

The role of emotions in the construction of collective identity

Analysis of the Polish public debate on foreign policy towards the United States and the European Union from 2015 to 2020

Summary of the doctoral dissertation

The aim of the dissertation is to answer the question of how Polish symbolic elites construct the collective identity of Poles. The theoretical basis of the thesis is postcolonial theory, the concepts of symbolic violence and symbolic elites, and theories of the sociology of emotions. The central notion of the dissertation is the so-called postcolonial identity, i.e. the internalised image imposed on the colonised by the coloniser through symbolic violence.

According to the Polish variety of postcolonial studies, Poland, due to its experience of a prolonged loss of independence and sovereignty, can be regarded as a victim of colonial conquests. Ewa M. Thompson's concept of the surrogate hegemon, on the other hand, assumes that Western countries act as a so-called surrogate hegemon against Poland.

After the Law and Justice party took power in 2015, the Polish political scene became the site of an intensified political struggle between the ruling camp and the opposition. In foreign policy, there has been a rapprochement with the United States. A long-lasting crisis between Poland and the EU also began, reinforced by the transfer of internal political conflict to the forum of EU institutions. In the foreign policy discourse, therefore, a postcolonial identity may have emerged in relation to the surrogate hegemon, i.e. the US and the EU.

In this paper I raise the following research questions: (1) How do Polish symbolic elites in foreign policy discourse construct a collective (national) identity? (2) Can this identity be considered postcolonial or peripheral? (3) What emotions are expressed and appealed to by Polish symbolic elites in foreign policy discourse? (4) What differences exist in the image of Poles constructed by the symbolic elites depending on the party affiliation or political sympathies of the participants in the journalistic broadcasts?

The research material consists of 312 recordings of journalistic broadcasts from 2015-2020, aired on major television and radio stations, with topics related to Poland's foreign policy in relations with the United States and the European Union. The length of the recordings is 62 hours and 40 minutes. As a research method, I used discourse analysis in a postcolonial perspective.

An analysis of the symbolic elites' foreign policy discourse, taking into account the identification of the emotional dimension of utterances, showed that it has features of a postcolonial discourse,

and at the same time constructs a postcolonial identity in relation to the USA and the EU. It assumes as an axiom the civilisational superiority of the West as the source of norms, values and standards. The discourse reveals pairs of oppositions characteristic of the centre and the periphery, such as: “modernity vs backwardness”, “rationality vs emotionality” or “adulthood vs childhood”. The most important feature of the discourse analysed, however, seems to be the relations of domination and subordination, which occur universally and are revealed at many levels. These include states and activities such as Poland’s subordinate (inferior) position, the use of double standards, various forms of control and discipline, humiliation, exploitation, disregard, interference, intimidation, and others.

In the analysed material, I also identified numerous references to periods of Poland’s lack of independence and sovereignty: the time of the Partitions of Poland, the Second World War and the years 1944-1989. The emotional overtones of the utterances point to the image of the collapse of the First Republic stored in the collective memory and to the internalised guilt for losing independence at the end of the 18th century. The Second World War, on the other hand, evokes in all participants of the discourse the memory of Poland as a victim, hence any attempt to undermine this status arouses moral indignation. The times of the People’s Republic of Poland, on the other hand, are associated with a period of authoritarian rule, providing a point of reference for the centrist-liberal opposition and its sympathisers to criticise the rule of the Law and Justice party. Instead, the discourse of the ruling coalition and its supporters reveals Poland’s role as the bulwark of Christendom and its mission to rebuild Western civilisation.

The division of the Polish political scene runs parallel to the orientation towards the US and the EU, and relations with both entities are a constant element in the political struggle between the ruling coalition and the opposition. Within the discourse, Polish sovereignty in relations with the United States and the European Union is sometimes questioned. In the first case, inter alia, because of the disrespectful treatment of Poland by the US administration, while in the second case, primarily because of the interference of EU institutions in the reforms of the Polish justice system.

The relations of domination and subordination indicated above, as well as Poland’s subordinate position, are confirmed by the emotions revealed and identified in the discourse. Representatives of the ruling coalition and its supporters feel pride in their close relations with the US, resentment towards the EU for its disciplinary actions, while anger and contempt towards the centrist-liberal opposition for ‘denouncing’ Poland to EU institutions. In turn, the centre-liberal opposition and its sympathisers reveal shame towards the West for Poland’s violation of democratic principles, while anger and indignation towards the ruling coalition for downgrading its status. Elites with a centrist-liberal orientation are furthermore accompanied by the fear of Poland’s marginalisation in the EU and a ‘return to the East’. A discourse indicating independence towards both foreign entities can be recognised in the statements of some: former politicians, experts, and opposition representatives with a national orientation.