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The Continuity of the Image of the West

The image of the West was frequently evoked both in pre- and post-1989 Poland. Unsettled by recurrent crises, Poland had to ‘turn towards the West, because otherwise a complete catastrophe menaced’. The jump to the market economy was induced by the ‘economic spirit’ that wanted a ‘return to Europe’. A standard definition of the image of the West is based on two main constituents. The first is the emergence of the co-existence of three logics: capitalism, industrialization, and democracy (Feher, 1995:56–8). These logics are conceived as dynamic on the basis of distinct institutions and institutional networks which presuppose a relatively independent learning process in each case. These logics are more or less independent. The second constituent is supposed to be the West’s inherent universalizing project. Western ideology and the social organization implicit in its project managed to learn and assimilate the competing civilization in the East, while retaining its identity and claim to superiority.

In Feher’s reading, the image of the West appears as a model of universalizing quality. On these grounds, communist modernity set out to become universal by competing successfully in the field of industrialization, while it excluded the development of both democratic and capitalist logics (Feher, 1995:57). Such an argument emphasizes the autonomy of the Eastern path. It conceives of the image of the West as a competitor which will be combated by a rationally induced version of modernity of its own. For Feher, the West as the combination of three logics, those of capitalism, industrialization, and democracy, is not a geographical concept, because many countries in the geographical East belong to the socio-cultural West (Feher, 1995:66).
Linking up with such a view, the end of communism in 1989 was seen as a systemic change which attracted attention on behalf of the crafting of a new system. Contrary to a historically grown pool of values and ethics, modernization in Eastern Europe on the basis of Western models was conceived as an operation from scratch. Western patterns of the growth of capitalism and prosperity were largely by-products of moral and ideological initiatives by early entrepreneurial and commercial protagonists. On the contrary, the rise of capitalism in post-1989 Eastern Europe was widely perceived as a spontaneous and outcome-oriented leap towards the market. Thus ‘privatization and marketization’ were ‘not rights-driven but outcome-oriented; not class-based but elite-initiated; not creeping and halting but sudden and highly visible; not supported by moral and ideological arguments or rights and freedom but defended in the name of vehemently and universally desired economic prosperity’. 3 The terms ‘sudden’ and ‘universally’ seem to point to an autonomous decision seeking a satisfying outcome. Going even further, Ralf Dahrendorf has denied such a fixation on the West, claiming that the countries of East-Central Europe have not shed their communist system in order to embrace the capitalist system, whatever it is, but have shed a closed system in order to create an open society (Dahrendorf, 1990:39).

In any of the above approaches, the means and modalities of catching up with the West are understood in realistic terms, weighing the perspectives of successful imitation of models. Feher acknowledged that ‘while Soviet societies compete, at the same time they parasitically co-exist, especially in a technological sense, with “the West” and develop certain functions in imitation of, and in response to, Western societies. “Imitation” and “response” should be taken seriously’. 4 The fascination for Western achievements and the longing to join the core structures of Western civilization and politics are portrayed as perceptions of the independent logics of capitalism, democracy, and industrialization combined with the universal appeal of the Western project of modernity and its diffusion. In this vein, adaptation to the West is induced by the rational pursuit of these logics.

As pointed out by Jadwiga Staniszkis, ‘revolution from above has allowed the negotiated establishment of a new generative grammar based on private ownership and parliamentary democracy’. 5 She has further argued that this revolution is incapable of filling the potential space thus created. On the contrary, this space is filled by ‘two