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Doctoral Thesis

**The Role of Culture and Tradition in the Shift
Towards Illiberalism.
The Counter-hegemonic Challenge of Polish
Neo-traditionalism**

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Abstract

The dissertation explores the discursive illiberal shift that is taking place in Poland considering the period between 2015 – 2020, and focusing on its cultural aspect. While the existing literature has mainly looked at the causes of illiberalism, this research is concerned with the construction of a neo-traditionalist discourse based on traditionalism, anti-modernism, and anti-colonialism. The ‘illiberal turn’ in Poland is explained as a counter-hegemonic reaction that rejects the cultural principles of liberal democracy and proposes an alternative worldview. Drawing from Post-structuralist Discourse Theory, the dissertation seeks to unveil the content of Polish neo-traditionalism, its political and hegemonic strategy, and the fantasies that provide it with ideological strength. To achieve this aim, a discourse-theoretical analysis of several Polish ‘neo-traditionalist discourse makers’ was performed. While it cannot be claimed that a single group or party is chasing the same political goals, it was observed instead the existence of a common (informal and unaware) discourse coalition that repeatedly promotes a narrative based on three elements: tradition, nation (culturally defined), and people-as-a-community. The neo-traditionalist discourse coalition in Poland has deployed a hegemonic project that has, at least in part, legitimized the discursive shift towards illiberalism giving voice to the ‘cultural losers of globalization’.

La fantasia dei popoli che è giunta fino a noi non viene dalle stelle...

Up patriots to arms, Engagez-Vous

Preface

This dissertation is based on scientific research conducted within the MSCA project “FATIGUE – Delayed Transformational Fatigue in Central & Eastern Europe: Responding to the Rise of Illiberalism/Populism”. As part of the project, the general framework and objectives of the research were set in advance, focusing on the role of cultural factors in explaining the shift towards illiberalism. While keeping this initial aim as the basis of the research, I have departed from it to develop my own account to explain cultural illiberalism, looking at it through the lens of hegemony and discourse. In using concepts like ‘neo-traditionalism’ or ‘delayed fatigue’, I was inspired by other members of the project. Yet, these notions were expanded, researched, and analyzed individually. In this respect, I have tried to contribute to the advancement of the research project by adding my perspective on the matter. For example, while the use of the concept of neo-traditionalism in Central and Eastern Europe has been borrowed from ‘FATIGUE’ rather than being a personal intuition, its conceptual and theoretical deepening discussed in Chapter 3 results entirely from my independent research and work.

Therefore, this dissertation is an original work. However, several parts of the research have been already published as peer-reviewed articles in academic journals. All the following publications were single-authored.

- Section 1 of Chapter 3 is largely based on [Melito, F. (2022). Anti-colonial neo-traditionalism in Central-Eastern Europe: A theoretical examination. *New Perspectives*, OnlineFirst. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X221135127>]. There are a few differences as the article includes some empirical observations. In the dissertation, these references can be found in Part V.
- Section 5 of Chapter 5 is partly based on [Melito, F. (2021). Populism vs. Demagogism: What if Anti-populists are the Real Demagogues? *Politologický časopis - Czech Journal of Political Science*, 3: 229-244. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5817/PC2021-3-229>]. The concept of demagogism discussed in the article is completely original. In addition to this section, I have used the concept throughout the dissertation. Therefore, other parts of the article are included in other sections (e.g., Section 1.3 of Chapter 13).
- Section 4 of Chapter 12 extensively overlaps with the empirical section of my article: [Melito, F. (2021). Defending the Traditional Polish Way of Life: The Role

of Fantasies. *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*, 2021(53): Article 2546. <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2546>]. Moreover, other parts of the article were included in Section 2 of Chapter 13 as part of the Conclusions.

- As discussed in Chapter 9, I conducted a pilot study at the beginning of my research, including only a small amount of data. The results of this initial study were published in [Melito, F, (2021). Finding the Roots of Neo-traditional Populism in Poland. 'Cultural Displacement' and European Integration. *New Perspectives*, 29(1): 23-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2336825X20954756>]. Unlike the other articles, this first article is not included in the dissertation. However, it can be considered as the ground of the thesis. Therefore, there can be similarities between the arguments made in the article and the dissertation.
- As I have kept working on the research after having written the thesis, some parts may be included in articles that have not been published yet at the moment of writing this preface.

Francesco Melito

Kraków, 08/11/2022

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PART I
INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

The 'Illiberal Turn' and the Counter-Hegemonic Thesis

'What if' questions are a futile exercise when we try to understand the course of history. Yet, we know that history is conditioned by non-necessary events and developments. We cannot predict 'what' if those specific circumstances had or had not occurred. Nevertheless, we know that what happened was only one of the infinite paths that the course of history could have taken. Similarly, the conditions of possibility of a particular worldview are not given. We do not know 'what' if communism had not collapsed in Central and Eastern Europe and how liberal democracy would have looked. We do know, though, that several years after 1989 and the transition to liberal democracy, some of those countries are taking a different path towards illiberalism. We know that the idea of liberal democracy, once uncontested, is being challenged by alternative illiberal worldviews.

Several theoretical conceptualizations have dealt with the establishment of dominant world descriptions: different traditions of political and sociological analysis have discussed, at some point, concepts such as *episteme*, *Weltanschauung*, paradigm, common sense and hegemony, habitus, and so forth. All these schools confronted themselves with the problem of the existing reality: How do we come to understand the world the way we understand it? How are the norms, practices, and values of a community produced, sedimented, or modified? For this view denies a positivist reading of social reality, I emphasize the role of meanings and processes of signification to define the world around us. The normality and truth produced by a certain description of the world result from these processes. What seems true and obvious, therefore, is just a possibility: the dominant position of 'the truth' is constantly challenged by alternative world descriptions and 'alternative truths'. Based on the insights of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT), the research will perform a discourse-theoretical analysis in order "to account for the different ways in which dominant orders are contested by counter-hegemonic or other resistance projects, where the latter involve the construction of new identities" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 5). The study of the struggle

between different worldviews (or discourses, as they have been referred to in this study) to define the hegemonic truth indicates what this research is about.

Although world descriptions characterize each aspect of social reality (from economy to the rules and wider meanings of football), this research will deal specifically with the cultural organization of a political community, from its values to its socially acceptable rules. In particular, this study aims to explore how a neo-traditionalist worldview in Poland has been constructed to gain a prominent position within Polish society, what are its main features, and why it was able to crystallize notwithstanding the infinite possibilities history can offer. To achieve this goal, the study will scrutinize the rules of the neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic project, its discursive strategy, and its underlying fantasies. In other words, rather than seeking causal explanations or discovering its genealogy, the illiberal backlash in Poland (Krastev and Holmes, 2020) is explained by referring to the idea of a hegemonic struggle: illiberalism and neo-traditionalism in Poland (re)emerged as a reaction to a crisis of hegemony and as a counter-hegemonic project based on traditionalist values against the dominant liberal worldview. Understanding and explaining how an illiberal *and* neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland is striving to replace the 'liberal truth' is the main goal of this research.¹

Before moving to the ontological foundations of this work that justify this initial stance and the specific vocabulary chosen for explaining neo-traditionalism, this chapter will introduce the basic aims and scope of the research. First, the literature on democratic backsliding and illiberal backlash in Central and Eastern Europe will be discussed. Second, by using the concept of counter-revolution, illiberalism/neo-traditionalism is explained as a counter-hegemonic discourse. Third, the initial conditions of the research will be exposed, highlighting its objectives and gaps to be filled.

1. Democratic backsliding and illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe

This brief and condensed introduction assumes several concepts and categories that will unfold throughout the investigation. The so-called 'illiberal turn' (or 'swerve', as defined

by Bustikova and Guasti, 2017) in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)² is the first political phenomenon worthy of explanation since it places the object of study in the right context. A wider look at European politics shows that political turmoil has affected the Old Continent for several years. Since the 1980s, scholars have endeavored to explain this political upheaval in Europe by referring to the return of populism (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000; Taguieff, 1984). A rather obscure word, which indicated two short-lived political movements in Russia and the United States more than 100 years ago, has quickly become the most used concept in political science, and the related literature has grown enormously in a few years. From academia, the 'populist hype' has spread out to actual politics, and populism has become a mainstream definition and a practical reality rather than just a theoretical concept (Mondon and Glynos, 2016). Depending on their affiliation, political parties use the word 'populism' to denigrate their opponent or highlight their popular appeal. The content of populism(s) and its implications will be discussed later; as for now, it can be argued that, regardless of the meaning we attribute to populism, Western politics has been undoubtedly affected by increasing polarization (Vachudova, 2021). The political spectrum can now be defined along a populist/anti-populist divide (Stavrakakis, 2014) or, adopting already the hegemonic perspective of this thesis, along a cleavage between the winners of the post-1989 order and the counter-revolutionaries (Zielonka, 2018).

The non-liberal³ wave did not spare the relatively young democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. This illiberal transformation of CEE politics has been labeled at different times as populist, counter-revolutionary, or revisionist (Zielonka and Rupnik, 2020). Despite different definitions, there is an academic consensus that the process of democratization in the region is reversing (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley, 2018). Whether or not of a populist nature, illiberalism is proliferating in these countries, and the quality of liberal democracy is declining. This is happening in spite of the successful transition towards liberal democracy. Before EU accession, the CEE countries were considered an exemplary case of democratization and a reversal of this trajectory was considered unlikely (Ekiert and Kubik, 1998). The death of the liberal consensus (Krastev, 2007) paved the way for illiberal narratives and a nationalist comeback.

One of the most commonly used concepts to describe this setback is ‘democratic backsliding’. Rather than a violent change or a rapid collapse of democratic institutions, democratic backsliding signals a (more or less) slow and gradual deterioration of the values and foundations of liberal democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Greskovits, 2015). Two paradigmatic cases of democratic backsliding, like Poland and Hungary, can hardly be associated with hybrid regimes *à la* Yeltsin; it can be misleading also to describe these countries as completely undemocratic (Ganev, 2020). Although it has been argued that a form of authoritarianism persists in these countries (Bugarcic and Kuhelj, 2018; Kelemen, 2017), even a pessimistic and biased assessment of their state of democracy would concede that they meet the “inescapable sine qua non” of democracy, namely open, free, and fair elections (Huntington, 1991: 9). Rather, this liberal democratic decay affects the checks and balances and the liberal democratic institutional framework of CEE countries (in particular, in Poland and Hungary) without breaking with the formal and constitutional rules of democracy (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2019).

The existing literature on democratic backsliding in CEE has focused mainly on the factors that facilitated this process (Buzogány and Varga, 2019). In some cases, the illiberal backlash has been explained as due to a lack of true commitment to liberal democratic norms and a weak liberal civil society (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Dawson and Hanley, 2016). Others have focused on the structural features of the political arena, blaming the polarization of the party system (Enyedi, 2016; Palonen, 2009). Explanations that emphasize agency have shown how opportunistic electoral strategies (Egedy, 2009; Pappas, 2014), or a paranoid style in politics (Sadurski, 2018) have contributed to spreading illiberalism. In a similar manner, it was observed that democratic backsliding has been the result of coalescence patterns (Holesch and Kyriazi, 2021). Finally, the indirect influence of external actors, such as the depoliticization brought about by the EU, has been identified as one of the elements behind democratic backsliding (Gora and de Wilde 2020; Melito, 2021a; Zielonka, 2018). This brief overview of the causes and explanations of democratic backsliding shows that we are discussing a multifaceted phenomenon that can be addressed from different angles. The latter explanation, namely the depoliticization of the public debate, suggests that this democratic decline

is due, at least to some extent, to an attempt to repoliticize politics and challenge the consensual governance praised by liberal democracy.

More specifically, what illiberal actors question is the adjective 'liberal' in the liberal democracy formula. As discussed by several influential authors (Canovan, 1999; Macpherson, 1977; Mény and Surel, 2002; Mouffe, 2000; Papadopoulos, 2002; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Zakaria, 1997), liberal democracy is constituted by two different pillars that refer to the liberal and the democratic traditions of democracy. Although these authors emphasize different aspects of this separation and use different definitions,⁴ the common thread consists of the division between the will of the majority (democratic) and the constitutional rules (liberal) as two separate ingredients that guarantee the functioning of liberal-democracy. The latter is, therefore, a contingent marriage between two different traditions. Liberalism does not need to be democratic and democracy does not need to be liberal. This non-necessary combination, however, proved to be effective to the extent that has achieved a hegemonic position. At least in Western countries, democracy is understood primarily as liberal democracy (Levitsky and Way, 2002; Pasquino, 2019). The equilibrium between these two traditions has contributed to maintaining a balance between the will of the majority and pluralism (Mouffe, 2000).

The erosion of this equilibrium and the growing importance attributed to the liberal tradition of democracy were identified by Chantal Mouffe (2005) as a critical conduit of right-wing populism and/or illiberalism⁵ in Western Europe. The convergence to the political center and the institutionalization of politics experienced in the West after the neoliberal turn led to a post-political consensus that harmed popular sovereignty and fostered the rise of a post-democratic regime (Crouch, 2004). The "displacement of the political" (Mouffe, 2005: 54) and the lack of an effective democratic debate on possible alternatives have led in many countries to the success of political parties that claim to be the 'voice of the people' and try to restore the lost will of the majority. Analogously, in CEE, the transition to liberal democracy has been characterized by a 'technocratization' of the political debate (Grzymała-Busse and Innes, 2003). The elite-driven process of EU integration gave priority to the establishment of liberal and neutral legal institutions. As a consequence, the political realm was

depoliticized, and constitutionalism took precedence over political participation (Melito, 2021a; Rupnik, 2007). Therefore, the 'illiberal turn' in CEE calls into question the liberal legal structure established during the transition by appealing to people's sovereignty. What is under threat is the idea of democracy as inextricably bound to the values of liberalism, including the rule of law, the protection of minorities, and liberal civil society.

However, in some cases, the appeal to the people goes beyond a bare call for a more 'democratic democracy'. It is also a call for a different worldview, which questions the core values of liberalism. In this research, in fact, the concept of liberalism is considered to be criticized even more widely. Liberalism is not seen as a neutral institutional framework that defines liberal democracy or the economic system only. Rather, it is understood as a regime of truth that defines the true and the false (Foucault, 2008). However, far from being accidental and axiologically neutral, liberalism is a comprehensive worldview that possesses a normative character, produces reality, and determines behaviors. Although liberalism can hardly be summarized in a single theory or ideology, its 'reason' is found in the idea of negative freedom (freedom from), axiological individualism, and the primacy of economic exchange in social relations (Zhok, 2020). Anti-liberal reactionary discourses question, first of all, these aspects of liberalism stressing the necessity to propose a positive freedom based on a common system of moral values (freedom to), and rejecting the rational exchange between individuals as the main organizing principle of social interactions.

Thus, taking a cue from Viktor Orbán himself, I argue that the challenge to liberalism in CEE goes beyond the mere critique of the legal structure of the state. It is the entire liberal organization of the national community that is contested.

"We had to state that a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal. Just because a state is not liberal, it can still be a democracy. [...] The Hungarian nation is not simply a group of individuals but a community that must be organised, reinforced and in fact constructed. And so in this sense the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation, but instead includes a different, special, national approach". (Orbán, 2014).

For Orbán, challenging liberalism means, first of all, contesting its individualist creed as liberalism privileges the individual interest over the national interest (Csillag and Szelényi, 2015). Liberalism and the bond between the new liberal elite and the former communists are considered to have hegemonized the post-communist transition; as a consequence, it has infiltrated each aspect of society. In this regard, the Polish Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Ryszard Legutko (2016: 77) of the national-conservative party Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) criticizes the majoritarian aspirations of liberalism:

“Liberalism is primarily a doctrine of power, both self-regarding and other-regarding: it aims to limit the power of other agents, and at the same time grants enormous prerogatives for itself. In a sense it is a super-theory of society, logically prior to and—by its own declaration of self-importance—higher than any other. It attributes to itself the right to be more general, more spacious, and more universal than any of its rivals”.

The ideological critique of liberalism from non-liberal actors is the nucleus and the starting point of this work. Non-liberal discourses aim at resignifying the core concepts of liberalism and creating a new common sense; in other words, by resignifying the discursive space, non-liberal discourses aim at becoming hegemonic. As mentioned above, the analysis of a non-liberal discourse in Poland and its counter-hegemonic strategy is, indeed, the main objective of the research.

In this respect, this approach differs from the studies that have been conducted in the field. The actual narratives of illiberal/populist discourses have been analyzed in different ways. Some works focus on emotional strategies (Cap, 2018) or the strategic politicization of a single issue (Krzyżanowski, 2018). The performative construction of ‘the other’ is also a relevant theme to describe illiberalism (Yatsyk, 2020) as well as the use of symbols to legitimize it (Kotwas and Kubik, 2019). These studies emphasize the performative aspect of illiberalism in CEE (something that will be discussed also in this work). However, they fall short in explaining how a certain discourse is able to become (or try to become) commonsensical. Although these works provide useful insights regarding the reactivation of conservative or nationalist sentiments, the risk is to underestimate the ideological underpinnings of illiberalism and reduce them to a mere opportunistic strategy to win votes.

In this regard, the hegemonic perspective seeks to go beyond the democratic backsliding paradigm. As noted by Cianetti and Hanley (2021), this model presents weaknesses as it implies a linear development of the quality of democracy. Elections are often seen as turning points that produce the back-and-forth movement along the quality of democracy continuum. From this perspective, the victory of a populist party in an electoral round is likely to ‘deteriorate’ the quality of democracy in a country, just as the victory of a liberal party can instantly ‘heal’ it. The study of democracy in CEE in terms of elections overlooks the structural factors that determine a certain change. In addition, using a broad category of ‘democratic backsliders’, in particular putting in the same basket all CEE countries risks misestimating the proportions of the problem and fails to grasp the cultural and political differences between countries. The study of illiberalism and neo-traditionalism as a hegemonic project (in a specific country) aims instead to overcome the limitations created by an election-based approach. Moreover, hegemonic theory can help to capture those long-term discursive constructions that work to resignify values within the public space and to slowly chisel common sense. The intellectual foundations of this “renaissance of conservatism”,⁶ in fact, have been poorly researched and constitute one of the main gaps within the literature on the ‘illiberal turn’ in CEE (Bluhm and Varga, 2019: 1). Although, as mentioned above, many studies have dealt with the factors explaining the illiberal backlash, the ideational dimension of the anti-liberal counter-reaction remains neglected (Buzogány and Varga, 2018). Engaging with this scholarship, the hegemonic approach of this research aims to grasp the construction of a ‘new common sense’ (as opposed to liberalism) and its discursive, rather than rhetoric, strategy.⁷

2. The post-1989 illiberal counter-revolution

Having discussed the contours of the ‘illiberal turn’, we can refer again to the first paragraph of this chapter to better define the scope and objectives of the research. The rise of an illiberal and neo-traditionalist worldview must be seen against the background of the symbolic triumph of liberalism in 1989. Since “liberalism became ‘the only game in town’ across the entire continent” (Zielonka, 2018: 5-6. See also Shields, 2012),

Fukuyama (1989) imagined the end of history. Rather than as a prophecy, it is useful to understand this concept as the last stage of the evolution of liberalism towards its acme. The relevance of this idea lies in the hegemonic dimension that liberal democracy has achieved: today, questioning liberalism in the West results hardly conceivable (Zhok, 2020). And hardly conceivable was, for Fukuyama (1989: 4; emphasis added), even to imagine an alternative to liberal democracy after the collapse of its main competitor.

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such.... That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. [...] *for the victory of liberalism has occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is as yet incomplete in the real or material world*”.

The “end of history” did not signal the end of historical events ‘in the material world’; rather, it suggested the impossibility of questioning at the imaginary level (“in the realm of ideas or consciousness”) the liberal democratic paradigm and the faith in the inexorability of progress. In other words, liberalism had conquered (and arguably still holds) a hegemonic position in the West. A political regime that would not rely on the principles of liberal democracy was unimaginable.

Conquering ideas and consciousness also meant determining the political path of several nations. In Central and Eastern Europe, the victory of liberalism was followed by the success of the liberal democratic project of the EU: the latter became a synonym for democracy and a point of reference for CEE countries in terms of freedom, economy, and justice. As noted by Dominika Biegoń (2016), during the EU integration process the liberal democratic discourse reached a hegemonic position and its legitimacy became uncontested. The non-necessary character mentioned at the beginning of the chapter⁸ implies that this was a contingent outcome (and, in fact, liberal democracy was not successful everywhere). Rather, its success can be found in the discursive construction of liberal democracy as a hegemonic project. Political parties of the center-left and center-right found themselves united into a single liberal ideological project (Zielonka, 2018). Citing the Romanian political scientist Aurelian Crăiuțu (1998, in Trencsényi 2014: 136), “liberalism in this part of the world became an obligatory syntax of political thought”.

Nevertheless, the previous speculation regarding a non-liberal counter-reaction suggests that the predominant position of liberalism begins to falter, not only in CEE. The current crisis of hegemony (Fraser, 2017; Rehmann, 2016) has created room for alternative discourses: the so-called 'populist moment' (Mouffe, 2018). While the literature mentioned earlier has focused on the specific elements fostering illiberalism, Jan Zielonka (2018) has offered a macro-contextual reading of the illiberal backlash; using his expression, we are witnessing a counter-revolution in Europe. An immediate advantage of this argument consists in overcoming the lack of clarity generated by the different definitions of the political phenomenon discussed in this chapter. The designation of 'counter-revolutionaries' indicates all those political actors that challenge the post-1989 order. Rather than being defined by their positive common features (therefore, rather than being populist, conservative, fascist, or socialist), counter-revolutionaries are lumped together as they all share the system they want to reverse. This perspective allows us to go beyond the controversial definitions tied to these parties.

"The counter-revolutionary politicians are often called populist. This term is misleading and stigmatizing and fails to identify the key objective of these politicians, namely the abolition of the post-1989 order and replacement of the elites associated with this order [...] The main cleavage and contest in contemporary Europe is not between soft and hard populists. The real contest is between the winners of the post revolution and those who intend to topple them and dismantle the post-1989 system. The latter may well be 'populist,' they may form tactical alliances, they may be neo-nationalists or post-Marxists, but they are first of all counter-revolutionaries with a mission" (Zielonka, 2018: 11; 14).

Although differences between left or right-wing counter-revolutionaries are clear (for instance, between Jarosław Kaczyński and Alexis Tsipras, as exemplified by Zielonka), it is possible to categorize these political actors within the same basket as they all share what they are not. While they all contest the existing order, it is complicated to find a coherent pattern in what they propose and the new order they seek to build.⁹ Yet, that does not disqualify the concept of counter-revolution and, rather, it explains the crucial differences between them.

The counter-revolutionaries, indeed, seek to revive those ideas excluded by the liberal discourse from different angles. The political convergence to the center has

created a new normality that can be contested at the cost of being excluded from the 'rational political debate'. As noted by Nancy Fraser (2017), an alliance between progressivism from the left and economic liberalism from the right converged toward a hegemonic center. What lies outside this "field of reason" (Taguieff, 1998: 8) has been considered an irrational monster, not worthy of consideration. By portraying alternative discourses as irresponsible, the liberal elite deploys a demagogic strategy to keep normality as it is (Melito, 2021b). European integration after the Maastricht Treaty, neoliberal economics, constitutional liberalism, liberal values: they all are seen as the outcome of the victory of liberalism; a normality that is contested, in full or in part, by counter-revolutionaries.

As hinted earlier, liberalism should be considered as a world description that determines the truth within each sector of society. Often, neoliberal measures in economics are blamed as the culprit for the 'illiberal turn' (Zielonka, 2018). It is worth recalling, indeed, that the economic sphere of liberalism is a crucial one. The principle of the free market is a founding element of liberalism, and the utilitarian exchange between rational actors has also been considered as its main feature (Foucault, 2008). However, this economic understanding of the counter-revolution is not sufficient to explain illiberalism. The triumph of liberalism in 1989 did not determine only the victory of neoliberal capitalism or institutional liberal democracy. Liberalism, as the undisputed worldview in the West, also shaped the field of reason of societal organization: habits, culture, models of life, individual aspirations, and social relations. Common sense. The contestation of this model is at the heart of the neo-traditionalist counter-revolution. It reflects a battle over values (Furedi, 2018). As exemplified by former PiS Minister of Foreign Affairs, Witold Waszczykowski:

"[PiS] only wants to cure our country of a few illnesses. A new mixture of cultures and races, a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians, who only use renewable energy and who battle all signs of religion. It has little in common with traditional Polish values" (Waszczykowski, 2016).

The contested truth is the liberal reality and its cultural underpinnings. Thus, anti-liberal counter-revolutions should be understood as reactions against the liberal ideology in all its aspects. Depending on the context where they are deployed and their political traditions, illiberal discourses affect several facets of the social space. One of

the spheres that are being *illiberalized* concerns culture and the values a community is built upon. Especially in CEE, the cultural terrain has been identified as the main battleground of the *Kulturkampf* between modernizing liberalism and its traditionalist rivals (Ágh, 2016; Trencsényi 2014). This is the field that will be analyzed and explained in this thesis.

2.1 The cultural counter-hegemonic thesis

While Zielonka has given a comprehensive explanation of non-liberal counter-reactions, the cultural counter-hegemonic thesis refers to a specific anti-liberal reaction concerned with values and social norms. Culture and identity (which had been almost forgotten in our post-political era) came back to play a crucial role and reshape the political environment in the West (Bale, 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016). The idea of a cultural counter-revolution is not new and can be traced back to even before 1989. Piero Ignazi (1992: 6) described the reaction against the post-materialist revolution in the 1960s as a “silent counter-revolution” of the traditionalist sectors of society. This silent discontent explains the subsequent rise of extreme right parties in Western Europe.¹⁰ The emergence of modern values, in particular after 1968, gave shape to contemporary societies. The old bastions of traditions and the old communitarian bonds were disrupted and replaced by a new set of values (in this respect, I will talk in the research of neo-traditionalism). Globalization went hand in hand with the post-materialist turn; the safe havens of local and national communities were forced to give the way to a lifestyle that stresses cosmopolitanism and universalism. This ‘cultural displacement’ triggered a reaction against the modernization of values; a reaction that should be understood as part of the current counter-revolution against liberalism in the Western world. Today, we can observe a cultural divide between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, universalism and communitarianism (Bornschiefer, 2010; Rensmann, 2017). Even if Ignazi observed this conservative response already in the 1980s, the growth of post-materialist issues accelerated in the next two decades giving, at the same time, more and more room to reactionary illiberal discourses. Ignazi’s silent reaction has been transformed into a “noisy counter-revolution [...] against post-industrial liberal

democracy and its universalistic, inclusive, and non-authoritarian cultural underpinnings” (Rensmann, 2017: 128).

A puzzling question concerns the delay of the noisy reaction: a reactionary process that had begun in the 1970s became salient only twenty years later and, arguably, it assumed a considerable dimension only recently, when the success of liberal democracy seemed to be unquestioned. With regard to Central and Eastern Europe, the situation is even more surprising: while the turbulent and uncertain years of the transition were characterized by a political consensus around the idea of liberal democracy, a strong non-liberal response has become visible only when the goal of liberal democracy had been achieved (Kubik, 2018). Giving an exact answer to this question related to this ‘delayed transformational fatigue’ is quite a complicated task. However, as hinted above, this research also aims to shed light on the conditions of possibility of a discourse. It is difficult to ascertain why a certain discourse becomes dominant in a certain moment; the hegemonic approach, though, can help to understand the discursive strategy that allows contesting and replacing the existing dominant ideology. As shown by Buzogány and Varga (2018), the emergence of an illiberal discourse in Hungary was the result of an intellectual work among conservative circles unhappy with liberal democracy. This construction of an illiberal discourse coalition cannot explain the reasons and timing of their success;¹¹ nonetheless, it explains how a discourse comes to exist. In this sense, this research will seek to take one more step forward. In addition to observing a neo-traditionalist discourse coalition in Poland (or conservative, as discussed by Dąbrowska, 2019) that laid its intellectual foundations, I will also analyze the discursive hegemonic strategy of the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland. Therefore, although it is not possible to give a precise causal answer to the puzzle of the ‘delayed reaction’, the hegemonic perspective suggests that an illiberal and neo-traditionalist discourse has been slowly built by several intellectuals and its success depends on the ‘war of position’ to conquer the field of reason (Gramsci, 1975).

3. Aims and objectives of the research

In this chapter, I have presented an overview of the debate about the rise of illiberalism/populism. We have seen how when discussing the 'illiberal turn' of CEE countries (or even when discussing populism in Europe in general), many factors are taken into account: from the lack of true democrats to the erosion of people's sovereignty. The counter-revolutionary thesis was presented as a comprehensive explanation of the illiberal backlash that involved a reaction against post-1989 liberalism. Drawing on the latter, this research aims to deepen this approach by using the concept of hegemony. What is often overlooked in explaining the 'illiberal turn' is the hegemonic struggle that is taking place between different worldviews. Counter-revolutionary discourses are nothing but alternatives to the dominant liberal hegemonic order. Hence, it seems almost natural to use the lens of hegemony to understand this new 'Vendée counter-revolution'.

The research aims to complete the scholarship on the 'illiberal turn' in CEE (and, specifically, in Poland) by providing a hegemonic understanding of this phenomenon: not only will it seek to understand the ideational and intellectual foundations of this reaction (as in Bluhm and Varga, 2019); it will also study its hegemonic and fantasmatic dimensions. In other words, I claim that we can observe a more or less conscious *Gramscisme de Droit* (right-wing Gramscianism) in Poland: a political strategy that is trying to shape a new normality. By studying how a counter-hegemonic project works in practice to alter the common sense of a society, the research aims to fill three gaps. First, despite the wide interest and theoretical development of the concept of hegemony, its empirical application, and methodical rigor are rather thin (Donoghue, 2017; Jacobs, 2019). Second, it seeks to provide an original explanation of the current political upheaval in Europe in terms of hegemony, which has been surprisingly limited so far. Finally, the study will analyze empirically how a certain discourse (in our case, the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland) may become dominant. As the idea of hegemonic struggle is often used from a leftist standpoint and focuses on socio-economic demands (Mouffe, 2018), this work will apply the concept of counter-hegemony and counter-hegemonic strategy to a reactionary neo-traditionalist political project. Since the focus of the neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic discourse is on the redefinition of values

and the very meaning of 'being a society', the thesis seeks to contribute to the cultural approaches to populism/illiberalism, exploring the salience of cultural factors in explaining the 'illiberal turn'.

Following this discussion, it is possible to summarize and problematize the initial conditions of the investigation. The liberal transition paradigm that was established after 1989 in CEE is deemed to have created a new normality based on the principles of liberalism. This liberal hegemony has affected, to a different extent, each aspect of society: from economy to culture, from politics to social relations, liberal values have become intrinsic to the organization of society. Old models were ousted by the omnipresence of liberalism. The research will focus specifically on the 'cultural displacement' experienced in Poland. This thesis claims that the post-communist transition caused the disruption of old traditions and stable beliefs (Melito, 2021a). The 'illiberal turn' led to the construction of a neo-traditionalist discourse that aims at resignifying the cultural terrain and recreating a common morality based on traditionalist principles. By analyzing the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition in Poland in the period 2015-2020, the research will explain how the shift towards illiberalism and neo-traditionalism emerged as a reaction to a crisis of hegemony and how a counter-hegemonic project based on traditionalist values is challenging the dominant liberal worldview. In other words, it seeks to explain how the post-1989 liberal normality is being replaced by an alternative normality narrated by neo-traditionalists.

In light of these objectives, the main question of the research is the following:

- *How has the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland emerged as a counter-hegemonic project that aims at resignifying the core values of society?*¹²

Chapter 2

Ontological and Epistemological Remarks:

Retrodution and Sensitizing Concepts

1. Radical contingency and the role of interpretation

The overarching goal of the research, namely offering a critical explanation of the rise of a neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland, makes positivist accounts unsuitable. At the same time, this objective is the result of ontological presuppositions claiming that, unlike the natural world, social processes cannot be controlled or predicted. Quantitative analysis or causal laws of the 'illiberal turn' can hardly be compatible with a discursive approach that emphasizes the role of meanings and identity construction. Hence, this work proposes a post-positivist and social constructionist model of inquiry that poses society and social practices as the outcome of human interactions rather than being essentially defined (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

From this perspective, objects do not possess essential characteristics that define their social function; it is rather their signification that shapes the properties and meaning of their identity. Thus, it is claimed here that social reality does not present a positivist essential content that can be grasped now and forever. Knowledge and the way we describe the world are historically and culturally specific and, therefore, there is no objective truth behind reality (Burr, 1995). Contingent and competitive truths derive from a specific description of the world; as such, truth and knowledge are rather social products that vary from one culture to another, from one historical moment to a previous or future one. Looking for the one essential truth is a self-defeating exercise. In this anti-foundationalist approach, what is more relevant is the discovery and interpretation of objects that we encounter in the social world, which, in turn, shapes our perception of reality. In general, two main elements disallow the use of positivist

accounts in social science: the non-essential character of identities and the self-interpretation of agents (including the filter the researcher sees reality through).

The poststructuralist linguistic turn in social sciences has decisively highlighted the non-necessary character of identity (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Thomassen, 2017). The ontological preconditions of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory entail

“the idea that any field of discursive social relations is marked by radical contingency, where radical contingency refers to the inherent (as opposed to accidental) instability of an object’s identity [...] By empirical contingency we aim to capture a sense of possibility: the possibility that contingency may be absorbed by a higher order process. [...] Radical contingency opposes empirical contingency’s sense of possibility with a sense of *impossibility*: the *constitutive* failure of any objectivity to attain a full identity. Other formulations of radical contingency as an ontological premise include ‘lack in the Other’ (Lacan), ‘structural undecidability’ (Derrida), and so on, all of which question the idea of a fully constituted essence of a practice, regime or object, in the name of an irreducible negativity that cannot be reabsorbed” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 109-110; emphasis in the original).

Radical contingency indicates the impossibility of defining the internal essence of any identity and practice. Even the most binding identity may show its contingency in moments of dislocation.

“To assert that something is radically contingent, and that its essence does not imply its existence therefore amounts to saying that the conditions of existence of an entity are exterior to it. Only in the case of a strictly necessary being does a perfect coincidence between essence and existence occur” (Laclau, 1990: 19).

The undecidability of identities (and the social world made of practices they sustain) makes causal predictions inappropriate for explaining the social world. Instead, the research’s interest shifts to those signifying practices that shape how we perceive reality – as discussed later, this is the role of political and fantasmatic operations that build and defend identities from their ontological contingency. Thus, radical contingency justifies the initial stance regarding the contingent rise of a certain discourse or the disappearance of another one. Moments of dislocation and resignification account for the emergence of practices and discourses that are possible inasmuch as their nature is considered as non-necessary.

Having said that, the main implication stemming from this ontological position does not relate to the contingency of the social world – this is quite a banality. Rather, PDT is concerned with the fixation of identities *despite* their contingency, as the inherent uncertainty of the social world opens room to several options of signification. Indeed, contingency and the different shapes the social world can assume, typical of post-positivist social constructionism, should not be equated to relativism (Mouffe, 1993). The infinite shapes the social can assume do not necessarily lead to a chaotic reality without any fixation. Social constructionism does not negate the existence of contextual elements that are true and inflexible at a certain moment (to use Thomas Kuhn’s term, the ‘paradigm’ through which we see the world). Both the discourse analyst and the subjects under study are placed in a particular historical moment that affects them, as is clear from the principle of ‘double hermeneutic’. If, on the one hand, this is in line with the refusal of positivist readings of reality giving special weight to self-interpretations, on the other hand, it also allows rejecting allegations of relativism since the contingency of knowledge and identities does not deny the possibility of their (temporary) fixation (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Furthermore, it should not be forgotten the impact of the material inviting subjects to attribute particular meanings to objects (Carpentier, 2017).

Interpretation, in fact, is the second crucial factor that dismisses causal predictions as a viable objective of analysis. As objects and social reality are not essentially defined, an anti-foundationalist inquiry must take into consideration the self-interpretations of the actors investigated. Unlike positivism, the hermeneutic approach does not consider behaviors and opinions as mere observable facts. Explaining people’s attitudes and their acts of identification requires an interpretative move that can untangle what is behind the visible surface; it requires cognitive empathy to understand how subjects understand their world (Small, 2018). However, grasping the self-interpretations of actors comes with a price. If we attach serious importance to the constructionist ontology of the research, it is not possible to underestimate the role of the analyst as well. The ontological perspective described thus far, therefore, is not simply a statement of intent; it is also a non-neutral lens that both helps and affects the interpretation of self-interpretations.

It follows that radical contingency and the role of interpretations play a crucial role in the development of my inquiry process. The latter takes into account the complexity of social reality, which cannot be simply predicted. The former suggests that a simple description and interpretation of the world cannot provide an exhaustive explanation; it is also necessary to disclose the structures and conditions of possibility of identities, practices, or discourses that are present within the social space. In this regard, retroduction is a promising mode of reasoning as it plays iteratively between theory and data; between the ontological preconditions of research and the nuanced empirical world.

2. Retroductive reasoning

The ontological perspective of the research and the special emphasis posed on meanings and the process of their signification prompts a specific logic of reasoning alternative to both deduction and induction. The hypothetico-deductive model (H-D), typical of natural science, is unsuitable in the context of social science if we take seriously into account the constant presence of uncontrollable variables. At the same time, naive inductivism (Chalmers, 2013) appears to downplay the impact of the ontological premises of the analysts and those of the agents studied (as in 'pure' Grounded Theory). Retroduction (or abduction),¹³ instead, is a logic of reasoning that *conjectures* about a certain phenomenon. Therefore, it is an appropriate logic of reasoning if the malleability and unpredictability of the social world are taken into consideration. "Deduction proves that something *must* be; Induction shows that something *actually is* operative; Abduction merely suggests that something *may be*" (Peirce in Hanson, 1981: 85; emphasis in the original). In this chapter, I argue in favor of retroduction as a valuable logical thinking and reasoning for explaining social phenomena.

Explaining the social world should be the main task of a qualitative researcher of social science. Nevertheless, what an explanation is supposed to achieve depends on both the ontological approach and the specific form of logical reasoning. In other words, these two elements determine the way a researcher links ideas and data together (or keeps them separate), as well as the place of theory within the research. The deductive

and positivist paradigms go hand in hand in natural science and have been the engine that sparked the scientific revolution and validated the scientific method. The latter is likely to provide causal laws that undoubtedly hold true in natural science, like physics. Deductive reasoning consists of subsuming from a theoretical axiom to explain the phenomenon under study. Posing a certain theoretical assumption as true, a specific empirical case is expected to happen. Hence, when reasoning deductively, theory and data have a causal correlation. Since theory is taken for granted (unless it is falsified), explanation of a given phenomenon does not differ from its prediction in essence:

“Explanation and prediction are thus conceptually linked within the Hempel-Oppenheim account.¹⁴ Explaining x is predicting x after it has actually happened. [...] Predicting x is explaining it before it has actually happened” (Hanson, 1958: 101; emphasis in the original).

Predictive explanations do not invalidate the deductive account. Prediction is, in fact, an essential component of the scientific method; unpredictable physics would be of little help indeed. However, the validity of causal laws depends on the surrounding world and how we understand it. The scientific method relies on stable initial conditions that will not change. For example, we can predict that an apple on our planet will always fall at a certain speed because of gravity. If we modify the initial conditions, if we move to the Moon, the law of gravity will not hold in the same way as on Earth. This is rather straightforward in natural science, where it is relatively easy to conduct experiments in closed environments. But is it possible to keep the initial conditions stable and provide predictive explanations in the social world? Simple answer: No.

Moving from the positivist picture that is dominant in natural science to the post-positivist ontology of this research, deduction (and so prediction) can hardly account for social or political phenomena. Despite its attractiveness due to its scientific strength, the deductive scientific method of explanation is weak when it comes to analyzing and explaining human behavior. As already hinted, within the social world self-interpretations of agents are fundamental to explaining a specific case. In the social world, there are no physical laws, and even the most predictable event may be altered by the involved actors, not forgetting the active role of the analyst. There are two main reasons to reject deduction in social science. Firstly, theory may become too intrusive. Trying to fit data into a predetermined theoretical framework may result in overlooking

observations, especially those that contrast with theory (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Furthermore, explaining by prediction a social world that can hardly be predicted is a risky operation, for the study may turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is even more so in qualitative research, where interpretation (both from the agents and the researchers) is a crucial aspect (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018). Secondly, deduction is unlikely to produce a new truth. By validating theory through empirical tests, deduction can only convey and confirm old truths, without offering surprising or innovative explanations (Reichert, 2014). The goal is, indeed, to confirm a certain theory; deductive reasoning leads to testing and proving a law that can explain an empiric case and predict a future similar scenario. According to Karl Popper (2005), an eminent advocate of deductive reasoning, how we come to discover this law or theory is only of psychological interest, whereas science lies only in the justification of the theory.

Popper's emphasis posed on the justification of a theory at the expense of the discovery itself rekindles a debate about the separation between the context of discovery and the context of justification. While the former indicates the creation of new knowledge, the latter refers to the process justifying the discovery. The separation between the context of discovery and the context of justification was first introduced by Hans Reichenbach (1938). Like Popper, the German philosopher of science deemed the context of justification the only logical operation; on the contrary, the 'irrational' moment of discovery was not considered as logical thinking and therefore did not belong to proper science (Szumilewicz-Lachman, 1982). This sharp compartmentalization between discovery and its justification has led to a preponderant role assigned to the latter as the only scientific action performed by the researcher. As already discussed, deductive reasoning, and so positivist science, is mainly concerned with testing a theory, regardless of the source of the theory itself. A similar account can be applied to inductive reasoning where observations and data analysis (context of justification) lead to theories that "are simply summarized projections of these data" (Glynn and Howarth, 2007: 26). As in deduction, inductive reasoning cannot originate any innovative discovery since it does not link theory and data; rather, it summarizes and generalizes data without explaining them, that is, without proposing a new theory (Kelle, 2014).

At this point, it is possible to finally introduce retroduction as a kind of logical inference that seeks to link theory and data in a more open-ended way. First of all, to provide a definition of retroduction, it is necessary to reject the positivist separation between the context of discovery and the context of justification. Indeed, retroduction does not privilege the context of justification as the only valid logical operation. Both the context of discovery and the context of justification need to be considered when reasoning retroductively as they affect each other. By blending the context of discovery and justification and playing iteratively between theory and data, retroduction is a logical reasoning capable of creating new insights going beyond empirical data and/or old theories (Thornberg, 2012). A study that proceeds retroductively does not have a theory as its starting point; or, more specifically, pre-existing theories come into play only in a second moment (unlike induction where old theories are dismissed altogether). The beginning of this kind of research needs to be found in a certain problem, a surprising fact that calls for an explanation. This anomaly leads the analyst to reconsider the hypothesis and explanations, and to re-think and problematize that anomalous phenomenon (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

At this point, retroduction departs from a 'pure' inductive study. Rather than looking at further data to develop an explanation, a researcher that proceeds retroductively would pose a preliminary hypothesis and explanation based on his or her pre-existing knowledge and a certain existing theoretical framework. In this sense, retroduction proposes a "logic of scientific discovery", namely it infers conjecturally a probable cause from its effect (Forstater, 1997: 7). More specifically, 'the logic of discovery' can be described in 3 strategic points (Hanson in Paavola, 2004: 279; emphasis in the original):

- 1) proceeds retroductively, *from an anomaly* to
- 2) the delineation of a *kind* of explanatory H which
- 3) fits into an organized *pattern* of concepts

Thus, in retroduction, the analyst starts with the observation of a problem, proposes a suitable and reasonable hypothesis based on previous theories and knowledge, and goes back to the data to adjust (rather than test) the initial explanation. Discovery, therefore, is not left just as of mere psychological interest; it is instead an

integral part of the inquiry. While theories pre-existed the anomaly, it is the articulation between the former and the latter and the resulting hypothesis that constitute the 'logic of discovery' (Paavola, 2004).

The formulation of an initial probable hypothesis is not the end of the research; unlike deduction, retroduction does not pose a higher-level hypothesis to be tested and proved. This is because of the ontological shift of social science. There cannot be iron laws in a world made up of contingent meanings and interpretations. The candidate hypothesis is just chosen as a possible explanation of the problematized phenomenon and as worthy of further investigation (Douven, 2011). Once the barrier between discovery and justification is torn down, the research will require a constant iterative and circular interplay between data collection and analysis; theory and knowledge. The qualitative researcher will be involved in a continuous back and forth movement between data and theory to adjust the initial hypothesis and discover new patterns. Once again, it is necessary to recall the importance of the logic of discovery, which needs to be seen as a strategic inquiry that is part of the explanation. Explaining the case under study does not seek to predict and generalize similar cases; rather, explaining that specific case means rendering the problematized issue (*explanandum*) more intelligible (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). To summarize, retroduction

“do[es] not start with a theoretical statement as a premise (like a deductive inference), but with an empirical observation. [...] So far it is similar to an induction. But instead of collecting further observation statements, as in an inductive inference, one draws on a general theoretical proposition which can explain the single observation. [...] Contrary to an induction, this implies a statement about 'antecedent conditions' which shows that the theoretical explanation is applicable to the investigated case. [...] Contrary to deductive inferences in a retroduction the conclusion does not follow with necessity from premises. [...] A retroduction does not exclude alternative explanations; it only serves to find possible hypotheses explaining empirical findings” (Kelle, 2014: 561)

This movement from problematization (empirical observation), to interpretation (hypothesis), and ontological projection (theoretical proposition) has been named by Glynos and Howarth (2007: 35) “retroductive circle” and serves to propose a critical explanation (not predictive) that accounts for a certain phenomenon and makes it more intelligible. In this way, both the self-interpretations of agents (unlike deduction) and

the ontological perspective of the researcher (unlike induction) are taken into consideration and contribute to forming a valuable and exhaustive explanation. Accordingly, the latter does not need to demonstrate the predictive validity and generalizing potential of a given hypothesis. Rather,

“a post-positivist understanding of the context of justification includes a much more capacious conception of ‘testing’ and thus explanation. In this view, an account is accepted as a valid explanation only if it produces insights and greater illumination according to criteria which can be publicly articulated, criteria concerning evidence, consistency, exhaustiveness, and so on. [...] A post-positivist conception of testing is therefore elastic (as opposed to hard) and involves theoretical and critical *interventions*, as well as practices of *persuasion*, in relation to both the agents being studied and the relevant scholarly community” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 38; emphasis in the original).

What is important in a retroductive explanation is not the demonstration of a certain hypothesis but the process of inquiry that explains and, possibly, influences the hypothesis itself.

2.1 Explaining neo-traditionalism retroductively

In addition to defining the epistemological position of the research, the discussion about retroduction serves to clarify the overarching goal of the research and to describe the process of analysis. The research will not seek to prove a theory or predict future developments in the region. According to the anti-foundationalist ontology of this study, the multifaceted nature of the social world entails a more complex investigation that goes beyond positivist assumptions. Therefore, theory is not used as a tool to explain why a certain event happened nor as an assumption to be tested.

Following the retroductive circle, the research begins with a problematization. Linking the introductory chapter to the epistemological position presented in this chapter, it is possible to identify now the problematized issue in the illiberal counter-revolution that is taking place in Europe (Zielonka, 2018). Contrary to the expectations for the end of history and the inexorable progress of modernity, the surprising fact lies in the comeback of traditionalist discourses that challenge the liberal hegemony. Even more surprising is the delayed counter-reaction after a relatively stable period and the

liberal consensus. As argued in the previous chapter, hegemonic theory is used in this study as providing a possible explanation for the 'illiberal turn'. In line with the retroductive mode of reasoning, pre-existing theories (in this case, theory of hegemony) suggest that this counter-revolution can be read as a non-liberal and neo-traditionalist reaction that seeks to establish an alternative worldview. At this stage, we are still within the context of discovery. The empirical analysis described in the last section of this thesis will verify this claim by analyzing data regarding the neo-traditionalist discourse. Thus, the context of justification consists in the critical explanation (once again, not predictive) of the initial hypothesis that is going to be achieved by studying the hegemonic strategy of a neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. It is worth mentioning that in retroduction the two contexts do not constitute two separate categories. The analysis of empirical data will be performed by looking at those criteria that are internal to the tentative explanations and serve as a source of inspiration for the research. Each aspect of the research is, indeed, affected by the constant exchange between the context of discovery and the context of justification typical of abductive inference. In this regard, the category of 'sensitizing concept' discussed below is particularly suitable to conduct this process of analysis.

3. Sensitizing concepts

The cyclical character of retroduction makes difficult to follow a linear narration since retroductive reasoning is 'circular' to the extent that discovery and justification are intertwined. To enhance the clarity of this manuscript, the analytical strategy will employ the category of 'sensitizing concept'. Sensitizing concepts are meant to play a role in both stages of the research as they direct the study in its initial phase, and provide support to the analyst in the interpretation of data. Also, they furnish the vocabulary and grid for the analysis (Cipriani, 2012). For this reason, these concepts represent a good starting point for deploying the argument of the thesis. The notion of 'sensitizing concept' was introduced by Herbert Blumer (1954) in his criticism of positivist social theory. According to the American sociologist, 'definitive concepts', made up of clear content and stable attributes, are unsuitable for studying the empirical social world.

Unlike empirical science, in social theory concepts can describe the social world only vaguely. Rather than defining reality, concepts should be considered as sensitizing instruments. Hence, Blumer named concepts in social theory ‘sensitizing concepts’:

“[A sensitizing concept] gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. [...] They rest on a general sense of what is relevant” (Blumer, 1954: 7).

Therefore, sensitizing concepts assist the researcher in what and where to look for in his or her analysis. They serve “to protect the balance between the need for theoretical foundation and the need to avoid a dominant theoretical framework that mutes the voices being analyzed” (Carpentier, 2017: 77). From this perspective, sensitizing concepts fit perfectly in the retroductive process of research, as they bridge theory and empirical data. Instead of defining a theory that is to be tested (this would be the role of definitive concepts), sensitizing concepts provide an open-ended guide that only points to a certain direction. Accordingly, a retroductive analysis that foregrounds the circular interaction between hypothesis, theory, and discovery can be directed by sensitizing concepts that function as empty labeled boxes to be filled out with data. Yet, their labels have a crucial role, as they make sense of what is that we are researching. In light of this, sensitizing concepts are the starting point for building analysis (Charmaz, 2003) and offer a conceptual structure that directs the analyst during the research.

3.1 Conceptual structure of the thesis

For a better understanding of the following analysis, this premise about sensitizing concepts is essential to grasp the structure and the mode of reasoning applied throughout the research. This part intends to offer a conceptual map to the reader, which can be used as a guide to untangling the cyclical-iterative nature of the research. As mentioned, the theoretical apparatus of the research is anchored to Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (and its methodological toolkit, the *logics approach*. Glynos and Howarth, 2007. See Chapter 7). Rather than explaining what PDT is about and how it can be translated into a proper methodology, it is enough, at this stage of the thesis, to stress

the underlying theoretical assumptions of this work. PDT (and, in this study, the logics approach) can be considered as a directive methodology that translates the tenets of the poststructuralist ontology into analytical principles to conduct empirical research (Carpentier, 2017). As such, it already presents a set of (sensitizing) concepts that can be used by the researcher in the analysis and the construction of the hypothesis. Using only concepts deriving from an existing theory, however, would transform the research into a pure deductive work. The goal of the research, in fact, is not to test whether the logics approach is a methodology that can effectively address social phenomena. Nor does PDT aspire to generate 'iron laws' regarding the functioning of the social world. Conversely, as already stressed, the aim is to critically explain a problematized issue found in the social world. For this reason, it is necessary to integrate PDT concepts (internal to theory) with external concepts, namely those sensitizing concepts that evade the theoretical framework and guarantee the originality of the research.

"In other words, directive methodologies come with their 'own' (internal) theoretical concepts and frameworks, but also enable other (external) theoretical concepts and frameworks to be integrated. It is this dynamics of internal and external theoretical support that requires the integration and calibration of external theoretical concepts and frameworks in order to ensure the alignment of the external theoretical concepts and frameworks with the internal ones" (Carpentier, 2017: 290).

In this light, sensitizing concepts (both internal and external) serve as a bridge between theory and the empirical world. Therefore, the research is built both on theoretical concepts (dawn from PDT) and empirical concepts (linked to the actual scope of the research). To summarize, the research will be based on PDT concepts (e.g., discourse, dislocation, nodal points, etc.), and those concepts that define the neo-traditionalist discourse (e.g., traditionalism, illiberalism, populism.). Still, to link the notion of sensitizing concept to the previous discussion about retroduction, it is necessary to clarify where these concepts come from. If, on the one hand, the origin of internal concepts is evident as they derive from the ontological position of the researcher, external concepts, on the other hand, are extracted from the problematized phenomenon. Hence, the choice of external concepts has been taken after having conducted several empirical observations at the beginning of the research process and adjusted after further analysis (the research process is discussed in detail in Chapter 9).

Drawing from Carpentier (2017), I also distinguish between primary internal sensitizing concepts and secondary internal secondary concepts. While the former refer to the ontology of the theoretical framework (namely, the notion of discourse in discourse theory), the latter are inferred from PDT and can be considered as their theoretical and methodological offshoots. Discourse-as-meaning is strictly connected to my ontological position and would define the contours of the research. Theoretical (hegemony) and methodological (logics) concepts, instead, contribute to the formation of the hypothesis that explains the specific problematized phenomenon of the ‘illiberal turn’ and neo-traditionalist counter-revolution. Finally, tertiary external concepts are not related to PDT and define the specific topic of the research. Table 1 and Figure 1 (based on the model provided by Carpentier, 2017: 293, 295) should clarify the conceptual structure of the research.¹⁵

Level	Definition	Concepts
Primary internal sensitizing concepts	Internal concept to PDT that defines the ontological assumptions of the research	Discourse (PDT) (as representation and meaning)
Secondary internal sensitizing concepts (theoretical)	Internal concepts to PDT that constitute the main elements of the theoretical framework	Hegemony Dislocation
Secondary internal sensitizing concepts (from theory to methodology)	Internal concepts to PDT that define the methodological framework (logics approach)	Nodal Points (social logic) Articulation (political logic) Fantasy (fantasmatic logic) ↓ Nodal Points of Sublimation
Tertiary external sensitizing concepts (analysis)	Sensitizing concepts external to PDT that define the object of research	Neo-traditionalism ↓ Traditionalism Ethno-nationalism/Illiberalism Populism/Demagogism

Table 1. Internal and external sensitizing concepts of the research (based on Carpentier, 2017: 295)

Whereas the table above shows a static picture of the conceptual structure, the following pyramid tries to grasp and illustrate the dynamic character of the retroductive cycle. According to the latter, 1) the research begins from the fourth level of problematization. The first empirical observations expose the neo-traditionalist anomaly: an illiberal counter-reaction, often described as populist, that proposes a traditionalist worldview. At this stage, 2) a preliminary explanatory hypothesis, informed by the researcher's ontology and involving the notion of discourse (as meaning), is offered; 3) the explanation, involving the cultural counter-hegemonic thesis, fits within the concepts of hegemonic theory and PDT which account for the 'discovery' explaining the problematized issue; having generated a tentative explanation, 4) the researcher moves now to the field of justification and empirical data: the external concepts identified (and adjusted) at the beginning of the research are linked to the internal concepts; empirical data are analyzed through coding procedures referring to internal concepts. This operation, using codes and sensitizing concepts, is a necessary step to avoid a predominant deductive analysis. At the same time, external concepts are brought within the safe haven of pre-existing knowledge that, eventually, help provide a critical and intelligible explanation of the anomaly. Finally, the retroductive circle may be repeated in order to constantly correct the hypothesis and explanation, evolving through different phases.

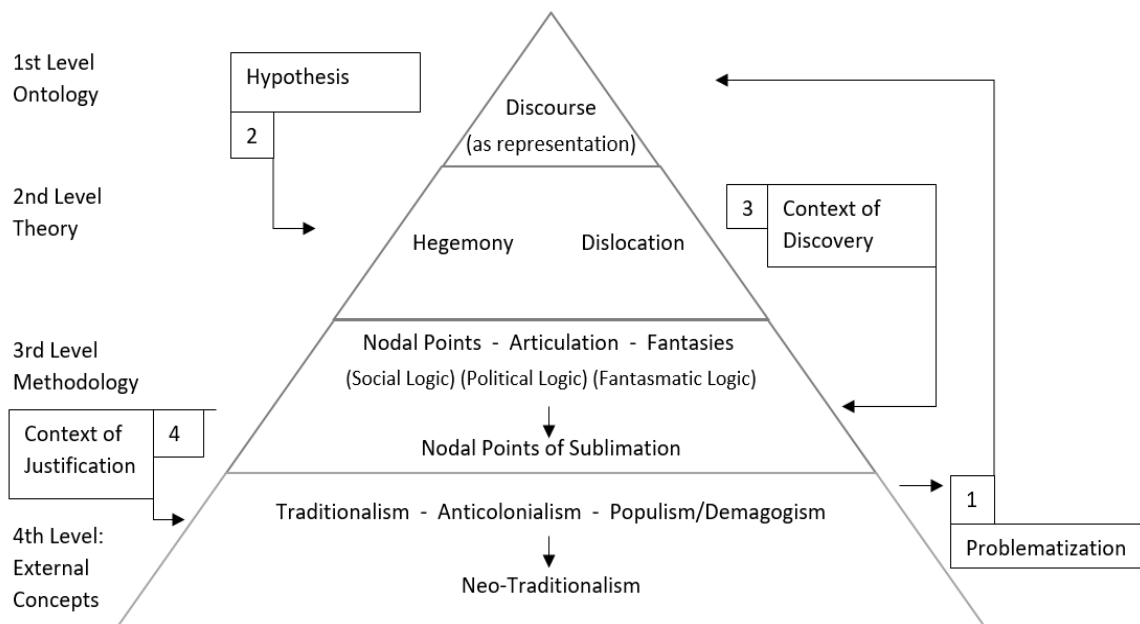


Figure 1. The retroductive cycle of the research (based on Carpentier, 2017: 293).

4. Structure of the thesis

The conceptual structure depicted in the previous pyramid is somehow reflected in the structure of the thesis. In this respect, I have tried to reproduce the retroductive circle, moving from problematization, through ontology and theory, to return at the end to the empirical data. Before the description of the actual research and analysis, each chapter will discuss the different layers of the pyramid, making sense of the concepts used.

The chapters of the thesis are divided into five parts that represent the different moments of the research. *Part I – Introduction* describes the empirical, ontological, and epistemological foundations of the research. As already seen, Chapter 1 discusses the puzzle that needs to be solved, namely the ‘illiberal turn’ and the neo-traditionalist counter-reaction. Chapter 2 has just illustrated the process of reasoning to achieve this goal. From the observed problem, it was argued that the research will follow a conceptual map to explain the problematized issue. Chapter 3 is still linked to the external concepts of the investigation. Following the initial empirical observations, the chapter will present a literature review of the external concepts of the research that constitute the core elements of neo-traditionalism. Of course, as the cycle of research is reiterative, this chapter has been reworked several times after more accurate observations. To make an example, I have identified neo-traditionalism as an umbrella concept that includes different sub-concepts only after the last cycle of analysis that revealed the importance of its nodal points.

After having defined the initial conditions of the research in the Introduction, *Part II – Theoretical Framework* will discuss the internal concepts of the research. First, Chapter 4 will define the ontological contours of the thesis, defining the meaning of discourse in PDT as the most important category that characterizes the social world. Chapter 5 will instead discuss the concept of hegemony, from the Marxist approach developed by Antonio Gramsci, to the poststructuralist turn promoted by Ernesto Laclau that sees hegemony as an effect of dislocations.

In *Part III – Methodology*, the internal concepts will be translated into a methodological framework for the analysis of the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland. From Gramsci, I have extrapolated the category of ‘organic intellectuals’ that account

for the dissemination of illiberal and neo-traditionalist narratives through a discourse coalition (Hajer, 2005) (Chapter 6). The work of Laclau, instead, is used as a methodological tool by looking at the *logics approach* (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) and *hegemony analysis* (Nonhoff, 2019) that translated Laclau's abstract categories into more precise guidelines for empirical analysis (Chapter 7).

At this stage, the first part of the retroductive cycle has been completed. All the concepts that link the hypothesis of the cultural counter-hegemonic thesis to an organized pattern of concepts derived from PDT have been discussed. Thus, the context of discovery needs to be integrated with the concept of justification. *Part IV – Empirical Research* describes how the initial discovery has been justified by analyzing data. First (Chapter 8), by summarizing the hypothesis and research questions. This time, unlike the first part of the thesis, the problematized issue can be rediscussed in light of the internal concepts. Therefore, the research questions can be stated again using the appropriate terminology informed by PDT. Second, in Chapter 9, I will discuss the actual research process, showing the various moves performed for analyzing neo-traditionalism, and justifying the case selection. In other words, this part makes clear how internal and external concepts have been merged to provide a single explanation of the 'illiberal turn'.

The last *Part V – Analysis and Interpretation* offers the answers to the research questions. For the sake of clarity, this part is divided according to the three logics described by Glynos and Howarth (2007). In brief, Chapter 10 describes the social logic of the neo-traditionalist discourse, namely its content and rules. Chapter 11 is interested in its political logic, that is, its diachronic moment of contestation and resignification of the discursive space. Finally, Chapter 12 reveals the ideological background of neo-traditionalism that sustains the construction of an illiberal imaginary. To conclude, the results are discussed in Chapter 13. The latter provides a general discussion about the main academic contributions of the research and the answers to the research questions.

Chapter 3

Literature Review: External Concepts

As discussed in the previous chapters, the research begins from an anomaly, namely the non-liberal and neo-traditionalist counter-revolution in Poland. As a result of empirical observations, the retroductive circle of the analysis has indicated three external concepts that contribute to understanding the illiberal discourse in Poland. First, we observe a return to traditionalism; second, its anti-colonial narrative is supported by an ethno-pluralist vision of societies; third, the rejection of liberal democracy, often described as populist, presents indeed an appeal to the people against the establishment. Hence, it is necessary to offer a thorough explanation of what neo-traditionalism is and why I have used this concept to discuss the *positive* content of the *negative* non-liberal reaction in Poland. In accordance with the retroductive process of reasoning, the choice of these concepts has not been made entirely *a priori*. Rather, this conceptual development was both a starting point and the result of the analysis which, in turn, is reflected in the following discussion.

1. Traditionalism

The current non-liberal discourse in Poland has been defined in this thesis as neo-traditionalist. In this specific case study, neo-traditionalism can be considered as an umbrella term that includes several characteristics: in summary, neo-traditionalism can be described as a political strategy that combines anti-colonial and anti-modernist elements in the name of a return to 'authentic traditions'. In this sense, traditionalism is just one of the elements that compose the neo-traditionalist discourse. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish between proper traditionalism, and neo-traditionalism as a specific non-liberal political strategy. The following section will focus, first, on the concept of traditionalism as a defining characteristic of a wider neo-traditionalist discourse. Second, I will explain how they are related to each other, and why it was

decided to use the broader term of neo-traditionalism to describe the anti-liberal discourse in Poland (instead of conservatism, for instance).

1.1 The dilemma of freedom

Hast Thou again forgotten that to man rest and even death are preferable to a free choice between the knowledge of Good and Evil? Nothing seems more seductive in his eyes than freedom of conscience, and nothing proves more painful.

(Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*)

One of the most problematic aspects in the study of illiberal discourses is their simplistic dismissal due to their unacceptable (from a liberal point of view) political stances. Consequently, scarce attention has been devoted to ideas, concepts, and the ideological background of conservative or illiberal movements (Buzogány and Varga, 2018; Dąbrowska 2019). Instead, the roots of illiberalism in Europe can be found in a variety of political and philosophical traditions. In particular, with regard to the cultural cleavage between liberalism and neo-traditionalism, the key line of division revolves around the meaning of freedom. The signification of freedom has been disputed since antiquity, not only in Europe. The current cultural conflict can be seen as the continuation of this clash about the signification of ‘freedom’ between different worldviews. As discussed in Part V, what freedom means and where its limits should be set is fundamental to understanding the neo-traditionalist counter-revolution.

Human history is rich in theoretical reflections on the ideal of freedom and liberation. Among human aspirations, freedom can be considered as an inherent instinct. Freedom is limited by chains, both material and abstract. Human beings are constrained by limits imposed by their environment; even the self-perceived free man of the 21st century is compelled to follow social norms and rules that affect his behavior, at least unwittingly. This desire for freedom is a constitutive element of human nature: a *fil rouge* can be found linking different philosophical (and spiritual) traditions regarding the concept of freedom. The issue of ‘liberation’ is central in several parts of the world, transcending the typical Western-centric understanding of humanity. In Hindu traditions, liberation (*Mokṣa*) is the ultimate aspiration, the last step to be achieved to

free the spirit from desire. In this case, the worldly life should be driven by the desire for liberation. In their lives, individuals should aim to go beyond the apparent knowledge of this world and seek the objective Truth. As aptly noted by Klaus Klostermaier (1985), this desire for emancipation is a constant pattern throughout human existence. In his audacious and brilliant parallel between the Indian philosopher Śaṅkara and Jürgen Habermas, Klostermaier associates the 'desire for liberation' proposed by the former with the 'emancipatory interest' of the latter. Both of them entail the liberation from the existing structures that limit our life; an emancipatory force that should lead us beyond what is given for granted. This desire for freedom, the unifying principle of human history, is to be understood as the desire to choose, the desire to overcome the impositions that constrain our life.

Several examples can also be found in literature. Freedom is the scream of Nikos Kazantzakis's character, Zorba. It is a cry for overcoming his passions: Fatherland, religion, violence as "only people who want to be free are human beings" (Kazantzakis, 2001: 164). This longing for freedom means the refusal of the external symbolic world: ideals and words induce us to follow a given path of life, and lead us to commit the worst and inexplicable actions. These abstract concepts are just an obstacle for the Greek Nietzschean hero in his quest for Life. The effort to free the self aims at preserving and defending free will against any external influence. Both in the Asian and Western philosophical traditions, this is a struggle for liberation towards the true meaning of life.

Another crucial example in the Western world, that will also be essential to understand the neo-traditionalist discourse, is the myth of another Greek, Prometheus. The Titan Prometheus is the symbol of the human craving for liberation. Having received fire and technology, men can emancipate themselves from the obligations of the Gods and the limitations imposed by nature. By relying on technology, the Promethean man does not need anyone except himself. It is exactly the liberation always desired by humans in history. And democracy is the political dream of Prometheus (Urbinati, 2020). In democracy, men can decide their principles; in democracy, secularism is the fire that can liberate people from transcendental values. However, again Urbinati, Prometheus is a two-faced Janus. Technology can liberate men, but it requires them to be subjected to machines. Secularism and axiological individualism can free humankind from

heteronomous values but they oblige people to decide. Can emancipated humankind without God decide what is right and what is wrong?

Here comes the pessimistic side of the dilemma of freedom. Emancipation is a human instinct; however, the journey towards freedom and truth is thorny and risky. Zorba, for instance, hungered for freedom; yet, he was aware that knowing the unfiltered reality would only lead men to misery. Tearing the veil of false consciousness and glimpsing at the Truth is just a step forward towards unhappiness. It is Knowledge and Truth, according to Giacomo Leopardi (2010), that show the unhappy condition of men. Values and passions hamper people's freedom, but serve to conceal their anguish. Freeing people from external false impositions might only reveal to men their incapacity of choosing and create awareness of their miserable condition. The dilemma of freedom is masterfully exposed in Fyodor Dostoevsky's tale *'The Grand Inquisitor'*. In this poem, within the novel *'The Brothers Karamazov'*, Dostoevsky (1950) addresses the issue of free will by narrating a surreal meeting between the Spanish Grand Inquisitor and Christ. In his monologue, the former accuses Jesus of having donated to people freedom of choice. Instead of showing his divine nature, Christ trusted people and their capacity to choose between Good and Evil. But people are rebellious, the Inquisitor affirms, and rebels cannot be happy. They can deceive themselves with free thinking and science. They can even turn their back on the One who fought for defending their free will. Soon, however, they will realize that freedom cannot show them the Truth; the gift that Christ gave to them can only lead to confusion, chaos, and misery. This is the burden that freedom and free will carry with them. A burden alleviated by ignorance, which the Church has donated to mankind, the Inquisitor says. Therefore, the Church, in Dostoevsky's tale, and, analogously, political powers today are called to correct this disproportionate amount of freedom people are forced to enjoy by offering them the only gift they need: absolute submission (Chomsky, 1989).

What does this literary digression have to do with counter-hegemonic neo-traditionalism? As I see cultural divisions in Central and Eastern Europe as a rough continuation of the debate about freedom, it is rather important to understand this concept. As discussed in the last analytical section of the thesis, the fight for signifying the signifier 'freedom' is a crucial aspect of the hegemonic struggle. While liberalism

promises free will and individual liberty, neo-traditionalism functions as the Grand Inquisitor's Church. It offers security within a heteronomous system of values. Whether freedom should be understood as the Promethean rebellion against authority or the voluntary (or unaware) submission to a higher order is fundamental to understanding the Polish *Kulturkampf*. Besides, the dilemma of freedom is intrinsic to the very non-liberal reaction. As the etymological roots of the word suggest, liberalism is based on liberty: especially in its early stage, liberalism was associated with the idea of liberation from authorities. Freedom from noble and ecclesiastical privileges, freedom from economic barriers, freedom from oppressing authorities. As already discussed, at the core of the liberal worldview we can find the individual and its moral system. The liberal individual is understood as "the locus of moral judgement and choice" and "the final adjudicator of morality" (Carse, 1994: 186). Liberalism praises freedom from bonds and constraints, whether those are bonds given by the community, by religion, by nature, or by the state. All these constraining barriers are rejected and possibly removed for the free will of individuals and the trust in their rationality is the only judgment parameter. All these constraining barriers are rejected and, possibly, removed for the free will of individuals and the trust in their rationality is the only judgment parameter.

In this light, we can see the link between neo-traditionalism (and, allegedly, other non-liberal reactions) and the dilemma of freedom. As the illusion that the Church of the Grand Inquisitor provided to the weak humans is fading, eroded by these liberating forces, people are compelled to face reality and choose their system of morality. This "coercion to freedom" (Legutko, 2016: 67) is sweeping away old communities and traditions, leaving people confused and disoriented. As discussed below, neo-traditionalism should be seen within the context of this discussion. It is to be understood as a response to the traumatic encounter with freedom of choice and as a mental map to find again the lost direction sacrificed to the altar of freedom. The question remains whether happiness and the meaning of life should be searched in freedom or illusion. Although this research does not have an answer to this existential question, the concept of fantasy discussed later will help us understand how subjects cope with the contingency of reality and with the dilemma of freedom.

1.2 Traditions against modernity

The dilemma of freedom indicates the existential challenge that each individual must face. Taking comfort in traditions is a possibility when liberty fuels confusion about one's direction in life. A good starting point to define traditions can be found in their constitutive outside and the culprit for any waves of liberty: modernity.

Traditionalist thinkers establish a clear separation between traditional and modern civilizations. The main difference in this duality regards the conception of time. While traditional society entails a circular notion of time, modern society moves on a straight line, exalting the future and progress. The historicist view of the time of the modern man contrasts with the supratemporal understanding of the world of the traditional man. The traditionalist philosopher Julius Evola (1969) distinguished between *being* and *becoming* as a crucial difference between the two civilizations. Since time is cyclical, traditional men are not concerned with the future. They understand the world through the past and *being* in this world is a source of security. On the contrary, modern men do not look at the past to understand the world. Progress and dynamism (*il divenire*, becoming) are their sources of mental security and they feel safe in this world insofar as society itself shows the direction to follow. Deepening Evola's studies (as well as those of other traditionalists such as René Guénon) would lead us to esotericism, which is out of the scope of this work. However, his description of the two civilizations is particularly important to explain why even in our modern society people look back at the past when they feel threatened by new values.

A first hint to answer this question is provided by one of the fathers of traditionalist thought, Edmund Burke. In his famous '*Reflections on the Revolution in France*', Burke (2003) praises prejudices (here understood as traditions) as points of reference in people's life. In his criticism against Jacobinism, Burke denounces the rationalism and atheism of the Revolution as a threat to the Church and traditional thinking. While faith in progress, rationality, and individuals characterizes modernity, traditional thinking is the guide of the traditional man.

"Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit; and not a series of

unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature” (Burke, 2003: 74-75).

Prejudices and traditions show the path to people, rather than leaving them with complete freedom of choice. The Revolution signaled the victory of the Enlightenment and reason over prejudice; modernity over traditions. Religion, authority, and hierarchy are replaced by a new set of principles whereas individuals gain more and more importance in defining their own system of values. While Burke maintained that there is no discovery in morality, modern society breaks prejudices in pieces and provides a (sometimes undesired) freedom of choice to people. Free will is boosted when the old directional bastions of the traditionalist civilization are razed to the ground.

Connecting the reflections of Evola and Burke, it results that the linear and progressive time of the modern world is an insufficient tool for the traditional man. As prejudice has been swiped off by the rational revolution and by the relativization (or individualization) of values, the man of modern society is lost when there is a lack of clarity of direction and he looks back at traditions to make sense of the world. The perception of chaos and the sudden encounter with freedom drive people to look at traditional institutions to find their safe path (Shils, 1958). The antagonism between tradition and modernity, therefore, reflects the dilemma of freedom. Modernity gives freedom to people, but deprives them of direction. Prometheus freed humanity while at the same time depriving them of the divine certainties of the Gods. Tradition, instead, reduces people’s freedom of choice, but guarantees stability and order in an otherwise meaningless and chaotic life.

1.3 Traditions and traditionalism

While modernity is a liberating force that breaks with the legacy of the past, traditions should be understood positively as the ‘illusions’ or ‘fantasies’ that protect people from the excess of freedom. In other words, traditions can be associated with the false consciousness that the Grand Inquisitor donated to his weak followers. Why, then, do we talk of traditions and traditionalism and what is their meaning?

To answer this question, we should distinguish between two different connotations of tradition. Tradition may refer to rituals or typical objects. In this case, Hobsbawm (1983: 1) speaks of 'invented traditions' as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past". The reference to the past, according to Hobsbawm, is often fictitious and it is an attempt to cope with the changes and innovation of the modern world by creating an unbroken bond with the past. Though not conceptually wrong, Hobsbawm's (1983: 3) definition refers to a narrower understanding of traditions (in his words, "the formal paraphernalia and ritualized practices surrounding their substantial actions"). The British historian is more concerned with the actual traditional practices than with the transmission of traditional values. To be sure, he distinguishes clearly between 'invented traditions' and 'customs', the latter of greater interest in this work. Custom, indeed, resonates somewhat with Burke's prejudice. Custom does not preclude innovation and finds its legitimacy as long as it is compatible with changes.

The other meaning of tradition (used in this research) refers to traditional ideas, norms, and values. Moving from its Latin etymology (*traditum*, transmitted), Edward Shils (1981) defines tradition as anything which is handed down from past to present. Shils' conception of tradition is, therefore, extremely wide and comprises a broad range of traditional elements. In this case, the meaning of tradition has a wider breadth than the concept of prejudice to the extent that it creates a paradox. According to Shils (1958), libertarian values are also underpinned by traditional elements. Libertarian values are transmitted from generation to generation and contribute to sustaining the institutions of modern society. However, as discussed previously, prejudice should serve as an instruction booklet that guides decisions when facing ambiguous situations. The prescriptive nature of traditions conflicts with individual freedom. Shils resolves the paradox by separating the traditional sphere of the individual from their sphere of freedom.

I only partially accept the explanation of tradition provided by Shils. First, the etymological understanding of tradition, used in the sense of transmission, might

include several practices of social life. For there is a degree of tradition in every aspect of our life, such a broad understanding of tradition can scarcely provide analytical advantages. Second, referring again to Evola, the paradox of liberal traditions cannot be solved only by dividing the individual sphere of choice. In fact, liberal traditions can be ascribed to practices that conceive of a progressive view of history. Liberal traditions want to break away from the yoke of old traditions. On the contrary, dogmatic traditions (which instead limit individual freedom) aim to reproduce the past in the future (in a cyclical way), rather than promoting progress and practices in the future. Indeed, in a later work, Shils (1981) refers to progressivism as an anti-traditional tradition (or antitraditions, as defined by Jacobs, 2007). Thus, while liberal traditions by definition imply an emancipatory thrust, old traditions intentionally limit people's freedom of choice and preserve the past.

It follows that the meaning of tradition, in this work, is linked to the transmission of values and their prescriptive character. If modernity removes barriers and obstacles to human emancipation, traditions guide people and conceal their freedom (or their unhappiness, Leopardi would say). Here is the divergence between liberalism and traditionalism.

“The expansion of individual freedom has come to be regarded as incompatible with the maintenance of tradition. [...] The illiberal potentiality of tradition as such is accentuated when the attachment to tradition is transformed into *traditionalism*. Traditionalism is the self-conscious, deliberate affirmation of traditional norms, in full awareness of their traditional nature and alleging that their merit derives from that traditional transmission from a sacred origin” (Shils, 1958: 154, 160; emphasis in the original).

The ideological and dogmatic ground of traditionalism makes it hostile to liberty, Shils says. Therefore, the appeal to traditions is inherently illiberal. Whereas liberalism is based on the continuous expansion of individual liberty to the extent that the individual should become the final adjudicator of morality, traditionalism grants this role to the norms of the past.

Similarly, the leading role assigned by liberalism to the individual contrasts with the role of communities. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (usually translated respectively as ‘community’ and

'society'. Tönnies, 2001). *Gemeinschaft* refers to an organic community where ties between individuals are strong. The will of the group is not cut into pieces and is driven by group habits, customs, and tradition (Aldous, Durkheim, and Tönnies, 1972). Interactions are personal and direct. An example of a pure *Gemeinschaft* is family, where its members act by consensus and do not require any form of exchange among each other. In the *Gesellschaft*, ties between individuals are formal and are driven by self-interest regulated by contracts. Beliefs and norms of behavior are not necessarily shared by its members and remain impersonal. Modern antitraditions push towards the individualization of society: besides disrupting traditions, they also lead to the disintegration of old communities based on religion, state, and traditions that curb individuals' liberty (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

To summarize, the opposition between liberalism/modernity and traditionalism can be found along two intertwined main lines: emancipation against traditional norms, and individuals against communities. To be sure, both Shils and Tönnies discussed ideal types. In modern society, Shils' extremist view of traditionalism is looser and traditionalism comes to play a role when the wisdom of the past is endangered. Similarly, even though old communities are disappearing, the need for belonging persists, and so new communities may arise. Yet, we observe (at least in Poland and Europe) a return of traditional thinking as a tool for understanding the world in response to a loss of clarity. Liberalism has fostered emancipation and negative freedom. Nevertheless, it did not offer a common ground of morality except that based on individual choice and rational exchange. Threatened by the chaos of modernity, the sacred origin of traditions and the sense of belonging given by communities provide a safe haven to lost individuals. This comeback of traditions, therefore, is understood in this work as a neo-traditionalist counter-reaction against the dissolution of stable meanings perpetrated by modernist and post-modernist ideologies.

"Tradition is one aspect of modern existence that must be repressed or even dissolved if the civilizing process is to proceed. It is that aspect that is represented by culture, defined as a system of rules and etiquette pegged to a totalistic cosmology that provides ultimate meaning to existence, defining man's place in the universe as well as the significance of all his activities. It embodies a structure of legitimate authority, or belief, a system of concrete values pertaining to a world of personal relations. It opposes itself to modernity, which is defined from this perspective

as a universe emptied of meaning, peopled by alienated individuals dominated by the structures of *Gesellschaft*, a system of abstract roles and functions. Postmodernism is opposed in this as the ultimate outcome of the modernist onslaught on culture, the total dissipation of value and meaning” (Friedman, 1988: 449).

Thus, the perpetual fight between traditionalism and liberalism that originated after the Renaissance and the French Revolution returns. The reproduction of culture and tradition in opposition to modernity and post-modernism is defined as neo-traditionalism.

1.4 Revolt against the modern world: Neo-traditionalism

The term *neo-traditionalism* has been used in two different contexts and academic fields with different meanings. In American sociology, neo-traditionalism describes the societal and political developments of Communist countries that combined modernization and traditional elements (Jowitt, 1983; Walder, 1986). Although they presented differences,¹⁶ Jowitt and Walder described the Soviet and Chinese communist regimes as neo-traditional since they amalgamated impersonal elements of modernity with the particularistic features and deferential relations of pre-modern societies. From this perspective, neo-traditional societies do not reject modernity. Rather, they develop an alternative (to Western) modernity that, at the same time, reproduces traditional and pre-modern elements (Martin, 2000). Communist neo-traditionalism, therefore, seems to diverge from the previous discussion that poses modernity as the constitutive outside of traditions. Even though the proponents of ‘communist neo-traditionalism’ may be right in their conclusions, the term neo-traditionalism appears to be poorly related to their point. In particular, none of them engages with the concept of ‘tradition’ and, as suggested by David-Fox (2006), ‘multiple modernities’ can better grasp the mixed system of modern and traditional elements within a society. This is not to say that neo-traditionalism needs to exclude any progressive and modernizing thrust. However, even modernization should be pursued through traditional social norms and customs.

My understanding of ‘neo-traditionalism’ differs from the sociological origins of this concept. Rather, my approach looks at anthropology and postcolonial studies as it sees traditions as a tool to reject foreign influences and shape a new (old) identity. In

this field, the concept of neo-traditionalism has been used to describe the cultural production promoted by a new postcolonial elite to claim an alleged continuity with an 'authentic' tribal past. In addition to challenging the colonial culture, neo-traditionalism also signals a political strategy that aims to legitimize the 'ethnic bourgeoisie' as the appropriate political elite of the country and the custodians of its genuine traditions. In this sense, neo-traditionalism is a strategy of political legitimization (Schröder, 2003). While it can be used to contest the legacy of colonialism, neo-traditionalism also causes societal and hierarchical fragmentation since it fosters the emergence of a neo-tribal elite, as it happened in the South Pacific (Rata, 2007). The alleged golden past of the nation grants a license of genuineness to indigenous political groups. Resisting modernity and progress confers political advantages on the ethnic elite. Western modernity, in contrast, is perceived as breaking social relations and the meaningfulness of life (Rata, 2000).

The specific contest of former colonies and the sharp cultural difference between indigenous and European ethnic groups entail a peculiar understanding of postcolonial neo-traditionalism. To utilize this concept more broadly, it is necessary to provide a more generic explanation. More generally, Jonathan Friedman (1994) sees traditionalism and neo-traditionalism as social phenomena that aim to re-establish a culturally defined identity. While modernity has led to progressive and fluid identities and the affirmation of the self as an ever-changing process, the recent return to traditions signals the need to create permanent and stable meanings. The rejection of the foreigner, therefore, has to be read also as the rejection of global processes of modernization. Progressivism, foreign elements, atomization of society: all these elements are the trigger of a neo-traditionalist reaction. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see them as untied. Modernity is the result of a campaign against traditions that initiated in the West centuries ago, which began when Prometheus emancipated himself from the Gods; modernity is the product that Western powers have spread throughout the world; modernity is the affirmation of the individual and the *Gesellschaft* in lieu of the traditional and communitarian values that bond the members of a community (Friedman, 1994). Accordingly, "neo-traditionalism is a view that rejects modernism and seeks an organic form of existence. [...] It aspires to return to the

importance of values and community that presumably existed before modernist rationality drove out customary verities” (Fisher, 2005: 242).

Hence, like traditionalism, neo-traditionalism is opposed to modernity and individualism by praising the past and communities as the key to living in modern society. Like traditionalism, a neo-traditionalist narrative offers stability and ontological security to contrast the post-modernist vacuum. Unlike traditionalism, the prefix *neo-* indicates the reproduction of cultural patterns as a (divisive) strategy of political legitimation “deployed in different ways by both elites and ordinary people” (Galvan, 2007: 599). Unlike traditionalism, modernity is also associated with something foreign and alien. In this way, by contesting the extraneous and foreign character of modernity, neo-traditionalism also gains a political dimension. Historically, in postcolonial countries, the modernizing enemy was identified with the Western colonizers and their different value system. Rejecting modernity also means rejecting the globalizing and homogenizing processes that are conforming local cultures to the liberal West. This is evident in former colonies, where neo-traditionalism can also be seen as a defensive strategy to protect the ‘authentic’ roots of indigenous communities. In addition, the study of postcolonial neo-traditionalism has an anthropological focus. Does the concept of neo-traditionalism hold even in today’s European context? And how can a category that belongs to anthropology be used for political analysis?

1.5 Neo-traditionalism in post-communist CEE

Neo-traditionalist strategies in postcolonial countries are rather evident. References to authentic pre-European traditions are a powerful mean to legitimize a postcolonial political project and their opposition to the Western world is self-evident. Furthermore, the colonization of these countries, both cultural and economic, is a historical fact and can be easily used as an emotional rhetoric stratagem against the former European elite. On the contrary, using the concept of neo-traditionalism in Europe as a rejection of the modern West is not straightforward. First, there are no ethnic differences between the liberal elite and the neo-traditionalist challengers (although the arrival of non-European

migrants can be described as a consequence of progressivism). Second, Europe and the West are seen as corrupted by foreign agents, rather than being foreign themselves.

To justify the use of neo-traditionalism within the European context, it is necessary to resort again to the cultural counter-hegemonic thesis in the West, promoted explicitly by political leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński (2016). After 1989, the liberal consensus and the perspective of joining the European Union paved the way for the ideological dominance of liberalism (Rae, 2007). Values and identities were resignified according to modernizing liberal principles stressing openness and cultural plurality (i.e., relativism), instead of the strong and immutable prescriptions provided by traditions or the predominance of a single national culture over others. This phase came as a blow to conservative circles, since post-communism was seen as a continuation of communist anti-traditional policies (Legutko, 2016). Only after EU accession have illiberal voices been raised in Central and Eastern Europe “to defend the sovereignty of their nations against liberal politics that had engendered, variously, economic crisis, an undesired cosmopolitanism, demographic decline, and immorality, whilst also threatening ethnic purity and Christian values” (Mark et al., 2019: 276). In this light, the allegedly genuine national and religious identities were perceived as being attacked.

Neo-traditionalism in CEE emerges as a reaction against these quick and radical changes that took place during the post-communist transition. Rather than a cultural dream, the West is now seen by illiberal actors as a colonizing power that is disrupting the traditional way to understand and depict society.

“The cause which I stand for is that the Central European nations must preserve their identities, their religious and historical national identities. These are not just outdated pieces of clothing that one should discard in the modern era, but armour which protects us [...]. The communities which will be successful, survive and be strong are those with strong identities: religious, historical and national identities. This is what I stand for, and this is what I am trying to protect. I regret to say that we must do so from time to time not only against the faithless and our anti-national rivals, but also from time to time we must do so against Europe’s various leading intellectual and political circles. But we have no choice: we must protect our identities – Polish, Hungarian and Central European identities – in the face of everyone; because otherwise there will be no room for us under the sun” (Orbán, 2016).

This example shows the construction of a culturally defined identity, which is indicated as pre-existing the “modern era” and, therefore, authentic. Furthermore, as in a typical postcolonial narrative, modernity and alien rivals are portrayed as stealing and corrupting “our identities” that need to be protected.

If we consider the previous discussion about traditions, in Orbán’s words national and religious identities are understood as a source of stability in an otherwise fluid world. These strong identities provide certainties as they tell us who we are, rather than leaving freedom of choice. Openness to the world and to new values (EU integration is emblematic in this sense) brought about a perception of insecurity and uncertainty in some sectors of society. In this sense, the novel experience of liberal values and the disruption of old communities (religious or national) produced a loss of ontological security (Benczes, Kollai, Mach, and Vignári, 2022). We can observe how the rapid post-1989 developments and the success of the liberal worldview were perceived by a section of the Central and Eastern Europe society as both impositions of a foreign entity and a cultural displacement (Melito, 2021a). From this perspective, applying the category of ‘neo-traditionalist’ to illiberal actors from Central and Eastern Europe results plausible. It is the cosmopolitan and globalist elite that ‘imposed’ liberal values to be considered foreign by neo-traditionalists, not Europe itself. It is the liberalization of principles to be alien to ‘the authentic way of life’ based on traditional values. Promoters of modern progressive values in Europe are seen as the extraneous colonizers that transformed the islands of the Pacific or the African tribes into colonies. Similarly, they have transformed the ‘Christian Europe of Nations’ into a supranational, secular, and multicultural geographical space.

This discussion reveals the disruptive force of modernity against the traditional world. In a sense, it signals the refusal by the neo-traditionalist elite in Central and Eastern Europe of the progressive Western liberal model. Whereas liberalism liberates individuals from external constraints and tells them to do what they believe is right, neo-traditionalism reproduces fragments of a past culture to give the recipe of life to its adherents. Neo-traditionalism furnishes a map to the ‘cultural losers of globalization’ who cannot find their way in the contemporary fluid world devoid of stable structures and organic communities. To fill this ‘lack’ neo-traditionalism (re)produces new (old)

identities. The unsettling loss of ontological security (what Ernesto Laclau (1990) would call 'dislocation') implies the necessity of finding a stable path to follow; in other words, it induces the need for prejudices and traditions to understand how to behave, who to believe in, and what to identify with, for modern society just leaves complete freedom of choice.

In addition to its prescriptive function, neo-traditionalism also presents a productive political dimension that should be found in its attempt to replace the liberal worldview and redefine the social. As underlined by Galvan (2007), neo-traditionalism brings into play old values and practices to confront the alienation that the dominant liberal democratic and capitalist order has promoted. In this light, as the hypothesis of this work suggests, neo-traditionalism has a clear counter-hegemonic connotation. Neo-traditionalism can be considered as a political discourse produced by different political actors (as discussed in Chapter 6, they can be named the 'organic intellectuals' of neo-traditionalism) that deploy a political strategy to contest the existing social order and institute a new one. In the same fashion as in the South Pacific, neo-traditionalism has also an intrinsic divisive nature: by considering alien and foreign the opposite worldview (the liberal West), neo-traditionalist advocates perform a political antagonistic division of the discursive space. On the one hand, the authentic heirs of the nation (ethnic groups or defenders of tradition); on the other hand, the foreign and corrupt elite (colonizers or cosmopolitans). The antagonistic division between the modernizing corrupt elite and the authentic traditional people resonates with the concept of populism.¹⁷ However, neo-traditionalism goes beyond and incorporates populism. The appeal to the authentic culture is more than a reference to the 'true people'. Neo-traditionalists do not claim to be necessarily "an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004: 543). Instead, they are the voice of the 'authentic and genuine culture' of the people. They do not advocate their *volonté générale*; they promote an alternative worldview that refuses liberal modernity. They *lead* the people by affirming and protecting traditional identities.

The contestation of the liberal societal organization and the call to reshape society on different principles are translated into a specific political project. This project seeks to redefine what is normal within society and highlights those aspects that would solve

the dilemma of freedom in favor of a more limited freedom of choice, namely, in favor of the institutions and morality that can provide direction and security to people. It appeals to a pre-modern (or pre-liberal and pre-communist, if we prefer) golden era when traditional values were at the center of society. In Central and Eastern Europe, this resulted in a political project that, in particular, relates to

“cultural illiberalism, authoritarianism, and conservatism. The adherents of neo-traditionalism are more interested in outcomes rather than procedures of the political processes; cherish the protection of a (national) collective rather than an individual; are determined to cultivate ‘traditional’ social roles, particularly when it comes to gender and sexual orientation; and are always vigilant to protect the purity of the (national) community against the perceived threats of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. In some places, such as Poland, they also play the role of guardians of the public space that they see as inevitably defined by Roman Catholic values, themes and concerns” (Kubik, 2019: 12).

In other words, neo-traditionalism emphasizes the role of the community over individualistic and cosmopolitan modern values; the importance of traditional social roles against relativism and emancipation; the antagonism between a globalized multicultural society (roughly comparable to the *Gesellschaft* devoid of organic and personal ties) and a national community (where national and religious values create a link between its members, as in the *Gemeinschaft*). Pushed by an all-pervasive dominant discourse emphasizing individualism and relativism, neo-traditionalists tend to resist the dilemma of freedom by holding their old values and ties to old institutions.

To conclude this part, it is necessary to explain why I have opted to use the concept of neo-traditionalism to investigate the ‘illiberal turn’. The nature of neo-traditionalism as a discourse that rejects modernity and its chaotic consequences hints that we are looking at a very specific aspect of the non-liberal reaction in Poland. Neo-traditionalism does not necessarily contest, for instance, the economic system. Also, it does not provide an answer to each problematic of our times. Rather, neo-traditionalism can be seen as a response to the atomization of modern society, the emancipation of individuals, and the breakdown of morality (as Durkheim (1960) would put it, it is a response to a condition of *anomie*). For this reason, my analysis will focus only on those aspects that refer to the revival of traditions, in the meaning explained in this chapter.

For this reason, other concepts to describe the non-liberal Polish counter-revolution have not been used.

For example, Ewa Dąbrowska (2019) has described the formation of a new conservative discourse coalition in Poland. Dąbrowska is convincing in identifying a conservative project in Poland that is trying to offer an alternative to neo-liberalism and the post-communist order. Furthermore, to some extent, her reconstruction of a conservative discourse coalition overlaps with the neo-traditionalist one, as well as the traditional underpinnings of both discourses. However, Dąbrowska (2019: 92) describes Polish conservatism as “a full-fledged political ideology of alternative conservative modernization that Poland should embrace”. Two considerations follow Dąbrowska’s perspective: first, conservatism is not at odds with the revolt against modernity discussed thus far. Modernity, indeed, is understood as modernization of values. Even though technology is sometimes seen with suspicion, economic development and progress are not refused. Second, as hinted by this point, the conservative project in Poland looks both at affirming traditional values (as in neo-traditionalism) and at redefining the post-communist order in terms of economy, societal development, and legal order. Conservatism, as observed above, is a full-fledged ideology that, therefore, seeks to cover each aspect of society. Neo-traditionalism, on the contrary, is interested in the rejection of modern and post-modern values; it is interested in the redefinition of the signifier freedom; it is interested, in general, in reproducing an alternative (to liberalism) worldview that can tell its adherents their position in the world and their direction. Simply put, neo-traditionalism is about the fundamental values of society. Thus, the conservative projects described by Dąbrowska (2019) in Poland or by Buzogány and Varga (2019) in Hungary have a much wider breadth than neo-traditionalism, the latter referring to a specific response to modernity and progressivism.

This first part of the chapter has discussed traditions as the piece missing in modern society. If traditionalism can be seen as the anti-modernist side of neo-traditionalism, the anti-colonial pillar is instead characterized by the emphasis placed on ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’. The role of these two signifiers within the neo-traditionalist discourse will be deepened in the empirical part (Chapter, 10). At this

stage, it is sufficient to discuss how ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’ emerge in the political arena. First, right-wing actors across the Old Continent are disseminating an illiberal discourse that emphasizes the importance of authentic national cultures. This vision finds its roots in the *Gramscisme de Droite*. Second, this narrative, often described as populist, refers indeed to the ‘authentic people’. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce different approaches to populism and what populism means in the context of this research.

2. Neo-traditionalist anti-colonialism: From national culture to populism

Neo-traditionalist anti-colonialism in the Central and Eastern European context can be observed with reference to two elements: the ‘authentic national culture’ against cosmopolitan globalization, and the ‘authentic people’ against the cultural colonizers. The former can be grasped by looking at the horizontal orientation characteristic of ethno-pluralist narratives. The latter instead is concerned with the vertical orientation that divides ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, which is usually described as populism. The following sections will focus on these two elements of anti-colonialism: First, it identifies its ideological and political foundations in the tradition of the French movement of the *Nouvelle Droite* (the New Right that theorized the so-called *Gramscism de Droite*) with particular attention given to the ethno-pluralist understanding of the national community; second, it will discuss the academic debate about the concept of populism, briefly offering an overview of the main definitions. The research will position itself in the ‘Laclaudian camp’.

2.1 Refusing globalization: Ethno-pluralism vs. Multiculturalism

Jens Rydgren (2007) identifies three main subgroups to explain the emergence of the radical right: political opportunity structures; party organizations; ideology and discourse of right-wing parties. The latter is of greater interest in the research. Therefore, after a brief description of the existing literature on political structures and

opportunities, I will look at the ideology behind the current 'illiberal turn', especially in its right-wing version.

A consistent share of the existing literature on right-wing parties and narratives deals with political opportunity structures. The rise of illiberal right-wing discourses is explained by looking at the shape of the political system. Some authors, for example, found a correlation between a proportional electoral system and voter support for conservative right-wing parties (Swank and Betz, 2003; Golder, 2003; Veugelers and Magnan; 2005). Political opportunities are also provided by new media and communication tools. Engesser et al. (2017) and Gerbaudo (2018) observed the correlation between right-wing populist parties and the successful use of new social networks. In particular, they show how social media are a suitable channel for 'mass politics' and the populist appeals to the people. Finally, even where there are popular grievances, the ability to seize them and exploit these political opportunities depends on party structures and organizations (Rydgren, 2007). For instance, a charismatic leader is crucial in order to mobilize the electorate (Eatwell, 2005). Although important, these explanations account for contingent situations and deal mostly with party politics and political institutions. Since I do not seek to find any causal mechanism that might explain the electoral success of these parties, this perspective will not be addressed in the investigation.

Rather than focusing on contingent factors, the cultural counter-hegemonic thesis portrays the 'illiberal turn' as a clash of worldviews at the level of ideas. A hegemonic project is not successful if it wins an electoral round. It establishes itself as hegemonic only when it leads civil society (Gramsci, 1975). The reference to Gramsci (developed in detail in Chapters 5 and 6) derives from the *Nouvelle Droite* that from the 1960s theorized the necessity for right-wing movements to conquer, first of all, the cultural hegemony of society. The goal of Alain de Benoist,¹⁸ the main thinker of the French New Right, was to reverse the dominant cultural hegemony of both Marxism and the liberal right, and promote, instead, a conservative and ethno-pluralist project that rejected the cultural homogenization caused by globalization (Camus, 2019). Although they came from opposite political traditions, De Benoist borrowed from Gramsci the idea that power had to be conquered first on the cultural terrain. Today, the rise of right-wing

illiberal discourses can be read as an attempt (more or less explicit) of reproducing the political strategy of the *Nouvelle Droite*: (right-wing) illiberal actors are deemed to put forward a cultural counter-hegemonic discourse hostile to the post-modern ideas of 1968 in order to create a *Kulturkampf* between two opposite cultural camps (Minkenberg, 2000). In the work of de Benoist, the cultural war revolves around two opposite views of society: on the one hand, the liberal one that promotes multiculturalism and globalization leading eventually to “the progressive homogenization of the world” (de Benoist in Camus, 2019: 80). On the other hand, the ethno-cultural society. The *Nouvelle Droite* supported the idea of ethno-pluralism (or ethno-differentialism) where each community keeps its own culture and identity neatly separated from other cultures.

Ethno-pluralism has been accepted by several right-wing non-liberal politicians who claim to be victims of a mondialist and cosmopolitan worldview that aims to neglect differences between different cultures and identities. Cosmopolitanism is considered a sort of reverse racism, which would lead to a mixture of cultures where national and local values are diluted into a single global melting pot (Betz and Johnson, 2004). The concept of ethno-pluralism, instead, indicates a hierarchy within the community where the national/native culture should prevail over others. Rather than stressing an alleged racial superiority, it claims the right of national cultures to be protected from foreign and alien cultures (Rydgren, 2007). In this sense, it is possible to observe a link with neo-traditionalism quite clearly. Neo-traditionalist anti-colonialism does not necessarily imply the supremacy of the ‘authentic culture’ over foreign cultures. Rather, it affirms the right to defend the original way of life against extraneous elements.

Therefore, the rejection of Western cultural colonizers can be seen as an affirmation of the native culture to protect the roots of the community. This is indeed the case of former colonies that deployed a neo-traditionalist strategy as a sort of emancipatory move. Ethno-pluralism captures exactly this point of view, at least theoretically. However, in practice, ethno-pluralism may become exclusionary when a multicultural society (or its perception) becomes real. For example, that can happen if the ethno-cultural community coincides with the nation and when anti-national agents (e.g., immigrants or, as in Poland, LGBT people) infiltrate the community. In this case,

apparently tolerant ethno-pluralism becomes discriminatory as people with a different culture or values can be discriminated or marginalized. Hence, although anti-colonial aspirations of neo-traditionalism may be seen as a genuine attempt to limit the impact of globalization, in practice it can have an exclusionary effect when 'foreign cultures' are part of the community and cannot adapt to its values.

Thus, in neo-traditionalism, the signifier 'nation' (which, as discussed in Chapter 10, occupies a key position in the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse) is understood in terms of culture. From this perspective, the nation is the *locus* of the national community, which should choose its own values and reject what is considered non-authentic and foreign. The anti-colonialism of neo-traditionalism in the European context signals that the revolt against modernity is portrayed concretely as a rejection of the colonial practices performed by Western European elites, including Western cultural models. In this case, when the 'authentic community' is identified with the national community, the non-liberal neo-traditionalist counter-revolution assumes an ethno-nationalist connotation that results in the refusal of multiculturalism or even (perceived) anti-national values.

2.2 Refusing cultural colonizers: People vs. Elite

Whereas the national community is described in neo-traditionalism as the guarantor of national values against foreign cultures, the people are culturally defined as opposed to those who do not belong to the cultural community. In this case, we can observe the typical populist division 'people versus elite', where the former refers to the authentic members of the national community, and the latter as cultural colonizers. To understand whether neo-traditionalism can be associated with populism, in this section I will present a review of the literature of the main definitions of populism. Three main strands are identified:¹⁹ the dominant position in the current literature that defines populism as an ideology (Mudde, 2004); populism as a style (Moffit, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017); populism as a political logic based on the theoretical work put forward by Ernesto Laclau (2005a).

Populism as an Ideology

The ideational perspective is currently the dominant approach in populist studies and it has been used in many works on populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). In the highly influential *'The Populist Zeitgeist'*, Mudde defined populism as

“an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (2004: 543).

From this definition, it is possible to identify the three main characteristics that constitute the analytical core of Mudde’s populism: the perception of people and elites as homogeneous groups; the antagonistic nature of the relations between the two groups; the moral primacy of the sovereign people (and their general will). In Mudde, populism is conceived as opposed to pluralism. Unlike pluralists who see society as divided into several groups and different interests and where consensus and compromise are significant decision-making tools, populists do not accept any cleavage within the groups and consider ‘the people’ morally sovereign. The moralistic divide between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ leads Mudde further. When populists emphasize the importance of the power of the people, the rights of those outside the homogeneous group of ‘the pure people’ are at risk as well as liberal democracy itself. “To put it simply, populism is pro-democracy, but anti-liberal democracy. It supports popular sovereignty and majority rule, but rejects pluralism and minority rights”, Mudde says (2016: 68).

Defining populism as a thin-centered ideology is both the strength and weakness of this approach. As a thin-centered ideology, populism functions as a “restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts” (Freeden, 1998: 750). ‘The people’ is the core concept of the populist thin-ideology that can be thickened by proper ideologies such as, for example, socialism or nationalism. This definition proved to be particularly useful in identifying different types of populism. In fact, it allows distinguishing between left or right populism by keeping the core concept of ‘the people’. The simplicity of the definition and its essential characteristics have largely contributed to providing practical analytical tools in the study of populism, especially

because it provides clear features to be identified in a given party in order to classify it as populist. However, the use of the word ideology has prompted criticisms (Aslanidis, 2016; Moffit, 2016; Stavrakakis et al., 2017). The ease in using this definition has prevented many scholars and observers from clarifying what the populist ideology actually is. 'The people', which is the core concept of populism, can assume several different forms depending on the type of populism. 'The people' is a discursive construction and it may refer, for instance, to an economic class or a certain ethnicity. In some cases, it has been referred to as the *heartland* of a nation (Taggart, 2000). That makes unclear the actual nature of the 'populist ideology'.

Moreover, Mudde (2016) defines morality and monism as the two essential features of populism. However, the monistic and moralistic construction of the people resonates with a biased right-wing perspective on the issue (Stavrakakis et al., 2017). By taking into account left-wing populist parties, the anti-liberal and anti-pluralist characterization contrasts with their democratizing discourse (Mouffe, 2018). Similarly, a monistic and moralistic interpretation of the people echoes the right-wing ethno-pluralism and extreme-right ideology. Notwithstanding its potential applicability to both left-wing and right-wing parties, this understanding of populism risks narrowing the word 'populism' to a restricted political camp (right-wing) and conflating 'thick ideologies' with 'thin populism'. In this case, discourses that are mainly nationalist or nativist are classified as right-wing populist by default (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017).

Populism as a Political Style

Populism has been described as a political style. Moffitt (2016) and Ostiguy (2017) have proposed two different definitions that can be grouped roughly in the same category that emphasizes their rhetoric. Moving from empirical analysis, Moffitt identifies three characteristics of the populist style: An appeal to 'the People' versus 'the Elite'; use of 'bad manners'; performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat. The socio-cultural approach put forward by Ostiguy (2017) also stresses the political style by emphasizing the 'low character' of the populist style. By flaunting the low, populist actors aim to establish a connection with the 'low' segment of the society in contrast to the 'high' out-of-touch

way of doing politics of the technocratic elite. The two approaches offer valuable insights regarding the political style of populists. However, this approach could hardly be generalized as a comprehensive definition of populism. For example, the use of 'bad manners' could be a populist rhetoric tool only in a context where the enemy is considered 'politically correct', as in the European Union. Similarly, the flaunting of the low is a populist feature where the construction of the people implies low classes. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that, notwithstanding the lack of a generalizing potential, this approach accurately describes the political style of many current populist parties. In particular, as discussed later, performing a crisis is a crucial operation in order to construct new identities, including populist or neo-traditionalist.

Populism as a Logic of Articulation

Ernesto Laclau (2005a; 2005b) defined populism as a logic of articulation. Unlike other definitions of populism, Laclau dismisses the ontic approach based on empirical observations and provides a formal definition of populism. In fact, attempts to describe the ontic content of populism

“have ended in a self-defeating exercise whose two predictable alternative results have been either to choose an empirical content which is immediately overflowed by an avalanche of exceptions, or to appeal to an ‘intuition’ which cannot be translated into any conceptual content” (Laclau, 2005b: 44).

Laclau, instead, links populism to its ontological poststructuralist position.²⁰ In short, to Laclau populism is a logic of articulation of equivalent demands. When a single democratic demand remains unfulfilled it does not involve any populist construction. However, when several different demands are unfulfilled by the same antagonist, they can be articulated as equivalent since they share the same enemy. Populism arises when the signifier 'the people' condenses within itself the other demands. It becomes the Name of the lack all demands share. In this sense, a populist logic of articulation is made of different but equivalent demands negated by the same enemy, and represented by name of 'the people'.

“This division presupposes [...] the presence of some privileged signifiers which condense in themselves the signification of a whole antagonistic camp (the 'regime', the 'oligarchy', the 'dominant groups', and so on, for the enemy; the 'people', the 'nation', the 'silent majority', and so on, for the oppressed underdog - these signifiers acquire this articulating role according, obviously, to a contextual history)” (Laclau, 2005a: 87).

It follows that, in Laclau, populism does not have a predetermined content, nor can it be considered as an ideology ‘thickened’ by other ideologies. Indeed, the discursive construction of ‘the people’ is by definition ‘empty’ and results from the articulation of equivalent demands that seek to overcome the unresponsive ‘establishment’. Thus, Laclau overcomes formally the shortcomings of Mudde’s definition by highlighting the discursive performative construction of ‘the people’ instead of considering populism as a steady ideology.

In light of this (and, in particular, accepting Laclau’s definition) we could grasp a neo-traditionalist populist sphere and link populism to anti-colonialism. ‘The people’ becomes ‘the Name’ of the frustrated authentic culture. Different demands that compose the genuine way of life (values, rituals, symbols) are frustrated by the foreign elite that imposes ‘their way of life’. Therefore, the populist articulation of demands indicates the vertical orientation that separates ‘the people’ from ‘the cultural colonizers’. Of course, this picture needs to be deepened to grasp how neo-traditionalist populism emerges. This will be included in the empirical analysis.

PART II
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chapter 4

Ontology: Discourse

The problematized 'illiberal turn' in Poland has activated a set of concepts that help describe and contextualize the rise of neo-traditionalism. The external sensitizing concepts discussed earlier draw the thematic boundaries of neo-traditionalism and will drive the research. Following the retroductive cycle, the puzzle related to the non-liberal counter-revolution leads to conjecture about this issue and to project my ontological vision to the political phenomenon under study. This move requires deepening the internal concepts of the research that will eventually be linked to empirical data in the last section of this work.

The previous chapters have set out the goals and objectives of the research. Furthermore, the scope of the thesis has been declared, including the study of neo-traditionalism in Poland between 2015-2020. It was also mentioned that the goal of the research will be achieved through discourse-theoretical analysis. However, the unit of analysis has not yet been stated. Rather than a specific political party or a certain social group, the research object has a more abstract substance. The focus, in fact, will be on the counter-hegemonic neo-traditionalist discourse as such. This choice calls for a thorough explanation of what discourse and discourse analysis mean in this thesis. The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I will examine the different approaches to discourse analysis, positioning myself in the macro-contextual approach of discourse theory. Second, I will concentrate on the construction of discourse, with particular emphasis given to the link between power, knowledge, and discourse proposed by Michel Foucault. Finally, I will introduce Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory, which serves as the theoretical framework of the research. In this chapter, I will only present the social ontology of their work (namely, their interpretation of discourse as a static configuration).

1. What is discourse?

The concept of discourse and discourse analysis will be used in the research in order to unpack the neo-traditionalist description of the world. Studying a given worldview in terms of discourse suggests that these two concepts are interconnected. More precisely, from my poststructuralist ontological perspective, discourse is understood as a system of representation of reality (Hall, 1997): it signifies discursive elements (including both language and practices) that, once articulated together, model a certain worldview and offer subject positions. In other words, the way we see the world and identify with is given by discourses that signify elements and describe objects. From a social constructionist perspective, therefore, discourse is understood as a structure that generates meanings. In this light, this reading of discourse diverges from its common definition. Indeed, contrary to an intuitive understanding of the term, a poststructuralist notion of discourse (as utilized in this thesis) does not define discourse as necessarily a verbal or written expression, nor is discourse necessarily a speech or a conversation. Consequently, discourse studies are not limited to the analysis of texts or language use.

Yet, there is no clear and commonly accepted definition of what discourse is since its characterization depends on how we look at meanings and meaning production. Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips (2002: 1) propose a preliminary definition of discourse “as a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)”. This definition is in line with the previous mention of worldviews. What is important in discourse studies is not the act of communicating *per se*; the focus is, instead, on the creation of meanings a discourse produces. Therefore, discourse is not neutral language use, but rather the result of signifying practices that contribute to shaping the social world or, at least, the way we see it. The meaning we attribute to a certain word or a certain object is an active force that signifies that very word or that very object.

This premise suggests the intimate link between discourse studies and social constructionism (Burr, 2015; Potter, 1996). The capacity of affecting meanings implies their contingent non-essential condition. Nonetheless, within social constructionism, there are several ways to intend discourse. Indeed, the ontological, epistemological, and

theoretical underpinnings of a given research affect the way discourse is constructed. In turn, there are various possibilities to perform a discourse analysis, depending on how language, structure, and agency are defined. Finally, methodology and methods result as a consequence of these fundamental premises. However, all different approaches to discourse share some characteristics. Building on Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 12), all discourse analytical approaches maintain that:

- Language is not a reflection of a pre-existing reality.
- Language is structured in patterns or discourses – [...] meanings change from discourse to discourse.
- These discursive patterns are maintained and transformed in discursive practices.
- The maintenance and transformation of the patterns should therefore be explored through analysis of the specific contexts in which language is in action.

Notwithstanding the common social constructionist starting point, a crucial difference between the various approaches to discourse regards to which extent a discourse constitutes the social world or is constituted by social practices. This difference affects what is to be considered as part of discourse. Of course, as discourse studies assume that discourses shape the social world, all different approaches entail their constitutive potential. However, this assumption calls for clarifying to which degree discourses model reality. Indeed, some approaches, like Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), deem discourse to be both constitutive of the social world and constituted by sedimented and institutionalized practices. “In critical discourse analysis, language-as-discourse is *both* a form of action through which people can change the world *and* a form of action which is socially and historically situated and in a dialectical relationship with other aspects of the social” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 62; emphasis in the original). Hence, critical discourse analysts are mainly (but not only) concerned with the linguistic practices embedded in texts, language, and other semiotic expressions that mold the social world. At the same time, other social practices external to discourse (for example, the family) are institutionalized to the extent that their existence influences discursive practices (Fairclough, 2010).

From the CDA example, it follows that a discursive approach needs to distinguish between discursive and non-discursive practices; what does belong to discourse and what does not. This categorization also determines what discourse means and includes.

In order to schematize the different strands of discourse studies, Nico Carpentier and Benjamin De Cleen (2007) introduced a micro-textual/macro-textual and micro/macro contextual continuum along which discursive approaches are situated (Figure 2). As mentioned above, discourse does not necessarily refer to language use, whether it is written or uttered. Yet, many discursive approaches focus mainly on spoken or written language (Van Dijk, 1997). In these micro-textual approaches, discursive practices largely coincide with language and with the common understanding of discourse (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007). A clear example is given by conversation analysis whose focus is the study of the discourse produced in a social interaction (Coulthard, 1985). In this case, discourse is generally spoken and its study comprises the analysis of what is being said. Nevertheless, in line with the social constructionist ground, non-verbal expressions are not dismissed since they are meaningful. On the opposite edge of the spectrum, Carpentier and De Cleen (2007) place macro-textual approaches: in this case, rather than as language, discourse is signified as ideology or representation. The focus shifts from the language-as-text to the meanings and ideologies embedded within the text. In discourse theory, which lies at the extreme right of the axis, everything is considered to be a discursive practice and everything is considered to be text. This assumption indicates that everything in the social world is meaningful and therefore needs to be treated as discursive. From this angle, it makes little sense to equate the discursive with linguistic practices only (Nonhoff, 2019). Words and objects; actions and symbols: they are all meaningful elements that acquire different meanings depending on the discourse in which they are situated. In this light, the difference between discursive and non-discursive practices is rejected.

The other coordinate in the Cartesian plane regards the contextual reach of discourse. Micro-contextual approaches concentrate on confined settings. Even though they do not entirely dismiss the role of external factors, the analysis of the discourse is limited to a specific context (like, for instance, the limited space of a conversational interaction). In contrast, macro-contextual approaches take into account the wider environment made up of social and regimes of practices (Carpentier, 2017). The study of meanings is not restricted to a narrow space. Rather, these approaches are interested

in their circulation within the social space: these studies include, for example, the signification of democracy or gender.

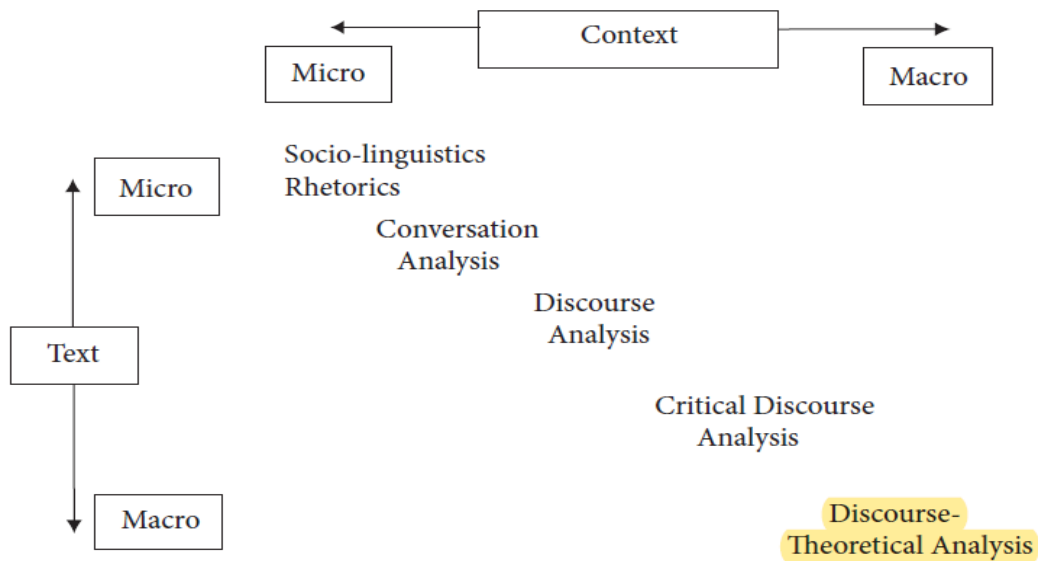


Figure 2. Approaches to discourse (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007: 277).

Drawing on PDT, this research adopts a similar point of view as it is interested in the signification of fundamental values and common sense in Polish society. As described by Carpentier and De Cleen (2007), indeed, discourse theory is placed at the bottom right of the figure, since it holds both a macro-textual and macro-contextual position. The next two sections will discuss in detail the relational structure of discourse, the role of power and knowledge, and how discourse is defined from the perspective of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory.

2. Constructing discourse

The foundations of post-structuralism and the idea that language shapes the lines delineating our experience derive from the theory of structuralism, in particular, the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Before the structuralist revolution, linguistics was mainly concerned with the history and philology of a language. The focus of linguists was on the evolution of words and language families (Joas and Knöbl, 2009). Saussure abandoned the historical approach, searching instead for the structure of language. By distinguishing between the speech of the individual (*parole*) and the

abstract system of signs that form the language (*langue*), Saussure (1959) moved the object of study of linguistics to the latter and became interested in the essential features of a linguistic system. Indeed, rather than being an individual act (as an uttered speech is), language is a social product “passively assimilated by the individual”.

“It is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity. [...] It is the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself” (Saussure, 1959: 13-14).

The separation of language from individual speech resulted in a series of consequences. Saussure introduced the idea that a sign is made of an ideal sound (signifier), and the concept that sound refers to (signified). For example, we know that the sound ‘dog’ refers to a certain animal while the sound ‘tree’ refers to a plant. What is relevant, though, is that this inherent link between sound and concept is arbitrary. The sound given to a concept is not an individual choice but a matter of convention within a collectivity. This discovery would seem to us rather obvious, as it is clear from the different words used in different languages to say ‘dog’. However, it triggered more complex reasoning. First, this distinction justified the idea that language exists outside individuals and, more importantly, that it can be considered as a stable system of fixed meanings. Second, it raised a question related to this arbitrary choice: How is that choice made? Saussure stated that language systems are relational and that signs can be defined only in relation to other signs. Consider, for instance, the sign ‘spoon’: we can define a spoon as a tool to eat a soup based on the fact that the signifier ‘spoon’ and the ideal concept of a utensil consisting of a small shallow bowl is different from the sign ‘fork’. At the same time, we can grasp this difference as we use two different signs. If we had to use the word ‘cutlery’ we would not be able to distinguish a spoon from a fork, despite having in mind the idea of the same object. Thus, we can distinguish between different words as they are not that other word: a spoon is a spoon because it is not a fork; a dog is a dog because it is not a cat. It follows that meanings (and sounds) are defined negatively by relationships between signs. It is this relational system that defines a language and constitutes its structure. This intuition led Saussure to believe that it was possible to find the fixed structure of a language. In this light, structuralist

linguists thought they could study objectively the inherent structure of the language, and so did think other structuralists in different fields: structuralism expresses the idea that it is possible to find an underlying structure that outlines the essence of a system, may that be a language system, human behavior, or society (Joas and Knöbl, 2009).

Post-structuralism takes a cue from the relational character of meanings but it diverges from structuralism since it refuses the existence of a stable and fixed structure. Like structuralists, poststructuralists claim that, rather than having an intrinsic identity, meanings are given by their relationship with other signs. However, they question the existence of an essentialist structure (Burr, 2015). Indeed, talking of an underlying and stable structure (whether it is the structure of a language or the structure of human societies) would neglect the changes that characterize any system, as fixed as it can be. Poststructuralists accept the relational character of the elements of the structure as defining their identity; however, they also stress that these connections between elements are undecidable (Laclau, 1994). The configuration given by this net of elements (what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) would define as discourse) is, therefore, contingent.²¹ Meanings, habits, values are constantly evolving and are always contestable. They are always subjected to signifying practices that modify their meanings and are incorporated into a wider discourse that affects them through discursive relationships.

In this light, the notion of discourse assumes a special relevance. Indeed, notwithstanding the different emphasis assigned to the role of language, all discursive approaches argue that language and meaningful objects create reality. Observing reality through discourses reveals how meanings are produced and, eventually, how they shift. In Poststructuralist Discourse Theory and other macro-approaches, the importance of signifying practices is even more significant since it touches upon the very existence of the world. As we have seen, not only does discourse theory use a discursive approach; it also highlights the constructed meaning of any existing object. Nevertheless, this ontological stance does not imply any relativist position, nor does it imply the fact that the world does not exist outside our mind. Rather, when discourse theorists argue that “all objects and actions are meaningful” (Howarth, 2000: 8) and that, as Stuart Hall (1997: 44; emphasis in original) would put it, “nothing which is meaningful exists *outside discourse*”, they claim that everything in the world, from language to practices, assumes

a certain meaning depending on the discourse signifying them. Using Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (1962), questioning the existence of the world itself is an unnecessary exercise: subjects are 'thrown into' a world made of meaningful elements they identify with, regardless of their physical existence. There is no difference between language and practice, since virtually everything has meaning for humans. Accordingly, the world exists inasmuch as human beings conceive objects in the world as meaningful and signified (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). From this perspective, what matters is not whether or not God exists. The question is instead what God means. The answer would only depend on the discourse the signifier 'God' belongs to. Citing Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985: 108):

"The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God', depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence".

Hence, we can state that the poststructuralist reading of discourse "is not about whether things exist but about where meaning comes from" (Hall, 1997: 45). However, as already mentioned, signifying practices and the constructed nature of objects should not lead to consider everything relative. As we shall see below, in discourse theory, discourses tend to find a certain fixity by employing nodal points, which are stable in a particular historical context. At the same time, discourses upon objects should not be considered as essentially given. A discourse that signifies an earthquake as the 'expressions of the wrath of God' is still open to include new elements that can modify the meaning of the earthquake. If we shift our attention to the object of analysis of this research, the hypothesis of competing worldviews suggests the existence of given identities that, even when shaped by an external context, tend to remain unchanged. However, as an idealistic reading of identities as socially constructed would reduce them to ships at the mercy of the waves of arbitrary interpretation, the assumption of given identities would completely ignore the slow chiseling from the external social world and

the openness of the social. Moreover, it would ignore the floating wandering of meaningful objects following a dislocatory experience. This traumatic experience, namely a crisis, is foundational for the research. Crisis is the necessary event to disrupt identities and open up space to alternative discourses. It follows that both the idealistic and essentialist understanding of world views needs to be rebutted using the Foucauldian concepts of power and knowledge.

2.1 Power, knowledge, discourse

Espousing the principles of post-structuralism, in this research the idea of the existence of a fixed structure is rejected. If we go beyond the linguistic understanding of discourse, as PDT does, we are left with meanings. From this perspective, a discourse can be defined, in brief, as a net of related discursive meaningful elements whose meanings are given by their discursive relationships (as discussed later, in PDT, for example, relations of equivalence and contrariety between discursive elements are of special importance). The redefinition of meanings by intervening in their relationships can be considered as the hegemonic practice *par excellence*.

Discourses, therefore, are not merely a passive picture of the world; they also actively shape it. According to Michael Foucault, discourse is intertwined with knowledge and power. The way we understand the world is given by the way a discourse signifies objects:

“Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others” (Hall, 1997: 44).

This construction of meanings and knowledge should be considered an act of power. Therefore, following Foucault’s work, it is power, rather than a fixed structure, that informs and changes meanings and practices. Foucault, however, had a very peculiar understanding of power. Unlike Marxists, like Louis Althusser, power shall not be conceived as oppressive. Quite the opposite, repressive and coercive power shows a lack of power. In this case, authorities need to resort to force to obtain discipline. Real

power, instead, is productive, as it creates regimes of truth that people follow spontaneously (Sawicki, 1991). In contemporary Western society, for example, reason occupies a special position of truth. Foucault argues that this has not always been the case. Discourse over reason is in fact just a possible truth: its hegemonic position in our society is just a form of power that sets what is socially acceptable and rational (e.g., science) and what is excluded and irrational (e.g., superstition).

“We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes”, it “represses”, it “censors”, it “abstracts”, it “masks”, it “conceals”. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production” (Foucault, 1995: 194).

Power, therefore, is productive to the extent that it produces knowledge. And knowledge is intimately linked to discourse since the latter defines how meanings are produced. As discussed in the next chapter, shaping society’s common sense means exerting hegemony: it is by intervening in the discursive relationships between discursive elements that power can overturn a certain worldview. Thus, the liberal revolution that redefined the discourse around the individual was an act of power and so is the neo-traditionalist counter-revolution when it tries to alter, for example, the discourse around the national community. The key aspect of power and discourse is their exclusionary character: discourse, power, and knowledge highlight (and shape) a certain truth while they always exclude alternatives.

Accordingly, to Foucault, power is a strategy (and, from the perspective of this research, it is a hegemonic strategy). Something to be exerted rather than acquired. The French philosopher rejected the top-down notion of power. Power “*is in fact locationless; it is decentralized, silent, inconspicuous, but all-pervasive*” (Joas and Knöbl, 2009: 358; emphasis in the original).

“Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. [...] Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault, 1978: 93).

A question stems from this definition: Where does power come from? The answer to this question has been a source of criticism. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre

observed that Foucault did not provide an answer in explaining where human thoughts are created and where they originated (Eribon, 1991). In this respect, Foucault does not conceive of any precise source of power. Power is simply created by different practices and discourses within society. He simply identifies the *episteme* (from Ancient Greek, knowledge) as a stratum of knowledge composed of practices, discourses, and beliefs in a certain epoch (the concept is in part overlapping Kuhn's paradigm). "It is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities" (Foucault, 2002: 211). The source of the *episteme* and how *epistemai* are created in different epochs remain undefined.

While I accept the Foucauldian notion of power, which is in part connected with the concept of hegemony, its locationless origin is refuted. From this perspective, also the accumulation of *epistemai* as a random process that has taken place throughout history is questioned. In the case of this work, competing discourses, advanced by sites of power (which we can simply call 'the creators of discourse'), struggle to impose their own worldview. Power, therefore, is not locationless as it stems from discourse makers that actively seek to produce and impose their truth. As we shall see in Chapter 6, we can refer to them using the Gramscian definition of 'organic intellectuals' of discourses (Gramsci, 1953). To make a generic example, while a liberal discourse conceives borders as an obstacle to further globalization, an anti-liberal discourse, as intended in this work in its current fashion, sees borders as a source of cultural and physical security. In this case, power is not randomly produced; preferably, discourses around 'borders' rather engage in a power struggle. There is not a single episteme, but a plurality of discourses struggling for hegemony. Hence, the *episteme* (using Foucault's expression) cannot be considered as a neutral deposit of knowledge. On the contrary, it would be more correct to talk of a dominant hegemony that is constantly challenged by new and alternative discourses that may be described as counter-hegemonic. The difference between 'random' power and hegemony is the self-awareness of the latter. A hegemonic project does not simply and randomly inform people's identity; it goes after them.

Yet, the work of Foucault is fundamental to understanding both the discussion about PDT and the objectives of the thesis. Foucault's concept of power as knowledge entails that there cannot be any privileged access to universal truth. As everything is

embedded within discourses, everything is representation (or ideology) and can only be analyzed in this light. Furthermore, even subjects can be considered just as objects of discourse. The way we think of ourselves and the way we think about others are filtered by discursive lenses. The complete annihilation of the subject is a rather bold thesis that requires further discussion about who the subject is.

2.2 The role of the subject

While Sartre had criticized the locationless creation of power, structuralism and post-structuralism were based on a critique of Sartre's subjectivism and of the idea that individuals can always choose (Joas and Knöbl, 2009). In the case of structuralists, the search for an objective structure completely overlooked subjectivity and the capacity for individuals to impact that given structure. Similarly, the fact that post-structuralism sees subjects as 'thrown into' an already signified world and the idea that individuals could only identify with the existing meaningful reality risks reducing humans to mere passive users of that reality. In his earlier works, even Foucault described discourses as constituting the subject, which is, therefore, simply a product of power (Eribon, 1991). As Stein Kvale (1992: 36) put it, "the focus on language implies a decentralization of the subject. The self no longer uses language to express itself; rather language speaks through the person. The individual self becomes a medium for the culture and its language".

From this perspective, the role of the subject is rather poor and our free will is a chimera. Nonetheless, even a poststructuralist approach leaves some room for agency. First, Foucault himself in his later works (1980) recognized the importance of the resistance of subjects. Whenever power and knowledge are exerted on individuals, they resist and actively contribute to the creation of new discourses. Although discourses are constitutive of subjects, power relations between subjects and discourse have to be understood as productive relations. This is not to deny the constitutive aspect of ideology and discourse; however, there is a consensus in discourse studies regarding the productive side of subjects' resistance (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Second, whereas Foucault conceived of a monolithic *episteme* and their accumulation throughout history,

other poststructuralist thinkers (including Laclau and Mouffe) assume the existence of a plurality of discourses in the same historical period. That implies the possibility for the subject to choose to identify with a certain discourse rather than another one. Moreover, the existence of multiple discourses at different levels of contemporary societies (e.g., discourses around politics, religion, sports, age, etc.) gives the opportunity to develop multiple selves (Laclau, 1996). At the same time, the active role of individuals and their capacity for identification should not be overestimated. Every subject in fact is born within a discursive field that can hardly change in its entirety (Carpentier, 2017). To provide a simple example, a person who lives in a Christian country is more likely to identify with the existing discourse that defines the religious space in that country. Despite this, they still have the possibility to choose otherwise, especially when they experience a dislocatory event. This possibility, however, depends on the sedimentation of a certain discourse, which reduces the potential for agency. Third, moments of dislocation and crisis are empowering for subjects. When a pervasive discourse falls apart, it opens room for new discourses to take its position. At that moment, individuals are not constrained by external discourses and can exert their political agency.

“[Laclau] argues that while human beings are constituted as subjects within discursive structures, these structures are inherently contingent and malleable. Once their ‘undecidability’ becomes visible in dislocatory situations when structures no longer function to confer identity, subjects become political agents in the stronger sense of the term, as they identify with new discursive objects and act to re-constitute structures” (Howarth, 2004: 264).

Using again the example about religion, it is more likely in Western countries to identify with new religions or abandon them since discourse around Christianity is in crisis and it is not as sedimented as it was centuries ago.

These three claims place this research in an intermediate position between essentialism/structuralism and idealism. Subjects are neither just passive slaves of discourses nor their creators. Like Saussure’s claim that language exists only as a collective phenomenon, discourses must be accepted by a group of people to circulate. However, although the creation of discourse should be seen as a collective action²² instead of an individual choice, these acts of identification contribute to keeping a

discourse alive and making it circulate within the social (Carpentier, 2017). Therefore, from a poststructuralist perspective, agency resides mainly in acts of identification: a discourse nobody identifies with is doomed to be forgotten.

3. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory

The approach to discourse used in this thesis follows the theory of discourse developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe originally in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), a text that would have become a milestone in poststructuralist literature. This work can be considered the theoretical starting point of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory. Later, this approach has been further developed by the two authors and has attracted other researchers whose works are commonly described as 'The Essex School'. As abovementioned, but worth repeating, discourse theory can be ascribed to the macro-contextual and macro-textual strands of discourse studies. From this angle, "every object is constituted as an object of discourse" so that there is no distinction between "linguistic and behavioral aspects of a social practice" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 107). In the empirical section of this thesis, for instance, several uttered speeches or written articles will be analyzed. At the same time, even objects, like the Cross, are considered to be significant components of discourse. Indeed, they are both meaningful objects, and therefore they are both discursive elements.

Laclau and Mouffe elaborated a comprehensive theory of discourse and hegemony. This theory can be read on two different levels (Carpentier, 2017). The first level refers to the ontology of discourse theory in its strictest sense. This is concerned with the structure of discourse, with special emphasis attributed to the practice of articulation. A practice, though, requires an active action of power. This action is described in terms of hegemony: the second level deals with the establishment of discourses and, more specifically, with the concept of hegemony as a political attempt to fix a contingent discourse in a given moment. In this section, I will expose the basic structuring elements of discourse according to Laclau and Mouffe. The link between discourse and hegemony, instead, will be discussed in the next chapter.

The key aspect of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is the practice of articulation. This idea derives from the Saussurean understanding of language: like in Saussure, meanings are defined relationally. Articulatory practices between discursive elements define their contingent identity. Contingent to the extent that a transformation in their relations modify also their meanings. We can understand the term 'father' by differentiating it from the term 'mother', 'son', and so on. On the contrary, we would understand it differently if 'father' was articulated as equivalent to the term 'priest'. Hence, articulatory practices can be defined as

"any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse*. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call *moments*. By contrast, we call *element* any difference that is not discursively articulated" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105).

This definition describes quite precisely discourse in Laclau and Mouffe: discourse is an articulatory ensemble of discursive elements whose meanings are defined by their articulations in a certain configuration. The special weight given to articulatory practices signals the contingency of identities that are defined in relation to other elements. Changing the configuration of discursive elements means transforming their meaning. For instance, whether a forest represents an obstacle to economic growth and industrial development, or the symbol of a sustainable lifestyle depends on its signification and articulation with other elements (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Similarly, ecologism, feminism, and even racism could have different meanings depending on their articulation with other elements (we can talk, for instance, of socialist or apolitical feminism; Žižek, 1989). However, as abovementioned, Saussure saw this relational web as a defined and unchangeable structure. In contrast to Saussure's structure, Laclau and Mouffe argue that articulations can be modified so that meanings and identities would be modified accordingly. A structure may exist; however, it cannot achieve any *permanent* closure. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse can reach, instead, a *temporary* closure. If a structure was fixed permanently, there would be no possibility for articulatory practices. A permanently fixed structure, as in Saussure, would be the same now and forever.

The openness of the social was justified initially²³ by referring to an excess of meanings. Closure cannot be achieved due to the fact that the social is “always surrounded by an ‘excess of meaning’, [the field of discursivity], which it is unable to master” (Laclau, 1990: 90). It follows that objects and their meanings will always be contested by a surplus of meanings. The articulation between elements and, consequently, their signification is never completed since other elements seek to reverse these relations. Take as an example from this research the signifier Polishness (*polskość*): its meaning depends on its articulation with other elements. When Polishness is articulated with ‘tradition’, ‘nation’, and ‘Christianity’ it takes on a very specific meaning. However, we cannot claim that Polishness (and Polish society) can be defined as necessarily linked to traditionalist sentiments. Other discursive elements circulate within the social: the articulation of terms like ‘emancipation’, ‘openness’, and ‘secularism’ with Polishness defines the latter in a different way. Whereas the very existence of this opposite configuration is necessary to define traditionalism (it can be considered as its constitutive outside), it also seeks to revert the traditionalist understanding of Polishness (Melito, 2021c). If a traditionalist signification of Polishness excludes some discursive elements (and vice versa), these elements do not simply disappear. They compose the field of discursivity: a surplus of meanings that constantly pushes the boundaries of a discourse to break its temporary closure. In this light, discourse-theoretical analysis does not aim at analyzing society as a structured object of discourse. Rather, PDT focuses on how this structure is created and how it changes.

Hence, Laclau talks of the impossibility of society “as a unitary and intelligible object” (Laclau, 1990: 90). Nevertheless, this ensemble can be represented in certain moments as a totality. The malleability of discourse does not entail in fact its relativism.²⁴ After all, “a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112). A privileged position to stabilize a certain discourse is assigned by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) to the category of *nodal points*. Based on Lacan’s *points de capiton*, these special discursive elements function like a nail that partially fixes meaning to solve the potential chaos provoked by the field of discursivity. Whereas articulations between elements structure discourses, nodal points give them coherence. Indeed, other articulated elements²⁵ within a

discourse are ordered by nodal points and acquire their meanings accordingly. As an example, think about the signifier 'democracy': the latter is the main nodal point of several political discourses. When used as a nodal point (like in Western countries, for instance), other discursive elements adopt a certain meaning. In a discourse that has democracy as its nodal point, 'human rights', 'elections' or 'citizens' are signified accordingly. In other words, the nodal point 'democracy' indicates how we have to understand other elements. Thus, in a democratic discourse, we know that 'citizens' means a member of the political community.

However, the example of 'democracy' is also illustrative of the instability and precariousness of nodal points. Even though it is a nodal point for many political discourses, the meaning of democracy is not given. What 'democracy' meant in West Germany had a very different connotation than in the German *Democratic Republic*, which explicitly used 'democracy' as a founding element. From this perspective, nodal points need to be understood as 'floating signifiers'. Therefore, nodal points are privileged points of reference around which discourses are structured. At the same time, they are empty signifiers, that acquire a certain meaning only within a discourse (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). While they crystalize and fix meanings within a certain discourse, they are also the object of discursive struggles to 'conquer' their signification. It is the case of 'democracy', as in East and West Germany, or, as we will see later, of the signifier 'freedom', whose signification is essential in the fight to hegemonize Polish common sense. Different discourses strive to define what 'freedom' means. Yet, unlike what Foucault wrote, the organization of a discourse around nodal points is not a random process. Rather, this struggle must be understood as a struggle for hegemony. This is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Theory: Hegemony and Dislocation

A significant novelty introduced by post-structuralism assumes the existence of different discourses within the same social space. It was discussed in the previous chapter how the excess of meanings in the field of discursivity implies the impossibility of their permanent fixation and the openness of the social to processes of transformation. A closed society where every meaning is fixed now and forever could only happen in a utopian society devoid of any antagonism and instability. It is more common, instead, to observe a discursive space where different discourses compete. Even a discourse around music would privilege certain elements at the expense of others. At the same time, we can observe the existence of ‘hegemonic music genres’ in a certain epoch. In our case, the privileged position of liberalism in the West does not exhaust all the discursive possibilities. Several re-articulations of the hegemonic ensemble can be performed and lead to new hegemonic formations. Unlike Foucault’s episteme, in post-structuralism knowledge and truth are the result of competition between discourses. It is only by referring to the liberal worldview that it is possible to articulate the neo-traditionalist alternative – as we have seen, identity is constructed out of difference. Changing and defining the ‘rules’ of the social (a process that Laclau calls ‘the political’), therefore, is the objective of the discursive struggle for hegemony. Hegemony is only possible through articulatory practices that seek to reorganize the discursive space.

Non-liberal counter-revolutions need to be read in this light: if we presuppose the existence of a liberal hegemony in crisis (Fraser, 2017; Rehmann, 2016; Zielonka, 2018), an illiberal counter-hegemonic discourse such as neo-traditionalism is an attempt to politically rearticulate meanings and replace the existing hegemonic discourse. Hence, we can talk of ‘competing truths’. As noted by Fukuyama (1989: 5), the victory of liberalism “in the realm of ideas or consciousness” meant a crystallization of meanings that could not be questioned in that specific period. Liberal nodal points had become hegemonic in the West. At a certain moment, fixed meanings are *the truth*: they cannot be contested, and doubting them is just irrational. The growth of illiberal discourses in

Europe suggests that the liberal democratic hegemony is creaking and *an alternative truth* tries to replace it. The emergence of these 'truths' is a matter of political hegemonic struggles. Hegemonic projects seek to establish a certain worldview within the social at the expense of other 'realities'. In other words, hegemony is a structuring force that seeks to create "a horizon of thought that is difficult to bypass (or even perceive) and that plays a major role in how we see a particular social reality" (Carpentier, 2017: 26). It is the attempt to achieve the impossible unity of society.

1. Who is the hegemonic elite?

A common aspect of non-liberal political actors consists of their refusal of the post-1989 order and their call for replacing the post-1989 liberal elite. The anti-establishment sentiment and the aim to reverse the current system have led to usually defining non-liberal politicians in the West (both left and right) as populists. Indeed, the claim that the existing liberal hegemony is being questioned resonates with the challenge to the establishment and the elite typical of populist parties. All definitions of populism, in fact, agree on its anti-elitist character in name of the people. However, leaving 'the people' aside for a moment (indeed the populist nature of the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland is still to be determined), who 'the elite' or 'the establishment' is can be not as straightforward as it seems (as in Mudde, 2004).

A first and superficial look at the vertical conflict between the masses and the establishment could result in a circumstantial separation between those parties that temporarily hold power against those who are left outside. Rather than on discourses, this approach is party-driven and looks at populism as a clash between different party families. In this case, anti-establishment parties, regardless of their systemic or anti-systemic nature, are always deemed as populist. This generational counter-hegemonic populism (Kim, 2022) usually targets the old political system as its elitist enemy. In this light, anti-establishment parties are regarded as 'populist' just because of their critique of mainstream parties. However, this vision does not consider whether this kind of populism and these parties also challenge the hegemonic discourse. On the contrary, this anti-establishment attitude can be considered as a sort of *qualunquismo* (anti-

politics or common man's politics): it is limited to the critique of mainstream parties without questioning their worldview. From this perspective, it does not matter whether they appeal to the people to propose a different discourse or just as a political strategy. A crisis of political representation or political institutions creates room to contest the old party system: in this situation, anti-politics messages can be delivered to gain power by claiming to represent the people (Roberts, 1995; Ruzza, 2016). This kind of interaction between demand and supply has been characteristic, for instance, of Berlusconi in Italy and Babiš in the Czech Republic. It is a political message based on anti-politics *qualunquismo* ('I will run the state as a firm') against traditional parties (Melito, 2021b). This approach can be particularly useful for conducting empirical analyses that aim at classifying political parties at a given moment. However, it cannot explain whether a certain party also questions the hegemonic discourse. In fact, from my point of view, it is not enough to criticize 'the elite' to be defined as counter-hegemonic or populist.

A Gramscian approach that links 'elite' and 'hegemony' would make the establishment/anti-establishment cleavage more complex. The concept of hegemony in Gramsci goes beyond political parties and it is crucial to better define who 'the elite' are. As argued by Gramsci (1975), retaining political power (in his words, controlling political society) is not sufficient for a social group to become the elite of a country. Assuming that 'to be in power' means 'to have power' might lead to the bizarre conclusion that 'the establishment' may change after every election term. Moreover, not only political parties should be considered as the establishment, which instead is made of several influential actors. Indeed, in this specific historical period, power (in the meaning provided in the previous chapter) is rarely in the hands of politicians only. This spurious reading of anti-establishment narratives has created confusion when so-called populist parties achieved governing positions. The different trajectories followed by these parties have generated a belief that populists in power are doomed to fail. Eventually, this kind of anti-politics populism is likely to be absorbed within the establishment or disappear. Their populist nature makes them unfit to govern unless they lose the populist nature itself (Taggart, 2000; Mény and Surel 2002). However, this approach considers populism as simply contesting the old party hegemony. As abovementioned, this *qualunquismo* rather focuses on winning political power; it does not necessarily seek to affect the

common sense. On the contrary, in this thesis 'the elite' will not refer to mainstream political actors or traditional political parties; similarly, counter-hegemony does not indicate common's man politics. From a Gramscian angle, 'the elite' should be understood as those sites of power that hold a hegemonic power, which means intellectual control over civil society. A counter-hegemonic discourse is, instead, an alternative narration that challenges the (so far) mainstream narration. Counter-hegemony aims to replace intellectual power, not only political.

2. Gramscian hegemony and beyond

A crucial trait to understanding Gramsci's work on hegemony is its essentially particularistic character where its originality resides. Most of the theoretical framework proposed by Gramsci derives from the Italian political context and history. This aspect, however, was also a step forward in Marxist theory as he overcame the deterministic development of political relations by stressing the importance of the socio-cultural terrain where politics is unrolled. It follows that it would be a mistake to blindly use Gramscian categories and apply them to contemporary politics (Hall, 1987). The technological and societal changes that took place in the last 90 years make many of Gramsci's categories hardly applicable to our context, as it will be clear when the role of intellectuals will be discussed. Besides, the fragmented nature of his concepts makes it even more complicated to reconstruct a general theory.²⁶ The aim of this section is, therefore, to explain the concept of hegemony as developed by the Italian philosopher in order to offer a Gramscian perspective to explain the illiberal counter-revolutions. In addition, Gramsci's theorization served as a starting point for the post-structuralist criticism of Marxism that will be discussed in the next part.

The term 'hegemony' commonly refers to leadership. In ancient Greece, a hegemonic power indicated a city-state with a predominant position over others. Narrowing the meaning of hegemony to the field of political relations, hegemony has later been used by Marxist authors to designate the hegemonic position of a class. As a communist politician, the elaboration of Gramsci's thought takes the lead from Marxist political theory. In particular, Vladimir Lenin introduced an understanding of hegemony

as the political leadership of the working class in a broader class alliance (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Torfing, 1999). At this stage, hegemony still refers to an aggregation of separate identities/classes; the hegemonic class, the proletariat, aims to take over the political society (Portelli, 1970; Piccone, 1976). Departing from Lenin, Gramsci introduces a different perspective that critically questions the notion of power as just political. Gramsci's hegemony entails the creation of a new collective identity that transcends class identities and that determines the cultural direction of civil society (Torfing, 1999).²⁷ "He tends to identify the state with coercion and repression, and civil society with the manufacture of consent and the practice of hegemony" (Howarth, 2004: 258). Hegemony is not, therefore, the formation of a class alliance to conquer the governing sites of the state, as proposed by early Marxists. The seizure of power means, first of all, determining the cultural direction of civil society. It means to be able to obtain consent without coercion. It means to control power in a Foucauldian sense. With Gramsci, the hegemonic horizon goes beyond political power and includes, as a source of legitimization, the leadership of civil society.

The key point to understanding Gramsci's notion of hegemony is the distinction between 'domination' and 'intellectual and moral leadership'. While political power furnishes the 'material force' needed for exerting coercion and keeping control, a hegemonic activity does not depend on physical domination and needs to be exercised well before the attainment of governmental power (Gramsci, 1975). Therefore, the study of a hegemonic discourse deals with the fight for intellectual and moral leadership, rather than with the fight for political power.

"The 'normal' exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterised by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so called organs of public opinion" (Gramsci, 1971: 80).

In this light, persuasion matters more than coercion. The fight for hegemony is a battle that has to be played in the terrain of civil society and has as its final goal the seizure of consensus (Bobbio et al., 1983). A hegemonic class does not obtain power from the capacity of coercion or, necessarily, from a dominant economic position.

Hegemonic power stems from the leadership in the social and cultural terrain to the extent that hegemony is defined by Gramsci as the normal way of doing politics in a democratic society. On the contrary, “democracy between the ruling class and the ruled groups exists in a hegemonic system to the extent that legislation fosters a flux from ruled groups to the ruling class” (Gramsci, 1975: 1056). In other words, democracy exists as long as the group which retains political power is responsive to the common sense of civil society; as long as there is an equilibrium between legal and hegemonic power. A detachment of the ruling group from the cultural leadership opens up room for alternative narrations. Hence, the conditions of possibility for counter-hegemonic formations to question the existing common sense depend on “the hegemonic crisis of the ruling class” (*crisi di egemonia della classe dirigente*. Gramsci, 1975: 1603). Why is the crisis a hegemonic crisis? Before discussing what crisis means and what the consequences of a crisis are, it is necessary to explore three of the main concepts proposed by Gramsci: common sense, the role of the intellectuals, and the war of position.

Holding the leadership of civil society means, in the first place, being able to shape the common sense of society, that is “the most widespread conception of life and man” (Gramsci, 1975: 2271). The meaning of common sense in Italian (*senso comune*) is in fact somewhat different from the English one (that would correspond to what Gramsci names good sense, *buon senso*). Rather than good or practical sense, *senso comune* refers to what is normally accepted as rational; what everybody would agree on (Ives, 2004).

“Why, then, is common sense so important? Because it is the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed. It is the already formed and ‘taken-for-granted’ terrain, on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery; the ground which new conceptions of the world must take into account, contest and transform, if they are to shape the conceptions of the world of the masses and in that way become historically effective” (Hall, 1986: 20).

Hegemony and common sense become, in this light, partially synonyms, as “hegemony means a given system of moral life” (Gramsci, 1975: 1084). Or, at least, they overlap when there is no crisis of hegemony. Common sense is, therefore, the main objective in the hegemonic struggle toward the leadership of civil society. It is not

something given; rather, it changes as long as a hegemonic practice is strong enough to modify what is normal in society. To use a hint from this research, when Kaczyński (2019/6) warns against those LGBT agents that contest “what is normal for us”, he is denouncing a liberal hegemonic practice that seeks to alter the traditionalist common sense of the Poles. When the subordinates consent to be governed by a ruling group as they have internalized their common sense, the discourse of the rulers has become hegemonic (Motta, 2008).

The cultural struggle for common sense is fought in civil society: the courts, the Church, the school, the media, and all those institutions of the civil society that deal with the production and diffusion of culture are the fighters of the hegemonic struggle (Bobbio, 1979; Errejon, 2012). Common sense is produced and spread by each individual that participates in social life and, often unwillingly, contributes to the maintenance of the hegemonic status quo and its rules.

“Doctors, pharmacists, teachers, priests and all sorts of professionals and semi-professionals take part, so Gramsci found in his analysis of social relations, in the dissemination of values and ideas that support inequities in relations of power and, with their partial propounding of how things are and why, legitimate the interests of one social class over another. With their value-laden intellectual activities, they produce hegemony and reproduce the status quo” (Holub, 1992: 23).

If ‘ordinary people’ reproduce common sense, the latter is a product of a certain class that seeks to define normality. In this respect, a special position in the colonization of civil society is given to intellectuals. In Gramsci, each class produces its group of intellectuals. While all the men are intellectuals, not all of them play an intellectual function, that is the duty of transferring the ideology of their class to the civil society so that the masses will ‘spontaneously’ grant their consent to be led by the dominant class (Gramsci, 1975). As suggested at the beginning of the chapter, the relationship between a social class and the intellectuals suffers a temporal shortcoming. While the role of an intellectual activity proves to be still valid today in shaping common sense, the modernization and further massification of society make, obviously, Gramsci’s account obsolete. Firstly, the classist division of society remains a very significant element of his theorization. This sharp separation limits the applicability of his theory. It would be more correct to use the previously discussed notion of discourse and hint at discursive

divisions. Discourses in fact define meanings and signify reality. Thus, an intellectual would serve as the mouthpiece of a certain discourse, rather than of a specific class. Secondly, the alphabetization of the masses and the enormous spread of new media in the last century (from television to social networks) have drastically changed the meaning and sources of 'intellectual activity'. It is possible to claim that even a Facebook page spreading certain information carries an intellectual activity. Consequently, talking of class intellectuals would risk constraining the analysis of hegemonic activities. It seems to be more appropriate to examine discourse makers.²⁸

Finally, since Gramsci moved the struggle for hegemony from political society to civil society, the way to conduct this war changes. It is not anymore a 'war of maneuver' – may that be the rapid and practical conquer of power through a *coup d'état* or an election victory – as the hegemonic struggle becomes a 'war of position': "a revolutionary strategy that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling" - rather than dismantling - "the coercive apparatus of the state" (Buttigieg, 1995: 7). Gramsci uses this warlike metaphor to describe how power changes. The war of maneuver was suitable for obtaining directly political power. However, in Western civilization, the development of a strong civil society has made a *blitzkrieg* impossible and, more importantly, useless. Obtaining material power without affecting the common sense of society and without consensus is just a short-term and ephemeral victory. To win power - to become hegemonic - means, first of all, conquering civil society and change the dominant discourse. The institutions of civil society function as a system of trenches that protect political society. Political power can only be achieved once the *trenches* of civil society are conquered (Martin, 1998). It is a slow process that requires a patient strategy and a massive mobilization of resources; the conquer of civil society, however, makes the victory permanent "since in politics the 'war of position', once won, is decisive definitively" (Gramsci, 1971: 239).

While conquering trenches is the strategy to be used to win the war, field artillery opens up a breach in the enemy's defense. This is the role played, for example, by an economic crisis that would bring us back to the crisis of hegemony.

"It may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of

thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life” (Gramsci, 1971: 184).

Thus, an economic crisis is not sufficient to reverse the hegemonic system as long as consensus toward the mainstream discourse holds in the civil society. However, when the crisis is multifaceted and involves several sectors of society, the crisis becomes organic (Fraser, 2017). A hegemonic crisis can happen either because the elite has politically failed to deliver, either because it has imposed consensus by force, or because a vast sector of the masses has become politically active (Gramsci, 1975). When the alliance between the dominant class and the people-nation (in Gramsci’s words the *Historical Bloc*) collapses, a ‘crisis of authority’ undermines hegemony.

“[When] the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer "leading but only "dominant", exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, 1971: 275-276).

The war between different social groups (or, from a poststructuralist angle, different discourses) becomes salient during this interregnum.²⁹ Dislocation within society is addressed by competing social groups (or discourses) that seek to achieve the ultimate goal of a hegemonic project: unity. The great novelty brought about by Gramsci, as already hinted, is the overcoming of the economic-corporative interests replaced by an intellectual and moral unity forged by a certain ideology (Gramsci, 1975). The lack of unity (crisis), therefore, is not filled “on a corporate but on a ‘universal’ plane, and thus [...] the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups” is created (Gramsci, 1971: 182) by articulating “a 'collective will' whose unity transcended the particular identities of its constituent parts”. (Martin, 1998: 161). Hegemony is not the description of society; it is rather the ideological construction of unity out of difference (Hall, 1987).

The construction of hegemony can assume two different forms (not necessarily mutually exclusive) that imply two simultaneous moments of restoration/revolution: the passive revolution (or *trasformismo*) and the expansive hegemony (Mouffe, 1979; Torfing, 1999; Errejon, 2012). *Trasformismo* entails the absorption of other social groups

through different methods, such as cooptation (Torfing, 1999). The 'passive revolution' is typical of those hegemonic forces in a situation of crisis and aims to neutralize the political demands and antagonistic forces that challenge the existing hegemony (Mouffe, 1979). *Trasformismo* is characteristic of the phase of restoration as a defensive strategy of the old hegemonic bloc against new instances. These instances are carried out by new actors that put forward an 'expansive hegemony', which, for this reason, takes on a revolutionary impetus. From Gramsci's point of view, the passive revolution was the defensive strategy used by the bourgeoisie to keep its hegemonic power in contrast with the expansive hegemony that the proletariat needed to employ to bring about the revolution. The contribution of Gramsci to hegemony and its application to contemporary politics ends where his class reductionism limits the struggle for hegemony to a mere conflict between classes. In fact, the two phases of the hegemonic activity cannot be associated with a specific class whereas, in Gramsci, a fundamental class remains the unifying principle in every hegemonic formation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Different hegemonic projects employ different strategies depending on the stage of their political expansion. In this respect, Torfing (1999) shows how the neoliberal hegemonic project first went through a revolutionary phase (expansive hegemony) with Margaret Thatcher and, then, it adopted a transformist strategy under the impulse of Bill Clinton.

The work of Gramsci, therefore, remains anchored in the Marxist tradition and, in particular, in the classist division of society. Although he had the intuition and the merit of moving the struggle for hegemony from the political to the cultural terrain, the forces facing each other in civil society are still rooted in pre-constituted sectoral interests (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Nonetheless, his huge contribution and impact on the development of the concept of hegemony are invaluable. As discussed in the next section, Gramsci's hegemonic theory has been of vital importance for the poststructuralist theoretical elaboration. Stripped of the essentialist chains of class reductionism, the concepts and terminology described in this paragraph have still a significant weight in political theory and will be used throughout this thesis.

3. The poststructuralist turn in hegemonic theory

The static structure of discourse, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is composed of an ensemble of discursive elements articulated around nodal points. An intuitive link between the concepts of discourse and hegemony would lead to defining the hegemonic discourse as a discourse that presents fixed meanings during a certain period. We are still within the first level of discourse theory as we consider the structure of discourse stable. The second level of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is instead concerned with the political, i.e. dynamic, aspect of discourse theory. Put simply, how a discursive formation tries to become hegemonic.

“The sedimented forms of 'objectivity' make up the field of what we will call the 'social'. The moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible constitutes the field of the 'political'” (Laclau, 1990: 35).

Even in a situation where the social is sedimented (that is when the historical bloc emerges), the radical contingency assumed by Laclau (1990) implies that the political dimension would never completely disappear. In some cases, (for example, when Fukuyama wrote his essay), it is hardly conceivable. Nevertheless, the possibility to transform hegemonic common sense is always on the prowl. The political in the background becomes visible when the social is disrupted opening space for new articulations and new hegemonic formations (Stavrakakis, 2003).

Although Gramsci's theory and its original innovations served as a starting point for a more general theory of hegemony, the goal of the authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was to overcome the last remnants of essentialism and class reductionism. This theoretical advancement was achieved by linking the concept of hegemony to the notion of antagonism. The result was an advanced and sophisticated elaboration of the concept of hegemony that combined the Gramscian perspective with elements from structuralism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis (Howarth, 2004). At the very beginning of their book, Laclau and Mouffe warn that

“'Hegemony' will allude to an absent totality, and to the diverse attempts at recomposition and rearticulation which, in overcoming this original absence, made it possible for struggles to be given a meaning and for historical forces to be endowed with full positivity. The contexts in which the

concept appear will be those of fault (in the geological sense), of a fissure that had to be filled up, of a contingency that had to be overcome. 'Hegemony' will be not the majestic unfolding of an identity but the response to a crisis (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 7)

From this 'statement of intents', it is already clear the direction of the poststructuralist turn. The struggle for hegemony is a struggle that aims to fill a (political) void created by a crisis. Like in Gramsci, hegemonic formations try to achieve power in response to an organic crisis (or dislocation). Unlike Gramsci, however, the existence of hegemonic projects is not the result of an alliance between classes essentially defined; they are instead contingent and depend on discursive articulatory practices. The construction of discourses through articulatory practices aspires to eliminate the contingent condition of identities by producing a new unitary, though illusory, universality. Illusory because the practice of articulation implies that meaningful elements are fragments articulated in a contingent totality, which constantly changes. In brief, hegemonic projects "attempt to weave together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or structure a field of meaning, thus fixing the identities of objects and practices in a particular way" (Howarth, 2000: 102). Hegemony is the (impossible) attempt to fix an immutable discursive horizon otherwise fragmented; it is the attempt to obtain consent from civil society for one, and only one, worldview.

Before moving to deeper details, it is useful to take a step back to Gramsci's theory to highlight the differences brought about by discourse theory. From this initial glimpse, hegemony results from the articulation of differential discursive elements to form identities. It is paradoxical that a hegemonic articulatory practice is only possible out of difference (there would be no need for articulation otherwise); differences that, at the same time, constantly question a hegemonic formation. Therefore, Laclau and Mouffe refuse the centrality of a fundamental class in creating a new collective identity. Furthermore, Gramsci assumed the existence of a single hegemonic center (the *historical bloc*) with the exception of interregna following organic crises. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 139), instead, affirm that the "irreducible plurality of the social" makes possible, theoretically, a plurality of hegemonic formations. The distance between Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe, here, is more theoretical than practical. Even if in a society there can be several hegemonic projects (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), Laclau

himself (1990), in later works, introduces the category of *myth* and *social imaginary* to indicate those hegemonic formations that are able to suture the social respectively in the short and long-term.

At the ontological level, discourse theory's hegemony goes beyond Gramsci's essentialist remnants. Two important corollaries derive from its anti-essentialism: they are related to the concepts of antagonism and frontier. An 'open society' would, indeed, lead to the conclusion that any identity is relative and that it is impossible to fix meanings unequivocally. Of course, nodal points serve exactly this function. However, they call for an explanation regarding their emergence. Laclau and Mouffe overcome this potential pitfall by affirming the primacy of politics. Discourses and social relations are a political construction involving antagonism and the exercise of power (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Without antagonism and power, hegemonic practices would be impossible. Here we can go back to Foucault's concept of power: for the French philosopher, power was locationless. That implied the succession of different power layers in a rather random fashion. Laclau and Mouffe, instead, affirm the political character of hegemony. The construction of a hegemonic formation, the articulation of discursive elements, the exclusion of alternatives: these are political operations that account for the political dimension of discourse theory. Thus, antagonism is not a mere contradiction between two discourses, that exists as such. Liberalism is not just different from traditionalism. Instead, an antagonistic relation is constitutive of a certain discourse. Antagonism is necessary for the very formation of a discourse (Norval, 2000). Rather than being just different or contradictory, an antagonistic discourse produces a blockage of identity to the extent that "the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 125). Since the political emerges as long as there exist political frontiers, different discourses can be identified as they are separated from each other. Thus, the construction of an antagonistic frontier is a political action necessary to the establishment of a hegemonic discourse. The concept of the 'Other' and of 'blockage of identity' will be expanded below. At this stage, it is important to underline that antagonism is the limit that prevents a hegemonic formation from fully attaining itself. At the same time, antagonism is also constitutive of a discourse. Therefore, talking of

two competing hegemonic discourses means that these discourses are separated by a frontier that needs to be essentially unstable as constitutive of the hegemonic discourse itself. Without the instability of the frontier the 'war of position' would not be possible.

If antagonism and frontier refer to the exterior identity of discourse, nodal points provide internal stability. The function of nodal points has been already discussed and it involves the partial fixation of floating signifiers. This accounts for the structure of discourse. In political terms, a hegemonic project has as its primary aim the seizure and stabilization of nodal points in order to stabilize systems of meanings. "What is at stake in the ideological struggle is which of the 'nodal points', *points de capiton*, will totalize, include in its series of equivalences, these free-floating elements" (Žižek, 1989: 96). Accomplishing this task leads to creating a horizon of thought that cannot be escaped. Using the problem of this research as an example: the goal of the neo-traditionalist hegemonic project is to signify the main nodal points that refer to the cultural organization of Poland. In this light, defining what signifiers like 'the nation', 'national values', or 'freedom' mean is crucial to define the dominant worldview of the country. Certainly, other discursive elements are important pawns in the war of position. However, conquering nodal points results in a strategic victory. When a hegemonic project is able to seize and signify the main nodal points, its hegemonic horizon "is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility of the emergence of any object" (Laclau, 1990: 64). Hegemonic success, therefore, happens when nodal points are so stable that it is not possible to question them. In this case, discourses become sedimented and they can be hardly challenged (think about the discourse around 'national identity').

The seizure of nodal points leads to the establishment of a sedimented hegemony, at least for a certain period. Applying generally the hypothesis presented earlier, it is possible to claim that a liberal democratic discourse was able to signify several signifiers concerning societal organization (e.g., freedom). However, I am interested in the counter-hegemonic political logic of neo-traditionalism. If a sedimented discourse constitutes 'the social', 'the political' is that logic that seeks to reverse and change (or defend) the social. This is possible when the links between discursive elements are not so strong anymore; when nodal points begin to 'float' again; in brief, in a situation of

crisis (or dislocation). Trying to link Gramsci with Laclau and Mouffe: an organic crisis takes place when there is a proliferation of floating elements, that is a crisis of common sense in different areas of society; the confrontation of different discourses (i.e., hegemonic projects) along an unstable frontier reminds the war of position: a struggle for defining common sense (in Gramsci) *or* signifying discursive elements and nodal points (in discourse theory); the articulation of a discursive formation fixed by nodal points and structured by relational identities forms the *historical bloc*, that is a hegemonic formation that is shaped and constituted by antagonistic relations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

The last point to be discussed involves the practical political actions that account for the emergence of hegemony. The Gramscian categories of 'passive revolution' and 'expansive hegemony' can be respectively associated with two political logics: the 'logic of difference' and the 'logic of equivalence' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The latter tends to create equivalent chains between different elements that are in antagonistic relations with a common enemy. Notwithstanding their differential nature, different elements find common ground as they all share what they are not. This articulation, therefore, is likely to institute a single political frontier between two antagonistic camps. The creation of a chain of equivalence between 'the oppressed' that overcome their differences as opposed to the 'oppressor' is an illustrative example (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). On the other hand, the logic of difference functions exactly in the opposite way. In a similar fashion to *trasformismo*, the use of this logic aims at breaking existing chains of equivalence by incorporating disarticulated elements and reducing the lines of antagonistic conflict. By lessening the antagonistic potential, the hegemonic bloc can co-opt excluded elements and broaden itself (Norval, 2000).³⁰

This first analysis accounts for the basic political function of a hegemonic project according to Laclau and Mouffe. In brief, hegemony (strictly speaking, an expansive hegemony which is of greater interest in this research) is defined as the attempt to articulate floating signifiers. This process is achieved through the incorporation of nodal points, which partially fix meanings, within a chain of equivalent demands. Thus, it can be argued that a successful hegemonic project is the one able to define common sense by signifying articulated nodal points. Finally, the conditions of possibility of hegemony

are given by antagonistic relations. The goal of a hegemonic project, a discursive totality that can describe reality, is possible only by excluding some elements; an exclusion which, at the same time, makes this desired totality impossible. Hegemony, however, is not only a consequence of articulatory practices: like in Gramsci, a hegemonic practice is primarily fostered by a situation of crisis. The contingency of hegemony (i.e., the lack of a permanent structure) is made visible by what Laclau (1990) called dislocation.

4. The psychoanalytic turn in hegemonic theory

The model proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* represented a major theoretical advancement in hegemonic theory. In overcoming essentialist remnants, Laclau and Mouffe proposed the concept of social antagonism as constitutive and, at the same time, as an impossibility: antagonism is necessary to form any identity out of difference but it also signals the impossible attempt to constitute society as a closed totality. To Slavoj Žižek (1990), this move represented the actual breakthrough of the book in developing an innovative political theory. Yet, the construction of the blocking enemy and “the impossibility of ‘society’” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 122) still resides within the field of social constructions. As such, antagonism is already signified. Laclau himself has pointed out that “there was a certain ambiguity in the way the category of antagonism was formulated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*... Today I believe that the constitution of the other as antagonistic already presupposes a certain discursive inscription” (Laclau in Stavrakakis, 2003: 324).

In *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* Laclau (1990) started to look beneath the surface of antagonism. Partly built on criticism by Slavoj Žižek (1990), in this book Laclau put forward a further elaboration of the concept of hegemony that leaned more heavily on psychoanalysis and the work of Jacques Lacan. While praising the double function of antagonism in the formation of discourses, Žižek (1990) rejected the notion of antagonism as a conflict only between different identities: rather than being blocked by an external enemy, subjects are already split internally and project upon this external Other their immanent impossibility. Thus, Žižek argues that it is not antagonism *per se* that makes society impossible as a totality. It is the Lacanian subject as lack, as

inherently split, that can never fully constitute itself. Laclau took into account these objections by introducing the categories of dislocation (1990) and empty signifiers (1996). The focus now is not anymore only on subject positions and acts of identification, as discussed in the previous chapter. It includes instead a negative ontology of the subject as lack, involving an original and constitutive lack of identity (Critchley and Marchart, 2004). In order to understand “the psychoanalytic turn” (Biglieri and Perelló, 2020: 332) and all the categories related to it, an excursus into Lacanian theory is necessary.

4.1 From Lacan’s psychoanalysis...³¹

Before digging into Lacan’s psychoanalytic perspective, we have to ask ourselves why Lacanian theory is needed here and what is the link between psychoanalysis and political analysis. The most intuitive (and misleading) answer would point to the importance of the individual in making political choices (Stavrakakis, 2003). The assumption is that knowing the psychology of individuals is likely to explain people’s political behavior. However, this task seems to be more appropriate for political psychology studies. Furthermore, as I have already discussed in the previous chapter, it is the subject, not the individual, to be of interest from a discourse-theoretical angle. And this difference is crucial: in Lacan’s psychoanalysis, the subject should not be associated with the individual or the conscious subject (Fink, 1995). Lacan is not interested in identifying essential characteristics of human beings nor their psyche; finding the kernel of human beings would lead to essentialist conclusions, which is exactly what Lacan (and Laclau) denies. Rather, his theory is centered on the subject as lack, not as fullness. Hence, the Lacanian subject is inherently bounded to the socio-political and cultural environment around it (the Other) that is supposed to fill this lack (Hoens, 2020). Therefore, as proposed by Žižek (1990), the starting point for the psychoanalytic turn of discourse theory is the Lacanian split subject. The link between psychoanalysis and political theory is not driven by the necessity of understanding individuals’ behavior or consciousness; instead, it is to be found in the relation between subjectivity and objectivity. In other words, in the emergence and sedimentation of hegemonic discourses that structure

subjects and affect their process of identification. In this respect, a Lacanian perspective is fundamental to offering a complete answer to the research question of this thesis.

If the subject is fundamentally different from the individual, it is first of all necessary to explain what the subject is (not) and why it is considered to be a subject of lack. As abovementioned, the Lacanian subject does not refer to individuality. Conversely, the ego is external to the subject; it is a projection of the unconscious. The formation of the ego occurs during what Lacan called 'the mirror stage'. The so far fragmented and incoherent self of the newborn acquires an identity through her or his reflected image in the mirror (Hoens, 2020). It is an imaginary identity that furnishes a sense of unity and completeness. Imaginary since it is external to the body. Soon, the child realizes that the unity in the mirror does not belong to the body. The register of the imaginary is just an illusion of unity, an illusion of completeness. It is a deceptive fantasy of ourselves pointing to an alleged unity; it is something external to the body and therefore alienating. "The ego, the image in which we recognise ourselves, is always an alien *alter ego*" (Stavrakakis, 1999: 18). The first act of identification of a human being results in a failure: our apparent self-unity is nothing but an external illusion outside our own body. Thus, the individual cannot be associated with the subject. It is just a mirage of an untruthful 'me' that contributes to alienating human beings from their real nature (Nobus, 1999).

"But the human being has a special relation with his own image - a relation of gap, of alienating tension. That is where the possibility of the order of presence and absence, that is of the symbolic order, comes in" (Lacan, 1954-1955: 323).

If the imaginary unity cannot provide for the formation of a stable identity, it is necessary to recur to another source able to offer consistency to the subject, namely to the symbolic order made of language and cultural references.³² Words and language promise a stable identity; they offer the means to acquire stability, to define themselves. Simply put, the symbolic order gives the linguistic tools of self-representation, something that the imaginary could only achieve at the cost of alienating the ego from the subject. Yet, that also comes with a cost. Even the symbolic order is external to the subject. The appropriation of language for attaining identity implies that the identity of the subject has to be dependent on the external symbolic order, the Other in Lacanian

terms. The symbolic order, therefore, leads to the “pre-eminence of the signifier over the subject” (Lacan, 1972: 70).

“A signifier is that which represents a subject. [...] The subject is born in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other. But, by this very fact, this subject—which, was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being —solidifies into a signifier” (Lacan, 1998: 198-199).

This time, the relation between the subject and what is outside is hierarchical: the search in the symbolic order to obtain identity entails an act of power by the latter that requires the submission of the subject to the law of language and culture, and the loss of his pre-symbolic condition. This ‘symbolic castration’ involves the deprivation of the third Lacanian dimension: the *real*, the indefinable and inexpressible age that preceded the submission of the subject to the Other. The entrance into the social world and *reality*. What is exactly the Thing³³ that the symbolic represses and the subject loses? This loss can be approached from two angles.

First, it can be explained by resorting to the distinction between signifier and signified. Whereas Saussure had hinted at the unity of signifier and signified into a sign, Lacan radicalizes this position by affirming the priority of the signifier over the signified (Stavrakakis, 1999). In the previous chapter, the Saussurean signified was described as the concept behind the sound. What is the concept made of though? To this question, according to Lacan, there can be no answer. The very act of naming a concept affects the signified and its alleged pre-symbolic substance. In Žižek’s words (1989: 104; emphasis in the original), to give substance to the object “is *the retroactive effect of naming itself*: it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object”. The signified, therefore, exists insofar as we have signifiers, subverting the unity of the sign. Or, more precisely, it exists outside the symbolic and, therefore, cannot be represented. As soon as we think of it, the signified disappears. The moment we name an object is the moment we lose its ‘real’ essence. Thus, it is the field of the signified to be repressed by the symbolic.

The symbolic suppresses the real, that is the time before the word. At the same time, it produces reality, it creates a world that can be represented, thought of, and talked about (Fink, 1995). The socio-cultural world made of signifiers offers the possibility of identification – here is the relevance for political analysis. Approaching the

real from a different angle, it is not only the 'unspoken' signified to be repressed by the symbolic. It is, says Lacan, the pre-symbolic time of the child. An age when the child lives in a sort of symbiosis with the mother, when needs are not articulated in symbolized demands and are satisfied immediately (Zicman de Barros, 2020). At this stage, the newborn lives in a primordial era where mother and child are united; an era of unity, an era of *jouissance* (Copjec, 2002). The concept of *jouissance* (usually translated as 'enjoyment') indicate a central aspect of Lacanian theory: it refers to the pre-symbolic alleged unity that existed before the newborn human enters language. The real, therefore, is sacrificed forever as the rules of language and culture (the Name-of-the-Father in Lacan's metaphor) impose to renounce the Thing (the Mother), to lose *jouissance*.

The result from both perspectives is that the subject is always missing something. By entering the symbolic order, the subject gives up on what is beyond language and gives up on the pre-symbolic idyllic *jouissance*. The loss of the real means that the subject is always lacking something and cannot represent itself as a full subject. It is therefore a subject of lack. This lack, however, does not disappear: it is visible through its absence (negatively), and the desire to cover it (positively). For this reason, the subject and the ego are radically different. The ego is an illusory fullness; the subject instead is lacking and therefore it seeks to fill this void.

"At the core of this matter of the unforgettable but forever lost Thing, we find not just an *impossibility of thought*, but a *void of Being*. The problem is not simply that I cannot think the primordial mother, but that her loss opens up a hole in being. Or, it is not that the mother escapes representation or thought, but that the *jouissance* that attached me to her has been lost and this loss depletes the whole of my being" (Copjec, 2002: 35-36; emphasis in the original).

This first elaboration leads us to the most innovative (and most important, for political analysis) conclusion of Lacanian theory. The lack in the subject feeds the desire for identification. As identity is an impossibility since the subject is inherently split, identification becomes a necessity (Stavrakakis, 1999). The symbolic gives access to reality but the signified behind the signifier of 'reality' is lost forever. Once we enter language and culture, once the social world provides names and rules we cannot get back the lost 'real' wor(l)d. "It is exactly this impossibility that forces us to identify again

and again. We never get what we were promised but that's exactly why we keep longing for it". (Stavrakakis, 1999: 34). The implications of this lack suggest that not only the subject is split. The symbolic is missing something too. A feeling, an idea, a concept: there is always something language cannot express, which is out of reach. There is always a lack of words to represent reality; something beyond the horizon that we know it exists but cannot express. Humans' existence is marked by some sort of incommunicability that shows negatively an unrepresentable absence. It is the same absence of unity, the absence of completeness at the root of the logic of love in Plato's myth of Aristophanes. The never-ending search for a primordial age of unity.

If the symbolic order gives to the subject as lack the possibility to constitute itself, this kind of full identity can never be reached. As I have highlighted in the first paragraph of this section, Lacan's psychoanalysis is not interested in the individual but in the subject; and the Lacanian subject is, first of all, made of lack. Therefore, the subject can only constitute itself through the socio-cultural world external to it. In other words, discourses produced within the social are the source of the (failed) identity of the subject. This position resonates with the previously discussed impact of discourses on subjects. But there is something more: not only is the subject lacking. Having sacrificed the signified, being unable of representing the real, the symbolic order is lacking as well. Identity always results in failures because attempts of identification cannot be absorbed by the social reality in their entirety.

"Today, it is a commonplace that the Lacanian subject is divided, crossed out, identical to a lack in a signifying chain. However, the most radical dimension of Lacanian theory lies not in recognizing this fact but in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*, crossed out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack. Without this lack in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation in the Other". (Žižek, 1989: 137).

It is this ontological condition of the symbolic order that prevents hegemony from constituting itself as a totality and allows discursive changes. No hegemonic formation, no matter how much is sedimented within the social, will ever be able to represent society in its entirety. There will always be something escaping it. Subjects seek identity within discourses but this lack can never be fully sutured. Acts of identification in the lacking Other are doomed to fail. There is no Other of the Other (Fink, 1995). The lost

'real' fullness is a mirage that will only be visible through its lack. The lack of symbolic resources is exactly the lack of the real and, in particular, "the lack of *jouissance* of a pre-symbolic real enjoyment or satisfaction which is always posited as lost" (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2004: 206). The prohibition of *jouissance*³⁴ is what animates the human desire to get enjoyment back, to achieve a full identity. It remains, however, a frustrated desire: "'That's not it' is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected" (Lacan, 1999: 111). The attempt of filling this void feeds itself in a constant desiring mechanism – the positivization of the real through, in Lacanian's terms, the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire. The *objet petit a* represents the lack of our impossible *jouissance* and the promise to fulfill the lack. It "is simultaneously the pure lack, the void around which the desire turns and which, as such, causes the desire, and the imaginary element which conceals this void, renders it invisible by filling it out" (Žižek, 1994: 178). The promise of obtaining the *objet a* and, consequently, eliminating the lack resides in imaginary fantasies.

Fantasy is the last Lacanian category to be discussed to open the doors of psychoanalysis to political theory. If full identity is an impossibility, if the symbolic cannot saturate the lack in the subject, fantasies then are necessary to sustain identities and give an imaginary sense of fullness. No stable identification is possible without fantasies supporting it. "Fantasy is a construction that stimulates, that causes desire, exactly because it promises to cover over the lack in the Other, the lack created by the loss of *jouissance*" (Stavrakakis, 1999: 46). Fantasies, therefore, promise access to the pre-symbolic era of unity, to the lost fullness of the real. They postulate the existence of a lost *object a* that, if achieved, would make the subject whole again. The fantasy announces that fullness is still possible (Sharpe and Turner, 2020). Thus, fantasies are necessary to cope with the traumatic loss caused by the entrance into the social world.

As a support of the symbolic order, however, they should not be searched at the level of the subject. They are not just an individual illusion. Rather, their nature is to be found next to the symbolic order, next to socio-cultural constructions. It follows that fantasies belong, first of all, to the social world (Stavrakakis, 1999). While the fantasy of the subject promises that the lost unity (with the mother) is still possible, similarly socio-political fantasies promise the return of a society without conflict and antagonism. As

the newborn lived in an age of pre-symbolic harmony, the same harmony is promised in socio-political fantasies. As exemplified by Žižek (1989; 1993), collective fantasies are constructed in nationalist narratives pointing to a lost unified society. The desire to go back to an idyllic past of the nation, a lost golden age, is typical of nationalist narratives; this kind of fantasy is a decisive ideological propeller. At the same time, nationalist fantasies blame an external Other for stealing their *jouissance*, the so-called ‘theft of enjoyment’. It is clear now that the role of fantasies is to conceal the lack of unity provoked by the entrance into language. It is only through fantasies that we can desire to obtain what we have lost and what we do not have. The same mechanism is found from a political perspective. In light of this psychoanalytic excursus, we can finally turn back to its implications for political analysis.

4.2 ...to Laclau’s theory of hegemony

The first reason to approach the latest work of Laclau on hegemony from a Lacanian angle is the explicit reference to Lacan’s theory in the work of the Argentinian political scientist. The psychoanalytic categories discussed so far are not just descriptive tools. They are integrated within Laclau’s framework and constitute the backbone of his theoretical elaboration. The general ontology of psychoanalysis is transposed entirely to the field of political analysis as it is related to political identities (Laclau, 2005a). It is the symbolic order *qua* discourses that gives subjects the possibility to identify. Both in Lacan and Laclau there can be no identity without the symbolic, that is without discursive constructions. But the symbolic is never complete and so is any discursive formation trying to represent society. Therefore, Laclau and Mouffe’s ‘impossibility of society’ is equivalent to the Lacanian ‘lack in the Other’. A full identity is not possible because discourses (the symbolic) can never fully represent society. At the same time, this premise has significant consequences for my analysis. It is only because a hegemonic discourse can never fully cover the social that counter-hegemonic practices are possible. Neo-traditionalism can arise and seek to model reality insofar as the antagonist discourse is dislocated.

From this new perspective, antagonism, as an articulated relation of contrariety, is now replaced by the centrality of lack within both subjectivity and, more importantly for political analysis, objectivity. Whereas the earlier elaboration of antagonism implied an external denial of identity, dislocation assumes that “every identity (and social object) is dislocated per se because it depends on an outside that denies it and, at the same time, is its condition of possibility” (Biglieri and Perelló, 2011: 54). Before the making of the enemy, before any discursive construction, the notion of dislocation signals an ontological negativity. Dislocation shows the shadow of the absent real. Thus, a hegemonic discourse is unable to symbolize the entire society not only because of the overflows of meanings (as previously discussed); this incapacity also stems from the inherent dislocation of any identity and the lack in the symbolic order. The fault within a society would not disappear even if the enemy was to be defeated (Žižek, 1990)

To understand the connections between Lacan and Laclau and their relevance it can be helpful to look at the Lacanian dimensions of real, symbolic, and imaginary to see how they fit within a theory of discourse. From the previous discussion, we know that discourses form the social with their system of rules and meanings. The social may be associated with the symbolic: it represents political reality as we see it in a given moment. A discourse representing the cultural values of a society can, for instance, be ascribed to the symbolic order. However, we also know that the social is subject to changes, which account for the succession of different hegemonic formations. The novelty of post-structuralism led to abandoning the search for a permanent structure of society in favor of a more malleable socio-political reality. This moment of change, “the moment of the disruption and undecidability governing the reconstruction of social objectivity including political reality” (Stavrakakis, 1999: 73), constitutes the ‘political’ and is blocked by the symbolic representation of reality and the fantasies supporting it. Therefore, while we cannot say that the political should be equated to the Lacanian real – the latter in fact cannot be represented – it is possible to claim that the political makes visible traces of the real within the symbolic. To put it another way, the lack in the Other or the impossibility of society are visible through political moments of contestation of the hegemonic order.

In addition, the real is not visible only through its lack. The real is not just the lack of full identity, the lack of the signified. In Lacan, the real is also positivized through the category of *jouissance*. Something is missing and therefore it is necessary to fill this void. “One needs to identify with something because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of identity” (Laclau, 1994: 3). This double mechanism of disruption/production is the core element of any hegemonic project. Gramsci (1975) had already hinted that an organic crisis opens up the possibility of both disrupting the previous order and constructing an alternative narration. Similarly, dislocations have a twofold character: they can both disrupt existing discourses and create the terrain where new identities are founded (Laclau, 1990).

“This acceptance of a (productive) negative ontology is what brings Laclau so close to the Lacanian problematic in one of its essential and most revealing aspects. For in Lacanian theory, Laclau’s ‘discourse’ – roughly equivalent to Lacan’s symbolic, the order of the signifier – is similarly revealed as lacking: it attempts the impossible, that is to say, the representation of something ultimately unrepresentable” (Stavrakakis, 2007: 69).

The impossibility to represent society as a totality, the fact that a harmonious and peaceful society is just a mirage, reveals the encounter between reality and the real. This is the paradoxical essence of hegemony: representing the whole society in a totality and the impossibility of doing so. Each attempt to solve conflicts and provide an immutable representation of reality is doomed to fail. This failure, however, entails the possibility of hegemonic struggles between different symbolizations of the real. It allows discourses to change and evolve in a constant effort to colonize the real and, as such, dislocation is a source of freedom. “It is only in so far as there is a radical impossibility of a system as pure presence, beyond all systems exclusions, that actual *systems* (in the plural) can exist” (Laclau, 1996: 38; emphasis in the original).

The double movement of dislocations (negative and positive) can be observed as an invasion of the real both in the symbolic and imaginary order. Regarding the former, dislocation shows the contingency of discursive structures (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). What does that involve in political terms? The impossibility of achieving a hegemonic totality is evident when a hegemonic discourse is dislocated, namely, when it has to face disruptive events displacing existing identities and meanings (Torfinn,

2005). This is the role of crisis, an event that disrupts existing discursive systems (as a hegemonic discourse can be). However, it is necessary to distinguish between failure and crisis (Hay, 1999). As noted by Benjamin Moffit (2015) the former pertains to the register of the Lacanian real. A failure indicates that something is not right; a systemic failure pre-exists a crisis and indicates exactly the ‘impossibility of society’. At the political level, failures need to be symbolized and performed by a crisis: “there may very well be a Real in which crisis operates, but we cannot access it because our language remains at the level of the Symbolic. As such, crisis is very much what we make of it” (Moffit, 2015: 195). Hence, the performance of crisis belongs to the symbolic level and accounts for the symbolic and negative side of dislocations. In this light, together with antagonism, a crisis consists of the (negative) symbolization of the political. It is a discursive construction of the lacking symbolic order: a response to the breakdown of the established modes of representation. Therefore, performing a crisis is essential to make visible the real; a performed crisis shows the inherent dislocation (lack) within established discourses (failure). At the same time, by disrupting existing discourses, crises open room for alternative re-articulations of floating elements. It is only when the hegemonic discourse becomes dislocated that counter-hegemonies can create something new. Recalling Gramsci (1971: 276), this is a period of interregnum when “the old is dying and the new cannot be born”.

The political, therefore, is not only present negatively. When the established hegemony is being disrupted, alternative competing projects struggle to rearticulate floating signifiers and create a different hegemonic configuration. In this sense, dislocations disrupt the existing order *and* trigger new constructions (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). It is only in the background of an organic crisis that the new can be born. However, a new discourse is not something inherently linked to failure (Laclau, 1990). The performative dimension is crucial too: neo-traditionalism is only one of the possible alternatives stemming from the crisis of liberalism. Its emergence is contingent, not necessary; and this point indicates the relevance of this research. The contingency of the social implies also the contingency of the political. Accordingly, the dual character of dislocations involves a disruptive and productive side. The latter is politically articulated through the political operations discussed above: equivalence and

difference. In addition, Laclau (1996) introduced also the category of empty signifier to explain how the real is (positively) symbolized and its link with hegemony. The void within a discourse, the impossibility to suture the social, can only be covered by empty signifiers, which should serve as symbolizing means of representation of the missing real.

“In a situation of radical disorder “order” is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of this absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function” (Laclau, 1996: 44).

The production of empty signifiers aims to cover the lack within society at the symbolic level. They have a hegemonic function since empty signifiers point to a lost unity. Order, freedom, democracy: they all can function as empty signifiers that seek to hegemonize the social space and represent the lost fullness (*jouissance*, in Lacanian terms). At the same time, they work as nodal points of the discourse (structuring) and, since their meaning is ‘empty’, are structured by other elements (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Like in Gramsci, an empty signifier with a hegemonic function is a particularity representing a totality (for example, the working class). Unlike Gramsci, this particularity is not pre-constituted; rather, it can emerge depending on a particular conjuncture. The empty signifier must be an open particularity, a singularity able to include differential elements. Using the Polish neo-traditionalist example, the empty signifier Polishness plays a hegemonic role since it points to a specific demand without a precise meaning (Melito, 2021c). Its meaning can only be defined by other discursive elements but, at the same time, ‘Polishness’ is an empty signifier representing the wider neo-traditionalist discourse. “This relation by which a particular content becomes the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness is exactly what we call a *hegemonic relationship*” (Laclau, 1996: 43; emphasis in the original).

As we know that this symbolic fullness is an impossibility, a hegemonic attempt to suture the social requires also an imaginary/fantasmatic dimension. It requires a fantasy narrating that the lost unity (the *objet petit a* discussed above) can still be achieved. Fantasies aim to conceal the traumatic loss of *jouissance*. The inherent lack within society is covered by a fullness-to-come; the promise to overcome antagonism. A

fullness that has been stolen by the Other. As noted by Matthew Sharpe and Kirk Turner (2020: 195),

“fundamental fantasies, for Lacan and Freud, re-narrate the origins of the individual, positioning them as the more or less passive victims of a theft of enjoyment by the Other. Just so, ideological fantasies will position the sublime Thing – national unity or greatness, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the community of the people, and so on – as having been stolen, damaged or corrupted, always by some contingent, external force”.

In a neo-traditionalist narrative, the ‘lost unity’ can be described as ‘our authentic way of life’, e.g., Polishness, to use the previous example. This way of life is something missing and, therefore, undefinable. We cannot claim what is exactly the authentic Polish, German, Ethiopian, or Mexican way of life. Socio-ideological fantasies narrate this way of life (embedded not only in texts but also, and especially, in rituals, myths, and symbols) that point to the lost unity and make visible how a community organizes its enjoyment (Žižek, 1993). While ‘our way of life’ is elevated to stand for the lost enjoyment, a nationalist narrative also blames external enemies for stealing the national Thing (theft of enjoyment). On the one hand, the enemy wants to ruin ‘our way of life’; on the other hand, their perverse way of enjoyment (‘their way of life’) represents a threat to the survival of the national community (Žižek, 1993).

Thus, fantasies cover the lack within the object and produce an illusion of unity at the imaginary level. By covering over the ‘impossibility of society’, fantasies sustain ideologically reality and hegemony: the belief that reality is the way we see it and that there is nothing outside it can only hold if sustained by a fantasy. Fantasy is the promise, for instance, that ‘there is no alternative’ in order to sustain the neoliberal hegemony. Fantasy is also the post-1989 promise when former communist countries dreamt of achieving again a lost unity. The 1989 fantasy narrated the rebirth of finally united societies without conflict and without the soviet ‘theft of enjoyment’, an imagined break that allowed redefining the social and instituting a new hegemony (Kim, 2022). But fantasies narrate also the broken promise of the transition (see Chapter 12 for a complete analysis). The failure to achieve this unity dislocated again the social space and opened the door to alternative discourses and alternative fantasies. Fantasies, therefore, are crucial to offering a critical explanation of the ‘delayed transformational

fatigue' in Central and Eastern Europe. Their constitution, as well as the political construction of discourses, need to be read against the background of a dislocated social space.

To conclude, the capacity of creating a hegemonic horizon that cannot be challenged lies at the intersection between the symbolic and imaginary construction of unity. The lost unity can be deceived through empty signifiers or fantasies. However, a successful hegemonic project needs that unity. It needs to sublimate, not only narrate, the fundamental fantasy. As noted by Laclau (2005a: 115-116) the quest for fullness is the same in psychoanalysis and politics; fullness is possible only by elevating a partial object to embody an impossible universality.

“The aspiration to that fullness or wholeness does not, however, simply disappear; it is transferred to partial objects which are the objects of the drives. In political terms, that is exactly what I have called a hegemonic relation: a certain particularity which assumes the role of an impossible universality. [...] No social fullness is achievable except through hegemony; and hegemony is nothing more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us because it is purely mythical (in our terms: it is merely the positive reverse of a situation experienced as 'deficient being'). The logic of the objet petit a and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical”.

The lost unity, the fundamental fantasy of the mother/child dyad, can only be achieved by sublimating partial objects to the dignity of the Thing. The metonymical mechanism of representing what is missing through a partial object overlaps with both the logics of desire and hegemony. These central elements work as both nodal points and empty signifiers of the hegemonic discourse. Yet, they do not play the function of representation; rather, objects are sublimated and thus their value is not second best compared to the lost enjoyment (Biglieri and Perelló, 2020). For example, the national flag is not only a symbol of the nation; it stands physically for the nation to the point that a soldier would die to defend it. A partial object needs to be elevated to become 'our way of life'. This way, the elevated object comes to be (not only represent) the lost Thing: it is an object that embodies the lost *jouissance* (Real), defines the hegemonic discourse (Symbolic), and promises to suture the lacking society (Imaginary). Using an expression by Laclau (2005a: 122), “it has to become a nodal point of sublimation”.

5. Populism, demagogism, counter-hegemony: A struggle for ‘normality’³⁵

A discussion about the Laclaudian concept of hegemony cannot be completed without including some considerations about populism. Although in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* the link between hegemony and populism was not mentioned, populist politics had been the starting point of Laclau’s theoretical elaboration (Laclau, 1977). As discussed above, the logic of hegemony in Laclau may be described as the construction of a discursive totality. The attempt to create a society as a full totality through the construction of a popular identity (e.g., ‘the 99%’), makes populism “the type of hegemonic politics par excellence” (Stavrakakis, 2017: 538). While most of the definitions of populism proceed inductively, Laclau (2005b) asserted the ontological priority of the category ‘populism’ over its ontic dimension. Instead of assigning specific populist features to a certain party or a certain discourse, Laclau asserts that “a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual *contents* identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular *logic of articulation* of those contents – whatever those contents are” (Laclau, 2005b: 33; emphasis in the original). More precisely, populism is defined as a “political logic [...] related to the institution of the social” (Laclau, 2005a: 117). Linking this crucial point to the previous discussion about hegemony, populism belongs to the political; in other words, populism is a logic of articulation that enters into play when the existing hegemonic discourse (i.e. the establishment) is being dislocated.

This particular view might present some common aspects with other definitions of populism discussed in Chapter 3. Like in Mudde (2004), we can observe a similar antagonistic division of the public space between ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’. However, the hegemonic perspective implies a different outcome: the establishment or the elite should not be necessarily associated with mainstream parties. This approach sheds light on the question posed at the beginning of the chapter: Who is ‘the elite’? It follows from this reconstruction that ‘the elite’ necessarily reflects a certain hegemony that holds common sense in civil society. Thus, populism is a political logic of articulation that can be applied to challenge the existing social logic through the discursive construction of a popular subject. In this sense, populism is a reaction against the mainstream hegemony – populism is counter-hegemonic (Melito, 2021b).³⁶

As abovementioned, the political can be seen as the encounter between the symbolic and the real. As such, even populism involves a double mechanism of (negative) crisis and (positive) production. In broad terms, populism entails the articulation of dislocated floating elements into a chain of equivalence, an antagonistic relation, and the production of empty signifiers (e.g., 'the people'). The precondition for a populist articulation is the existence of unfulfilled demands due to a dislocatory experience. Failures might precede this stage; however, it is only by performing a crisis that populism (or any other hegemonic formation) is able to dislocate the social (Moffitt, 2015). The political also includes a productive dimension. If the performed crisis serves to dislocate the existing discourse of the establishment, the lack surfacing again within the objectivity requires a (productive) rearticulation of floating elements. Crisis both signals this lack and justifies alternative discourses in a hegemonic struggle (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). Thus, the performative dimension of crisis involves both the discursive construction of crisis to disrupt the hegemonic order and, also, the production of an alternative discourse.

In light of this, aiming at reversing the hegemonic order, the populist logic can be said to relate to an expansive hegemonic strategy. Hence, populism might share some affinities with anti-colonial neo-traditionalism, at least in their political logic. If we consider 'the elite' to be the hegemonic order, both populism and neo-traditionalism present a counter-hegemonic force as they seek to overthrow the established order. "Counter hegemonic strategies are called *counter-hegemonic* since they constitute attempts to replace a particular hegemony with a different hegemonic order" (Herschinger, 2012: 76; emphasis in the original). That, of course, reflects the peculiar meaning assigned to 'the elite' in this thesis, which is connected to intellectual power rather than to political power. Thus, neo-traditionalism might present a populist dimension as long as it pictures the 'authentic people' as being deprived of their 'authentic culture' by the cultural colonizers (this will be subject to discussion in the analytical part). That results in a bottom-up vertical orientation of neo-traditionalist populism versus 'the elite'.

Yet, the picture is not complete without taking into account the top-down orientation between, this time in this order, 'the elite' and 'the people' and the concept

of demagogy. The notion of demagogy is one of the victims of the 'populist hype'. Often, these two concepts are used interchangeably in a negative fashion to describe a political opponent that uses opportunistic rhetorical stratagems to win votes. However, looking at the etymology of these two terms, there is a clear distinction: while populism, historically, refers to a genuine bottom-up popular contestation of the elites (Jäger, 2017), demagogy (from ancient Greek, to lead the people) has a clear top-down connotation and, in this regard, should be understood as opposed to populism (Sartori, 2007). Thus, while populism is associated (at least to some extent) with the popular will and the majoritarian principle of democracy (Mudde, 2004), demagogy describes instead the mobilization of the people enchanted by the promises of the demagogue that seeks to achieve or maintain power.

That said, the hegemonic point of view discussed so far suggests that this distinction is not enough: if 'the elite' is the hegemonic discourse, demagogy can be extended beyond the selfish aims of the demagogue. What happens if in the top-down flow, 'top' refers to the hegemonic bloc? In other words, besides the opportunistic techniques of the typical demagogue, we can add another layer of power. From this perspective, demagogy can be seen as a discursive strategy that a hegemonic project applies in order to mobilize people and manipulate their common sense. This strategy has been described as 'demagogism' (Melito, 2021b) and involves the re-signification of the signifier 'normality'.

Giving meaning to 'normality' is not a neutral political operation and, instead, is a crucial aim of any hegemonic project. What is normal varies across different epochs as a result of acts of power. The signifier 'normality' is situated within a discursive field where different discourse coalitions compete for its signification. Against this background, demagogism should be read as a practice employed in the context of a hegemonic struggle. Even in this case, in a logic of competing discourses, the role of crisis is fundamental: as discussed above, performing a crisis is necessary to create new discourses, including the signification of 'normality'. However, what I try to emphasize here, and what differentiates demagogism from populism, is the top-down signification of 'normality'. In other words, a demagogic practice refuses the plurality of discourses and poses '*our normality*' as the only rational and desirable option. Whereas populism

constructs 'the people' as the main nodal point of a discursive formation and poses 'the elite' as its main antagonist, demagogism is a discursive strategy that uses 'normality' *qua* 'rationality' as a structuring signifier. In this case, the enemy is depicted as an irrational actor, an abnormal monster. For example, it was observed that demagogism is a typical behavior of anti-populist discourses that exclude from the field of rationality any challenge to the hegemonic way of thinking (Melito, 2021b). This ideological move is central to demagogism. Beyond anti-populism, we note these "normalizing processes as discursive technologies of domination" that characterized several hegemonic discourses in history in defense of their predominant position (Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos, 2019: 188). In brief, demagogism can be defined as an act of power: it is a hegemonic practice that poses past common sense in a certain discourse as a rational situation for restoring normality. On the one hand, it denounces the opposite imaginary as an abnormal irrationality; on the other hand, it seeks a remedy to a failure by narrating an alternative fantasmatic imaginary that will restore the lost normality. Demagogism, therefore, is typical of those hegemonic discourses in distress (i.e., anti-populism) that strive to keep their dominant position, as well as reactionary discourses (i.e., neo-traditionalism) that portray a 'mythical past' as a solution to the ever-present crises of our times.

The differences between populism and demagogism are also reflected in their discursive construction. As we have seen, the populist logic is in fact constructed as a logic of equivalence that links different demands into a unified popular subject. On the contrary, the demagogic logic is a logic of difference. Rather than absorbing other demands, demagogism simply excludes them from the field of rationality, breaking opposite chains by delegitimizing them. Thus, if populism can be associated with the expansive hegemony described by Gramsci, demagogism is instead linked to *trasformismo*. If populism entails a 'revolution' to change the hegemonic order, demagogism aims at the 'restoration' of the lost normality. Its reactionary impetus seeks to neutralize or exclude antagonistic political forces (Torfing, 1999) and oppose changes. In this sense, demagogism has a clear ideological connotation. Since the construction of normality tries to impose "obviousness as obviousness" (Althusser, 1971: 172), the

demagogic discourse narrates an ideological fantasy that covers over the existence of alternative truths and alternative 'normalities'.

PART III
METHODOLOGY

Chapter 6

Analyzing Discourse:

From Demands to Discourse Coalitions

The abstractions of discourse theory discussed so far require a further step in the direction of observable data. This part will seek to translate the previous ontological and theoretical positions into a coherent methodological framework for the analysis of Polish neo-traditionalism. To recapitulate briefly, the research focuses on the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland (Chapter 4). This discourse is to be understood in terms of hegemony: it seeks to redefine the normality and common sense of the cultural terrain in the country (Chapter 5). The goal is to offer a critical explanation to understand neo-traditionalism within the context of the Polish cultural war: what the main features of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse are, how it emerges politically, and why it settles (Chapter 1). If these points make clear what the scope of the research is, I have not defined clearly which data I am going to analyze empirically and how.

The rise of neo-traditionalism has to be read from the lens of a wider discursive struggle. A struggle for hegemony is a struggle to set ‘the truth’ and ‘the acceptable’. This perspective suggests that the focus should not be on actors *per se* (e.g., politicians, political parties, etc.): that would lead to study a struggle for party hegemony. As often underlined, but worth repeating, the research object is the discourse itself. However, a discourse is not an autonomous entity that lives outside the collective action of what I have named discourse makers. Although discourses (i.e. the symbolic) predominate the subject, the latter is still necessary to make them circulate (Carpentier, 2017). Thus, the focus and research object is still the neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic project (or the neo-traditionalist discourse, if we prefer); nevertheless, from an analytic point of view, discourse makers play a central role. As discourse has been defined as an ensemble of articulated elements, it is necessary to explain how to catch these elements and who the articulating subjects are. Why would we consider an articulation as belonging to neo-

traditionalism? Where are the limits of discourse? Who are the producers of the neo-traditionalist discourse? *Part III* of this thesis seeks to answer all these questions and discuss the methodological aspects of the research.

1. Deconstructing discourse: The role of demands

The discussion about Lacanian theory showed that the object (discourse) *makes* the subject (agents). Posing our attention on discourse rather than on a specific political party means that the object of analysis does not change as party strategies evolve. Discourse makers may change their minds; they may belong to very different political formations with different political goals. However, having at the center of the analysis the neo-traditionalist discourse implies capturing the research object regardless of who produces that discourse. At the same time, that does not entail an essential core of neo-traditionalism (or any other discourse) whose configuration is always preliminary (Nonhoff, 2019). If dislocated entirely, the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse could no longer be defined as such. Indeed, it is important to stress that the neo-traditionalist discourse does not really exist out there waiting to be observed; it is rather the result of the interpretation and intervention of the analyst. Using Lacanian terminology, we can say that neo-traditionalism is a symbolized construction created by the researcher of a *real* discursive configuration.

It follows that before stating who the discourse makers are, it is necessary to deconstruct the notion of discourse in order to identify it. Even if we cannot claim that a certain party or a certain group is essentially neo-traditionalist, it is possible to grasp the neo-traditionalist discourse by identifying what is made of.³⁷ This move will allow us to define the frontiers of neo-traditionalism and help select what and who belongs to it. As argued in Chapter 4, the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic components of discourse is rejected. Any discursive element may belong to a discourse as long as it is meaningful. Thus, a meaningful discursive element can be a word as much as an act or a picture. Even silence, if meaningful, can be considered part of discourse. Silence between two friends can signal anger or complicity. Hence, all meaningful elements can be constructed discursively. Of course, it is still necessary to reduce the notion of

discursive elements for analytical purposes. In political terms, Laclau (2005a: 224; emphasis in the original) isolated the category of demand as the minimal unit of discourse.

“I have insisted from the very beginning that my minimal unit of analysis would not be the *group*, as a referent, but the socio-political *demand*. This explains why questions such as 'Of what social group are these demands the *expression*?' do not make sense in my analysis, given that, for me, the unity of the group is simply the result of an aggregation of social demands - which can, of course, be crystallized in sedimented social practices”.

The analysis of neo-traditionalism, therefore, will not focus on the *group* but on *an aggregation of demands* that once articulated gives rise to a discursive formation. Furthermore, the study will not be based on every single discursive production uttered or generated by a neo-traditionalist discourse maker. Instead, I am interested in those demands with a political *qua* hegemonic function. In other words, those demands that contest the social: “*a demand becomes political to the extent that it publicly contests the norms of a particular practice or system of practices in the name of a principle or ideal*” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 115; emphasis in the original). A demand is political when it challenges the existing social order; that can happen only when the existing hegemonic discourse faces a dislocatory experience. Recalling Lacan, a demand can be described as the symbolization of a need. While newborns’ needs cannot be expressed but crying and, as such, belong to the pre-symbolic age, demands pertain to the symbolic order. However, their inner void does not disappear. From this perspective, it follows that the notion of demand can be understood as pointing to a *lack*, to something missing that needs to be positivized. A demand aims to fulfill this lack. Thus, a political demand tries to overcome its inherent lack as it publicly contests fundamental social rules and those principles governing the social. It is a demand with a political function as it seeks to cope with a dislocatory experience.

Clearly, a discourse (not necessarily a group) results from the equivalent articulation of these demands. Since hegemony tries to represent a lacking (and ultimately unrepresentable) universal ideal within society, demands with a hegemonic political function are “those demands which aim at alleviating or completely overcoming the lacking universal” (Nonhoff, 2019: 75). A hegemonic project includes a series of

articulated demands. When a chain of demands is articulated by sharing their lack (they are all unsatisfied demands) to alter a hegemonic regime of practices, it presents a counter-hegemonic potential. Having in mind the discussion about hegemony and demands, a hegemonic project can now be seen from a different angle: it refers to a chain of several demands constructed on an equivalent (symbolized) lack. However, while they have an equivalent side (lack), their positive features differ (Laclau, 2005a). Equivalent demands maintain their particularity. Their weight, however, varies: one or more demands might assume a prominent position representing other demands. It is the case, for instance, of empty signifiers that seek to positivize the absent common lack.

In his elaboration of hegemony analysis,³⁸ Martin Nonhoff (2019) introduces a distinction between demands in order to operationalize Laclau's theoretical work. He distinguishes between cumulative, subsuming, and encompassing demands. Let us focus on them in turn. Cumulative demands aim to overcome their intrinsic lack claiming that a lost totality can be achieved only when that demand is attained. Since each demand is built on lack, there can be more demands of this kind, so that it is possible to consider them as the basic demands of a hegemonic project. The second type of demand is named by Nonhoff subsuming demand: they are demands that promise, once met, to fulfill the lack of other similar demands. Finally, in a similar vein, there are encompassing demands, that is those demands that subsume all other demands: once an encompassing demand is achieved, all other demands will be achieved. It is the decisive goal, and therefore never fully possible, of a hegemonic project. Hence, depending on their weight and width within the discourse, demands have a hierarchical structure.

As we will see in the empirical part, all these types of demands can be described in three different ways: their positive content (e.g., cumulative demand for authority), their negative lack (e.g., lack of traditional morality), and the construction of a blocking anti-demand (e.g., anti-demand for negative freedom). While an elementary demand for authority is not hegemonic in itself, its inclusion within a wider chain of unsatisfied demands transforms it into a hegemonic demand. 'Authority' keeps its particularity and it is still different from other equivalent demands, for example, the demand for 'traditional values'. Yet, they share the same inner void. Even if all demands are

symbolized both negatively and positively in different manners, they have in common the universal lack. In the case of neo-traditionalism, the lack and the empty signifiers covering the inherent lack of other demands will be discussed in the empirical part. They are key elements for defining and identifying a hegemonic formation.

Having defined a political demand as the smallest element of discourse, it is still necessary to clarify why a certain demand should be ascribed to a certain discourse. In other words, if our research object is the neo-traditionalist discourse, how do we know which discursive productions belong to neo-traditionalism? One of the indicators is the common universal lack. This commonality is the basis for the key mechanism of discourse construction: articulation.

In Gramsci, the articulating subject of hegemony consisted of a fundamental class, e.g., the bourgeoisie. Hegemony, in this case, was a product of a certain class with essential features. The hegemony of the bourgeoisie had to be understood as the common sense produced by that class and its intellectuals. As discussed in the previous chapter, from a poststructuralist point of view, the articulating process is reversed. The object constructs the subject. Thus, a hegemonic discourse *precedes* any fundamental class or party. In this light, it is more promising to look first at the coherence of a hegemonic formation (object), and only then at its mouthpieces that are exterior, not excluded, to it (discourse makers). A discursive formation with hegemonic ambitions, therefore, is not constituted *a priori*. It makes no sense, from this perspective, to talk of the discourse *of* neo-traditionalists. On the contrary, it is *the* neo-traditionalist discourse. Its unity is given by what Laclau and Mouffe (1985), inspired by Foucault, call regularity in dispersion: an expression that “allows us simultaneously to hold on to the idea of a pattern and an open-endedness” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 139). While ‘dispersion’ refers to the contingency of discourse, ‘regularity’ stresses the articulatory moment that forms an ensemble of different elements. “This ensemble is not the expression of any underlying principle external to itself [...] but it constitutes a configuration, which in certain contexts of exteriority can be signified as a totality” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 106).

Articulation between demands is not the only aspect that provides coherence to discourse. Their equivalence, as we know, is given by antagonistic relations. Articulated

demands share the same universal lack as well as the same constructed enemy. Thus, demands are equivalent and belong together not only because of their inherent lack, but also when they are opposed to an antagonistic adversary that blocks their identity. In this scenario, a discourse is different from its opposite because it is not it. By transforming its limit into antagonism, a discourse can constitute itself (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Using again the example of Polishness (Melito, 2021c), it is possible to clarify how to identify a certain hegemonic formation. Polishness can be considered a floating signifier *par excellence*: it can express opposed meanings or values depending on its specific signification (Chlebda, 2017). How do we know when the demand for 'Polishness' belongs to neo-traditionalism instead of, say, liberalism? Simply put, that requires ascertaining its relations with other elements. On the one hand, Polishness takes on a specific meaning when articulated with other elements. We talk of traditionalist Polishness when it is articulated with other demands such as traditional values, catholic religion, etc. On the other hand, it is necessary to determine its antagonistic relationship. In this case, traditionalist Polishness is denied by a liberal understanding of Polishness based on liberal values, secularism, etc. To summarize, in order to establish the composition and limits of the neo-traditionalist discourse, two operations are required: first, different demands belong together if they point to the same universal lack (equivalence). For example, it can be said that they share the lack of traditional values. Second, the antagonistic limits are constitutive of the discourse. Hence, unity and coherence of discourses are given by what they are not. "It is only through negativity, division and antagonism that a formation can constitute itself as a totalizing horizon" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 144).

2. Discourse coalitions

At this point, all the previous discussions about structure, subjects, or hegemony find their way out to the actual political world. The theoretical elaboration was not an ornamental decoration. Instead, all categories discussed so far play a central role in defining and understanding how to conduct the empirical analysis. In the retroductive

circle, we can say that we are at the point when the ontological position of the author begins to be translated into empirical categories to analyze the problematized phenomenon. The rise of illiberal discourses in Europe can be seen already at this stage as a performed response to a dislocatory experience. The 'illiberal turn' accounts for the negative side of dislocation, namely the refusal of the liberal democratic hegemony. The main tenets of liberal democracy are contested and resignified. Neo-traditionalist demands represent (one of) the positive moments of dislocation. They seek to cover the contingency of discourses by filling it with new (old) meanings and articulation. In this light, we can see the Polish cultural war as a battle between different worldviews. Those who face each other on the hegemonic battlefield are no longer necessary classes or political parties, but contingent discourses.

Nevertheless, discourses need a 'subjective support'; they need to be carried out and promoted in some way. However, the decentralization of the subject means that the discourse *uses* the subject, not the other way around (Kvale, 1992). This position is in line with the Lacanian reading of the subject: not an individual with a given power capacity but an empty being that can be filled by the Other, namely external discourses. In practical terms, this suggests that agency and hegemony should not be seen as a product of voluntarism, which overrates the free will and structuring capacity of agents. "A discourse, within this perspective, is not something used by an individual to voice his ideas; it is an intersubjective constellation of subject positions" (Jacobs, 2020: 35-36). For this reason, we can talk of discourses as a structure that informs the views of the subjects. At the same time, agents are responsible for arranging discursive elements as part of their hegemonic strategy. Does that imply the existence of an intentional project behind the scenes to change the world and how we see it? Not necessarily, or at least not each articulation should be seen as part of a common strategy. The structure still precedes the actors and so do hegemonic strategies: subject positions can be assumed by agents of a different variety. As argued by Eva Herschinger (2012: 76), "[strategies] do not exist outside of structure". Claiming that a coalition of discourse makers is deploying a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic strategy to establish its world description does not entail the existence of a precise group with precise strategic duties to achieve their goal. The unifying principle of a hegemonic project is found in the articulations of

demands and the construction of the enemy, not in the role of agents. Since articulatory strategies belong to the discourse itself, not to subjects, a hegemonic project as well does not exist outside of structure. Thus, to make it clear, when I talk of a neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic project in Poland, I do not refer to a specific group of people that explicitly unite themselves to overthrow the existing hegemonic order. Rather, I refer to a counter-hegemonic discourse whose demands are shared and articulated by different (and not necessarily linked among them) actors.

To better understand the ‘uncoordinated’ alliance between different actors sharing and propagating the same discourse, I will borrow the notion of discourse coalition by Maarten Hajer. In the struggle for discursive hegemony, “a discourse-coalition refers to a group of actors that, in the context of an identifiable set of practices, shares the usage of a particular set of story lines over a particular period of time” (Hajer, 2005: 302). While in Hajer story lines are considered to be the cement keeping together a given discourse coalition, from a discourse theoretical perspective the unifying principle of the coalition is made of the articulated demands that constitute a certain discursive formation (Nonhoff, 2019). Yet, the concept proves to be particularly useful in identifying and defining a hegemonic project. In fact, if we understand ‘practices’ or ‘story lines’ as meaningful discursive elements, the gap between Hajer and the discourse theoretical approach is not unbridgeable. As long as they are signified in a certain way, ‘story lines’ can be read as part of the discourse. In this light, a discourse coalition can be seen as a group of people who utter and articulate the same demands against the same enemy. They do not necessarily share similar views regarding other matters; the starting point of the discourse coalition is the demand, not those expressing it. Putting in the center of ‘discourse coalitions’ the meaningful discursive element, rather than the actor, carries significant implications.

“A discourse-coalition is not so much connected to a particular person (as if such a person would have a coherent set of ideas and beliefs that were not context specific), but is related to practices in the context in which actors employ story lines and (re)produce and transform particular discourses. Thus, it becomes possible to come to terms with the fact that some actors might utter contradictory statements, or indeed help reproduce different discourse coalitions” (Hajer, 2005: 32).

A discourse coalition, therefore, does not indicate a coalition of political actors that belong to the same organization. Nor does it mean that a member of the discourse coalition cannot reproduce different discourses or participate in different discourse coalitions. In this light, a discourse coalition signals an informal and unaware alliance of different discourse makers that try to establish their worldview as the dominant one. What links these discourse makers is not their affiliation to the same organization. They are tied together because they propagate the same demands and the same discourse at the same time. It is very likely that the members of a discourse coalition do not share anything else. It is also likely that discourse makers also contradict themselves. However, they can be considered as part of the coalition as long as they identify themselves with the discourse in a certain moment and in a certain field. Thus, members of a discourse coalition function as a conduit for their discourse. The more they spread a certain discourse, the higher the chances that the discourse's subject positions will be adopted by other actors. This is how a given discourse becomes hegemonic. In the example provided by Nonhoff (2019), several German political parties from very different political traditions (from social democrats to conservatives) were part of the same discourse coalition that successfully implemented a hegemonic strategy to establish the 'social market economy' as the hegemonic worldview that governed German economy. Probably, these parties did not share much but the demand for the 'social market economy'. In addition, even the signification of their demands varied depending on the articulating subject. Nonetheless, they could be ascribed to the same hegemonic project, since all of them spread a certain worldview that, eventually, became hegemonic.

To conclude, the concept of discourse coalition suggests that a discourse is produced by numerous different actors. They do not necessarily belong to a single political party or to the same political area. Instead, discourse coalitions might include a variety of actors as long as they contribute to disseminating a certain worldview by adopting the same subject positions. Because discourse coalitions contain several actors, the empirical analysis must focus on the *members* of the coalition regardless of their political affiliation. Moreover, since every person may, potentially, contribute to spreading a certain discourse, it is necessary to carefully select those discourse makers

that exert a consistent influence at different levels. The question remains, however, who belongs to the discourse coalition? How to choose the right actors who actively participate in the discourse coalition? As the object *precedes* the subject, to reconstruct a discursive coalition it is necessary to start from the universal lack and the enemy that bring together different neo-traditionalist discourse makers. In this case, Gramsci's concept of intellectuals can be helpful again.

3. The 'organic intellectuals' and the production of common sense

At first sight, looking for the establishment of a certain worldview may seem as something unreachable. The very idea of worldview could be hard to grasp. We understand and see the world in a given way. Yet, it is complicated to define exactly a certain world description. Where is this worldview to be found? How can nebulous common sense be studied? Anticipating the poststructuralist elaboration, the answer given by Gramsci is simpler than one might expect. According to Gramsci (1971: 323), language, common sense, and folklore are the *locus* where philosophy, and so any conception of the world, is located. Their study is the key to understanding hegemony.

"It is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or of professional and systematic philosophers. It must first be shown that all men are "philosophers", by defining the limits and characteristics of the "spontaneous philosophy" which is proper to everybody. This philosophy is contained in: 1. Language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2. "common sense" and "good sense"; 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of "folklore"

Philosophy is understood by Gramsci as an explanation of the world that everybody possesses. However, the world we see is not as much the result of a philosophical elaboration as the product of everyday practices, including language. Worldviews, therefore, are embedded in the language where the latter indicates meaningful objects instead of grammar or syntax only; by simply participating in

language or social practices, everyone contributes to creating a certain 'philosophy of life'.

"Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a "philosopher", an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought" (Gramsci, 1971: 9).

However, while every person expresses a specific conception of the world by simply using language or acting, not every person carries an intellectual function, that is not every person possesses critical consciousness. The 'intellectual activity' of individuals reproduces and sustains 'spontaneously' a certain worldview, but it does not necessarily mold it. At least not consciously. As mentioned in Chapter 5, all men are intellectuals since they contribute to spreading a certain worldview. Any simple practice carried out by ordinary people (for example, making a Christmas tree), even when it is done spontaneously and without critical thinking, makes sure that a certain 'normality' propagates within society. In this case, there is no need for coercion. The Christmas holiday, therefore, is also a consequence of the behavior of ordinary people. In this light, everyone holds a certain 'philosophy', behaves according to certain rules, and, by doing so, grants a spontaneous consensus to the hegemonic common sense.

Nevertheless, the category of intellectuals is distinguished from non-intellectual people since its function is to organize and criticize elements of common sense (Ives, 2004). The intellectual class critically elaborates on new forms of knowledge that actively shape different conceptions of the world. In other words, intellectuals do not have 'the truth', they actively create 'the truth'. While everyone spreads the hegemonic common sense by simply accepting it, Gramsci assigns a special role to the intellectual function of the intellectuals in maneuvering common sense. "Being an intellectual is a position within society and it has to do with the way you organize and disseminate ideas and the impact that they have." (Ives, 2004: 75). In this light, a description of the world is nothing too abstract. It reflects the language and habits that characterize a certain 'philosophy'. Therefore, the study of a worldview or, in other terms, the study of a certain discourse, should begin with those who have the function of 'creating' the worldview/discourse; in other words, those who have *a signifying capacity*. To answer

the question posed at the beginning of this part, common sense can be studied by looking at the agents shaping it.

If political power is maintained through legal and coercive means, intellectuals are those who obtain consensus within civil society. In this respect, Gramsci (1953) distinguishes between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals. In fact, the 'intellectual function' of actively shaping common sense may be (supposedly) autonomous or depend on a certain group. The first kind is typical of traditional intellectuals. Here, Gramsci (1953: 5) refers to that type of intellectual that "believe to be 'independent' and autonomous". However, the autonomy of these intellectuals is fictitious, since they legitimate the status quo and the hegemonic class. While they think to produce their own culture, 'traditional intellectuals' (like the clergy, philosophers, journalists, and artists) are a product of the hegemonic common sense and eventually serve the interests of the dominant class. At least unknowingly, they are 'organically' bound to the hegemonic order and the hegemonic class. Therefore, every intellectual with an intellectual function acts as a part of a certain group (or a certain discourse). 'Organic intellectuals', instead, are willingly connected to a certain class (or discourse) and work to propagate its creed. I disagree here with the interpretation of the distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals that poses the former as belonging to the hegemonic class and the latter as counter-hegemonic (see for example Birchfield and Freyberg-Inan, 2005). Gramsci (1953) indeed called for the creation of a new category of intellectuals that are organic to the working class in order to implement a (counter-) hegemonic strategy to change common sense. However, organic intellectuals are created by each social group, including the hegemonic one. In this light, the function of the organic intellectuals of a certain class (or discourse) is to spread their worldview and to seek the spontaneous consensus of the masses.

From this perspective, the Gramscian category of intellectuals is extremely vast and extensive. It comprises all those "clerks of the dominant group" (Gramsci, 1953: 9) who exert their hegemonic function in civil society. In addition, all social groups that have hegemonic ambitions produce their organic intellectuals to steer common sense. Gramsci is also careful in highlighting that, obviously, not each intellectual has the same weight. Using his typical military metaphor, he compares the ranks of the army to the

different levels of intellectuals. Although their influence differs (the intellectual activity of philosophers matters surely more than the one of a humble bureaucrat in defining common sense), they all share the same function: strengthening the cultural power of their class. Special importance is attributed to politicians: indeed, Gramsci (1953) oftentimes makes clear that the political class equates to the intellectual class. Similarly, when the political class performs the function of the mouthpiece of the dominant class it is named 'the elite'. Thus, the duty of politicians is not simply administrative or political; it is also intellectual.

"That all members of a political party should be regarded as intellectuals is an affirmation that can easily lend itself to mockery and caricature. But if one thinks about it nothing could be more exact. There are of course distinctions of level to be made. A party might have a greater or lesser proportion of members in the higher grades or in the lower, but this is not the point. What matters is the function, which is directive and organisational, i.e. educative, i.e. intellectual" (Gramsci, 1971: 16).

Politicians are deemed to be at the top of the pyramid of the intellectual organism of a given class. Rather than serving only their interests, political parties should be a direct emanation of their class. Having an intellectual function, they can legitimate political power by linking politics and culture; political and civil society. Hence, "for Gramsci, the study of intellectuals and their production is synonymous with the study of political power" (Landy, 1986: 53).

4. From Gramsci to Hajer: Organic intellectuals and discourse coalitions

As discussed in Chapter 5, the concept of intellectuals in Gramsci cannot be applied entirely to the contemporary world. The main reason is, of course, the rejection of pre-existing social groups; something that has been discussed widely so far. However, the link between Gramsci's 'intellectual' and the category of discourse makers is rather straightforward. If Gramsci (1953) claimed that each social group produces its organic intellectuals with a hegemonic function, from a discursive perspective, we can argue that even discourses – by offering subject positions – generate their intellectuals. Like in Gramsci, each individual can be considered a 'philosopher' since they contribute to the dissemination of a certain worldview simply by using a discourse. A person who defines

himself as a citizen of a certain nation makes sure that the concept of 'nation' (and all the consequences originating from it) continues to be sedimented within the social. However, like in Gramsci again, individuals are not proper intellectuals because their intellectual function consists of reproducing a certain vision rather than consciously shaping it. This is the task instead of the organic intellectuals. In this case, the organizers of a nationalist march (e.g., *Marsz Niepodległości*)³⁹ can be considered to have an intellectual function since their demonstrations signify the signifier 'nation' with nationalist connotations. Discourse makers, therefore, can be considered the organic intellectuals of one or more discourses. By entering the space of mass communication (through politics, art, journalism, and so on), they disseminate a certain discourse and keep it alive.

Using the Gramscian notion of 'organic intellectuals' means looking for those agents that spread a certain worldview, namely, a certain discourse. They might be politicians, philosophers, journalists, artists, or activists: at any rate, they need to be considered intellectuals as long as their intellectual production actively contributes to spreading a certain worldview and defining common sense within civil society. Claiming that they are 'organic' to a certain discourse means that they identify with that discourse and, therefore, belong to it. Clearly, this does not imply that neo-traditionalist discourse makers identify themselves as neo-traditionalists. Indeed, they may belong to several discursive formations as argued in the previous section. Also, the neo-traditionalist label is a consequence of the active intervention of the researcher and is hardly used by these intellectuals to define themselves. Rather, this suggests that they accept the main nodal points of neo-traditionalism and put forward the same demands as their own. Simply put, every person with an intellectual function can be considered an organic intellectual of neo-traditionalism as long as he or she uses neo-traditionalist nodal points and is the spokesperson of neo-traditionalist demands. The analysis of the Polish neo-traditionalist world description needs to begin with the identification of a neo-traditionalist discourse coalition; this is made of its organic intellectuals who spread neo-traditionalism at different levels and through different media. Linking Gramsci's category of organic intellectuals and Hajer's notion of discourse coalition, it is possible to draw the lines defining a group of intellectuals that form an informal alliance with hegemonic

purposes. In other words, a discursive alliance that produces and changes common sense.

The reconstruction of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse coalition is the first step in analyzing neo-traditionalism. The discursive productions of its organic intellectuals constitute the raw data to be analyzed to capture the emergence of the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland and its hegemonic strategy. However, it is important to remember that not each of their discursive productions can be defined as 'neo-traditionalist'. Only demands with a hegemonic function and pointing to the same lack of traditional values can be considered as part of the discourse. In other words, choosing the organic intellectuals of neo-traditionalism serves as a support to find the hegemonic articulation of demands. The analysis of their discursive productions can be described as a discourse analysis that looks at discourse, rather than at its creators. In this light, discourse analysis refers to

“the practice of analysing empirical raw materials and information as discursive forms. This means that discourse analysts treat a wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic data – speeches, reports, manifestos, historical events, interviews, policies, ideas, even organisations and institutions – as ‘texts’ or ‘writing (in the Derridean sense that ‘there is nothing outside the text’). In other words, empirical data are viewed as sets of signifying practices that constitute a “discourse” and its “reality”, thus providing the conditions which enable subjects to experience the world of objects, words and practices”. (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 4).

Hence, a discourse coalition is only a support of discourse, yet necessary to identify it. This requires the empirical reconstruction of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition, which is one of the main objectives of hegemony analysis (Nonhoff, 2019). This task is made hard by two main difficulties. First, the inclusion of both linguistic and non-linguistic discursive elements as part of the discourse means that virtually everything might belong to the neo-traditionalist discourse: from uttered speeches to newspaper articles; from protest rallies to political billboards. The amount of possible data is almost inexhaustible and, therefore, their selection and the selection of the intellectuals producing them would be the result of a complicated choice among several possibilities. Second, the massive diffusion and variety of new means of communication caused an enormous circulation of intellectuals. Arguably, not only politicians, philosophers, or journalists - as at the time of Gramsci - but also ordinary people using social networks

carry today an intellectual function. Thus, even in this case, the number of discourse makers of neo-traditionalism includes hundreds, if not thousands of organic intellectuals. In both cases, the selection of discursive data and organic intellectuals requires a careful and selective operation that would necessarily include some actors and exclude others. This choice could be, of course, an object of criticism. No analysis of any discourse can today incorporate each significant discourse maker or each significant discursive production. The analyst, however, is called to make a choice and pick only a few representatives of the discourse coalition that would reflect a larger group. It follows that, as suggested by Nonhoff (2019), the object of analysis will be a proxy of discourse represented by a proxy of its discourse coalition.

To conclude, in this chapter, I have presented the methodological direction taken in order to select a representative sample of Polish neo-traditionalism. The two main concepts are those of organic intellectuals and discourse coalition. The former refers to those agents that actively produce common sense. Using several media, they are the mouthpiece of discourse. The latter, instead, refers to the informal alliance among these actors. Even if they do not belong to the same political formation, their demands and nodal points are equivalent, and, therefore, contribute to spreading the same discourse. In Chapter 9, I will provide a detailed description of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. It is enough to underline now that, following Gramsci and Hajer, this coalition will include several different actors. Using the previous military metaphor, the members of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition consist of, first of all, political leaders (e.g., Jarosław Kaczyński). It is possible to argue that, as Gramsci did, politicians occupy the higher rank of the 'neo-traditionalist army' due to their political weight. At a lower level, we encounter politicians/philosophers (e.g., Ryszard Legutko) and journalists (e.g., Paweł Lisicki). The former performs a proper intellectual function since they seek to elaborate a coherent worldview. The latter also plays a significant role because of the capacity of newspapers and magazines to reach a wide audience. Going down the power ladder, we can find think tanks (e.g., *Ordo Iuris*): even though they probably have a narrower reach than magazines, think tanks play an important role behind the scenes by exerting a remarkable influence in agenda-setting. Finally, grassroots movements (e.g., *Młodzię Wszecpolska*, All-Polish Youth) have a

considerable mobilizing function. Even if they are on the margins of the mainstream political debate, their actions can affect people's views in a smaller environment. At the same time, their analysis needs to be conducted carefully because of their extremist position, which, perhaps, might be at the fringe of the discourse. As it is clear from the few examples provided, these actors do not belong to the same political organization and, in some cases, they are not even within the same political area. However, the examples aim to show that the members of a discourse coalition are not necessarily 'friends'. The only aspect they need to have in common is their 'organic affiliation' with the neo-traditionalist discourse.

Chapter 7

The Logics Approach

Notwithstanding their strong influence on discourse analysis, Laclau and Mouffe did not leave a 'guide' on how to perform empirical research; accordingly, discourse theory is widely recognized to suffer from a 'methodological gap' (Carpentier, 2005; Torfing, 2005). Among others, two main contributions tried to provide a formal advanced methodological framework (Marttila, 2015) that could help the researcher in the empirical application of discourse theoretical tools: the logics approach developed by Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007) and hegemony analysis proposed by Martin Nonhoff (2019). This research will build upon both works in order to develop a comprehensive methodological framework for the analysis of the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland. On the one hand, the former will provide the concepts and vocabulary to critically explain the object of research in all its nuances, since "these logics enable us to account for the institution, contestation and sedimentation of social practices and regimes" (Glynos and Howarth, 2008: 9). This is in line with the objectives of the thesis. Not only am I interested in the hegemonic strategy of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition; I am also looking for the conditions of possibility that made neo-traditionalism a viable alternative to liberal democracy. In this respect, the conception of logic can offer helpful methodological tools since

"logic refers to the purposes, rules and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime possible and intelligible. An understanding of the logic of a practice aims, therefore, not just to describe or characterize it, but also to capture the various conditions that make that practice 'work' or 'tick'" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 15).

On the other hand, hegemony analysis will be used as a supplementary instrument to make visible the hegemonic function of a discourse and to "deal with the question how a specific world description turns into a valid and/or dominant world description" (Nonhoff, 2019: 63). Although hegemony analysis is rather specific and cannot be a generalizing methodology for operationalizing the insights of the Essex School (Marttila,

2015), it particularly fits the goals of this research since it is described by Nonhoff as a particular type of discourse analysis that aims to scrutinize hegemonic struggles. Therefore, it will serve as a 'sub-methodology' for analyzing more deeply the political logic of the discourse (and, as we shall see, the fantasmatic logic too).

Hegemony analysis has a specific purpose, namely, it is interested in how a certain discourse implements a hegemonic strategy to become commonsensical, rather than its content or genealogy. At the same time, questions related to the materiality and rules governing the discourse cannot be escaped through the very act made by the researcher of analyzing a specific research object and explaining it; in this respect, the logics approach offers a more comprehensive set of concepts. This chapter will focus, therefore, more extensively on the logics approach as it offers a wider framework for the study of discourse. Through this approach, it also seeks to go beyond the mere self-interpretation of practices or discourses aiming at understanding the political and ideological moves that make a discourse possible.

1. Introduction to the logics approach

The logics approach was first proposed by Glynos and Howarth (2007) in the *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* and is situated within Poststructuralist Discourse Theory. It tries to develop a coherent middle-range theorization that, by integrating PDT ontological categories with observed data, can be used for the empirical analysis of several social phenomena. The authors aimed to make Laclau and Mouffe's level of abstraction closer to the actual empirical material a researcher has to face during his or her studies. Hence, the ontological premises of their elaboration consist of the radical contingency and structural incompleteness of all discourses within a social order discussed in the previous chapters (Glynos and Howarth, 2008).

To bring down to earth the discursive possibilities given by the radical contingency of meanings, Glynos and Howarth propose the category of logic as a middle-range concept to critically explain social reality in all its aspects. "We could say that the logic of a practice comprises the rules or grammar of the practice, as well as the conditions which make the practice both possible and vulnerable" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007:

136). In order to explain analytically the content, the condition of possibility and the ideological grip of a practice (or a regime of practices), they distinguish respectively between social, political, and fantasmatic logic. The articulation of the three logics would allow researchers to achieve their overarching objective, that is “to elucidate processes of social change and stabilization within a general theory of hegemony” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 152). Therefore, the logics approach is a suitable methodology to answer my research question: on the one hand, it seeks to answer how a particular hegemonic project discursively implements a hegemonic strategy; on the other hand, it explains why that project is able to obtain a certain success within society among the number of possibilities given by the contingency of the social.

Taken together, the three logics try to answer all the questions that a problematized phenomenon arises: *what*, *how*, and *why*. In brief, a social logic investigates the rules or grammar of a social practice or a regime of practices; it is interested in the content of a specific object of study answering *what* is that we are studying. While the social logic deals with the synchronic aspect of a regime of practices (what the content of a discourse is in a given moment), the political logic, instead, relates to the diachronic aspect as it focuses on *how* a certain social practice or regime comes to the fore. Based on Laclau and Mouffe’s logic of equivalence and difference, the political logic accounts for the emergence or maintenance of a certain discourse by creating or disrupting political frontiers. Also the fantasmatic logic plays a role in explicating the emergence of a practice as it discusses *why* that specific discourse is able to offer inviting subject positions by showing how a certain fantasy (beatific or horrific) conceals the radical contingency of social relations.⁴⁰

A preliminary clarification is necessary regarding the very concept of ‘logic’. It can be noted the existence of a certain similarity between the social logic and the notion of discourse itself. Indeed, even Laclau (2000: 76-77) had affirmed that a social logic is a “grammar or cluster of rules which make some combinations and substitutions possible and exclude others. It is what, in our work, we have called ‘discourse’, which broadly coincides with what in Lacanian theory is called the ‘symbolic’”. Tomas Marttila (2015), similarly, claims that there is no need to use the category of social logic instead of discourse as the terms largely overlap. Whereas this point raises interesting questions

that will be discussed below (in a similar fashion, for instance, the analysis of social practices instead of discourse may cause confusion), Glynos and Howarth (2007: 153) seem to be aware of the similarity between the two concepts when they argue that social logics are “virtually coterminous with the social practices and contexts they inform and make possible”. However, their differences concern the status of a logic. Firstly, the Essex researchers insist on the ontological dimension and abstract character of the political logic and fantasmatic logic (in the singular) while explicitly defining social logics (in the plural) as ontic entities that can be defined only by referring to the empirical phenomena they describe. That means that the empirical phenomenon ‘out there’ is interpreted by subjects (both the articulating subject and the researcher) losing the status of ‘discourse’ (Glynos et al., 2021). The concept of logic helps the researcher in grasping the dynamics of the discourse (De Cleen et al., 2021).

Secondly, and this is extremely important for understanding the very object of study of this research, individual articulations should be seen as a logic within a discursive pattern. The decentralized subject uses discourse, rather than creating it. When we deal with individual articulations, we are dealing with their logic, not the discourse itself. Discourses are a contingent outcome that results from political and hegemonic struggles, rather than as a product of the subject.

“Ideational change is for PDT not the result of individual persuasion, but of hegemonic politics. A discourse-theoretical approach to the study of ideas in politics concerns itself with the construction of an ideological common-sense, with how the extant ideational environment conditions the feasibility of political projects, with how the hegemonic structure maintains its dominance and is simultaneously open to contestation” (Jacobs, 2020: 36).

Social logics, therefore, are an interpretation of discourse made by the researcher that constructs and names them. They fall in the hermeneutic tradition of research that focuses on meanings and self-interpretation of actors.

The ambition of Glynos and Howarth is to go beyond the quasi-descriptive work of interpretive research while, at the same time, distinguishing their approach from the causal law paradigm or the neo-positivist causal mechanism. Regarding the former, the political and fantasmatic logics should exactly serve this purpose since they aim to disclose the conditions that make a certain practice (interpreted through the social logic)

possible. Beyond the actual rules of an object of research, they are interested in those moments of disruption that make a new practice, discourse or hegemony emerge or resist. At the same time, they refuse to subsume this process under a certain mechanic law that makes up the world referring to the radical contingency of the social order and rejecting empirical contingency.

The two-fold goal of the logics approach is both to offer a new form of explanation in social sciences and to provide the tools for empirical research. In this respect, Glynos and Howarth were only partially successful: the logics approach has been applied by several studies since its publication in 2007, not without criticisms (Marttila, 2015; Remling, 2018). The actual text analysis is left to the imagination of the reader and the concrete methods used during the research process are usually not described (Marttila, 2015; Remling, 2018; Zienkowski, 2012). The attempt to elevate political logic, for instance, to the status of a middle-range concept is not successful as its operationalization “remains too vague and indeterminate to make it possible to relate political logics to distinctive social phenomena with distinctive phenomenal characteristics” (Marttila, 2015: 122). Similarly, Remling (2018: 2) claims that “articles rarely give an explanation of how the logics were brought to bear on the empirical material”.

In responding to these criticisms, Glynos et al. (2021) refuse to provide a guide that would lead the analyst in the identification of the logics. Rather, it is on the judgmental abilities of the researcher to construct, test, and rework his or her logical assumptions about the empirical material. That provides a certain degree of freedom in selecting the right technique for the analysis of data (from quantitative to qualitative methods).

“A core element of the logics approach is that a researcher uses their situated ability, acquired through practice, to connect key theoretical concepts – such as the social, political, and fantasmatic logics, or hegemony – to the empirical phenomena that are studied via the appropriate production and selection of relevant data” (Glynos et al., 2021: 8).

In addition, they also invite to use previous studies as ‘paradigmatic examples’ of the logics approach highlighting again the importance of researchers in constructing a methodological framework (rather than applying an ‘already existing’ mechanism). In

this regard, it has to be noted that most of the studies using the logics approach (including the *Logics of Critical Explanation*) are policy-oriented and are concerned with the reasons behind the adoption of a certain policy or a change in the relative discourse (e.g., Clarke, 2012; Glynos and Speed, 2012; Glynos, Klimecki and Willmott, 2015; Remling, 2018; West, 2012; Zienkowski, 2012). Even when the analysis refers to a wider discourse (i.e. the Eurosceptic discourse in Britain in Hawkins, 2015) the overall scope still falls within policy studies.

The lack of specific 'heuristic devices' to identify the logics and the policy-oriented interest of the logics approach require further discussion in this chapter. On the one hand, it is necessary to develop a specific methodological framework for constructing and working with the logics. That also means articulating the logics approach with a more specific instrument of research as, for example, Nonhoff's hegemony analysis, or creating original methodological tools (I will discuss later, for instance, the nodal points of sublimation as an original synthesis between the three logics). On the other hand, it is necessary to adjust the vocabulary utilized by Glynos and Howarth to the actual object of research. Since this study is more concerned with the construction of a counter-hegemonic project and with the superstructure of society rather than a specific policy, a different terminology would help the readers to better orient themselves in the field of logics.

2. Applying the logics approach in the study of hegemony

2.1 Social logic

Glynos and Howarth (2007) introduced social logics as an instrument to characterize the rules of a social practice or a regime of practices. Unlike political and fantasmatic logics, the social logic lacks an abstract theorization as it is strictly related to the empirical phenomenon under study. Social logics are related to the content of a discourse and the self-interpretation of subjects (Glynos and Howarth, 2008). Therefore, it is arguably the most difficult to operationalize and find in the available data. Indeed, as Marttila (2015) and Remling (2018) noted, those studies that use the logics approach identify social

logics without providing any methodological insight regarding the way the logics were identified in the first place.

This section will try to offer a more detailed picture of social logics in order to build, if not a precise map, a framework to deal with the raw material the researcher has to face in the analysis. To achieve this goal, it is necessary, first of all, to define the smallest element of analysis to be found in the data. Glynos and Howarth repeatedly associate social logics to social practices, namely “the ongoing, routinized forms of human and societal reproduction” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 104). However, by social practice, we are already referring to a second-order level of discursive performances. As previously mentioned, this work rejects the study of a certain party or group as essentially neo-traditionalist focusing, instead, on the articulation of a neo-traditionalist discourse; in a similar vein, it also rejects the study of social practices as the element of analysis reducing them further to demands. Hence, practices as well as discourses, can be further reduced to an aggregation of demands, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Even if this reduction to demands could be accused of essentialism (Zicman de Barros, 2020), it offers several advantages in terms of analysis. To make an example, a traditional wedding church can be considered an established social practice. However, in terms of logics, it is necessary to find the demands (discursively constructed) or the *real* lack that sustain that social practice. For instance, that could be the demand for a traditional family or the demand for keeping alive a religious tradition as well as the necessity to cope with social rules or to emulate an external social model. To find the social logic of a discourse means, first of all, to deconstruct the discourse itself and conceptualize analytically the social practice as based on a demand (whether it is existing or projected as discussed by Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott, 2015). In addition, conceptualizing demands as the smallest element of analysis will also help to define the political and fantasmatic logics since political discourses generally deal with the organization of society (Nonhoff, 2019) or refer to an ideal way of life.

Nonetheless, reducing a discourse to (unsatisfied) demands is only the first step in identifying the social logic of a political discourse. This move allows identifying discursive elements within a discourse which, however, is still open to different articulations. The concept of nodal point could help in the search for the rules of a discourse. Although

“identifying nodal points is crucial in discourse-theoretical analysis because nodal points operate as points of reference, as privileged cores that overdetermine the meaning of a whole structuration of meaning” (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017: 306), they are barely mentioned in the *Logics of Critical Explanation*. Failing to operationalize nodal points is a major methodological limitation in their work (Marttila, 2015), since it is arguably the most important Laclaudian category to characterize a certain discourse. Whether a discourse can be defined, for instance, as nationalist or populist depends on the main nodal point, that is, respectively, the people-as-nation or the people-as-underdog (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017).

Yet, which nodal point will define the social logics of a discourse? Identifying a social logic requires two further operations: an interpretative move and an articulatory practice to discern the ‘ruling’ nodal points. The former is indicated by Glynos and Howarth (2007: 172) as the underlying principle of the social logic: “the identification and operation of social logics requires some reference to – or passage through – the self-interpretations of subjects”. In this respect, identifying social logics of a discourse means understanding why a certain discourse signifies meanings that way; a goal that can be achieved through ‘cognitive empathy’, that is the capacity to understand how an idea is understood by its proponent (Small, 2018). The researcher, therefore, plays an active role in naming a certain logic and shall use his or her expertise and theoretical knowledge to make a judgment when it comes to applying a certain category to an empirical phenomenon (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). In this regard, sensitizing concepts function as a bridge between data and theory.

By using this ability, and moving now to the second point, the researcher can perform an articulation between the categories of nodal points, encompassing demands, and fantasies since nodal points alone are not enough to characterize a certain discourse. In this case, a nodal point does not simply structure the discourse by giving meanings to other signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). By articulating these categories, nodal points stand also as encompassing demands in the chain of equivalence and as empty signifiers. It is not only a crucial discursive element in the discursive structure but also a hegemonic demand that integrates other demands (Nonhoff, 2019) and a fantasy that promises a utopian enjoyment to fulfill the lack in

the discourse. A not yet defined signifier that, nonetheless, promises meaning, promises hegemony (Glynos, 2000). By performing this operation, a social logic can both overcome allegations of essentialism by highlighting the lack and the desire behind the demand (Zicman de Barros, 2020), and show the contingent rationale of a discourse.

2.2 Political logic

Whereas social logics describe the substance of a discourse, political logics account for the institution (or de-institution) of the social and explain processes of social change (Laclau, 2005a). Therefore, while social logics coincides with the Lacanian symbolic order, the political logic comes into action in presence of a dislocatory moment; when reality encounters the real. “Political logics thus formalize our understanding of the ways in which dislocation is discursively articulated or symbolized (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 143). In other words, a dislocatory experience allows for the re-articulation of discursive elements and, consequently, the re-signification of meanings; we can grasp this process by studying it as a political logic. The first step for articulating a new discourse is by performing a crisis. In discussing populist crisis, Moffit (2015) identifies six passages. However, as we have seen in Chapter 5, the performance of crisis cannot be considered just a populist action. It is instead a necessary move for any discursive articulation. Drawing from the model proposed by Moffit (2015: 198), the performance of crisis involves the 1) identification of a failure; 2) elevation to the level of crisis; 3) identification of those responsible for the crisis; 4) use of media to propagate performance; 5) presentation of simple solutions and strong leadership; 6) propagation of crisis. Points 4, 5, and 6 relate to the populist style and, therefore, will not be used in the empirical analysis. Points 1, 2, and 3, instead, have been applied to capture the ‘negative’ dislocation that created the conditions of possibility of neo-traditionalism.

The ‘positive’ political construction of discourse relies more heavily on the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) since it refers directly to the logics of equivalence and difference as the two only mechanisms applied in the institution (or protection) of a hegemonic discourse. A political logic, therefore, accounts for the construction (or disruption) of an antagonistic frontier by unifying (or dividing) equivalent demands. Yet,

it lacks a precise operationalization when it comes to identifying these two logics in a discourse (Remling, 2018). For this reason, Nonhoff's hegemony analysis seems to be a promising methodology for the identification of a political logic, especially when the researcher has to deal with those discourses that aim at hegemonizing society's common sense. Hegemony analysis looks at how a hegemonic process functions and tries to identify a hegemonic (or counter-hegemonic) strategy, that is the political logic of a discourse. It is worth reminding, in fact, that in Laclau (2005a) political logic and hegemony are strictly interconnected: the former, indeed, is necessary for the institution of a hegemonic horizon through a radical investment in a particular object and the construction of chains of equivalence and difference. In a similar manner as the political logic, hegemony analysis is interested in "how hegemony is being exercised, in which structures and mechanisms it is grounded, and which factors are characteristic of its success" (Nonhoff in Golinczak, 2019: 97).

As for the study of social logics, the starting point for the analysis of the political moment of a discourse is the demand. The political logic accounts for the subversion of an established system of meanings that happens, in Lacanian terms, when the symbolic encounters the real. Hegemonic demands can be considered as the positivization of the missing universal, the lack within social. Covering the lack caused by dislocation is the primary hegemonic goal. Yet, it is their articulation to play a political function. As a political discourse is made of articulated demands (in fact, as discussed in the previous chapter, a single demand before being articulated cannot subvert the hegemonic order or establish an antagonistic frontier), Nonhoff suggests looking for discursive relations in the study of hegemony. Following Laclau (2005a), he indicates *substitution* and *combination* as the two basic options to relate discursive elements. These were further distinguished by Nonhoff in five types of relations. I propose to slightly modify this model by re-organizing it.⁴¹ Unlike Nonhoff's model, there are only two discursive relations that reflect, indeed, the modes of operation of substitution and combination. The former is rather straightforward as it refers to the typical hegemonic relation of *representation*, that is what Laclau (2005a: 114) defined as "a certain particularity which assumes the role of an impossible universality". This hegemonic relation will be discussed later as it refers to the categories of 'empty signifier' and *objet petit a* and it is where the political

and fantasmatic logics intersect. Combination, instead, refers to relations of *difference*: two different discursive elements can be articulated through *equivalence* and *contrariety*. A relation of equivalence is formed by two different elements that are equivalent in relation to a third element. Equivalence is, therefore, the typical relationship in a chain of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Similarly, a relation of contrariety also happens between two different discursive elements *x* and *y*; in addition, the identity of *x* is also blocked by *y*. Here, it is necessary to add a conceptual difference between Nonhoff and my research. While in Nonhoff the relation of contrariety between different elements of a chain of equivalence does not reflect necessarily contrariety between all their elements, it has been noted that in a counter-hegemonic articulation *all* unsatisfied demands point (directly or indirectly) to the entire opposite chain of equivalence (Melito, 2021a). It is important to bear in mind this aspect during the actual analysis.

In brief, it is possible to slightly reformulate Nonhoff's types of discursive relations as follows:

1) **Representation**

- relation of substitution where *x* stands for *y*
- it signals the logic of equivalence (political logic) and beatific fantasy (fantasmatic logic)

2) **Difference**

- relation of combination where *x* is different from *y*
- it signals the basic differences between discursive elements and it is divided into two sub-groups

2.1) **Equivalence**

- relation of combination between different elements where *x* is different from *y* but they are equivalent in relation to *z*
- it signals the logic of equivalence (political logic) and a beatific fantasy (fantasmatic logic) and it is, therefore, linked to 'representation'

- equivalence is also a source of antagonism in relation to an opposite chain

2.2) **Contrariety**

- relation of combination between different elements where x is different from y and it is blocked by y

- it signals the construction of antagonism (political logic) and a horrific fantasy (fantasmatic logic)

The elements discussed so far (demands and discursive relations) make possible the drafting of an ideal hegemonic strategy. Studying the hegemonic strategy of a discourse means understanding its political (strictly speaking, hegemonic) logic.⁴² Nonhoff identifies several stratagems that characterize a hegemonic project and that need to be analyzed in empirical research. Three of them are defined as core stratagems: they are a reformulation of the key concepts of discourse theory and are closely related to what has been discussed earlier in this chapter. I will work predominantly with these three stratagems to observe the hegemonic function of Polish neo-traditionalism.

1) *Articulation of equivalences between different demands made with regard to the universal:*

The first stratagem refers to the creation of a chain of equivalence between different demands. This kind of articulation is possible through a relation of equivalence between different demands that, notwithstanding their differential nature, are equivalent in relation to a 'lack'.

2) *Antagonistic division of the discursive space*

The second stratagem is connected with the first one – it refers to the creation of an antagonistic division of the discursive space. Sharing the same external enemy, different demands of the chain of equivalence tend to divide the discursive space through relations of contrariety with opposite elements. In a hegemonic confrontation, this leads to the creation of two opposite chains of equivalence. The opposite elements (and the opposite chain) block the identity of the discursive elements, making impossible to remedy the universal lack. This opposition stands as the basic antagonistic relationship between discursive elements. There is, however, one more thing to add to Nonhoff's

stratagem. Each demand is intrinsically split and it is based on an internal lack, not only external (Biglieri and Perelló, 2011; Žižek, 1990). For this reason, a study of hegemony that includes only an external antagonistic relationship would not be complete. Another fantasmatic dimension needs to be added to have a complete picture and will be discussed later. If the construction of an antagonistic frontier is a political operation, its condition of possibility and its stability depend on a (horrific) fantasy.

3) Representation

The last stratagem suffers from a similar shortcoming. Representation involves a relation of substitution where a certain element of the chain of equivalence stands as the representative of all the other demands (the encompassing demand, in other words). Nonhoff suggests that in order to find the representative demand, it is necessary to look for that element that stands in a relation of contrariety with all the other elements of the opposite chain of equivalence. However, in a counter-hegemonic project, all demands differ somehow from the opposite chain. If we consider the internal lack, it seems, therefore, more accurate to describe the representative demand(s) as the one(s) that conceal this lack. Once again, it is necessary to take a wider look and refer to all the logics. As we discussed in the paragraph about the social logic, the discursive element that is able to represent the entire chain of equivalence needs to have several characteristics. It should function as an encompassing demand (as Nonhoff argues), but also as a nodal point and a fundamental fantasy. This threefold relationship, already seen in the previous section, will be completely exposed in the next part.

Nonhoff's model provides a more complex and precise device to identify those articulations that allow for the construction of hegemonic projects and the contestation of the social. Here, it is possible to link hegemony analysis to the logics approach. Hegemony analysis is a valuable method for finding these demands and, more importantly, for identifying their relations and their hegemonic potential. However, hegemony analysis does not provide an answer to all the questions I am interested in. It is necessary to introduce the fantasmatic logic to offer a complete picture of a hegemonic discourse.

2.3 Fantasmatic logic

If the political logic explains the symbolization of a dislocated social space, fantasies are necessary to suture (deceptively) this lack (Stavrakakis, 1999, Žižek, 1989). The political constitution of the social is possible because of the radical contingency of the social; “fantasy operates so as to conceal or “close off” the radical contingency of social relations” (Glynos and Howarth, 2008: 12). In this regard, a fantasmatic narrative has an ideological connotation since it tries to cover the non-necessary character of a discourse. It promises a fullness-to-come, an impossible totality blocked by ‘the Other’; a beatific fantasy that promises to give back what has been stolen and to ‘make me whole again’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Sharpe and Turner, 2020). At the same time, when the fantasy foresees a disaster – when ‘the Other’ destroys ‘our way of life’ – we can talk of a horrific fantasy. The logic of fantasy aims “to capture something about the way a subject is (strongly) attached to, or (over)invested in, a fantasmatic narrative” (Glynos, 2011: 74). Hiding the non-necessary character of the social, fantasies are fundamental in the construction of any identity through their affective force. As noted by Jacqueline Rose (2005: 96) in her analysis of Israeli identity,

“What would happen to a political or religious identity, even the most binding, if it could see itself as contingent, as something that might have taken another path? Can you be devoted to an identity – or would you be differently devoted to an identity – if you knew it was also unsure?”

To achieve this goal, fantasies involve an imaginary situation that promises to overcome (beatific) or surrender to (horrific) the antagonism always present in the social. What are we thinking of, then, when we talk of a ‘fullness-to-come’ or ‘totality’ against antagonism? To complete this picture, it is worthy to add the fundamental fantasy, that is the fantasy that narrates the origin of the subject or the community. A fundamental fantasy of a once unified society, without antagonism and divisions.⁴³ This fundamental fantasy is the kernel of the lost enjoyment:

“Ideological fantasies, in this dimension, represent deep-seated culturopolitical narratives that explain a people’s relationship to enjoyment or jouissance. More than this, they represent ways of coming to terms with the finitude involved in being subjects to the Symbolic order and thus with the loss of direct, unmediated access to enjoyment. Recall that individuals’ fundamental fantasies, for Lacan and Freud, re-narrate the origins of the individual, positioning them as the more or less passive victims of a theft of enjoyment by the Other. Just so, ideological fantasies will position the

sublime Thing—national unity or greatness, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the community of the people, and so on—as having been stolen, damaged or corrupted, always by some contingent, external force” (Sharpe and Turner, 2020: 195).

Beyond the beatific and horrific fantasies, there is another element to identify to grasp the fantasmatic logic of a political discourse in its entirety. It is the Thing or, in a discourse that refers to a certain community, ‘our way of life’ (Žižek, 1993). As pertaining to the Real, it can be visible through a series of empty signifiers (embedded not only in texts but also, and especially, in rituals, myths, and symbols) that point to the lost unity and make visible how a community organizes its enjoyment (Žižek, 1993). For this reason, the category of ‘empty signifier’ is strictly linked with the concept of fantasy as it stands for the productive side of the real (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2004; Laclau, 1990).

In general, the fantasmatic logic deals with how subjects organize their enjoyment. Fantasies serve to support identities that, otherwise, would be weak and easily mutable. They promise to take back the lost enjoyment or to blame an external force for its lost (Stavrakakis, 2007). As the category of enjoyment belongs to a pre-symbolic order, what is that we are looking for in the texts when we search subjects’ enjoyment and fantasies? At the analytical level, we have identified three categories. The beatific fantasy, the horrific fantasy, and the fundamental fantasy. Beatific and horrific dimensions of fantasies are identified by Glynos and Howarth (2007) as the two main forms of deploying an affective and ideological investment. The former is associated with a utopian future, a golden age, or a sense of omnipotence. Looking for a beatific fantasy in a discourse involves the search for those imaginary elements that point to a bright future, to opportunities (Remling, 2018) as well as the removal of and the defense from the enemy. On the other hand, horrific fantasies refer to a dystopian future where the enemy has stolen *our* enjoyment. It is associated with the imaginary construction of the Other as ‘stealing’, ‘taking away’ something, or with expressions predicting an imminent disaster and the destruction of *our* community or a symbol of it. Similarly, it is also *their* perverse way of enjoying that disturbs *our way of life* (Žižek, 1993).

As it is clear from this discussion, fantasies serve to strengthen a political project: a beatific fantasy describes the ultimate goal of a hegemonic project, unity, as symbolized by a utopian future without antagonism. On the contrary, horrific fantasies

defend the hegemonic project from dislocatory experiences. Beatific and horrific fantasies, therefore, describe the affective power that holds subjects tied to a certain identity by referring to a lost totality or a fullness-to-come (Hawkins, 2015). Yet, they do not explain what is this imaginary totality nor how to define it analytically.

The function of a socio-ideological fantasy is to cover the intrinsic and constitutive antagonism present within a society by picturing a harmonious and consensual community (Homer, 2020). As already discussed in Chapter 5, the idea of a broken unity is taken from Lacan's psychoanalysis: the entrance of the baby into language and culture (into the symbolic order) is seen as a traumatic experience as the baby loses that pre-symbolic full enjoyment that could have been satisfied by living in symbiosis with the mother (Zicman de Barros, 2020). This desire for this golden era, however, never disappears and it keeps being imagined in an object that promises to re-encounter this lost unity, the lost *jouissance* (Stavrakakis, 1999). In psychoanalytic political theory, the ontology of psychoanalysis is transferred to fantasmatic narratives. The lost unity is encountered through metonymical objects of desire (Žižek, 1993). The affective investment in a partial object, the *objet petit a*, elevates that object to the dignity of the lost Thing; as in the logic of hegemony, a partial object is sublimated as to stand for the lost *jouissance*.

It is not, however a relation of representation but, rather of sublimation (Biglieri and Perelló, 2020). That suggests a difference with the previously discussed relation of representation. This sublime empty signifier is not only an encompassing demand; it is also a fundamental fantasy. This difference has serious consequences for the analysis of a hegemonic discourse. Consider the importance of nodal points in the social logic, of encompassing demands in the hegemonic logic, and of fundamental fantasies in the fantasmatic logic: we can arguably define the intersection and articulation of these categories as the core elements of a hegemonic discourse; they function as structuring the rules of the discourse (social logic), as the representative demands in a chain of equivalence necessary to overcome the lack (political logic), and as a fundamental fantasy that describes the sublime Thing, the lost totality (fantasmatic logic). Using an expression by Laclau (2005a: 120), we might define these element(s) as the nodal point(s) of sublimation.

Finally, it has to be noted that the *objet petit a* allows going beyond textual analysis. As a sublimation of the Thing, the fundamental fantasy lends itself to being assumed by symbols (e.g. flags) or rituals (e.g. national parades) that exemplify 'our way of life'. Even if they can hardly embody the nodal points of sublimation (although that should be left to the actual analysis), they can function as the object-cause of desire. They might represent at the same time the lost totality that feeds subjects' desire and the fantasy that conceals this lack.

3. Summary: A model for the analysis of a counter-hegemonic project

The chapter has provided a general overview of the logics approach and its articulation with hegemony analysis. A brief summary can help rationalize the previous discussion and furnish a model for the analysis of a (counter-)hegemonic project. First, the social logic aims to capture the rules of the hegemonic project. That implies an interpretative process to unveil its content and meanings and to make them accessible to the reader. Second, social practices need to be deconstructed into a smaller unit of analysis: (unsatisfied) demands. A special position in the social logic is given to the nodal points of a discourse. Third, the political logic deals with the institution of the social. The logics of equivalence and difference have been identified as the two logics that allow for the institution of a new regime of practices (or discourse) after a performed crisis. Fourth, hegemony analysis provides the means to recognize the logics in the texts. In particular, articulation of equivalence and difference, antagonism, and representation are the three core stratagems of a hegemonic strategy. Fifth, hegemony analysis suggests distinguishing between different types of demands. Encompassing demands are seen as those demands that promise to fulfill the lack and overcome antagonism. Sixth, fantasmatic narratives are necessary to conceal the radical contingency of the social and the very possibility of articulating different demands. Beatific and horrific fantasies describe, respectively, the achievement of a lost unity once the enemy or obstacle is removed, and a disaster if the enemy will be able to 'steal *our* enjoyment'. Seventh, fundamental or ideological fantasies indicate the lost unity, a golden era without lack and antagonism. Discursive elements are sublimated to stand for the lost totality.

Finally, by articulating the concepts of nodal points (social logic), encompassing demands (hegemonic logic), and fundamental fantasy (fantasmatic logic) we can find the core of the hegemonic project, which has been named nodal point of sublimation.

PART IV

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Chapter 8

Hypothesis and Research Questions

At this point, we have all the ingredients that lead the way for the analysis and interpretation of neo-traditionalism in Poland. The external and internal concepts can now be merged with the methodological and empirical aspects of the research. The thesis can be said to be at the last step of the logic of discovery, where inductive inference and theoretical deductions are articulated and combined. This brief chapter aims to establish the last components of the research before diving into the analytical part. Accordingly, the initial hypothesis and research question will be revisited in light of previous theoretical and methodological discussions, and the results of the discourse-theoretical analysis.⁴⁴ That also allows using the proper terminology that, in Chapter 1, would have resulted otherwise unclear. The first section will describe the preconditions that gave rise to the neo-traditionalist counter-reaction. This *excursus* justifies the hypothesis of the thesis, which will lead, in the second section, to the research questions that have been investigated.

1. Displacement of the political: The post-1989 liberal context

The discursive approach offers a peculiar perspective to explain the ‘illiberal turn’. As the 1989 revolution coincided with the establishment of a liberal hegemonic worldview (at least in the realm of ideas), the illiberal counter-revolution seeks to redefine the discursive space. Thus, the shift to the right reflected in the current political scene is primarily understood here as a discursive shift. Since this work seeks to explore the salience of cultural factors in explaining the ‘illiberal turn’, the discursive shift towards illiberalism signals the attempt to redefine the core values of society. Thus, the ‘illiberal turn’ is a discursive turn: from liberal values to traditions. The hegemonic liberal order of the transition has been eroded, and its dislocation opened the room to alternative worldviews. In this scenario, Polish neo-traditionalism, and thus other illiberal

discourses, surfaced as a response to 'the broken promise of 1989'. The neo-traditionalist discourse coalition denounces post-1989 failures and promises and new unifying fantasy.

The rise of illiberal narratives, in Poland as elsewhere in the region, was preceded by the occupation of the discursive space by the liberal democratic discourse. The transformations of 1989 marked a significant discursive shift in Europe and, even more so, in former socialist countries. The collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War have been crucial dislocatory events that subverted the existing discursive field. Political systems in both Eastern and (to a minor extent) Western Europe were disrupted, and the window of opportunities was left open for a new resignification of the discursive space. In Central and Eastern Europe, 1989 meant the abandonment of socialist narratives to embrace the liberal West; and, in that context, the West meant the liberal democratic system that emerged as the winner from the Cold War. It involved a new signification of freedom that touched on various spheres of the social. The free market, free party competition, free civil society. In most cases, freedom was signified as negative freedom, as opposed to the chains of communism.

The liberal consensus monopolized the discursive field of Western countries. The 1990s were characterized by the sedimentation of the neoliberal hegemony: the ideological rapprochement of 'progressivism' from the left and 'economic liberalism' from the right gave shape to a new hegemonic bloc defined by Nancy Fraser (2017) as 'progressive neoliberalism'. The liberal democratic consensus created the conditions for a depoliticization of the public sphere. Political parties converged to the center and transformed into catch-all parties: ideological differences gradually waned, and their political visions were reduced to mere administrative duties, distancing these parties from the people (Shekhovtsov, 2016). EU integration of the CEE countries took the shape of a technocratic process, where mainstream political actors competed on the *modus operandi* rather than on different worldviews (Grzymała-Busse and Innes, 2003). As a consequence, EU integration shaped the political environment in which political parties operated (Ladrech, 2009), fostering depoliticization and pushing to the margins alternative political views.

This model became the paradigm to follow for the elites of Central and Eastern Europe. The 'return to the West' was the main goal of most former socialist countries; it functioned as an imaginary fantasy to achieve after the 'Soviet theft'. Certainly, the perspective of EU and NATO memberships was a driving force. However, the political debate on the matter remained scant (Ekiert, 2008): rather than relating to its political consequences, the West and EU integration were pictured as an "imagined cultural destiny" (Mark et al., 2019: 275). Yet, this liberal consensus should not be understood as a lack of alternatives. Some of the CEECs presented a fragmented and tumultuous political arena, and the intellectual debate was still vivid (Kim, 2022). Nonetheless, as already suggested, the victory of liberalism had to be found in the field of ideas (Bluhm and Varga, 2019). In spite of the fact that party competition was often turbulent, the hegemonic position of the liberal consensus was never put into question. In this light, the dominance of the liberal discourse determined the direction taken by most of the former socialist countries. The result was a "technocratic monism" (Bill and Stanley, 2020: 379) that outweighed other discursive alternatives. Thus, the post-1989 dislocation was exploited by the liberal discourse that quickly defined the main political tenets of the CEE countries.

From a hegemonic perspective, the liberal consensus should be read as an expansion of the liberal democratic discourse from the West that co-opted ideologically the elite of CEE. In Poland, the 'molecular' transformation of civil society aimed at the creation of a new progressive common sense. Following a hegemonic strategy, the new liberal elite was prepared to fill the void of the transition and assimilate counter-hegemonic forces (Shields, 2012). According to the post-communist Polish elite, the market economy, democracy, and liberal values were intertwined as the same desirable object (Balcerowicz, 1995). Therefore, they needed to be 'liberalized' to 'catch up with the West'. As I propose a Gramscian account for the rise of neo-traditionalism in Poland, Stuart Shields (2008) has defined in the same terms the neoliberal hegemonization of Poland. Interestingly, the same thesis is espoused by illiberal actors in Poland when they accuse the post-communist elite of having been co-opted by foreign forces (for example Kaczyński, 2019/15).⁴⁵ Hegemonic forces, in fact, cannot be confined within the nation-state, though they impact the national discursive arena (Shields, 2008). Thus, if we talk

about a liberal hegemony in post-communist Poland, it is necessary to stress that here hegemony refers to a set of ideas concerning economic, political, and social changes that followed a globalizing path. The new liberal hegemony in the country was rather a consequence of international pressures (of ideas) that conquered the new elite and spread the liberal creed.

The external hegemonic pressure was even clearer during the EU integration process. The mechanism of conditionality to access the EU made virtually impossible for the CEE countries any negotiations with their more powerful counterpart and contributed to excluding alternative worldviews from the public space (Melito, 2021a). The perspective of joining the European Union functioned as a metaphor for the 'return to the West'. The paradoxical aspect of EU integration consisted of the awareness of a condition of asymmetry and imbalance between the EU and Poland, and, at the same time, the acceptance of EU conditions and predominance. "Poland accepted dominance not only because it was a necessary condition of being accepted in the EU. Dominance was accepted because both the dominating and the dominated were seen as belonging to the same community of shared European values" (Orzechowska-Wa lawska, Mach and Sekerdej, 2021: 25). From this perspective, the decision to integrate Poland within a liberal and western system of values taken by Polish politicians could be seen as an independent and informed choice. It was not in fact imposed by force. However, Gramsci reminds us that persuasion matters more than coercion. Obviously, the EU did not impose anything by force. Rather, it exerted an intellectual pressure as it held intellectual and moral leadership (Gramsci, 1975). In this light, it can be argued that there was a 'fantasmatic attraction' that put the country on this path: the imaginary of a European promise of freedom. The economic system, democracy, and even 'Europeanness' were defined in liberal terms (Shields, 2008).

Liberalism, therefore, came as a full-fledged promise to cover several aspects of society.⁴⁶ While alternative voices were present, the political moment (understood as the challenge to the hegemonic discourse) vanished quickly, and liberalism rapidly sutured the social. The displacement of the political (Mouffe, 2005) meant a 'technocratization' of politics where pluralism of worldviews is substituted for administrative competence (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2017). The market

economy, liberal democratic institutions, and liberal values that emphasize the role of the individual over communities became the pillars of this societal transformation towards liberalism (Kubik, 2018). The liberal consensus, indeed, was based on three macro-themes: economic, civic, and cultural. Economic and civic liberalism refer, respectively, to the superiority of the free market and the relevance of individuals in political activities. Cultural liberalism, which matters the most in this thesis, is concerned with openness and cultural plurality (Bill and Stanley, 2020). Any illiberal counter-reaction should be read as a response to one or more of these aspects. All three strands led to alternative solutions. Surely, rising inequality and the deepening of the cleavage between rural areas and cities were exploited by the right in Poland by bestowing material benefits, not necessarily in a counter-hegemonic fashion (Shields, 2007). Similarly, the post-1989 institutional architecture is constantly questioned by illiberal actors, as demonstrated by the Polish constitutional crisis. However, in this work, I have focused on the last aspect, namely the rejection of the liberal-progressive system of values that caused a cultural backlash. According to this hypothesis, the novelties brought about by the transition generated a cultural displacement that, eventually, produced a counter-hegemonic neo-traditionalist revolution (Melito, 2021a).

Nevertheless, the division between these three main themes should not be considered watertight. The critique of the liberal system can be articulated against both economic and cultural measures. Often, criticisms against individualism (cultural) are coterminous with criticisms against neoliberal economic policies. More importantly, the lack of a compartmentalized separation between these areas suggests that the *historical bloc* can be dislocated at different levels. In this sense, the existing literature agrees on the disruptive effects of the 2008 economic crisis that, at the very least, accelerated the crisis of democracy (Bluhm and Varga, 2019). Recalling Gramsci (1975), even if economic crises do not necessarily lead to the subversion of hegemony, they often play the function of breaking down the first lines of the 'hegemonic army'. The 2008 financial crisis, although barely led to any change in the actual economic organization of global capitalism (Crouch, 2011), has surely created room for alternative discourses to the liberal consensus. The dislocation following the economic crisis severely weakened the legitimacy of the Western-liberal model and allowed for a resignification of the

discursive space also in civic and cultural terms. Thus, while the creation of a 'counter-elite populism' dates back to the first years of the transition (Bill, 2020), only the financial crisis created the conditions to deploy a successful counter-hegemonic strategy as the previous discourse in the West was dislocated. The 2008 dislocation subverted the existing discursive order and gave the opportunity to re-articulate a new discursive structure. The cultural backlash and the silent counter-revolution (Ignazi, 1992) have finally surfaced; they are no longer silent (Shekhovtsov, 2016).

The disruptive role of the 2008 crisis in many areas of Western civilization has been noted also by Andrzej and Katarzyna Zybertowicz, two of the neo-traditionalist intellectuals. According to Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz (2017/4), the 2008 crisis disrupted the existing order of the West in several ways: from the technological challenge to the migration crisis, the West has become marked by instability. Only a new positive ordering principle (for example, Christianity, Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz argue) can fix the discursive structure and provide stability again. The cultural backlash can be seen as a response to the *real* failure of the reorganization of values that occurred during the transition. Its *symbolic* performance, which took place after the 2008 crisis, instead, is to be researched through the analysis of the illiberal *and* neo-traditionalist discourse promoted by a discourse coalition.

2. Hypothesis and research questions

The dislocatory phase of the post-communist transition did not lead only to the disruption of existing meanings. As argued by Laclau (1990: 39), "the effects of dislocation must be contradictory. If, on the one hand, they threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundations on which new identities are constituted". New discursive formations attempt to suture the dislocated social, narrating a crisis and offering new solutions to describe reality (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). Thus, the crisis of liberal hegemony gave rise to alternative hegemonic projects. On the one hand, they negated dislocated liberal principles (illiberal side); on the other hand, in the Polish case, they constructed an alternative discourse and a new normality (neo-traditionalist side). In other words, in Poland, the rejection of liberalism (*pars destruens*) is accompanied by

the construction of a neo-traditionalist discourse (*pars contruens*). We are witnessing a hegemonic struggle that might lead, as a consequence, to a shift of paradigm. No longer the post-communist liberal democratic dream, but a new cultural organization that seeks to shuffle the core values and *senso comune* of society.

This picture reflecting the double mechanism of the neo-traditionalist counter-revolution allows us to restate the hypothesis and research question proposed at the beginning of the thesis (Chapter 1). In brief, it is possible to articulate a tentative explanation: the shift to illiberalism has taken place in Poland as a (negative) non-liberal *reaction* against the dominant liberal discourse, and a (positive) neo-traditionalist discursive *production*, promoted by a neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. The explanation involves three phases of analysis. It interprets the content of neo-traditionalism; it analyzes the political strategy to change the social; it studies the fantasies sustaining ideologically the illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse in its creation of a new collective imaginary. The main research question, proposed already in Chapter 1, defines the general scope of this work as it deals with the hegemonic potential of neo-traditionalism:

- *How has the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland emerged as a counter-hegemonic project that aims at resignifying the core values of society?*

However, it is now possible to add three sub-questions that expose in detail the different facets of neo-traditionalism, following the three logics:

- *What are the rules characterizing the neo-traditionalist discourse?*
- *How is the hegemonic strategy of neo-traditionalism deployed?*
- *Why is neo-traditionalism able to resist the changes brought about by modernity? What are the fantasies that give an ideological ground for identity construction?*

Chapter 9

Research Process and Case Selection

1. Case study: Neo-traditionalism in Poland between 2015-2020

Although the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition is made up of several organic intellectuals affiliated to different organizations, the object of analysis remains unitary. The neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland, indeed, is treated as a single object produced by different sources. Its 'regularity', given by its articulated demands, confers a stable pattern to be observed and analyzed and provides internal coherency. Simultaneously, 'dispersion' signals its contingency and open-endedness. The openness of the social and of discourses is somehow fixed mainly by nodal points that form a discursive formation. In this regard, I have tried to capture a snapshot within a relatively short period of time of the counter-hegemonic illiberal worldview in Poland defined as neo-traditionalist. Accordingly, this work takes on the characteristics of a case study as it focuses on a single unit. John Gerring (2004: 342; emphasis in the original) defines a case study

"as an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units. A unit connotes a spatially bounded phenomenon— e.g., a nation-state, revolution, political party, election, or person—observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time".

Following Gerring's definition, *the single unit of this research is the neo-traditionalist discourse; it is spatially bounded in Poland; it is observed between 2015 and 2020.* Although generalization is not among the goals of the research, the study of neo-traditionalism in Poland as a counter-hegemonic project can shed light on similar hegemonic strategies. Of course, national and cultural differences play a decisive role in differentiating discourses. Even in the case of Poland and Hungary, whose counter-hegemonic force is based mostly on similar socio-cultural factors (Kim, 2022), the construction of neo-traditionalism differs as the two countries do not share the same history and, not necessarily, the same national interests. To provide another banal example, tribal traditions in former colonies are obviously different from Polish

traditions rooted in Christianity. Therefore, the study does not aim to provide a 'critical case' in order to explain comprehensively 'illiberal turns'; Poland (and any other country) has its specificities. However, it is still possible to observe an illiberal pattern in Europe against the liberal hegemony (Zielonka, 2018) and the construction of alternative projects in a counter-hegemonic fashion. Non-liberal discourses can be found in several nations but, in line with the notion of hegemony and 'the domination of civil society', the socio-cultural terrain where a discourse is deployed matters. Therefore, the generalizing scope of the research is limited to the logic of hegemony of non-liberal discourses. The way to construct this discourse may change across countries and, in particular, the social logic would certainly vary. However, the illiberal political logic and the construction of the 'liberal enemy' can help to understand a larger class of similar units.⁴⁷

The emphasis on the national and cultural characteristics of neo-traditionalism justifies already the choice of Poland as the 'space of analysis'. Since the goal of the study is to explain the emergence of illiberalism and neo-traditionalism, Poland represents a significant case *per se*. A comparison of different illiberal discourses would be interesting; however, having in mind the research question, a comparative study would offer little added value. The choice of the temporal space requires instead further explanations. As discussed in the previous chapter, the crisis of liberal hegemony can be dated at least to the 2008 financial crisis. Moreover, in Poland, the first illiberal resurgence occurred already in the 2001 parliamentary election and, even more significantly, in 2005 and 2006 with the formation of openly Eurosceptic and illiberal governments. The intellectual challenge to liberalism can be traced even further back (Dąbrowska, 2019), as explained below: conservative circles unhappy with the post-communist transition organized a cultural reaction since the 1990s. The decision of delimiting the temporal space from 2015 to 2020 is supported by three main reasons.

First, reducing the analysis time to a few years offers practical advantages. For every meaningful object is part of discourse, the amount of analyzable data is endless. Focusing on a 6-year interval consistently reduces the number of discursive productions a single researcher can handle. In addition, it fosters the coherence of the discourse, since external variables affect the construction of any discourse. In this way, it was

possible to control political changes that would have made the sampling strategy extremely difficult.⁴⁸ Second, the salience of illiberal narratives has grown exponentially during the last few years. While a counter-hegemonic strategy in Poland was in place since the 1990s, its relative success has been achieved only recently. Furthermore, the simultaneous rise of illiberal narratives in many countries has made illiberalism a crucial phenomenon in the current political scene. This is also reflected in the increasing academic interest in populist and illiberalism studies. Third, 2015 and 2020 have a symbolic valence. Although elections should not be seen necessarily as discursive turning points, PiS' electoral success signaled and confirmed the growth of illiberalism and the effectiveness of the neo-traditionalist strategy. This period of time includes four main electoral rounds in Poland (two presidential elections and two parliamentary elections) that were won consecutively by PiS. This electoral shift certainly boosted the discursive diffusion of illiberalism in the country and contributed to increasing political and cultural polarization.

Although the limited period of time reduces the amount of data and actors involved, a further decision had to be made to perform the empirical research, namely, the selection of a representative sample of neo-traditionalist organic intellectuals.

2. The Polish neo-traditionalist discourse coalition

One of the most problematic aspects in the study of illiberal narratives is their simplistic dismissal due to their unacceptable (from a liberal point of view) political stances. Consequently, scarce attention has been paid to ideas, concepts, and themes of conservative or illiberal movements (Bluhm and Varga, 2019; Buzogány and Varga, 2018). Often, populist/illiberal actors are accused of merely fear-mongering or exploiting people's anxiety. This rhetoric is typical of anti-populist narratives: the so-called populists or, in other words, those who do not share mainstream opinions are described as a dangerous monster, a threat to democracy (Taguieff, 1998). Although this may still be the case, little consideration is given to their ideological and intellectual background (Dąbrowska, 2019). Non-liberal narratives (whatever their positive content is) are not just a blind critique to the current liberal democratic model, nor just a

propagandistic strategy. They also propose a set of ideas that find their roots in a variety of political traditions.

The concept of hegemony reveals an unusual perspective for understanding and explaining the 'illiberal turn' in Poland. The hegemonic approach involves a different reading of recent political developments in the country and the region. The hegemonic interpretation of these events goes beyond the borders of a certain country and accounts, with obvious national differences, for the understanding of a significant discursive change – from the liberal consensus to the formation of an illiberal and conservative Internationale (Behr, 2021; Bluhm, 2019). Discourse change should not be read as being just manufactured or exploited by political entrepreneurs. Rather, it is the result of a discursive strategy implemented by the organic intellectuals of illiberalism that challenges the liberal consensus. They form a wide discourse coalition in different countries made up of politicians, think tanks, academics, and all those actors who spread the illiberal voice. The most visible and clear example is given by the organization of conservative international conferences with the participation of several intellectuals of different countries.⁴⁹ Poland is one of the countries where, arguably, the illiberal discursive coalition is earning its most stunning victories. This section will look at the formation and identification of the anti-liberal neo-traditionalist discourse coalition in Poland. The goal is to offer methodological grounds for the selection of a significant sample and text corpus used for the empirical analysis of the neo-traditionalist discourse.

2.1 Sampling in qualitative research

Focusing on discourse as such, instead of a specific political entity producing that discourse, complicates things. If discourses *precede* subjects, their study raises a thorny issue. A complete and exhaustive analysis of the emergence and sedimentation of neo-traditionalism would require examining each nodal point, demand, and fantasy that can be described as belonging to this discourse. Obviously, this is an impossible task even with unlimited time and resources. If we take seriously the claim that 'nothing exists outside discourse', every articulated sentence, gesture, or object within the discursive

space could potentially belong to the neo-traditionalist discourse. Since every human action is meaningful, the research object of discourse-theoretical analysis is virtually inexhaustible (Nonhoff, 2019). Therefore, at this point, it is necessary to face one of the most important and most difficult tasks of the research: the selection and reconstruction of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition, as defined by Hajer (2005). In other words, it is necessary to select a sample of actors belonging to the informal neo-traditionalist alliance. However, not all of their meaningful actions can be analyzed. Within this sample, a further selection of their discursive productions is needed (e.g., articles, speeches). The resulting text corpus⁵⁰ will be taken into account in the analysis.

To describe the sampling process, it is necessary to distinguish between proper discourse and virtual discourse (Nonhoff, 2019). The former indicates the neo-traditionalist discursive formation in its entirety, which includes any neo-traditionalist meaningful practice. Proper discourse is something we can theorize but never grasp in its entirety: its diffusion is constant, and its frontiers are unstable. The latter, instead, is the result of a choice made by the researcher for analytical purposes. Faced with an endless amount of discursive elements and articulations, the analyst is required to carefully pick which data, i.e. discursive elements, can offer a representative picture of the discourse under study. In this light, the research object is rather a proxy of the neo-traditionalist discourse that results from acts of interpretation committed by the researcher (Busse and Teubert, 2014). The unity of this sample and its representativeness is given by the research questions, the interests, and the objectives of the researcher.

This position may arise criticism since the research object could be seen as the neo-traditionalist discourse according to the researcher, rather than the neo-traditionalist discourse itself. However, there are a few reasons to reject this objection. Firstly, for practical reasons: it is just impossible to carry out a qualitative analysis of each discursive production made in any discursive arena. Even if we were interested in a discourse within a small environment, the number of meaningful objects will always overwhelm a single researcher or even a team of researchers. Hence, the necessity in qualitative research of selecting a purposive (relatively) small sample (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014). Secondly, also in more scientific-based disciplines, like semantics,

the research object is to some extent a consequence of an act of interpretation, since it is based on practical and scientific interests (Busse and Teubert, 2014). Finally, and more importantly, the very ontological position of this research implies that the researcher's point of view in no case can be neglected. From this perspective, any description of social reality itself is nothing more than an act of interpretation. If we seek to analyze a political or societal phenomenon, that can happen only as an act of interpretation made by the analyst. Thus, it makes little sense to criticize the predominant role of the researcher in selecting a representative sample and a discourse corpus because, according to my ontological perspective, any attempt to describe the social world can only be interpretive. Nevertheless, the sample choice must be strongly justified. The selection of relevant discourse makers and the text corpus that stands as a proxy of discourse requires to be based on solid grounds to avoid offering only a partial and biased picture of the research object. At any rate, the aim should be to deliberately choose a representative sample so that diversities and similarities within the research environment can be captured (Flick, 2007).

Sampling in qualitative research can follow different strategies: for instance, Patton (1990) suggested that it is possible to select a sample by looking at extreme or deviant cases, at their variation, or at many other features. In the case of this work, I believe that my sampling strategy should be employed in accordance with my ontological position. If the study aims to analyze discourse and if discourse is understood as a symbolic horizon that defines reality, then the act of selecting a sample should be guided by the concepts expressed by the discourse under study. Therefore, in this light, it seems that the most appropriate strategy to find sources of neo-traditionalism should follow a *theory-based sampling* where data are collected "on the basis of their potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs. The sample becomes, by definition, representative of the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 1990: 177). Concepts defining neo-traditionalism (acquired retroductively) delimit the boundaries of the object of analysis. Consequently, sampling should include those data that would help answer the research questions (Flick, 2007). This choice, however, does not solve the dilemma of selecting a representative virtual text corpus. Theory and

sensitizing concepts can suggest where to look for data; nevertheless, the quantity of potentially significant discursive productions remains enormous.

At this point, I have identified two possible entry points to approach the neo-traditionalist discourse and select an illustrative sample of its discourse coalition. The first one would focus on keywords. The initial step would consist of picking and isolating certain keywords (e.g., 'tradition', 'people', 'nation') and, then, reconstructing the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. However, this strategy presents some limitations. First, every potential neo-traditionalist keyword in the discursive arena is still a huge amount of data; too large for a single (or more) researcher. Think about the daily discursive production on social media: even a software program searching for keywords would hardly manage them. As argued earlier, unlike Gramsci's world, the number of actors playing an intellectual function has grown exponentially after the digital revolution. Since it is impossible to manage the inexhaustible amount of data, there is a risk of cherry-picking keywords from one source instead of another. Obviously, this could be addressed by limiting the number of sources taken into account and, therefore, would require an active decision by the researcher (for example, by focusing only on some politicians and excluding others). Yet, another complication would arise from the fact that I am interested in meanings, not frequency. A focus on keywords would certainly provide a wide picture of neo-traditionalism and its appearance within the discursive space. However, that would come at the expense of interpretation. Even though taking into account each appearance of a given keyword would reduce the risk of missing all its nuances, an in-depth analysis of meanings would be better served by focusing on a narrower sample. For example, fantasies usually appear as narrations; hence, they could easily escape keyword-based search criteria. Simply put, I value a deep understanding of a signifier more than its occurrence. In particular, basing my methodology on the logics approach, frequency does not offer any significant added value to the study of the logics of a discourse. For these reasons, the option of using keywords for reconstructing the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition has been discarded.

I have tried to solve this potential shortcoming – managing interpretable data and the unlimited amount of discursive productions – by linking the general principles of qualitative research with the Gramscian notion of 'organic intellectuals'. The latter will

serve as the starting point for building a representative sample, instead of 'neo-traditionalist keywords'. The problem of fishing data in the vastness of the neo-traditionalist ocean would be solved by carefully selecting a limited sample of neo-traditionalist discourse makers as it is more likely to find the driving concepts of the research within their discursive productions. The organic intellectuals of the neo-traditionalist discourse are, in fact, deemed to deploy a counter-hegemonic strategy to overturn the liberal common sense and spread their illiberal worldview. Therefore, rather than moving from keywords to reconstruct the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition, the sampling process is reversed. I have decided, as a first step, to select some discourse makers that arguably belong to the coalition. This move required an intensive pre-analysis of the Polish discursive space in order to have a clear vision of the actors playing a hegemonic function.⁵¹ Of course, any choice of this kind is doomed to include some actors instead of others. Nonetheless, this approach offers several advantages.

First, it is in line with the theoretical and methodological framework presented so far. In particular, here, I refer to the concepts of discourse coalition (Hajer, 2005) and organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1953). Selecting a sample of the members of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition serves exactly the purpose of shedding light on the propagation and creation of the neo-traditionalist discourse. In this way, the boundless universe of neo-traditionalism is confined within a few representative organic intellectuals that effectively produce and disseminate the discourse and their common sense. Second, it is advantageous in practical terms. Focusing on a few actors and a share of their discursive productions allows reducing the amount of data to be analyzed while, at the same time, maintaining the possibility of achieving a point of saturation. Furthermore, the limited number of selected actors allows us to focus deeply on meanings and narrations, avoiding a superficial and irrelevant count of occurrences of keywords. Finally, this choice is still in line with a theory-based sampling (Patton, 1990) that follows the principles of qualitative research: because of their alleged position in the neo-traditionalist camp, the chosen discourse makers are likely to manifest the main themes, demands, and fantasies of the neo-traditionalist discourse. Thus, even though they obviously cannot cover the entire spectrum of their discourse coalition, the analysis

of their hegemonic function can provide an accurate representation of the phenomenon of interest and an answer to the research questions.

2.2 Reconstructing a discourse coalition: The Polish case

The growth of an informal illiberal alliance in Poland should not be seen as an occurrence independent of other events. Rather, it is to be read against the background of the post-communist transition. The opposition to the liberal hegemony involved a discursive alternative with solid and consistent intellectual foundations. The influence of Gramsci on this research invites us to look for the reconstruction of a hegemonic formation and its 'production of common sense'. The empirical application of Gramsci's theory follows that strand of existing contemporary literature on illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe that, in general terms, looks at the formation of an illiberal alliance between different conservative actors (for example, Buzogány and Varga, 2018; see also Behr, 2021). This approach suggests that, rather than simply being a contextual reaction to the failures of liberal democracy, the roots of the 'illiberal turn' can be traced back to a meticulous intellectual construction that slowly made illiberal narratives a viable alternative to liberalism. As claimed by Bluhm and Varga (2019), a loose 'knowledge network' of different actors is involved in the production and dissemination of a conservative political conception of the world.⁵² This group (which overlaps with what I have called 'discourse coalition') operates in a discursive field where, broadly speaking, liberal and conservative forces ideologically contest and define meanings.

Refusing the post-1989 cultural and political architecture, this counter-movement in Central and Eastern Europe has shown a growing discontent with the 'fake freedom' obtained after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As argued by Ryszard Legutko (2016), a totalitarian communist regime was replaced by an equally totalitarian liberal order. Hence, the articulation of a conservative project is an attempt to reshape the existing order and redefine (positively) what it means to be a society and its values. In this light, illiberalism did not arise just because 'liberalism failed to deliver' (Krastev, 2016). Rather, conservative projects were built by several intellectual milieus in Central and Eastern Europe and, arguably to a minor extent, other Western countries. They propose a

coherent and exhaustive discourse that could eventually replace the liberal consensus. In particular, (with regard to the scope of this research), the cultural hegemony of liberalism has been harshly questioned.

In this respect, Korolczuk and Graff (2018: 798) observed the rise of an international illiberal alliance that is “constructing a new universalism, an illiberal one, that replaces individual rights with rights of the family as a basic societal unit and depicts religious conservatives as an embattled minority”. This transnational alliance not only challenges the liberal order; it also promotes the formation of an illiberal civil society. Illiberal conferences, journals, and think tanks proliferate in the West and seek to push for a radical discursive change that redefines common sense and Western identity. Using the example of anti-gender campaigns, Elżbieta Korolczuk (2014) underlines how the ‘war on gender’ should be read as a transnational movement – not simply local. However, ‘gender’ is just one aspect of a wider critique. We may say that it is the constructed Other that stands for the antagonist, the opposite worldview. Indeed, these movements across countries have something more in common than a mere refusal of ‘gender ideology’. They also share “a conservative, anti-liberal agenda, and the fact that they interpret ‘gender ideology’ as a trend that endangers not only the welfare of children and the family, but the whole of society and even Christian civilization” (Korolczuk, 2014: 3). The ‘war on gender’ can be placed on the same level as the fight against multiculturalism, the pro-life agenda or the defense of Christian values within the public sphere. These occasional episodic fights are not unrelated. They represent the tip of an iceberg of a wider confrontation between worldviews, and, concerning the scope of this chapter, between different discourse coalitions (Melito, 2021c). The *Kulturkampf* between worldviews is a *Kulturkampf* fought by the organic intellectuals of different discourses. A cultural war that transcends national borders and, arguably, is affecting several countries, especially in the West, where the cultural order following the 1960s cultural revolution has not yet been definitively settled.

Poland is no exception and, in fact, represents a paradigmatic case of the illiberal resurgence. Furthermore, these lines of conflict (e.g., multiculturalism, abortion, gender) are particularly pronounced and make the so-called Polish *Kulturkampf* (Grabowska, 2020) a prominent topic in the mainstream political debate of the country.

The contrast between two worldviews and the formation of an illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse coalition is not just academic speculation or the result of excessive reliance on Gramscian theory. Interestingly (and ironically), the communist Gramsci was an explicit point of reference (and arguably still is) for the Polish conservatives in the preparation of a hegemonic plan: in a speech delivered in 1996, Andrzej Nowak, one of the most influential Polish conservative intellectuals, called for a battle in the field of media, schools, and cultural institutions in order to conquer cultural hegemony, referring explicitly to the Italian philosopher (Nowak in Behr, 2021). A similar explicit appeal to use Gramscian concepts in the “crusade” against the abnormality of political correctness has been made by another neo-traditionalist intellectual, Aleksander Nalaskowski (2019/32). The neo-traditionalist discourse coalition, therefore, is not only an abstract concept used for analytical purposes. The lesson of the *Gramscisme de droit* was learned by Polish conservative intellectuals who after the fatigue of the democratic transition have waged a long war of position.

The development of an anti-liberal counter-hegemonic project has been carried out by intellectuals and ideologues since the beginning of the 1990s (Behr, 2021; Dąbrowska, 2019). Slowly, this alternative worldview gained strength and proselytes; while its electoral success through the political party PiS remains a contingent and non-necessary outcome, the ideological network linking conservative ideologues created the conditions and the subject positions for the emergence of neo-traditionalism and its fruitful dissemination. In the same vein as in this research, Ewa Dąbrowska (2019) has used Hajer’s intuition to describe this network in Poland as a conservative discourse coalition. This coalition, Dąbrowska argues, fits within the transnational illiberal movement that characterizes the political scene of several Western countries, although it was developed independently and presents specific Polish features. The formation of the discourse coalition was born as a criticism against the dominant narrative that sought to ‘catch up with the West’ through liberal reforms (Dąbrowska, 2019). The dissatisfaction of conservative circles with the post-communist transition had resulted in a wider intellectual project that, since the post-communist transition, elaborated a conservative alternative. The conservative discourse coalition in Poland, as proposed by Dąbrowska (2019), must be understood exactly as defined by Hajer. Rather than a formal

alliance of conservative actors, the discourse coalition involves several actors loosely linked among them. They share the same conservative values and oppose the same post-1989 liberal narration. However, the discourse coalition cannot be considered as a monolithic conservative movement, as demonstrated by some political fracture within.⁵³ As theorized by Nowak (Behr, 2021), this project was supposed to follow a Gramscian strategy and spread a conservative worldview in Polish society. Hence, one of its main goals consisted in creating an alternative (non-liberal) civil society (Bill, 2020; Grzebalska and Pető, 2018).

While the concept of civil society is generally associated with the good functioning of liberal democracy and is integrated within liberal political theory (Osborne, 2021), we know from Gramsci that civil society does not need to be liberal. And so do also know the conservatives in Poland. While a liberal democracy needs civil society to be defined as such, civil society can also be representative of a non-liberal worldview. This is particularly evident in what Stanley Bill (2020) has named ‘counter-elite populism’, namely, the funding and promotion of illiberal organizations by the PiS government to replace the liberal elite with an illiberal one. Therefore, I argue that the concept of ‘illiberal civil society’ is not a contradiction and, actually, accurately captures the rise of conservatism (and neo-traditionalism) in Poland. In creating a valid sample of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition, I will necessarily need to draw the relevant actors from this illiberal civil society.

Arguing in favor of the existence of an illiberal civil society also serves the purpose of shifting the attention from party politics to discourse. Both Dąbrowska (2019) and Bill (2020) maintain that the right-wing discourse coalition in Poland explains the electoral victory of Law and Justice. Similarly, Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik (2019) claim that far right, nationalist, and religious associations ‘thickened’ Polish public culture with traditionalist symbols. For instance, the concept of Polishness has been signified in a traditionalist fashion and linked to a collective identity associated with nationalist and religious elements. Eventually, this symbolic thickening helped legitimize PiS’ discourse and expanded the discursive opportunity structure for Kaczyński’s party and other right-wing movements (Kotwas and Kubik, 2019). While the neo-traditionalist discursive production has undoubtedly contributed to the electoral successes of PiS, I would like

to look at this matter from a slightly different perspective. As these scholars argued, the diffusion of a conservative/neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland has certainly encouraged the political rise of PiS and has inspired its political agenda. However, the non-liberal discursive proliferation cannot be reduced to mere ideological support for the main non-liberal party. Rather, as also stated by Dąbrowska (2019), Kaczyński ideology is part of a larger discourse that informs and is informed by his party. Arguably, PiS brought to the fore the conservative/neo-traditionalist project that was advocated by several intellectuals already in the first years of the transition, well before the establishment of Law and Justice. PiS, therefore, should not be considered external to the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition nor as simply exploiting the ideological work of conservative milieus. Rather, it can be considered as the spearhead of the discourse coalition. Using the words of Gramsci again, PiS politicians and, more specifically, their leader are the elites of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition, holding a vital intellectual and hegemonic function.

Consequently, PiS members do not exhaust the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition that includes several more actors at different power levels. While the analysis of Polish populism/conservatism/neo-traditionalism (whatever we name it) has usually been carried out referring to Law and Justice, little attention has been devoted to media and other opinion makers (Stępińska, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Wyszyński, 2020). The empirical analysis performed by Kinga Adamczewska and Agnieszka Stępińska (2020) constitutes an exception in this regard. These researchers collected journalistic materials and studied populist content in selected newspapers and tabloids. They demonstrated how populist messages are not exclusive to political parties; they are also delivered through the media. Right-wing magazines like *Do Rzeczy*, *W Sieci*, and *Gazeta Polska* often criticize the liberal elite and contribute to spreading a typical populist narrative. Their analysis has been based on the frequency of 'populist keywords' in order to observe the presence of populism in the media. Thus, it offers a clear picture of the impact played by non-political intellectuals in disseminating a certain narrative. From this angle, it is clear how even the media (e.g., magazines) play a fundamental intellectual function and belong to the illiberal discourse coalition. Unlike the study by Adamczewska and Stępińska, the sampling strategy of my research has not followed

‘frequency’ as the driving criterion, but ‘concepts’. Therefore, the analysis will begin with the organic intellectuals of neo-traditionalism and the concepts and narratives they produce.

2.3 Constructing a sample: Research strategy

The previous section has described the existence of a discourse coalition in Poland that put together several intellectuals from different fields (from politics to the media). However, their selection for analytical purposes requires a precise strategy. As argued by Patton (1990), a *theory-based sampling* implies the collection of data based on the potential manifestation of important theoretical constructs. Because of the virtually infinite extension of the discursive space, this choice does not solve all the problems. The selection of a representative sample and the construction of the text corpus cannot be a process that randomly pursues abstract concepts. Behind any sampling choice, there is a research strategy that seeks to limit as much as possible the possible weaknesses that the selection procedure may encounter. The research strategy that led to the collection of the empirical material followed the typical retroductive circle and consisted of five steps: preparatory work, first pilot study, preliminary selection of the sample and text corpus, second pilot study, and finally the definition of the sample and text corpus that will be analyzed.

1) *Preparatory work*. Even if it is not included in the empirical analysis, the preparatory work is one of the most important steps of the research as it gives the necessary pre-knowledge about the research object. Each subsequent step resulted from this phase of the study. Indeed, this stage was not simply a pre-analysis to understand the context and broaden my knowledge on the topic. It also served to better define the boundaries of the research object and offer a first glance at the potential discourse coalition. This stage consisted of a general daily reading of any potential significant discursive production: from social media posts to public statements of politicians in the illiberal area. Furthermore, I have conducted some direct observations of ‘neo-traditionalist events’ to have a clearer picture and obtain what Maxwell (2005: 225) has named *experiential knowledge*: these activities provided me “with a major source of insights,

hypotheses, and validity checks". This phase produced three main results: first, it gave me a wider understanding of the context and, more specifically, of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition; second, it skimmed the research object from unnecessary contours, giving a more precise idea of what would have been necessary to answer the research question, and furnishing the main external concepts; third (which is more significant for this section), it made clear which relevant actors could have been potentially included in the sample of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. In addition, the pre-analysis of the neo-traditionalist camp also helped delineate the criteria for selection. In particular, it provided me with the core concepts of neo-traditionalism that guided the theory-based sampling. At this stage, the first possible list of organic intellectuals to be included in the sample was drawn up.

2) *First pilot study*. The second step of the research strategy moved from a general (and occasionally chaotic) pre-analysis to a systematic study of a few of the organic intellectuals of neo-traditionalism.⁵⁴ The choice fell on two PiS members: its leader Jarosław Kaczyński and one of its ideologues, Ryszard Legutko. This choice is justified by the fact that Kaczyński and Legutko are undoubtedly among the main representatives of neo-traditionalism and their selection would have raised few doubts. Thus, I was sure at that point that they would have been part of the sample of the discourse coalition. The importance of this first pilot study was twofold: First, it provided a better deep understanding of the neo-traditionalist discourse according to its 'elite'. Second, it made clear what the main nodal points of the discourse are. The empirical results were necessary to enlarge the discourse coalition to other organic intellectuals, as discussed in the next step of the research strategy.

3) *Preliminary selection of the sample and text corpus*. Linking the insights provided by the pre-analysis of neo-traditionalism and the first in-depth pilot study, it has been possible to draw up a first pre-selection of the sample and text corpus. The pre-analysis gave a relatively ample idea of which organic intellectuals played a hegemonic function within the discursive space. The pilot study, instead, made clear the main nodal points and demands of Polish neo-traditionalism. The preliminary list included a few discourse-makers expressive of different levels of the power ladder (from politicians to journalists). However, the pre-selection of the sample raises another issue, namely which texts

produced by the selected actors should be included in the corpus. For instance, if we consider a certain journalist as a neo-traditionalist organic intellectual, his or her discursive production is too vast and, oftentimes, it has nothing to do with the object of the research. Therefore, during this stage, I have read several texts from the selected intellectuals and picked only those expressing neo-traditionalist positions.⁵⁵

4) *Second pilot study*. This stage follows point 2). However, this time the in-depth analysis has focused on other actors to evaluate their actual belonging to the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. Using a small sample of their discursive production, this second test study was intended to find a possible *fil rouge* linking the various discourse makers. Hence, I could be sure of the neo-traditionalist character of the selected discourse-makers. At the same time, I have discarded the discursive production of those intellectuals that could add little to the critical explanation of neo-traditionalism.⁵⁶

5) *Final selection of the sample and text corpus*. Having gathered all the necessary information, the last step consisted of delineating a final list of the representatives of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. In addition, I have also taken a decision with regard to the text corpus. The texts were selected in order to achieve a point of saturation and ensure that the research question was answered. Of course, the final list produced at this stage is still a tentative sample, since I am open to further changes during the last cycle of analysis. The final sample and the text corpus (as defined after the empirical analysis) are discussed in detail in the next section.

2.4 The Polish neo-traditionalist discourse coalition: Sample and text corpus⁵⁷

Following the guidelines elaborated in Chapter 6, the selection of a sample of neo-traditionalist organic intellectuals and a text corpus has been based on the nodal points and demands expressed by these actors. In addition, I have established a hierarchy that seeks to include different actors at different power levels. The 'Polish neo-traditionalist discourse coalition' can be divided into five levels that capture different layers of the illiberal civil society. This categorization has a schematizing function with the goal of providing an organized sample of discourse makers. In fact, the different levels do not

Discourse-makers	Position	Analyzed texts
Jarosław Kaczyński	Leader of PiS	Speeches held during the 2019 electoral campaign for parliamentary elections
Krzysztof Bosak	Presidential candidate of Konfederacja Vice Chairmain of Ruch Narodowy (RN)	Speeches and interviews held during the 2020 electoral campaign for presidential elections
Ryszard Legutko	Philosopher, member of PiS	Book: <i>The Demon in Democracy. Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies</i> Related articles
Robert Winnicki	Member of Konfederacja Chairman of RN	Speeches held in 2020
Andrzej and Katarzyna Zybertowicz	Sociologists	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>W Sieci</i> , period 2017-2020
Aleksander Nalaskowski	Professor of pedagogy	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>W Sieci</i> , period 2017-2020
Paweł Lisicki	Journalist, editor of the weekly <i>Do Rzeczy</i>	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Do Rzeczy</i> , period 2015-2020
Rafał Ziemkiewicz	Journalist and publicist	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Do Rzeczy</i> , period 2015-2020
Tomasz Sakiewicz	Journalist, editor of the weekly <i>Gazeta Polska</i>	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Gazeta Polska</i> , period 2015-2020
Jan Pospieszalski	Journalist and publicist Television author	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Gazeta Polska</i> , period 2015-2020
Ordo Iuris	Think tank	Documents related to the Istanbul Convention
Nowy Ład (nlad.pl); narodowcy.net	Right-wing information portals linked to nationalist grassroots movements	Online articles related to identity and culture, period 2017-2020

Table 2. Sample of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse coalition and of its organic intellectuals.

aim to show their different weight. Of course, the words of a high-level politician have a higher impact on the political debate than the words of a young member of a grassroots movement that writes on an online portal. However, in terms of analysis, that is irrelevant. All discursive productions have been analyzed as neo-traditionalist discursive productions and, therefore, what matters is just their *meaning*. Furthermore, the discursive similarities across the different levels of power contribute to demonstrating the existence of a discursive alliance that goes beyond any specific political affiliation. In this section, I will present the ‘organic intellectuals’ included in the sample of the discourse coalition. Table 2 offers a schematic description of these actors.

1st level: Political leaders

The first level of the discourse coalition includes those who would be defined by Gramsci as the intellectual elite. Political leaders, in fact, exert a significant intellectual function due to their weight within the political debate. In this case, I have chosen two political leaders who come from different political parties. Jarosław Kaczyński is the current leader of PiS and, undoubtedly, one of the most influential (and divisive) figures in Polish politics. In this case, there were few doubts as to include Kaczyński as a member of the discourse coalition since he can be said to be a key mouthpiece of illiberalism in the country. Krzysztof Bosak is a prominent member of the far-right nationalist party *Konfederacja* (Confederation). Although he cannot be considered the undisputed leader of this movement (which is rather a political alliance of different extreme right wing parties), he gained more and more visibility as the candidate for the 2020 presidential elections. In addition, he is a long-standing member of *Ruch Narodowy* (RN, National Movement), an ultranationalist political movement. In both cases, I have analyzed their speeches prior to the electoral campaign for, respectively, the 2019 parliamentary elections, and the 2020 presidential elections, where Bosak was a candidate. Although the speeches refer to a limited period of time, they offered a clear picture of their worldviews. In the case of Kaczyński, the selection was pretty simple since during the electoral campaign he held four speeches in the same format (25-30 minutes) every weekend, fully available on the PiS Facebook page. In the case of Bosak, instead, I could not find the same coherent discursive production. For this reason, I also

included a few interviews and a few speeches right after the presidential campaign. Furthermore, two speeches held in 2016 in the capacity of Ruch Narodowy member were taken into account and can be considered as linked to the fifth level of power.

The selection of these two politicians could arise objections: in fact, *Konfederacja* opposes PiS government and is rather different in several regards. In many of the texts analyzed, Bosak harshly criticized the government for not being 'enough nationalist'. However, this is actually one of the most important advantages and contributions of analyzing a discourse coalition. Despite their differences, they often propagate similar demands and signify nodal points in a similar manner. This observation resulted from the analyzed texts and, in fact, constitutes one of the main results of the research, as discussed in *Part V*. Thus, rather than being a limitation, putting in the same discourse coalition different politicians from different political traditions like Kaczyński and Bosak strengthens the validity and the argument of the thesis.

*2nd level: Politicians/ideologues*⁵⁸

Ryszard Legutko is the only organic intellectual that has been assigned to this category (although other figures occupy a similar position). Legutko is a philosopher and PiS politician whose ideas, arguably, play a considerable influence in shaping the party ideology; it is not rare to see how ideas that were developed in Legutko's book, *The Demon in Democracy*, resonate in Kaczyński's speeches. As mentioned above, the book was a starting point for my analysis and is a crucial manifesto of neo-traditionalism. As discussed by Behr (2021), Legutko can be considered a prominent ideologue of the global conservative right. In addition to the book, I have also looked at related articles that, in particular, criticize liberalism. Legutko's political trajectory in some way followed the neo-traditionalist strategy trajectory. From the first anti-liberal ideas developed in the niches of the Polish political debate in the 1990s, his voice gradually gained importance as it became incorporated into PiS discourse (Behr, 2021).

3rd level: Publicists

This level is rather diverse since I have selected several actors that publish columns in right-wing magazines, although they occupy different positions. We can distinguish between academics, editors, and journalists. Moreover, they can be classified according to the magazines in which their columns are published. For this reason, I have chosen three of the most popular conservative weeklies: *W Sieci*; *Do Rzeczy*; *Gazeta Polska*. The initial idea was to select the three editors plus a prominent contributor for each of them. However, in the case of *W Sieci*, the columns of Jacek Karnowski were not often focused on the topic of the research. Thus, in this case, I opted for a different strategy. Besides dividing these intellectuals according to their magazine, they can also be divided based on their position: we have two academics (Andrzej and Katarzyna Zybertowicz,⁵⁹ and Aleksander Nalaskowski in *W Sieci*); two editors (Paweł Lisicki, editor of *Do Rzeczy*, and Tomasz Sakiewicz, editor of *Gazeta Polska*); two publicists (Rafał Ziemkiewicz, in *Do Rzeczy*, and Jan Pospieszalski, in *Gazeta Polska*). The selection of these organic intellectuals was due to their focus on 'neo-traditionalist arguments'. As discussed in the next part, they often present arguments whose focus is on culture and values. With regard to the selection of texts, I have looked at each column produced in the period of interest each week. After having read all the columns, I have included only those with a clear neo-traditionalist content based on the concepts expressed. Only in the case of Ziemkiewicz, have I analyzed a few proper articles since they were particularly relevant and highlighted, for example, on the weekly cover. In the case of *W Sieci*, I only had access to the period 2017-2020. However, the value-oriented discursive production of Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, and Nalaskowski provided enough material to be analyzed and did not affect the results (indeed, despite the shorter period of time, the texts analyzed written by these authors were equal or more than the others).

4th level: Think Tank

In this case, the choice fell almost naturally on Ordo Iuris, one of the most known (and controversial) think tanks in Poland. This conservative organization plays a significant role in agenda setting and, moreover, it has an important role in the transnational

construction of the illiberal Internationale. In 2020, Ordo Iuris organized a sort of alliance that included other European think tanks and organizations to contest the Istanbul Convention. In this sense, it can be said that Ordo Iuris plays a proper 'organic intellectual function' since it actively pursues and promotes a policy and discursive shift about ethical issues, such as the right to abortion or gender policies. Nevertheless, the analysis collides with my expectations: due to the legal orientation of the think tank, oftentimes their discursive productions had a specific legal character. Still, I could find valuable data in those documents that question the ideological background of the Istanbul Convention. Therefore, the selection of their texts was mainly made by looking at their reference to the so-called 'cultural Marxism' or 'gender ideology'.

5th level: Grassroots movements

The last 'level of power' includes actors who are members of youth organizations and produce discourse in a more restricted environment. The initial plan was to conduct extensive direct observations of demonstrations or protests. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, I had to slightly change my plans; the text selection can be found on two levels. First, I have participated in three anti-LGBT counter-marches in Lublin, Kalisz, and Kraków.⁶⁰ Second, I have analyzed articles published on two online portals: narodowcy.net, and nlad.pl (*Nowy ład*, New Order). The authors of the articles are linked to nationalist groups such as *Młodzież Wszechpolska* or *Ruch Narodowy* and are unknown in the mainstream political debate. For this reason, rather than looking at a specific person, as in the previous cases, this time I have selected articles included in the sections of 'culture' and 'identity' of the portals. Only in the case of Robert Winnicki, chairman of RN and a member of the Polish Parliament elected within *Konfederacja*, could I look for his specific productions. The selection of obscure authors on relatively small online portals might seem a bold move with little impact on the research. However, besides being in line with my theoretical and methodological underpinnings, this choice is exactly a representation of what discourse coalition and organic intellectual mean. Although the reach of these portals might be limited, the circulation of ideas begins at this level and, in this respect, even an article that only a few people

would read *is an act of power*. Rather than being a weakness, this choice is a practical explanation of my ontology.

3. Process of analysis and coding procedure

Although the various phases of analysis partially overlap the sampling process, this section will describe the research process. On the one hand, the constant movement between theory and empirical data led to the selection of a representative text corpus produced by the organic intellectuals. On the other hand, this phase of research constitutes the gateway to the analytical and interpretive part of the thesis.

1) *Preparatory work*. During this phase, the selection and analysis of texts have been conducted summarily. Several texts from a wide range of sources were taken into consideration. The texts were not coded.

2) *First pilot study*. This study focused on a few texts. First, I have analyzed Ryszard Legutko's book *The Demon in Democracy*. Then, I have taken into consideration some speeches held by Jarosław Kaczyński in 2019. Since at this stage the contours of the research were not clear, texts predating 2015 were included (for example, Jarosław Kaczyński's book, *Polska naszych marzeń*) as well as actors that were later cut from the sample (e.g., the Archbishop of Kraków, Marek Jędraszewski). Although I was already influenced by the theoretical positions of Gramsci and Laclau, the coding scheme was partially inductive. Sensitizing concepts were used to know what and where to look for. Categories such as 'empty signifiers', 'antagonism', or 'enjoyment' constituted already the backbone of the research. However, the codes were acquired inductively. For example, I have first identified 'nihilism' as a crucial point in Kaczyński's speeches; only in a second moment have I linked 'nihilism' as a discursive element to its blocking function *vis-à-vis* 'traditional Polishness'. Similarly, 'authority' or 'religious beliefs' were coded as occupying an important position in their discourse. Articulations of equivalence between demands were observed only later.

3) *Preliminary reading of texts*. As discussed above, this phase linked the first two stages in order to draw a preliminary list of the sample and text corpus. For each discourse

maker, I have selected a coherent set of discursive productions. For example, all the speeches held by Kaczyński before the 2019 parliamentary election, or all the columns written by Tomasz Sakiewicz in the period of interest. The subsequent selection has been made on a thematic basis. After having read all the columns (or speeches), those without any clear reference to neo-traditionalism (e.g., columns about economics) were discarded. In some cases, the entire corpus of an actor was dropped as irrelevant. Therefore, during this stage, no discourse theoretical analysis was performed. Rather, this preliminary reading and thematic analysis were necessary to reduce the data and focus more deeply on the pertinent texts. As a result, the huge amount of data collected at the beginning was diminished to a more manageable set. Due to the large amount of data collected and the excessive zeal of the researcher, there was no risk of overlooking significant texts. In fact, the point of saturation has been reached beyond necessity. That increased the workload, but provided further validity.

4) *Second pilot study.* In addition to offering a clearer picture of the neo-traditionalist organic intellectuals (see point 4 above), this phase also served to refine the list of codes. The first codes acquired inductively during the first pilot study were partially merged with sensitizing concepts. Therefore, these preliminary codes were inserted into a wider theoretical and methodological structure. Using the previous example, 'nihilism' was coded as an *anti-demand* of the liberal chain of equivalence; 'Polishness', instead, was referred to as a *nodal point of sublimation*. No reference to the logics had been made yet. This second cycle of analysis guaranteed also the coherence of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition since similar (if not overlapping) codes and discursive articulations could be found within the discursive productions of different discourse makers. The 'regularity' of neo-traditionalism in this phase of research confirmed already the hypothesis that the neo-traditionalist discourse is produced and disseminated by a loose coalition of organic intellectuals. This preliminary result was crucial to continue the research along these methodological lines. A large discrepancy between different actors or the absence of a common worldview would have led to the redefinition of the general objectives of this work.

5) *Final analysis.* Having defined the final sample and text corpus (see point 5 above), the discourse theoretical analysis of all texts has been performed. Each text has gone

through a detailed reading and analysis (a process facilitated as a first reading and thematic analysis had been conducted during phase 3). Following the analysis and coding procedure, a summary, interpretation, and explanation of each text were converted into a memo. Thus, each text is associated with an analytical memo that describes and interprets the content of the texts in detail. Memo writing guarantees the inclusion of every text in the phase of analysis and interpretation described in *Part V*. With regard to the coding scheme, at this stage it followed a deductive approach (or retroductive, as it would describe this process more appropriately). The codes acquired inductively during the pilot studies were transformed into the categories described in the previous chapters on methodology, and inserted within their specific logic. Example: single demands (e.g., 'authority') were coded as related to the social logic; relations of equivalence ('authority'='hierarchy') constituted the political logic; horrific fantasies (e.g., 'the rainbow plague') contributed to defining the fantasmatic logic. The completed code trees (both the initial inductive version and the one based on the logics approach) can be found in Appendix 2. The code tree offers concise guidelines regarding the process of analysis. In practice, the latter has always more blurred boundaries. Codes such as 'performance of crisis' and 'horrific fantasies' often overlap. To distinguish them and, more importantly, to analyze their significance, require a deeper intervention of the researcher 'on the text'. Thus, the division of texts between different logics has, rather, a schematizing function for the sake of clarity. As discussed in the last part of Chapter 12, the three logics need to be articulated to offer a general explanation of the neo-traditionalist discursive shift.

3.1 Summary of the process of analysis

Figure 3 provides a schematization of the logics used for the analysis of the neo-traditionalist discourse. As we can see from the figure, often some categories belong to two logics. For example, a demand contributes to defining the social logic of discourse. At the same time, when articulated, it has a political counter-hegemonic function. Similarly, the performance of a crisis can be seen as the political logic necessary to disrupt the existing social order. However, when they are constructed as demonizing

‘their way of life’ the symbolic representation of negative dislocation (crisis) is transformed into a horrific fantasy.

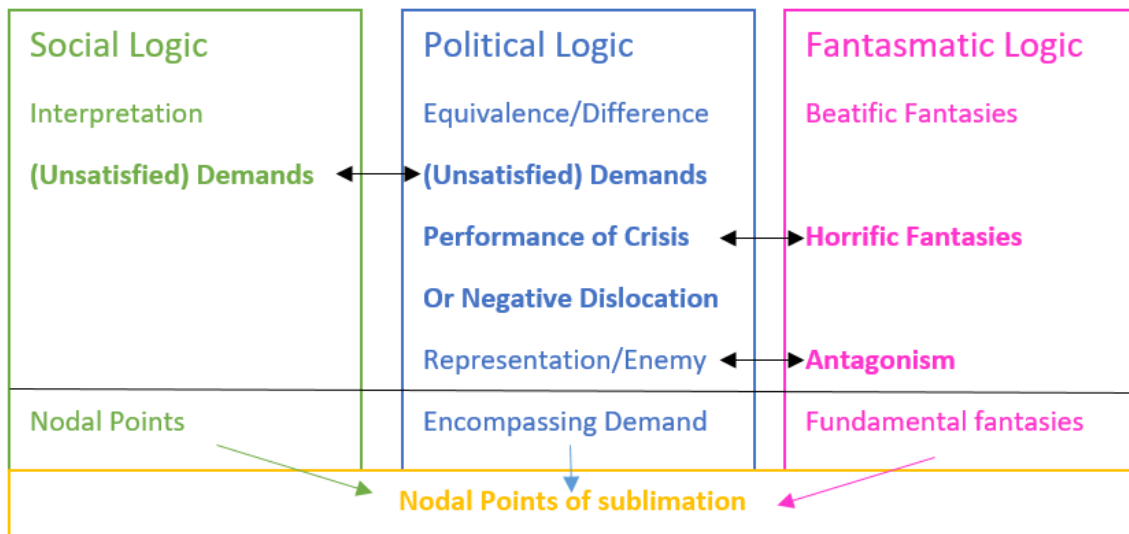


Figure 3. Visual representation of the logics approach applied in the empirical analysis.

Accordingly, the coding procedure during this phase was based on the following schematic process. The next three chapters are based respectively on this division.

Social Logic: as the social refers to the interpretation and the rules of the discourse, codes within this category refer to neo-traditionalist nodal points and demands (and progressive anti-demands) taken singularly. Once a demand was identified within the text, its content, lacking universal, and constitutive outside/antagonist (implicit or explicit) were indicated. For example (from Legutko, 2016):

Hierarchy

- Cumulative demand
- Lacking universal: order and morality (traditional constraints)
- Blocked by: equality, negative freedom, relativism

Political Logic: it refers to the typical discourse theory categories (equivalence, antagonism, dislocation) and, in particular, to Nonhoff’s stratagems. The identification of the political logic often went hand in hand with the identification of single demands. When demands are listed together, are denied by the same ‘enemy’, or share what is missing, they display a political relationship. As articulation is a “practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the

articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105), relationships between demands are clear even when implicit. It is clear, for example, how ‘nation’ and ‘religion’ are equivalent when they present the same antagonistic division in relation to relativism. This also leads to Nonhoff’s second stratagem, namely the *antagonistic division of the discursive space*. In this case, we would encounter an explicit negation of a demand by its opposite (e.g., authority negated by equality) or the contestation of its meaning. In this respect, the performance of crisis signals the political logic as well.

Fantasmatic Logic: fantasies operate at the imaginary level to conceal the impossible symbolization of the social. “All ideological formations, all constructions of political reality, although not in the same degree or in the same way, aspire to eliminate anxiety and loss, to defeat dislocation, in order to achieve a state of fullness” (Stavrakakis, 1999: 82). Therefore, unlike the previous two logics, I did not look for single discursive elements or for their articulations. Beatific and horrific fantasies are visible as narratives, as utopian (or dystopian) stories that foresee an imaginary totality. Their identification can be schematized in the following way:

Beatific fantasy:

- utopian future
- past golden age
- no antagonism and division/unity
- removal of an obstacle to achieve the fantasy

Horrific fantasy:

- dystopian future
- verbs like: ‘stealing’, ‘destroying’, ‘taking away’ etc. referring to the Other
- ‘their perverse way of enjoyment’ and ‘theft of enjoyment’ by an enemy
- destruction of ‘our way of life’ or ‘our symbols’

Fundamental fantasy

- sublimation of a particular object
- normality
- exemplification of ‘our way of life’

PART V

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Chapter 10

Social Logic

The identification of the social logics of neo-traditionalism in Poland contributes to shedding light on the content of this illiberal worldview. Although the research interest lies in studying the hegemonic function of neo-traditionalism, finding its 'rules' is a necessary step to contextualize the 'illiberal turn'. If we consider a discourse as an ensemble of articulated elements, social logics provide an understanding of the patterns of meanings created by articulatory practices. However, as discussed in the chapter on methodology, social logics concern the interpretation of a certain discourse. The substance of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse, as well as its 'naming', is the result of the hermeneutic activity of the researcher. It would be indeed a mistake to argue that neo-traditionalism exists as such. It does not have some essential characteristics that wait to be discovered. Rather, its construction and interpretation result from the observations and intervention conducted by the analyst.

In this respect, interpretive activities are performed in two distinct moments. First, the researcher has the task of disclosing the self-interpretations of the actors involved and their meaning-making activities. This move allows us to understand and explain how neo-traditionalism is seen by neo-traditionalists themselves. Here, it is crucial to neutralize our own prejudices and preconceptions in order to see things from their point of view. As regards illiberalism, we should not fall into a superficial and summary judgment; instead, it is necessary to look beneath the surface of what appears as an aggressive or intolerant discourse. In this sense, the analyst is required to possess 'cognitive empathy', that is:

"The ability to understand another person's predicament as they understand it. A good qualitative study convinces the reader that the author has captured the world as those studied see it, not as the author had seen it ahead of time and not as the author wishes he or she had seen it" (Small, 2018: 3).

Therefore, it is not enough to analyze texts and interpret them. It is also necessary to understand how neo-traditionalist discourse makers see themselves. Second, and as a consequence, the identification of the main nodal points and demands helps to name and define the social logics of the discourse. While the first step is purely interpretive, during this phase the analyst engages retroductively with texts and theory trying to link abstract categories to empirical data.

For social logics serve to describe and characterize discourses (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), at this stage, we are still dealing with the static status of discourse. Indeed, the study of nodal points and demands (and their lack) is limited to comprehending the content of discourse. The analysis of the self-interpretations of the actors involved contributes to uncovering the intellectual foundations of neo-traditionalism without, however, explaining how they discursively emerged. The dynamic moment produced by articulation and antagonism defines instead the political logic of neo-traditionalism and will be discussed in the next chapter.

1. Neo-traditionalist manifestos

To scrutinize the self-interpretations of neo-traditionalist discourse makers, a ‘sample within the sample’ of the text corpus was selected. During the discourse analysis, it emerged how, sometimes, neo-traditionalist discourse makers provided reflections at the metapolitical level. In these cases, they developed a theoretical interpretation of the current cultural conflict (sometimes defined explicitly as *wojna kulturowa*, cultural war). In these texts, they denounce the liberal hegemony and the instability provided by individualism and relativism. At the same time, they praise traditions and traditional values as the answer to ‘liberal chaos’. In other words, they deal, partially or entirely, with the hypothesis of the research, reasoning about it in a direct and explicit manner. This should not come as a surprise and neither does it affect the validity of the research. It instead gives a clear example of the retroductive circle, which consists exactly of the constant exchange between theory and empirical data. The concept of neo-traditionalism discussed in Chapter 3 has been developed and reworked also in light of the following analysis. These texts, which I have significantly renamed and coded as

'neo-traditionalist manifestos' (Table 3), furnished a specific (self-)interpretation of neo-traditionalism in Poland: while in Chapter 3 I provided a generic description of the concept of neo-traditionalism, its ontic manifestation in Poland transpires clearly from the analyzed manifestos.

The corpus of neo-traditionalist manifestos is composed of one or two texts from (almost) each of the selected organic intellectuals.⁶¹ Their selection did not follow specific criteria; in fact, their theoretical orientation appeared clearly during the first round of analysis. These texts presented a programmatic nature that was identified inductively since I did not expect to encounter this kind of theoretical reflection. A closer look during the second cycle of analysis showed that all the texts present one or more

List of neo-traditionalist manifestos
1. Bosak (2020/5)
2. Kaczyński (2019/15)
3. Legutko (2016)
4. Legutko (2020)
5. Lisicki (2019/42)
6. Pospieszalski (2019/31)
7. Pospieszalski (2019/38)
8. Szabelak (2020/9)
9. Winnicki (2020/1)
10. Ziemkiewicz (2019/15)
11. Zybortowicz and Zybortowicz (2017/5)

of the following elements: a criticism of the liberal system of values; the accusation (against liberalism) of destroying authentic traditional values and institutions; the construction of the West as a foreign colonialist enemy; the call for defending/creating a way of life based on traditions. To put it differently, they express in an explicit manner the basic points of the concept of neo-traditionalism previously described.

The main features of the concept of neo-traditionalism are situated along two main lines. The combination of anti-

Table 3. List of neo-traditionalist manifestos.

modernist and anti-colonial attitudes constitutes the core element of neo-traditionalism. Opposing modernity and colonizing cultures, neo-traditionalism praises, in turn, traditions and 'the authentic culture'. In Poland, the antimodernist revolt has been directed against the values promoted by the liberal West, which is pictured as the cultural colonizer. These reflections were first disclosed during the analysis of the texts produced by the philosopher Ryszard Legutko. Since Legutko articulates a philosophical and theoretical critique of liberalism, his considerations provided the building blocks for

reconstructing neo-traditionalism in Poland. In his essay, significantly titled *'What's Wrong With Liberalism?'*, Legutko (2020) blames the disruptive character of liberalism. Modernity, liberalism, and progress go hand in hand as they seek to remove non-liberal and traditional institutions from the public space. By putting the individual at the center of the moral hierarchy, liberalism deprives communities of their functions (e.g., the Catholic Church) as they aim to offer a substantive framework to understand human experience (Legutko, 2020). This aspect captures the modernizing force of liberalism, which aspires to remove the tutelages of the past and donate freedom to individuals. If Friedman (1988. See pages 53-54, Chapter 3) generally describes how modernity represses tradition, Legutko links the abstract dichotomy between modernity and tradition to the political trajectory of the Central and Eastern European Countries towards liberal democracy. The post-communist transition brought with it liberal modernity and its anti-traditional impetus. In this regard, his reflections also hint at the colonizing character of liberalism in Central and Eastern Europe.

“Modernity, we are told, makes it imperative to embrace the liberal system and to reject whatever is not liberal. Whoever thinks otherwise should be placed in the dustbin of history. In no place is this imperative more palpable than in Eastern Europe. Almost immediately after the fall of the old communist regime — whose ideologues also believed in the inexorable laws of history — the peoples of Eastern Europe were told that in order to become free societies they would have to conform to one political model. In order to be free, they had to submit to liberal tutelage. There was to be no nonsense about experimenting, trial and error, drawing lessons from one's own historical experience or traditions. Schools, universities, the media, families — all had to become liberal” (Legutko, 2020).

Rather than being neutral, liberalism is seen as exercising power; it replaces those alternative worldviews drawn from tradition, or any other non-liberal discourse. Thus, a problematic point of liberalism concerns its totalizing character, Legutko (2016) argues. Although liberalism is defined by liberty as it aims to leave people with the highest amount of freedom, at the same time it poses itself as the only rational option. It cannot be claimed that liberalism is substantively empty. Instead, by excluding alternatives and pushing them to the sole private sphere, it produces norms and behaviors. In Foucauldian terms, Legutko (2016:77) defined liberalism as a “doctrine of power”. As noted in the

previous fragment, post-communism liberalism made sure that everything had to become liberal.

“Today, those who write and speak not only face more limitations than they used to, but all the institutions and communities that traditionally stood in the way of this ‘coercion to freedom’ are being dismantled. As in all utopias, so in a liberal democracy it is believed that the irrational residues of the past should be removed” (Legutko, 2016: 67).

The thesis proposed by Legutko regarding the ‘liberalization’ of society supports the hypothesis of this work: neo-traditionalism should be interpreted as a reaction against ‘cultural displacement’. From these initial theoretical arguments, it is possible to draw the main points that led to Polish neo-traditionalism as they appear in its ‘manifestos’: a critical expansion of negative freedom; the colonial role of the West; the necessity of traditions as a response to insecurity and instability. These three points found in the analyzed texts reflect respectively the three core features of neo-traditionalism: anti-modernism, anti-colonialism, and traditionalism.

1.1 Liberalism and modernity: Negative freedom

A key aspect of the Polish counter-hegemonic discourse relates to the ‘cultural displacement’ experienced by a part of Polish society. As claimed in the Introduction, the illiberal and neo-traditionalist turn in Poland is read as a reaction against the long wave of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, which promoted a modernizing worldview and ‘displaced’ traditions. Polish neo-traditionalism maintains that the removal of any restriction to individual free will occurred through the dismissal of traditional bonds and values. In some cases, that has been described as an imposition of freedom. As we know from the dilemma of freedom, expanding the sphere of individual freedom equates to reducing the role of external values and institutions. In this case, individuals are required to decide by themselves, as they cannot count anymore on heteronomy. Therefore, far from being absent, the substantive aspect of liberalism is simply transferred to the hands of individuals. According to neo-traditionalist discourse makers, liberal values liberated people from the yoke of past traditions and communities. Now, individuals can finally decide (and are forced to do so) and their free will can be used. This thesis is clearly exposed in the following words:

“In pursuit of full freedom, the ideologues of liberal democracy are trying to remove all the restrictions that bind the individual. According to them, religion, family, and belonging to a national community are the chains that are set to enslave man today. Since God has been killed, the family has been demolished, and the bond with the nation and its history is considered to be fascism, the only reasonable task is to deify the individual” (Pospieszalski, 2019/31).

In this example, Pospieszalski denounces exactly the imposition of (negative) freedom and individualism that liberalism has brought about. The revolution pursued by ‘the ideologues of liberal democracy’ led to expanding destructive negative freedom. In fact, to donate freedom to individuals, all the rest needs to be demolished. Liberation from family, traditions, and Christianity also means relativizing what is good and what is evil. It obliges people to choose. The central point of liberalism is by definition the emancipation of humankind, which leads to relative morality. However, as the Grand Inquisitor reminds us, humans cannot choose by themselves. His position is clearly espoused by neo-traditionalists:

“How to distinguish good from evil in a period where concepts lose their contours one after another? [...] In the world of liberalism, there is no clear ethical framework in which good and evil do not mix” (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2017/5).

Since axiological individualism means that good and evil do not exist, it exists only what individuals rationally want, we witness a loss of direction; a loss of prejudice, Burke would say. The consequence, in the neo-traditionalist discourse, is just the same as that foreseen by the Grand Inquisitor. Unhappiness and confusion. The uncertainties created by relativism are a primary source for the growth of traditionalism, first, and neo-traditionalist strategies, then. The lack of clarity and the lack of a clear system of values push people to look at traditions (or, in general, at any stable value system) to find a guide and a secure haven in their life. Traditions, communities, and even history serve to conceal relativism and show the direction in people’s lives.

Instead, the liberal revolution created the conditions for individuals to follow their own paths. Individuals are deified (Pospieszalski, 2019/31; Pospieszalski 2019/38) as they become the “final adjudicator[s] of morality” (Carse, 1994: 86). Therefore, the conflict between neo-traditionalism and liberalism reflects the eternal division between freedom and authority embodied by the relationship between Prometheus and the Gods. Although the Titan is not mentioned explicitly in these texts, his presence lingered

during the analysis. Sometimes, even technological progress is described as a symbol of unstoppable modernity that questions the existing state of nature (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2018/26). In this light, Prometheus is the sublimated hero of liberal thinking. The man without any external rule, norm, and constraint other than his own. The liberation carried out by Prometheus/liberalism freed people also from nature and natural law. While Prometheus liberated humankind, giving them fire and technology, neo-traditionalists complain about the destruction of the boundaries imposed by nature. Here, the reference to gender is clear and intuitive. Often, the fight of LGBT activists is portrayed as the final modernist struggle to liberate individuals from the last chains that harness humanity: those given by nature and biology. The intellectual roots of neo-traditionalism, however, go deeper than a visible political issue as the actual clash of the cultural war is about the sources of normativity and morality. LGBT issues are often used in political debates for they can easily mobilize the electorate, from both sides. Nevertheless, the question is another one: Is morality defined by nature or by men?

“The whole cultural war that has been waged for decades by left-wing radicals for the souls of societies is precisely about this: the destruction of the concept of nature. The denial of the natural division into sexes and its replacement with the free choice of the individual” (Lisicki, 2019/42).

From these words, it could be argued that the key aspect of the cultural war concerns the limits of human agency and where they should be set. Thus, the previous question can be formulated again in these terms: To what extent can men transcend the limitations imposed by nature, religion, or society? Who has the right and legitimacy to create morality: nature or humans? Is morality given by God, or should morality result from individual desires? All these questions underlie the cleavage between nature vs. individualism, tradition vs. modernity that characterize the Polish cultural war, as pictured by neo-traditionalist discourse makers. In this light, the cultural war and the dilemma of freedom function through the same mechanism. The more men are emancipated; the more traditions disappear. The more traditions define behaviors and morality; the more men lose their individual freedom. The real clash regards the role of freedom and the provider of rules and norms. Although the Polish cultural war is constructed around visible fields of battle performed as a crisis (e.g., abortion,

multiculturalism, the role of the Church. See next Chapter), its roots are found in the different answers to these questions. The consolation (and, at the same time, the horrific fantasy) for neo-traditionalists is that at the end of the liberal path there can be only “chaos, decay, and pain”, they argue. Like it happened in the West, as it happened to Prometheus Bound.

“The fact that these are not only mere delusions and rhetorical figures is shown by examples of other Western countries that have embarked on this terrible path. There is no turning back. And what is easy to see, there is no happiness at the end of it, but chaos, decay, and pain. This is how nature takes revenge on a man who wants to submit it to his will”. (Lisicki, 2019/42).

1.2. Liberalism and modernity: The Western colonizers

Besides anti-modernism, the second key element of neo-traditionalism is anti-colonialism. It was argued previously that in Central and Eastern Europe the cultural colonizer has been identified by neo-traditionalists in the liberal West. The neo-traditionalist counter-revolution involves an anti-colonial narrative since it accuses the liberal Western elite of attacking the authentic European civilization rooted in Christianity and imposing its borderless, nationless, and relativist worldview. If the bone of contention of the cultural war revolves around the concept of freedom, its political dispute deals with the signification of the true European Civilization. According to neo-traditionalists, liberal revolutionaries have transformed Europe and its European values. Today, Western Europe, and the Western civilization in general, has definitively lost the war against the modernizers of morality. Poland and so other nations in the region managed to preserve their national authenticity thanks to the communist bubble in which they lived for more than 40 years. Poland has not yet capitulated to modernity just because “[is] suffering from liberalism for too little” (Szabelak, 2020/9).

However, liberal modernity has finally arrived at the borders of Poland and its Western agents are trying to infiltrate the country with their worldview. This picture is delineated clearly in the neo-traditionalist manifestos, where the West (or the European Union) is explicitly portrayed as a cultural colonizer. They accuse the liberal world, led by the United States and the EU, of imposing its economic and cultural power on

peripheral countries. In name of progress, liberals push their agenda condemning Poland for not being 'progressive' enough in terms of human rights (Bosak, 2020/12; Lisicki, 2019/42; Winnicki, 2020/1). The Western colonial mentality of the XIX century never disappeared; today, the West disseminates its ideological colonization to those countries that are still attached to traditions. The "poison" that the Anglo-Saxon civilization spread throughout the world during its imperialist history is now coming to Poland.

"This poison, which does not suit our nation at all, is made of 'human rights', forced on us by the Western world (led by organizations such as Amnesty International), including abortion and 'gay rights'. The West, overwhelmed by its intolerant past, wants to impose "tolerance" on us, and is unable to see that it could learn it from us [...]. The "gentlemen" from Washington, Brussels, and Berlin want to teach us how to live. Never." (Szabelak, 2020/9).

In this case, cultural colonialism is described from its proactive side as the West seeks to impose its worldview on Poland. However, this is only part of the story. Cultural colonialism, in fact, should not be seen as an imposition by force. Here, references to Gramsci and cultural hegemony are not rare. Liberalism has penetrated Poland through a discursive change. European Integration marked a fundamental step as the Central and Eastern European countries found themselves in a subordinate position *vis-à-vis* their Western counterparts also in terms of ideas. Often, the post-communist elite is described as having succumbed to the ideology from the West. After decades of communism, Western Europe represented *the* fantasy of freedom. Its way of life was pursued as something inherently better to be achieved.

"The East Europeans were supposed to follow in their [EU and American] footsteps. The metaphors of catching up and a race were often used to describe the situation of the societies that joined the world of liberal democracy: "they" were somewhere in front of "us," rushing fast forward, while we remained in the back. [...] [T]he deeper wisdom was to copy and to imitate. The more we copied and imitated, the more we were glad of ourselves. Institutions, education, customs, law, media, language, almost everything became all of a sudden imperfect copies of the originals that were in the line of progress ahead of us". (Legutko, 2016: 43).

Cultural colonialism, therefore, is understood in Gramscian terms. The Western model flowed to Poland and other former communist countries, fostered by its fantasmatic attractiveness. The accusation made by neo-traditionalist organic

intellectuals is that the 'Western dream' has replaced 'the authentic way of life'. As in a typical neo-traditionalist narrative, the model of life of the Western modernizers has swiped off genuine traditions. In this way, liberalism has conquered the hearts and souls of a large part of Polish society that has forgotten its roots: "the government of souls belongs to the liberal left", Lisicki (2017/29) moans. Cultural colonialism is accompanied by a kind of inferiority complex, which Ziemkiewicz (2019/15) has defined as *oikophobia*, using Roger Scruton's concept: the refusal of the own culture and homeland. The internal liberal elite in Poland is accused of suffering from a post-colonial syndrome. They are deemed to hate everything which is Polish (the so-called pedagogy of shame, *pedagogika wstydu*), while praising everything which is foreign and modern. As a consequence, Western colonialism, supported by internal agents, i.e. the Polish liberal elite, is responsible for breaking traditionalist Polishness. Like the communist elite allowed the Soviets to penetrate the country, the liberal elite today promotes a foreign way of life based on illusory freedom. As discussed later in the thesis, two fundamental fantasies face each other: one looks at Western Europe as a model of (negative) freedom; the other narrates the golden era of Poland where traditions, national culture, and Christianity were respected and constituted the core of the country. The anti-modernist and anti-colonial souls of neo-traditionalism are synthesized in the words of Robert Winnicki (2020/1) at the 2020 Marsz Niepodległości:

"Today, the left offers you freedom. What is this freedom? This freedom says that you just have to drink, take drugs, smoke, and have free sex. This is all the freedom that the left can offer you. Today I am appealing to all young people in Poland for a true rebellion. Rebellion in the name of responsibility, rebellion in the name of values, rebellion in the name of the national community. [...] Today, the face of rebellion is patriotism, tradition, and identity. This is the face of the rebellion against the modern world, against this anti-culture, against this destruction, and against the Civilization of Death. [...] We do not want to follow their wrong path [of the West], the path of multiculturalism, the path of mass immigration, the path of cultural wildness and devastation. No, today we must make it clear: we do not share the same world of values with the West and we do not have to share the same world of values with it".

In these words, the refusal of the modern world is coterminous with the refusal of liberal freedom and Western values. The anti-modernist and anti-colonial narrations of neo-traditionalism are intertwined. Modern values and the West are rejected altogether in the name of a different cultural model based on the wisdom of traditions.

Winnicki denounces both negative freedom and the West as corrupting Poland. At the same time, we can finally find here the answer to disruptive modernity: tradition.

1.3 From chaos to traditions

The role of traditions as a lifebuoy in the sea of uncertainties of modernity has been widely discussed in the literature. To briefly summarize, traditions provide stability in a situation of insecurity. As negative freedom grows, traditions work as a point of reference in people's lives. In Polish neo-traditionalism, this interpretation of traditions is often explicitly expressed. Although it may be repetitive, it is notable to see how the words of Burke, Scruton, and other conservative thinkers resonate in the words of Krzysztof Bosak, Ryszard Legutko, or Andrzej and Katarzyna Zybertowicz. In an interview conducted during his presidential campaign, the former put out a conservative manifesto emphasizing the importance of traditions to find the right path in the modern world.

“No one of us is as wise as an individual and as intelligent as to solve all the problems of humanity in our short lives. So, we need a baggage of knowledge and experience from previous generations. And tradition is a method of transferring the baggage of knowledge and experience of previous generations, which makes our life easier, more civilized, and the forms of our behavior nobler, less primitive. And this should be the role of tradition [...]. I don't just mean traditions at the level of national costumes [...]. I mean the forms of behavior that we pass on to children, the values that we teach children [...]. At the moment, in my opinion, especially in the Western world, the cultural, intellectual and media mainstream claim that everything old is useless, and everything new is ok.” (Bosak, 2020/5).

These words do not tell us anything new about the role of traditions. However, what is interesting is to see how neo-traditionalist discourse makers (a prominent national politician in this case) propagate conservative and neo-traditionalist ideas.⁶² It shows the intellectual foundations of neo-traditionalism around which their counter-hegemonic project is constructed. That would confirm the hypothesis that neo-traditionalism is an attempt to promote a discursive shift. The praise of the role of traditions against the modern West ‘invites’ people to adhere to their discourse and affect, at least in their aspirations, the common sense of society. Whether the neo-

traditionalist strategy is effective in Poland is, indeed, beyond my research interest. Instead, observing these neo-traditionalist patterns demonstrates the existence of a discursive alternative to liberalism in a way that overlaps the theoretical discussion.

To go a little deeper into the particularity of traditions in the Polish context, they are often defined by Christianity. At this level of discussion, however, I am not interested in their content;⁶³ it is their function to be essential. Andrzej and Katarzyna Zybertowicz (2017/5) underline how Christianity works as an anchor that defends Poland from the novelties brought by liberal values and the chaos of modernity. Since Europe is drifting and liberal democracy does not present any clear ethical framework (but an individualist one), traditions and religion show the path and help the lost people of the modern era to cope with changes and uncertainty. They tell people what is right and what is wrong. In this sense, traditions are intertwined with culture, since culture defines the way we behave. Therefore, in neo-traditionalism, cultural models are not simply items people can pick like in a supermarket. The national culture should be unified and provide a model to follow. It should give moral imperatives that define the cultural pattern of a country (Bosak, 2020/5).

2. Nodal Points of Polish neo-traditionalism

The 'neo-traditionalist manifestos' accurately describe the kernel of the Polish cultural war. Traditions occupy a primary role in the neo-traditionalist discourse, in contrast with negative freedom and emancipation. However, as explained by Shils (1958) and accepted by Bosak (2020/5), traditions do not necessarily refer to traditional rituals and costumes. Rather, they are related to norms of behaviors, values, and cultural codes. To discursively reconstruct the role of 'traditions' (understood in this peculiar sense) and their signification in contemporary Poland, it is necessary to look at the nodal points of the neo-traditionalist discourse. Since nodal points fix meanings and are the primary categories for revealing the 'rules' of a discourse, their identification makes possible to characterize cultural illiberalism in Poland. Like the analysis of the neo-traditionalist manifestos, also this process is interpretive. However, while the former referred to the self-interpretation of the actors involved, now the intervention of the researcher is more

intrusive. Finding and analyzing nodal points within the text corpus is the result of my analytical choices. Yet, they have been made against the background of the previous discussions. Using the terminology of the logics approach, the nodal points determine the social logics of neo-traditionalism and how it manifests itself in the discursive arena.

Often, the illiberal counter-revolution is analyzed through the concept of 'populism' to the extent that the illiberal right is defined as populist by default. This *reductio ad populismum* fails to capture the bigger picture of illiberalism, namely the non-liberal attempt to reverse the post-1989 order in its entirety (Zielonka, 2018). This reductive interpretation of illiberalism does not take into consideration the clash of worldviews that takes place on several occasions and which is instead the main interest of this research. The frequent appeal to the people and the criticism against the elite suggest that a populist dimension is certainly present in the current 'illiberal turn'. However, the conflation of populism with other concepts made lose sight of the complexity of illiberal discourses. In this way, the social logics of illiberal discourses are usually oversimplified into a single populist logic, sacrificing any other possible interpretation. Nativist or nationalist aspects, for example, are often overlooked and reduced to facets of populism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017).

Similarly, the empirical analysis of neo-traditionalism in Poland has shown a clear populist dimension, which emphasizes the role of ordinary people against the 'enlightened elite' in Brussels or the liberal circles of Warsaw (Kaczyński, 2019/17; Lisicki, 2017/25; Ziemkiewicz, 2016/6). This logic deals with the anti-colonial aspect of Polish neo-traditionalism linking 'the people' with the 'authentic culture'. However, this is not the only 'rule' of neo-traditionalism, nor is it the most significant. Indeed, I have identified three main social logics governing the neo-traditionalist discourse: a populist logic, a nationalist logic, and a traditionalist logic. They are based, respectively, on three main nodal points: people (Poles), nation (Poland), and tradition (based on Christianity and Polishness). The three logics define what Polish neo-traditionalism is about and what its hegemonic goal is, namely, the aspiration to define the whole society according to these nodal points as they are signified in a 'traditionalist way'. The post-1989 order is accused to promote a multicultural society and a supranational political organization (against the national community), governed by liberal technocrats and progressive

leftists (against the people), and based on the Western model of values endorsing relativism and individualism (against Christian values and Polish communitarian traditions). Refusing the liberal system, Polish neo-traditionalism performs a discursive shift toward illiberalism to redefine the core aspects of the political community. In general, based on the discourse theoretical model developed by De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017: 312) for the conceptualization of discourses, the analysis searched for three main categories related to the three nodal points: the subject position offered, the constitutive outside, and the orientation of relation between nodal points and constitutive outsides. At the end of the analysis, Table 4 schematizes these findings.

2.1 The populist, nationalist, and traditionalist logics of neo-traditionalism

The three logics have been identified following the external concepts exposed in Chapter 3. Populism, nationalism, and traditionalism emphasize, respectively, the construction of the people against the elite, the importance of the sovereign nation, and the role of traditions as guiding principles. However, one of the main problems during the analysis concerned the scope of these concepts. Indeed, it was necessary not to be 'dragged' by them. The risk was to drift from the actual object of analysis (the neo-traditionalist discourse) and include discursive elements that are unrelated to the research interest. The members of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition in fact participate in several other discourse coalitions. Thus, it has been necessary to discern their 'neo-traditionalist productions' from other discourses. For example, populism has relevance for the analysis as long as it can be included within the neo-traditionalist framework; a purely anti-politics 'thin populism', instead, would not have any connection with neo-traditionalism. Similarly, the nodal point 'nation' is (relatively) irrelevant when it refers to national power politics or the need to increase military expenses.⁶⁴ On the contrary, it can be ascribed to neo-traditionalism when its meaning is connected to national values. In this case, the nation is portrayed as a community that preserves the authentic national culture.

The people

Following this premise, the populist logic has been included as a rule of the neo-traditionalist discourse to underline the vertical orientation of the latter (against the elite/colonizers) and the signification of the signifier 'the people' as culturally defined. Together with the nationalist logic, neo-traditionalist populism captures the anti-colonial character of the discourse. Thus, we can talk of a populist logic of neo-traditionalism when populism meets these criteria. Furthermore, 'the people' is not just one of the demands of neo-traditionalism. The signifier 'the people' (or 'Poles') is considered one of the main nodal points, as its particularity is elevated to represent the hegemonic horizon of neo-traditionalism. To use Nonhoff's words, 'the people' is an encompassing demand that can cover the universal lack of neo-traditionalism. 'The people' (along with the signifiers 'nation' and 'tradition') plays the function of *representation* of the discourse itself.⁶⁵

Different approaches to populism agree on two characteristics: the undecidability of the meaning of 'the people' and the anti-elitist direction of the appeal to 'the people'. In Mudde (2004), people are defined according to the 'thick ideology' that supports 'thin populism'. In Laclau (2005a), instead, 'the people' is an empty signifier whose definition is clearly undefined. However, regardless of the approach used and notwithstanding the differences between them, the empirical manifestations of populism remain similar, since the empty meaning of 'the people' is filled positively by other discursive elements/ideologies, and negatively by their antagonistic relationship with the elite (Melito, 2022). Consequently, a crucial operation to study and analyze any populism concerns the reconstruction of the signifier 'the people' to discern who belongs to them and who is against them. In short, which subject position is offered, and who its constitutive outside is.

Who are the people and their enemies in the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse? The first move to construct the rules of the populist logic in Polish neo-traditionalism can be taken by looking at the political (Mouffe, 2005) and cultural displacement theses (Melito, 2021a). The appeal to 'the people' interpellates those excluded from democracy, whose voices are not heard by the establishment. It finds strength as a

promise of regaining people's sovereignty since the post-1989 order led to a convergence to the political center and to liberal ideals, which depoliticized public space.

"It was supposed to be a system that had the appearance of democracy but, in fact [...] it was not democratic. Democracy is that system that needs to conform to several conditions – not only to the legal structure. One of these conditions is that there are competitive elites. However, in that system, there was to be only one elite and all those who tried to compete with it and present different ideas were treated with various offensive phrases. They were eliminated, at least in the sphere of public awareness" (Kaczyński, 2019/35).

This narrative describes 'the people' as implicitly excluded from the political. It claims that the Polish people were deprived of their sovereignty since the elite offered only one platform to choose from and failed to deliver. Alternative political views were excluded from public discourse and, Kaczyński argues, people remained unrepresented.

The distance between people and the elite, however, does not simply touch on economic or political failures. The new system is deemed to have stolen the traditionalist way of 'enjoyment'; it corrupted people's way of life. Therefore, the populist aspect of neo-traditionalism found an advantageous momentum due to, recalling Gramsci (1975), a failure to deliver (political displacement) and an 'imposition' of liberal values (cultural displacement). What the liberal elite failed to deliver - what harmed people's sovereignty - is ontological security. To be more precise, neo-traditionalists maintain that Poles could not choose a political elite that promoted traditional values, those stable values offering a sense of security and order. The dominant liberal elite is accused of having endorsed a worldview that did not meet the demands of true Poles, true people. Multiculturalism, globalization, and cultural changes are portrayed instead as agents of insecurity. They displaced the stability and security offered by traditions, providing room for a neo-traditionalist and populist reaction. If the post-communist elite brought uncertainty to that sector of society that did not benefit from it,⁶⁶ neo-traditionalist populism is a scream for regaining sovereignty and setting again the boundaries of safety, whether physical or ontological. The intimate link between a practical issue (migrant crisis) and the abstract uncertainty produced by cultural changes is described by Andrzej Zybertowicz (2018/21) as a propeller of the call for popular sovereignty typical of populism.

“Populism is generally perceived as an anti-democratic movement. But perhaps in recent years in Europe, the so-called populist reaction is precisely the expression of faith in the possibility of rebuilding politics through the election. Undoubtedly, this is what a large (dominant?) part of the electorate of Law and Justice thinks. Isn't the uncertainty brought about by the excessively rapid effects of technological development, the unexpectedly extensive effects of globalization and cultural changes, trying to run, like a steamroller, over tradition, over the respect for moral rules and authorities, also behind the populist response to migration? Perhaps the migration shock should be calmly read as a warning against the naive belief in the rationality of the policies of the enlightened elites of the West?”

The fragment clearly links the displacement of the political (to be rebuilt through election) to cultural displacement (cultural changes and globalization advocated by the enlightened Western elites trying to break up with tradition and social morality). There is a distance between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’. However, this distance is not just a moral distance between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’, as Mudde (2004) would put it. It is, first of all, a cultural distance: Poles (truly Poles, of course) are those attached to Polish traditions and the Polish nation. The elite (the wrong foreign-guided elite) is instead globalized, cosmopolitan, and detached from national values. Since the post-communist establishment has ideologically imposed what is perceived as a foreign worldview, the populist reaction arises as a refusal of their relativism in name of the certainties provided by traditions – the authentic culture. What people want, neo-traditionalist populism argues, is a cultural evolution based on the natural development of the national culture, not a revolution of values.

“Due to the lack of a sense of political agency, citizens began to look at ‘those who speak as we do’ and also share similar values characterizing their worldview. The elite, painfully rational, cosmopolitan, often mocking traditional values, deluded themselves that they would manage to eradicate the identitarian and religious tendencies of the ‘dark people’ through liberal evangelization in the spirit of cosmopolitanism, hedonism and ‘pedagogy of shame’ [...]. The pendulum that swung to the left-liberal side is bouncing back. People instinctively feel that the national community is important and that traditional culture is under fire from both the left-liberal mainstream and culturally alien immigrants [...]. People want cultural evolution, not revolution” (Adamus, 2020/7).

The antagonistic division between ‘traditional people’ and ‘globalized elite’ is, in this sense, a cultural division. It points to the vertical orientation of neo-traditionalist populism that pits ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’, hinting at the national and traditional

culture of the people against the foreign and modernizing values of the liberal establishment. This division reflects the anti-colonial cleavage narrated in the neo-traditionalist manifestos where 'cultural colonizers' (both left-liberal mainstream and immigrants) function as the constitutive outside of 'the people'.

In addition, the positive content of 'the people' is also thickened by the neo-traditionalist worldview or, to put it in Laclaudian terms, the nodal point is articulated with other neo-traditionalist demands. Two main connected themes were found in the text corpus that help define 'the people'. First, people are described as ordinary hard-working Poles, sometimes emphasizing their origins in the countryside in contrast with the citizens of large cities, exemplified by the liberal and Westernized capital Warsaw (for example, in Nalaskowski, 2017/1). Yet, the emphasis posed on the rural origins of the people does not point to a mere geographical distinction. The Polish countryside is pictured as the custodian of Polish values, the Heartland (Taggart, 2000) of the country, the source of true Polishness (Kaczyński, 2019/5). The second aspect relates to the nature of 'the people', which refers to their traditionalist thinking. True Poles are those who follow traditions and the Catholic religion, often described using the expression *Polak-katolik*.⁶⁷ They are attached to their national culture and do typical 'Polish things'. Obviously, defining what is exactly a 'Polish thing' is a fantasy, rather than actual behavior. A fantasy that pictures what is traditionally Polish as normal and ordinary. Hence, ordinary people are discursively constructed as normal people, that is Catholic people that care about their nation. They represent the locus of common sense in contrariety to the absence of common sense of the elite (for example, Bosak, 2020/4; Lisicki, 2019/45; Sakiewicz, 2019/14; Zybertowicz, 2020/40): "Poles have more common sense than the elite would like to attribute to them" (Lisicki, 2015/10).

The emphasis on common sense implies the hegemonic function of 'the people'. Common sense resides among the people; on the contrary, the elite is described to be imbued with Western progressive ideology. As will be discussed in Chapter 12, this division is based on the idea of normality. People are pictured as normal, doing normal things, and having normal thoughts. Often, ironically, they describe themselves as the obscurantist part of Poland (*ciemnogród*), still bound to traditions and against modernity. Yet, this self-irony points to the distance from the elite. Being part of the

ciemnogród indicates their belonging to national culture; the Polish liberal elite instead is made of entrepreneurs “who called their business very European, with an English word in the name” and despise poor ignorant Poles (*bieda-Polak*. Ziemkiewicz, 2016/6). This appeal to the people – flaunting low culture – reminds Ostiguy’s (2017) definition of populism. It creates a cultural distance between the people, poor and ignorant but attached to national culture, and the enlightened elite, rich and educated, whose values, however, are foreign and westernized. Rather than something to be ashamed of, their simplicity is praised, since traditional values are simple, have always existed, and are just based on what is considered normal. In the neo-traditionalist narrative, ordinary hard-working Poles do not care about ideological trends. They follow common sense and believe in what has already been checked in our civilization (Bosak, 2020/4). The neo-traditionalist character of ‘the people’ is here clear. People are constructed as looking at traditions since they provide security; they look at ‘normality’ since normality provides a path to follow. Modernizing ideologies belong instead to the elite and only cause uncertainty. While “common sense is among ordinary people”, the social and political elite follows blindly ideological trends that are absurd compared to the logical thinking of ordinary people (Bosak, 2020/13). Common sense, the real one, is attributed to Poles that think that way. It does not matter that not every Pole is against multiculturalism, refugees, LGBT rights, secularization. The signifier ‘Poles’ is signified in opposition to the elite who, instead, want to impose their agenda on Poland.

In conclusion, the signifier ‘the people’ emerges in the neo-traditionalist discourse as the expression of traditional morality and as a community of shared values. While the ‘modern man’ can choose his morality, and his individuality is foregrounded, the people and their *common* sense in neo-traditionalism indicate that they are more than a sum of individuals. They belong to the same *community*; more precisely, the national community.

The Nation

‘The nation’ (signified as a national community based on national values and culture) is the second nodal point of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse. As mentioned above,

in neo-traditionalism, the signifier 'nation' refers to a community that shares the same cultural framework. Although the nodal points of the populist and nationalist logics differ, their meaning is intertwined as a result of articulation. People (Poles) are constructed in conjunction with the nation (Poland): they constitute a community, which is defined as delimited by cultural national boundaries. In this regard, the interests of the majority of Poles and Poland are equivalent (Kaczyński, 2019/25). Beneath this equivalence, however, we can observe a deeper connection between the populist and nationalist logics of neo-traditionalism: in both cases, the signifiers 'the people' and 'the nation' are signified as a collective entity. In both cases, 'the people' and 'the nation' transcend the individual. In other words, they are broader categories that incorporate the individual. In this sense, the role of individuals is understood as serving the community and preserving its values (Pospieszalski, 2015/5). Neo-traditionalist populism and neo-traditionalist nationalism create a safe environment within the stable limits of the community; they offer a sense of belonging to their insecure members to cope with the challenges brought by modernity and individualism. Thus, the cleavage between emancipation and tradition returns also in the context of the nation. Nations and communities are portrayed as another target of the steamroller of progress, which pictures them as a source of oppression (Legutko, 2016; Lisicki, 2018/ 33; Pospieszalski, 2018/27).

"How Poland is changing under the rule of [PiS] is of great interest and concern to the EU elite. We are creating an alternative to the vision of the world without religion, without nations, without patriotism, without the family as the backbone of the social fabric, going against the tide of leftist-liberal political correctness [...]. If [PiS] loses its challenge, the globalist steamroller, the steamroller of demoliberal convulsions, although twisted, may lead to a situation in which there will be no further chance for the reconstitution of the Polish nation. The project of the Union, which will "modernize" Poland through depolonization and de-Christianization, may win. Therefore, without the success of [PiS], not only will there be no Polish nation, but perhaps even a nation-building social fabric capable of another drastic change" (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2018/15).

If 'the steamroller of progress' aims to destroy communities and traditions, 'the nation' is constructed as the protector of the bonds and ties between its members, keeping together the national social fabric. It provides them with the ethical framework necessary to survive as a community (Zybertowicz, 2019/35). Therefore, the neo-

traditionalist nation is idealized as a *Gemeinschaft* where the members share the same system of values, go in the same direction, and work in function of a common interest. Like the signification of 'the people, 'the nation' is also culturally defined and the subject position offered relates to a shared way of life.

If 'the nation' and 'the people' present similarities in terms of their content (they are both represented as communities), their main difference concerns their orientation in relation to their constitutive outsides. While the populist logic indicates the vertical division between 'the people' and 'the elite', nationalism typically relies on a horizontal relationship between the nodal point (nation) and its constitutive outside (non-members of the nation). In the context of neo-traditionalism, the former is negated vertically by the elite/colonizers; the latter is denied horizontally by other nations/foreign cultures. Yet, the horizontal discursive orientation of the nation requires further scrutiny: what is the role of the neo-traditionalist nation *vis-à-vis* other nations and cultures? Here, we move to a slippery slope. Certainly, the degree of nationalism between different discourse makers varies considerably. In addition, they often distinguish between nationalism and patriotism, whose semantic difference in the Polish context is rather a matter of positioning along the political spectrum. However, when the nation is constructed as a cultural community, it is possible to find a common thread that highlights the necessity of protecting national values and culture within the borders of the countries. This narrative involves an ethno-pluralist view, typical of radical right discourses. Although it does not necessarily claim the superiority of Polish national culture over others, ethno-pluralism stresses the primacy of national culture within the state, refusing multicultural models of coexistence. According to Polish neo-traditionalism, Polish culture (the one that pre-existed globalization) should prevail over other cultures within Poland, in contrast with multiculturalism where different lifestyles, religions, and values are given the same dignity, as long as they do not clash with the liberal framework. As Bosak argues (2016/1), "there is nothing wrong with the diversity of cultures. However, each country has its leading culture, its national culture. And it should have the position it deserves: the position of the dominant culture".

Therefore, the relationship between different cultures within Poland should be hierarchical, according to neo-traditionalists. At the top of the pyramid, we find

'Polishness', the national culture, while other cultures are tolerated. However, as argued already, the issue of migrants is only an empirical manifestation of the cultural war which resides instead in the conflict between worldviews. Other cultures do not entail just foreign cultures, say Islamic culture. Also the liberal worldview is considered to be alien to Poland, even though several Poles share it. Thus, in neo-traditionalism, traditional Polishness prevails over other 'ways of life' that are not considered truly Polish, regardless of their geographic origin. It is the case of the lifestyle promoted by the LGBT community. Notwithstanding that there exists a community of Polish LGBT activists, their worldview is still viewed as foreign, not belonging to the tradition of the country. At best, their worldview is tolerated, not accepted as part of the national heritage.⁶⁸ Here, it is interesting to see how Jarosław Kaczyński, the other political leader within the sample of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition, espouses the same ethno-pluralist thesis. The criticism, this time, is against alternative models of family that do not belong to Polish tradition.

"Do not believe that it is the case that we must adopt all these terrible norms in order to achieve the Western European level [...]. We don't have to be the same. We can achieve [wealth] while maintaining our beautiful tradition, our way of life and, above all, the foundation of this life, which is the family. The foundation of life and future. And I am talking about a family that consists [...] of a woman and a man and children. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the norm we defend. And we leave two daddies or two moms to those who want it. Tolerance yes, we are tolerant [...]. But one thing is tolerance, another thing is affirmation. Tolerance, yes, because it is also a beautiful Polish tradition, but affirmation – no!" (Kaczyński, 2019/38).

Similarly, Bosak (2020/5) argues in favor of the necessity of perpetuating the national *ethos* based on traditions, while progressive tendencies, including the LGBT worldview as he defines it, are pursuing a deep cultural change within the country. Therefore, the ethno-pluralist aspect of neo-traditionalism reveals that the constitutive outsides of the nation are not simply other nations, other religions, or other cultures. Rather, the enemy is identified in those foreign and non-authentic ideologies that threaten the very idea of nation and national community; in this particular case, the idea of the Polish nation. Thus, the constitutive outside consists of those different worldviews within or outside the country that aim to change the idealized national way of life. In this sense, it follows the same mechanism of post-colonial neo-traditionalism where the

culture of colonizers is described as the enemy. From this perspective, the nation becomes the emblem of national culture; the guarantee of its survival. The nation and the flag function as representatives of the system of values embraced and promoted by neo-traditionalist discourse makers as opposed to the progressive worldview embodied by, for example, the rainbow flag. “We do not have to try to be like those who are there in the West; we do not have to stand under the rainbow flag, we can stand under the white and red flag – this is our program” (Kaczyński, 2019/1). Besides the evocative tone used to catch his audience, this citation tells us more than a mere accusation of the LGBT community. The rainbow flag symbolizes the liberal ideology in the West and ‘their way of life’; on the contrary, the red and white flag symbolizes not only the nation, but all the values connected to its traditionalist signification.

To complete this picture, the ideological constitutive outside of neo-traditionalist nationalism is often symbolized as a concrete enemy. As the nation plays a prominent role in the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse, those political agents that want to dilute the idea of sovereign nations in the name of supranational and globalizing projects constitute the symbolic construction of the enemy. In this case, the anti-national agenda promoted by the cosmopolitan elite and supranational organizations becomes the main culprit. Neo-traditionalist actors oppose the European Union (at least its ideological background) as it tries to reduce the sovereignty of nations by imposing a Pan-European ideology (Lisicki, 2018/36; Sakiewicz, 2019/14). Their contestation is directed against the attempt to displace the signifier ‘nation’ and ‘sovereignty’ proclaimed by the enemies of sovereign nations. Instead, neo-traditionalists praise the constitution of a Europe of Nations, where the original national community can preserve its ‘authentic way of life’. Poland occupies a special position in Europe as it is often portrayed as the only country where the authentic Western civilization has not been defeated yet by the liberal revolution:

“Poland is the largest country in Europe, where a successful leftist moral revolution has not yet been carried out. This is the last, and certainly the biggest bastion of the old Western civilization, that has not surrendered yet to the taming of feminism, genderism, multiculturalism, and anti-racism” (Lisicki, 2017/26).

Significantly, Lisicki talks of the ‘taming’ that the leftist revolution has carried out in the European nations, disrupting the old Western civilization. Polish (and national) sovereignty is a crucial neo-traditionalist demand since it calls for the self-determination of national values. Brussels and the EU, as well as the oikophobic Polish liberal elite, are pictured as interfering actors that seek to limit national sovereignty and, as a consequence, displace national values: “Because breaking Poland from the inside - in terms of customs, religion, media - is the main goal of our native and foreign ‘Europeans’” (Nalaskowski, 2018/16). Europe and Europeans (those corrupted by foreign ideologies) are described as alien to the country and a threat to Polish values; they play the same role as the colonial powers did in Africa or the Pacific. In this scenario, the horizontal division between the Polish nation and anti-national actors is just another layer of the cultural war between neo-traditionalism and liberalism.

These examples say that the primacy of national culture can be extended over other ‘ways of life’. Protecting the nation is a synonym for protecting those values attached to the idea of national culture. However, the emphasis posed on the neo-traditionalist construction of the nation as a culture-based national community raises a question. Does that mean that alternatively a national community cannot be constructed in liberal terms? Or, that national culture must necessarily be signified as a traditional culture? Of course, it is possible to articulate the nation and national culture in different terms. To understand the exclusionary limits of the Polish national community built by neo-traditionalist discourse makers, it is necessary to look at the signification of their last nodal point: tradition.

Tradition

Arguably, ‘tradition’ is the most important nodal point of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse since it works as the primary source of meanings, ‘thickening’ both ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’. If ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ represent the community, tradition is the glue that binds the members of the national community.

The literature on traditionalism defines tradition in opposition to modernity. Modernity, “which is defined from this perspective as a universe emptied of meaning,

peopled by alienated individuals dominated by the structures of *Gesellschaft*" (Friedman, 1988: 449) requires the constant disruption of past traditions and any predetermined value. Communities, essentialist natural law, and religion harness individuals in rigid schemes, which hampers their free choice. In the previous interpretive analysis, the enemies of communities (like the people and the nation) were found in the cosmopolitan and anti-national sentiments promoted by the Western elite. The discursive constructions of 'the people' and 'the nation' are an attempt to resist the alienating structures of *Gesellschaft*. They aim to provide again that sense of belonging lost with the modernizing atomization of society. The nodal point 'tradition', instead, seeks to restore the wisdom of the past, a victim of liberalism's axiological individualism. At any rate, the lack in both cases (disruption of communities and disruption of traditions) is the same: lack of order and stability; lack of a perpetual center of gravity that would fix meanings indefinitely. Positively, if communities provide security by offering *common* common sense, traditions give meaning and prejudice.

The analysis of the meaning of tradition did not require a profound interpretive process, since the role of traditions as an ordering principle is explicit in Polish neo-traditionalism. All that remains is to describe the content of the traditionalist logic. Significantly, the following reflections were expressed by a member of a youth organization where the feeling of precariousness is a frequent theme as well as the search for stability in religion or nationalism.

"So how do you find yourself in the new reality? How, while navigating in a space of constant changes, can we discover a solid ground that ensures peace and security? The greatest stability is certainly provided by the so-called 'simple moral backbone', based on fundamental, traditional values and references to universal truths" (Okulska-Bożek, 2020/4).

The discourse analysis showed that, in Poland, the 'simple moral backbone' includes three main elements. First, Catholicism is a key aspect in defining Polishness. Often, Polishness and Catholicism are articulated as strictly equivalent, for example, when Polish identity is outlined interchangeably with Catholic identity, even for people who do not believe (Kaczyński, 2019/23). Catholic values are the ordering principle of the nation and, it is argued, only if based on these values, Poland can be considered independent and sovereign (Świder, 2017/2). Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz (2018/24)

go even further: they describe religion as a necessity for Poland, regardless of faith, explicitly sharing traditionalism in its theoretical fashion. In a world of increasing insecurity, religion is the anchor; it

“has important social functions. It imposes a moral and customary framework. It organizes relations. Through rituals, it maintains community ties. It integrates. The community gives a deeper sense of the existence of the individual. Religion is inherently pro-social as opposed to extreme individualism. [...] But it is also important that it protects collectivity from moral decay - isn't that the role of the fear of God, mistakenly taken for thoughtless obscurantism [*ciemnogród*]? This fear, whether or not the Supreme exists, is an objectively existing phenomenon, both psychological and social. If we banish religion, other systems will assume the role of similar regulators. For example, the obsession of secularism with its modern idols” (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2018/24).

In this light, religion (and the Catholic Church, in particular) assumes the meaning of tradition as the main provider of security. It is a tradition since it works as a stable source of morality. Religion offers a stable system of values, discerning clearly good and evil, and therefore giving an answer to the crisis of identity modernity has generated.

The second element is the so-called traditional family. The discursive element of ‘traditional family’ is used in several ways and for different purposes. Clearly, it has a very emotional appeal, especially when it is uttered in contrast with alternative models of family, and when the latter are accompanied by horrific fantasies. In some cases, however, family is pictured as a synonym for traditions. Like the nation or the people, families are idealized as the custodians and the treasure chest of the traditional national heritage. Traditional Polishness can survive only within the traditional family, where values are passed over generation after generation.

“We want tradition. We want to maintain what tradition has created and what is the foundation of this Polish building, but also of the entire construction of this civilization. [...] This civilization, which was also based on the family, on this mechanism of transmitting not only life, but also culture, also civilization norms, which also led to the education of children and young generations, must be defended. This civilization was based and must be further based on family” (Kaczyński, 2019/21).

On similar grounds, we find the third element that characterizes the traditionalist logic. Traditions ensure continuity. While modernity constantly advances and renews itself, continuity predicts and preserves behavior and norms. In this respect, national

heroes are celebrated as the tangible presence of traditional Polish values. Besides their symbolic valence, they represent a certain way of understanding Polish values that would otherwise disappear. Polish heroes, in this sense, become a metaphor for Polishness, an empty signifier of an absence. In other words, they embody that system of values that continues generation after generation and that, during Polish history, allowed Poland to survive with a precise shape (Nalaskowski, 2018/17). Here, we can already glimpse the articulation between the three nodal points of the neo-traditionalist discourse. The neo-traditionalist triad made up of Poles, Poland, and Polishness represents a chain that preserves Polish values. National heroes and traditional families (symbol of the continuity of Polish people through different generations), Poland (as a sovereign state through history), and Polishness (understood as a set of predetermined traditions, i.e. Catholic teachings) are linked together as a representation of a fight for freedom against the enemy, may that be the Western elite, foreign cultures, or modernity.

What differentiates the nodal points, even in the case of 'tradition', is their orientation. In this sense, it is necessary to add a four-dimensional space when discussing traditions. If 'the people' are opposed to 'the elite' vertically, 'the nation' is opposed to 'cosmopolitanism' and 'multiculturalism' horizontally, 'tradition' has a temporal orientation against modernity. It goes without saying again that this view does not imply a Luddite understanding of modernity. Modernity is the constitutive outside of tradition because it negates its reference to the past and communities. Polishness, a signifier that concentrates in itself the values of Polish traditions, is a barrier against the relativist, nihilist, and modernizing drift that has revolutionized Western European values. Thus, all three nodal points are sublimated to an imaginary level: they all function as a fundamental fantasy against their enemies.

At this point, it is possible to provide an answer to the previous questions. Are Poles necessarily culturally defined? Is Poland necessarily a traditionally culture-based national community? Is Polishness necessarily related to traditional values? The social-constructionist ontology of this thesis suggests that the answer is certainly negative. The three nodal points of Polish neo-traditionalism, namely Poles, Poland, and Polishness, can be defined in different ways depending on their articulations. As argued by Wojciech

Chlebda (2017: 8), the clash around the meaning of Polishness “has led to the enantiosemey of the Polish communication space, which caused that one and the same signs are able to express opposing contents, values and emotions”.

	Populist Logic	Nationalist Logic	Traditionalist Logic
Nodal points	The people (Poles)	The nation (Poland)	Tradition (Polishness)
Subject positions offered (content)	Ordinary people <i>Polak-katolik</i>	Poland as a national community culturally defined	Polishness based on traditional values (religion, family, continuity with the past)
Constitutive Outside	The elite (liberal/Western)	Pan-European ideology Cosmopolitanism Multiculturalism	Modernity Relativism Axiological individualism
Orientation of relation between nodal points and constitutive outside(s)	Vertical (people against elite)	Horizontal within the country	Temporal (traditions against progress)

Table 4. Conceptualization of the three logics of neo-traditionalism in Poland.

This observation suggests that ‘Polishness’, as well as Poland and Poles, has become what Laclau (2005b: 43) describes as “floating signifier”: its meaning varies depending on its articulation with other discursive elements and might take on different forms in different contexts. Therefore, as advocated by Witold Gombrowicz (1994) in *Trans-Atlantyk*, Polishness need not refer to the Fatherland and respect for authorities, as traditional Polishness does. A new Polishness emerges in his novel, devoid of the old bonds to the Polish community and emphasizing the liberty of the individual. The clash between two Polands, as is usually described, is a clash that revolves around the signification of Poles, Poland, and Polishness. The three neo-traditionalist logics seek to explain how neo-traditionalist discourse makers signify the main nodal points of Polish

society. Revealing this process of discourse construction is indeed the aim of this thesis. The signification of the three nodal points coincides with the signification of what it means to be a society in Poland. Those who can signify hegemonically what Poles, Poland, and Polishness mean will emerge victorious from the cultural war. In this sense, the three nodal points cannot be seen as separated elements. Their articulation is crucial to hegemonizing common sense.

2.2 The neo-traditionalist logic

For analytical reasons, I have separated the three logics of neo-traditionalism. The aim was to characterize the particular form of illiberalism that is emerging in Poland and uncover its discursive purpose by deconstructing it in three different constitutive social logics. As populism is the standard concept utilized to explain the ‘illiberal turn’ in Central and Eastern Europe, distilling the three logics is an attempt to generate a more nuanced explanation of this political phenomenon beyond the mere appeal to the people against the elite. However, more frequently, in the texts analyzed, the three logics and nodal points are not so neatly divided. Often, they are articulated together as equivalent, and, at times, the meanings of Poles, Poland, and Polishness largely overlap. Also in the previous part, it could be seen how the difference of signification between ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ is not always very sharp. Thus, having deconstructed neo-traditionalism in three main strands, it is now possible to put the pieces back together and look at the articulations of the three nodal points as they form a comprehensive neo-traditionalist logic. To understand their connection, we can look at the discursive articulation performed by Kaczyński in his programmatic speech held in Lublin (2019/15).

“The community we especially value is the nation. A nation is a community of language, culture, history, common destiny, common civilization achievements. The nation is the basis of human existence and activity in our civilization [...]. We need the nation, Europe needs it, the world needs it. Here I am not talking about our nation, but about nations. But for us, the nation is Poland. We value Polishness very highly. It builds the foundations of our programs, our hopes, and we place everything that is related to our future in it. We want Poland to last, and we know that it is worth being Poles, it is worth being a Pole. Christianity is part of our national identity. The Church was and is the proclaimer and holder of the only system of values commonly known in Poland”.

In this condensed fragment, Kaczyński poses at the center of his political plan all three neo-traditionalist nodal points. He emphasizes the nation as the “basis of human existence” in contrast to cosmopolitan or individualist alternatives; the nation must be sovereign and democracy can only be achieved in the context of the nation-state (Kaczyński, 2019/6). The reference to the people is strictly related to a culture-based understanding of national identity. To be a Pole means to be part of the national community. It means following Polish values and Polishness. And the latter is explicitly defined according to the values of Christianity, “the only system of values commonly known in Poland”. From this quote, it is also clear that the nodal points signify each other. The Polish nation and the Polish people are defined by their adherence to Christian Polishness. Moreover, they also have a structuring function as they provide meanings to other signifiers and define their antagonistic relationships. Polish people are those who respect traditional and Christian Polishness as ‘our way of life’: “apart from it, we have only nihilism” (Kaczyński, 2019/15).

A similar articulation of the main nodal points of neo-traditionalism is performed by Tomasz Sakiewicz, including the construction of an antagonistic frontier between us and them: people against Eurocrats, nations against Pan-European ideology, traditional family and normality against demoralization.

“Even more nations are opposed to the group of Eurocrats who wanted to replace democracy with a Pan-European ideology. The cheering crowds of Poles and Hungarians on the streets of Budapest at the sight of the prime ministers of both countries declaring their fight for a Europe of Homelands – this is a visible sign of a new spring of peoples. This bloodless revolution involves more and more countries. Protection of the family, and especially children, against demoralization is its important element. [...] This rebellion cannot be stopped. People want normality” (Sakiewicz, 2019/14).

In both cases, the three logics are merged into a single one that we can define as the neo-traditionalist logic. In the case of Poland and in the case of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse, neo-traditionalism indicates a revolt against the emancipating thrust of progressive liberalism represented by the liberal elite, within and outside the country. While the latter is deemed to seek to remove traditional barriers (gender, religious, historical, geographical), Polish neo-traditionalist discourse makers erect a safe enclosure made of unchangeable categories: as opposed to liberalism, they appeal to the national community (Poland) defined by traditional values (Polishness) linked to

Catholicism and historical ties. This community is inhabited by people (Poles) that constitute a homogeneous group as long as they share the same culture. Using Nonhoff's terminology (2019), they can be considered as the encompassing demands of Polish neo-traditionalism. Accordingly, their signification represents the hegemonic goal of neo-traditionalism, and, therefore, it has a political meaning. However, since their meaning is 'empty', it should be clear that the chain of equivalence Pole-Poland-Polishness is not sufficient. These nodal points need to be politically and hegemonically articulated with other demands to acquire a precise meaning.

2.3 The demands of Polish neo-traditionalism

The articulation of single discursive elements (demands) is eminently a political operation. It is through discursive articulations that meanings are generated and hegemony can be achieved. As a consequence, articulatory practices pertain to the political logic of neo-traditionalism and will be thoroughly discussed in the next chapter. To avoid repetitions, I will only summarize in the following tables the single demands of neo-traditionalism identified during discourse analysis. Table 5 shows the subsuming demands of Polish neo-traditionalism, which refer directly to the three nodal points (and encompassing demands) or the universal lack of the discourse, namely order and freedom.⁶⁹ Table 6, instead, offers an overview of the cumulative demands of neo-traditionalism. The two tables describe neo-traditionalist demands before being articulated, as they are present singularly within the social. The identification of single demands is necessary to draw the boundaries of the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland. They were considered as part of this discourse as they share the same lack or the same constitutive outside. Only through articulatory practices, do they come to form a hegemonic horizon.

2.4 Side note: How to identify nodal points

In this chapter, I have provided an interpretive reading of Polish neo-traditionalism. The interpretive nature of the analysis in this phase does not necessarily require a justification of its validity. PDT, in fact, aims exactly at translating empirical

Subsuming Demands	Blocked by	Lack of
Christian Europe of Nations	Multiculturalism	Nation (authentic culture)
Religion (Christianity)	Secularization/Prometheus myth	Polishness, <i>polak-katolik</i>
Community	Individualism/Pluralism	People (continuity)
Heteronomy	Relativism/Prometheus myth	Tradition
National ethos	Relativism/Multiculturalism	Nation/Polishness/Freedom
God (religious constraints)	Prometheus myth	Tradition (as ordering principle)
Past/Old	Modernity	Polishness
Democracy (illiberal)	Elite/Liberal opposition	People and Nation's sovereignty
Sovereignty	EU/Anti-national sentiments	Nation (cultural and political)
Hierarchy of values	Relativism	Tradition
National identity	EU/Multiculturalism	Nation (primacy of national culture)
Traditional family	Relativism (alternative families)	Polishness (tradition), people (as a community)
Essentialism	Relativism	Tradition
Stable cultural patterns and continuity	Progressivism/Nihilism	Tradition (authentic way of life)
Stable social morality	Progressivism/individualism	Tradition

Table 5. Subsuming demands of neo-traditionalism in Poland.

manifestations into its distinctive ontological categories. However, it may be questioned how these abstract categories were linked to the empirical texts.

Cumulative Demands	Blocked by	Lack of
Memory	Politically correct/Relativism	Continuity/Past
Natural law	Relativism	Heteronomy
Decorum	Relativism	Stable social morality
National dignity	Pedagogy of shame	Nation (as a community)
History	Pedagogy of shame /Relativism	Stable cultural patterns/Nation (as a community)
Dignity	Individualist dignity (Human Rights)	Community
Authority	Individual liberty	Hierarchy of values
Identity (essentialist)	Relativism	Essentialism (nation, religion...)
Limits posed by religion	Individual liberty	Religion/Hierarchy of values
Limits to individual freedom	Individual liberty	Hierarchy of values
Limits to sexual life	Hedonism	Christianity
Cultural models (national heroes)	Individualism	Stable cultural patterns/Nation (as a community)
Traditional customs	Alternative ways of life	Essentialism
Traditional social roles (biological sex)	Social engineering	Essentialism
Traditional social roles (motherhood)	Individualism	Traditional family
Traditional institutions (school, church)	Modernity/Individualism	Continuity/Community

Table 6. Cumulative demands of neo-traditionalism in Poland.

As noted by Marttila (2015) and Remling (2018: 2), the logics approach failed to operationalize its own categories so that researchers using the approach are provided with “a limited understanding of the analytical processes that lead to the eventual identification of different logics in a discourse”. In particular, the social logic is the most problematic since it relies entirely on the sole interpretation of the researcher. Glynos et al. (2021) rejected this criticism: they argue that “social logics are not found, deduced or extrapolated directly from documents, texts, media representations, and so forth, but are constructed, tested and reworked by the analyst in relation to a diverse range of empirical data” adding that “the application of the logics approach is more akin to the *art* of the historian, literary critic or psychoanalyst than the spurious scientific pretensions of much positivist social science” (Glynos et al. 2021: 8). In this way, they give special weight to the role of the researcher and his or her ability to analyze, intervene, and link empirical material to ontological categories.

At first, the response given by Glynos et al. does not seem to tackle the issue raised by Marttila and Remling. Their answer is in fact that there is no precise answer about how to find logics within the texts but relying on the knowledge and capacity of interpretation of the analyst. However, after having approached the text corpus of Polish neo-traditionalism, the position of Glynos et al. resulted clearer to me. In the particular case of my research object, there are few doubts about which nodal points structure neo-traditionalism in Poland. In this respect, the previous chapters on theory and methodology were not developed only for the sake of filling blank pages. They constituted the mental map to orient myself within the texts. The articulation of nodal points, their lack, or their representative function appear extremely clear when texts are approached from PDT’s perspective and with a profound knowledge of its ontology. In this scenario, the answer given by Glynos et al. (2021) to Marttila and Remling is plausible.

Finding nodal points and constructing social logic is an interpretive action carried out by the researcher that can be performed only when he or she has the necessary expertise in the theoretical and methodological apparatus of PDT. To provide a more precise answer (and not be accused of having another fuzzy solution to solve this issue), nodal points were identified by looking at their capacity of filling a lack, as, in fact, Laclau

(1996) defines empty signifiers in these terms. Thus, nodal points should represent both the goal to be achieved (for example, when Kaczyński (2019/15; 2019/21) states “we want Poland to last” or “we want tradition” there is not much to interpret), and their function to cover ‘the lack’ of neo-traditionalism, something that can be seen already in the previous tables and that will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. The covering function of nodal points makes them become both an encompassing demand and a fundamental fantasy – they are nodal points of sublimation, as explained in the theoretical framework of the thesis. Hence, interpretation, in this case, is only slightly an arbitrary decision taken by the researcher. Rather, it is the result of the retroductive circle of analysis that allowed me to link ontological categories and empirical data in a logical manner.

Chapter 11

Political Logic

The populist, nationalist, and traditionalist logics of neo-traditionalism give substance to cultural illiberalism in Poland as they define the boundaries, aims, and scope of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse. Albeit characterizing a discourse as neo-traditionalist implies necessarily a political anti-colonial dimension, the three social logics do not tell much on this aspect or on the hegemonic function of Polish neo-traditionalism. Indeed, the goal of this thesis is not limited to the description and interpretation of neo-traditionalism, and therefore identifying its social logics is not enough. The research aims in particular to disclose the hegemonic strategy of neo-traditionalism, as the very meanings of Poles, Poland, and Polishness would be 'empty' without articulatory practices with other discursive elements. The seizure of nodal points is the key moment in any ideological struggle: those who are able to provide meaning to these crucial *points de capiton* will eventually become hegemonic (Žižek, 1989). Signifying nodal points, or any other discursive element (as we know, through articulation and antagonism), involve an act of 'Foucauldian power': it is an operation that covers the *real* and produces *reality*.

If the three social logics revealed what Polish neo-traditionalism is about, its political logics explain how it tries to signify what it means to be a society, and how it implements this discursive strategy to overthrow the previous and antagonist hegemonic order. If the social logics deal with the symbolic aspect of neo-traditionalism and how it appears in the discursive arena, the political moment emerges as a shadow of the *real*. As such, the emergence of neo-traditionalism should be read against the background of dislocation. The resignification of the core values of a society can happen only when their meanings begin to float. In other words, a failure within the existing hegemonic system is necessary to construct new identities, and thus political logics symbolize the internal failure of discourse (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

What Gramsci (1975) called ‘organic crisis’ is the gateway to new hegemonic formations. However, as underlined in the introduction, how and why a certain discourse would emerge instead of any other remains a matter of contingency. If liberalism is allegedly going through a crisis, how and why do we observe a neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic project? Since during a crisis “a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, 1971: 276), the emergence and sedimentation of a specific discourse depend on its political construction. Hence, political logics provide an explanation that justifies the passage from contingency to reality; the passage from a discursive possibility to a concrete hegemonic project. The political aspect of Polish neo-traditionalism indicates how a possible response to the liberal failure (the one described by several authors like Fraser, 2017 or Zielonka, 2018) has taken the shape of a neo-traditionalist response, which led to the current cultural war. This phase entails three distinct moments. First, the dislocation of the discursive space and the ‘lack’ in the Other must be signified through a performed crisis. Second, articulatory practices and antagonism create new meanings within the discursive space. Finally, particular signifiers emerge as representative of the discourse itself in order to establish a hegemonic horizon. This chapter will discuss the first two steps of the neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic strategy. The stratagem of representation, instead, will be analyzed at the end of the next chapter since it involves the articulation of all three logics.

1. The ‘lack’ of Polish neo-traditionalism: Performance of crisis

“The impossibility of any closure of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 136) and the openness of the social imply that no hegemonic discourse can find a definitive unity and its disruption is always around the corner. However, as long as meanings are fixed, dislocation remains in the background of social reality. It is only when dislocations surface that discourses are destabilized and new discursive alternatives are possible (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). Transforming a *real* failure into a *performed* crisis is the first necessary step to contesting the previous hegemonic order and articulating a new one. Failures, in fact, do not lead to predetermined counter-reactions. In the example offered by Laclau (1990), Nazism is seen as one of the non-necessary possibilities to cope with

the failures of the Weimar Republic. Performing the crisis as dictated by a conspiracy hatched by the Jews was one of the possible ways to transform a failure into a hegemonic Nazi project. Unfortunately, the wrong one.

As already mentioned, the most evident failure of the liberal hegemony can be traced back at least to the 2008 financial crisis. This event harmed the legitimacy of the liberal order and shuffled existing meanings.⁷⁰ However, if the 2008 crisis created a window of opportunity for illiberal actors in the world, in Poland, as confirmation of its performative character, the crisis has often revolved around the core values of society, rather than the economy (Bill and Stanley, 2020). Polish neo-traditionalism emerged to cope with the resurgence of the negative lack of objectivity; simply put, it is a response to the crisis of liberalism. The latter showed that history had not come to an end. It made clear that even a *mythical* hegemonic discourse is contingent, and failures make possible political moments of contestation of the hegemonic order. Thus, the political logic of neo-traditionalism is visible as an attempt to re-colonize the real. As a counter-hegemonic discourse, neo-traditionalism tries to fill the fault within society and overcome the contingency of identities through performed crisis and discursive articulations. Citing again Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 7), “‘hegemony’ will be not the majestic unfolding of an identity but the response to a crisis”.

Without the performed crisis, counter-hegemonic projects could hardly be accomplished. Crises create a sense of urgency that is essential in mobilizing people and disseminating new discourses. The model proposed by Benjamin Moffit (2015) provides a good structure to explain how the performance of crisis is an indispensable conduit for new discourses, although his focus lies on the link between populism and crisis. Stavrakakis et al. (2018) engage with the work of Moffit as they agree on the dislocatory character of the crisis. However, following Laclau, they add that crisis is just the symbolized side of dislocation; the performance of crisis is the ground for both disrupting the previous order and constructing new identities, populist or other. In light of this, the performance of crisis cannot be simply seen as an exclusive feature of populism. Any discourse with a counter-hegemonic aim is constructed out of a performed crisis. Therefore, it seems suitable to utilize some of the criteria proposed by Moffit (2015: 198) to explain how neo-traditionalists perform crises to replace liberalism

and establish their worldview. In particular, three separate moments should be taken into account when describing a performed crisis.⁷¹ In the context of neo-traditionalism they can be renamed as follows: 1) identification of failure and dislocation; 2) elevation to symbolized crisis; 3) construction of the enemy.

The failure

Moffit (2015: 195) argues that failures pertain to the Lacanian *real* while crises are at the level of the *symbolic*, since “crisis is very much what we make of it”. In this sense, while failures precede crises, the latter are instead internal to the (populist) discourse; they are symbolized representations of the failure which “has become politically and ideationally mediated” (Hay, 1999: 324) and thus perceived as a crisis. Nevertheless, the difference between failures and crises remains blurred when, for example, Moffit mentions Australian and New Zealander politicians complaining about “the ‘failure’ of Asian immigration in their countries” (Moffit, 2015: 1998). In fact, it seems that the failure of immigration is already at the symbolic level of crisis. From Moffit’s perspective, a crisis arises out of the link between different failures, similarly to Laclau’s chain of equivalence.

My approach is more orthodox as I tried to find in the texts *real* failures before any symbolic performance. In other words, I have been looking for the ‘lack’ of the neo-traditionalist discourse; the missing piece that impedes achieving hegemony, and that the neo-traditionalist discourse tries to cover. Of course, this is an impossible task, for the real cannot be represented by definition and negative dislocations within texts were already signified to some extent. To be fair, during the coding process it has not always been clear when to code discursive elements as ‘negative dislocation’ or ‘performance of crisis’, making the distance between my position and Moffit’s more theoretical than practical. However, when I look for the failure of the liberal hegemony (or, to be more precise, its discursive dislocation), I look for the hidden lack that generated the illiberal response, something more abstract than ‘the failure of immigration’.

In this case, we cannot identify a single initial failure, as Moffit would put it. Rather, the failure emerges as a consequence of the reversal of meanings and dislocation of the

demands of neo-traditionalism, as they were listed in the previous chapter. In Chapter 6, demands of a hegemonic discourse were defined as belonging to the same discursive formation when they share the same lack. It is only their negative equivalence that makes their articulation possible. The list of demands from the previous chapter, whose structure is represented below in Figure 5, presents a composite hierarchy since encompassing demands incorporate subsuming demands that, in turn, contain cumulative demands. Yet, if we focus on their 'lack' and their 'blocking other', their particularities vanish. In all cases, we can observe that blocking demands 'steal' the same missing element. Although it cannot be represented in a single world, 'the *real* lack' of neo-traditionalist demands always points to a lack of certainty, stability, security, order, clarity, steady principles, essentialism, predictability, direction. Dislocation appeared since every point of reference that gives stability has been removed from the public space. Moving slightly to the symbolization of failure, in the public space of Western liberal democracies

“traditional points of reference in the life of nations, traditional values, such as the value of religion, family, nation, identity, tradition, culture, history, even gender identity, gender identification - have been undermined and somehow killed” (Winnicki, 2020/2).

In this example, Robert Winnicki identifies the failures of the Western liberal democratic model as a lack of points of reference. By reversing the meanings of traditions, nations, religion, and so on, liberalism generated a void in the social. If we consider the role of traditions as explained by Shils (1981), what exactly the liberal West has dislocated is security. An ambitious claim could go as far as to argue that security is missing in several regards. The precariat and the sense of insecurity created by neoliberal policies have been described as a source of populism (Braga, 2018; Standing, 2011). As far as it concerns neo-traditionalism, a similar account can be registered. Modifying a well-known expression to define this phenomenon, we can describe the subjects of neo-traditionalism as the 'cultural losers of globalization'. The lack of security (in this case ontological rather than economic), which was identified at the roots of neo-traditionalism, can be seen as the cultural 'failure to deliver' that hampered the liberal consensus.

More specifically, the failures of liberalism, as perceived by neo-traditionalists, involved the dislocation of all those demands that entail order, the one provided by immutable categories. If religion tells its members how to behave, secularization allows individuals to choose their path (Lisicki, 2015/2; Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2018/15). If natural law and morality provide ethical boundaries, relativism gives complete individual freedom (Bosak, 2020/14; Lisicki, 2016/18; Pospieszalski, 2018/29). If history is the source of direction and continuity, its lack creates uncertainty (Legutko, 2016; Lisicki, 2016/16). If traditional families guarantee continuity with the past, alternative models generate chaos (Bosak, 2020/12; Kaczyński, 2019/22; Sakiewicz, 2019/14). If traditional and hierarchical communities create a safe environment, individualism breaks bonds between people (Legutko, 2016). If the nation provides a stable cultural pattern, cosmopolitanism destroys the very idea of nation (Bosak, 2020/4). If traditional social roles tell us our place within society, emancipation forces us to choose who we are (Narodwcy.net, 2020/5; Ordo Iuris, 2020/3). The list could go on and, in part, 'the lack' of neo-traditionalism and the 'dislocating' force of liberalism have already been discussed in the previous chapter. What is clear is the universal lack of the neo-traditionalist discourse, which is a lack of security and order.

The unsatisfied demands previously listed are defined as demands since they seek to cover this lack. Neo-traditionalism demands 'Polishness', demands 'essentialism', or demands 'authority' because they all became dislocated after the liberal turn. Security is missing and is the constitutive lack of neo-traditionalism; the lack that needs to be filled to close the neo-traditionalist discourse. All demands (from nodal points like 'Poland' to cumulative demands like 'memory') serve this purpose as the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland is an attempt to discursively cover this lack, to cover the real. Having clarified that, it is necessary to move from the fuzziness of dislocation to the concrete symbolic construction of discourse. In this case, the 'lack' within Polish society was performed by neo-traditionalist actors as a *lack of order* (usually signified as a *lack of normality*) and a *lack of freedom*. The latter is signified through discursive articulations as neo-traditionalism tries to signify 'freedom' differently than in liberalism. The former, which is discussed in the following section, emerges as a result of the performance of crisis.

Performance of crisis

The second step, in Moffit (2015), consists of linking the initial failure with other equivalent failures, elevating the lack to crisis. Moffit is here inspired by Laclau, treating failures as demands. Albeit Moffit (2015: 199) argues that “Laclau, however, does not explain how such demands become linked together”, the connection between failed demands can be found exactly in their common lack visible through its absence, as explained also by Nonhoff (2019) and Laclau himself (1996). Therefore, in my orthodox approach, the elevation to crisis means to symbolize the *real* failure in a series of empirical crises. The ‘lack of ontological security’ or ‘the lack of order’, which stands behind neo-traditionalist demands and their equivalence, go through a mediated performance reflected in practical disrupting events: the ‘lack’ is transformed into and narrated as crises of multiculturalism, abortion, dechristianization, and several more. Performed crises are the visible part of ‘the lack in the Other’.

Of course, I am aware of the mobilizing character of crisis, such as ‘the politics of fear’ (Wodak, 2015), which is used as an effective rhetorical stratagem. Sometimes, crisis is certainly performed as a calculated political tool to polarize the electorate and win votes. However, I am not interested in this aspect of crisis. Rather, the analysis looks at the discursive link between lack and crisis since it seeks to see how performed crises (e.g., crisis due to LGBT rights) capture the lack of security within a certain sector of society (e.g., lack of essentialist categories). To put it differently, looking at the performance of crisis is an attempt to add another layer to the analysis of neo-traditionalism: moving from the quite abstract fight between worldviews for the signification of meanings and signifiers, the focus on the performative dimension of neo-traditionalism reveals the linkage between the discursive shift towards illiberalism and the visible aspects of the cultural war that characterize, in practice, the Polish political debate.

In general, neo-traditionalist discourse makers perform crisis by creating a sense of threat to the existing traditional social order. Ideologies from the West and consequent policies are described as a legacy of Marxism, sometimes referred to as cultural Marxism (Kaczyński, 2019/39; Ordo Iuris, 2020/2; Ziemkiewicz, 2017). “Cultural Marxism programs the liberation of mankind by attacking three important pillars of the

social order - family, religion, and nation” (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2019/30). This citation accurately exemplifies the link between lack and crisis. The former is marked by the emancipation of humankind, which leads to ontological insecurity. Liberation is pursued by destructing the pillars of the social order, a destruction that can only fuel a sense of crisis. The displacement of family, religion, and nation (that, as noted in the previous chapter, can be associated, respectively, to the nodal points of Poles, Polishness, and Poland) are thus the drivers of crisis, the source of the lack. As family, religion, and nation are attacked, different displacing phenomena arise and affect Polish society. In this way, the universal lack of order in neo-traditionalism is transformed and *performatively* narrated as a crisis that requires a counter-reaction.

Displaced signifier	Performed Crisis	Disrupted organization/institution
Nation	Supranational organizations	Nation (Poland)
Nation/Religion	Multiculturalism	National culture
Nation/Religion	Western civilization	Classic Europe
Religion	De-Christianization/Islam	Christianity/Catholic Church
Religion	Abortion	Traditional and Christian values
Family	LGBT and gender ideology	Traditional social roles
Family	Alternative models of family	Traditional family

Table 7. Links between dislocation and crisis.

Whereas the counter-reaction entails a positive discourse construction through articulatory practices (discussed in the next section), the crisis serves to delegitimize and denounce the antagonist discourse. Neo-traditionalists narrate that the attack on family, religion, and nation is visible in the societal model of liberalism, the one that was successful in the West. However, we are not talking about different phenomena; rather, performed crises refer to a series of events that find their roots in the cultural displacement promoted by liberal-leftist actors. As suggested by Sakiewicz (2017/5; emphasis added), the crisis caused by Islam is just a consequence of liberal policies that de-Christianized Europe: “Christian civilization has been weakened today because it was

attacked from the inside by the left-liberal anti-civilization and *therefore* the progress of Islam will be rapid". Crisis, therefore, is narrated as an organic crisis caused by leftism-liberalism; every disrupting event in Europe happens as a consequence of the liberal redefinition of values. Table 7 schematizes the link between the displacement of family, religion, and nation and performed crises.

A few examples can provide a better picture of how crises are performed. Although in the table they have been separated, often crises are interrelated, marking their equivalence. This is the case of the performance of crisis of national identities, crisis of religion, and crisis of traditional social roles. As Moffit theorized, the performance of crisis involves articulating different failures (dislocation) into a single framework of crisis. This move is clear in this article by Paweł Lisicki (2019/19) in which the journalist describes the crisis of the West as a multifaceted phenomenon unified by the destruction of stable identities, those given by the pillars of society.

"One of the main sources of the present crisis of the West is an exaggerated desire for unification coupled with the hostility of European intellectual and political elites against their own identity. In fact, they want to build a new man, a non-Pole, non-Hungarian, non-Czech, but some peculiar figure of a pan-European. Instead of a man and a woman, a peculiar transgender hybrid is to appear, instead of a Pole, a Hungarian, a Spaniard - their mutated European variety [...]. In their view, the Union is to become, and more and more often is, an effective mean to carry out the grand operation of the cultural revolution, a vehicle for social engineering on a gigantic scale, the ultimate goal of which is to subordinate nation-states to one global hegemon. Different nations, faiths, religions, including genders, are to lose their character".

All the strands of cultural displacement are synthesized as different aspects of the same crisis. Behind the disruption of national, religious, and biological identities conducted by leftist radicals and the EU, Lisicki finds the attempt to disrupt stable (traditional) identities – identity traditions as defined in Chapter 3. He discursively transforms the hidden lack of security into a "cultural revolution" whose aim is to eliminate "nations, faiths, religions, genders". Interestingly, the crisis of gender and the crisis of nations are pictured as part of the same phenomenon that signals the same lack of stable and immutable identities against the fluidity of the modern world. In addition, this revolution is carried out by the EU, the supranational enemy *par excellence*. It should also be noted that this column was written to support the joint speech delivered

by Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński in Krynica-Zdrój (2016) where the two leaders called for a cultural counter-revolution. In fact, crisis is performed in order to create the conditions to reverse the existing order. It is only through crisis that new discourses can be constructed. This piece, therefore, can be considered as a condensed example of all the characteristics and consequences the performance of crisis entails and shows why it is vital for delivering a counter-hegemonic project.

Although Lisicki's fragment offers an exhaustive picture of what is at stake when we talk about crisis, other examples can furnish a more nuanced picture. In fact, while it is rather clear where the 'lack of security' in the case of 'crisis of multiculturalism' or 'crisis of sovereign nations' resides,⁷² it should be explained why neo-traditionalists see the right to abortion or the 'Istanbul Convention against violence against women' as a threat, and perform these issues as pressing crises. Sometimes, abortion or contraception methods are simply seen as conducive of a demographic catastrophe that would make Poland disappear. Accepting migrants is not considered an option as it would lead to multiculturalism. But abortion is also seen as something that would disrupt religion or values.

"[PO government]⁷³ is implementing a left-feminist social model, and all left-wing societies (supporting feminism, abortion, contraception, and homosexuality) are just dying out. Only religious people, living according to the dictates of morality, based on tradition, have enough children to survive. [...] The rulers, promoting contraception, relativizing the protection of life, weakening the importance of marriage and the family, waged war on traditional values and religion. Their behavior in the face of a demographic catastrophe can be described briefly: suicides or idiots!" (Pospieszalski, 2015/6).

In this case, the crisis is performed by linking abortion and homosexuality as the main cause of the demographic crisis. Security is damaged by claiming that the "left-feminist social model" will lead to the disappearance of Poland as based on traditional values and religion. What is at stake with the issue of abortion is not just a single individual right. Neo-traditionalists argue that the right to abortion, as well as LGBT rights or any other product of the cultural revolution, is a direct threat to the authentic Polish culture. As in a typical narrative of crisis, they also argue that the process of demoralization that is coming from the West to Poland requires a quick counter-reaction; if conservatives do not react against this "toxic, dangerous, revolutionary, and

radical ideology” (Bosak, 2020/12) the foundations of European civilization will disappear. In this light, the right to abortion is linked to the dismissal of traditional and historical bonds of the past carried out by leftist ideologues: their ‘theft’ causes a lack in the neo-traditionalist space, a lack of tradition. Moreover, they are pictured as ‘barbarians from the West’; they do not belong to Poland as their values are not genuine and authentic (Lisicki, 2016/14).

Another example of performed crisis is given by the debate about the withdrawal of Poland from the Istanbul Convention. Although the primary scope of the Convention aims to combat gender-based violence and domestic violence, several conservative actors have criticized the document for using the term ‘gender’ and promoting gender ideology. The latter is seen as a threat to Polish society and imposition by foreign powers. As argued by Ordo Iuris (2020/3), the very word gender does not even exist in Polish, signaling its foreignness to national culture. In addition, they describe ‘gender’ as a signifier that dislocates essentialist categories. Giving complete freedom to individuals, the word ‘gender’ becomes a synonym for relativism and lack of morality.

“The whole concept of gender is rather the culmination of a certain process in which a human is (at least seemingly) a fully sovereign being that is able to decide on his/her own ontological status, as well as on other spheres of reality. The best example is the extreme relativisation of morality, which was also an ‘obstacle’ to human emancipation” (Ordo Iuris, 2020/2).

In this regard, the crisis of traditional social roles indicates more than a mere individual choice. Instead, it points to a cultural displacement (imposition) and the negative dislocation of the existing order. Gender ideology dislocates existing ‘patriarchal’ structures such as family, schools, established roles, hierarchy, authority, etc. The result is a subversion of meanings: biological sex is dislocated to become gender. Femininity is dislocated to become feminism. Finally, the removal of gender-based roles can also lead to the dislocation of traditional families and – as a consequence – of the entire society. The direct outcome is the relativization and fluidity of identities leading to the universal lack. The Convention, through the term ‘gender’, is accused of causing disorder and creating a lack of security and stability.

To conclude, different performed crises should not be treated as separate issues. They are performed as part of the same cultural war and share the same hegemonic

goal. Each of them triggers a cascade mechanism (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2017/9) that eventually will displace 'the authentic way of life' that guarantees tradition, culture and security. Crises are performed as the practical consequence of a progressive and modernizing discourse against traditions and the ethno-cultural nation.

The enemy

The third point of the performance of crisis consists of identifying those who are responsible for the crisis (Moffit, 2015), namely the tangible enemy of neo-traditionalism. We can approach this aspect from two different perspectives. First, the 'enemy' is usually identified in those actors that practically attack traditional values and order. The culprit here is the European Union (against the nation), the liberal establishment (against the people), Islam (against Christianity), the LGBT community (against the family), communists and post-communists (against national freedom), liberal salons (against religion and tradition), Warsaw (against the Heartland), pro-choice activists (against morality) and so forth. In these cases, we are always dealing with a symbolized enemy. Crises happen because 'the enemies' conspire against Poland. This is certainly a typical narrative of crisis that finds the culprit in identifiable actors that can be easily blamed. In this sense, the construction of the enemy points to keep propagating a sense of crisis while mobilizing people against a perceived threat.

However, since the research object is discourse, the analysis also revealed a 'discursive enemy'. To describe that, I have used interchangeably so far the labels 'liberalism', 'progressivism', 'post-communism', 'modernity', 'leftist-radicalism', 'consumerism', 'relativism' and some more. Rather than showing confusion or a promiscuous mixture of definitions, this choice was made on purpose. Not so much my choice as the reflection of what has been analyzed in the text corpus. In fact, oftentimes, neo-traditionalist discourse makers do not refer directly to real enemies. Instead, they pose directly the opposite discourse as their enemy using all those different classifications. In these cases, we can observe a frequent lack of clarity within texts, since several definitions are attached to the antagonist of neo-traditionalism. It could be argued that this vagueness reflects the dislocating *real*. The abstract enemy of neo-

traditionalism remains fuzzy because it is another attempt to symbolize 'the lack in the Other', which, as we know, always escapes the symbolic order; it shows the impossible effort to symbolize failure. This distinction between 'concrete enemies' and 'discursive enemies' functions as an introduction to the next section on the hegemonic strategy of neo-traditionalism. What is relevant in the hegemonic struggle is the seizure of meanings and consensus. Therefore, the enemy of neo-traditionalism is first of all the opposite discourse that denies the affirmation of traditional values and 'steals' order and security. The enemy is modernity.

2. The neo-traditionalist hegemonic strategy

If crises are performed to disrupt the existing social order and account for the negative side of dislocation, equivalence and antagonism constitute the other side of political logics as they positively produce new discourses and new discursive frontiers: they "signif[y] the presence of 'the real' in the symbolic order" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 143). In our case scenario, they positively fill the lack of order and freedom.

In the previous chapter, the three main nodal points were described as characterizing neo-traditionalism. However, equivalence and antagonism *precede* their meanings: nation, people, and tradition are floating signifiers, and only through articulation do they become sovereign Poland, *Polak-katolik*, and traditional Polishness. Similarly, other single demands do not have any hegemonic potential without articulation. Take as an example the cumulative demand for 'memory': taken singularly, it could be absorbed by the liberal discourse and its hegemonic potential neutralized. Only equivalence and antagonism make the political emerge (Laclau, 2005b). "For a political demand to become hegemonic, it needs to become part of chain of demands that are perceived as equivalent demands, as demands that go hand in hand with each other" (Nonhoff, 2019: 80-81). That suggests that these political operations constitute the core aspect of a hegemonic project, namely the symbolic signification of the discursive space. If the social logic describes the content of discourse and the fantasmatic logic deals with its ideological character, political logics serve to analyze the very counter-hegemonic process that endeavors to reverse the existing system of

meanings. Thus, the political aspect of neo-traditionalism marks its dynamic movement: we are not simply facing a description of the world in some niches of Polish society. It is also possible to observe a political discursive strategy, often explicit, to overthrow what is considered a colonial discursive regime (with its practical consequences) and establish an alternative system. Simply put, the political logic of neo-traditionalism reflects the illiberal discursive shift at work.

2.1 Neo-traditionalism as a counter-reaction to solve the crisis

The other face of performed neo-traditionalist crises involves the call for a counter-reaction. Bosak (2020/6) seems to share exactly Ignazi's thesis (1992) of a conservative counter-revolution arguing that, in the West, the 1968 cultural revolution harmed the transmission of conservative values and introduced post-modern values. Now, as the same is happening in Poland, the old European civilization needs to be defended:

“Someone poured sand into these gears of development of our civilization, this mechanism stopped working. The 1968 revolution that took place in the Western world: this was the moment when these gears started to crunch and this mechanism started to crumble. We in Poland, right now, are in a quite similar moment, in my opinion, as Western societies in '68 [...]. If [the revolution] succeeds, our civilization will end its life and will slowly collapse” (Bosak, 2020/6).

The necessity of defending Poland and its values from the crisis triggered by the progressive cultural revolution is a typical theme within the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse (for example, also in Kaczyński, 2019/41; Lisicki, 2016/12; or Sakiewicz 2019/15). The political aspect of neo-traditionalism involves a (counter)revolution⁷⁴ to reject the ‘Western colonizers’ and defend the essence of the ‘authentic European civilization’: “a counterrevolution is needed both internally and externally throughout Europe for our civilization to survive” (Bosak, 2020/3; a similar position is also expressed in Lisicki, 2016/19; Orbán and Kaczyński, 2016; Sakiewicz, 2019/14; Szabelak, 2020/3; Ziemkiewicz, 2019/17). In this light, the discursive shift towards illiberalism entails the construction of a cultural alternative to Western liberalism. A counter-hegemonic project that rejects the path of progress and modernity in the name of traditional values:

“Poland is a dangerous example of reversing the "only right" path of progress, of an effective counter-revolution. It can teach Western societies many things that their rulers very much do not

want them to learn. How to prepare yourself to resist your opinion-forming elites imposing a "gender" revolution? How to free the youth from their charm and restore the feeling of patriotism that is so terrifying for European salons? How to stop the masses from being ashamed of having a different opinion from television role models and intellectuals on duty?" (Ziemkiewicz, 2016/5).

Therefore, if the performances of crisis denounce the dangers posed by liberalism and break the chain of equivalence of the existing hegemonic discourse (for example, the equivalent link between 'progress=relativism'), the construction of the neo-traditionalist discourse offers new subject positions to choose. By creating and modeling a precise discourse (worldview) through equivalence and antagonism, Polish neo-traditionalism gives disoriented people the possibility to identify themselves with the stable categories provided by (and articulated with) tradition. If fluidity of identities is the way to go for progressive discourse makers and, therefore, subject positions are purposefully extremely variable as well as the range of choice, neo-traditionalism gives the opportunity to identify with something safe, stable, and unchangeable, like Christianity.

"But since a man who wants to be himself always "chooses" from the repertoire of possibilities offered by the culture in which he lives, then our Polish tradition offers something much more extraordinary than the most exclusive drink and the fashionable atmosphere created by marketing. It offers the answer: [...] "Be yourself. Choose Jesus Christ!" (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2019/34).

While consumerist society offers several subject positions based on individualism, fluidity, and instant pleasure, Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz suggest identifying with the discursive possibilities given by tradition, sharing somehow a social constructionist ontological position. More importantly for this chapter, we can glimpse already here the political construction of discourse and the importance of equivalence and antagonism: Polish tradition is articulated as equivalent to Jesus (i.e., religion) as they are constructed as sharing the same individualist antagonist created by consumerist society. Indeed, it is through equivalence and antagonism that discourses are generated and subject positions offered.

2.2 Hegemonic strategemes: equivalence, difference, antagonism

Although crises are performed around visible political questions, the positive political construction of neo-traditionalism can be better understood through discursive practices of resignification. To unveil the processes of resignification, I have applied the hegemonic strategemes of equivalence and antagonism proposed by Nonhoff (2019). Equivalence and antagonism, Nonhoff says, are discursive relations whose purpose is to overcome the lacking universal of discourse. I have divided the discussion about the hegemonic strategemes into three sections: the first part refers to the lack of order, as neo-traditionalism divides the discursive space to 'fill' discursively the void generated by the lack of boundaries brought about by modernity. The second part looks more in general at the entire hegemonic project: neo-traditionalist demands are signified through equivalence and antagonism. Finally, we will look at the signifier 'freedom' since its signification plays a special role in the discursive struggle for hegemony.

Antagonistic division of the discursive space

The lack within the social – the lack of order and freedom – conduces to the articulation of a new discourse and produces new meanings since “it is the lack created by dislocation that causes the desire for a new discursive articulation” (Stavrakakis, 1999: 74). To redefine meanings, neo-traditionalism is built to cover the absence of limits praised by its antagonist liberal discourse: that implies 1) the construction of a chain of equivalence of neo-traditionalist demands; 2) the projection of an opposite chain of equivalence, and 3) the articulations between the two opposite chains through relations of difference and contrariety. In the following example, Legutko is exactly performing this threefold operation. Separate demands (i.e. the tutelage of religion, social morality, and tradition) are bound together as they all have an equivalent relationship in contrariety to the enemy: the modernizing force of liberal democracy.

“By becoming a member of a communist and liberal-democratic society, man rejects a vast share of loyalties and commitments that until not long ago shackled him, in particular those that were imposed on him through the tutelage of religion, social morality, and tradition”. (Legutko, 2016: 14)

Whereas liberal democracy (equivalent to communism, in Legutko's construction) liberates men from the burden of "loyalties and commitments", neo-traditionalism redefines morality in just the opposite way. More precisely, by articulating 'religion=tradition=social morality' against liberal democracy, Legutko tries to fill the absence of boundaries with traditionalist subject positions. The fault created by modernity has displaced stable anchors and the hierarchy of values. Cultural displacement, in fact, occurs when existing meanings are redefined and replaced by other meanings. In the same vein, Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz (2017/10) claim that the deficit of authority implies the breakthrough of relativism in our lives. The denunciation of the lack of authority, which is a lack of order, suggests that the triumph of liberal values has created a demand for filling this void. In this light, when we look at the neo-traditionalist redefinition of meanings, it is worth looking as well at the antagonistic division of the discursive space. For example, the demand for 'authority' should be read in relation to its contrariety with the anti-demand for 'relativism'.

More generally, neo-traditionalism displays here its prescriptive character. According to neo-traditionalist discourse makers, the antagonistic division of the discursive space is not just between two different political views. It is between the disorder caused by individual freedom and relativism, and the stability given by traditions.

"Between what is predictable (knowledge/order) and what is unpredictable (lack of knowledge/chaos). Between truth, and falsehood and information storm: post-truth, fake news. Between the rich and the powerful, and the people [...]. Between closure and openness: e.g., borders vs. migrations [...]. Finally, between these areas of what is safe and what is dangerous" (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2019/39).

This example shows how the division of the discursive space is far more complex than a mere political divergence. Rather, it shows the clash between worldviews that has characterized European history at least since the French Revolution (and, in terms of theoretical reflections, at least since the myth of Prometheus). It is the same clash between individual emancipation and heteronomy, freedom and authority, modernity and tradition, that is at the roots of the dilemma of freedom. The current Vendée counter-revolution calls for the restoration of moral limits and stability. Since

progressivism has torn down immutable principles in the name of emancipation, the distinction between good and bad has been reduced to a personal choice. Neo-traditionalism, instead, claims to offer the anchor of traditional elements (e.g., nation, family, religion) to cope with the chaos of the modern world (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2017/5). Post-materialism, relativism, tolerance, equality, and anti-clericalism are depicted as equivalent anti-demands, part of the same worldview articulated as equally wrong. A worldview that invokes complete freedom to desire, freed from the obligations given by God, morality, and historical and religious constraints (Nalaskowski, 2019/29). The discursive production of neo-traditionalism is essentially a rejection of absolute emancipation and negative freedom. By redefining existing meanings, it aims to counterweight the emancipatory trend of modernity.

Resignifyng the discursive space

Since political logics *qua* articulations “contribute to the generation of (old and new) meanings” (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007: 278), the discourse theoretical analysis of neo-traditionalism has crucially addressed the redefinition of meanings performed by discourse makers through equivalence and antagonism. As the discursive map (Figure 5) will show below, neo-traditionalism is composed of several articulated demands (listed in the previous chapter). The demand for ‘religion’ or the demand for ‘natural law’ characterize the neo-traditionalist discourse and create necessary subject positions for those who cannot cope with progress and modernity. However, at this point, the content of tradition and the differences between neo-traditional essentialism and liberal relativism have been discussed abundantly; explaining the equivalent link between, for example, ‘heteronomy and ‘hierarchy of values’ in opposition to ‘individualism’ and ‘relativism’ would just lead to unnecessary repetitions. The map of neo-traditionalism, I believe, is sufficient to explain visually the discursive linkages between neo-traditionalist demands against the chain of anti-demands.

A more interesting aspect to look at to explain the political logics of the neo-traditionalist discourse and provide a better understanding of its counter-hegemonic function concerns the redefinition of contested meanings. Indeed, through articulations,

some signifiers are taken out of the liberal camp and redefined according to the traditionalist worldview. We can argue that the hegemonic struggle is exactly about this, namely a struggle for signifying those discursive elements that form common sense. Some of them refer to cumulative demands; although their signification is not crucial to winning the battle for hegemony, it shows well how new meanings are created. Other signifiers, on the contrary, can be considered as encompassing demands: their signification is necessary to 'seize' the main nodal points and, therefore, is decisive in the cultural war.

A first example is given by the signifier 'dignity' (*godność*). 'Dignity' is not an encompassing demand of the neo-traditionalist or liberal discourses (nor does it have a special mobilizing appeal). Nevertheless, its signification shows the differences between meanings, and how articulatory operations work and affect in practice discourse as a whole. Its meaning is contested since the liberal signification of 'dignity' produced an individualistic reading of the term in contrariety to what can be described as 'communitarian dignity'. Consider this long reflection expressed by Ryszard Legutko (2016: 31-32):

"Especially striking is a change in the meaning of the word "dignity," which since antiquity has been used as a term of obligation. If one was presumed to have dignity, one was expected to behave in a proper way as required by his elevated status. Dignity was something to be earned, deserved, and conformed by acting in accordance with the higher standards imposed by a community or religion [...]. At some point, the concept of dignity was given a different meaning, contrary to the original. This happened mainly through the intercession of the language of human rights, especially after the 1948 Universal Declaration [...]. In order to strengthen the unjustified and, within the accepted conceptual framework, unjustifiable notion of human rights, the concept of dignity was invoked, but in a peculiar way so as to make it seem to imply more than it actually did. This concept created an illusion of a strong view of human nature, and of endowing this nature with qualities nowhere explicitly specified but implying something noble, being an immortal soul, an innate desire for good, etc. [...]. Since the issue of the Universal Declaration dignity has no longer been about obligation, but about claims and entitlements. The new dignity did not oblige people to strive for any moral merits or deserts; it allowed them to submit whatever claims they wished, and to justify these claims by referring to a dignity that they possessed by the mere fact of being born without any moral achievement or effort".

Here, Legutko reflects exactly on the contested meaning of 'dignity'. In the first half of the fragment, the classic meaning of 'dignity' is produced by its equivalence with other elements: 'dignity → =community=religion=obligations'. In this case, people are deemed to obtain 'dignity' as long as they behave within the ethical framework of the community. Therefore, this 'dignity' functions as a limit to individual liberty since it is strictly interconnected with social morality. From the same perspective, Kaczyński (2019/2) links the concept of 'dignity' to the well-being of Poles-as-a-community. Even if he refers to dignity with respect to the material conditions of Poles, the leader of PiS equates 'dignity=community', transcending its individualist signification provided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"We tried to strive for the material living conditions all the time, but also - which is very important - for the dignity of Poles, that we should live with dignity, that we would feel equal, that all parts of Poland were equal, that what we call community could be rebuilt, and that what is so important could also be rebuilt, so that this community, the Polish community, the community of Poles could exist".

Interestingly, Kaczyński articulates as equivalent 'dignity' and 'equality'. However, this particular signification of dignity affects in turn the meaning of equality: unlike liberal equality, which has an individualist and progressive character that would instead lead to relative identities (Ordo Iuris, 2020/3; Sakiewicz, 2019/16), neo-traditionalist equality is pursued within the organic community. Therefore, the meaning of 'equality' based on individualist grounds is a consequence of the post-human rights signification of dignity described by Legutko; instead, 'communitarian dignity' transforms the meaning of equality on the ground of the cultural bonds that bind the community of Poles.

In the second half of Legutko's extract, the modern meaning of dignity is provided by the chain of equivalence 'dignity → =individualism=entitlement=human rights'. In this case, 'dignity' is closely related to negative freedom and the absence of boundaries. In other words, this 'dignity' has dislocated the traditional discursive space and generated a lack within the neo-traditionalist camp, namely a lack of direction, order. A person within the liberal discourse is worthy (*godny/a*) if he or she is free from boundaries. Therefore, liberal dignity comes from the quality of being free (from). It is

an inherent quality that human beings acquire as long as they are entitled to satisfy their claims and desires.

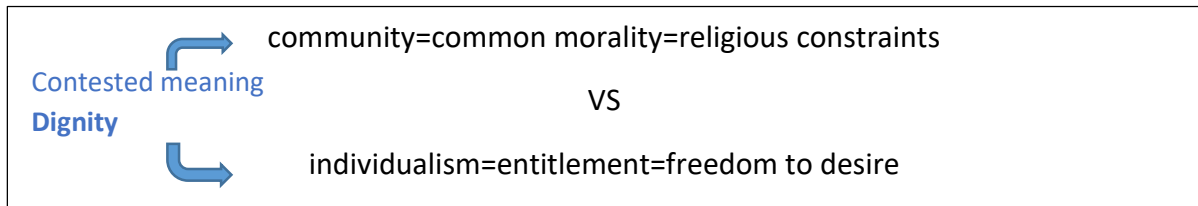


Figure 4. Chains of Equivalence and antagonism defining 'dignity'.

The signification of 'dignity' provides an illustrative example of the political construction of discourse (Figure 4). Although it may seem as a language game with a purely descriptive goal, the implications are serious and can be seen by looking at other discursive productions. Indeed, in the construction of the neo-traditionalist worldview, the particular meaning attached to a discursive element (and through equivalence to many others) affects the overall description of reality, establishing what is acceptable within society and what is not. Eventually, new meanings are likely to sustain performed crises and justify traditionalist narratives. For example, neo-traditionalists accuse the link between dignity and individual liberty of having opened the door to the so-called 'ideology of human rights'. As Legutko argued, dignity as an inherent quality of individuals freed them from external norms and entitled them to more and more 'human rights'. Therefore, neo-traditionalists see with suspicion the universal application of the 'ideology of human rights' (which is constructed in relation of contrariety to heteronomy or natural law) as they described it as a colonial practice rather than a tool to protect individual's rights. As pointed out by Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz (2018/14) inspired by the British philosopher John Gray:

"We are among those observers of the contemporary world who do not rashly reject the idea that among the deeper, at first glance invisible causes of the crisis that Western civilization is undergoing today, there is a strong democratic fundamentalism attitude among the liberal elites. This attitude presupposes that a democratic order is always better than any form of authoritarianism [...]. This ideology [of human rights] assumes that our vision of human rights, formed and implemented in some Western countries, has a universal value. Therefore, we should export this vision (e.g., the human right to 'liberate' oneself from oppressive cultural identities, for example, free choice of gender identity) wherever possible".

Two aspects should be underlined from this example. First, liberal democracy is portrayed as an attempt to colonize different cultures across the world under the flag

of universal human rights, thus imposing, for instance, gender identity. As this ideology is pictured as having wrecked Western civilization, Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz perform a crisis to disrupt liberal democracy and justify a different worldview (where authority plays a more prominent role). Second, they link the crisis of Western civilization to a sort of 'lack of authority' since people can "perceive authoritarian orders and hierarchical organizations as more appropriate, natural forms of collective existence than orders based on the principle of equality" (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2018/14). In light of this, we can look again at the previous chain of equivalence. If neo-traditionalist dignity is linked to the community and hierarchy of values rather than to universal human rights, the sphere of individual rights is modified accordingly. In this scenario, it is not possible to talk of universal rights that are equal here and anywhere else in the world. Neo-traditionalism in Poland affirms the supremacy of the collective system of values over individual claims. The signification of dignity in traditional terms makes common morality always prevail on individual rights. There is no principle of equality of individuals, but rather equality within a well-defined heteronomous morality.

In practical terms, the rejection of 'universal human rights=dignity' justifies the denial of several individual rights as they are not included in the common morality, for example, LGBT rights or the right to abortion. The latter is usually described by neo-traditionalists as an individual desire, not an individual right. As the liberal discourse poses 'dignity=emancipation', "abortion is no longer a necessary evil, it becomes a source of dignity, a guarantee of emancipation" (Lisicki, 2016/20). Instead, in the neo-traditionalist discourse, the fact that dignity has been signified through a relation of contrariety with individual emancipation (and is in turn articulated as equivalent to Christian morality) makes the right to abortion socially unacceptable. As a consequence, by rejecting the very existence of human rights (through the resignification of 'dignity'), the right to abortion is described by neo-traditionalists just as another removal of boundaries and constraints. Different ways to signify and understand dignity, therefore, impact the normative character of discourses, trying to exclude from the social what is to be considered socially acceptable. If the neo-traditionalist meanings of dignity, equality, or morality become commonsensical, individual rights like abortion or LGBT rights would be automatically excluded from the discursive space.⁷⁵

In case the struggle to signify 'dignity' seems like a narrow dispute, we should look at the bigger picture, since discourses are made up of interconnected elements. As discussed so far, in neo-traditionalism dignity is linked to common (Christian) morality; liberation and dignity are still linked but, however, within the ethical framework given by Christianity, not by individuals (Szabelak, 2020/8). Hence, if dignity is not a universal value, if human rights are not universal, what are the implications for the social morality of a community and its organization? The answer is typically neo-traditionalist: the 'authentic way of life' of a community should be preserved from external agents, as human rights are seen as just another face of cultural colonialism (Pospieszalski, 2018/22). This position entails that the meaning of several more signifiers is contested, and their signification results again from other articulatory practices. In this sense, a crucial signifier in the Polish discursive struggle is the subsuming demand for 'democracy'. Indeed, democracy can be signified as the guarantee of individual rights (liberal) or by affirming the rule of the majority (non-liberal). In Poland, its signification marks the shift (or not) towards illiberalism. Neo-traditionalism explicitly signifies 'democracy' in illiberal terms since it makes it equivalent to the people-as-a-community and with the principle of majority, as exemplified in this citation.

"In the narrative of the elites whose position is threatened, the notion of "liberal democracy" means just such a democracy that essentially does not exist, or which, in any case, has reached an advanced decline. We do not need to argue about what is the rule of the "demos", i.e., of the people, as an idea. It is a social device in which the government is under the control of the majority of society" (Ziemkiewicz, 2019/13).

In this sense, as people are culturally defined, the link between 'democracy=majority of society=people (culturally defined)' also includes the affirmation of the primacy of national culture (which in turn defines the nation). This articulation makes democracy equivalent to national sovereignty and national identity. Inspired by Orbán (a point of reference for any Polish neo-traditionalist discourse makers), Winnicki (2020/2) called for the replacement of liberal democracy with national democracy, refusing the Western model in name of national values. Liberal democracy in fact brings with it its hegemonic worldview sponsored by the foreign elite and articulated with LGBT demands, gender relativism, multiculturalism, and openness to other cultures (Legutko, 2016; Ziemkiewicz, 2019/13). On the contrary, stretching the

chain of equivalence to other signifiers (see the discursive map below), '(illiberal) democracy' in Poland ends up being linked to religion and national culture.

The long thread linking all the signifiers discussed so far has been described by Kaczyński in his speech in Kraków, unifying through equivalence and dividing through antagonism. Kaczyński (2019/29) describes post-1989 Poland as a period when there was no democracy since the post-communist elite hijacked “not so much power [*władza*] but domination [*panowanie*]” that is a “permanent social advantage of a certain group” over society. The reference to Gramsci’s hegemony here is rather clear as he distinguishes between political power and domination.⁷⁶ According to Kaczyński, the production of the post-communist liberal discourse aimed not only at political power but also at redefining meanings; the leading elite, in fact, was

“supplemented by a very peculiar ideology, very simplified, we could say a vulgar version of liberalism, of permissiveness: an attack on values, an attack on the Church, an attack on the national tradition, on everything that contributed to national dignity”.

According to this view, the absence of democracy that characterized the post-communist transition implies the absence of values, religion, national tradition, and national dignity; or at least the submission of conservative voices to the liberal domination. Liberal post-communism, instead, is described as characterized by permissiveness, namely the previously discussed absence of boundaries. Equivalence is once again possible because of the common lack of order. Articulated neo-traditionalist demands share the same lack, as they help give a direction, fitting in the neo-traditionalist narrative. In other words, while liberal democracy is constructed on negative freedom, illiberal democracy has a positive content, for “probably democracy works best when it is connected (in our minds) with affection for national, religious and civic traditions” (Zybertowicz, 2017/3). Equivalence and antagonism in this case are crystal clear. The division between liberal and illiberal democracy is the same as the division between nihilism and traditional values, secularization and the Church, multiculturalism and national traditions, individual dignity and communitarian dignity. It reflects a division between worldviews.

The discursive struggle for 'freedom'

The signification of (illiberal) democracy through equivalence and antagonism makes its meaning very different from liberal democracy and all that goes in terms of individual rights and the rule of law.⁷⁷ Similarly, the neo-traditionalist chain of equivalence provides meanings to the other demands of the neo-traditionalist discourse: Western civilization is defined by national cultures and Christianity in contrast with Enlightened Europe; tradition is defined by social morality in contrariety to relativism; national sovereignty is the guarantee for the nation to defend itself against external enemies that want to undermine national values. The chain of equivalence, which includes the pillars of Polish neo-traditionalism, is expressed by Lisicki (2017/26) in this meaningful sentence: "Defending Polish sovereignty is the same as defending the classical understanding of freedom and Western civilization".

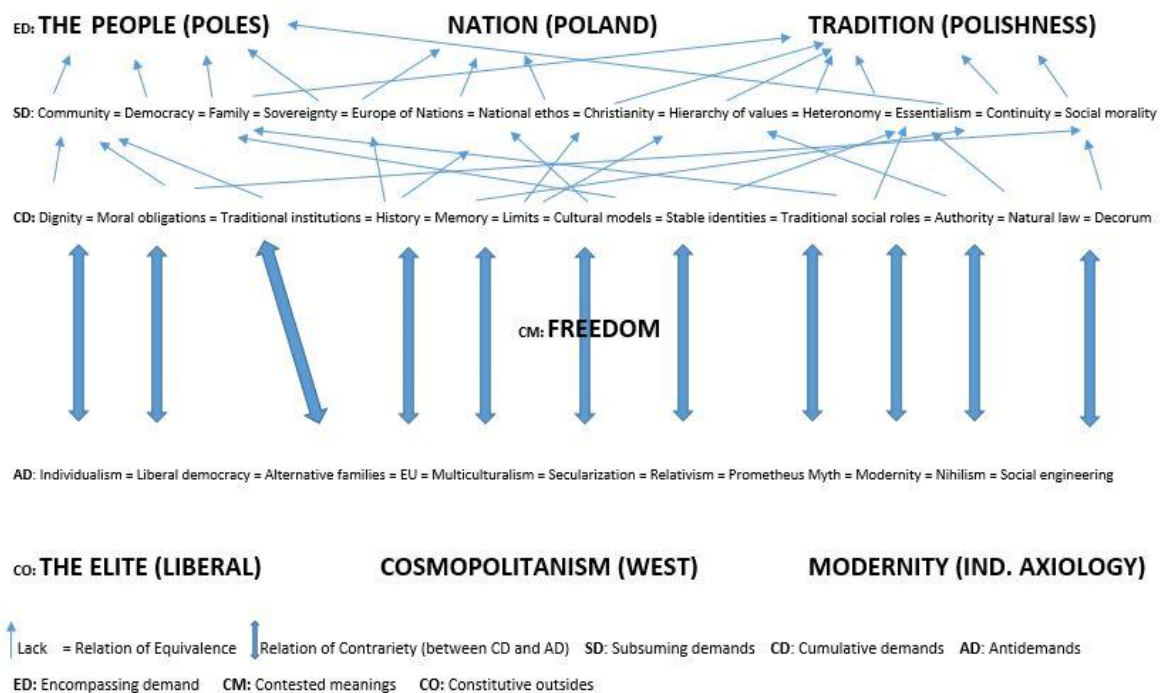


Figure 5. Discursive map of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse (selection of discursive elements).

In light of this, equivalence and antagonism transform respectively the single neo-traditionalist demands and the divisive frontier into hegemonic demands and hegemonic frontier. As modernity advances, these demands remain frustrated and unfulfilled. Or, to be more coherent with the post-structuralist theoretical framework, modernity makes their internal lack visible. Figure 5 shows a visual representation of the

neo-traditionalist discourse *vis-à-vis* the liberal one. In the upper part, we can see the neo-traditionalist demands divided into three levels. The three nodal points (encompassing demands) structure the second level (subsuming demands) as they constitute their lack; in turn, subsuming demands define the third level of cumulative demands. For example, the cumulative demand for 'traditional social roles' lacks 'essentialism' which finally refers to the lack of 'tradition'. A clearer description of each demand can be found in the previous chapter. This graph, instead, tries to represent the discursive linkages between demands. And equivalence is not the only one. In the lower part, the liberal discourse (whose nodal points are the constitutive outsides of the neo-traditionalist triad) denies entirely the neo-traditionalist discourse. This confrontation between discourses is made of smaller relations of contrariety, as single (and articulated) neo-traditionalist demands are denied by their opposite anti-demands:⁷⁸ for example, the demand for 'tradition' is blocked by 'modernity, 'essentialism' by 'relativism', 'traditional social roles' by 'emancipation'. Taken separately, these demands do not present any counter-hegemonic potential. The hegemonic character of neo-traditionalism is given by the articulation of equivalent demands and their common contrariety to the modern world, as is clear from this fragment.

"We are facing confusion and a deep crisis of traditional values. Faith, patriotism, family, marriage, or the protection of life are not as respected today as a generation or two ago. Authorities are challenged, and extremely different views divide society. While more attention is paid to the individual, we are all treated as a mass. Under the apparent slogans of freedom, equality, and encouragement to make our own decisions, we are deprived of control, autonomy, and we are forced to think in a certain way" (Okulska-Bożek, 2020).

Faith, patriotism, traditional roles, and authority are all blocked by the liberal understanding of freedom (one which emphasizes axiological individualism) and by the confusion provoked by the lack of direction. In this regard, the political aspect of neo-traditionalism signals the attempt to reverse the modernizing and individualistic tendencies of liberal democracy. Certainly, the equivalence of these demands is nurtured by the same liberal and relativist antagonist that seeks to dislocate what is *truly* Polish, European, and Catholic. However, they also share the same lack. That explains how the failure (lack) can be performed by neo-traditionalists through different but equivalent crises; it explains how multiculturalism and LGBT rights are seen as two faces

of the same coin by neo-traditionalists. At any rate, if the crisis told us more about the *lack of order*, the positive construction of the neo-traditionalist discourse should be seen as the symbolization of the *lack of freedom*. Nation, democracy, religion, or values do not only provide stable categories to contrast relativism. Their blocked identity is also a symptom of the lack of freedom; neo-traditionalism narrates that only by winning the cultural war freedom can be re-established in Poland.

“As witnesses of the growing conflict, we believe that a nation, a strong state, religion, or order, attacked today from liberal and new-left positions, are not relics. Human communities invariably need a cultural binder and an organization that will *ensure their security* and create the conditions for development and the *achievement of true freedom*. They still need traditions and faith that feel rooted in a higher order. So we do not consider the topic of the cultural war to be secondary. The destruction of traditional forms of collective life observed in Western countries is an important warning to us.” (Nowy Ład, 2020/1; emphasis added).

The reference to freedom, and the very lack of freedom as constitutive of neo-traditionalism, may sound like an oxymoron since I have argued so far how the illiberal counter-reaction took place as a refusal of the excess of freedom brought by liberalism. Nevertheless, rather than an oxymoron, illiberal freedom is instead an attempt to resignify one of the most important signifiers for any society. As the map shows, in between the liberal and neo-traditionalist discourses, there is the signifier ‘freedom’; the center of the hegemonic struggle; the lack in both discourses. Freedom to be *us*, freedom to make society a totality without conflict and antagonism. Freedom in fact is a powerful mobilizing discursive element whose discursive seizure is fundamental to colonizing common sense. It is the signifier that *par excellence* would allow to constitute hegemony, for only a *self-perceived* free person can grant consent to the elite. It is the signifier that would cover the Lacanian *real*. In this light, only a discourse that is capable of giving meaning to ‘freedom’ can become hegemonic.

Even in this case, the contested meaning of freedom is exposed by Legutko (2016: 45; emphasis in the original):

“Liberal democracy boasts of bestowing freedom on individuals and emancipation on groups, while simultaneously taking it for granted that freedom and emancipation are possible only in a liberal democracy, or rather, that freedom and emancipation *are* liberal democracy. [...] The portrayal of liberal democracy as a realization of the eternal desire for freedom is very popular, almost verging

on a platitude, especially in recent decades. This picture is false. [...] It is hard to imagine freedom without classical philosophy and the heritage of antiquity, without Christianity and scholasticism, without different traditions in the philosophy of law and political and social practices”.

In both discourses, freedom represents a universal empty signifier that, through its absence, stands for all the equivalent demands and functions as an encompassing demand. Using the Gramscian metaphor of the ‘war of position’, the two chains of equivalence constitute the trenches while freedom lies in the no man’s land where both discourses struggle for its signification. If the liberal freedom is about emancipation and negative freedom, neo-traditionalist freedom is primarily signified by its three nodal points. The former has been described by Kaczyński (2019/26) as consent to everything in contrast to the prescriptions of religion and tradition.

“Poland has its great, beautiful tradition, a specific tradition, because it is very much connected with Catholicism, connected with the Church. And in the last 30 years, at least for most of this period, this tradition [...] has been questioned. It was questioned by this specific form of liberalism, which dominated in Poland after ‘89, by permissiveness, that is consent to everything”.

The key distinction of the meaning of freedom between the two discourses regards their positive content. Liberalism expresses a view of absolute emancipation, the one pursued by Prometheus, which consists of freeing man from external norms. In this sense, liberalism frames freedom as an emancipatory force. Progressive modernity can be said to be the sponsor of this reading of freedom, since it removes the bonds of the past. On the other side of the hegemonic frontier, negative freedom and emancipation are instead restrained. As argued again by Kaczyński (2019/15), negative freedom needs to be sided with positive freedom.

“To be worthy [*godny*], man must be free, he must be free in two ways. It must be *free from* all kinds of unnecessary prohibitions, oppressions but it must also have the right to a different freedom, *freedom to* act, to participate, to co-decide. And this freedom, ladies and gentlemen, is extremely important in our history; this positive freedom can be said to have constructed our history, of course, along with the former. [...] Only [the state] can be a sphere of freedom in these two understandings: this freedom ‘from’ [*wolność od*] and that freedom ‘to’ [*wolność do*], also that freedom to participate, to be democratic. Only a nation-state can be democratic, can be a democracy”.

Through equivalence, freedom is attached with other meanings: people are free *if* they live according to tradition; they are free *if* the nation's sovereignty is maintained; they are free *if* rules overwhelm relative values. In this sense, to neo-traditionalists, absolute negative freedom is not freedom at all; it is just another form of slavery from multinational corporations, global trends, and fluid identities. The antagonistic division of the discursive space, in this case, consists in creating two different spheres of freedom: progressive freedom is about individual free will and choice. On the one hand, it promotes emancipation; on the other hand, it is accused by neo-traditionalists of falling victim to their own oppressive ideology.

“There are also arguments that it is, after all in the name of freedom, the value currently considered by many to be the highest. Of course, this is some abstract freedom, because as soon as we try to clarify what kind of freedom it really is, it turns out that people, as animal and as social beings, by nature cannot be completely free. Freedom is a cultural construct, it has its framework, its philosophy. Today, the so-called progressive environments, promoting diversity and hyper-creativity, fight everything that they associate with radicalism and oppression. They proclaim their ideology so passionately that they do not notice that they fall into the trap of oppression of their own ideas, they do not see that they themselves are tied with strings to the frames of certain lifestyles, food habits, behavior, dressing, taking care of themselves, using certain gadgets, forms of partying, etc. They are not as free as they think they are” (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2019/36).

In other words, Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz argue that complete negative freedom cannot exist since freedom will always be limited by culture and existing meanings. Neo-traditionalism instead rejects *a priori* absolute negative freedom and proposes a positive meaning where the community defines how freedom can be exercised. As stated for example by Bosak (2020/4), Kaczyński (2019/6), Legutko (2016), or Winnicki (2020/1), freedom is equivalent to patriotism, continuity, tradition, Christianity, and sovereignty. Neo-traditionalist freedom is the freedom of the community of affirming national and traditional values and living according to them, even though they contrast with individual liberty and may have an authoritarian character. In addition to being crucial to winning the cultural war, the example of ‘freedom’ shows exactly the neo-traditionalist political logic. It explains how culture (through signifiers like ‘tradition’, ‘nation’, ‘religion’) legitimizes the discursive shift towards illiberalism.

“If we want to live much better in 5-10 years, but live in freedom and not to be subject to all that is happening to the west of our borders, where freedom is liquidated, where people are punished [...] for saying what they think; to stop this from coming to our country, Poland must be an island of freedom, of our freedom, of Polish freedom! And Polish freedom is the right to have our sacred values respected so that we can live as we want; so that our lives can go with a rhythm that has been preordained centuries ago, millenniums ago by those who created our faith” (Kaczyński, 2019/6).

To conclude, this fragment contains in a few words everything that has been said so far about neo-traditionalist freedom. To Kaczyński, Polish freedom is inextricably and definitively linked to tradition, to religion, to the past and there is no freedom outside of it. To use the neo-traditionalist terminology, freedom is about defending the ‘authentic culture’ from colonizers. This last aspect should be emphasized: the reference to the West as the stealer of Polish freedom strengthens the anti-colonial narrative of neo-traditionalism. The political and counter-hegemonic dimension of illiberalism in Poland is directed against the cultural influence of ‘cultural colonizers’. Therefore, the counter-reaction against liberalism is narrated as an affirmation of national freedom to defend the ‘authentic way of life’ based on “our sacred values”.

Chapter 12

Fantasmatic Logic

In the previous chapter, I have referred to the political as the shadow of the real whose appearance is conducive to the resignification of the dislocated discursive space. This moment of failure - the encounter with the real - is the primary trigger for different symbolizations of reality (Stavrakakis, 1999). However, even though political constructions cover *real failures*, the contingent “ignoble origins” of the symbolic order do not disappear (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 159). The political constitution of discourses through equivalence and antagonism does not erase their non-necessary nature. “If political reality is a symbolic construction, [...] it nevertheless depends on fantasy in order to constitute itself” (Stavrakakis, 1999: 81). Therefore, the political moment of discursive construction must be sided by imaginary fantasies that conceal their contingency. Only thanks to fantasies discourses can sediment and build resistant (though never immutable) identities. Indeed, the aim of this thesis, as well as the overall aim of discourse theory, is not so much to reveal the contingency of reality and the fluidity of identities – this is rather a banality passed off as a great discovery of constructionism – but quite the opposite. It seeks to scrutinize how contingent discourses (in this case, neo-traditionalism) emerge and sediment; to put it differently, it aims to explain how discourses conceal and overcome radical contingency. Fantasies tell us how to believe in *that* specific truth, while dismissing *other* truths as irrational. Knowing that an objective discursive truth cannot exist, if the political logic shows how meanings are nailed through nodal points, the fantasmatic logic says more about how these meanings are ideologically protected from alternative representations. In brief, if discourse is an open enclosure made of articulated discursive elements, fantasies are the *inclosure acts* that temporarily lock the field of discursivity.

Moving back to the case study, the fantasmatic logic of neo-traditionalism contributes to revealing the ideological support behind traditional Poles, Poland, and Polishness. The different possibilities to signify the three nodal points, or other signifiers

like 'normality' or 'freedom, show the inherent instability of any discursive formation. To defend their discourse from the openness of the social, neo-traditionalist discourse makers narrate fantasies that offer an ideological shield against the contingency of identities. It is only through (horrific) fantasmatic narratives that their signification can resist the revolutionary pressure exerted by modernity, and only (beatific) fantasies provide them with a hegemonic appeal. The imaginary register of neo-traditionalism, however, involves much more than horrific and beatific narrations as it unfolds across different levels. Though Glynos and Howarth (2007) argue that the logic of fantasy possesses only the function of closure, the latter can touch on several aspects of discourse. Fantasies are necessary to 'close' the meaning of Polishness, for example. However, fantasies also 'close' the horizon of society, determining its organization and its perspectives. They define 'our authentic way of life' blocking alternative models. Or they exclude 'abnormality' from the social space. Thus, their sole function of closure can be displayed in several ways and with different goals. In light of this, the chapter will look at the different ways the organic intellectuals of neo-traditionalism secure the stability of their worldview and establish a neo-traditionalist collective imaginary.

1. The broken promise of 1989

Just like new discourses are built upon crisis (and failure), new social imaginaries emerge from the ashes of broken fantasies. The difference between crises and broken fantasies regards their different symbolic or imaginary dimensions. While the former implicates a sense of urgency and refers to a single event (or lack), the narration of broken promises tells subjects that 'their previous imaginary' was wrong and unsuccessful. Instead, new social imaginaries, such as the one proposed by Polish neo-traditionalist discourse makers, are narrated as an opportunity to finally fulfilling the aspirations of Polish society and re-establishing the lost normality. In this case, the neo-traditionalist fundamental fantasy confirms the hypothesis of the research that poses neo-traditionalism in Poland as a response to political and cultural displacement.

From this hypothesis, the 'illiberal turn' is seen as a result of the failure of constructing a stable post-communist imaginary (Kim, 2022). The year 1989 represented

a breakthrough that completely dislocated the discursive space, opening a historical window of opportunity to redefine ‘the rules of the game’ and construct a new society. As discussed in Chapter 8, this opportunity was seized by the liberal discourse that quickly became hegemonic. The desire to join that part of Europe that had always been ‘normal’ paved the way for liberalism as the West exercised a ‘fantasmatic attraction’ on the new Central and Eastern European democracies. Even Legutko (2016: 1) admits that from the perspective of a socialist country, “the West was the best of all possible worlds”. The Western liberal democratic model represented the imaginary fantasy of the liberal discourse: the dream to catch up, follow, and imitate (Legutko, 2016). It came as a full-fledged promise of normality and freedom which, through this hope, conquered the field of ideas. (Bluhm and Varga, 2019; Shields, 2008). In this sense, the post-1989 social imaginary was a liberal democratic one, the imaginary offered by the idyllic, prosperous, and free West.

However, this picture has been progressively fading (and attacked by performed crises) and neo-traditionalists took the chance to replace it with their fundamental fantasy and their ‘authentic way of life’ based on the neo-traditionalist triad. As we know, the signifier ‘West’ has been transformed by neo-traditionalists from a beatific heaven into a colonialist enemy. Yet, even fantasmatic narrations involve a double mechanism of disruption and production. To construct a successful new social imaginary, the previous one needs to be removed and delegitimized. To achieve hegemony, the new neo-traditionalist discourse must bring about a change in the collective imaginary. It must eliminate the fundamental fantasy based on ‘catching up with the West’, and create a new horizon of unity. To do so, neo-traditionalism narrates ‘the broken promise of 1989’: the failure of meeting the hopes of freedom and normality grown after 1989.

The claim that the post-communist system failed to deliver the promises of 1989 is a long-standing one. Since at least the beginning of the century, Jarosław Kaczyński had denounced how the so-called *układ* (system) had hijacked the main political and economic positions of power in Poland. As noted before, he has indicated the existence of political groups that exerted complete domination over society (Kaczyński, 2019/29). For this reason, he repeatedly called for the construction of a new state (Bill and Stanley,

2020). More recently, however, the focus has shifted from the *układ* to the 'liberal ideology coming from the West' (Kaczyński, 2019/15). The current performance of crisis blames the 'liberal ideology' as the source of abnormality and the 'stealer of enjoyment'

The disenchantment with the hopes of the post-1989 revolution constitutes a common theme in the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland. The fall of socialism is described (and perceived) as a moment of rupture to gain back freedom, after centuries of partitions, foreign dominations, and wars. However, the post-communist transition towards democracy is often portrayed as fake and illusory: the yoke of communism has been replaced by the one of liberal democracy.⁷⁹ Unlike the 1989 liberal fantasy promised, post-communism is pictured by neo-traditionalists as the continuation of colonialist practices. 'Freedom from' the soviets should have meant 'freedom to' create an independent country; freedom *from* censorship and foreign dominations *to* get back Polish values. Instead, as Bosak (2020/12) warned, "after 1989, [...] there was no decommunization at universities. The old communists draw young leftists, portray them as a sort of higher kind of enlightenment" so to spread their ideology.⁸⁰ Power and propaganda centers simply moved from the hands of the communist intelligentsia to a different elite defined, with a certain irony, as "competent, responsible, enlightened and progressive" (Lisicki, 2017/25).

In this sense, the narration of 'broken promise' reflects the same clash regarding the signifier 'freedom', this time at the imaginary level. If at the symbolic level 'liberal freedom' means negative freedom and the removal of any barrier (rather than the affirmation of national values), at the imaginary level 'liberal freedom' is narrated as a horrific fantasy that frustrated the hopes of liberated Poles. Rather than a society based on their traditions, freedom meant purely negative freedom, while symbols like the Catholic Church or the Polish nation were abused. Rather than Christianity or Polish traditions, liberal freedom brought erotic magazines and pornography.

"1989 awoke the appetites and hopes. It became a breakthrough year. So it seemed to me then. Censorship was soon abolished and religion returned to schools. And here for the first time, but not the last, my euphoria got a slap in the face. It turned out that the elimination of censorship with all its political dimensions did not necessarily mean access to the previously forbidden books. [...] Eroticism and pornography started to create sensation! Kiosks were filled with Western magazines available without restrictions, sometimes even for minors" (Nalaskowski, 2018/15).

This extract tells exactly how the promise of freedom was broken according to neo-traditionalists. The post-1989 freedom entailed liberation from communism but did not offer any *pars construens* for the country except individual liberty. Like communists attacked traditional institutions, so did the liberals, Legutko (2016) accuses. And the entrenchment between liberalism and communism as part of the same progressive and destructive faction contributes to feeding horrific fantasies. The post-1989 imaginary is portrayed as flawed since nothing changed. The poisonous ideology from the West is represented just as the human face of cultural Marxism. The accusation is that the creation of the post-communist/liberal imaginary came at the expense of traditional institutions. The 'pedagogy of shame' not only meant the exclusion of traditional discursive elements from the social; it also pushed the followers of the traditionalist camp to the fringe.

"As Legutko showed, after 1989, the task of rebuilding identity and the national fabric was not given a high priority. On the contrary: the circles that believe in a Poland anchored in the tradition of the nation and its relationship with the Catholic Church, had to fight for historical politics against the activists of the pedagogy of shame" (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2018/15).

All these contributions provide ideological support to the neo-traditionalist claim of the broken promise. By narrating the post-communist transition as a horrific fantasy that thwarted Polish traditions and sovereignty, the counter-revolution gains strength and impetus. The broken promise of 1989 (or to be more precise its performance) disassembles the Western dream as something ultimately undesirable, creating instead the discursive opportunity for a new imaginary horizon and a new counter-hegemonic project. Since 1989 meant the extension of the 1960s cultural revolution of the West to Poland, neo-traditionalism mobilizes its followers and oppose a different imaginary that contrast "the latest ideological fabrications of Brussels" (2016/12). The objective is to pursue a cultural shift and another transition, "from post-communism to normality" (Sakiewicz, 2018/9).

In short, the broken promise of 1989 is narrated as an unforgivable sin. The lack of order and the lack of freedom behind neo-traditionalism are reconstructed as a 'theft of normality'. By following the Western model, the constitutive lack of the country could not be filled and after decades of communism Poland kept being 'abnormal'. Therefore,

the construction of a new social imaginary involves the construction of a new normality by the neo-traditionalist organic intellectuals. This fantasmatic narrative should be read against the background of the broken promise of 1989: the restoration of a negative freedom that, however, failed to defend the *normal* traditions and values of Poland.

2. Building 'normality'

The discursive construction of normality is where the political and fantasmatic moments intersect. Like any other discursive element, 'normality' is signified through equivalence and difference. Like 'freedom', 'normality' is a crucial empty signifier to win the hegemonic struggle and define common sense. It has a mobilizing appeal and, even more than freedom, it defines what is acceptable (normal) within society and what is unacceptable (abnormal). Despite being an example of both the political and fantasmatic logics at work, the discussion about the signifier 'normality' has been included in this chapter for two reasons. First, I aimed to explain both the political signification of an empty signifier, and its ideological thickening but it would have been repetitive to discuss the same process two times. Therefore, the signification of 'normality' through equivalence will only be mentioned briefly here. In this respect, I could have instead devoted more space to the political signification of normality and the fantasmatic narrative of freedom. However, and this is the second reason, normality has a much more pronounced ideological character. The very construction of normality requires references to abnormality, which is often associated with images of monstrosity and irrationality evoked to exclude alternative lifestyles from the field of rationality. In this regard, the ideological construction of normality is charged with demagogism. Recalling what has been discussed in Chapter 5, demagogism is a "hegemonic practice that poses past common sense in a certain discourse as a rational situation for restoring normality" (Melito, 2021b: 242). In Polish neo-traditionalism, that means the refusal of the liberal worldview as an unacceptable and abnormal way of life, and the narration of a fantasmatic imaginary that restores the lost normality; the normal way of life that has been stolen after 1989.

2.1. Defining the field of normality

The construction of 'normality' and 'abnormality' follows the 'broken promise of 1989'. Since the post-1989 imaginary is fading as it did not keep its promises, a different counter-hegemonic horizon is being built. 'There was an alternative', neo-traditionalists argue, and the restoration of the true traditional normality is the remedy to that failure. The construction of 'normality' is carried out by neo-traditionalist actors in two different ways. On the one hand, we observe an explicit and theoretical signification of the signifier of 'normality', which usually refers to norms and natural law. In this case, the signification process follows the same pattern described in the previous chapter: 'normality' is articulated with typical traditionalist elements (e.g., traditional customs) and rejects opposite demands (e.g., relativism). On the other hand, normality is narrated through beatific fantasies that point to an idyllic way of life and a mythical past as opposed to horrific fantasies of abnormality and irrationality.

If in the previous chapter I have described the political construction of neo-traditionalism as pursued through the *logic of equivalence* (typical of offensive hegemonic projects), here the signification of the 'normal discursive space' refers to the exclusion of 'irrational demands' from the field of rationality, delegitimizing their claims. Hence, the novelty in the political logic about 'normality' is the use of the *logic of difference* (which conversely denotes the reactionary character of neo-traditionalism). By dismissing everything that lies outside the field of rationality as irrational and wrong, the logic of difference is implemented in a quite crude way. Alternative demands are excluded from 'our normal way of life' and are, rather than coopted, tolerated. In this way, they are incorporated in their discourse while, at the same time, pushed to the margins of society (Howarth, 2000). For example, a crucial element of the neo-traditionalist discourse is the 'traditional family', often also defined as 'normal family'.⁸¹ Alternative models are, instead, simply tolerated and occupy a low place in the hierarchy of values.⁸²

"The attack to the Polish family is underway. The attack, which aims to undermine its essence, to make it at most one of the possible solutions, is underway [...]. Of course, there is no perfect social institution, but there is no social institution that would contribute so much to the creation of the most benevolent civilization in the history of the world, the Christian civilization. And our family -

whether someone likes it or not – emerges from Christianity. We are tolerant, this is a feature of our nation and this is also a feature of our party. But I have already said: tolerance – yes. But affirmation of anything that comes to one’s mind – no! Law and Justice is the guardian of the Polish family now, and it will be. It also stands in defense of normality and for something that could be described as being in harmony with nature” (Kaczyński, 2019/19).

In addition to pushing to the margins of society alternative models of family, this fragment also shows what normality means in the neo-traditionalist discourse, “something that could be described as being in harmony with nature.” Indeed, normality is often articulated with other discursive elements that define its meaning. It is ‘normal’, for example, to abide by natural law, to defend traditional social roles, to respect authority, to preserve cultural roots and traditional values, to affirm Christianity in the public space (Bosak, 2020/12; Lisicki, 2020/50; Pospieszalski, 2015/8; Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2019/29). In these cases, normality is explicitly defined: a normal situation entails the absence of relativism, where everything follows the pattern of tradition. This signification of normality stems from the equivalence between different signifiers. Thus, in Polish neo-traditionalism, a discourse that poses Polish people, the Polish nation and traditional Polishness as its main nodal points, normality is present when the nation-state is sovereign, when traditional values and institutions define the public space, and when Polish and Christian culture is not questioned as ‘our way of life’.

Abnormality, instead, is expressed by opposite discursive elements and opposite discourses. Relativism, emancipation, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism are not normal values. Citing Nalaskowski (2019/26), “affirmation of homosexuality is not normal for me. There can be no consent to publicly manifest this orientation (the term “perversion” is no longer allowed), homoparades, acceptance of homounions, attempts to adopt children”. This abnormality, Nalaskowski adds, is a direct consequence of communism and the post-1989 transition, mentioning again the broken promise. Interestingly enough, the demagogic restoration of normality in Poland is often associated to the restoration of common sense. The latter, in fact, is not considered as something contingent; rather, true common sense has been corrupted and needs to be restored. Referring to the LGBT community, Pospieszalski (2019/34; emphasis added) argues that

“Just as an inhuman totalitarian system was brought to us with tanks - the atheistic doctrine of communism - so today, through a gigantic propaganda offensive, they are trying to impose on us

an anti-civilization vision of society. This neo-pagan ideology is contrary not only to the values that have built our civilization, but above all *to nature and common sense.*”

From this last example, we can already see how the political exclusions of anti-demands and the so-called ‘LGBT ideology’ begins to merge with the narration of horrific fantasies that disqualifies ‘their abnormality’. Fantasies (horrific in this case) serve the purpose of justifying the exclusion of these demands; they ‘close’ the enclosure of normality preventing alternative demands from entering. Accordingly, if we consider normality as contingent (and it obviously is – what is normal in a certain epoch is abnormal in another), fantasies are necessary to defend ‘our normality’ from alternative truths.

As discussed in the chapter about the logics approach, fantasmatic narrations consist of two separate but complementary moments: beatific and horrific. Even in the case of the fantasy of normality, both dimensions are at work. To sustain the vision of a ‘traditionalist normality’, idyllic scenarios and a mythical past are narrated. The ideological maneuver to uphold this kind of normality seeks to manipulate common sense from above: ‘our way of life’ (something that, as Žižek (1993) taught us, is fuzzy and contestable) draws on a golden age that was constantly attacked by internal and external enemies. Normality is something that existed in the past and which, at the same time, was always stolen. Today, and this is the second fantasmatic phase, Poland can still be normal but agents of abnormality are trying to ruin ‘our way of life’ again. Beatific and horrific fantasies provide the ideological strength to resist the cultural changes brought by modernity. Otherwise, liberal demands would simply penetrate Polish culture. By claiming, for instance, that multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism represent an existential threat to Poland, people are mobilized to defend their common sense.⁸³

Thus, the counter-revolution is pictured as the restoration of normality after the dislocation caused by different forces (from the EU to the LGBT community). Consider again the following quote from Sakiewicz (2019/14). Not only does he link the three nodal points to normality (as discussed in Chapter 10) defining the content of the neo-traditionalist counter-revolution. He also ‘closes’ their meanings through fantasies.

“Even more nations are opposed to the group of Eurocrats who wanted to replace democracy with a Pan-European ideology. The cheering crowds of Poles and Hungarians on the streets of Budapest

at the sight of the prime ministers of both countries declaring their fight for a Europe of Homelands – this is a visible sign of a new spring of peoples. This bloodless revolution involves more and more countries. Protection of the family, and especially children, against demoralization is its important element. [...] This rebellion cannot be stopped. People want normality”

National sovereignty, the principle of majority, and the defense of the traditional family: all these elements are defined as the basis for normality – what people want. The mobilization of the people is directed against all those entities that are deemed to have stolen the Polish way of life. At the same time, normality is accompanied by images of exultant people that are finally rising against the disconnected Eurocrats in Brussels. It is a fantasy of hope: if people stand up in name of traditions and sovereign nations against the demoralizing forces of relativism and cosmopolitanism, normality can be reinstated. Poland can achieve unity again.⁸⁴

In all cases, normality refers to the ‘authentic Polish way of life’ based on traditional values. While Western Europe is following the attractions of individualism and nihilism, Poland is still somehow anchored to the stability given by the traditional family, community, and nation (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2018/22). This idyllic way of life is opposed to the ‘monstrous’ liberal behavior. Oftentimes, the two lifestyles are compared. This is how Nalaskowski (2019/30; emphasis added) described the LGBT parade in Białystok:

“In Białystok, there were riots because someone didn't think (or they politically chose to ignore) and created in the heart of the conservative, *that is normal*, Poland a pro-pederasts march. Brigades of homosexuals invaded the capital of Podlasie [...] They invaded, hoping to infect this land with their "Europeanness", "modernity" and "diversity".

Here, the rural region of Podlasie is idealized as the heart of conservative, and therefore normal, Poland. On the contrary, the participants in the LGBT march are defined with terms that allude to their abnormal monstrosity: they are *pederasts* that *invade Białystok infecting* with the disease of modernity. While Podlasie is the Heartland of traditional Poland, they promote a foreign way of life which disrupts normality. Normality, instead, is described in the same article as the life of ordinary Poles.

“In Tykocin 20 km away it was still normal, as it usually is in Podlasie [...] On Monday people went to work normally. The majority of people to the fields. Because it was almost harvest time. They will be working hard from dawn till dusk, repairing the machines broken in the fields, eating fatty

food and sleeping little. And so until Sunday, when they will put white shirts on sunburnt necks, ties, wear their jackets, their Sunday shoes and go to church, and then take their children for ice cream” (Nalaskowski, 2019/30).

This citation offers a clear example of how the fantasmatic logic secures the meaning of ‘normality’: the infinite possibilities of interpreting the ‘Polish way of life’ are reduced here to two options. The first is represented by the ‘abnormal’ LGBT march, associated with negative images of violence and perversion. This perverse lifestyle is blocked by the beatific fantasy. Normality, in fact, resides in the ordinary lives of working people. The idyllic life of ordinary Poles takes place in a beatific scenario where the illness and dirt of *abnormal people* do not exist. Here, people do not worry about fictitious post-modern issues; they just work hard. Everyone goes to Church and acts normally, eats ice-creams. The contrast between the two scenarios is sharp and seeks to deny the fact that different ways of life in Poland might even be contemplated.

3. The role of fantasies: Defending identities from contingency

Normality can be considered as the signifier that covers the lack of order within society. At the imaginary level, normality is narrated as an idyllic situation of peaceful coexistence in contrast to the chaotic liberal abnormality that followed 1989 and disoriented people. Although normality is linked to the construction of ‘our way of life’, the latter needs to be supported by more fantasmatic narratives that define what the common good of Polish society should be. In other terms, ‘our way of life’ is delineated by fantasies that narrate the imaginary lost *jouissance* and blames the Other for its theft (Žižek, 1993). It is not simply related to the definition of what is normal; more than that, it sets the hegemonic horizon of society defining the good and the evil, the truth and the false. Nonhoff (2019: 74; emphasis added) maintains that

“any political discourse will sooner or later have to refer to some idea of the common good (or a similar concept). But the common good as such can never be discursively present; it needs to be *symbolized* by one of the concrete discursive elements”

In this case, Nonhoff is referring to the function of representation of some signifiers to keep together the (counter-)hegemonic chain of equivalence. In Polish neo-

traditionalism, this role has been entrusted to Poland, Poles, and Polishness. Yet, symbolization is not enough and Nonhoff's argument, although correct, is incomplete. As argued in Chapter 7 (section 2.2), all the strategemes proposed by Nonhoff need to be supported at the imaginary level by fantasies with a function of closure. The antagonistic division of the discursive space requires the demonization and discursive exclusion of the adversary; similarly, representative nodal points or articulated demands have to be supported by fantasies. As pointed out by Žižek (1993, 201):

“the element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated. This relationship toward the Thing, structured by means of fantasies, is what is at stake when we speak of the menace to our ‘way of life’ presented by the Other: [...] It appears to us as ‘our thing’, as something accessible only to us, as something ‘they,’ the others, cannot grasp; nonetheless it is something constantly menaced by ‘them.’”

In the case of the narration of ‘true Polishness’ or ‘our authentic way of life’, equivalence, representation, and antagonism are not enough. It is not enough, for example, to advocate a demand for religious traditions and articulate it as equivalent to the demand for ‘traditional family’. The discursive equivalence requires a fantasy that provides ideological support. This is clearly shown in Zybertowicz (2017/2): the demand for religion as a source of values and stability is also supplemented by the beatific fantasy of a happy family (children, parents, grandparents) going together to the Church and singing. A beatific fantasy that promises unity, and opposes the hyper-individualist turmoil of our times. Only when sustained by a fantasy the demand for Christian values is legitimate. At the same time, the enjoyment given by traditions is accessible only to those considered authentic Poles, as also suggested by Lisicki (2020/51) in his column significantly entitled ‘*Poles and these others*’, typically excluding from the people ‘the Others’ who *enjoy* differently and therefore do not really belong to the community. People defending communism were not true Poles during the Polish People's Republic, and so are not those Poles who are not attached to Polish traditional symbols today (e.g., the Church, the flag). To ‘close’ its meaning, the common good that Polish neo-traditionalism aims to achieve needs to be fantasized about.

3.1 Ways of life compared: 'our way of life' and the 'theft of enjoyment'

The antagonist chains of equivalence and nodal points outlined in the previous chapter can be represented at the imaginary level as two antagonist ways of life, usually narrated as antagonist storylines. In this case, we do not observe a discursive division between discursive elements but, rather, the representation of idealized and contrasting lifestyles. The imaginary character of fantasy is evident since 'our way of life' is always pictured as a beatific postcard, where everything functions perfectly and obstacles are concealed. On the other hand, 'their way of life' is horrific: even regular behaviors become source of repulsion and dangerous threats. In the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse, these fantasies are linked respectively to neo-traditionalist demands and progressive anti-demands. Confirming the methodological model, these 'interdimensional bonds' between the symbolic and the imaginary level signal a link between equivalence and beatific fantasies, and between contrariety and horrific fantasies.⁸⁵

Our way of life

In many of the texts analyzed, a sense of frustration with the contemporary cultural models emerges. The 'broken promise of 1989' seems to cover something deeper than a political delusion. It seems rather a sign of incapacity or unwillingness to adapt to the modern world and sometimes, referring probably to Julius Evola's book, neo-traditionalists call for a revolt against the modern world. They can be defined as the 'cultural losers of globalization', the cultural precariat living in a world of ethical instability. This attitude reveals the refusal of and dissatisfaction with the 'common good' of the liberal market society. It is a meaningless 'common good' that does not have any higher aspiration but material. Liberalism is deemed to be incapable of elevating humans above the material sphere and, therefore, cannot provide any wisdom (Legutko, 2020).

The triviality of the liberal way of life narrated by neo-traditionalist actors can be interpreted as the cause of the lack of order and freedom. This lack is imagined as a lack of a golden past, where traditions regulated the rhythm of life, religion marked the steps

of human existence, and the nation was the highest value for the member of the community. This idyllic life that (allegedly) existed sometimes in the past has been replaced by a different cultural model where the rhythm of society is set by consumerism, the steps of life relate mainly to the personal working career, and individual desires are the highest values that need to be satisfied in all cases. The lost *jouissance* coincides with the lost 'common good'. Neo-traditionalism narrates that the general aspiration of society that should define 'our way of life' has been replaced by the aspiration of the single individual. As a consequence, people are said to be disoriented as they do not have a clear goal in their life. Often, from the reflections of Legutko to the articles of the young members of nationalist organizations, the modern world is described as an individualist horrific fantasy emptied of any higher value and higher goal. At least not in social terms. It is the world of the *Gesellschaft*, where people live disconnected between them, have a terrible city life (represented by the capital of sins, the liberal Warsaw; Nalaskowski, 2019/18), and whose goal is merely working and consuming. Money, self-realization, and physical pleasure are represented as the horrific liberal enjoyment. Meaningless achievements for neo-traditionalists. Their model of life is pictured as a hedonistic world, which refuses sacrifice and guilt. Neo-traditionalist enjoyment, instead, is not provided by individual pleasure but by what is perceived as having a higher value. Different 'ways of enjoying' entail different lifestyle:

"A generation shaped by hippie slogans of "peace & love", smoking pot and singing pacifist protest songs, has dominated contemporary culture and politics [...]. Fortunately, the Independence March generation and football fans respect the Cursed Soldiers not because of their heroic death, but because they look for role models in how they lived. And they were real warriors. They did not resemble yesterday's hippies or today's malleable dandies in rainbow-colored clothes, who conquer the clubs of Warsaw with their dance steps" (Pospieszalski, 2016/12).

This example compares the two lifestyles through fantasies. On the one hand, Pospieszalski describes the enjoyment of the hippie generation who imagined a world without divisive passions (those created by higher values like the nation or religion) and whose goal is simply to get high. They are linked to today's hippies, the rainbow generation that only cares about clubbing and fashion; in Warsaw, of course, not in the pure Heartland. On the other hand, we find the Independence March generation, 'those who want God' (as discussed below) and, therefore, follow the proper lifestyle, ready to

fight for their country as the nation, as well as God, is a value higher than any individual desire. The same concept is expressed in the following example by a member of the “Independence March generation”, showing again the dissatisfaction with the current models of life proposed by liberal society.

“I am passing tests. I am finishing school and studies. I am a great specialist. What for? To earn good money? Please. To serve others better? That's better, but still not it. To transform reality and improve your character through work? Hmmmm... Why? Why, why, why? There is only one satisfactory answer. The Absolute - God. You don't even have to believe in Him to come to that conclusion. But when you get to it, you can't help but believe it” (Szabelak, 2020/3).

As in several other examples, God transcends his religious dimension. In the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse, God becomes primarily the ordering principle: “you don't

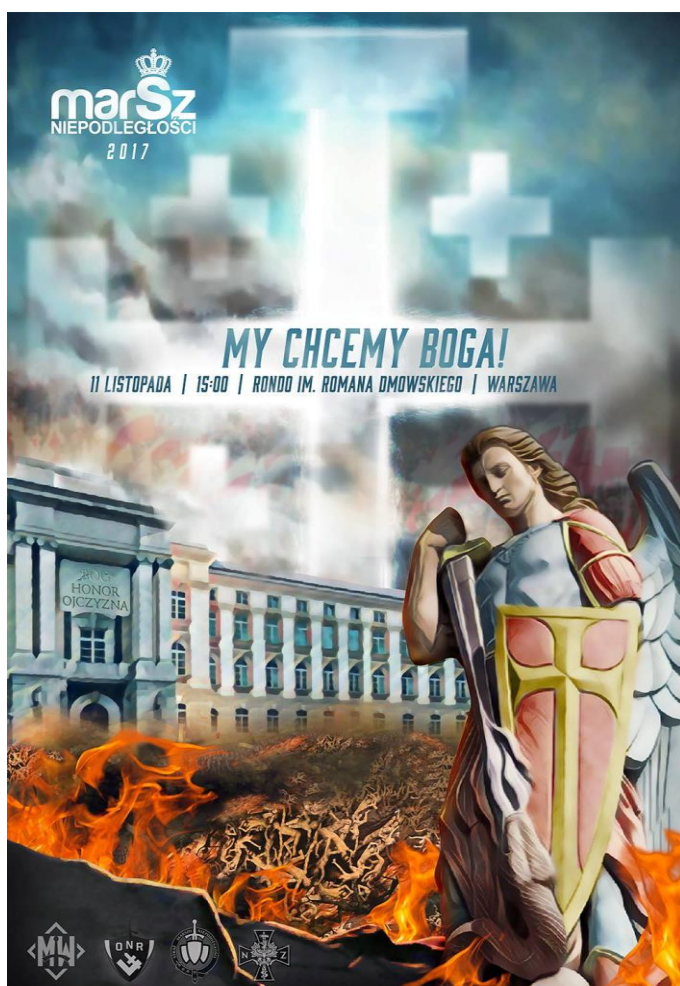


Figure 6. Official poster of the 2017 Independence March.

even have to believe in Him to come to that conclusion”. Perhaps strangely, neo-traditionalists represent God as an empty signifier that condenses within himself tradition, regardless of faith. In a world where traditions are disrupted, God is the way out: God can be represented as the highest life-goal (Szabelak, 2020/3), the source of Polish identity (Kaczyński, 2019/15), or the anchor of values (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz, 2018/23). In all cases, the invocation of God serves to conceal the void and constant dissatisfaction

generated by pervading materialism. In light of this, we can read the slogan of the 2017 *Marsz Niepodległości* that reads ‘We Want God!’ (*My chcemy Boga*) as a desire for the lost enjoyment (Figure 6). As discussed by Kotwas and Kubik (2019), this poster has

certainly a ‘thickening’ political function, linking Polish national culture with Catholicism. The slogan is also connected to practical demands such as the teaching of religion in school. However, ‘We Want God!’ also displays a fantasmatic dimension: God is the fundamental fantasy, the aspiration to a different society where the good (symbolized in the poster by Saint Michael the Archangel) triumphs over the evil (the flames of the hell, the sins of modern society). Desiring God means desiring a different society where the ultimate goal is given by the certainties of religion and where the chaos of the modern world is defeated.



Figure 7: Sticker that was inserted in Sakiewicz, 2019/18 reading: *Queen of Poland - Stand in her defense*

‘We want God!’ suggests that God – the Thing, our ‘Enjoyment’ – is not at hand; it is threatened by the flames at the bottom of the poster. The same can be said for several more fantasized elements that embody the lost Thing and that always appear as evanescent. “If we are asked how we can recognize the presence of this Thing, the only consistent answer is that the Thing is present in that elusive entity called ‘our way of life’” (Žižek, 1993: 201). It is not a case that, during discourse analysis, codes referring to

beatific or fundamental fantasies were not as frequent as those referring to horrific fantasies. In general, the call for defending the ‘Polish way of life’ is one of the most frequent themes in the text corpus. When it comes to defining what is to be defended, however, fantasies become much vaguer. In light of this, ‘our way of life’ is usually embodied by traditions or symbols that stand in defense of the Thing: Christmas carols (*kolędy*) represent ‘our way of life’ against ‘their consumerist way of life’ (Pospieszalski, 2019/40); the Black Madonna *is* Poland and therefore needs to be defended against the LGBT worldview (Sakiewicz, 2019/18; see also figure 7); the national flag defines ‘true Poles’, whereas the intellectual elite of the country is ashamed of it (Ziemkiewicz, 2015/3); the traditional family, always represented in idyllic contexts, stands as a symbol

of freedom that represents happiness; it is a desire to be achieved in order to make society a totality but it is blocked and threaten by the LGBT ideology (Sakiewicz, 2019/16; Kaczyński portrays the traditional family as a fundamental fantasy in most of his speeches); finally, the ordinary life of ordinary Poles is another example of doing unspecified 'Polish things' (Nalaskowski, 2018/19). These examples of the neo-traditionalist construction of enjoyment confirm what Žižek (1993) argues with regard to 'our way of life', namely a series of disconnected (though articulated) elements made of symbols, rituals, and ceremonies that make visible the fuzzy way a community organizes its *real* enjoyment.

'The theft of enjoyment'

The reference to these 'symbols of Polishness' makes clear that 'our way of life' is not something that can be described clearly and unequivocally. On the contrary, this 'way of life' is constantly described as under threat by the enemies that seek to 'steal' it and by 'their perverse way of enjoyment'. Again, the fantasmatic neo-traditionalist narratives perfectly fit the theoretical assumptions proposed by Žižek (1993). Polish freedom was first stolen by foreign empires; then by the Soviets; after 1989 by the post-communist elite; and finally, today, by anti-national and anti-Polish ideologies. The 'theft of enjoyment' committed throughout the years by the enemies of the nation is perfectly represented in the illustration below (Figure 8): Robert Biedroń, the homosexual leader of a liberal leftist party, smiles as he looks at Joseph Stalin throwing darts at the icon of Black Madonna of Częstochowa, not only a religious symbol but the very incarnation of the country. The horrific fantasy shows a thread between soviet communism and liberalism as they both 'steal' traditional Polish *jouissance*. To protect its way of life, neo-traditionalism narrates continuity of theft. The horrific fantasy places 'our way of life' in constant danger: from Stalin to Biedroń, Poland always faces new enemies that aim to

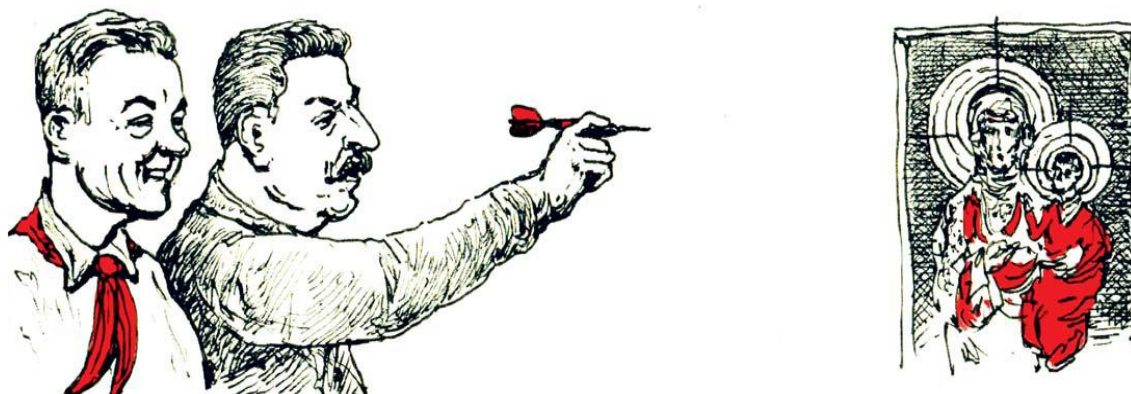


Figure 8. Stalin and Biedroń 'steal' the Thing (Zawistowski in Sakiewicz, 2019/17).

destroy the core of the Nation. The political construction of neo-traditionalism discussed in the previous chapter is possible and acquires strength as it is sided by ideological fantasies. By blaming the Other, fantasies justify the absence of unity that impedes the country from being a totality again, to defeat antagonism and achieve hegemony. The 'theft of enjoyment' reflects the symbolic castration experienced by the child and described by Lacan: it reflects "a lack of *jouissance* of a pre-symbolic real enjoyment or satisfaction which is always posited as lost" (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2004). In the same way, the 'authentic Polish way of life' narrated by neo-traditionalist is always posited as stolen by external agents, as Kaczyński (2019/6) maintains:

"There are some in our country who want to break into our families, schools, kindergartens, into our lives; who want to deprive us of our culture, freedom, rights; they attack our sacred values, they attack the Church. They want what is normal for us [...] to become contested."

Although I did not conduct a linguistic analysis of the text corpus, in this case, verbs like 'break into' (*wedrzeć się*), 'deprive' (*odebrać*), and 'attack' (*atakować*) are particularly relevant to show exactly how 'our way of life' is portrayed as a victim of a 'theft' (break into, deprive, attack). As in Lacan, the horrific fantasies of the 'theft of enjoyment' always pose some Other as responsible for the lack. The lack of order and lack of freedom, namely, the *real* in the neo-traditionalist discourse, are attributed to external enemies that conspire against the Polish way of life. Thus, for example, as Christmas pastoral visits represent a Polish tradition and a worldview based on continuity from the past, the progressive mainstream is accused of destroying them and expelling religion from life: their horrific goal is to radically change the Polish way of life.

“In my childhood, the pastoral visit was something special. The apartment, which had already become dusty after celebrating Christmas with a bunch of people, was thoroughly cleaned, we were putting on a white shirt and a velvet ribbon under our necks, while my mother prepared a festive coffee service and wore a dress suit. Dad used to tie his tie and shave for the second time that day, spraying himself with cologne. The presence of the priest at home was a real celebration [...]. The ferocity with which they try to destroy, trample and humiliate this very Polish tradition today is completely extraordinary. It shows how great is the determination of the opponents of Christianity, and thus the opponents of the roots of our civilization, the hierarchy of values, and the ethical system” (Nalaskowski, 2019/24).

This example shows plainly how the political construction of neo-traditionalism is supported ideologically by fantasies. In the first part, Nalaskowski narrates the idyllic past when, notwithstanding the communist rule, (Christian) traditions were part of ‘our way of life’ and allowed the survival of the nation. Today, all of this is in danger as the mainstream is trying to ridicule and remove the Christmas pastoral visits *qua* God from everyday life. The chain of equivalence between the demands ‘Christianity=our civilization=hierarchy of values=ethical system’ is sustained by a horrific fantasy portraying the Other (in this case the intellectual mainstream) as destroying the Polish tradition of the Christmas pastoral visit as an attempt to expel religion from the public space, from the Polish way of life. The equivalent demands are embodied fantasmatically by a tradition which represents symbolically a different worldview where traditional values, religion and hierarchy matter.

‘Their perverse enjoyment’

Christmas carols, pastoral visits, the traditional family, or the Black Madonna are just some examples of how the objects of *jouissance* are fantasized as stolen or under threat. The same can be said about other symbols: the pedagogy of shame of liberal intellectuals desecrates Polish emblems as they are an obstacle to transforming ‘obscure Poland’ into a ‘European country’. Denying traditional symbols of Polishness, Polish identity is being attacked as well as the true Pole, the *Polak-Katolik*, who becomes an object of aggression (Bosak, 2020/11; Ziemkiewicz, 2018/8; 2019/15). However, as argued by Žižek (1993: 203), the threat to our way of life not only does come from the

‘theft of enjoyment’ that threatens identities. Enjoyment is under threat also by ‘their different and perverse way of enjoying’:

“We always impute to the “other” an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what really bothers us about the “other” is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment, precisely the surplus, the “excess” that pertains to this way: the smell of “their” food, “their” noisy songs and dances, “their” strange manners, “their” attitude to work”.

In the case of ‘their (liberal) perverse way of enjoyment’, what transpires from the horrific fantasies is always the relationship between individualism and *jouissance*. If neo-traditionalism identifies as sublimated objects of ‘our enjoyment’ the symbols of the community, ‘their pleasure’ derives instead from individual axiology. This is well represented by the liberalization of sex as the ultimate stage of individual liberty. To Legutko (2016), the liberalization of sex is just the culmination of growing consumerism, the exaltation of instant pleasure. The sex revolution was set as the last step to overthrow repressive power structures, like marriage and family. The quest for pleasure, for enjoyment, became the essence of life itself to the point that happiness, once a condition to be achieved throughout the entire life, has become synonymous with pleasure. The liberal way of enjoyment, therefore, is episodic, best shown by the new interpretation of Horace’s *Carpe Diem*; once praise of simplicity, today an invitation to enjoy the moment. *Just do it*, as a famous slogan would suggest. It is a form of enjoyment that is constantly frustrated and fed by its renewal. Sex becomes, therefore, the ephemeral pleasure for the individual *par excellence*, freed from any constraint and domination, including those established by old ties.

“Women, homosexuals, lesbians, polygamists, advocates of sexual communes all wanted to have their claims recognized and to contribute to the making of a new society. Sex became both the weapon to destroy the old order and the instrument to forge a new one” (Legutko, 2016: 103).

In this narrative against sexual liberty, the description of free sex as something inherently bad and horrendous assumes particular relevance. Some might argue that there is nothing wrong with different kinds of sexuality. However, to ‘close’ the essence of ‘our way of life’ otherwise contingent, “homosexuals, lesbians, polygamists” are attached with a negative connotation, implying ‘their perverse enjoyment’ and legitimizing their exclusion from the collective imaginary.

These horrific fantasies have normative implications and are used to contrast demands for more individual rights (Pospieszalski, 2016/15). Depicting 'their enjoyment' as selfish individualism, individual rights such as abortion, euthanasia or adoption by homosexual couples are placed as part of the liberal dystopia. For instance, Lisicki (2015/3), discussing the example of LGBT couples adopting children, claims that they only seek to satisfy individuals' desires. Accepting the right to adopt for homosexual couples means, to Lisicki, damaging 'our way of life'. The latter, he argues, is not defined anymore by the values of traditions, natural law, and Christianity. It is defined, instead, by individualism and relativism. Hence fantasies are also crucial in propagating illiberal narratives and mobilizing subjects against, in this case, the expansion of individual liberties as a threat to the life of the community. Using horrific fantasies to contrast liberal policies is a decisive ideological weapon in the cultural war. Demands for natural law or traditional social roles result, accordingly, 'ideologically protected' against the pressure of modernity.

The same can be said with regard to other horrific fantasies about 'their pleasure'. Is there anything in common, for example, between a Muslim migrant and a homosexual? The association could be even paradoxical as Muslims are accused of being backward but at the same time similar to LGBT people.⁸⁶ At any rate, 'their perverse way of enjoyment' is equivalent: the individualist pleasure of homosexuals is equivalent to the perverse enjoyment of Muslim refugees that do not accept European values, except individualism: money, women and cars indicate the selfish and horrific nature of Muslim refugees, as narrated by Nalaskowski (2017/4):

"The refugee issue, or rather the crusade of one culture against another, is not merely a political or diplomatic problem. It's a matter of two speeds. Western European standards are falling head over heels. They allow homosexual unions (the word gay is a propaganda euphemism), they allow them to adopt children, taking into account only the pleasure of "parents", and completely ignoring the child. And of course, transforming logic and decency into politically correct, which requires accepting what is "different" ("foreign" is a forbidden word) with great applause and care. But this other person does not want European culture, let alone Christianity, which is already burning out in Western Europe. He wants European abundance, money, women and cars".

Like the enjoyment of homosexuals, also the *jouissance* of refugees is linked to individualism and aims at the destruction of Christianity. Thus, it does not matter

whether LGBT people and refugees are similar people, or the fact that they are culturally rather different. 'Their perverse enjoyment' is a threat to 'our way of life' and will eventually destroy it.

Finally, it can be added that these horrific fantasies are narrated as a cultural revolution. To defend the contingent meaning of Poland, Polishness, and Poles from different significations, 'their way of life' must be represented as disgusting and unacceptable. Fantasies explain why the illiberal and neo-traditionalist discursive shift in Poland appears legitimate within the social: in fact, the confrontation about, for example, LGBT rights does not involve a mere political debate. The exclusion of their worldview from the field of normality, rationality, and acceptability is charged with strong ideological justifications. It is not simply about a single policy or the expansion of individual rights. *They* threaten society in its entirety. It is *them* to be an obstacle to achieving morality and unity. Thus, *they* do not just advocate 'disgusting' policies. Horrific fantasies say that *they are disgusting*. In describing the participants to the rock festival *Przystanek Woodstock*, Nalaskowski (2017/6) constructs a horrific picture of their lifestyle: their hippy style, their tattoos, their language are sign of 'their perverse enjoyment'. The anarchist behavior of the participants in the festival is a threat to normality. By enjoying perversely, the standard norms of society are attacked as they behave as external agents that have nothing in common with 'our proper way of life'. It is clear the contrast between *them* and the hardworking people described in other texts 'doing typical Polish things'. Mud, beer, intolerance, free sex at the festival become symbols of their attempt to resignify society and its common good, just like the original Woodstock Festival in the 1960s changed Western civilization. This representation of 'their way of life' is nothing more than a horrific picture of the lack of order brought by liberalism: the principles given by God against anarchism, the Christian morality against sex in the mud.

4. Marching fantasies: The anti-LGBT case⁸⁷

Although the evocation of horrific scenarios is rather frequent in the analyzed texts, it usually refers to pictures and images of *them*. For this reason, I have conducted direct

observations of anti-LGBT marches as fantasies emerge clearly in an environment where their ideological weight has a central role in mobilizing people. This analysis has a twofold complementary function: first, it reveals that the neo-traditionalist discourse, disseminated mainly and more successfully by its organic intellectuals, actually embraces the whole society. Second, it illustrates how fantasies provide the *grip* to be attached to a specific representation of reality.

Since 2001, *Marsze Równości* (Marches of Equality, LGBT parades) have taken place in many cities around Poland and, at the same time, they have generated severe counter-reactions. Most of the LGBT parades are literally followed by counter-demonstrators, who express their dissent in various ways. In the most notable case, in July 2019, in Białystok, counter-demonstrators (largely members of far-right groups and football hooligans) violently attacked the local LGBT march causing a stir in the country. The violent clashes in Białystok have radicalized the confrontation between LGBT activists and their opponents in Poland. Although following these events LGBT parades are even more heavily protected by the police, counter-marches and clashes have not stopped.

The direct observation of counter-marches against LGBT parades has been conducted in Kalisz, Lublin (22 and 28 September 2019, right before the parliamentary elections held in October), and Kraków (29 August 2020, a few weeks after the presidential elections in June and July). The distinct locations of the marches provided different perspectives: while Kalisz is a relatively small city in western Poland, Lublin is a regional capital and one of the most important cities in the east of the country.⁸⁸ As a consequence, the rather small and calm counter-march in Kalisz (a few hundred people) was not as turbulent as the one in Lublin (a few thousand), where police charged the counter-demonstrators and arrested some of them. Unlike in Kraków, both in Kalisz and Lublin the counter-marches were attended by different groups: not only hooligans and far-right organizations but also 'ordinary people' who did not show any political affiliation. Owing to the absence of 'ordinary' counter-demonstrators and the liberal and international orientation of the city (the second largest in Poland, capital of a region), the LGBT parade in Kraków was the only one that clearly outnumbered the counter-march (in Kalisz and Lublin counter-demonstrators were probably more numerous). It

has to be said, though, that both marches in Kraków were rather small (probably because of Covid-19 restrictions, only a few dozen people took part in the counter-march, although Kraków is much larger than both Kalisz and Lublin); yet, the counter-march provided several insights because its limited route around the main square made the observation easier. In terms of analysis, all discursive productions were taken into consideration: banners, body language, physical acts, symbolic objects, chants, slogans, speeches (in line with PDT, both linguistic and non-linguistic data constitute text). The data gathered are to be understood as elements of the neo-traditionalist discourse. Except for an interview with an anonymous politician during the counter-march in Lublin, I did not disclose my identity and acted as one of the many silent observers of the counter-marches. In a few cases I walked with LGBT activists in order to have a more complete picture; this was possible only in Kraków and Kalisz, as in Lublin the police kept the two marches neatly separated.

4.1 Beatific, horrific, and fundamental fantasies at the counter-marches

The three fantasmatic dimensions explain how counter-demonstrators are affectively attached to their worldview and contrast the opposite worldview since fantasies provide ideological strength. The fantasies observed at the counter-marches are described as neo-traditionalist since they picture an external enemy that, just like a colonial power, is trying to impose its foreign values (horrific fantasy). At the same time, the fantasmatic stories emphasize traditionalist elements, such as the national community, religion, traditional social roles, and permanent values (beatific fantasy). Finally, as in post-colonial neo-traditionalism, they refer to an authentic way of life, which is sublimated in partial objects (fundamental fantasy). All three fantasmatic dimensions were visible in the counter-marches and they explain why the cultural war in Poland is still raging.

In the selected field of analysis, the threat to 'our way of life' is represented by LGBT parades. The very act of marching with rainbow banners and rainbow symbols is seen as a danger for the idea of traditionalist Polishness. Hence, counter-demonstrators march next to LGBT parades to protect their world. In their narrative, the latter risks disappearing if LGBT activists achieve their goal. This horrific scenario, the dystopian

future that will happen if the LGBT value system wins, portrays the disruption caused by the enemy and its 'perverse way of enjoyment'. For instance, a flyer distributed at the counter-march in Lublin warned:

“Warning, rainbow plague! [...] This ideology aims to change the way of thinking, valuing and to create a different family, with the exclusion from the social life of those who do not agree, to the point of legal stigmatization”.

The consequences foretold by this horrific fantasy entail the dislocation of traditionalist Polishness. The LGBT attempt to resignify the main tenets of the 'genuine



Figure 9. Picture taken in Kalisz showing MW members dressed as to clean up the 'LGBT virus'

Polish way of life' is considered to be a threat coming from the outside; LGBT organizations, as well as the European Union, are described as trying to impose another set of values, one that aims to change what is normality.⁸⁹ This form of perceived colonialism is rejected in the name of an authentic Polish ethnic

community. Indeed, in the same way as in the text corpus, the LGBT community and the EU are pictured as foreign agents operating in Poland. The text of a chant sung by participants of the counter-march in Kraków was as follows: “Here it’s Poland, not Brussels – here there is no support for perversion”.

This dislocatory experience depicting an external element inside the pure community was performed in a spectacular way in the counter-marches in Kalisz and Lublin (Figure 9). Wearing white lab coats, members of the far-right organization All-Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska, MW) followed the *Marsz Równości* along the entire route cleaning, sweeping, and disinfecting after the 'LGBT virus'.⁹⁰ Spectacularizing their rejection of a different Poland, the message is clear: their concept of Poland cannot be infiltrated by something alien, embodied in this case by a virus. The

LGBT virus is displayed as an agent that wants to break down the existing structure and the existing values of the country. This fantasmatic narrative foretells an imminent disaster if the external agent is not removed from the body. As in a typical exclusionary narrative, what is at stake is the very idea of 'our way of life'. The performance of the disinfecting squad is just necessary to conceal the very fact that 'their way of life' may change society; that another Poland (and another Polishness) is marching ahead of them. The same horrific fantasy can be found in the words of Nalaskowski (2019/31) who defined the participants to the LGBT parades as "travelling rapists" of Polish cities (a definition that caused a stir in the country).

"They raped Warsaw, Poznań, Wrocław and Gdańsk long time ago. Recently, they have been brutally deflowered Białystok. The rainbow plague, culturally and historically foreign, a traveling tyranny of rapists protected by the police, who occupy our streets now reaches for other, already smaller towns [...]. Because there are "we", astonished and helpless, and "they", tramps raping Poland with the rainbow plague".

Unlike a mere political division between 'us' and 'them', here Nalaskowski performs an ideological division portraying 'them' as a plague and rapists, something that will eventually destroy 'our way of life': "Their sign of peace is our anxiety" (Nalskowski, 2019/31). Their very existence causes malaise; they are the blocking Other that 'castrates' Polish people, threatens the nation, and destroys traditions. It is because of 'them' that 'our enjoyment' is lost, the horrific fantasy narrates. As discussed earlier, the lost unity, the harmonious society without antagonism, is posited as a lost *jouissance*: the enemy is responsible for this loss and is accused of the 'theft of enjoyment':

"We stress our affection for those values they fear so much; they spit on; those values they want to deprive the Polish nation of. But we will surely guard them and raise the next generations in this spirit. [...] The ideological war continues" (participant in the counter-march in Kraków).

These examples show how fantasies are necessary to prevent foreign values from affecting traditional Polishness. By calling to arms against the foreign enemy, fantasies provide the ideological force needed to resist the alternative discourse. As in a (virtual) leaflet published on a social network inviting people to participate in the counter-march in Lublin: the leaflet urges people to say no to homosexuality and the Western way of

thinking; to defend the true idea of Poland. What is at risk is the utopian idea of Poland, represented by the 'traditional family' (a man, a woman, two children, and a dog) drawn at the top of the leaflet in an idyllic sunny scenario (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Leaflet inviting people to participate to the counter-march in Lublin

pointed out here: first, the traditional family and the national community are articulated as equivalent. This articulation shapes the neo-traditionalist character of the counter-marches. The reference to the past signals the authentic traditional way of life that is allegedly better than modern models; it also claims its superiority owing to its origin in the past. Second, this equivalence defines the concept of Poland. 'Poland can be Poland' only if it includes the fantasy of an idyllic family. It does not even matter whether the idyllic family represents the current Polish way of life or just a utopian projection. The beatific fantasy conceals the fact that alternative families may exist in Poland (as evident from the demands of the LGBT people marching next to them). The presence of Polish LGBT activists right there is neutralized by excluding them from their idea of Poland; in this regard, they are treated as foreign colonizers.

Indeed, horrific fantasies are not enough. The fantasmatic logic includes a beatific dimension: a promise that if an obstacle is overcome there is a bright future ahead. This beatific fantasy is displayed in the flyer as an original form of enjoyment (the unity of the family). The caption announces: "For hundred years Polish family has looked exactly like that"; and further: "Say yes to Poland so that Poland can be Poland".

Two considerations can be

These horrific (e.g., Poland deprived of her values) and beatific fantasies (e.g., the call for a Great Catholic Poland, *Wielka Polska Katolicka*) try to conceal the liberal attempt of resignifying Polishness. In both cases, fantasies seek to defend the lost Thing, that sense of unity that precedes the dislocatory experience. This incommunicable unity, the access to enjoyment, can only be achieved by elevating objects to a higher level. I have described this mechanism as sublimation. According to Laclau (2005a), a sublimated object goes beyond mere representation. In sublimation, we are not dealing just with a partial symbol of a lost totality; rather, the sublimated object stands as the actual lost totality. If a beatific fantasy promises a utopian future, the sublimated object is what makes that future so bright; the radical investment in this object means that the object itself becomes “the embodiment of a mythical fullness” (Laclau, 2005a: 115).

This analysis argues that the sublimation of partial objects was observable in the counter-marches; in particular, the Christian cross and the rosary assumed a special role. The use of these objects has two implications. First, it shows that ‘our way of life’ is signified by Christianity. As discussed by Brian Porter-Szűcs (2017), the term ‘Pole-Catholic’ (*Polak-katolik*) appears with more frequency when this tie is in danger. By calling for secularism, LGBT marches put into question the idea that the Polish nation needs to be inherently Catholic. They put into question the unity of Poland. This threat leads to strengthening the tie between Poland and Catholicism to the extent that religious objects come to embody the Nation as well as ‘our truthful way of life’. The Pole-Catholic knot reinforces the idea of a community without antagonism.

The second implication deals with the affective importance of the Cross and the rosary. These two objects were used in the three marches as if they were shields against the LGBT parades. As the *Marsz Równości* advanced, counter-demonstrators displayed their rosaries, crosses, and religious pictures to protect themselves and, figuratively, to protect their idea of Catholic Poland. At that moment, these sublimated objects embody the very idea of the Nation; they are the incarnation of the original enjoyment. By raising their crosses and rosaries, the counter-demonstrators show how their way of life clashes with the opposite one. On one side there are dances, pop music, glitter, colorful and fancy clothes, and rainbow flags; in other words, a cultural model based on individual liberty and a form of enjoyment that emphasizes the freedom of the individual to break

the bonds imposed by customs and tradition. On the other side, religious symbols, prayers, national flags, and patriotic chants are displayed; the rosary is used as a powerful object, something more than just beads.⁹¹ They all are objects and rituals that embody 'our way of life'. Opposed to individual liberty, they stress a form of enjoyment linked to communitarian freedom. From this point of view, there is no freedom outside the rules of the community. The affective investment in these objects, the fundamental fantasy, covers and protects the members of the community from the disruptive resignification of a different Polishness. It provides the ideological grip to resist the changes brought about by modernity.

5. How neo-traditionalism emerges as a hegemonic discourse: Nodal Points of Sublimation

At the very end of this analytical section, a discussion related to the final construction of hegemony is owed. The category of nodal points of sublimation should make clear how neo-traditionalism 'closes' itself as a discourse trying to fix the core values of society and establish itself as hegemonic. They play a function of representation of the neo-traditionalist chain of equivalence whose role is "to mobilize hegemonic leverage" (Nonhoff, 2019: 81). In a certain sense, here the theoretical and empirical aspects of the research are fully integrated: by indicating the role of the nodal points of sublimation in Polish neo-traditionalism, I am bringing Laclau's theory to the empirical reality to illustrate the limits of the hegemonic horizon. In other words, the nodal points of sublimation replace the liberal imaginary and (try to) determine what means to be a non-liberal society. As argued by Laclau, the failed and irretrievable fullness can be replaced by partial objects that stand in lieu of the lost totality; hegemony is exactly the impossible but necessary attempt to close discourse; to create an inescapable horizon:

"This operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification is what I have called *hegemony*. And given that this embodied totality or universality is, as we have seen, an impossible object, the hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness. With this it should be clear that the category of totality cannot be eradicated but that, as a failed totality, it is a horizon and not a ground" (Laclau, 2005a: 70-71; emphasis in the original).

As argued previously, this particularity elevated to the unachievable fullness is described by Laclau (2005a) as the nodal point(s) of sublimation. The fact that the nodal points of sublimation give the final answer to the research question is not the only reason why their function is discussed in this chapter, the last of the analytical part. Although I have argued earlier that the category of nodal points of sublimation implicates the articulation of the three different logics and closes the circle of the logics approach, it also introduces a significant aspect in the construction of hegemony, namely the order of *affect* (Laclau, 2005a). In this sense, if the nodal points determine the social logic of discourse, and their political articulations relate to signifying operations, affect is linked to the *force* given to these sublimated elements. Thus, while the social and the political deal with the shape of the hegemonic formation, the elevation of nodal points to a higher level of sublimation is rather connected with their ideological (and fantasmatic) dimension. Hegemony, in fact, requires a 'radical investment' in partial objects that would embody the lost whole, that would make a particular element the embodiment of a mythical fullness:

"the complexes which we call 'discursive or hegemonic formations', which articulate differential and equivalential logics, would be unintelligible without the affective component [...]. So we can conclude that any social whole results from an indissociable articulation between signifying and affective dimensions" (Laclau, 2005a: 111)

The previous discussions point undoubtedly to a clear answer: the name of the totality in the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse – the objects of cathexis that receive the affective radical investment are Poland, the Poles, and Polishness. However, in this case, we are not simply dealing with their function of nodal points and *signifying signifiers* (this was instead their role in terms of social and political logics). Now, claiming that neo-traditionalism *invests* on these objects equates to saying that they *are* the lost totality. To put it differently, they are the imaginary society the neo-traditionalist hegemonic project seeks to define; the particularity "which assumes the role of an impossible universality" (Laclau, 2005a: 115); a hegemonic universality that defines what society means.⁹² If the liberal imaginary consisted of a modern, progressive and European Poland, the neo-traditionalist imaginary envisages a traditionalist sovereign Poland inhabited by Catholic people. Poland, Poles, and Polishness *are* the name of the

lost harmonious society, not just a second best. They embody the lost Thing; they are nodal points of sublimation.

This conclusion has been achieved through discourse theoretical analysis. What does it mean, in practice, that Poland, Poles, and Polishness are nodal points of sublimation of neo-traditionalism? Methodologically, I have indicated the nodal points of sublimation as resulting from the articulation of the three logics. Hence, a nodal point of sublimation is a nodal point that structures discourse and other signifiers (social logic); it is an encompassing demand with the function of covering the universal lack (political logic); it relates to the fundamental fantasy as it embodies the sublime Thing, the lost totality (fantasmatic logic). Empirically, that was visible when the nodal points covered the lack by pointing to a lost unity. It followed that they were identified when they were discursively constructed as the final goal of the hegemonic project (i.e. covering the lack of order and freedom) and as a source of unity (i.e. affirming Poland/Poles/Polishness means unity) excluding, instead, any extraneous body that could hamper this unity.

In the texts, Poland-Poles-Polishness are described as the same thing: the embodiment of the totality. There is no space for other significations of Poland that are instead excluded. For example, Lisicki (2020/51) describes as non-Poles those people (though Polish citizens) that are indifferent to the Polish nation and its traditions. To Lisicki, Poland is not divided since 'the Others' do not belong to the community. The articulation of Poland-Poles-Polishness defines the existential foundations of society.

"Political divisions can be about different issues: tax levels, immigration policy, social expenditure, and to some extent foreign policy. This, I repeat, is natural. However, can such a division concern the very foundations of the state's existence? [...] Is it possible to be a Pole and mock what has always been the most important for Poles, regardless of their privately professed faith: the white and red flag, the cross, etc.? The symbols of Polishness are not junk without meaning. In order to save them, to keep them around, generations of Poles shed blood, died, fought and made sacrifices. So, in a cultural sense, is it possible to be a Pole, and to reject these signs and despise them? I do not think so [...]. Today, in Poland, we are not dealing with a war of two tribes, but with the defense of Polish national heritage against the mob, and of Polish culture against rabble"

Poland-Poles-Polishness represent here a totality, a fundamental fantasy that traditional symbols seek to represent. Those who see Poland differently cannot be included in this totality due to their different enjoyment. Their exclusion and figurative

expulsion from the national community is a necessary move to achieve unity. But Poland-Poles-Polishness are also nodal points: the radical investment on the three objects is clear as there can be no division concerning the foundations of the state. They are the undisputed and undisputable cornerstone of society. Finally, they also represent the lacking universal: they are both the fundamental fantasy and the idea of the lost fullness and, at the same time, the missing piece; there is no fullness because they are constantly blocked by the 'stealers of enjoyment'. Therefore, only by affirming and achieving Poland-Poles-Polishness society could constitute itself as a totality and establish a new collective imaginary. In this respect, they are the encompassing demands that would cover the lack of freedom and order. Consider this fragment:

"What does the communitarian and identitarian worldview propose instead of the hypocritical cult of freedom of speech? It proposes the idea of a social order based on the primacy of the nation, state, tradition and religion. For a community-minded person, Poland is a mainstay of order and security, and not a field for the enthusiasts of experimenting with new customs. For a person that shares traditional values, an active fight against relativism must be taken for granted" (Ulicz, 2020/10).

The fight against relativism is taken over by the key elements of the "communitarian and identitarian worldview". Poland, tradition (Polishness), and community (people), as the pillars of society, are supposed to determine the "social order" that should follow the interests of the community (not individuals) organized in nation-states and following traditions. The articulated triad should set the norms of the community so that, only in this way, the lack of security, order, and freedom can be covered (Legutko, 2016). Filling the lack would ensure unity.

Their unifying potential derives from their construction as *objet petit a*. As objects of cathexis and radical investment, the three nodal points are the universal lack of every demand. Negatively, that also implies that demands can be fulfilled only as long as Poland-Poles-Polishness survive. In this case, the affective investment on Poland-Poles-Polishness is clear as it concerns the very existence of the country. The three nodal points of sublimation defend the old European civilization from the battles of progress (Pospieszalski, 2019/37; Zybortowicz and Zybortowicz, 2018/22). They are the particularity that takes on the lost universality and can fill its absence. As argued by Laclau (2005a), the chain of equivalence (of neo-traditionalist demands) is condensed in

the name of the Thing: a demand for freedom, a demand for religion, a demand for essentialism *is* a demand for Poland-Poles-Polishness. Therefore, the discursive articulation between them (Chapter 10 and Chapter 11) needs to be supplemented by their affective role as their presence is a matter of survival. Neo-traditionalist demands can be met only if the universal lack is covered by the promise of unity guaranteed by the nodal points of sublimation.

“It is not only about our faith. It is about whether Poles can behave in this kind of situation when the holy symbols are being offended. Nations that could not do this, died. They died because they lost the binder of their community. This struggle is therefore more than just a demand for the rights of Christians. This is about keeping our nation alive” (Sakiewicz, 2019/18).

The absence of Poland-Poles-Polishness functions as the drive for reacting to the liberal crisis of hegemony. If these sublimated nodal points are denied, the whole nation would perish and the community disappear. On the contrary, affirming the three nodal points (in their traditionalist signification) as the cornerstone of Polish society is a crucial step to achieving the ultimate goal of a hegemonic project: unity. They are narrated as a replacing promise that can establish a new collective imaginary of a harmonious and free Polish society. The broken promise of 1989 is replaced by the neo-traditionalist promise. The discursive shift towards neo-traditional illiberalism can become hegemonic if these nodal points are definitely conquered by the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition.

Chapter 13

General Discussion and Conclusion

1. General discussion

The outcomes and academic contributions of the research can be read on several levels. The main focus remains on the illiberal discursive shift that has taken place in Poland in the last years. However, the analysis showed that the research contributes to the literature about the 'illiberal turn' from different angles. To answer the research question, the investigation also uncovered other aspects that can be useful to study illiberalism in general. The contributions of the research can be schematized as follows:

1. *Conceptual contribution*: While the 'illiberal turn' is usually described as populist, the concept of neo-traditionalism better captures its nuanced shades given by the three different social logics.
2. *Theoretical contribution*: A comprehensive explanation of the 'illiberal turn' should also involve the use of the concept of demagogism in order to understand the function of normalization of neo-traditionalism.
3. *Normative contribution*: The previous point marks the ideological background of neo-traditionalism. Revealing how neo-traditionalist fantasies work in practice is essential to deconstruct and counterweight illiberal narratives.
4. *Methodological contribution*: the research is a rare example of empirical application of discourse theory and could be used in part as a guiding model for similar research. Moreover, it applied categories (e.g., 'organic intellectuals of discourse coalition') that can help refine the empirical application of the logics approach.
5. *Empirical contribution*: The research aimed to demonstrate how the 'illiberal turn' in Poland should be read as a counter-hegemonic project that aims to resignify the key values of Polish society.

The following final discussion will illustrate these points separately.

1.1 Conceptual contribution

The overall objective of the analysis was to unveil the conditions of possibility of illiberalism in Poland. To achieve this goal, the research has largely focused on the cultural factors that justify the ‘illiberal turn’, using the concept of neo-traditionalism to capture the role of culture and traditions in delegitimizing and challenging the liberal worldview. Although several recent studies have dealt with the importance of cultural factors in sustaining populist and illiberal narratives, the concept of populism remains dominant to explore illiberalism, including its cultural variety (for example, Aslanidis, 2020; Furedi, 2018; Volk, 2022). As argued by Zielonka (2018), first we need to characterize the ‘illiberal turn’ for what it is, namely a refusal of liberal principles. Then, it is necessary to examine the *positive* content of illiberalism, which is not necessarily, or not only, a populist one. In fact, this *reductio ad populismum* overlooks other aspects of the illiberal discursive shift and neglects more nuanced interpretations of the polarization that characterizes the current European political scenario.

The use of the concept of neo-traditionalism aims exactly to add further interpretive layers to the simplistic reading of illiberalism as a mere ‘appeal to the people’ against ‘the corrupt elite’. In a nutshell, neo-traditionalism relates to the cultural underpinnings of illiberalism: in Central and Eastern Europe, it captures the anti-modernist and anti-colonial character of illiberal discourses against the liberal West accused of having lost touch with the authentic traditional European values. Accordingly, the refusal of liberal principles does not consist of a simple criticism against the establishment. It also involves the rejection of their liberal worldview and cultural hegemony. Neo-traditionalist actors in Poland perceive the liberal West as carrying out a colonial project that seeks to impose its progressive and modern values on Poland and other countries in the region, often portrayed as the bastions of authentic ‘Europeanness’. At the same time, they articulate a political discursive strategy that aims to install a different non-liberal cultural hegemony based on the centrality of the people-as-a-community, the ethno-cultural nation, and traditional values linked to Christianity.

The conceptual advancement in explaining illiberalism using the notion of neo-traditionalism can be deconstructed through two complementary contributions, referring respectively to anti-modernism and anti-colonialism. First, the research

investigated the content of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse. What is at stake in the confrontation between liberalism and non-liberal neo-traditionalism are the fundamental values of society. In particular, the idea of freedom is crucial. As modern liberal societies pose emancipation and individual freedom at the center of their organization, neo-traditionalism places special emphasis on all those elements able to contain and limit negative freedom. Traditions, religion, nations, borders, are united by the fact that they reduce the fluidity of the modern world, and create a stable environment. In the dilemma of freedom, neo-traditionalists side with the Grand Inquisitor. In this regard, it is also clear why illiberalism is not a sufficient concept to explain this process. Illiberalism, or non-liberalism, refuses the liberal principles. However, its positive content can be articulated in different ways. Neo-traditionalism is a peculiar illiberal discourse that rejects liberalism *and* promotes traditional thinking.

The second anti-colonial aspect relates to the tangible construction of this division, beyond the ideological conflict. In fact, in neo-traditionalism, the revolt against modernity is portrayed concretely as a rejection of the colonial discursive practices performed by Western European elites, including Western cultural models. The research has examined patterns of (perceived) colonialism imposed by the 'liberal West' on 'authentic Christian Europe', often performed as crises that require a counter-revolution. The same neo-traditionalist strategies deployed in former colonies against the Western colonizers are implemented in Poland. The illiberal discursive shift is legitimized with reference to the pre-colonial authentic culture. This pre-liberal, pre-communist, pre-partitions era is indeed an idyllic fantasy of a golden age that never existed but is necessary to support ideologically the neo-traditionalist narrative.

These two remarks define the scope of the concept of neo-traditionalism. Emphasis on tradition (against modernity) and anti-colonialism (against the West) are the two key ingredients for developing a more coherent conceptual framework in illiberalism studies. Of course, its breadth is rather narrow and should be confined to the examination of cultural illiberalism. Yet, in this field, neo-traditionalism seems to be a more suitable and complete concept to describe and study the cultural side of the so-called populist right. Neo-traditionalist actors are not necessarily concerned with the general will of the people. Rather, the latter is defined by a pre-existing authentic

culture. In this light, neo-traditionalism can capture several aspects of illiberal narratives in the region, more than 'thin populism'. Indeed, the concept of neo-traditionalism is still to some extent concerned with the vertical division between 'the people' and 'the elite', like populism. However, this separation is rather the result of an ideological clash between worldviews. In addition, the horizontal orientation of 'the nation' and the temporal orientation of 'tradition' provide depth to the concept beyond populism-as-usual. Consequently, neo-traditionalism denotes the politicization of the cultural war through anti-colonial narratives and cultural counter-hegemonic projects. It indicates the attempt to redefine common sense and establish non-liberal traditions as the guiding principles of 'our authentic way of life'.

1.2 Theoretical contribution

The overcoming of the simplistic use of the label 'populism' to describe the 'illiberal turn' also concerns its theoretical dimension. We saw in Chapter 10 that the three logics are interrelated and, therefore, it would be incorrect to say that populism in Poland is 'thickened' by nationalism and traditionalism (they are rather articulated logics of the same discourse). However, in a certain sense, the nationalist and traditionalist logics of neo-traditionalism can be said to complement and give substance to the vertical orientation that pits 'the people' and 'the elite' against each other.⁹³ The theoretical contribution of the thesis deals with this latter aspect; we could say perhaps that it pertains to the 'thinness' of populism, paraphrasing Mudde's famous formula. Is the appeal to the people always populist? The 'populist hype' and the huge academic interest in populism studies have fostered the tendency of naming as populist every speech, tweet or slogan that mention 'the people'. But this cannot be always the case. In this regard, I have used the concept of 'demagogism' to elaborate on the relationship between the people and the elite, and the direction of the vertical orientation. In fact, while populism typically stems from below (Sartori, 2007), demagogism indicates top-down normalizing processes imposed by the organic intellectuals of the hegemonic discourse on their subordinates, who can just grant their consent and adapt unwittingly to what appears rational. Thus, we cannot name 'populist' the ideological manipulation

of common sense, although the latter is articulated with the discursive construction of 'the people'.

As discussed in Chapter 5, demagogism is defined as an act of power; "a hegemonic practice that poses past common sense in a certain discourse as a rational situation for restoring normality" (Melito, 2021b: 242). This ideological operation entails the production of a beatific '*our normality*' in contrariety to '*their abnormality*'. As the very word 'demagogy' suggests, the demagogic logic aims to manipulate people's common sense and lead them in the field of rationality and obviousness. In this case, the vertical orientation 'people vs. elite' is not directed against the establishment; 'the people' are not constructed as the underdog. It is quite the opposite; they are ideologically manipulated by the elite as the latter have the power to determine what is normal and socially acceptable. Rather than revolutionary, like populism, demagogism is reactionary.⁹⁴ Therefore, it is crucial to distinguish demagogism from populism. The strictly ideological character of the former plays a decisive political function in legitimizing discursive shifts and exclusionary practices. By affecting the perception of what is normal, demagogism shows as inevitable a certain way of thinking and excludes alternatives. In this way, 'normality' becomes immune to criticism (Taylor, 2009) to the extent that, when demagogism is successful, opposite worldviews are not even thinkable. When people are convinced that 'there is no alternative', the demagogic hegemony has achieved its goal. Normality has been imposed. It is in these cases, when normality becomes normal and uncontestable, that critical explanations and deconstructions of demagogic practices are indispensable.

The discussion about the ideological construction of normality (Chapter 12) revealed that the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse cannot be associated only with populism. Certainly, neo-traditionalist populism is to be linked to the anti-colonial narrative against the liberal West and liberal salons. However, it is not a mere bottom-up appeal to the people against the elite. While neo-traditionalist populism denounces external enemies (cultural colonizers), neo-traditionalist demagogism is used when the enemy is constructed internally. The crucial aspect in differentiating populism from demagogism, in this case, consists in the potentially democratic character of the former (or, at least, populism signals a certain popular dissatisfaction with the hegemonic

worldview) as opposed to the manipulative nature of the latter. By fantasizing 'normality', neo-traditionalist discourse makers implement "normalizing processes as discursive technologies of domination" (Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos, 2019: 188). That may have serious consequences on democracy, excluding alternative worldviews from the field of rationality. This is the case of, for example, the neoliberal 'there is no alternative' that established neoliberal policies as the only rational option at the expense of any other 'irrational' model. As Gramsci would put it:

"For these sorts of moderate historicists [...] (those classes involved in the restoration after 1815 and 1848) the irrational was Jacobinism, and antihistory equated Jacobinism. But who can prove historically that Jacobins were guided only by whim?" (Gramsci, 1992: 253).

In the case of neo-traditionalism, the demagogic orchestration of the people and common sense has even more dramatic consequences: setting 'normality' against the background of the 'abnormality of homosexuals' has exclusionary outcomes. 'Abnormal' and 'irrational' are adjectives attached to the Other, who becomes the source of abnormality. Thus, the examination of demagogic practices and its differentiation from populism is essential to reveal their ideological character, and deconstruct their exclusionary and polarizing effects. In this regard, this study also provides a normative contribution.

1.3 Normative contribution

In addition to the 'methodological deficit', Laclau's discourse theory has been accused of having a 'normative deficit' (Critchley, 2004), making it a pure descriptivist theory. In this section, I would argue in favor of the normative breadth of discourse theory and, in particular, of this thesis, especially in light of the novelties brought by the conceptual and theoretical contributions.

The ontological assumptions of discourse theory already bring with them a certain normative character. Rather than being a sign of descriptivism, radical contingency entails the openness and different possibilities of signifying the social. It is against this background that new identities and political projects are constructed. In this sense, ideological fantasies play a central role. As they cover the contingency of the

social, they are likely to protect and perpetuate prejudices and exclusionary views. In the example of the anti-LGBT marches, it was shown how, by structuring their 'enjoyment', fantasies grip subjects to their traditionalist understanding of Polishness and, eventually, aggravate the clash. Hence, the ideological construction of fantasies has radicalized identities and exacerbated the conflict. In this regard, their disclosure and deconstruction are an important step to reduce polarization and the tensions of the political debate.

Having said that, the roots of polarization and cultural wars should be found in the political dimension of hegemonic competition. In the logics approach, "the centrality we accord to the political dimension of practices already implies a normative point of view [...]. Reactivating the political dimension thus presupposes the intrinsic contingency and unevenness of power" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 192). In this sense, the research has shown the contingent roots of the emergence of neo-traditionalism in Poland. This is to say that the illiberal outcome was not predetermined and, as we have seen, emerged as a reaction to a failure. This interpretation of the 'illiberal turn' presents key normative implications. It says that the emergence of neo-traditionalism is the symptom: the very fact that there is a contingent symptom means that *there is* an original failure. The causes of the symptom manifested as the 'illiberal turn' are to be found in the failure of the democratic pillar of democracy (displacement of the political) or the failure of the destructive character of progressivism (cultural displacement). By disclosing 'the lack' of neo-traditionalism, the analysis of the contingent illiberal reaction has shown all its relevance. As already argued by Zielonka (2018) when dealing with illiberalism we have to be concerned, first of all, about the shortcomings of liberalism. In this sense, neo-traditionalist demands emerged out of frustration as they were unfulfilled.

Does that necessarily mean that demands for 'authority' or 'traditional social roles' should be accommodated, for example? No, of course. However, it is necessary to go back to the citizens. To hear what they ask for, as these demands are nothing but the political answer to a political failure. In this specific example, it is clear that the disruption of old institutions and relativism has left many people disoriented. Thus, a political model that seeks the rupture of the old world without offering 'positive freedom' to cope with the dismissal of old archetypes is likely to give room to

alternatives, illiberal in this case. New discourses are built upon failures and performed crises. If something is perceived as not just right (and this is true in terms of values, economy, politics, and so on), an effective discursive strategy should take into account this dissatisfaction: actors that aim to defend liberal democracy should abandon the narrative made of 'there is no alternative' or 'we expert know better'. In the specific Polish case, it should also be abandoned the narrative of the progressive Europe and West that backward and obscurantist Poland needs to catch. This approach overlooks that there is a 'lack' to be filled that followed the 1989 regime change and cannot be filled by simply removing the 'old'. Using the neo-traditionalist example, if there is dissatisfaction with the current role of nations *vis-à-vis* the EU, it should be thought again how to make the EU more democratic and inclusive, rather than eroding more and more people's sovereignty. If there is dissatisfaction with security issues due to immigration, a broader policy should be offered; one that takes into account people's concerns rather than reducing them to the dimension of racism. A political discourse that seeks to counter illiberal discourses should consider including that part of European society still attached to traditions rather than excluding them from the 'rational circles'. Instead, the narrative of a progressive West that backward Eastern countries need to catch to be modern is likely to feed anti-colonial narratives.

To summarize and integrate these first three sections: the research demonstrated that we need meticulous academic rigor when we discuss illiberalism, in Poland as somewhere else, and should avoid generalizing everything as populist. First, we need that for the sake of research clarity. Since populism has become a buzzword in political science, any slightly anti-establishment discourse is defined as such. Sometimes, there is no research at all in using the definition 'populism' since some parties have been standardized as belonging to the populist category without further scrutiny. A closer look at the characteristics of these discourses (or even parties) would show the variety of arguments that cannot be reduced to a mere thickening of the populist thin ideology. Neo-traditionalism and demagogism capture a fraction of this variety; more research is needed to disclose other 'thick ideologies' that have conflated into populism (e.g., nativism).

Second, this is not just an academic quarrel. Putting in the same 'populist cauldron' very different non-liberal discourses has a severe impact on the legitimacy of democratic discourses. This is exactly how the demagogism of anti-populists works: it describes as abnormal any challenge to the hegemonic order and impedes any democratic advancement. At the same time, defining as simply populist extremist far-right worldviews is likely to legitimize them as the voice of the people (Mondon and Glynos, 2016). Zybertowicz (2018/21) is right when he sees populism as an answer to the undemocratic rationality of the elite. In this case, populism is used as a weapon against liberal democracy. It becomes a salvific word that redeems the darkest side of neo-traditionalism. Using instead different and more precise concepts (i.e., neo-traditionalism) is beneficial to shed light on the exact nature of so-called populist discourses. Not necessarily an evil nature but definitely something more than an appeal to give back power to the people. Furthermore, distinguishing between populism and demagogism is essential to expose the ideological character of the construction of normality. Claiming that 'ordinary Polish people do typical Polish things and are not abnormal like homosexuals' is not a populist appeal. It is not about giving back power to the people and taking it from the elite. It is instead a clear ideologically charged demagogic practice that tries to manipulate common sense and sets precise limits of normality. Deconstructing this narrative and depriving it of the 'populist alibi' is a necessary step to avoid the spreading of exclusionary discourses.

1.4 Methodological contribution

Although the research is firmly anchored to Poststructuralist Discourse Theory and the logics approach (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), it also introduces some methodological novelties. They can be divided into two main methodological advancements. First, the research has applied the logics approach to study discourse as such, instead of social practices that derive from discourses. Moreover, the object of analysis was a discourse (neo-traditionalism) that deals directly with the resignification of common sense. As already argued, the logics approach has been mainly applied in policy studies; for this reason, my methodology presents some new and original elements that allowed to examine discourse at the macro-contextual level. Second, I have introduced some

partially original categories (i.e., organic intellectuals; nodal points of sublimation) that can facilitate the process of, respectively, data gathering, and logics' articulation. I will discuss these themes in turn.

The focus on discourse foregrounds the hegemonic character of neo-traditionalism in the strictest Gramscian sense. Rather than looking at how a social practice or a policy becomes hegemonic, the research had the more ambitious aim of discovering the redefinition of common sense, something which is by definition fuzzy and evanescent. In this regard, the main methodological innovation consisted of linking the logics approach (and, in particular, the political logic) to hegemony analysis (Nonhoff, 2019). An attentive reading of the latter, in fact, reveals that the political logic discussed by Glynos and Howarth can be operationalized by using the categories proposed by Nonhoff. In particular, I am greatly indebted to the visual representation of hegemonic discourses developed by the German political scientist. Nonhoff's model provides a clear visual characterization of the discursive linkages that constitute a hegemonic project. Furthermore, the division of three categories of demands (that at first seemed to me superfluous) turned out to be essential to grasp the importance of lack in constructing a hegemonic discourse.

At the same time, I have reworked in part Nonhoff's model. If on the one hand, the logics approach has been supplemented by hegemony analysis, on the other hand the latter has been articulated with the insights of the former. More precisely, while Nonhoff does not pay too much attention to the relevance of fantasies and ideology, I have integrated the construction of chains of equivalence and antagonism with the fantasmatic logic. This move had two main implications: first, 'the articulation of equivalences between different demands' and 'the antagonistic division of the discursive space' (respectively Nonhoff's first and second strategemes) have been complemented by fantasies. Nonhoff projects 'the universal lack' externally (somehow recalling the first notion of antagonism in Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) as it is clear from the scheme representing two opposite chains of equivalence. I have espoused this position and proposed the neo-traditionalist version of the figure. At the same time, I have taken into consideration the psychoanalytic development of late Laclau that, following Žižek (1990), argued in favor of an internal constitutive lack. In light of this, the

constitutive lack of discourse requires equivalence and antagonism to be compensated and supported by ideological fantasies that would hide its contingency. As a result, I could use Nonhoff's schematic and practical categories, and integrate them within the wider framework of the logics approach and PDT. The same can be said regarding the third strategeme of hegemony analysis (i.e., representation). Since 'representation' is missing in the logics approach (or, at best, it is included implicitly), in this case Nonhoff's strategeme had to be integrated directly by Laclau's work. Thus, I have introduced the category of nodal points of sublimation, which aims to capture all three Lacanian dimensions (symbolic, real, imaginary) of representative nodal points.

The nodal points of sublimation lead us to the second methodological advancement. Surprisingly, to my knowledge, this expression used by Laclau (2005a: 120) has gone completely unnoticed in the substantial literature produced about discourse theory. Surprisingly, because I believe it occupies a central position in the construction of a hegemonic discourse (and so it appears to be in Laclau's work). The category of nodal point of sublimation, in fact, captures all the elements necessary to hegemonize the social. It is a nodal point structuring discourse but it is also sublimated to embody the lost Thing. It is linked both to the political and psychoanalytic souls of discourse theory. It goes beyond even the category of empty signifiers (Laclau, 1996), which seems to pertain still to the symbolic representation of the lack. Instead, the nodal point of sublimation can be said to *be* the fundamental fantasy (imaginary), to *be* a nodal point (symbolic), and to *be* the presence of the absence (real). Thus, it is much more than a representative object, as in Nonhoff. It is also the object of cathexis that goes beyond simple representation and introduces the affective dimension in the analytical framework. In terms of methodology, identifying nodal points of sublimation was essential to articulate the three different logics and provide a coherent explanation (social, political, and fantasmatic) of the emergence of neo-traditionalism. Through nodal points of sublimation, the separated pieces of discourse compose a unified picture of the different aspects of neo-traditionalism, from the political construction, to its ideological sedimentation. Therefore, I believe, a proper application of the logics approach would be incomplete without the identification of the nodal point(s) of

sublimation since they can be considered as the binder that keeps together the different strands of a discourse (or a social practice).⁹⁵

Also the second new category introduced in this research is rather an articulation of already existing concepts. By linking Gramsci's organic intellectuals (1953), and Hajer's discourse coalition (2005), I aimed to set the limits of discourse in a way that would allow a single researcher to manage the infinite modes of producing discourse. The content of this articulation and its implications have been discussed in Chapter 6. Here, I would just like to underline the impact of the 'organic intellectuals of a discourse coalition' for the empirical discourse theoretical analysis. This formula proved to be extremely helpful for the selection of a significant sample and for the validity of the research. Consider the possible alternatives: focusing on political parties (for example, Inglehart and Norris 2016) is a lottery: parties, more often than not, shift along the political spectrum as they chase polls and the electorate. The recent examples of the Five Star Movement in Italy or Jobbik in Hungary, two former paradigmatic populist parties, are illustrative since they transformed themselves into mainstream/liberal parties in a period of time shorter than my Ph.D. research. Similarly, the political views of a certain politician are not always coherent with themselves and he or she might even utter contradictive statements.

The second part of the formula – discourse coalition – is essential to overcome this potential pitfall as it focuses on themes (in my case, demands), not on the actors producing them. The first part of the formula – organic intellectuals – fits instead in the hegemonic theory that envelops the research. If we take seriously the conception of power in a Foucauldian sense, and the identity of the subject as formed by the field of objectivity, there is no alternative than considering discourse makers as organic intellectuals of a certain discourse. Culture, role models, fantasies, or values do not come from the stars: rather, they are generated as acts of power. Therefore, using the expression of 'organic intellectuals' is useful in two regards: first, it allows selecting a variegated sample of actors as long as they produce the same discourse. Second, their discursive production is a product of power that can modify common sense, as Gramsci defines their intellectual function. Thus, they reproduce a certain discourse, making possible the selection of a valid text corpus. Clearly, both the selection of non-affiliated

organic intellectuals and of their texts as a proxy of discourse fit perfectly within the notion of 'discourse coalition'. In this way, the formula of 'organic intellectuals of discourse coalition' made sure I did not fall into the trap of studying a single incoherent political actor guaranteeing at the same time the validity of the study as it offered exactly a glimpse of the neo-traditionalist discourse.

1.5 Empirical contribution

As discussed in Chapter 1, the general aim of the research was "to complete the scholarship on the 'illiberal turn' in CEE (and, specifically, in Poland) by providing a hegemonic understanding of this phenomenon" (see page 26). In Chapter 1 I have also identified three main gaps I aimed to fill:

- empirical application of hegemonic theory.
- original explanation of the current political upheaval in Europe in terms of hegemony.
- empirical analysis of how a certain discourse (in our case, the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland) becomes dominant.

The first two points are interconnected and represent the main empirical advancement of the research. The last point is linked to the research questions and will be discussed in the next part.

The existing literature about the 'illiberal turn' usually revolves around electoral behaviors, rhetorical and propagandistic strategies, or causal explanations that can link populism/illiberalism to different variables. The approach taken in this research was completely different and considered the 'illiberal turn' as a clash between worldviews. Considering this premise, the 'illiberal turn' has been indicated as a discursive shift. Stressing the contingency of discourses, neo-traditionalism has not been described as belonging to a specific party (in this respect, the formula of the 'organic intellectuals of discourse coalition' was crucial) but, rather, as a non-liberal discourse that aims to redefine common sense and normality. The counter-hegemonic nature of neo-traditionalism and the enemy as 'discursified' represent a key contribution in explaining

illiberalism. Poststructuralist literature mostly focuses on Western Europe and socio-economic demands from a leftist point of view (for example, Mouffe, 2018). Even *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was written to implement, in fact, a socialist strategy. Notwithstanding its leftist roots, hegemonic strategies are implemented more often and more successfully by right-wing actors. This is overly clear when we find explicit references to Antonio Gramsci made by neo-traditionalist actors. Nevertheless, studies on the hegemonic potential of the current 'illiberal turn' are rare. The empirical analysis of neo-traditionalism in Poland demonstrates that the roots of neo-traditionalism should be found in a different worldview that is becoming increasingly attractive and that, in several countries, is trying to replace liberalism to forge a new common sense.

This result opens up the discussion regarding the possibility of generalization. Generalizing results is not a priority of PDT since it goes against its very ontological foundations. Contingency means contingency: therefore, no discourse can emerge independently of external factors. Rather, in PDT, generalization consists of reifying abstract concepts: "what makes possible the simultaneous singularity *and* generalisability of each case is the background theoretical framework informing the analysis, coupled with the articulatory process itself" (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 189; emphasis in the original). What can be generalized, in the case of Polish neo-traditionalism, is the construction of an illiberal hegemonic project. To put it differently, it is the counter-hegemonic mechanism against liberalism. That means that even if the content, the linkages between demands, and fantasies of discourses differ, their counter-hegemonic structure remains similar. Therefore, analogous hypotheses for comparable cases can be drawn (for example, neo-traditionalist discourses could also be observed in other Central and Eastern European countries).

Obviously, we cannot claim that the social logics of Polish neo-traditionalism are the same as those developed in another country, as much as they can share similarities, like Hungary. Nevertheless, the overall functioning of neo-traditionalism – that is, its anti-modernist and anti-colonial character – can be used as a guide for similar studies. Take as an example the meaning of 'the people': in Polish neo-traditionalism 'the people' are strictly articulated with Catholicism and the ethno-cultural nation. That would not be possible in an Asian country, for instance, but the same populist logic could

be found there. Indeed, the very logic of neo-traditionalism has been extrapolated from a post-colonial non-Western context and applied to a European country. Therefore, generalization does not involve a causal explanation of the 'illiberal turn', nor the same interpretation of the content of neo-traditionalism. Nonetheless, it can be generalized that the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse (as well as any other illiberal counter-hegemonic project) represents an exemplary case of the 'illiberal turn', where the former involves a redefinition of values on traditionalist basis.

2. Conclusions

The last gap the research aimed to fill concerns the empirical analysis of a counter-hegemonic discourse. The main objective of the thesis was to explain the 'illiberal turn' in Poland as a struggle between different worldviews to define the hegemonic truth. As delineated in the first Chapter, "in other words, rather than seeking causal explanations or discovering its genealogy, the illiberal backlash in Poland (Krastev and Holmes, 2020) is explained by referring to the idea of a hegemonic struggle: illiberalism and neo-traditionalism in Poland (re)emerged as a reaction to a crisis of hegemony and as a counter-hegemonic project based on traditionalist values against the dominant liberal worldview. Understanding and explaining how an illiberal *and* neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland is striving to replace the 'liberal truth' is the main goal of this research" (see page 14). To achieve this goal, I have conducted a discourse theoretical analysis of a proxy of the neo-traditionalist discourse. In line with the objectives of the research, the analysis showed that in fact illiberalism and neo-traditionalism are emerging to cover a failure (performed as a crisis), and are trying to resignify common sense and the main values of society through political and ideological discursive operations. The analysis of neo-traditionalism through the logics approach has highlighted different aspects of the discourse. This concluding section will summarize the main findings of the research answering each of the research questions of the thesis.

What are the rules characterizing the neo-traditionalist discourse?

Contrary to a simplistic reading of the 'illiberal turn', the analysis demonstrated the presence of a neo-traditionalist discourse that goes beyond party politics, electoral strategies, or performative exclusionary techniques. To explain illiberalism as a discursive shift, in fact, I did not search for those factors facilitating the illiberal process. Instead, I have looked at the very intellectual foundations of neo-traditionalism as their dissemination is the main weapon to colonize common sense. The analysis of the 'neo-traditionalist manifestos' revealed the theoretical grounds of neo-traditionalism, something that has not obtained too much attention in illiberalism studies so far (Bluhm and Varga, 2019).

From the analysis, it can be noted how the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse (and its clash with the 'lights of progress') fits within a wider intellectual debate that has characterized the centuries-old intellectual development of the Old Continent. In this sense, looking at the cultural war as a clash about abortion, immigrants, or LGBT rights is quite superficial. There is something deeper beneath the surface that continues to upset European civilization and related identity issues. Thus, neo-traditionalism, and in general this kind of conservative narratives, needs to be put into perspective. The cultural war concerns the historical clash to signify European identity. Although 'the end of history' made us lose sight of who we, as Westerners and Europeans, are, this dilemma of identity never went away: The dilemma of a progressive, humanist, and liberal European identity against the spiritual, traditionalist, and reactionary Europe. The same dilemma is narrated in *'The Magic Mountain'* by Thomas Mann (1927) between Lodovico Settembrini and Leo Naphta; a dilemma between the enlightened and humanist Europe against the dark reactionary conservatism.⁹⁶ Or, remaining in the Polish context, it is the same dilemma experienced by Witold Gombrowicz (1994) in *'Trans-Atlantyck'* between liberal Polishness, devoid of the old bonds to the Polish community and emphasizing the liberty of the individual, and traditional Polishness, related to the Fatherland and respect for authorities.

Polish neo-traditionalist actors are often disenchanted, recognizing that in the West the cultural war is over and progress has won. The Polish cultural war is a marginal conflict and, sometimes, even neo-traditionalists are rather pessimistic regarding the

possibility of resisting the forces of modernity. Nonetheless, the very existence of a counter-hegemonic project in Poland indicates that this fight is not over yet. It indicates that Europe and the West still need to settle their identity definitively. The clash between tradition and modernity, communities and individuals, nation and cosmopolitanism observed in the text corpus reflects the conflict about our identity as Europeans. To put into perspective means to recognize the wider character of events that might seem limited to a specific local area in a specific period. Thinking that after the Renaissance, after the French Revolution, after the rise of modern nation-states, after the two World Wars, after the Cold War – after all this, Polish and European identities have been settled forever equates to saying that ‘history is over’. An assumption that, as demonstrated by this research, is misleading and denies the contingency and inherent dislocation of discourses and identities. Far from being over, European and Polish identities undergo a constant development that could lead to further progress or further traditionalism. The mistake would be to neglect or downplay the counter-revolutionary forces of traditions.

Narrowing down the general clash of identity to the specific case of Polish neo-traditionalism, I have identified the social logics of the discourse. Illiberalism in Poland is characterized by a populist logic, a nationalist logic, and a traditionalist logic. The three logics attempt to capture the various aspects of the ‘illiberal turn’ in Poland. Articulated together, they form the neo-traditionalist logic that is supposed to regulate society. The society narrated by neo-traditionalism, where common sense is defined and functions according to the neo-traditionalist logic, has its value center on the people-as-a-community and culturally defined, the ethno-cultural nation, and traditional values. The ‘rules of the neo-traditionalist discourse’ say that the interest of the community overcome the interests of the individual; the interests of the nation prevail external elements (minorities or supranational organizations); traditions are more important than emancipation and individual freedom. A society based on neo-traditionalist principles reconfigures the imaginary aims of its members. Consider this comparison: in an ideal primitive society, the main logic is the logic of survival, which leads to a specific division of roles; in an ideal theocratic society the main logic is given by the rules provided by religion; in an ideal liberal society it is the individual to choose his or her

own aspirations; finally, in an ideal neo-traditionalist society, the rules are given by the membership to the national community, by the principles of religion and traditions, and by the rejection of foreign cultures. These are the 'rules' governing the neo-traditionalist discourse.

How is the hegemonic strategy of neo-traditionalism deployed?

The rejection of progressive and modern values that emerges from the neo-traditionalist discourse has been analyzed using the political logic and the ontological categories provided by Laclau's discourse theory. If the social logics deal with the content of discourse, and the fantasmatic logic with its ideological dimension, the hegemonic strategy described as a political logic is strictly linked to the theoretical framework. In analyzing the political logic of neo-traditionalism, I have used extensively the Laclaudian terminology, trying to describe the resignification of values performed by neo-traditionalist discourse makers as a discursive construction of chains of equivalence, antagonistic frontiers, and dislocatory experiences.

Thus, this part of the research is reflective of the retroductive circle and clearly shows how I proceeded during the analysis to explain the illiberal discursive shift. The anomaly of the 'illiberal turn' was first explained as a counter-hegemonic reaction. This hypothesis maintained that illiberalism and neo-traditionalism had to be read as a reaction against the post-communist transition and an attempt to establish an alternative worldview (Chapter 8). The context of justification of the hypothesis (context of discovery) was best shown by the political logic (Chapter 11). As in a typical retroductive analysis, the intuitions of the hypothesis fitted into an organized *pattern* of concepts (Paavola, 2004). To summarize the findings of the political logic of neo-traditionalism, we can schematize and integrate the hypothesis with the ontological categories of discourse theory as follows:

- Ontological insecurity → Lack within discourse/Failure
- Political and Cultural displacement → Performance of crisis
- Neo-traditionalist counter-reaction → Articulation of equivalent demands

- Accusing the establishment, cosmopolitanism, and modernity as the enemy → Antagonistic division of the discursive space
- Poles, Poland, Polishness → Nodal points of sublimation

In this regard, the justification of the initial hypothesis has been confirmed through the use of the abstract categories of discourse theory, which proved to be reflective of the empirical problem.

Having explained the research procedure, the research sub-question can be answered by deconstructing the neo-traditionalist hegemonic strategy in two moments that reflect the negative and positive sides of dislocation: the performance of crisis, to disrupt the previous hegemony, and the positive construction of discourse through equivalence, difference and antagonism. Combining these two aspects, we observe the redefinition of discursive elements through a double mechanism of contestation and re-articulation. The empirical application of hegemony analysis did not only aim to show how a hegemonic strategy works in practice. It also discussed what it means to become hegemonic. And the main goal of a hegemonic project is to seize the main floating signifiers within the discursive space.

The attempt to resignify the signifier 'freedom' is particularly relevant to win the hegemonic struggle. In the previous section, I have mentioned how the illiberal counter-revolution represents a sign of the two souls of Europe: progressive or conservative, modern or traditional. If this division offers a static picture of the cultural war, the political logic explains how the non-liberal side tries to replace the opposite worldview. The 'fight for freedom' through means of discursive articulations can be said to display the dynamic representation of this divide. Therefore, talking of equivalence, nodal points, or antagonism is not a mere academic exercise. Rather, the political logic of a discourse is fundamental in signifying reality. In the Introduction this question was posed: "How do we come to understand the world the way we understand it?". With regard to the Polish case, the political logic provided the answer. Equivalence and antagonism thicken the meaning of freedom. Thus, the way we understand reality – in this case, the way we understand freedom – depends on discursive articulatory practices. The logic underlying this assumption has some more concrete implications. One of the inherent aims of a research based on PDT is to show the contingency of reality

(understood as discursive reality). I believe that this apparently simple statement of intents remains sometimes hidden behind the veil of ideology, and even the meaning of a concept like 'freedom' should not be taken for granted. We are probably used to signify freedom intuitively as negative freedom or emancipation. The research showed that a different signification of freedom, one that would instead restrict negative freedom, is possible and is actually present in Poland. Regardless of our personal views and whether this is or not a desirable outcome, the research invites to reflect on the 'openness' of meanings that can always change and affect the way we understand reality.

Why is neo-traditionalism able to resist the changes brought about by modernity? What are the fantasies that give an ideological ground for identity construction?

The discussion about the 'illiberal turn' would not be completed without including its ideological sedimentation. The previous two logics dealt with the content and political construction of neo-traditionalism. However, that does not explain *why* neo-traditionalism emerged and *why* it became consistent more than 20 years after the fateful 1989. Contingency assumes that every discursive reality, every social practice, even every historical event is non-necessary. Yet, it does not say anything about why that specific discursive reality, that specific social practice, or that specific historical event took place. Of course, we cannot predict facts that are a matter of contingency. However, fantasies, and their ideological background, can tell us more about why a certain discourse emerged at the expense of others.⁹⁷

The same uncertainty was observed with regard to the delayed illiberal reaction. In Chapter 1, I have mentioned the 'delayed reaction' puzzle proposed by Jan Kubik (2018). Illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe appeared surprisingly late and only after the transition to liberal democracy was completed. The fantasmatic logic cannot explain exactly why neo-traditionalism appeared with this delay and, in addition, providing causal explanations is not among my research goals. Nevertheless, the fantasmatic logic can shed light on the 'delayed fatigue' as an ideological change of collective imaginaries. This aspect was discussed referring to 'the broken promise of

1989' and its replacement with a different hegemonic horizon based on the nodal points of sublimation. The success of a certain worldview depends on its capacity of establishing a stable imaginary. In the context of the post-communist transition, the collective imaginary in Poland was the one of liberal democracy, of the West, of freedom. This assumption does not deny the presence of alternatives or internal division. Rather, it indicated the existence of an evanescent fantasy, a final goal on the horizon whose contours remain blurred. In this context, we can interpret the lack of non-liberal counter-hegemonic contestations as being neutralized at the imaginary level by the liberal democratic fantasmatic logic that underpins the social imaginary. If the collective imaginary is strong enough, alternative visions, economic turmoil, or political divisions do not matter as the collective aim of society does not change. In a period characterized by the 'end of history' and dominated by the liberal democratic paradigm, challenging the *mythical* horizon of Western democracy would have been 'ideologically difficult'.⁹⁸

The rise of illiberalism (in Poland as in the rest of Europe) coincides with the fading of this imaginary. Surely, concrete events and the material are necessary to disrupt any order, symbolic or imaginary. However, a real change requires the construction and sedimentation of alternative imaginaries. If we consider the 'illiberal turn' primarily as a discursive shift, the latter can occur only against the background of a collective imaginary shift. In other words, the delayed rebellion consists of the substitution of fantasies. As discussed in Chapter 12, that took place in two moments: first, narrating the previous liberal democratic imaginary as a broken promise, as a failed attempt to deliver freedom and order to the Polish community. Second, it has been sided by the ideological redefinition of normality and the manufacture of a different imaginary, one emphasizing the nation, the people, and tradition. In light of this, we can read the delayed 'illiberal turn' from a different perspective: no illiberal discourse could have been successfully implemented as long as the post-communist liberal imaginary was healthy and kept exerting a 'fantasmatic attraction', regardless of economic or political crises.⁹⁹ Illiberalism, instead, appeared once the liberal fantasy started to fade. Only by narrating 'the broken promise of 1989', neo-traditionalism has been able to challenge the previous collective imaginary and is currently trying to establish a new illiberal

imaginary. Fantasies, therefore, play the role of propeller of neo-traditionalism. Their logic reveals the ideological ground of neo-traditionalism that facilitated the passage from a liberal democratic to an illiberal imaginary.

On the one hand, fantasies support the illiberal imaginary. On the other hand, the fantasmatic dimension of neo-traditionalism tells us something more about their resistance against the forces of progress. While the rest of European countries have gradually accepted post-material social values (Rensmann, 2017), traditionalist worldviews still resist in Poland (and, arguably, in most of the former communist countries). This attachment to traditional values is considered to be an anomaly in the secularized Europe. Thus, the fantasmatic logic also explains why a sector of Polish society 'resists' the revolution of modernity and progress that, to liberals, seemed inevitable. Hence, we can read fantasmatic narratives as ideological weapons to oppose the attempted redefinition of Polish identity. Neo-traditionalist fantasies offer a solid ideological ground for defending and strengthening the idea of a traditional Polish way of life. They enable subjects to hold on to the contingent neo-traditionalist discourse, notwithstanding the emancipatory impetus of liberalism. By narrating fantasies, neo-traditionalist discourse makers, as well as the participants in the anti-LGBT counter-marches, provide the neo-traditionalist discourse with an ideological layer that fosters the mobilization against modernity. At the same time, partial objects are sublimated to embody the idyllic and authentic way of life. Objects like the rosary, the flag, or the Cross are elevated as the lost Thing that need to be achieved to realize a society devoid of antagonism, to realize the lost unity. Therefore, the fantasmatic logic identifies an additional level beneath the surface of the political construction of discourse. Fantasies link the substance of the discourse with the level of desire. In this sense, the cultural war is not fought only by deploying a political strategy and setting political demands. It also involves the narration of fantasies that promise to achieve again the real Polish way of life. By structuring their 'enjoyment', fantasies grip subjects to their concept of Polishness and, eventually, radicalize the clash.

How has the neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland emerged as a counter-hegemonic project that aims at resignifying the core values of society?

In explaining the tasks of hegemony analysis, Nonhoff (2019) identifies two main points: 1) the reconstruction of the discourse coalition which supports a given discursive formation; 2) the reconstruction of the hegemonic strategy of the discourse under scrutiny. Although my research has a more extensive scope than Nonhoff's, the main research question can be answered from the same two perspectives.

First, the research showed that the illiberal hegemonic project has been deployed by a neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. This result carries some implications. In fact, the discourse coalition includes different actors that belong to different and rival political formations. This position might raise objections: is it possible to include in the same coalition, however informal and discursive it may be, Jarosław Kaczyński and Krzysztof Bosak, Ryszard Legutko and Robert Winnicki, Andrzej Zybertowicz and members of *Młodzię Wszepolska*? Theoretically, the notions of 'organic intellectuals' and 'discourse coalition' say it is possible. Still, it is to be discussed whether the empirical analysis demonstrated that they propagate in fact the same neo-traditionalist demands, the same fantasies, and the same hegemonic horizon. In other words, it is to be illustrated whether they can be considered *equivalent*, in a Laclaudian sense. The answer to this question should be found in their common lack. Like equivalent demands maintain their differences but are equivalent in relation to a common lack (*real*) and a common antagonist (*symbolic*), in the same way, the members of the discourse coalition remain different and express different political positions. Nevertheless, they are equivalent, namely, they belong to the same discourse coalition, since they share the same lack and denounce the same enemy. The same lack of order and freedom could be found in the discursive productions of all these actors; the discursive division between tradition and progressive values was a common political operation; horrific fantasies against the traditional family were narrated by all of them as well as anti-colonial narratives; the same objects were sublimated as the Thing; finally, and more importantly, the main nodal points – Poland, Poles, and Polishness – were signified in the same traditionalist way. Simply put, notwithstanding their differences, the analysis has evidenced that the organic intellectuals of neo-

traditionalism disseminate the same counter-hegemonic project and are responsible for the illiberal discursive shift.

The second point relates to the actual illiberal discursive shift that counter-hegemonic neo-traditionalism is promoting. The research demonstrated that the discursive shift is being sustained and legitimized by cultural factors linked to traditionalist thinking. Using the logics approach, this process can be summarized in the following three points:

- The shift to illiberalism in Poland has been legitimized with reference to the nation, the people, and tradition signified in a neo-traditionalist way: the latter combines anti-modernist and anti-colonial tendencies coupled with references to a traditional authentic way of life.
- This discursive shift followed a hegemonic strategy linking several non-liberal demands, and creating an antagonistic division between two different worldviews. The neo-traditionalist discourse has been constructed upon a lack of order and freedom which is being filled by the stable categories of traditions.
- The neo-traditionalist discourse is supported by fantasies that picture an idyllic scenario of an *authentic Polish way of life*, and a horrific dystopia threatening *normal* Polishness. Fantasies contribute to creating a new imaginary, which is essential for deploying a successful counter-hegemonic project.

To conclude, the research reinforces the counter-hegemonic thesis explaining the 'illiberal turn'. Rather than a mere political shift or an electoral turbulence, the rise of neo-traditionalism in Poland signals that we are witnessing a cultural discursive shift or, at least, a crucial struggle for the signification of reality. The discursive construction of neo-traditionalism is surfacing as an alternative worldview to the liberal consensus whose goal is, in a broad sense, to modify what is considered normal and socially acceptable. Therefore, the illiberal *and* neo-traditionalist turn in Poland should be seen primarily as the attempt to change common sense; to establish a traditionalist *Weltanschauung*; to make traditions a habitus. By providing a detailed explanation of the neo-traditionalist discursive strategy, the research made clear that, albeit important, causal explanations need to get to grips with hegemonic projects that account for the

construction of new identities. Thus, confirming Gramscian theory, the research put back as a key explaining factor cultural hegemony. Studies of illiberalism that look at concrete variables to explain the 'illiberal turn' are certainly important. However, the hegemonic and discursive fields constitute the backbone that makes political changes happen. Studying illiberalism in terms of hegemony is essential to understand what makes possible the constant dynamic changing of worldviews.

Notes

Chapter 1

¹ As explained below in more detail, illiberalism and neo-traditionalism are two sides of the same coin. Illiberalism refers to the refusal of liberal principles. It is liberalism's negative face. Neo-traditionalism is (one of) the worldview that positively replaces the liberal order.

² In this research, Central and Eastern Europe refers to former communist countries that accessed the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007.

³ I use the adjective 'non-liberal' as Viktor Orbán (2014) did in his famous speech in Băile Tușnad (Tusnádfürdő) about illiberal democracy. I aim to stress here the opposition between liberal democracy and the current state of democracy in CEE. Indeed, the concept of 'illiberal democracy' as introduced by Fareed Zakaria (1997) is too vague and broad and will be discussed later.

⁴ For instance, Canovan (1999) focuses on the redemptive (popular) and pragmatic (institutionalized) faces of democracy; Mény and Surel (2002) on representation as the main element of the constitutional tradition; Mouffe (2000) on the tension between the rule of law and minority rights, and people's sovereignty.

⁵ At this stage of the thesis, I prefer to use both adjectives. This distinction is not clear in the literature as right-wing actors are described either as populist either as illiberal depending on the definition given by the author. In some cases, the two adjectives overlap and are used as synonyms.

⁶ Bluhm and Varga (2019), and the contributors to their edited book, talk of the return of conservatism in Poland, Hungary, and Russia. In this work, I will use the concept of neo-traditionalism instead. Even though these two concepts share affinities, their scope is different and it will be deepened later in Chapter 3. For instance, conservatism is described as a full-fledged ideology that touches upon several fields, including economics (Dąbrowska, 2019), while neo-traditionalism is concerned mostly with the cultural aspects of society.

⁷ A discursive strategy refers to the construction of discourse, broadly understood as a worldview. A proper discussion about discourse will be provided in Chapter 4.

⁸ It is needed to warn the reader that assuming discourses as non-necessary is a direct consequence of the ontological foundations of this research. In this case, I am referring to the radical contingency of the social: this position will be explained and justified in the next chapters.

⁹ In this regard, a significant example is given by the attempts of alliance between PiS and Matteo Salvini's League. Notwithstanding some similarities and their meetings, the two parties never achieved a common understanding. Arguably, a true 'illiberal international' in Europe can be found only between the current Polish and Hungarian governments (although, even in this case, foreign policy has undermined this alliance).

¹⁰ A comprehensive review of the literature regarding the rise of right-wing parties as well as neo-traditionalism will be provided in chapter 3.

¹¹ Too many factors play a role in this regard, not least the very simple reason of access to funds to boost and spread a discourse.

¹² The problematized issue, hypothesis, and research questions of the research will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 8. This short overview and the research question serve to orient the reader.

Chapter 2

¹³ As I was inspired at first by the work of Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007) and their conceptualization of the retroductive cycle, I will use in this work the term 'retroduction'. Charles S. Peirce, the father of abductive reasoning, used abduction and retroduction as a synonym. However, it is important to note that Peirce modified his own understanding of abduction during his life generating

confusing and misleading interpretations (Mcauliffe, 2015). In this work, retrodution (or abduction) refers to its contemporary understanding within philosophy of science (for example, Kelle, 2014).

¹⁴ The Heppel-Oppenheim model refers to the deductive-nomological model of scientific explanation.

¹⁵ Since all these concepts will be defined at a later stage, this scheme has only an illustrative purpose.

Chapter 3

¹⁶ Mainly, Jowitt claims that traditional elements are preponderant in Soviet society while Walder describes the mixture of modern and traditional elements as a unique feature of communist modernity (David-Fox, 2006).

¹⁷ The concept of populism is discussed below.

¹⁸ The intellectual work of de Benoist is rather complex and will not be exposed here. However, some of his concepts (e.g., ethno-pluralism) are essential to understand neo-traditionalism. Nonetheless, because of the complexity of his thought, we should not equate these concepts to the personal interpretation given by de Benoist. For example, he praised cultural and ethnic identities rejecting instead the idea of the nation. As we will see in Chapter 10, 'nation' and 'ethno-pluralism' are not necessarily at odds in Polish neo-traditionalism if the community is defined as a national community.

¹⁹ These definitions do not provide an exhaustive discussion about populism and were chosen for the following reasons: Mudde (2004) developed the most used definition of populism in the existing literature. Although I do not agree entirely with the ideational approach, his definition includes the minimal feature of populism, namely the division between 'the people vs. the elite'. Moffit (2016) proposes an inductive definition of populism: as discussed later, the performance of crisis is a crucial aspect of this research. Finally, Laclau's definition (2005a) is just an offshoot of a more general theory of hegemony, which constitutes the theoretical backbone of this research.

²⁰ The theoretical bulk of Laclau will be discussed exhaustively in the following Chapters.

Chapter 4

²¹ Again, contingency does not indicate absence of fixity. The concept of hegemony discussed in the next chapter will explain how a discourse can find stability.

²² Nonetheless, individuals' signifying practices can still produce discourse and power as, for instance, those carried out by a charismatic leader or powerful actors.

²³ As discussed in the next chapter, in later Laclau's works, the influence of psychoanalysis and Jacques Lacan would contribute to expanding this idea further.

²⁴ It is important to stress that discourse theory seeks to overcome exactly the relativist connotations of social constructionism. The fact that every social institution is constructed is nothing new and, additionally, it is a rather banal and naïve assumption. Laclau and Mouffe (and so is this thesis) are instead interested in the fixation of meanings and discourses. There is nothing revolutionary in saying that, for example, nations are a social construct. However, what is relevant from a discourse-theoretical approach is to understand how a discourse about nations can become sedimented and accepted. Thus, rather than presenting a post-modern vision about the fluidity of identity, discourse theory deals exactly with its opposite: the attempts to generate fixity in identity construction (Stavrakakis, 2007).

²⁵ From the definition given on page 85, articulated elements are called by Laclau and Mouffe *moments*. However, this definition tended to disappear in later works since all moments can always become floating signifiers.

Chapter 5

²⁶ The core of the theoretical apparatus built by Gramsci can be found in his *Quaderni del Carcere* (Notes from Prison). *I Quaderni* is a collection of notes, rather than a coherent work, that Gramsci was not able to finish and publish before his death.

²⁷ However, as will be discussed below, Gramsci did not entirely abandon class reductionism and the role of preconstituted social groups in shaping this new collective identity.

²⁸ The role of discourse makers as modern Gramscian intellectuals will be discussed in Chapter 6.

²⁹ It is important to note that it is not a peculiar phenomenon that takes place only during a crisis because the fight for hegemony and for signifying meanings is a constant process.

³⁰ The political logic (including the logics of equivalence and difference) will be discussed thoroughly in Chapter 7.

³¹ This section does not aim to explain Lacanian theory in its entirety. Rather, it discusses some of the main concepts developed by the French psychoanalyst that were later used for developing a psychoanalytic political theory (for example by Stavrakakis, 1999; Stavrakakis 2020; Žižek, 1989).

³² Although the imaginary and the symbolic pertain to two different dimensions, the boundary between them is blurred. Indeed, language is necessary to articulate a fantasy: even a blind child is in fact able to acquire a self-image if guided by the language of the Other (Nobus, 1999). This will be relevant in the empirical analysis of imaginary fantasies since their narration at times is not distinguishable from their political dimension.

³³ The Thing is a concept that Lacan took from Sigmund Freud (*das Ding*) and indicates what remains outside the symbolic order.

³⁴ *Jouissance* is explained as prohibited by recurring to the Oedipus complex. It is the Name-of-the-Father, the law and rules of culture, that prevents us from obtaining *jouissance*. The accusation of stealing enjoyment directed against something external to the subject will be relevant to my political analysis since the same 'theft of enjoyment' (Žižek, 1993) is present in nationalist narratives blaming external enemies for the troubles of the nation.

³⁵ This section is partly based on Melito (2021b).

³⁶ In line with the ontological reading of populism as proposed by Laclau, this argument does not intend to suggest an essentialist understanding of populist actors as necessarily counter-hegemonic forces. Indeed, occasional breaches of the antagonistic line are almost inescapable as discourses are never fixed.

Chapter 6

³⁷ Again, this assumption does not mean that, unlike political parties, the neo-traditionalist discourse possesses some essential features.

³⁸ A thorough discussion about Nonhoff's hegemony analysis will be offered in the next chapter.

³⁹ *Marsz Niepodległości* (March of Independence) is an annual event that takes place in Warsaw on the 11th of November to celebrate the independence of Poland. The March is organized by far-right political organizations.

Chapter 7

⁴⁰ It is crucial to underline that, even if the fantasmatic logic claims to answer *why* a discourse emerges, it does not have any ambition of finding a causal mechanism.

⁴¹ The last discursive relation of *super-difference* will not be included in the research as, I believe, it adds little value in hegemonic analysis and in discussing the political logic of a discourse.

⁴² Nonhoff (2019: 78-79) talks of discursive strategy instead of strategy of discursive participants. This is relevant since it suggests, even in his model, that objects of study are hegemonic articulations, not subjects. Thus, strategy "must not be conceived as one that has been planned or deliberately brought about" but rather as a strategy that evolves "in the course of the contingent interplay of multiple strategic plans and intentions". This position is in line with the concept of discourse coalition as an informal alliance of discourse makers.

⁴³ As we recall from the previous part, in this respect the concepts of demands and fantasy partially overlap. Indeed, they both aim to achieve a lost unity (equivalence and beatific fantasy) and they both describe an antagonism (contrariety and horrific fantasy). What makes them different from an analytical

point of view is that a political demand refers to the structure of the discourse while a fantasy is constructed as a narrative. It follows that the political logic is interested in the construction of the chain of equivalence and antagonism whereas the fantasmatic logic looks at the ideological character of a discourse. In other words, demands belong to the symbolic while fantasies are constructed at the imaginary level.

Chapter 8

⁴⁴ The cyclical character of the research implies that the writing process has been conducted through different stages. Obviously, it would be impossible and unclear to write chapters according to the temporal order of the research. Unlike the previous parts that have been written before the analysis (and revised afterward), this chapter has been produced entirely after the empirical analysis had been completed. Thus, the chapter seeks to reflect the analytical process the author went through in developing the hypothesis and research questions.

⁴⁵ As discussed later, references to Gramsci, explicit or implicit, should not come as a surprise. In this speech, Kaczyński used exactly the verb co-opt (*kooptować*) with a clear Gramscian connotation.

⁴⁶ Unlike Shields (2008), I prefer referring to liberalism instead of neoliberalism since I am interested in those aspects that go beyond the preeminence of the economy.

Chapter 9

⁴⁷ If a neo-traditionalist discourse cannot be generalized across countries, why should we accept the existence of a single hegemonic liberal discourse in different countries? Even in this case, I would argue that a liberal discourse in Europe supposedly presents similar points notwithstanding national differences. Compared to the neo-traditionalist one there is also a crucial difference, which is the construction of the community. While the neo-traditionalist community refers to the nation or to a religious community (hence, it is spatially bounded), the liberal discourse emphasizes the individual. The individualization of society dampens national differences and focuses on different aspects. Therefore, when talking about the liberal discourse the individual prevails over the nation.

⁴⁸ An example: the analysis of neo-traditionalism since 2005 would have included as discourse maker the then influential nationalist politician Roman Giertych. Fifteen years later, Giertych's political evolution led him to the liberal camp. According to Hajer (2005), contradictory positions would not harm the validity of the concept of 'discourse coalition'. As the unit of analysis is the neo-traditionalist discourse itself, contradictory statements are expected even in the sample selected for this research. However, such a long period of time would have made it more complicated to control this kind of external factors and to select a valid sample of the discourse coalition.

⁴⁹ Behr (2021) indicates the 'National Conservatism Conferences' organized by the Edmund Burke Foundation as a sign of the attempt to create an anti-liberal Internationale. Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Giorgia Meloni, and Ryszard Legutko were among the speakers at the conference. The latter is considered in this work as one of the organic intellectuals of Polish neo-traditionalism.

⁵⁰ In accordance with discourse theory's ontology, a text corpus is not composed necessarily of textual sources (strictly speaking). It is worth reminding that each meaningful object is a 'text'.

⁵¹ The selection of sources will be discussed in detail below.

⁵² Following Bluhm and Varga's edited book (2019), in this section I will often use the terms conservative/conservatism to define the transnational political project that is challenging hegemonic liberalism. Conservatism should not be read as alien to neo-traditionalism; it is rather a wider and more general concept. As explained in Chapter 1, but worth repeating, conservatism and neo-traditionalism overlap to a large extent. The former, however, signals a broader scope and a full-fledged ideology that stretches from economy to culture. Neo-traditionalism, instead, has a narrower scope. It is a term that seeks to capture the counter-reaction against liberal modernity. Unlike conservatism, it is more interested in proposing a traditionalist cultural model and denouncing the 'colonialism' of foreign agents (in this

case, the liberal West). Finally, 'conservative' is a general label that is used also by the actors involved. 'Neo-traditionalist' is instead an adjective that describes this counter-hegemonic project resulting from the active interpretation of the author.

⁵³ Here, Dąbrowska (2019) refers to the criticism received by PiS from other conservative intellectuals regarding the reform of the Constitutional Court. PiS and its members can be considered members of the coalition. Nevertheless, that does not mean that the coalition is a rigid structure where PiS is at the top of the pyramid. The members of the coalition are united by the same nodal points and demands, not by the same political affiliation. Significantly, even a liberal politician might participate in the conservative discourse coalition if he or she happens to support and spread conservative demands.

⁵⁴ The results of this pilot study are included in a published article (Melito, 2021a).

⁵⁵ This process will be explained below.

⁵⁶ For instance, the pre-analysis showed that some intellectuals clearly belonged to the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition (e.g., the editor-in-chief of *W Sieci*, Jacek Karnowski). However, their discursive production focuses more often on different matters that are not relevant to this research. Thus, they were excluded from the sample since their contribution to answering the research question would have been minimal and would have required a longer process of 'scanning'.

⁵⁷ The complete text corpus analyzed can be found in Appendix 1.

⁵⁸ Although Robert Winnicki could be associated with this category, for practical reasons I have included him in the fifth level (grassroots movements) in the capacity of *Ruch Narodowy* chairman. This is in fact only a schematization and often the discourse makers belong to two categories (e.g., Andrzej Zybertowicz is a columnist and, to some extent, could be considered among the ideologues of PiS).

⁵⁹ They can be considered as a single actor as they publish a single column together weekly.

⁶⁰ Further details will be provided in Chapter 12. It should be reminded that even demonstrations are considered texts.

Chapter 10

⁶¹ Those excluded from this corpus did not produce any specific metareflection on the current cultural cleavage. To be sure, also from their texts neo-traditionalism emerges clearly. However, their neo-traditionalist narrative is not theoretical, strictly speaking, or does not pose theoretical reflections as their central point.

⁶² When this kind of reflections is expressed, these actors position themselves as conservatives. In fact, the intellectual substrate of their positions originates clearly from classic conservatism. However, taken in its entirety, their discourse follows a neo-traditionalist strategy as explained earlier. Therefore, it is not a contradiction to define them as conservative.

⁶³ The significance of the nodal point of 'tradition' will be expanded below.

⁶⁴ To be sure, this could also be seen as a tool to increase people's feeling of security. However, the jump from national security to ontological security is too long and would not add much more to the analysis.

⁶⁵ As discussed earlier, 'the people' shares this privileged position with the nation and tradition. This section focuses only on its discursive construction. Its wider connections and its fantasmatic function will be discussed in the section about the nodal points of sublimation.

⁶⁶ Usually, this thesis refers to the losers of globalization, that is those people that, in recent years, found themselves displaced in the globalized world since they lost economic and employment stability. However, in this work it is argued that the expression 'losers of globalization' also includes those people that found their cultural system displaced by liberal and modern values.

⁶⁷ The term *Polak-katolik* is hardly translatable in English since it is made of two nouns – Pole and Catholic. The phrase indicates the inherent link between being a Pole and therefore being a Catholic. In this respect, it implies that its opposite is a foreigner, not another kind of Pole and that there can be no Pole who is not Catholic (Porter-Szűcs, 2017)

⁶⁸ Even in this case, the degree of tolerance varies between discourse makers. For example, Kaczyński claim that its tolerance is demonstrated by the massive presence of police at LGBT parades to protect demonstrators. Bosak, instead, uses the question of LGBT parades to criticize PiS' government 'from the right' and gain electoral consensus. Others (like Nalskowski) argue that tolerance should be strictly limited to their private sphere. In all cases, however, they share the vision of traditionalist Polishness as the dominant culture of the country.

⁶⁹ The universal lack of neo-traditionalism has been implicit so far. A more exhaustive discussion will be provided in the next chapter.

Chapter 11

⁷⁰ That does not mean that political resignifications of the social were not possible earlier since even the most fixed hegemonic discourse is contingent and can be dislocated at any moment. Indeed, in Poland, an illiberal reaction was in progress at least since 2001. However, 2008 marked the beginning of a global discursive shift that paved the way for non-liberal alternatives worldwide.

⁷¹ As explained in Chapter 7, Moffit (2015) discerned six distinct steps in his model of the populist performance of crisis. However, only three of them are relevant to my analysis.

⁷² Multiculturalism or supranational organizations are considered a threat since they question the primacy of national culture.

⁷³ This column was written before the 2015 Polish presidential parliamentary election won by respectively by Andrzej Duda and Law and Justice. At that time, the liberal *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO) was in power.

⁷⁴ I have put 'counter' in brackets as this is a matter of definition. In a joint speech in Krynica Zdrój, Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński (2016) both called for a cultural change in Europe although they disagreed on whether it should be called a revolution or a counter-revolution.

⁷⁵ If this conclusion seems too extremist, consider those societies where it is commonsensical to signify social roles as essentially defined. In many cases, the consequence is the automatic and unquestionable exclusion of women from public life (at least until the signifier 'social roles' is resignified). This example shows clearly how the contingency of meanings is reflected in the contingency of practices and norms.

⁷⁶ It is not possible to say with certainty if Kaczyński has Gramsci in mind when he divides between power (*władza*) and domination (*panowanie*), although the reference seems clear. Wróblewski (2012: 308) defines Gramsci's hegemony as based in fact on a moral, intellectual and cultural domination (*moralnym, intelektualnym oraz kulturowym panowaniem*) over subordinate groups. Kaczyński's description of the post-communist elite seems to denounce exactly their social, economic, political hegemony.

⁷⁷ It follows that even the meaning of the rule of law changes. For example, Bosak (2020/3) defines the rule of law as linked to national sovereignty: "the rule of law in a state is when the laws that we deliberately have adopted are respected", detaching its meaning from the respect of universal human rights or the independence of democratic institutions.

⁷⁸ In this graph, anti-demands are displayed in a relation of contrariety with neo-traditionalist subsuming demands while nodal points are blocked by their constitutive outsides. The relations of contrariety between neo-traditionalist cumulative demands and their opposites are not included here.

Chapter 12

⁷⁹ For example, Kaczyński, (2019/22) compares post-communism to the tragic events that characterized the loss of freedom for Poland; see also Legutko (2016) or Zybortowicz and Zybortowicz (2018/15).

⁸⁰ Quite interestingly, Bosak here refers to the post-communist cultural domination of a certain group, as Kaczyński did in Kraków and several other speeches. Notwithstanding their different political affiliation, their narrative about the post-communist hegemony is rather similar, confirming their informal 'membership' to the same discourse coalition.

⁸¹ 'Boy, girl – normal family' (*chłopak, dziewczyna – normalna rodzina*), this slogan is usually shouted at several anti-LGBT events.

⁸² As discussed earlier, the same can be said regarding foreign cultures and values.

⁸³ To be sure, it is worth underlining that the opposite is true as well. Liberal fantasies provide the strength to fight for emancipation against the bonds of tradition.

⁸⁴ This fragment is also significant to observe both the demagogic and ideological mobilization of the people in the field of normality, and the populist division between the people and the elite. It is clear here how these two concepts are not mutually exclusive.

⁸⁵ As discussed on pages 150-151, the discursive relation of equivalence is conducive of the logic of equivalence (political logic) and beatific fantasy (fantasmatic logic); instead, the discursive relation of contrariety signals the construction of antagonism (political logic) and a horrific fantasy (fantasmatic logic).

⁸⁶ As argued by Glynos and Howarth (2007), assigning contradictory features to the Other is typical of horrific fantasies.

⁸⁷ This part is based on Melito (2021c).

⁸⁸ It is important to note that eastern Poland is considered to be a bastion of traditionalism and conservatism, while western Poland is known as more liberal.

⁸⁹ Interview conducted by the author with an anonymous politician participating in the counter-march in Lublin.

⁹⁰ Note that both marches took place before the COVID-19 pandemic and there is no reference to it.

⁹¹ Beads as described by a participant in the LGBT parade in Lublin.

⁹² The meaning should be clear at this point and can be summarized as follows: people-as-community, ethnic and cultural nation, religious and national traditions.

Chapter 13

⁹³ Crucially, I have talked of neo-traditionalist populism, and neo-traditionalist nationalism (neo-traditionalist traditionalism is cacophonous but it makes the idea). They are separated logics of the same discourse.

⁹⁴ However, as noted in Chapter 12 (see note 84), populism and demagogism can co-exist within the same discourse. The former is visible when the logic of equivalence is predominant; the latter emerges when the logic of difference is implemented.

⁹⁵ This methodological advancement underlines the importance of this category to explain the emergence of a discourse (or social practice). I do not aim to explain, however, how to recognize them in the texts. I believe that a proper and deep knowledge of Laclau's theory would provide the answer more than any practical exemplification.

⁹⁶ The reference to Settembrini and Naphta is not accidental. In *'The Magic Mountain'*, Settembrini is the champion of progress and faith in the human being. Naphta, instead, is a reactionary traditionalist that praises the force of authority over individuals. At the same time, contrary to the current cultural conflict, Settembrini sees the democratic nation-state as the best option to organize society while Naphta refuses a worldly entity as the highest authority in name of Christian universalism. This is to say that, even if the cultural war between progress and traditions is long-standing, we do not face two monolithic worldviews. They are instead still contingent discourses and can evolve and be redefined in several ways.

⁹⁷ The fantasmatic logic does say something about the ideological strength of discourses. However, in explaining the emergence of a discourse instead of another, we should not dismiss the role of the material, although it was out of my research interest in this thesis.

⁹⁸ The presence of a strong 'liberal imaginary' does not mean that other visions of Poland were not possible or did not exist (as argued by Kim, 2022). Rather, it tells that it was complicated to undermine the 'liberal consensus'.

⁹⁹ If this is the case, how can we explain the Belarusian case? Once again, it has to be underlined that the focus on discourse does not dismiss the material. In this case, geopolitical factors mattered more than discursive productions.

Appendix 1 – Text corpus analyzed

Jarosław Kaczyński

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Kaczyński, J. (2019/4). *Speech at the Family-Picnic in Dygowo*. 3 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pisorgpl/> (accessed 7 October 2019).

Kaczyński, J. (2019/5). *Speech at the Family-Picnic in Zbuczyn*. 11 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pisorgpl/> (accessed 7 October 2019).

Kaczyński, J. (2019/6). *Speech at the Family-Picnic in Stalowa Wola*. 18 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pisorgpl/> (accessed 7 October 2019).

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Kaczyński, J. (2019/8). *Speech at PiS Convention in Piotrków Trybunalski*. 28 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pisorgpl/> (accessed 7 October 2019).

Kaczyński, J. (2019/9). *Speech at PiS Convention in Poznań*. 29 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pisorgpl/> (accessed 7 October 2019).

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Kaczyński, J. (2019/18). *Speech at PiS Convention in Warszawa*. 13 September. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pisorgpl/> (accessed 16 October 2019).

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Appendix 2 – Code trees

Inductive Code Tree (NT side)
1 Hegemonic Project
2.1 Our Enjoyment/Normality? (fundamental fantasy)
2.1.1 Lack of (horrific fantasy)
2.1.2 Desire (Beatific fantasy)
2.2 Polskość, Poles, Poland (nodal points of sublimation)
3 Encompassing demands
3.1 Wolność
3.2 Demokracja
4 Subsuming demands
4.1 Community
4.1.1 Naród
4.1.2 Church
4.1.3 Society
4.1.4 Family
5 Elementary demands
5.1.1 Godność
5.1.2 Solidarność
5.1.3 Równość
5.1.4 Sprawiedliwość
5.1.5 Several other demands not coded yet

Inductive code tree (enemy side)
1 The enemy (Horrific fantasy/encompassing anti demand)
2.1 Their perverse enjoyment
2.2 Theft of enjoyment
2.2.1 Guilty pleasures
2.3 Crisis (negative dislocation)
2.3.1 Cultural revolution
2.3.2 Modernity
2.3.3 Threat to security
2.3.4 Redefinition of meanings
3 Anti-demands
3.1 Elite (subsuming antidemands?)
3.1.1 Kosmopolitizm
3.1.2 Postkomunizm
3.2 Blocking values
3.2.1 Nihilism
3.2.2 Individualism
3.3.3 Relativism
4 Cumulative anti-demands
4.1.1 Gender
4.1.2 Multiculturalism
4.1.3 Individual liberty
4.1.4 Several other demands not coded yet

Deductive code tree

1 Nodal points of sublimation

2 Social logic

2.1 Nodal points

2.2 unsatisfied demands (previous articulation)

3 Political logic

3.1 Articulation of equivalence between demands

3.1.1 Type of demand [Encompassing demands, Subsuming Demands, Cumulative demands]

3.1.2 Lacking universal

3.1.3 Constitutive outside/antagonist

3.2 Articulation of contrariety

3.2.1 Type of anti-demand

3.2.2 Identity blocked by it

3.3 Representative demands

3.4 Performance of a crisis (negative dislocation/subversion of a system of representation)

4 Fantasmatic logic

4.1 Fundamental Fantasy

4.1.1 Sublimation of a particular object/discursive element

4.1.2 Access to 'our enjoyment'

4.1.3 'Our way of life' (Normality??)

4.1.4 Totality

4.2 Beatific fantasy

4.2.1 Utopia/Desire?

4.2.2 Removal of the obstacle

4.2.3 No antagonism

4.3 Horrific fantasy

4.3.1 Lack of enjoyment

4.3.2 Their enjoyment

4.3.2.1 Theft of enjoyment

4.3.2.2 Perverse way of enjoyment

4.3.2.3 Chaos&Divison

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