or actors making up "the society". Even eminent modern historians dealing with social history emphasize the lack of sources and the inability to create any broader social picture, remaining content with vague statements that the Polish March of 1968 "awakened the demons". "It is arguable to what degree the anti-Semitic slogans 'caught on' outside the party and police apparatus — but many demons awakened at the time. The more spontaneous anti-Jewish acts, whether intentionally induced by the apparatus or encouraged by its propaganda, combined with the prevailing atmosphere in Poland, led to a wave of emigration of people of Jewish origin"[15].

Let us look at the imagery in this passage. The society is not an active force. The whole event consists in manipulation, and the causative agent is the apparatus and its propaganda. The demons that have so far been asleep, quiet, and absent, wake up in a social vacuum, somewhat unexpectedly. The use of the poetics of sleep and awakening creates a distance from any kind of agency. The second factor turns out to be the impersonal "atmosphere", which, like fate, dooms "people of Jewish origin" to emigration. This is a most euphemistic and impersonal image. Removal of all action and thus agency from the entity of "the society" becomes an important feature and the object of this description. In another passage we read: "it is very difficult to determine to what extent the March slogans gained purchase with people. In a system in which the public could not freely express opinions, this question is very difficult to answer"[16].

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[15] M. Kula, op. cit., p. 189.

[16] Cf. also on reluctant grass-roots impulses in the society. "The most interesting thing is the size of the latter. It is also the most difficult matter to investigate in the prevailing at the time conditions of the lack of the freedom of expression". Ibid., p. 209.

This lack of sources and opportunities to examine social attitudes declared by a social historian seems astonishing, especially when we recall that the events of 1956 could be clearly and comprehensively described, taking into account a wide range of individual and collective behaviors, expressed in various accounts and documents. At both historical moments censorship operated vigorously. But some things could be determined after all: "Clear protests against the March were infrequent. It was not their time"[17]. To read it bluntly: the vast majority of anti-Semitic persecution and repression was not met by resistance from the society.

3. "Conformism"

Marcin Zaremba frames this issue carefully, in terms of probabilities, estimates and experiences: "in mid-March a polarization of attitudes towards the student protest occurred. I propose that to a large extent, the workers and peasants either consciously supported the Party authorities in the conflict with the students […] or behaved in a conformist manner. […] Although no estimates are possible, it seems that the conformist attitude dominated in Polish society"[18]; "the public demand for effective measures to eliminate the Zionists may have been invented by propaganda, but had its roots in the society"[19]. Conformism becomes the key category in the description of social attitudes. Zaremba does not elaborate the notion of conscious support he has pointed out. He is content with, fundamentally opportunistic, consent to the authorities' actions. Thus he draws a picture in which the society goes with the flow of external events, with instances of strong support or vigorous engagement pushed into the shadows.

Engagement in the March

Feliks Tych, Director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw from 1995 to 2006, was one of the few historians who had tried to reconstruct the picture of the events while avoiding the myths associated with the image of trauma. Tych emphasizes a widespread social response to the March, spontaneous rallies, support for the purges from some intellectuals (such as the sociologist Józef Chałasiński), Catholics (not only from among PAX members) and the former Home Army (Armia Krajowa) members: "Polish society was sent a certain signal: look, here we are, new blood in the Party, getting rid of the foreigners — the Jews […] who were also the perpetrators of the security police crimes during the Stalinist times: We cannot be free of Soviet

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[17] Ibid., p. 192.
[18] M. Zaremba, "Biedni Polacy 68. Społeczeństwo polskie wobec wydarzeń marcowych w świetle raportów KW i MSW dla kierownictwa PZPR", [in:] *Marzec 1968 trzydzieści lat później*, p. 150.
[19] Ibid., p. 169.

control, but at least here in the country itself, we will rule ourselves, a Pole won't hurt a fellow Pole"[20].

Describing the situation in terms of communications turns out to be the key to understanding the social scene of the late 1960s. The message mentioned above was in fact sent as content meaningful to the recipient, who was willing to decode and accept it. As Tych emphasizes: "1968 saw a record growth in the Party ranks"[21] (by 34% compared with the previous year; in 1969 the number of applicants fell by 21%). And further: "In March '68 […] the crowd of eager executors of the will of the Moczar group and the PUWP (PZPR) leadership stretched beyond the usual group of opportunists fulfilling their duty and getting involved in the earlier political campaigns of the Party"[22]. In summary, in Tych's opinion the events of the March did not just take place inside the circles of power, and the participation of "the society" cannot be put down to opportunism, or reduced to acting under duress exerted by the authoritarian power. A similar image can be found in Ireneusz Krzemiński's statements. Krzemiński, a Polish sociologist researching anti-Semitism, says that it was March '68 that granted the government popular legitimacy. The Polish People's Republic (PRL) has become "ours" and so did its politics[23].

Whose trauma? What is trauma?

In the light of Tych's and Krzemiński's texts (the support for the March '68 clashing with the image of a whole-society trauma), it is clear that the image reconstructed above is not a factual historical description but a phantasm, a symptom configured around a real experience. It is worth considering whose experience has been ignored and who actually suffered the trauma. The answer lies on the surface: the opposition, the revisionists, the persecuted intelligentsia were certainly traumatized by the March. They became disillusioned about the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL) which disgraced itself by its nationalist-chauvinistic and anti-Semitic actions, they ultimately rejected communism, and perhaps Left-wing politics in general. This is how the process can be described in a nutshell.

Let us look closer at its logic: an experience of this kind would certainly put people off Gomułka and Moczar, would lead to the rejection of chauvinistic nationalism and, most of all, would strengthen the distrust and criticism of the nationalistic legitimization of the government. And if the revisionists were to actually achieve

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[20] F. Tych, "Kilka uwag o Marcu 1968", [in:] *Marzec 1968 trzydzieści lat później*, Warsaw 1998, p. 19.

[21] Ibid., p. 20.

[22] Ibid., p. 23.

[23] I. Krzemiński, "Antysemityzm, socjalizm i nowa świadomość. Długofalowe konsekwencje Marca 68", [in:] *Marzec 1968 trzydzieści lat później*, p. 267.

some kind of a moral victory, it would entail the strengthening of the left-wing and critical project, opposing the discredited communist-nationalist model.

The events unfolded quite differently: the March put an end not to the chauvinistic nationalism and anti-Semitism in Poland, but to the left-wing opposition, which from then on leant towards solutions much closer — ideologically, politically and morally — to Christian Democrats, to recall only *The Genealogy of the Defiant* (*Rodowody niepokornych*) by Bohdan Cywiński (1971) or *The Church and the Left* (*Kościół, lewica, dialog*) by Adam Michnik (1977) — books which take a revisionist position toward earlier revisionism, no longer seeking a left-wing path and breaking off from the traditional left-wing policies, recognizing the power of the nationalist and religious legitimacy.

The erstwhile left-wingers entered the discourse field defined by the right-wing — whether Moczar's, or Catholic. It should be noted that this field did not appear in the 1960s, it had already had a notable presence in the universe of social concepts and images, and strongly affected the cultural and social world from the very beginning of the communist (Polish People's Republic) era. It had remained, however, only one of the options, and the counterweight had been clearly present in the public space in the form of a strong project of the communist government, but also the accompanying left-wing projects of varying social provenance. In the mid-1960s these projects were placed onto losing positions as compared to the national identification, identity and legitimacy.

The trauma was therefore suffered not by the public, but by the left-wing opposition, or, more broadly, by the left-wing and critical Polish intelligentsia. What does this trauma actually consist in? As we have seen, the 1960s made the Left recognize and accept the strength of nationalist legitimization. The revolutionary subjects of its social projects (the excluded of the inter-war period, the classes emancipated by the communist) turned out to strongly reject the critical language; they rejected the revolution, turned out to be conservative. The left-wing intelligentsia recognized itself as a formation suspended in a social void. Looking for land to stand on, it found it in the shared code of the society: in its nationalism; and slowly moved to more or less nationalistic positions, leading to the supremacy of national-Romantic aesthetics in social and cultural life of the 1980s.

However clearly these changes can be seen in retrospect, they have not found any direct representation, they have not been expressed, conceptualized or presented. Let us repeat once again: the shock was suffered not by the nation and not by the society, but specifically by the revisionists, by the left-wing intelligentsia. As a consequence, nationalistic-conservative governance was established as a valid way of organizing political, social, and cultural life. The rivalry between the Church and the Party for national legitimacy, a race whose escalation could already be seen at the time of the celebrations of the Millennium in 1966, ended with establishment of a new consensus, accepted by all the actors: the Party, the Church and the opposition, and above all the society (or its significant majority, though not without alternatives).

The 1960s not so much established a new symbolic (nationalistic) authority, but reinforced its hegemony. The left-wing project lost. Since then, no attempt at social change has been able to do without references to nationalistic legitimacy. Patriotism and the nation become the undisputed horizon of the political community. The trauma has remained mute.