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## **‘BLACK MONDAY’ AND THE ‘CHAIN OF LIGHT’: THE INFRAPOLITICS OF CIVIC RESISTANCE IN POLAND<sup>1</sup>**

### **„Czarny Poniedziałek” i „Łańcuch światła”: o infrapolitycznych formach oporu społecznego w Polsce**

**Streszczenie:** Celem artykułu jest antropologiczna analiza wydarzeń, które miały miejsce w Polsce w 2016 i 2017 roku. Były to masowe protesty obywatelski przeciwko polityce rządu. Inaczej niż w większości opracowań socjologicznych i politologicznych, autor proponuje interpretować je w kategorii działań infrapolitycznych. W tym celu odwołuje się pojęcia ‘infrapolityka’, zaproponowanego niegdyś przez Jamesa Scotta, i przygląda się temu, czy i na ile można ją wykorzystać do interpretacji opisywanych wydarzeń.

**Słowa kluczowe:** obywatelski protest, opór, Czarny Poniedziałek, Łańcuch światła, infrapolityka.

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is an anthropological analysis of the events that took place in Poland in 2016 and 2017. These were massive civil protests against government policy. Unlike most sociological and political science studies, the author proposes to interpret them in the category of infrapolitical actions. To that end he refers to the concept of ‘infrapolitics’, once propounded by

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is a revised version of the text originally published in Polish (Dohnal 2017).

James Scott, and examines whether and to what extent it can be used to interpret the described events.

**Key words:** civic protest, resistance, black Monday, Chain of Light, infrapolitics.

In this paper I would like to briefly reflect on the events of October 2016 and July 2017, when mass protests against policy changes proposed by the government took place throughout Poland – the first was the announcement of a plan to tighten the country’s already restrictive abortion law, and the second, a project for a widely criticized “reform” of the justice system. The civic opposition that emerged illustrates perfectly the complexity of the phenomenon of resistance and its entanglement in cultural and social contexts. My remarks are an attempt to look at this issue from the perspective of political anthropology. I refer in it to James Scott’s concept of infrapolitics, which I believe provides a valuable analytical tool for better understanding the political processes taking place in Poland today.

### **“Black Monday”**

On Monday, October 3, 2016, over 100,000 people took to the streets of 143 Polish cities to express their opposition to a draft bill being considered by the Polish parliament (Sejm) which called for an unconditional ban on abortion and punishment for women who violated the ban. These demonstrations, known as the National Women’s Strike”, or “Black Monday”, were the culmination of a protest, ongoing since September 23rd, organised by feminist activists on the Internet, mainly on Facebook, under the hashtag “#Czarny protest” (Black Protest). It encouraged posting photographs on social media sites of supporters dressed in black. The author of the slogan, Małgorzata Adamczyk, explained her idea in this way:

[I]t was a protest with a very simple instruction manual. Dress in black, take a picture, and then: don’t go to work, go to a demonstration.

You don't have to do all of this, one of these things is enough. This was doable in almost anyone's home and with anyone's wardrobe. (...) Everyone has black clothes at home, everyone looks good in black, so everyone could easily get involved in the protest in this visible way. The colour black has, above all, a clear symbolism – sadness and mourning. We would have been condemned to mourning if Ordo Iuris' barbaric project had passed. (Gostkiewicz 2016).

This popular online protest took to the street under the influence of a Facebook entry by Krystyna Janda, a famous Polish actress<sup>2</sup>. She recalled a one-day strike by Icelandic women in 1975 that paralysed the whole country. The women took the day off because they wanted men to appreciate their work. Janda declared that “if you organize such a protest, publicize it throughout Poland, and not only on the Facebook, I will join it with full conviction. But it's necessary to ensure at least a minimal chance for its success” (Michałek 2016). In response, the lawyer Marta Lempart made a call to action: “Let's give them a Black Monday!” The idea was enthusiastically received by masses of Internet users, who, in addition to preparing for the strike planned for October 3rd, also began organizing local protests. Adamczyk recalled:

The first thing we came up with was the hashtag. The later strike was a grassroots initiative – people took up the slogan and there was no holding them back. The Black Protest began to take on various forms. (...) At first, there were 17 posts on Instagram with the hashtag. Then 100. And then suddenly 3,000. And then there was an avalanche. I wanted to like all the selfies on the event page, but soon it turned out that my fingers were working too slowly (Gostkiewicz 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> According to data from the Monitori analytical system, the number of posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram containing the words ‘Black Protest’ and ‘Black Monday’ after September 23rd reached 1.5 million. On the other hand, according to the “Politics Online” study, ‘#The black protest’ was credited with being the hashtag with the largest online reach in 2016 (Gostkiewicz 2016).

The demonstrations that took place on “Black Monday” were accompanied by various events, including lectures, training sessions, workshops and happenings. Many women did not go to work or their university classes that day, and those who could not afford to do so, dressed in black. Men did the same, thus expressing their support for the idea of the strike. The participants of the demonstration carried slogans and banners in defence of women’s rights. Some expressed blunt criticism of the government (“The government’s not like a pregnancy, it can be ended”, “PiS OFF!”), others were more humorous in tone (“No women = no country”), and even somewhat risqué (“The government’s so nimble, it’s getting into our pussies”, “My vagina is not your problem”). Some banners were accompanied by coat hangers symbolizing underground abortion. The black umbrellas, under which the demonstrators shielded themselves from the pouring rain, became a completely unintentional emblem of the protest. The slogan “We’re not folding up our umbrellas” is now used at all women’s demonstrations.

The scale of the strike surprised the government, which initially tried to dismiss it. For example, the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in an interview for TVN24 said: “Let them have their fun if they have nothing else to worry about (...) We have to talk about this seriously, not dress up, organise happenings and shout stupid slogans”. He also added that a demonstration of 30,000 people in Warsaw, a city of two million inhabitants, was a “marginal” issue (tvn24.pl). The situation soon turned out to be quite different, and the authorities were forced to make concessions – just three days after Black Monday, the Sejm rejected the proposed amendments to the abortion law. The women had achieved their goal.

## **The “Chain of Light”**

Nine months later, in July 2017, Polish cities and towns once again became an arena for civil protests. This time the protests were related to a reform of the judiciary being forced through parliament by the ruling majority – this included changes in the laws concerning the National Council of the Judiciary and the court system, as well as a draft of new

regulations governing the Supreme Court. According to the protesters, these constituted an attack on the independence of the judiciary and the separation of powers, and thus undermined the constitutional foundations of Poland as a democratic state governed by the rule of law.

Resistance to the government's policies grew progressively. It was initiated by small demonstrations, but over time it grew into mass gatherings involving tens of thousands of ordinary citizens. On Sunday, July 16th, people gathered in crowds with candles at Krasinski Square in Warsaw to "create a chain of light and pure intentions" around the Supreme Court building. The atmosphere of the gathering was solemn: Chopin's music was played, the slogan "Free courts!" was chanted, and a statement from the event's initiator, the Polish Judges Association 'Iustitia', was read out loud: "Today we stand in a Chain of Light in many places in Poland. In defense of justice. We want a reform of the courts to be drafted that transcends political divisions. For the benefit of ordinary people, and not just a small group of ruling politicians" (Onet.pl). The event ended with the playing of the Polish national anthem and the participants placing candles in a line around the court building.

The "Chain of Light" was not a one-time action. In the days that followed, demonstrations against violating the independence of the courts took place throughout Poland. The organizers of the demonstrations were local committees that distanced themselves from any party and from politics in general, emphasizing the civic character of the protests. The informal leader of the group in Poznań was Franciszek Sterczewski, an urban and social activist, and organiser of happenings (Żytnicki 2017). He used Facebook to summon residents to protests that for more than a week took place in various parts of the city ( first at Freedom Square, and then in Mickiewicz Park and next Kasprowicz Park). Constant features of the Poznań protests included lights, Polish and EU flags raised above the participants' heads, a group reading of the Constitution, and singing of the national anthem, as well as the word "veto" being formed out of candles or being spelled out by the arranged bodies of the participants. During the demonstrations politicians were not allowed to speak; only lawyers and "ordinary" residents could express themselves.

Sterczewski believed that the defense of courts was a civic matter and took great care not to have the event be appropriated by any political group<sup>3</sup>. He thus succeeded in mobilising thousands of people to take part in the protests, including many young people, who generally stay away from politics and place little trust in politicians.

The authorities responded to the nationwide “chains of light” with dismissal and irritation, as they had to the “black protest”. According to the head of the Ministry of the Interior, among the crowds of demonstrators in Warsaw were “many people out on walks” and random onlookers who had been out on the city’s streets that summer evening and stopped to see what was going on. In his opinion, everything had taken place in a “picnic atmosphere”. Pro-government journalists, in turn, questioned the spontaneous nature of the “chain of light”, claiming it was a “street revolt planned and financed from abroad” (Ibid.). The tone of these statements changed on July 24th, when the President vetoed two of the laws passed by the Sejm, admitting that one of the reasons for his decision was the scale of the citizen protests. It soon became clear that the government had not abandoned its plans, only postponed them. Nonetheless, the “chain of light” proved that resistance made sense – although it did not guarantee success, it created an opportunity to publicly declare one’s beliefs, fostered the formation of a group identity, and mobilized people to action, all things without which any change in power relations would be impossible. This is what Małgorzata Adamczyk meant when she said, unable to hide her joy, that “I’m damn glad that it was possible to activate even those women who had never before protested against the fancies of politicians. (...) Polish girls finally saw that together they had strength” (Gostkiewicz 2016). This may be a romantic view of resistance, but it is difficult to deny it outright.

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<sup>3</sup> Those behind the Poznań initiative wrote on their Facebook profile: “We disassociate ourselves from any connections with one party or another”, and Sterczewski ignored the politicians present at the protests, welcoming those gathered, greeting in turn: “the residents of Poznań, judges and lawyers, people of culture, employers and employees, people in love and unloved, believers and doubters, senior citizens and youths, Law and Justice voters and others”. For more on the origins and course of the Poznań protests see Żytnicki 2017.

## **Infrapolitics: the beginnings**

From a political or sociological perspective, “Black Monday” and the “Chain of light” can be considered typical examples of political protest, i.e. symbolic or organised action (of groups or individuals) in the sphere of political rivalry, taken against actions considered for various reasons by the protestors to be wrong (see Antoszewski, Herbut 1995). Such an approach is, of course, fully justified, but in my opinion, it is too general and does not sufficiently express the specificity of these two particular actions. I believe it is more accurate to interpret them as infrapolitical forms of civic resistance in the sense attributed to this category currently in the anthropological literature. This sense refers to the concept originally proposed by James C. Scott and later developed by other researchers.

As widely known, the concept of infrapolitics was introduced by Scott in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), which describes the methods used by Malaysian peasants to oppose the negative effects of the “green revolution”. These methods included passivity, work slow-downs, spreading rumours and minor acts of theft and sabotage. It was precisely this kind of behaviour as a reaction to domination (power) that gave birth to infrapolitics, i.e. the bottom-up politics of resistance of subordinate groups.

The concept was developed and systematized by Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), where he argued that infrapolitics (or “hidden transcripts”) does not exist only in feudal, caste or totalitarian systems, and is not cultivated only by subalterns, but it is present everywhere where dominators do not respect the rights and dignity of the ruled, governing in an authoritarian manner, contrary to a sense of social justice.

## **Bottom-up Politics of Citizen Resistance**

The category of infrapolitics proved so attractive and theoretically meaningful that it was quickly adopted by other researchers who, over time, began to employ it to analyze the bottom-up opposition politics

of many other groups living in different social and political systems. I just want to mention only two examples of this tendency.

The first was Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Race Rebels: Culture Politics and the Black Working Class* (1994), a book devoted to non-institutional forms of resistance used by African-American workers fighting for racial and economic justice in the 20th century. Kelley goes beyond the understanding of infrapolitics proposed by Scott – he finds resistance on various scales in the spatial, economic and cultural behaviour of Black workers, in the complexity of the experiences of ordinary people struggling with day-to-day exclusion and discrimination. At the same time, he repeatedly emphasizes the close relationship between politics and culture, pointing out that forms of protest are derived from the cultural resources at the disposal of the subordinates.

### **Infrapolitics and Social Mobilization**

The second example is the 131st volume of the journal *Revue française d’études américaines*, published in 2012 and entitled “Infrapolitics and Mobilizations”. It is dedicated to analyses of various forms of grassroots opposition in contemporary Western societies. The authors of the articles contained within it are united by the conviction that the essence of infrapolitics is mobilising social resistance, i.e. uniting people around practices and values that covertly express political criticism of power – that represent forms of symbolic protest against hegemonic action. In accordance with these assumptions, they analyse practices encompassed within infrapolitical resistance: from consumer boycotts, LGBT demonstrations and anti-war graffiti, to the street riots, taqwacore subculture and urban ‘greening’. Although the form of protest is different in each case, the protests are attended by members of different social groups, and though the goals being fought for are different, they share many things in common – they are all ways of publicly articulating political beliefs by means that are beyond the “visible spectrum” of political action, or – to put it another way – infrapolitics uses cultural masks, and manifests itself through



discourses and practices whose connection with the traditionally understood category of politics is not obvious.

Scott referred to this argument in a response he made in the same volume. In his opinion, the essays published in “Infrapolitics and Mobilizations” shed new light on infrapolitics, significantly broadening its semantic boundaries. Originally, this category related to “a politics that ‘dare not speak its name,(...) a careful and evasive politics that avoided dangerous risks” (Scott 2012: 113). However, in its ‘renewed’ and extended sense, it also includes acts of public resistance which seem to have nothing to do with typical “weapons of the weak”. Can they still be called infrapolitical? Scott, with some reservations, thinks so. This is determined by a number of features, which – regardless of the form of protest – can be found in the actions of subordinates, no matter whether they are Malaysian peasants, African-American workers, the inhabitants of ethnic ghettos, sexual minorities, anti-war activists, or simply a group of citizens dissatisfied with the policies of those governing the country.

The first is related to the issue of anonymity – although participants of such events as demonstrations or consumer boycotts sometimes cover their faces, they more often appear without “masks”, and in some cases even under their own names. In such situations, being part of a group acts as an insurance policy, because “large crowds and mobs provide their individual participants with a measure of anonymity”. Digital media, especially the Internet, a vast new terrain of civic resistance, plays an analogous role today .

Another feature of many infrapolitical actions is their provocative and iconoclastic character – such actions like provocative insults or public mockery of hegemony expose its paradoxes and absurdities, and are therefore forms of infrapolitics, and in some cases, effective means of undermining hierarchies of power.

Another issue raised by Scott is that of who and what grassroots protests are directed against. According to him, these protests generally address specific issues and problems that, from the point of view of the participants, have a significant impact on them, because they restrict their freedom or are sources of humiliation or injustice. Infrapolitics, therefore,

does not speak about morality in its broadest sense, but addresses specific, chosen issues, such as the right to abortion; it does not undermine the existing legal system, but rather attacks concrete provisions within it, such as those concerning the use of torture or the death penalty; it does not question the existence of the state, but protests against its toleration of discrimination and inequality based on gender, age, ethnicity or religion. This is the nature of LGBT activities or consumer boycotts.

Summing up his comments, Scott expressed his hope that “Infrapolitics and Mobilizations”, as well as the work to be done, “will contribute to the appreciation and understanding of the vast realm of consequential political life that lurks below the deceptive surface of ‘politics as usual’” (Ibid.: 117).

To put it another way: infrapolitics is not a substitute for politics, not is it quasi-politics or non-politics, but a phenomenon located under the surface of conventional politics. It is politics *per se*, but expressed in activities whose content and form are devoid of typically political features. They can be seen as symbolic manifestations of resistance against the unjust use of power, encompassing both hidden transcripts, as well as structured political actions and group or individual acts of dissent, which for various reasons are articulated “in disguised forms” (Scott 1990: xiii; Kelley 1994: 8).

## Conclusion

Having this in mind, I argue that “Black Monday” and the “Chain of Light” may be thought of as good examples of a bottom-up politics of resistance – ergo infrapolitics. Recognising them as such focuses attention on several features that distinguish these from other types of political protests. First, it emphasizes their grassroots and spontaneous character – the main initiators and participants of both events were ordinary citizens and not organized political entities. This is perfectly illustrated by the Poznań example, about which sociologist Rafał Drozdowicz has said:

(...) a new form of political commitment was being born before our very eyes. Paradoxically, the essence of this involvement was anti-political. The negative associations connected with politics were now being substituted by citizenship. Another feature of this new type of involvement was an aversion to party leaders and political parties, understood as corporations (Nyczka 2017).

Secondly, infrapolitical actions are directed against those elements of the politics of domination that are perceived by the protesters as threatening the good of the community, and which exclude and stigmatize people and reinforce the hierarchies of power.

We can also say that what we have seen in Poland is a new form of political movement, built around specific issues, based on what unites rather than what divides. This was the case with the “Black Protests” and is now the case with the “Chain of Light”. (...) These protests were not about ideologies or worldviews, but about specific issues whose influence on our everyday life can be easily imagined (Ibid.).

Thirdly, despite the fact that grassroots opposition is a thoroughly political phenomenon, because like all resistance, it strives for social change, it almost always distances itself from traditionally understood politics – party politics carried out in the name of the fight for power and often resorting to “dirty” methods. Infrapolitics wants to be different; it “speaks” using the language of symbols, which does not have clear political connotations, but instead refers to positive values, and praises equality and tolerance, a language that is not exclusionary, and often makes use of humour and irony.

Fourthly, to mobilize social resistance, today’s infrapolitics uses social media, which greatly increases its strength and allows it to reach many audiences, especially young ones. Thanks to this, these people feel they are part of a community and see that many others, both friends and strangers, think in a similar way. This is conducive to engaging in action and to integration. Bearing this in mind, Scott (190: 196) referred to the metaphor of a dam bursting under pressure from rising water. This is what Gosia Adamczyk had in mind when noted:

There are voices that a few clicks on Facebook won’t change the world. This is true. When I ‘like’ a post that claims children are starving, I won’t feed the children with this ‘like’. But if I want to manifest my views with it, that’s another matter. It works. We have seen how many of us there are. We counted ourselves. If my friend, my aunt, my mother and my aunt send me a selfie in black, I know that there are many of us (Gostkiewicz 2016).

Fifthly and finally, due to the fact that the politics of grassroots resistance is not obvious, rulers have considerable problems assessing it and reacting to it appropriately. Civic demonstrations without politicians are difficult to attack as typical political actions, so attempts are made to ridicule them, to create the impression that they are of little importance, marginal and frivolous. This is a tactic aimed primarily at their supporters and those watching “from the sidelines”, aimed at convincing them that resistance is limited in scope and limited to groups that seek to take power. The accusation that the protests are politicised is thus meant to discredit them, which is one of the paradoxes of politics.

I am aware that the category of infrapolitics proposed by Scott is an imperfect analytical tool that can be criticized for various deficiencies (see e.g. Apiary 2015: 12–15). Nevertheless, I believe that it provides a convenient starting point for reflecting on the complexity of political life and its entanglement in cultural and social contexts.

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