

Tradition Against Liberalism in Poland

The Counter-hegemonic
Challenge of
Illiberal Neo-traditionalism

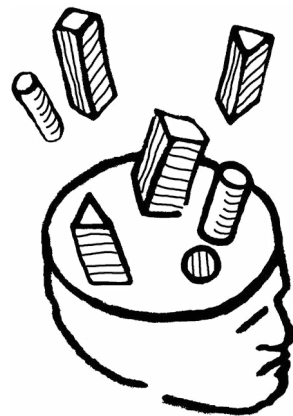
Francesco Melito



While much of the existing literature has explored the causes of illiberalism, this book investigates the construction of a counter-hegemonic illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland, analyzing the period 2015–2020. To this end, the author conducts a discourse-theoretical analysis of a Polish neo-traditionalist discourse coalition that has deployed a counter-hegemonic strategy shaped by traditionalism, antimodernism, and anticolonialism. Rejecting the cultural foundations of liberal democracy, their discourse is organized around three core elements: tradition, a culturally defined nation, and people-as-a-community. This neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland legitimized the discursive shift towards illiberalism, giving voice to the ‘cultural losers of globalization’.

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Abstract:

The book examines the discursive shift towards illiberalism in Poland, analyzing the period 2015–2020, with a particular focus on its cultural dimension. While much of the existing literature has explored the causes of illiberalism, this study investigates the construction of an illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse shaped by traditionalism, anti-modernism, and anti-colonialism. The Polish ‘illiberal turn’ is explained as a counter-hegemonic reaction that rejects the cultural foundations of liberal democracy, offering an alternative worldview. Grounded in Poststructuralist Discourse Theory, the research seeks to uncover the content of Polish neo-traditionalism, its political and hegemonic strategy, and the fantasies that sustain its ideological appeal. To this end, a discourse-theoretical analysis was conducted on various Polish ‘organic intellectuals’ of neo-traditionalism. Instead of focusing on a single actor or party, the study identifies a common (informal and often implicit) discourse coalition that consistently advances a narrative centered on three key elements: tradition, a culturally defined nation, and people-as-a-community. This illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse coalition in Poland has deployed a hegemonic strategy that has, at least in part, legitimized the discursive shift towards illiberalism, giving voice to the ‘cultural losers of globalization’.

Keywords: neo-traditionalism, illiberalism, Poland, cultural hegemony, Discourse Theory, populism, nationalism

Abstract: Il libro esamina lo slittamento discorsivo verso l’illiberalismo in Polonia, concentrandosi sul periodo 2015–2020 e ponendo particolare attenzione alla sua dimensione culturale. Mentre gran parte della letteratura esistente si è soffermata sulle cause dell’illiberalismo, questo studio analizza la costruzione di un discorso neotradizionalista illiberale, caratterizzato da elementi tradizionalisti, antimodernisti e anticolonialisti. La ‘svolta illiberale’ polacca viene interpretata come una reazione contro-egemonica che rifiuta i fondamenti culturali della democrazia liberale, proponendo una visione del mondo alternativa. Basata sulla Teoria del Discorso post-strutturalista, la ricerca mira a far emergere i contenuti del neotradizionalismo polacco, la sua strategia politica ed egemonica, nonché le fantasie che ne alimentano il richiamo ideologico. A tal fine, è stata condotta un’analisi teorico-discorsiva di diversi ‘intellettuali organici’ del neotradizionalismo polacco. Invece di concentrarsi su un singolo attore o partito, lo studio individua una coalizione discorsiva (informale

e spesso implicita) che promuove una narrazione incentrata su tre elementi chiave: la tradizione, una nazione definita culturalmente e il popolo come comunità. Questa coalizione discorsiva neotradizionalista e illiberale in Polonia ha adottato una strategia egemonica che ha almeno in parte legittimato lo slittamento discorsivo verso l'illiberalismo, dando voce ai 'perdenti culturali della globalizzazione'.

Parole chiave: neotradizionalismo, illiberalismo, Polonia, egemonia culturale, teoria del discorso, populismo, nazionalismo

About the Author

Francesco Melito is a research fellow at the University of Trieste. His research interests are in the fields of discourse theory, illiberalism, and populism. His recent publications include: 'The revival of thin-centred nationalism. The case of Fratelli d'Italia', *Contemporary Italian Politics*; 'The organization of Brothers of Italy: an activist and centralized party led by a "mother in the family"', *South European Society and Politics* (with M. Zulianello); 'Hegemonic struggles and the role of contemporary 'organic intellectuals': A different perspective for the analysis of discourses', *Politics*.

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1.

Introduction. The illiberal turn and the neo-traditionalist reaction

‘What if’ questions are a futile exercise when trying to understand the course of history, yet history is undeniably shaped by non-necessary events and developments. We cannot predict ‘what’ if those specific circumstances had or had not occurred. Nevertheless, we do know that what happened was only one of the infinite paths history could have taken. Similarly, the conditions of possibility of a particular worldview are not predetermined. We do not know ‘what’ liberal democracy would look like if communism had not collapsed in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). We do know, though, that several years after 1989 and the transition to liberal democracy, some of those countries are now shifting towards illiberalism. We know that the idea of liberal democracy, once uncontested, is being challenged by alternative illiberal worldviews.

Several theoretical conceptualizations have addressed the establishment of dominant world descriptions. Various traditions of political and sociological analysis have discussed, at some point, concepts such as *episteme* (Foucault 2002), *Weltanschauung*, paradigm (Kuhn 1962), common sense and hegemony (Gramsci 1975), habitus (Bourdieu 1984), and so forth. These schools have grappled with the problem of the existing reality: How do we come to understand the world as we do? How are the norms, practices, and values of a

community produced, sedimented, or modified? By rejecting a positivist reading of social reality, this view emphasizes 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 worldviews and 'alternative truths'. Competing truths are contingent social products that vary from one culture to another, from one historical moment to a previous or future one. Thus, social reality is marked by radical contingency, that is the impossibility of defining the internal essence of any identity and practice (Laclau 1990). The main implication stemming from this ontological position does not relate to the contingency of the social world – an almost banal observation. Rather, it 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 (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

Based on these ontological assumptions, this book aims to explain the illiberal turn in Poland as an attempt to *discursively* redefine the cultural organization of the national community, from its values to its socially acceptable rules. In other words, illiberalism questions and challenges the accepted liberal truth. To achieve this goal, it applies the insights of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT) “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). Specifically, the research aims to explore how an illiberal and neo-traditionalist worldview (or discourse, as it has been referred to in this study) in Poland has been discursively constructed to challenge the dominant position of liberalism, what its main features are, and why it has crystallized notwithstanding the multiple possibilities history can offer. Rather than seeking causal explanations or discovering its genealogy, cultural illiberalism in Poland is explained through the lens of hegemonic struggle: using a neo-traditionalist political strategy, cultural illiberalism in Poland have (re)emerged as a counter-hegemonic project rooted in traditionalist values against the dominant liberal worldview. Following these premises, the main research question of this study is:

- *How has the illiberal and neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland emerged as a counter-hegemonic project against liberalism, seeking to resignify the core values of society?*

This broad question entails a specific ontological framework that will be elaborated in the subsequent chapters. In brief, the study will scrutinize the rules of the neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic project, its discursive strategy, and the underlying fantasies that provide it with ideological grip. Understanding and critically explaining how an illiberal *and* neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland strives to replace the ‘liberal truth’ is the main goal of the book.¹

ILLIBERALISM AND NEO-TRADITIONALISM IN POLAND

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE. HEGEMONIC PERSPECTIVE

After the successful journey towards liberal democracy that culminated in EU membership in 2004, several Central and Eastern European countries are experiencing an illiberal backlash, though uneven, against the principles of liberalism (Guasti and Bustikova 2023; Laruelle 2022; Rupnik 2023). This illiberal transformation of CEE politics has been labeled at different times as populist, counter-revolutionary, or revisionist (Zielonka 2018). Despite different definitions, there is an academic consensus that the process of democratization in the region is reversing (Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley 2018). One of the most 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). However, 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 discursive change. In addition, using the broad category of ‘democratic backsliders’, and putting in the same basket all

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.

CEE countries, risks misestimating the proportions of the issue and fails to grasp the cultural and political differences between countries.

Due to these limitations, the book narrows the focus on a single case-study while, at the same time, widening the perspective to the illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse produced in the country by a plurality of sources (from political parties to journalists; see Chapter 5), moving beyond an agent-centered approach. Poland represents a significant example of the ‘illiberal turn’ (Bustikova and Guasti 2017) in the region. After 8 years of government led by the national-conservative Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS), the recent victory of the liberal camp in the 2023 general election has certainly impacted Polish politics. However, this does not mean that illiberal discourses have disappeared and are now irrelevant. The discursive construction of an illiberal and neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic project, which occurred throughout the previous decade, transcends the alternation of different governments or the ideological repositioning of political parties. In this respect, the book applies hegemonic theory, trying to capture those long-term discursive constructions that work to resignifying values within the public space and to slowly chiseling common sense. The intellectual foundations of this “renaissance of conservatism”, 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). While many studies have dealt with the factors explaining the illiberal backlash (for example, Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Gora and de Wilde 2020; Pappas 2014; Sadurski 2018) the ideational dimension of the illiberal counter-reaction remains neglected (Buzogány and Varga 2018).

Despite internal differences, it is possible to glimpse a pattern within the illiberal camp in Poland, which, more or less consciously, is seeking to rebuild an alternative common sense – non-liberal, as Viktor Orbán (2014) described it in his famous speech in Băile Tușnad (Tusnádfürdő) about illiberal democracy. This alliance that combines nationalist – or, for some, populist – stances with religious sentiments and traditionalist values has been described as a neo-traditionalist counter-hegemonic discourse (Melito 2021a), an illiberal populist ideology (Korolczuk and Graff 2018), a counter-elite populism (Bill 2020), or a conservative discourse coalition (Dąbrowska 2019). These approaches, different in some respects, identify the existence of an ideological project with certain characteristics. Notwithstanding their different terminology, they all describe a political or discursive alliance opposing what they perceive as the dominant cultural values of liberalism. This study, therefore, contributes to the literature regarding the emerging field about illiberalism (Laruelle 2022; Sajó et al. 2021), looking both at its *negative* illiberal side, and its *positive* aspect, in our case, neo-traditionalism.

The illiberal turn must be seen against the background of the 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 expression as the last stage of the evolution of liberalism towards its acme. To Fukuyama (1989: 4. *Emphasis added*) it was hardly conceivable even to imagine an alternative to liberal democracy after the collapse of its main socialist 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.

CEE countries did not remain immune to the transformation of 1989 and underwent a significant discursive shift. Communist political systems were entirely disrupted, and the window of opportunities was left open for a new resignification of the discursive space. 1989 meant the abandonment of socialist narratives to embrace the Western liberal democratic system that emerged as the winner from the Cold War. This discursive shift towards the liberal West redefined the meaning of ‘normality’ and involved a new signification of the signifier ‘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 (Bill and Stanley 2020).

The liberal consensus monopolized the discursive field of the Western hemisphere (in a broad sense). 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. More importantly for the fate of this region, the liberal consensus affected also the process of EU integration of the CEE countries where mainstream political actors competed on the technocratic *modus operandi* rather than on different worldviews (Grzymała-Busse and Innes 2003). 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”.

The ‘return to the West’ and ‘to normality’ became the main goal of most former socialist countries (Krastev and Holmes 2020). It functioned as an imaginary fantasy to achieve after the ‘Soviet theft’ of freedom. Rather than relating to its political consequences, the West and, later, EU integration were pictured as an “imagined cultural destiny” (Mark et al. 2019: 275). However, the liberal consensus should not be understood as a lack of alternatives. Some of the CEE countries presented a fragmented and tumultuous political arena, and the intellectual debate was still vivid (Kim 2022). Nonetheless, the victory of liberalism had to be found in the field of ideas (Bluhm and Varga 2019). Although party competition was often turbulent, the hegemonic position of the liberal consensus was never put into question. This lack of discursive pluralism has been performed as a crisis by PiS leader, Jarosław Kaczyński (2019/35), years later:

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.

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 equivalent as part of the same desirable object, as stated by the then finance minister, Leszek Balcerowicz (1995). They needed to be liberalized in order 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 – using a Gramscian terminology – is echoed 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). Hegemonic forces, in fact, transcend the boundaries of the nation-state, yet they profoundly shape 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.

Liberalism, therefore, came as a full-fledged promise to cover several aspects of society. 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 book, 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 scripts. All these 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 the Polish constitutional crisis demonstrates. 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 by the transition generated a cultural displacement that, eventually, produced an illiberal neo-traditionalist counter-revolution (Melito 2021a).

THE POST-1989 ILLIBERAL COUNTER-REVOLUTION AND THE CULTURAL COUNTER-HEGEMONIC THESIS

The past decade has seen a surge in studies about populism, which in its minimal definition can be briefly described as an anti-establishment appeal to the people (Stavrakakis et al. 2017). Only recently has academic attention turned to illiberalism as a distinct concept worth of research. This conflation of populism and illiberalism may stem from the alignment between the elite and their guiding ideology, liberalism. Illiberalism, instead, should be understood as a separate concept, rather than a regime (Waller 2024), which has an *ex negativo* relation to liberalism. It “is a new ideological universe [...] [which] represents a backlash against today’s liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational [...] [and] proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favouring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity” (Laruelle 2022: 312).

In this light, the illiberal turn can be explained as an ideological critique of the liberal hegemony from non-liberal actors as suggested by Jan Zielonka (2018) who has offered a macro-contextual reading of the illiberal backlash. Using his expression, we are witnessing an illiberal counter-revolution in Europe. 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.

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)

Thus, illiberal counter-revolutions should be understood as reactions against the liberal hegemony in all its aspects. Moving from the counter-revolution thesis, the book will specifically focus on the illiberal contestation of the liberal worldview in the cultural sphere. Especially in CEE, in fact, the cultural terrain has been identified as the main battleground of the *Kulturkampf* between modernizing liberalism and its traditionalist rivals (Ágh 2016; Trencsényi 2014) and as a battle over values (Furedi 2018). The cultural counter-revolution entails a clash between different worldviews, which has been accurately described by the evocative words of the former PiS Minister of Foreign Affairs, Witold Waszczykowski (2016):

[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.

Thus, while Zielonka has given a comprehensive explanation of illiberal counter-reactions, the cultural counter-hegemonic thesis refers to a specific form of illiberalism concerned with values and societal norms.

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. The emergence of post-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; see next section). 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 (Bornschieer 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 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 twenty years later and, arguably, it assumed a considerable dimension only recently, when the success of liberal democracy seemed to be unquestioned. Regarding 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 study 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 and to give a precise causal answer to the puzzle of the 'delayed reaction'. The hegemonic approach, though, can help to understand the discursive strategy – or the 'war of position' to anticipate Gramsci's terminology – that allows to contest and replace the existing dominant ideology.

REVOLT AGAINST THE MODERN WORLD: NEO-TRADITIONALISM

Criticisms of the progressive values promoted by the liberal elite are often attributed to the so-called populist radical right (Mudde 2007). Political parties within this category are characterized by authoritarianism – emphasizing both law-and-order policies and traditional values – and a peculiar form of nationalism – nativism – concerned with the prerogatives of natives in contrast to foreign individuals and cultures (de Genova 2016). The adjective 'populist' further indicates that these authoritarian and nativist elements are expressed by appealing to the people while blaming the elite. As discussed later in the empirical analysis, neo-traditionalism incorporates these features but also extends beyond them since its premises are different from those of the

populist radical right. Rather than being tied to political parties, neo-traditionalism refers to a broader political strategy aimed at replacing the liberal worldview – seen as a colonialist project – with the re-affirmation of traditional values. In essence, it functions as an anti-colonialist strategy that rejects the liberal cultural hegemony, aligning with the cultural counter-hegemonic thesis.

More specifically, this clash of worldviews can be understood as part of a wider ideological conflict between modernity and tradition. Modernity is closely linked to cultural liberalism as they both seek to free individuals from the obligations of the past while promising negative freedom. The modern liberal individual strives to escape heteronomous systems of values, becoming “the locus of moral judgment and choice” and “the final adjudicator of morality” (Carse 1994: 186). In contrast, traditions offer stable reference points – prejudice – in a world where modernity and progress have broken ties with the past (Burke 2003). Traditional values provide individuals with a mental map to navigate the world and rediscover the lost direction that was sacrificed on the altar of freedom. Therefore, individual liberty is incompatible with tradition and its prescriptive nature. Using a mythological metaphor, this clash mirrors the conflict between the Titan Prometheus – embodying humanity’s relentless pursuit of liberation through fire and technology – and the Gods, who impose their norms and the force of nature upon humankind (Melito 2022).

As Edward Shils (1958) argued, traditionalism is primarily a reaction against modernity. While liberal modernity liberates people from the chains of prejudice, traditionalism provides stable and permanent values that draw legitimacy from the past. The *Unsicherheit* (insecurity) provoked by the contemporary lack of certainties (Bauman 1999) led to a growing need of stable values. This ‘dilemma of freedom’ suggests that when individuals experience a greater liberty, the resulting disorientation may drive them to seek mental security within traditions (Melito 2022).

The term neo-traditionalism, borrowed from anthropology and post-colonial studies, refers to the rejection of foreign cultural influence and the construction of a new (old) identity rooted in traditions (Friedman 1994; Rata 2007). In the context of former colonies, neo-traditionalism has been used as a political strategy to legitimize tribal elites and rejects the cultural influence of Western powers. Rejecting the colonizers also entails rejecting their modernity. References to the past serve to re-establish a culturally defined identity, opposed to the Western one, and constructed upon a ‘more genuine way of life’. 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). Thus, like traditionalism, neo-traditionalism refuses relativist modern values and individualism, valuing instead stable traditions and communities. However, unlike traditionalism, the *neo-* prefix indicates a political strategy “deployed in different ways by both elites and ordinary people” (Galvan 2007: 599) that revives past cultural patterns to legitimize itself. Neo-traditionalism not only opposes modernity but also associates modernity with a foreign, extraneous influence. It does not merely call for a return to tradition; it presents a political dimension aimed at achieving this goal.

Yet, how can a concept used in anthropology, in the context of former colonies, also be applied to political analysis in Europe? As aptly noted by Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff (2018), illiberal actors in Central and Eastern Europe have increasingly deployed an anti-colonialist narrative. Cosmopolitan elites from the West are accused to impose alien liberal values and globalizing processes on post-socialist countries. As in former colonies, this discourse has a neo-traditionalist component by invoking an authentic original culture that is threatened by the corrupt West. The liberal West is perceived as a foreign entity attempting to replace the old traditions of the past. Neo-traditionalism in Central and Eastern Europe, therefore, represents a revolt against Western modernity and the liberal values it promotes (Benczes et al. 2022). Those implementing a neo-traditionalist strategy view the liberal West as conducting a colonial project aimed at imposing its progressive, secular and modern values on CEE countries, often portrayed as the bastions of authentic ‘Europeanness’ and Christianity. At the same time, they articulate a political strategy to establish a different non-liberal cultural hegemony by evoking a ‘lost authentic past’ (Trencsényi 2014). In this context, neo-traditionalism has a dual function: (negatively) it accuses the liberal elite of disrupting the ‘authentic culture’ and (positively) reproduces elements of a past culture to address a perceived loss of ontological security, displaying an anti-modernist and anti-colonialist character.

What does this discussion tell us regarding the Polish cultural war? Oftentimes, Poland is described as internally split into two parts between liberal and conservative; West and East; cities and rural areas. This basic and descriptive distinction, yet commonly and historically accepted, provides a first hint regarding the signification of the signifier Polishness. As advocated by Witold Gombrowicz (1994) in *Trans-Atlantyk*, Polishness does not necessarily have to be tied to the Fatherland and respect for authorities. A new Polishness emerges in his novel, devoid of the old bonds to the Polish com-

munity and emphasizing the liberty of the individual. He named it through an evocative neologism Filistria (*synczyzna*). Killing the Father is a metaphor that illustrates the desire for overcoming the chains of tradition. The aspiration of the Son is the aspiration of modernity and the current liberal discourses. Conversely, what we might call neo-traditionalist Polishness reflects the tension between modernity and tradition. Rather than seeking to break superstructural chains, neo-traditionalism values the obligations imposed by the ethno-national community and religion. In this context, 'Polishness' is resignified in a neo-traditionalist manner by articulating traditionalist demands in opposition to liberal modernity, which is perceived as a foreign force attempting to 'steal' this way of life.

HYPOTHESIS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The dislocatory phase of the post-communist transition did not lead only to the disruption of existing meanings. As argued by Ernesto 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". The crisis of liberal hegemony gave rise to alternative hegemonic projects. On the one hand, a cultural counter-revolution opposed dislocated liberal principles (illiberal side); on the other hand, in the Polish case, an alternative discourse and a new normality was constructed (neo-traditionalist side). In other words, in Poland, the rejection of liberalism (*pars destruens*) is accompanied by the construction of an illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse (*pars contruens*). We are witnessing a hegemonic struggle that might lead, as a consequence, to a discursive shift. No longer the post-communist liberal democratic dream, but a new cultural organization that seeks to shuffle the core values and common sense of society.

By providing a hegemonic understanding of illiberalism, this book aims to complete the scholarship on the illiberal turn in CEE and, specifically, in Poland. 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'. 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 2018; 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 illiberal 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.

Following this discussion, it is possible to summarize and problematize the initial conditions of the investigation. The liberal hegemony that was established after 1989 in CEE has affected, to a different extent, each aspect of society. In terms of values, the 'cultural displacement' experienced in Poland caused the disruption of old traditions and stable beliefs (Melito 2021a) that, contrary to the expectations for the end of history and the inexorable progress of modernity, caused an illiberal neo-traditionalist counter-reaction. By analyzing the discursive productions of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition (see Chapter 5) in Poland in the period 2015-2020, the book aims to offer a critical explanation (not predictive) that accounts for and make more intelligible the shift towards illiberalism and neo-traditionalism in the country. To achieve this result, it will employ retroductive (or abductive) reasoning (cf. Hanson 1981; Paavola 2004) moving from a problematized phenomenon (the illiberal turn) to a tentative explanation based on existing theories (the cultural counter-hegemonic thesis), which will be refined after the empirical analysis in a constant exchange between data and theory. At this stage of this 'retroductive circle' (Glynos and Howarth 2007), it is possible to articulate a preliminary explanation: the shift to illiberalism has taken place in Poland as a (negative) illiberal *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, based on the three logics of critical explanation developed by Glynos and Howarth (2007; see Chapter 3). 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 to replace the 'liberal dream'.

The main research question, proposed at the beginning of this chapter, defines the general scope of this work as it deals with the hegemonic potential of neo-traditionalism:

RQ: *How has the illiberal and neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland emerged as a counter-hegemonic project against liberalism, seeking to resignify the core values of society?*

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

RQ1: *What are the rules characterizing the neo-traditionalist discourse?*

RQ2: *How is the hegemonic strategy of neo-traditionalism deployed?*

RQ3: *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?*

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book will be structured as follows. Chapter 2 will lay out the theoretical foundations of the research, introducing discourse, hegemony, and fantasy as the three key pillars for addressing the research sub-questions. Drawing on Glynos and Howarth's (2007) logics approach, Chapter 3 will connect these main theoretical concepts to the methodological framework, introducing respectively the social, political, and fantasmatic logics. Chapter 4 will propose the formula 'organic intellectuals of a discourse coalition' to justify the selection of a sample of discourse makers for analysis, a selection that will be detailed in Chapter 5 indicating the actors and text corpus used for the empirical study. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 will present the research findings, each focusing on one of the three logics shaping the illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland. Finally, Chapter 9 will offer a general discussion, outlining the study's contributions and providing a comprehensive response to the research questions.

2.

Discourse, hegemony, fantasy

To investigate the emergence of illiberal neo-traditionalism in Poland, this study takes a discursive approach, which relies on the discourse theory elaborated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, originally presented in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), a seminal work in poststructuralist literature. This text serves as the foundation of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory, which has since evolved and inspired a range of researchers collectively known as ‘The Essex School’. Their work can be read on two interrelated levels (Carpentier 2017). The first level refers to the ontology of discourse theory in its strictest sense. This is concerned with the static structure of discourse composed of an ensemble of discursive elements articulated around nodal points, forming the ‘social’. The second level of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is instead concerned with the dynamic establishment of discourses and, more specifically, with the concept of hegemony as a *political* attempt to fix a contingent discourse.

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)

Following later Laclau's (1990, 1996, 2005) works, a third *ideological* level can be added, involving fantasy as key to "concealing the radical contingency of social relations" (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 14). These three dimensions reflect the three sub-questions of the research. In this chapter, the concepts of discourse, hegemony, and fantasy will be examined from a discourse-theoretical point of view, constituting the theoretical foundations of the study. The final section will elaborate on these concepts, providing an overview of Ernesto Laclau's comprehensive theory of hegemony.

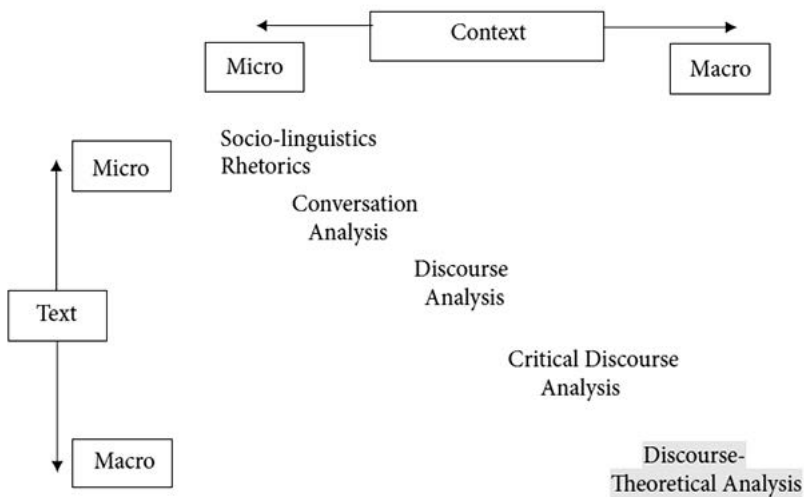
DISCOURSE

Contrary to an intuitive understanding of the term, a poststructuralist notion of discourse (as employed in this book) does not limit discourse to verbal or written expression, nor does it confine it to speech or conversation. In PDT, discourse is instead understood as a system of representation of reality (Hall 1997). It involves discursive elements – including meaningful language, visuals and practices – that, once articulated together, model a certain worldview and offer subject positions. In other words, our perception of the world and our identification within it are shaped by discourses that signify elements and assign meanings to objects. Thus, discourse studies are not confined to text or language analysis. 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)", aligning with the idea of worldviews, previously discussed. Here, the focus is not on the act of communication itself but on the meanings a discourse creates. Therefore, discourse is not neutral language but the product of signifying practices that shape the social world – or at least our perception of it.

This premise indicates the intimate link between discourse studies and social constructionism (Burr 2015; Potter 1996), where the ability to shape meanings highlights the contingent, non-essential nature of discourse. Within social constructionism, however, discourse is interpreted in various ways. A key distinction among diverse approaches concerns the degree to which discourse is understood as constitutive of the social world versus being conditioned by social practices – essentially, the question of what falls within the realm of discourse and what lies beyond it. To map these distinctions, Nico Carpentier and Benjamin De Cleen (2007) proposed a micro-textual/macro-textual and micro/macro-contextual continuum along which different discursive approaches can be positioned.

At one end, micro-textual approaches, such as conversation analysis, focus on spoken or written language, analyzing the content of what is said. At the other end, macro-textual approaches conceptualize discourse as ideology or representation, shifting focus from language as text to the embedded meanings and ideologies within it. In discourse theory, positioned at the far right of the spectrum, everything is considered to be a discursive practice, and everything is considered to be text since virtually “all objects and actions are meaningful” (Howarth 2000: 8). The other axis in Carpentier and De Cleen’s framework represents the contextual scope of discourse. Micro-contextual approaches focus on specific settings narrowing the analysis to a particular context, such as a conversation, while acknowledging the influence of external factors. In contrast, macro-contextual approaches consider broader environments encompassing social systems and regimes of practices (Carpentier 2017). These approaches study meanings beyond confined spaces, examining their circulation across the social. As Carpentier and De Cleen (2007: 277) illustrate (Figure 1), discourse theory sits in the lower right quadrant of the continuum, aligning with both a macro-textual and macro-contextual perspective.

Figure 1. Approaches to discourse (from Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007: 277).



Central to Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is the concept of articulation, derived from Saussure's relational understanding of language. Saussure (1959) viewed language as a system where signs derive their meanings through their relations to other signs. Moving from this assumption, Saussure believed it was possible to find the inherent structure of the language, and so did other structuralists in different fields. Poststructuralists acknowledge the relational nature of the elements of the structure but argue that these connections are inherently unstable and undecidable (Laclau 1994). Meaning, therefore, is contingent and shaped by articulatory practices within broader discourses. For instance, we can grasp the meaning of the signifier 'father' by distinguishing it from related terms such as 'mother' or 'son.' However, if 'father' were instead articulated as equivalent to 'priest,' its meaning would inevitably shift. Thus, meanings are constantly shaped by the discursive relationships in which they are situated. Accordingly, 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*. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105. Emphasis in the original)

Accordingly, discourse is an articulatory ensemble of discursive elements whose meanings are shaped by their specific configurations. Emphasizing articulatory practices highlights the radical contingency of identities defined in relation to other elements. Altering this configuration transforms the meaning of these elements. For instance, a forest represent either an obstacle to economic growth or a symbol of sustainable living, depending on how it is articulated with other elements (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). In this sense, language creates reality. Nevertheless, this ontological stance does not equate to a relativist position or suggest that the world exists only within the mind. Rather, as Stuart Hall (1997: 44. Emphasis in the original) asserts, "nothing which is meaningful exists *outside discourse*", implying that everything, from language to practices, assumes a certain meaning depending on the discourse signifying it. Thus, a meaningful discursive element can be a word as much as an act or visual elements. Even silence, if meaningful, can be considered as part of discourse. Silence between two friends can signal anger or complicity. Hence, all meaningful elements can be constructed discursively. From this perspective, the essential question is not whether God exists but what 'God' means. The an-

swer would only depend on the discourse the signifier ‘God’ belongs to. Citing again 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.

At the same time, discourses upon objects should not be seen as essentially given. A discourse that signifies an earthquake as the “expressions of the wrath of God” remains open to incorporate new elements that could alter its meaning. Saussure’s structure may exist; however, it cannot achieve any *permanent closure*. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of discourse allows for only *temporary closure*, as the social is “always surrounded by an ‘excess of meaning’” (Laclau 1990: 90). Consider again 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 particular meaning. However, this does not mean that Polishness (and Polish society) is necessarily tied to traditionalist sentiments. Other discursive elements circulate within the social: the articulation with terms like ‘emancipation’, ‘openness’, and ‘secularism’ would shape Polishness in a different way (Melito 2021b).

While discourse is always open to new significations, it can, at times, be represented as a fixed totality. As Laclau and Mouffe argue (1985: 112) “a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic”. To stabilize meanings, they introduce the category of *nodal points*. Based on Lacan’s *points de capiton*, nodal points serve as anchoring elements that partially fix meaning, helping to manage the potential chaos created by the excess of meanings. While articulations between elements shape discourses, nodal points lend them coherence.

Take, for example, the signifier ‘democracy’. In Western countries, when ‘democracy’ is used as a nodal point, other discursive elements – such as ‘human rights’, ‘elections’, or ‘citizens’ – adopt a specific meaning. However, the example of ‘democracy’ also illustrates the instability and precariousness of

nodal points. Although 'democracy' is a nodal point of many political discourses, its meaning is not fixed. 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. Similarly, the meaning of democracy in the *Democratic* People's Republic of Korea differ from a liberal reading. In this sense, nodal points need to be understood as 'floating signifiers'. They function as 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 temporarily stabilize meanings within a certain discourse, they are simultaneously contested sites of struggle over signification.

The idea that discourses *compete* to signify elements suggests that the social comprises a plurality of discourses. Signifying practices can thus be seen as acts of power, aiming to shape common sense and worldviews. Consequently, rather than oppressive and coercive, power should be understood as productive, creating regimes of truth that people follow spontaneously (Sawicki 1991). In a Foucauldian sense, "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault 1995: 194). However, Foucault (2002) contends that the dominant *episteme* of a certain epoch arises from the confluence of multiple, often uncoordinated factors. In PDT, instead, the organization of a discourse around nodal points is a political operation that must be understood as a discursive struggle for hegemony.

HEGEMONY

THE CONCEPT OF HEGEMONY IN GRAMSCI

Moving beyond the Marxist view of hegemony as the political leadership of the working class within a broader class alliance, Antonio Gramsci developed a more nuanced perspective that challenges the notion of power as merely political. For Gramsci, hegemony involves creating a new collective identity that surpasses class divisions and guides the cultural trajectory of civil society (Torfing 1999). In this sense, power is not confined to state control or electoral victories (Hall 1987). Rather, it primarily means 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. Thus, the key as-

pect to understand Gramsci's concept of hegemony is the distinction between 'domination' and 'intellectual and moral leadership'.

Leading civil society fundamentally involves shaping society's 'common sense,' which Gramsci defines as "the most widespread conception of life and man" (1975: 2271). Common sense is not predetermined; rather, it evolves when a hegemonic practice is powerful enough to redefine societal norms. The cultural struggle for common sense is fought within 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 (Bobbio 1979; Holub 1992). A special role in defining common sense is assigned to intellectuals, as discussed in Chapter 5. By shifting the struggle for hegemony from the realm of political society to civil society, Gramsci transforms the nature of this battle. It is no longer a 'war of maneuver' – a swift seizure of power through a *coup d'état* or an election victory. Instead, 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). To win power and achieve hegemony means, above all, to conquer civil society and reshape the dominant discourse.

A successful hegemony acts as a structuring force shaping "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). However, even a stable hegemony, at times, can be questioned, challenged, and ultimately replaced by counter-hegemonic forces offering an alternative vision. An organic crisis represents a fundamental moment for disrupting the hegemonic order. Such a crisis may arise either if the elite has politically failed to deliver, enforces consensus through coercion, or because a vast sector of the masses has become politically active (Gramsci 1975).

[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)

These organic crises create an opening to both dismantle the established order (hegemony) and constructing a new, alternative narrative (counter-hegemony). In this interregnum, competing social groups (or discourses) strive for

the ultimate aim of a hegemonic project: unity. Hegemony, in this sense, does not reflect a straightforward description of society but is instead an ideological construction of unity from diversity (Hall 1987). However, although Gramsci shifted the struggle for hegemony from the political to the cultural sphere, he still viewed the opposing forces in civil society as grounded in existing sectoral interests, such as the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) expanded on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, affirming that these struggles for hegemony are not confined to class but instead encompass a plurality of discourses.

THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST TURN IN HEGEMONIC THEORY

An intuitive link between the concepts of discourse and hegemony suggests defining hegemonic discourse as one that establishes fixed meanings within a given period. However, the radical contingency of discourse and meaning posited by Laclau (1990) implies that the political dimension can never completely disappear. In certain contexts – such as when Fukuyama wrote his essay – alternative discourses might seem nearly inconceivable. Nevertheless, the potential to reshape hegemonic common sense is always on the prowl since the “irreducible plurality of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 139) makes possible, theoretically, a plurality of hegemonic formations. The political, typically operating in the background, becomes visible when disruptions in the social create room for new articulations and hegemonic formations (Stavrakakis 2003). In this respect, at the very beginning of their book, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 7. Emphasis added) 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.*

From this ‘statement of intents’, it is already clear the direction of the post-structuralist turn. The struggle for hegemony is a struggle that aims to fill a (political) void created by a crisis, which dislocates the social and allows resignifying floating signifiers. In other words, it is a struggle to colonize the field of common sense by redefining values. 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.

As discussed earlier, nodal points are pivotal in fixing meaning and creating a unitary discourse. Yet, their contingency requires an explanation regarding their emergence. While, to Foucault, power is “*locationless; it is decentralized, silent, inconspicuous, but all-pervasive*” (Joas and Knöbl 2009: 358. Emphasis in the original), Laclau and Mouffe, instead, affirm the primacy of politics and the political character of hegemony. Discourses and social relations are a political construction involving antagonism and the exercise of power (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). 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 illiberalism. 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). Discourses are divided by a frontier that is inherently unstable – a condition essential to the hegemonic discourse itself. Without this instability, the ‘war of position’ would not be possible.

In political terms, a hegemonic project’s primary aim is to seize and stabilize nodal points, thereby consolidating systems of meaning. As Slavoj Žižek (1989: 96) notes, “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.” For instance, in the neo-traditionalist hegemonic project examined in this research, the objective is to secure key nodal points that shape Poland’s cultural framework. Defining signifiers such as ‘the nation’, ‘national values’, or ‘freedom’ becomes central to con-

structuring the country's dominant worldview. Certainly, other discursive elements are important pawns in the war of position. However, conquering nodal points results in a strategic victory. Ultimately, hegemonic success is marked by nodal points so stable that they become nearly unquestionable. In this case, discourses become sedimented and they can be hardly challenged (think about the discourse around 'national identity').

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) introduces two logics to explain the 'political': the 'logic of difference' and the 'logic of equivalence'. 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. 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 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).

This initial analysis clarifies the core political function of a hegemonic project according to Laclau and Mouffe. In brief, hegemony – specifically, an expansive hegemony which is of greater interest in this research – refers to the attempt to articulate floating signifiers. This process involves incorporating nodal points, which partially fix meanings within a chain of equivalent demands. Consequently, a successful hegemonic project can be seen as one that defines common sense by signifying articulated nodal points. Finally, the conditions of possibility of hegemony hinge on antagonistic relationships. A hegemonic project, aspiring to form a discursive totality capable of describing reality, relies on excluding certain elements – an exclusion which, simultaneously, 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 inherent contingency of hegemony, or its lack of a permanent structure, becomes evident during moments of dislocation (Laclau 1990).

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC TURN¹ AND THE ROLE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL FANTASIES

Following criticism by Žižek (1990), Laclau adjusted the notion of antagonism proposed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and developed the concepts of dislocation (1990) and empty signifiers (1996) that relied explicitly on psychoanalysis and the work of Jacques Lacan: in a nutshell, identities are shaped negatively not only by an external – discursively constructed – antagonist but also by an internal fault. Accordingly, Laclau develops a ‘negative ontology’ of the subject-as-lack, involving an original and constitutive lack of identity (Critchley and Marchart 2004). Yet, this move does not imply a shift towards the individual (Stavrakakis 2003). Rather, the Lacanian split subject is bounded to the socio-political and cultural environment around it (the Other) that is supposed to fill this lack (Hoens 2020). The ‘fundamental lack’ of the subject implies an endless quest to fill the void, a quest for unity. Thus, 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 emergence and sedimentation of hegemonic discourses that structure subjects and affect their process of identification.

To fully understand “the psychoanalytic turn” in Laclau’s work (Biglieri and Perelló 2020: 332), it is necessary to briefly introduce the three inter-related registers that constitute Lacan’s theory: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The *Imaginary* is the realm of perception, where the subject constructs a projected and illusory image of wholeness. Just as a mirror reflects a false image of a unified self, the Imaginary offers an illusion of completeness – a deceptive fantasy that suggests a unity that does not truly exist. To overcome the illusion, the split subject turns to the *Symbolic*, the order of language and culture.² Words and language promise a stable identity, of-

¹ 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).

² 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.

fering the linguistic tools of self-representation. Yet, this stability comes at a cost: submission to the Other (the Symbolic order) and the loss of the pre-symbolic condition leads to the “pre-eminence of the signifier over the subject” (Lacan 1972: 70). 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 Real, repressed by the Symbolic, represents the pre-linguistic era of unity with the mother, characterized by *jouissance* – an unattainable enjoyment tied to the imagined wholeness of that primordial stage. While suppressing the Real, the Symbolic produces reality, it creates a world that can be represented, thought of, and talked about (Fink 1995). The socio-cultural world of signifiers constructed by the Symbolic enables identification, making Lacan’s framework particularly relevant for understanding political discourse and identity formation.

Going back to the beginning of this section, 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. Since the subject is inherently split, identification becomes a necessity (Stavrakakis 1999). However, 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 itself ‘split’ because it cannot fully encompass the Real, which resists symbolization. This inability creates a fundamental lack within the Symbolic, mirroring the lack in the subject.

the most radical dimension of Lacanian theory lies [...] 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. The lost ‘real’fullness is a mirage that will only be visible through its lack, specifically, “the lack of *jouissance* of

a pre-symbolic real enjoyment or satisfaction which is always posited as lost” (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004: 206). 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* “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 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 *objet a* that, if achieved, would make the subject whole again. The fantasy announces that fullness is still possible (Sharpe and Turner 2020).

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 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 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. Considering this psychoanalytic excursus, we can finally turn back to its implications for political analysis.

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 2005). 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 the current 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 excess 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 the 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.

However, we also know that the social is subject to changes, which account for the succession of different hegemonic formations. 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 through political moments of contestation of the hegemonic order.

Additionally, the Real is not visible only through its lack. Gramsci (1975) had already hinted that an organic crisis opens 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. 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. “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 dis-

ruptive events displacing existing identities and meanings (Torfing 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 Moffitt (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” (Moffitt 2015: 195). Hence, the performance of crisis belongs to the Symbolic level and accounts for the *symbolic* and *negative* side of dislocations. In this respect, 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 the Real visible. Recalling Gramsci (1971: 276), this is a period of interregnum when “the old is dying and the new cannot be born”.

The political, however, is not present only 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 against 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. Consequently, the contingency of the social implies also the contingency of the political.

Regarding the positive side of dislocation – in addition to the previously discussed logic of equivalence and difference – Laclau (1996) introduced the category of empty signifier to explain how the Real is (positively) symbolized. 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. 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 2021b). 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).

Finally, since 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 Matthew Sharpe and Kirk Turner (2020: 195) observe,

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.

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 the contingent 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. Socio-ideological fantasies conceal this contingency, allowing identification. 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 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 (2005: 115-116) the quest for fullness is the same in psychoanalysis and politics; fullness is possible only by elevating a partial object to embodying 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 in both the logics of desire and hegemony. Sublimated 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 (2005: 122), “it has to become a nodal point of sublimation”.

3.

Methodology: 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 to develop a comprehensive methodological framework for the analysis of the illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland. The logics approach offers the conceptual framework and vocabulary needed to critically examine the research object in all its nuances, as “these logics enable us to account for the institution, contestation and sedimentation of social practices and regimes” (Glynos and Howarth 2008: 9). This perspective aligns with the objectives of the study, which not only investigates the hegemonic strategy of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition but also explores the conditions of possibility that have enabled illiberal neo-traditionalism to emerge

as a viable alternative to liberal democracy. In this respect, the notion of logic can offer helpful methodological tools since it

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)

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).

This chapter will therefore focus extensively on the logics approach, as it provides a wider framework for understanding the political and ideological dynamics that make a discourse possible. However, certain questions must first be addressed in the analysis of discourse: Why would we consider some discursive elements and their articulation as belonging to neo-traditionalism? Where are the limits of discourse? To address these issues, the following section will deconstruct discourse into demands, treating them as the minimal unit of analysis. The second part of the chapter will introduce the logics approach, examining in turn the social, political, and fantasmatic logics.

DECONSTRUCTING DISCOURSE. THE ROLE OF DEMANDS

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. 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). Therefore, for analytical purposes, it is necessary to deconstruct the notion of discourse.

In political terms, Laclau (2005: 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, 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 does not include every discursive production generated by a neo-traditionalist discourse maker. Rather, the focus is on those demands that serve a political, *qua* hegemonic, function. In other words, those demands that contest and challenge the existing social order. That can happen only when the existing hegemonic discourse faces a dislocatory experience (Glynos and Howarth 2007).

Recalling Lacan, a demand can be described as the symbolization of a *real* need (Zicman de Barros 2021). From this perspective, the notion of demand can be understood as pointing to a lack, to something missing that needs to be positivized. A discourse results from the equivalent articulation of these demands. Since hegemony tries to represent a lacking – ultimately unrepresentable – universal ideal within society and “allude[s] to an absent totality” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 7), 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. The chain of demands is constructed upon an equivalent (symbolized) lack. However, while they have an equivalent side (lack), their positive features differ, maintaining their particularity (Laclau 2005). At the same time, their weight 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, Martin Nonhoff (2019) introduces a distinction between demands to operationalize Laclau’s theoretical work. He identifies a hierarchical structure, distinguishing between cumula-

tive, subsuming, and encompassing demands. 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. Subsuming demands 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 – therefore never fully possible – of a hegemonic project.

As discussed later 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.

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? While in Gramsci the articulating subject of hegemony consisted of a fundamental class, 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 (see next chapter). Inspired by Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) describe the unity of discourse as *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’ highlights the contingency inherent in discourse, ‘regularity’ underlines the articulatory process that binds these diverse demands into a structured whole: “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 the example of ‘Polishness’ (Melito 2021b), it is possible to clarify how to identify a certain hegemonic formation. Polishness can be considered the 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, 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). 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).

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 social phenomena. 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 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 the 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 (RQ1). 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, refers to the diachronic aspect as it focuses on *how* a certain social practice becomes visible. 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 (RQ2). Likewise, the fantasmatic logic contributes to explaining the emergence of a practice by illustrating, instead, *why* that specific discourse succeeds in offering subject positions – demonstrating how a certain fantasy (beatific or horrific) conceals the radical contingency of social relations (RQ3). In this regard, 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.

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. At the same time, the ambition of Glynos and Howarth is to go beyond the quasi-descriptive work of interpretive research while distinguishing their approach from the causal law paradigm or the neo-positivist causal mechanism.

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 and by referring to radical contingency, they are interested in those moments of disruption that make a new practice, discourse or hegemony emerge or resist.

SOCIAL LOGIC

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 refers to the content of a discourse and the self-interpretation of subjects (Glynos and Howarth 2008). As Marttila (2015) and Remling (2018) noted, studies using 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 to build, if not a precise map, a framework to deal with the raw material the researcher must face in the analysis.

Although Glynos and Howarth repeatedly associate social logics to social practices, we should move from demands as the smallest element of analysis to be found in the data, as discussed above. Even if this reduction to demands could be accused of essentialism (Zicman de Barros 2021), it offers several advantages in terms of analysis. To make an example, a traditional wedding church can be considered as 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.

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 their expertise and theoretical knowledge to make a judgment when it comes to applying a certain category to an empirical phenomenon (Glynos and Howarth 2007).

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. 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 2021) – and show the contingent rationale of a discourse.

POLITICAL LOGIC

While 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 2005). 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.

The first step for articulating a new discourse is by performing a crisis. In discussing populist crisis, Moffitt (2015) identifies six passages. Drawing from this model (Moffitt 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 populist communication 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.

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 explains the subversion of an established system of meanings. 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, Nonhoff suggests looking for discursive relations in the study of hegemony. Following Laclau (2005), he indicates *substitution* and *combination* as the two basic options to connect

discursive elements. These were further distinguished by Nonhoff in five types of relations. I propose to slightly modify and reorganize his model by identifying only two discursive relations that reflect 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 (2005: 114) defined “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 happens between two different discursive elements x and y where, however, the identity of x is 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. 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. 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 relates to 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. There is, however, one more thing to add to Nonhoff's stratagem. Each demand is intrinsically split and is based on an internal lack – not only an external antagonist (Biglieri and Perelló 2011; Žižek 1990). For this reason, a study of hegemony that includes only an external antagonistic relationship would be incomplete. To gain a full understanding, it is essential to incorporate the fantasmatic dimension, as 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 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, if we consider the internal lack of a split demand, it seems 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. 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 briefly mentioned in the previous section, will be completely exposed in the next part.

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, fantasmatic narratives have an ideological connotation as they try to cover the non-necessary character of a discourse.

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, pointing to a fundamental fantasy of a golden lost unity or the impossibility to achieve it again. A fundamental fantasy of a once unified society, without antagonism and divisions that, in a discourse that refers to a certain community, define ‘our way of life’ embedded not only in texts but also, and especially, in rituals, myths, and symbols, which make visible how a community organizes its enjoyment (Žižek 1993).¹

¹ 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, it 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.

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, there are 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 enjoyment* 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 a scenario of unity imagined as 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). However, they do not clarify what this imagined totality consists of, nor do they provide a precise framework for its analytical definition.

The fundamental fantasy refers to the desire for the lost golden era – the imaginary pre-symbolic unity of the child with the mother (Zicman de Barros 2021), which 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). 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 (2005: 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.

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. 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 suggests distinguishing between different types of demands. Encompassing demands are seen as those demands that promise to fulfill the lack and overcome antagonism. Fifth, articulation of equivalence and difference, antagonism, and representation are the three core stratagems of a hegemonic strategy. 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.

Table 1. Theoretical and methodological key elements of the research.

The social	Discourse	Symbolic	Social logic
The political	Hegemony	Real	Political logic
The ideological	Fantasy	Imaginary	Fantasmatic logic

To conclude, Table 1 outlines the main concepts of the research, and its methodological pillar, distinguishing three macro-area. Figure 2, instead, provides a visual 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 crisis is narrated to demonize ‘their way of life’ is transformed into a horrific fantasy. Accordingly, the coding procedure during the analysis was based on the following process.

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):

Demand for hierarchy:

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

Political Logic: 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 they 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 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 images, as utopian (or dystopian) stories that foresee an imaginary totality or its destruction. Their identification can be schematized in the following way:

Beatific fantasy:

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

Horrific fantasy:

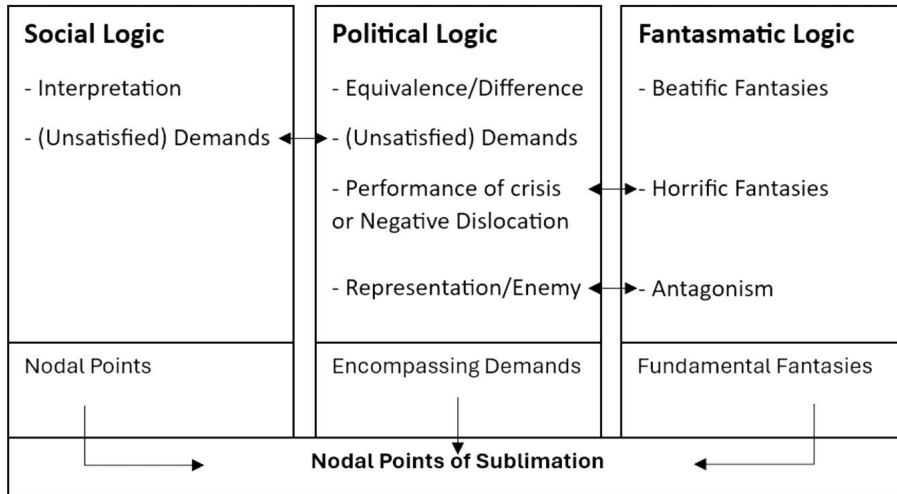
- dystopian future
- chaos and disorder
- verbs like: 'stealing', 'destroying', 'taking away' etc. referring to the Other
- 'their perverse way of enjoyment'
- destruction of 'our way of life' or 'our symbols'
- 'theft of enjoyment' by an enemy

Fundamental fantasy:

- sublimation of a particular object
- references to normality

- exemplification of 'our authentic way of life'

Figure 2. Visual representation of the logics approach applied in the empirical analysis.



4.

Organic intellectuals and discourse coalitions

Since the rise of illiberal neo-traditionalism is understood within the context of discursive struggles for cultural hegemony, the focus of the empirical analysis shifts away from political actors (e.g. political parties) to the discourse itself. However, discourse is not an autonomous entity existing beyond the collective action of what I term discourse makers. Although discourse (i.e. the symbolic) predominate the subject, it still requires agents to circulate (Carpentier 2017). Therefore, while the core research focus remains the illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse, those who shape and propagate it are analytically significant. Given that discourse consists of articulated elements, for analytical purposes it is necessary to identify the ‘articulating subjects’ that voice a discourse. Using two concepts by Maarten Hajer (2005) and Antonio Gramsci (1953) this Chapter will propose the formula of ‘organic intellectuals of a discourse coalition’ as a methodological platform for the analysis of a specific discourse.

DISCOURSE COALITIONS

As the Lacanian subject is a lacking being filled by the Other, our discursive approach implies the decentralization of the subject *vis-à-vis* discourse (Kvale 1992). From this angle, agency and hegemony are not seen as a product of voluntarism (Jacobs 2020). At the same time, agents are responsible for arranging and voicing discursive elements as part of their hegemonic strategy. Yet, that does not necessarily imply the existence of an intentional project behind the scenes to change the world and how we see it. The structure precedes the actors and so do hegemonic strategies (Herschinger 2012). Claiming that a coalition of discourse makers is deploying a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic strategy to establish its description of the world 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 equivalent articulated demands and the construction of the enemy, not in the role of agents. This position, however, raises methodological thorny issues in terms of analysis since it makes difficult to operationalize demands and discourse as data to be analyzed.

This potential shortcoming have been addressed by employing the notion of ‘discourse coalition’, which “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 Hajer considers storylines as the binding force that holds a discourse coalition together, a discourse-theoretical perspective locates this unity in the articulated demands that shape a particular discursive formation (Nonhoff 2019). If we understand ‘practices’ or ‘storylines’ as meaningful discursive elements, the divide between Hajer’s approach and discourse theory becomes less rigid. As long as they are signified in a particular way, ‘storylines’ can be interpreted as part of the discourse. From this perspective, a discourse coalition consists of individuals who articulate the same demands against a common antagonist, even if they hold divergent views on other issues. The foundation of the discourse coalition is found in the demand itself, which becomes the starting point for the discourse-theoretical analysis. Placing the meaningful discursive element – rather than the agent – at the core of ‘discourse coalitions’ has far-reaching analytical 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: 303)

A discourse coalition, therefore, does not refer to a specific group of political actors within the same organization, nor does it imply that its members cannot participate in different discourse coalitions simultaneously. Instead, a discourse coalition represents an informal and often unintentional alliance of discourse makers sharing the same political demands and seeking to establish their worldview as hegemonic within a given timeframe. Members of a discourse coalition may have little else in common, and contradictions among them – as well as contradictions in their own statements – do not invalidate their *membership*.

Consequently, discourse coalitions may encompass a diverse range of actors, provided they contribute to disseminating a particular worldview. Given this plurality, the empirical analysis of a discourse must focus on coalition members irrespective of their political affiliation. Moreover, since anyone can potentially contribute to the spread of a discourse, selecting discourse makers with considerable influence across different levels becomes essential. This raises some key questions: Who belongs to a discourse coalition? How can we identify them? Since the object *precedes* the subject, reconstructing a discourse coalition requires starting from the universal lack that unites various discourse makers. In this regard, Gramsci's concept of intellectuals proves particularly useful.

THE ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS

At first sight, looking for discursive changes may seem something unreachable. The very idea of worldview could be hard to grasp. We understand and see the world in a given way. However, 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 linguistic turn, Gramsci's answer refers to language and grammar as means of power (Donoghue 2018). According to Gramsci (1971), 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”. (Gramsci 1971: 323)

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.

The category of intellectuals is distinguished from non-intellectual people since its function is to organize and criticize elements of common sense (Ives, 2004) or, using the Laclaudian terminology, to articulate it. 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 com-

mon 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 given ‘philosophy’. Therefore, the study of a worldview or, in PDT terms, the study of a specific discourse, should begin with those who have the function of creating/articulating 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 making discursive articulations visible: the intellectuals.

Gramsci (1953) distinguishes between ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’ intellectuals. The former refers to the type of intellectuals that “believe to be ‘independent’ and autonomous” (Gramsci 1953: 5) However, the autonomy of these intellectuals is fictitious since they legitimate the status quo and the hegemonic class, serving the interests of the dominant class. At least unknowingly, they are ‘organically’ bound to the hegemonic order and the hegemonic class. Organic intellectuals, instead, are willingly connected to a class 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 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 sense, the function of the organic intellectuals of a certain class (or discourse, in our case) is to spread their ideology (i.e. worldview) to “organise’ human masses” (Gramsci 1971: 377) and seek their spontaneous consensus.

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 politi-

cians and parties. 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. Hence, "for Gramsci, the study of intellectuals and their production is synonymous with the study of political power" (Landy 1986: 53).

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)

FROM GRAMSCI TO HAJER. THE ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS OF A DISCOURSE COALITION

For obvious reasons, the concept of intellectuals in Gramsci cannot be applied entirely to the contemporary world. First, media today have a completely different dimension than 90 years ago. Second, Gramsci was still anchored to the idea that intellectuals were organically affiliated to a pre-established class. Nonetheless, his view can still be adapted to contemporary politics and contemporary (constructionist) theories. The link between Gramsci's 'intellectual' and the category of discourse makers is indeed 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 or herself 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 articulating it. This is the task instead of the organic intellectuals, who identify with certain subject positions, articulate, and propagate them. Providing a similar example, the or-

ganizers of a nationalist march (e.g. *Marsz Niepodległości*)¹ 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. 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 as an organic intellectual of neo-traditionalism if 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 from 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

¹ *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.

sive 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 individuals using social media 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.

In the next chapter, 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, grass-roots movements (e.g. *Młodzież Wszechpolska*, MW; 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.

5.

Research process and case selection

NEO-TRADITIONALISM IN POLAND BETWEEN 2015-2020

This work adopts the characteristics of a case study (cf. Gerring 2004), focusing on a single unit of analysis – the illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse – geographically confined to Poland and examined within the period from 2015 to 2020. Although the research does not aim for generalization, examining neo-traditionalism in Poland as a counter-hegemonic project can offer insights into similar hegemonic strategies. Naturally, national and cultural differences play a crucial role in shaping distinct discourses. Even in the case of Poland and Hungary, where the counter-hegemonic force is largely rooted in similar socio-cultural factors (Kim 2022), the construction of neo-traditionalism varies, as the two countries do not share the same historical trajectory or necessarily the same national interests – diverging positions about Russia provide a clear example. Therefore, the study does not aim to provide a ‘critical case’ for fully explaining ‘illiberal turns’. However, an illiberal pattern challenging liberal hegemony can still be observed in Europe (Laruelle 2022; Zielonka 2018). Despite socio-cultural differences, these cases may exhibit a similar ‘hegemonic logic’ and construct alternative projects in a similar counter-hegemonic manner.

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* as a country where illiberalism has obtained significant achievements (Behr 2024; Bill and Stanley 2020; Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Dąbrowska 2019; Kotwas and Kubik 2019). The delimitation of the timeframe requires instead further explanations. 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, 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 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, limiting the analysis to a few years offers practical advantages. Since every meaningful object is embedded in discourse, the amount of analyzable data is potentially infinite. Focusing on a six-year interval narrows the scope to a manageable set of discursive productions, while also enhancing the coherence of the discourse by reducing the influence of external variables. This approach also helps control for political changes that could complicate the sampling strategy.¹ 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. 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 includes four

¹ 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 more complicated to control this kind of external factors and to select a valid sample of the discourse coalition.

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 time frame reduces the amount of data and actors involved, an additional step was necessary to perform the empirical research: selecting a representative sample of neo-traditionalist organic intellectuals.

THE POLISH NEO-TRADITIONALIST DISCOURSE COALITION

If discourses *precede* subjects, focusing on discourse raises a challenging issue. A complete and exhaustive analysis of the emergence and sedimentation of neo-traditionalism would require examining each nodal point, demand, and fantasy associated with this discourse – an unattainable task even with unlimited time and resources. If the claim that ‘nothing exists outside discourse’ is taken seriously, then every articulated sentence, gesture, or object within the discursive space could, in principle, be relevant to the analysis. Since all human actions carry meaning, research data in discourse-theoretical analysis are virtually limitless (Nonhoff 2019). Therefore, one of the most critical and complex tasks of this study is the selection and reconstruction of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. This involves identifying a sample of actors within the informal neo-traditionalist alliance. However, analyzing all their meaningful actions is unfeasible, necessitating a further selection of their discursive productions – such as articles and speeches – which will form the text corpus for analysis. Moreover, in accordance with discourse theory’s ontology, a text corpus is not composed necessarily of textual sources (strictly speaking) since each meaningful object is a ‘text’.

To describe the sampling process, it is essential to distinguish between proper discourse and virtual discourse (Nonhoff 2019). The former refers to the neo-traditionalist discursive formation in its entirety, encompassing all neo-traditionalist meaningful practices. While theoretically conceivable, we can never fully grasp it due to its constant diffusion and unstable boundaries. The latter, by contrast, results from the researcher’s analytical choices. Given the vast number of discursive elements and articulations, the researcher must carefully select data that offer a representative picture of the discourse under study. In this sense, the research object serves as a proxy for the neo-traditionalist discourse, shaped by interpretative decisions, which determine its representativeness (Busse and Teubert 2014).

This approach may invite criticism, suggesting that the research object reflects the neo-traditionalist discourse as seen by the researcher rather than the discourse itself. However, there are strong reasons to reject this objection. First, for practical reasons: conducting a qualitative analysis of every discursive production in any setting is impossible. Even within a small and limited environment, the volume of meaningful material exceeds what a single researcher or team can analyze, necessitating purposive sampling (Miles et al. 2014). Second, even in empirical disciplines like semantics, research objects are shaped by acts of interpretation driven by practical and scientific interests (Busse and Teubert 2014). Finally – most importantly – the study’s ontological position holds that any analysis of social reality is inherently interpretative. Analyzing a political or societal phenomenon can only occur through interpretation, making the researcher’s role in selecting a representative sample and text corpus indispensable.

Nonetheless, the selection of a representative sample must be rigorously justified to ensure it captures both diversity and commonalities within the research environment (Flick 2007). As the study employs a retroductive reasoning, the research strategy to find neo-traditionalist discourse makers follows 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 because the quantity of potentially significant discursive productions remains enormous.

At this stage, two possible entry points have been identified for selecting a representative sample of the discourse coalition. The first focuses on keywords. This approach would begin by isolating key terms (e.g. ‘tradition,’ ‘people,’ ‘nation’) and then reconstructing the illiberal neo-traditionalist discourse coalition based on their usage. However, this strategy has significant limitations. First, the sheer volume of potential neo-traditionalist keywords in the discursive arena remains too vast for a single researcher – or even a team – to analyze comprehensively. The digital revolution has exponentially increased the number of actors fulfilling an intellectual function, making data management overwhelming. Consequently, there is a risk of arbitrarily selecting keywords from some sources while overlooking others. Second, while this could be mitigated by restricting the number of sources

(e.g. focusing on specific politicians while excluding others), this method prioritizes frequency over meaning, while this study is concerned with interpretation. Tracking keyword appearances could provide a broad overview of neo-traditionalism's presence in discourse, but it would do so at the expense of depth. Fantasies, for instance, often take narrative forms and could easily evade keyword-based searches. Similarly, meaningful visuals do not even contain words. Simply put, given the methodological foundation in the logics approach, a deep understanding of a signifier is more valuable than merely quantifying its occurrences since frequency does not significantly contribute to understanding the logics of a discourse.

I have tried to solve this potential shortcoming – managing interpretable data and the unlimited number of discursive productions – by linking the general principles of qualitative research with the Gramscian notion of 'organic intellectuals'. The problem of fishing data in the vastness of the neo-traditionalist ocean was 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, as discussed in detail below. 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 members of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition serves precisely the purpose of shedding light on the propagation and creation of the neo-traditionalist discourse. This approach confines the boundless universe of neo-traditionalism to a few representative organic intellectuals who effectively produce and disseminate the discourse and their shared 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.

RECONSTRUCTING A DISCOURSE COALITION: THE POLISH CASE

The empirical application of Gramsci's theory aligns with the strand of contemporary literature on illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe that examines the formation of an illiberal alliance among conservative actors (for example, Buzogány and Varga 2018; see also Behr 2021, Coman et al. 2025). This approach suggests that the illiberal turn is not merely a contextual reaction to the failures of liberal democracy but the result of an intellectual project that gradually legitimized illiberal narratives as a viable alternative to liberalism. As Bluhm and Varga (2019) argue, a loose 'knowledge network' of various actors contributes to constructing and disseminating a conservative political conception of the world.² This group – overlapping with what I term a 'discourse coalition' – operates within a discursive field where, broadly speaking, liberal and conservative forces ideologically contest and define meanings.

Refusing the post-1989 cultural and political order, this counter-movement in Central and Eastern Europe expresses a growing discontent with the 'fake freedom' obtained after the Soviet Union's collapse. As Ryszard Legutko (2016) claims, the totalitarian communist regime was replaced by an equally totalitarian liberal order. Thus, the articulation of a conservative project is an attempt to reshape the existing order and redefine (positively) the foundations of society and its values, questioning the cultural hegemony

² 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. 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.

of liberalism. 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 but also fosters the formation of an illiberal civil society. Across several countries, illiberal conferences, journals, and think tanks proliferate, seeking to drive a radical discursive shift that redefines common sense and Western identity.

For instance, Elżbieta Korolczuk (2014) highlights how anti-gender campaigns should be understood as a transnational – not merely local – movement. However, ‘gender’ is only one facet of a broader critique. We may say that it is the constructed Other that stands for the antagonist, the opposite worldview. Indeed, these movements share more than just a mere rejection of ‘gender ideology’. They also advance “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’ aligns with other ideological battles, such as opposition to multiculturalism, the pro-life agenda, and the defense of Christian values in the public sphere. These occasional episodic fights are not unrelated. They represent manifestations of a broader confrontation between worldviews and, in the scope of this chapter, between discourse coalitions (Melito 2021b). This *Kulturkampf* is waged by the organic intellectuals of competing discourses, transcending national borders and reshaping cultural conflicts, particularly in the West, where the post-1960s cultural order remains unsettled.

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. Polish conservative intellectuals, unhappy with the political and cultural outcome of the post-communist transition, have actively waged a long war of position, applying the lessons of *Gramscisme de droit*.

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). As in this research, Ewa Dąbrowska (2019) has applied Hajer’s framework to describe this network in Poland as a conservative discourse coalition, which emerged in response to the dominant post-1989 narrative of ‘catching up with the West’ through liberal reforms. 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 narrative. However, the discourse coalition cannot be considered as a monolithic conservative movement. Rather, the members of the coalition are united by the same nodal points and demands, not by the same political affiliation. 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 *illiberal civil society* (Bill 2020; Peřo and Grzebalska 2016).

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 the conservatives in Poland are well aware of this too. 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, the concept of ‘illiberal civil society’ is not a contradiction and, instead, accurately captures the rise of conservatism (and neo-traditionalism) in Poland.

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. 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 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 illiberal discursive proliferation cannot be reduced to mere ideological support for the main illiberal party. Rather, as also stated by Dąbrowska (2019), Kaczyński’s 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, 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 Wyszynski 2020). The empirical analyses performed by Joanna Orzechowska-Wacławksa and Agnieszka Sadecka (2023) and Kinga Adamczewska and Agnieszka Stępińska (2020) constitute an exception in this regard focusing on journalistic materials and populist content in selected newspapers and tabloids. Both works demonstrate how populist messages are not exclusive to political parties; they are also delivered through the media. Right-wing magazines like *Do Rzeczy*, *Sieci*, and *Gazeta Polska* often criticize the liberal elite and contribute to spreading a typical populist narrative offering 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. Mixing a wide range of actors – from politicians to journalists – my analysis will begin from the organic intellectuals of neo-traditionalism and the concepts and narratives they produce.

CONSTRUCTING A SAMPLE: RESEARCH STRATEGY

For analytical purposes, the selection of a sample of organic intellectuals 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. The research strategy followed a retroductive approach, consisting of five key steps:

1. *Preparatory Work.* This foundational phase provided essential preliminary knowledge of the research object. Through daily engagement with various discursive productions (e.g. social media, public statements) and direct observations of ‘neo-traditionalist events’ (e.g. *Marsz Niepodległości*) to obtain *experiential knowledge* (Maxwell 2005: 225), I developed an initial understanding of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. This stage helped refine research boundaries, identify relevant actors, and establish selection criteria for theory-based sampling. At this stage, the first tentative list of organic intellectuals to be included in the sample was drawn up.
2. *First Pilot Study.* A systematic examination of two key figures, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński and ideologue Ryszard Legutko, was conducted.³ This choice was made due to their centrality in the Polish illiberal camp. This phase provided a better understanding of the neo-traditionalist discourse, clarifying the discourse’s main nodal points and offering empirical insights necessary for expanding the coalition’s sample.
3. *Preliminary Selection of Sample and Text Corpus.* Integrating insights from the preparatory work and first pilot study, I compiled an initial list of discourse makers across different power levels (e.g. politicians, journalists). A key challenge was determining which texts should be included,

³ The results of this pilot study are included in a published article (Melito 2021a).

as not all discursive output by these actors aligned with the study's focus. A systematic review helped isolate relevant texts.

4. *Second pilot study.* This phase extended the analysis of the first pilot study to additional actors, testing their relevance within the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition. By analyzing a small sample of their discursive production, I identified a consistent ideological thread linking the various discourse makers. At the same time, I have discarded the discursive production of those intellectuals whose contribution to answering the research questions was deemed to be marginal.
5. *Final selection of the sample and text corpus.* Based on accumulated data, I established a refined list of key figures of the discourse coalition. Moreover, texts were selected to ensure analytical saturation. Yet, the final sample remained flexible, allowing adjustments during the last phase of empirical analysis. The final sample and the text corpus (as defined after the empirical analysis) are discussed in detail in the next section.

THE POLISH NEO-TRADITIONALIST DISCOURSE COALITION: SAMPLE AND TEXT CORPUS

Following the guidelines elaborated in Chapter 4, 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. The different levels do not 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 provides a schematic overview of these actors and the texts they produced that were included in the analysis (N=283).

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

<i>Discourse makers</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Analyzed texts</i>
Jarosław Kaczyński	Leader of PiS	Speeches held during the 2019 electoral campaign for parliamentary elections (n=47)
Krzysztof Bosak	Presidential candidate of Konfederacja (2020); Vice Chairmain of Ruch Narodowy (RN)	Speeches and interviews held during the 2020 electoral campaign for presidential elections (n=14)
Ryszard Legutko	Philosopher; member of PiS	Book: <i>The Demon in Democracy. Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies</i> Related article
Robert Winnicki	Member of Konfederacja; Chairman of RN	Speeches held in 2020 (n=3)
Andrzej and Katarzyna Zybortowicz	Sociologists	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Sieci</i> , period 2017-2020 (n=42)
Aleksander Nalaskowski	Professor of pedagogy	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Sieci</i> , period 2017-2020 (n=34)
Paweł Lisicki	Journalist; editor of the weekly <i>Do Rzeczy</i>	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Do Rzeczy</i> , period 2015-2020 (n=51)
Rafał Ziemkiewicz	Journalist and publicist	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Do Rzeczy</i> , period 2015-2020 (n=17)
Tomasz Sakiewicz	Journalist; editor of the weekly <i>Gazeta Polska</i>	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Gazeta Polska</i> , period 2015-2020 (n=18)
Jan Pospieszalski	Journalist and publicist; Television author	Columns in the right-wing weekly <i>Gazeta Polska</i> , period 2015-2020 (n=41)
Ordo Iuris	Think tank	Documents related to the Istanbul Convention (n=3)
Nowy ład (nlad.pl); narodowcy.net; <i>Młodzież Wszechpolska</i>	Right-wing information portals linked to nationalist grassroots movements	Online articles related to identity and culture, period 2017-2020 (n=11); protest marches and related visuals

1st level: Political leaders

The first level of the discourse coalition includes individuals who, following Gramsci, could be described as the intellectual elite. Political leaders play a crucial intellectual function due to their influence on political debate. In

this case, I have selected two figures who come from different political parties. Jarosław Kaczyński is the current leader of PiS and, undoubtedly, one of the most influential – and polarizing – 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 far-right 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), a political movement representing the national-conservative wing within Konfederacja. In both cases, I analyzed their speeches prior to the electoral campaign for, respectively, the 2019 parliamentary elections, and the 2020 presidential elections, where Bosak was a candidate. While the timeframe is limited, these speeches provided a clear insight into their worldviews. For Kaczyński, the selection process was straightforward, as he delivered four speeches in a consistent format (25–30 minutes) every weekend during the campaign, all available on PiS' Facebook page. In contrast, Bosak's discursive production was less uniform. For this reason, I also included a few interviews and a few speeches right after the presidential campaign. Additionally, I incorporated two speeches from 2016, delivered in his capacity as a Ruch Narodowy member, which aligns with the fifth level of power.

The selection of these two politicians could arise objections: in fact, Konfederacja opposed 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 instead one of the most important advantages and contributions of analyzing a discourse coalition. Despite their differences, they often propagate similar demands and give meanings to 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 the empirical analysis. 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 book.

2nd level: Politicians/ideologue

Ryszard Legutko is the only organic intellectual that has been assigned to this category (although other figures occupy a similar position).⁴ A philosopher and PiS politician, Legutko's ideas – most notably articulated in his book *'The Demon in Democracy'* – frequently echo in Kaczyński's speeches. This book served as a starting point for my analysis and stands as a key manifesto of neo-traditionalism. In addition to his book, I examined related articles criticizing liberalism. His political trajectory mirrors the evolution of the neo-traditionalist strategy: from formulating illiberal arguments in the margins of Polish political debate in the 1990s, Legutko became not only the main ideologue within PiS but also a significant figure in the broader global conservative right (Behr 2021; Halmai and Scholtes 2024).

3rd level: Publicists

This level is rather diverse, as it includes individuals writing columns for right-wing magazines, although they occupy different roles – academics, editors, and journalists. They can be classified by their affiliations with three major conservative weeklies: *Sieci*, *Do Rzeczy*, and *Gazeta Polska*. The initial plan was to select the three respective editors alongside a prominent contributor for each magazine. However, in the case of *Sieci*, the editor Jacek Karnowski rarely addressed the research topic, prompting a different approach, dividing them by magazine and by professional role. The academic category includes Andrzej and Katarzyna Zybortowicz,⁵ and Aleksander Nalaskowski (*Sieci*). The editors are Paweł Lisicki (*Do Rzeczy*) and Tomasz Sakiewicz (*Gazeta Polska*). The publicists are Rafał Ziemkiewicz (*Do Rzeczy*) and Jan Pospieszalski (*Gazeta Polska*). The choice of these organic intellectuals was made due to their focus on culture and values, often disseminating 'neo-traditionalist arguments'.

Regarding the selection of texts, I reviewed each column within the period of interest each week. After having read all the columns, I have included in the text corpus only those with a clear neo-traditionalist content. In Ziemkiewicz's case, I also analyzed a few feature articles that were prominently highlighted on the cover. Access to *Sieci* was limited to 2017–2020,

⁴ 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 Zybortowicz is a columnist and, to some extent, could be considered among the ideologues of PiS).

⁵ They can be considered as a single actor as they publish a single column together weekly.

but the extensive value-oriented contributions of Andrzej and Katarzyna Zybortowicz, and Nalaskowski ensured sufficient material for analysis. Despite the shorter timeframe, the number of texts analyzed from these authors was comparable to, or even greater than, those from other sources.

4th level: Think Tank

In this case, the choice naturally fell on Ordo Iuris, one of the most successful and controversial think tanks in Poland (see Curanović 2021; Korolczuk 2020). This conservative organization plays a significant role in agenda setting and, moreover, contributes significantly to the transnational construction of the illiberal Internationale. In 2020, it spearheaded an alliance of European think tanks and organizations to contest the Istanbul Convention. In this sense, Ordo Iuris plays a proper ‘organic intellectual function’ by actively promoting a policy and discursive shift on ethical issues such as abortion rights and gender policies. However, the analysis did not entirely align with initial expectations. Due to the think tank’s legal orientation, much of its discursive production has a technical, legal character. Still, valuable insights emerged from documents that critique the ideological foundations of the Istanbul Convention. Therefore, the selection of texts was mainly made by looking at their reference to 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. These events, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8, are considered texts within the corpus. 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 like Młodzież Wszechpolska or Ruch Narodowy and have little visibility in mainstream political debate. For this reason, unlike previous cases where specific individuals were analyzed, this selection focused on articles published in the ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ sections of relevant online portals. Robert Winnicki, former chairman of RN and, at the time of the analysis, MP elected within Konfederacja, was the only figure for whom I could analyze specific discursive productions.

The selection of lesser-known authors from relatively small online portals may seem like a bold move with limited impact on the research. However, beyond aligning with my theoretical and methodological framework, this choice exemplifies the very essence of a discourse coalition and the role of organic intellectuals. While the reach of these portals may be restricted, the circulation of ideas begins at this level. In this sense, even an article read by only a handful of people constitutes an *act of power*. Far from being a limitation, this choice serves as a concrete illustration of my ontological approach.

6.

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. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the static status of the neo-traditionalist discourse, looking at its nodal points and demands (and their lack). The dynamic moment produced by articulation and antagonism defines instead the political logic of neo-traditionalism and will be discussed in the next chapter.

As the logics approach posits, social logics concern the interpretation of a given discourse. The substance of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse – along with its very naming – emerges from the researcher’s hermeneutic activity. It would be a mistake to claim that neo-traditionalism exists as such, with essential characteristics waiting to be discovered. Rather, its construction and interpretation stem from the analyst’s observations and interventions. In this respect, interpretation unfolds in two stages. First, the

researcher must disclose the self-interpretations of the actors involved and their meaning-making activities. This step enables an understanding and explanation of how neo-traditionalism is perceived by neo-traditionalists themselves, looking beneath the surface of what may appear as an aggressive or intolerant discourse. In this sense, the analyst is called to exercise ‘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)

Second, and as a consequence, the identification of the main nodal points and demands helps naming and defining 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. The next two sections will respectively discuss these two stages.

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.

These texts, which I have significantly renamed and coded as ‘neo-traditionalist manifestos’ (Table 3), offer a specific (self-)interpretation of neo-traditionalism in Poland. The corpus consists of one or two texts from (almost) each of the selected organic intellectuals.¹ Their selection did not

¹ Those excluded from this corpus did not produce any specific meta-reflection 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.

follow predefined criteria, as their theoretical orientation emerged clearly during the initial round of analysis. These texts presented a programmatic nature that was identified inductively since I did not expect to encounter this kind of theoretical reflections. A closer look during the second cycle of analysis showed that all these texts present one or more 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.

Table 3. List of neo-traditionalist manifestos.

<i>List of neo-traditionalist manifestos</i>
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. Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz (2017/5)

The main features of the concept of neo-traditionalism are situated along two main lines. Opposing modernity and colonizing cultures, neo-traditionalism praises, in turn, traditions and ‘the authentic culture’. In Poland, the anti-modernist 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 liberalism for its disruptive nature. Modernity, liberalism, and progress go hand in hand, striving to expel non-lib-

eral and traditional institutions from the public space. By placing the individual at the center of the moral hierarchy, liberalism strips communities – such as the Catholic Church – of their role in providing a substantive framework for understanding 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. As modern values repress traditions (Friedman 1988), Legutko links the abstract dichotomy between modernity and tradition to the political trajectory of the CEE 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 the region.

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 an exercise of power, replacing alternative worldviews rooted in tradition or other non-liberal discourses. A key issue with liberalism, Legutko (2016) argues, lies in its totalizing character. While liberalism ostensibly promotes liberty by granting individuals the highest degree of freedom, it simultaneously presents itself as the only rational option. Far from being substantively empty, liberalism produces norms and behaviors by relegating alternatives to the private sphere. In Foucauldian terms, Legutko (2016: 77) defines liberalism as a “doctrine of power”. As noted in the previous fragment, post-communist 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 book: illiberal 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 individual 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.

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. 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 “a coercion to freedom” (Legutko 2016: 67). This dilemma of freedom – where expanding the sphere of individual freedom equates to reducing the role of external values and institutions – oblige individuals to decide, as they cannot count anymore on heteronomy (cf. Castoriadis 1986). Therefore, 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 ushered by liberalism. The revolution pursued by ‘the ideologues of liberal democracy’ led to expanding destructive negative freedom. Granting freedom to individuals, he argues, requires demolishing everything else. Liberation from family, traditions, and Christianity entails the relativization of good and evil, forcing individuals to choose without external reference points.

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 – only what individuals rationally desire is deemed to matter – we witness a loss of direction; a loss of prejudice, Burke (2003) would say, leading to 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 coherent system of values drives people to seek guidance and a secure haven in traditions – or, more broadly, in any stable value system. Traditions, communities, family, religion and even history offer *Sicherheit* (security, cf. Bauman 1999), shielding individuals from relativism and providing direction in their 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). 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, 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. Surely, 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 the individual?

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 individuals 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 and choices? 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 individuals are emancipated; the more traditions disappear. The more traditions define behaviors and morality; the more individuals lose their liberty. 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, like 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)

LIBERALISM AND MODERNITY: THE WESTERN COLONIZERS

Besides anti-modernism, the second key element of neo-traditionalism is anti-colonialism. As previously argued, in Central and Eastern Europe, neo-traditionalists identify the cultural colonizer 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, have 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 (sometimes embodied by the European Union) is explicitly portrayed as a cultural colonizer. They accuse the liberal progressive world 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 counter-

parts 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 and normality. 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. Neo-traditionalist organic intellectuals accuse the ‘Western dream’ of supplanting ‘the authentic way of life’. In a typical neo-traditionalist narrative, the model of life promoted by Western modernizers has swept away genuine traditions. Through this process, liberalism has conquered the hearts and souls of a large part of Polish society, leading it to forget 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 promote a foreign way of life based on illusory freedom. As discussed later, two fundamental fantasies face each other: one that looks at Western Europe as a model of (negative) freedom; the other narrating 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.

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, Bosak 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.² 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 the goals of this research. Instead, observing these neo-traditionalist patterns demonstrates the existence of a discursive alternative to liberalism in a way that overlaps the theoretical discussion.

Looking more deeply at traditions in the Polish context, they are often defined by Christianity. At this level of discussion, however, I am not concerned with their specific content, which will be expanded below. 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: in neo-traditionalism, cultural models are not simply items people can pick like in a supermarket. The national culture should provide a model to follow. It should give moral imperatives that define the cultural pattern of a country (Bosak 2020/5).

² When this kind of reflections are 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 follow a neo-traditionalist strategy as explained earlier. Therefore, it is not a contradiction to define them as conservative.

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 (1981) and accepted by Bosak (2020/5), traditions do not necessarily refer to traditional rituals and costumes. Rather, they are related to norms, 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 serve as the primary categories for revealing the ‘rules’ of a discourse, their identification enables the characterization of cultural illiberalism in Poland. Like the analysis of the neo-traditionalist manifestos, this process is also interpretive. However, while the former concerned the self-interpretation of the actors involved, the researcher’s intervention here is more intrusive. Identifying and analyzing nodal points within the text corpus results from my analytical choices, made considering the previous theoretical discussions. Using the terminology of the logics approach, these nodal points determine the social logics of neo-traditionalism and how it manifests 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 (Laruelle 2022; Zielonka 2018). This reductive interpretation of illiberalism does not take into consideration the clash of worldviews that takes place on various levels, making lose sight of the complexity of illiberal discourses (Stanley 2008).

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 anticolonial 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). Although they resemble the characteristics of the populist radical right – nativism, authoritarianism, and populism

(Mudde 2007) – the discursive approach implies a different perspective as we are discussing a discourse, not a party family. Moreover, traditionalism is certainly concerned with the role of authority, yet only in terms of ontological security rather than law-and-order policies. Finally, as discussed below, nationalism appears as a thin-centered ideology (cf. Freedon 1998), while nativism is mainly characterized as symbolic nativism (cf. Betz 2019).

The resulting 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. 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 their constitutive outsides. At the end of this section, Table 4 schematizes these findings.

THE POPULIST, NATIONALIST, AND TRADITIONALIST LOGICS OF POLISH NEO-TRADITIONALISM

Populism, nationalism, and traditionalism emphasize, respectively, the construction of the people against the elite, the primacy of the sovereign nation, and the role of traditions as guiding principles. However, a key challenge during the analysis concerned the scope of these concepts. It was crucial not to be ‘dragged’ by them, as this risked diverting attention from the actual object of analysis – the neo-traditionalist discourse – and incorporating discursive elements unrelated to the research interest. The members of the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition, indeed, participate in several other discourse coalitions. Thus, it was 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; elements of valence populism (cf. Zulianello 2020), instead, would not have any connection with neo-traditionalism. Similarly, the nodal point ‘nation’ is (relatively) irrelevant when it refers to national power poli-

tics or the need to increase military expenses. Conversely, it can be ascribed to neo-traditionalism when the nation is portrayed as an organic 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 terminology, ‘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.

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 by the ‘thick ideology’ that sides ‘thin-centered populism’. In Laclau (2005), instead, ‘the people’ is an empty signifier whose definition is explicitly 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. Consequently, a crucial operation to study and analyze any populism concerns the discursive construction 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 step in identifying the rules of the populist logic within Polish neo-traditionalism involves 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 gains strength by promising to restore popular sovereignty, as the post-1989 order led to a convergence towards the political center and liberal ideals, depoliticizing the 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, deprived of their sovereignty as the elite offered only one platform to choose from. 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’, corrupting people’s genuine 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, namely 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 which did not benefit from it – the losers of (cultural and economic) globalization – neo-traditionalist populism is a scream to regain sovereignty and redraw the boundaries of security, 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 (true 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'.

Additionally, the positive content of 'the people' is also thickened by the neo-traditionalist worldview – 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 helps define 'the people'. First, the people are described as ordinary hard-working Poles, sometimes emphasizing their origins from 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 (cf. 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*.³ They are attached to their national culture and do typical 'Polish things'. Obviously, defining what constitutes a 'Polish thing' is more a fantasy than an actual behavior – a fantasy that frames what is traditionally Polish as normal and ordinary. Consequently, ordinary people are discursively constructed as normal people: Catholic individuals who 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; Zybortowicz 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, while the elite is depicted as imbued with Western progressive ideology. As will be discussed in Chapter 8, this division is anchored in the idea of normality. People are pictured as normal – engaging in normal activities and holding normal thoughts. Often, ironically, they describe themselves as the obscurantist part of Poland (*ciemnogród*), still bound to traditions and resistant to modernity. Yet, this self-irony underscores the distance from the elite: identifying as part of the *ciemnogród* signals their belonging to national culture; the Polish liberal elite instead is

³ 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).

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 experienced in our civilization (Bosak 2020/4). The neo-traditionalist character of ‘the people’ is here clear. People are constructed as looking for traditions and normality since they provide security. 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. 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 progressive 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 sharing the same cultural framework – is the second nodal point of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse. 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)

While 'the steamroller of progress' seeks to dismantle communities and traditions, 'the nation' is discursively constructed as their protector, reinforcing the bonds and ties among its members and cementing the national social fabric. It provides the ethical framework necessary for survival as a community (Zybertowicz 2019/35). In this sense, the neo-traditionalist nation is idealized as a *Gemeinschaft*, where members share the same system of values, move in the same direction, and work towards a common interest. Like the signification of 'the people, 'the nation' is also culturally defined, offering a subject position tied 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 relation between the nodal point (nation) and its constitutive outside (other nations and 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 (Rydgren 2007), which can be characterized as symbolic nativism (Betz 2019). 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 native national culture. However, 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. 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 during his government. Bosak, instead, uses the question of LGBT parades to criticize PiS' government 'from the right' and obtain electoral gains. Others (like Nalaskowski) 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.

Here, it is interesting to see how Jarosław Kaczyński espouses the same ethno-pluralist thesis as Bosak. 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 native 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 native 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 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.

Beyond symbolic nativism, nationalism is also framed as a thin-centered ideology centered on the primacy of the nation, national sovereignty, and the organic national community (Melito 2025). Neo-traditionalist discourse makers portray the nation as the fundamental political entity in a world of nations. Its constitutive outside is constructed as those political forces seeking to dissolve sovereign nations in favor of supranational and globalizing projects. In this narrative, the cosmopolitan elite and supranational organizations – seen as promoting an anti-national agenda – emerge as the primary antagonists.

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 ‘national 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 nation-

al 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 show how symbolic nativism and thin-centered nationalism intertwine. Protecting the nation is a synonym of 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 impose rigid structures that constrain individual freedom. The discursive constructions of ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ emerge as a response to the alienating forces of *Gesellschaft*, seeking to restore the sense of belonging eroded by the modern 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 negative 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 demand a deep interpretive process, as its role as an ordering principle is explicit in Polish neo-traditionalism. What remains is to outline the content of the traditionalist logic. Notably, the following reflections come from a member of a youth organization where themes of precariousness and the pursuit of stability – whether through religion or nationalism – are particularly salient.

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). Zybortowicz and Zybortowicz (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 a 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. (Zybortowicz and Zybortowicz 2018/24)

In this light, religion – 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 that modernity generated.

The second element is the so-called traditional family. The discursive element 'traditional family' is used in several ways and for different purposes. It carries a strong emotional appeal, particularly when contrasted with alternative family models, which are often depicted through dystopian horrific fantasies. In some instances, the family is framed as synonymous with tradition itself. Much like the nation or the people, it is idealized as the guardian and custodian of national heritage. Within this framework, traditional Polishness is seen as surviving only through the traditional family, where values are transmitted across generations.

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.

To distinguish 'tradition' from the other nodal points, we need to look again at their orientation (see Table 4). In this sense, it is necessary to add a four-di-

mensional space. While ‘the people’ are opposed to ‘the elite’ on a vertical axis and ‘the nation’ stands against ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ on a horizontal one, ‘tradition’ introduces a temporal orientation against modernity. It goes without saying again that this view does not imply a Luddite understanding of modernity but rather frames it as the constitutive outside of tradition – an opposing force that disrupts its ties to the past and communities. Polishness, as a signifier embodying the values of Polish traditions, is a barrier against the relativist, nihilist, and modernizing drift that has revolutionized Western European values. Ultimately, all three nodal points – the people, the nation and tradition – 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 these 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 book 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”.

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

	<i>Populist Logic</i>	<i>Nationalist Logic</i>	<i>Traditionalist Logic</i>
Nodal points	The people (Poles)	The nation (Poland)	Tradition (Polishness)
Subject positions offered (content)	Ordinary people <i>Polak-katolik</i>	Poland as a sovereign entity and 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 (against other political organizations and foreign models)	Temporal (traditions against progress)

This observation suggests that ‘Polishness’, as well as Poland and Poles, have become what Laclau (1996) describes as ‘floating signifier’: their meaning varies depending on its articulation with other discursive elements and might take on different forms in different contexts. The clash between two Polands, as 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. 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.

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. Distilling the three logics is an attempt to generate a more nuanced explanation of this political phenomenon. 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. 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 (2019/15) in his programmatic speech held in Lublin.

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 the 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.

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. Consequently, 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 tables at the end of the chapter 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. A more exhaustive discussion on the universal lack of neo-traditionalism, implicit so far, will be provided in the next chapter. 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. Identifying single demands is essential to delineating the boundaries of neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland. These demands are integrated into the discourse because they share a common lack or a constitutive outside. It is only through articulatory practices that they coalesce into a hegemonic horizon, shaping a unified vision of the social order.

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 manifestations into its distinctive ontological categories. However, it may be questioned how these abstract categories were linked to the empirical texts. 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 and colleagues (2021: 8) 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”. Accordingly, 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 glance, the response by Glynos and colleagues does not seem to directly address the concern 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 engaging with the corpus of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse, their position became clearer to me. In the case of my research, there is little doubt about which nodal points structure neo-traditionalism in Poland. The theoretical and methodological discussions in the previous chapters served as a mental map, guiding my analysis of the texts. The articulation of nodal points, their lack, or their representative function appear extremely clear when texts are approached from the PDT’s perspective and with a profound knowledge of its ontology. In this scenario, the answer given by Glynos and colleagues (2021) to Marttila and Remling is plausible.

To provide a more precise answer – to avoid being accused of having another fuzzy solution to solve this issue – nodal points were identified by looking at their capacity of filling a lack, as, indeed, 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 tables below 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 Chapter 2. 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.

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

<i>Subsuming Demands</i>	<i>Blocked by</i>	<i>Lack of</i>
Christian Europe of Nations	Multiculturalism	Nation (authentic culture)
Religion (Christianity)	Secularization/Prometheus myth	Polishness, polak-katolik
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 6. Cumulative demands of neo-traditionalism in Poland.

<i>Cumulative Demands</i>	<i>Blocked by</i>	<i>Lack of</i>
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

7.

Political logic

The political logic of neo-traditionalism discussed in this chapter reveals its hegemonic strategy, 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*. 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. Thus, the political logic 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 neo-traditionalism, 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 the performance of crisis. Second, articulatory practices and antagonism create new meanings within the discursive space. Finally, specific 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 the three logics.

THE ‘LACK’ OF POLISH NEO-TRADITIONALISM: PERFORMANCE OF CRISIS

“The impossibility of any closure of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 136) and its openness imply that no hegemonic discourse can find a definitive unity and its disruption is always looming. However, when meanings are (temporarily) 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 *performance* of 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 several 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.

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. This 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 in any moment, as in Poland, where an illiberal reaction had been underway at least since 2001. However, if the 2008 crisis created a window of opportunity for illiberal actors in the world, in Poland – confirming 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 Moffitt (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 and colleagues (2018) engage with the work of Moffitt 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. Considering 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 performance of crisis. Therefore, it seems appropriate to utilize some of the criteria proposed by Moffitt (2015: 198) to explain how neo-traditionalists perform crises to replace liberalism and establish their worldview. In particular, three separated moments should be taken into account when describing a performed crisis. 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

Moffitt (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, crises are symbolized representations of the failure which "has become politically and ideationally mediated" (Hay 1999: 324). Nevertheless, the difference between failures and crises remains blurred when, for example, Moffitt mentions Australian and New Zealander politicians complaining about "the 'failure' of Asian immigration in their countries" (Moffitt 2015: 198), where it seems that the failure of immigration is already at the symbolic level of crisis. From Moffitt'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 Moffitt'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 Moffitt would put it. Rather, the failure emerges because of the reversal of meanings and dislocation of the demands of neo-traditionalism, as they were listed in the previous chapter. In Chapter 3, 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 4, 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 the liberal West has fundamentally 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 made. 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 and narrated 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; Zybortowicz and Zybortowicz 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 indicate 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 to some extent, the ‘lack’ at the core of neo-traditionalism, as well as the ‘dislocating’ force of liberalism, have already been addressed in the previous chapter. What stands out, however, is the overarching absence that defines neo-traditionalist discourse: a fundamental lack of security – *Sicherheit*, as Bauman (1999) would put it – 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 transition from the abstract fuzziness of dislocation to the concrete symbolic construction of discourse. In this context, neo-traditionalist actors have framed the ‘lack’ within Polish society 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’ in opposition to liberal interpretations. The former, which will be explored in the following section, emerges through the performance of crisis.

Performance of crisis

The second step, according to Moffitt (2015), consists of linking the initial failure with other equivalent failures, elevating the lack to crisis. Moffitt is here inspired by Laclau, treating failures as demands. Albeit Moffitt (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’.

Certainly, performances of crisis have a mobilizing character, such as ‘the politics of fear’ (Wodak 2015), which is sometimes used as an effective rhetorical stratagem 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, look-

ing 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): “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) – which notably coincide with the very same three categories that Bauman (1999) identifies as displaced in the contemporary globalized world, whose absence thus becomes a key source of insecurity. 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 of neo-traditionalism is transformed and *performatively* narrated as a crisis that requires a counter-reaction.

While 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 successful in the West. However, we are not talking about different phenomena but, rather, the performance of crisis refers 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, for example, 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.

Table 7. Links between dislocation and crisis.

<i>Displaced signifier</i>	<i>Performed Crisis</i>	<i>Disrupted organization/institution</i>
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

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 Moffitt 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 (2016/19) 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. 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 view of what is at stake when we talk about crisis, other examples can furnish a more nuanced picture. While it is rather clear where the ‘lack of security’ in the case of ‘crisis of multiculturalism’ or ‘crisis of sovereign nations’ resides, it should be explained why neo-traditionalists see the right to abortion or the Istanbul Convention 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]¹ 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

¹ This column was written before the 2015 Polish presidential and parliamentary election won by respectively by Andrzej Duda and Law and Justice. At that time, the liberal *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO) was in power.

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 and domestic violence, several conservative actors have criticized the document for using the term ‘gender’ and promoting gender ideology. ‘Genderism’ 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. Additionally, they describe ‘gender’ as a signifier that dislocates essentialist categories. Giving complete liberty 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 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 sharing the same hegemonic goal. Each of them triggers a cascade mechanism (Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz 2017/9) that will eventually displace 'the authentic way of life' that guarantees tradition 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 (Moffitt 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. There are many culprits such as 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. Oftentimes, neo-traditionalist discourse makers do not refer directly to concrete enemies. Instead, they frame the opposing discourse itself as the enemy, employing various classifications to define it. 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.

THE NEO-TRADITIONALIST HEGEMONIC STRATEGY

If crises are performed to disrupt the existing social order and highlight the negative dimension of dislocation, equivalence and antagonism constitute the positive side of political logics, actively constructing new discourses and establishing 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 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, acquiring meaning through articulation as 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: "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. Thus, the political aspect of neo-tradition-

alism marks its dynamic movement. In other words, the political logic of neo-traditionalism reflects the illiberal discursive shift at work.

NEO-TRADITIONALISM AS A COUNTER-REACTION TO SOLVE THE CRISIS

The other face of the performance of crisis 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-revolution to reject the Western colonizers and defend the essence of the authentic European civilization: "a counter-revolution 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. While consumerist society offers multiple subject positions based on individualism, fluidity, and instant gratification, Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz advocate for identification with the discursive possibilities given by tradition and religion, adopting a somewhat social constructionist ontological position.

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)

HEGEMONIC STRATAGEMS: 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 looked at the hegemonic stratagems of equivalence and antagonism, that is those discursive relations whose purpose is to overcome the lacking universal of discourse (Nonhoff 2019). I have divided the discussion about the hegemonic stratagems 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 bought 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 – drives the articulation of a new discourse, generating 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 individuals 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 hierarchy of values. Cultural displacement, in fact, occurs when existing meanings are redefined and replaced by other meanings. Similarly, Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz (2017/10) claim that the deficit of authorities 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. Thus, 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. It is an answer to chaos and the relativization of values. 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 demonstrates 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 evil 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.

Resignifying 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 4) will show below,

neo-traditionalism is composed of several articulated demands (listed in the previous chapter). However, at this point, the content of tradition and the distinctions between neo-traditional essentialism and liberal relativism have been thoroughly examined; reiterating the equivalence between, for instance, 'heteronomy' and 'hierarchy of values' in contrast to 'individualism' and 'relativism' would only lead to unnecessary repetition. The map of neo-traditionalism, I believe, already provides a clear visual representation of the discursive linkages between neo-traditionalist demands and the opposing chain of anti-demands.

A more compelling aspect to explore in understanding the political logics of the neo-traditionalist discourse and its counter-hegemonic function concerns the redefinition of contested meanings. Through articulatory practices, certain signifiers are extracted from the liberal camp and redefined within a traditionalist worldview. Indeed, we can argue that the hegemonic struggle is precisely about this – a struggle over the meaning of discursive elements that shape 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.

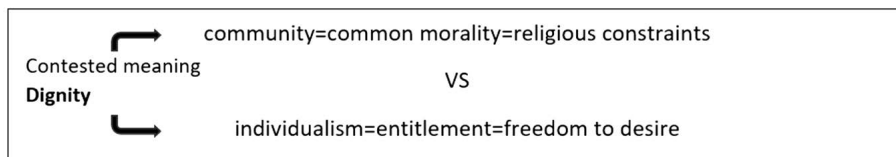
Here, Legutko reflects exactly on the contested meaning of 'dignity'. In the first half of the fragment, the classic meaning of 'dignity' is produced by its equivalence with other elements: 'dignity →=community=religion=obligations'. In this case, people are deemed to obtain dignity as long as they behave within the ethical framework of the community. Therefore, this 'dignity' functions as a limit to individual liberty as 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 specific 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 fragment, 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 3. Chains of Equivalence and antagonism defining 'dignity'.



The signification of ‘dignity’ provides an illustrative example of the political construction of discourse (Figure 3). 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. In the construction of the neo-traditionalist worldview, the specific 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 argues, dignity – signified as an inherent quality of individuals – liberated 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, thereby imposing, for instance, gender identity. As this ideology has wrecked Western civilization, this aspect can be seen as a performance of crisis to disrupt liberal democracy and justify a different worldview (where authority plays a more prominent role). Second, Zybertowicz and Zybertowicz (2018/14) 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". 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 universal 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.

If 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 implies 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'.

Democracy can be signified either as the guarantee of individual rights (liberal) or as the affirmation of majority rule (non-liberal). In Poland, its articulation signals the extent of the shift toward illiberalism. Neo-traditionalism explicitly defines 'democracy' in illiberal terms, equating it with the people-as-a-community and the primacy of the majority, as exemplified in the following 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, 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.² 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 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

² 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.

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, because “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.

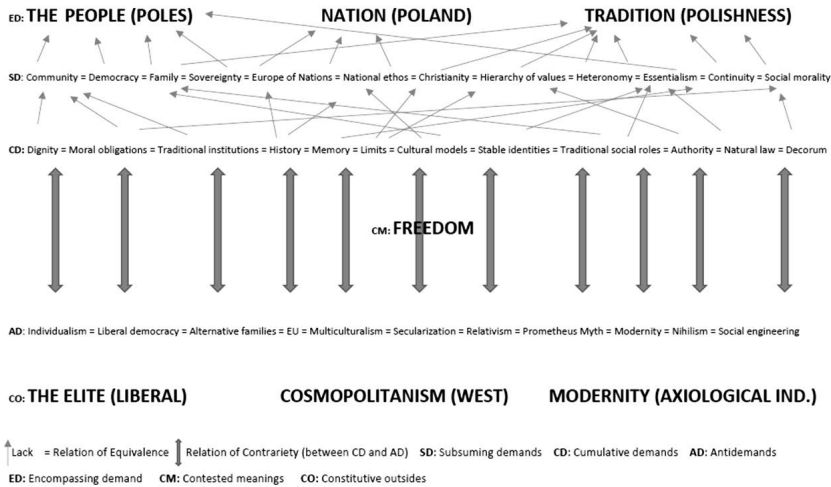
The discursive struggle for ‘freedom’

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. For example, Bosak (2020/3) defines the rule 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. 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”.

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 4 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.

Figure 4. Discursive map of the Polish neo-traditionalist discourse (selection of discursive elements). Based on Nonhoff (2019).



Beyond equivalence, 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:³ 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.

³ 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.

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 reinforced 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), possibly inspired by Erich Fromm (1965), negative freedom needs to be sided with positive freedom.

To be worthy [*godny*], a person must be free, they must be free in two ways. They must be *free from* all kinds of unnecessary prohibitions, oppressions but they 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".

8.

Fantasmatic logic

In the previous chapter, I referred to the political as the shadow of the Real whose appearance is the 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 through fantasies can discourses sediment and construct resistant – though never immutable – identities. Indeed, the aim of this research, like that of discourse theory more broadly, is not merely to expose the contingency of reality and the fluidity of identities – an insight often presented as a grand revelation of constructionism but which is, in fact, a banal truism – but quite the opposite as it seeks to examine how contingent discourses (in this case, neo-traditionalism) take shape 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. If political logic demonstrates how meanings are anchored through nodal points, fantasmatic logic reveals how these meanings are ideologically protected from competing interpretations. 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.

In our 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' and '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, extends beyond horrific and beatific narrations, unfolding across multiple levels. While Glynos and Howarth (2007) argue that the logic of fantasy possesses only the function of closure, this closure operates on various dimensions of discourse. Fantasies are essential in 'closing' the meaning of Polishness, for instance. However, fantasies also 'close' the horizon of society, determining its organization and its trajectory. They define 'our authentic way of life' blocking alternative models, and 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 seek to establish a neo-traditionalist collective imaginary.

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 collective imaginaries, such as the one proposed by Polish neo-traditionalist discourse makers, are narrated as an opportunity to finally fulfilling the aspirations of Polish soci-

ety 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 5, 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; Krastev and Holmes 2020; 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); neo-traditionalists took the chance to replace it with their fundamental fantasy and their 'authentic way of life'. The '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. 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.¹ 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 the ‘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

¹ 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.

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. 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 '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" (Lisicki 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.

BUILDING 'NORMALITY'

The discursive construction of normality is where the political and fantasmatic moments intersect. Like any other discursive element, 'normality' is structured through equivalence and difference. Similar to 'freedom,' it functions as a pivotal empty signifier in the hegemonic struggle to 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 exemplifying both the political and fantasmatic logics at work, the discussion of the signifier 'normality' has been included in this chapter for two reasons. First, my aim is to illustrate both the political signification of an empty signifier and its ideological thickening but addressing the same process twice would be redundant. Thus, the signification of 'normality' through equivalence and difference will only be briefly mentioned here. In this regard, I could have instead allocated more space to the political signification of normality and the fantasmatic narrative of freedom. However – and this is the second reason – normality possesses a distinctly ideological dimension. Its very construction necessitates the invocation of abnormality, often linked to images of monstrosity and irrationality, which serve to exclude alternative lifestyles from the realm of rationality. 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.

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 denotes the reactionary character of neo-traditionalism by dismissing everything that lies outside the field of rationality as irrational and wrong. 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’, as usually shouted at several anti-LGBT events. Alternative models are, instead, simply tolerated and occupy a low place in the hierarchy of values.

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 [...]. 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; Zybortowicz and Zybortowicz 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 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) argues, 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 (it is worth underlining that the opposite is true as well since liberal fantasies provide the strength to fight for emancipation against the bonds of tradition).

Thus, the counter-revolution is pictured as the restoration of normality after the dislocation brought about by different forces, from the EU to the LGBT community. Consider once again the following quote from Sakiewicz (2019/14). Not only does he link the three nodal points to normality (as discussed in Chapter 6), thereby defining the substance of the neo-traditionalist counter-revolution, but 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.

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 (cf. Taggart 2000) 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 usual in Podlasie. [...] On Monday people went to work as always. The majority to the fields. Because it was almost harvest time. They will be working hard from dawn till dusk, repairing machines broken in the fields, eating fatty food and sleeping little. And so, in this way, until Sunday, when they will put white shirts on their sunburnt necks, not minding the heat, put on their ties, wear their jackets, their Sunday shoes and go to Church, and later with their children for an 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 a 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.

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 progressive 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. As Nonhoff (2019: 74. Emphasis added) maintains,

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 3, all the stratagems 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 must be supported by fantasies. As Žižek (1993: 201) pointed out:

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 Zybortowicz (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.

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. As discussed in Chapter 3, 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).

Our way of life

In many of the analyzed texts, a sense of frustration with the contemporary cultural models emerges. The 'broken promise of 1989' appears to cover something deeper than mere political disillusionment. Rather, it reflects a broader sense of incapacity or unwillingness to adapt to the modern world and sometimes, perhaps referring 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 a rejection of and dissatisfaction with the 'common good' of the liberal market society. It is a meaningless 'common good' devoid of any higher aspiration beyond the material. Liberalism is seen as incapable of elevating humans above the material sphere and, consequently, as lacking the capacity to provide true 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 traditional values and families 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. Consequently, 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

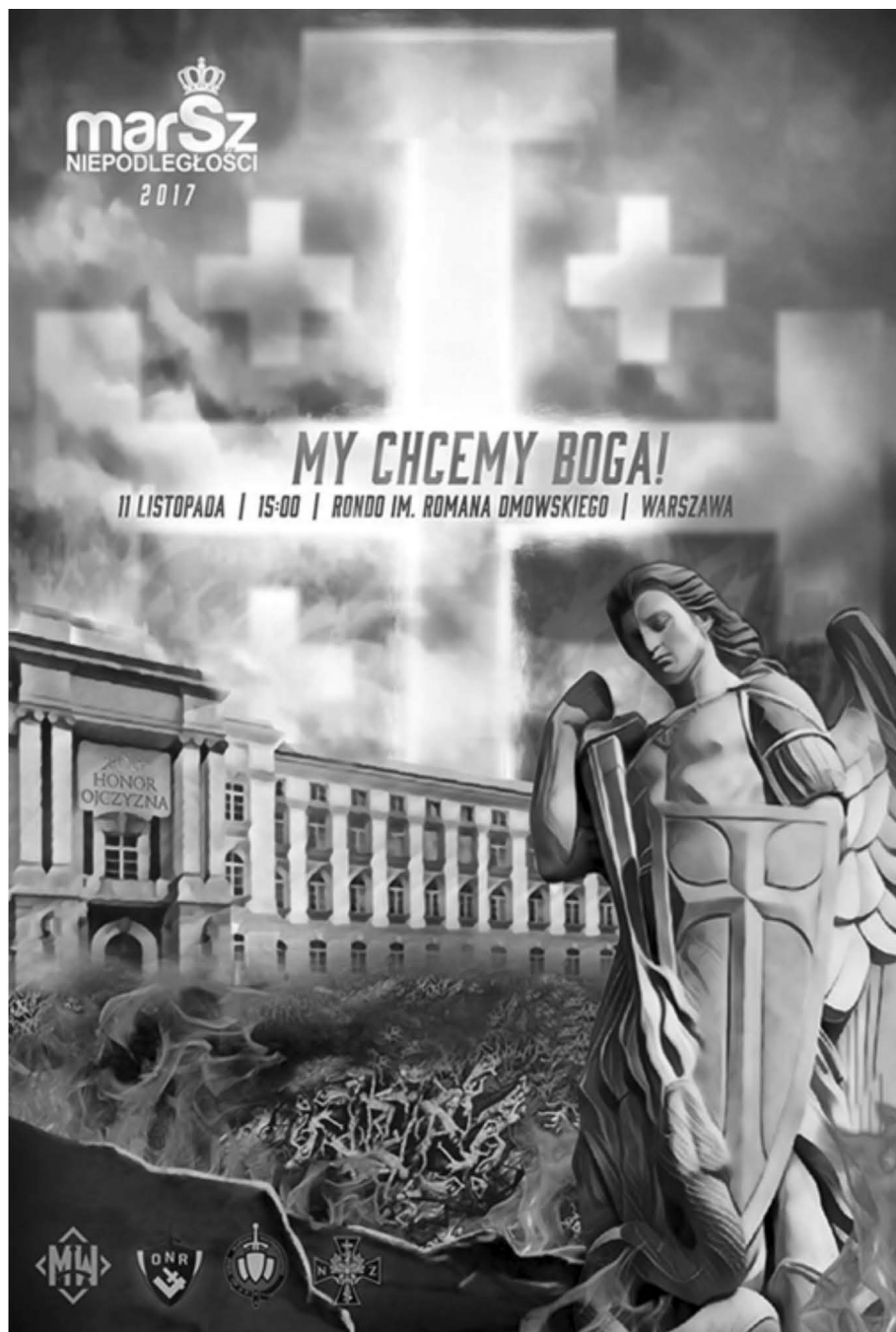
least not in social terms. It is the world of the *Gesellschaft*, where people live disconnected between them, have a terrible city life (represented by the capital of sins, the liberal Warsaw; Nalaskowski 2018/19), and whose goal is merely working and consuming. Money, self-realization, and physical pleasure are represented as the horrific liberal enjoyment. Meaningless achievements for neo-traditionalists. ‘Their way of life’ is pictured as a hedonistic world, which refuses sacrifice, responsibility, 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 [*Marsz Niepodległości*] 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)

Figure 5. Official poster of the 2017 Independence March.



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 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 persistent dissatisfaction generated by pervasive materialism. In this light, we can read the slogan of the 2017 *Marsz Niepodległości*, ‘We Want God!’ (*My chcemy Boga*) as an expression of the desire for the lost enjoyment (Figure 5). 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.

‘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 Figure 6); 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 regarding '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.

Figure 6. Sticker that was inserted in Sakiewicz, 2019/18 reading:
Queen of Poland - Stand in her defense.



'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 Figure 7: 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 destroy the core of the Nation.

Figure 7. Stalin and Biedroń ‘steal’ the Thing
(Zawistowski in Sakiewicz, 2019/17).



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’ nar-

rated by neo-traditionalists is always posited as stolen by external agents, as Kaczyński (2019/6) argues:

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 at the Imaginary level 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 Žižek (1993: 203) states, the threat to our way of life does not only stem from the 'theft of enjoyment' that destabilizes identities but also from the unsettling presence of an enjoyment that appears excessive, transgressive, or illegitimate.

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 individualism. 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 final assault on repressive power structures such as marriage and family. The quest for pleasure was elevated to the essence of life itself, reducing happiness, once understood as a lifelong pursuit, to mere instant gratification. 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, in this light, 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 special 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 regarding 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. As argued by

Glynos and Howarth (2007), assigning contradictory features to the Other is typical of horrific fantasies. 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.² 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 par-

² Even in this case, it is worth emphasizing that in a polarized political space, such narratives are also employed by the liberal counterpart, portraying backward Poles as obstacles to Poland's transformation into a truly modern and 'normal' European country.

ticipants 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.

MARCHING FANTASIES: THE ANTI-LGBT CASE³

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.

³ This part is based on Melito (2021b).

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 (more liberal) western Poland, Lublin is a regional capital and one of the most important cities in the east of the country (more conservative). 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 couple of 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 from *Konfederacja* 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 instances I walked with LGBT activists to gain a more comprehensive picture. This was feasible only in Kraków and Kalisz, as in Lublin the police kept the two marches strictly apart.

*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 coun-

ter-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 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.⁴ This form of perceived colonialism is rejected in the name of an authentic Polish ethnic community. Indeed, 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”.

⁴ Interview conducted by the author with an anonymous politician participating in the counter-march in Lublin.

Figure 8. Picture taken in Kalisz showing MW members dressed as to clean up the 'LGBT virus'.



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 8). Wearing white lab coats, members of the far-right organization *Młodzież Wszechpolska* followed the *Marsz Równości* along the entire route cleaning, sweeping, and disinfecting after the 'LGBT virus'.⁵ 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

⁵ Note that both marches took place before the COVID-19 pandemic and there is no reference to it.

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 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, 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” (Nalaskowski 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 9).

Figure 9. Leaflet inviting people to participate to the counter-march in Lublin.

**POLSKA RODZINA OD SETEK LAT
WYGLĄDA WŁAŚNIE TAK**

**NIE DLA HOMOSEKSUALIZMU
NIE DLA ZACHODNIEJ MODY**

**POKAŹ SWÓJ STANOWCZY PRZECIWIW
28 września 2019 r.**

**NARODOWY
LUBLIN**

**TAK DLA POLSKI
BY POLSKA BYŁA POLSKA**

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 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.

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 (2005), 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 2005: 115).

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 counter-marches as if they were shields against the LGBT parades. As the *Marsz Równości* advanced, counter-demonstrators displayed their rosaries, crosses, and religious pic-

tures to protect themselves and, figuratively, to protect their idea of Catholic Poland. In that moment, these sublimated objects came to embody the very essence 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, as described instead by a participant in the LGBT parade in Lublin. 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.

HOW NEO-TRADITIONALISM EMERGES AS A HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE: NODAL POINTS OF SUBLIMATION

At the 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 an illiberal 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 2005: 70-71. Emphasis in the original)

As previously discussed, this particularity elevated to the unachievable fullness is described by Laclau (2005) 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 2005). In this sense, if the nodal points determine the social logic of discourse, and their political articulations refer 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 2005: 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 that the neo-traditionalist hegemonic project

seeks to define; the particularity “which assumes the role of an impossible universality” (Laclau 2005: 115); a hegemonic universality that defines what society means.⁶ If the liberal imaginary consisted of a modern, progressive and European Poland, the neo-traditionalist imaginary envisions 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. Thus, 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 follows 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 analyzed text corpus, 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

⁶ 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.

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 'thieves of enjoyment'. Therefore, society could constitute itself as a totality and establish a new collective imaginary only by affirming and achieving Poland-Poles-Polishness. 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. Emphasis added)

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 Laclau claimed (2005), 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 6 and Chapter 7) 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 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 definitively conquered by the neo-traditionalist discourse coalition.

9.

General discussion and conclusions

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The outcomes and 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 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*: beyond populism, the ‘illiberal turn’ is described using the wider concept of illiberal neo-traditionalism, which captures its nuanced shades given by the three different social logics.
2. *Normative contribution*: The ideological background of neo-traditionalism reveals how neo-traditionalist fantasies work in practice, which is essential to deconstruct illiberal narratives.
3. *Methodological contribution*: the research is a rare example of a thorough 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.

4. *Empirical contribution*: The research aimed to demonstrate how the ‘illiberal turn’ in Poland should be read as a counter-hegemonic project that aims at resignifying the key values of Polish society.

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 progressive 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. 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 progressivism and cultural hegemony. Neo-traditionalist actors in Poland perceive and narrate 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 illiberal 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 illiberal neo-traditionalism are the fundamental values of society. In particular, the idea of freedom is crucial. As modern liberal societies posit emancipation and individual freedom at the center of their organization, neo-traditionalism places special emphasis on all those elements able instead 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 and safe environment.

The second anti-colonial aspect relates to the tangible construction of this division, beyond the ideological conflict. 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 of the Global South against Western colonizers are being 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. 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 illiberal traditions as the guiding principles of 'our authentic way of life'.

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 work.

The ontological assumptions of discourse theory already carry 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. Thus, the ideological construction of fantasies has radicalized identities and exacerbated the conflict. In this regard, their disclosure and deconstruction constitute 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 aspect 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) and the failure of the destructive character of progressivism (cultural displacement). By disclosing 'the lack' of neo-traditionalism – a lack of security – the analysis of the contingent illiberal reaction has shown all its relevance. As already argued by Zielonka (2018) when dealing with illiberalism the shortcoming of liberalism needs to be taken into account. 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, these demands are nothing but the political answer to a political failure. In this specific example, 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 consider this dissatisfaction: actors that aim to defend liberal democracy should abandon the narrative of 'there is no alternative' or 'we experts know better'.

In the specific Polish case, the narrative of the progressive Europe and West that backward and obscurantist Poland needs to catch should also be abandoned. 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 popular 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.

METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

Although the research is firmly anchored to Poststructuralist Discourse Theory and the logics approach (Glynos and Howarth 2007), it also introduc-

es 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 the logics approach has been mainly applied in policy studies, 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 (in particular, the political logic) to hegemony analysis (Nonhoff 2019). The political logic discussed by Glynos and Howarth has been operationalized by using the categories proposed by Nonhoff. In particular, I am greatly indebted to the visual representation of hegemonic discourses developed by Nonhoff, whose model provides a clear 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 equivalence between different demands' and 'the antagonistic division of the discursive space' (respectively Nonhoff's first and second stratagems) 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 (Figure 4). 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 this light, 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, while integrating them within the wider framework of the logics approach and PDT. The same can be said regarding the third stratagem of hegemony analysis (i.e. representation). Since 'representation' is missing in the logics approach (or, at best, it is included implicitly), in this case it had to be integrated directly using 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 (2005: 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 even beyond 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 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).

Also the second new category introduced in this research is rather an articulation of already existing concepts. By linking Gramsci's organic intellectu-

als (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 4. 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 as parties, more often than not, shift along the political spectrum as they chase polls and the electorate. (see the recent examples of the Five Star Movement in Italy or Jobbik in Hungary). 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), rather than the actors producing them. The first part of the formula – organic intellectuals – fits instead in the hegemonic theory that underpins 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 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'. Therefore, 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.

EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTION

As discussed in Chapter 1, "by providing a hegemonic understanding of illiberalism, this book aims to complete the scholarship on the illiberal turn in CEE and, specifically, in Poland". Three main gaps were identified in this respect:

- 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, illiberal 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 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 in practice 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 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 ar-

ticulatory 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.

CONCLUSIONS

The last gap to be filled concerns the empirical analysis of a counter-hegemonic discourse. The main objective of the research 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, “rather than seeking causal explanations or discovering its genealogy, cultural illiberalism in Poland is explained through the lens of hegemonic struggle: using a neo-traditionalist political strategy, cultural illiberalism in Poland have (re)emerged as a counter-hegemonic project rooted in traditionalist values against the dominant liberal worldview”. 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 book.

RQ1: 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, 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.¹ Or, remaining in the Polish

¹ 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

context, it is the same dilemma experienced by Witold Gombrowicz (1994) in *'Trans-Atlantyk'* between liberal and traditional Polishness.

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 discussed so far, 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 our case study, illiberalism in Poland is characterized by a populist logic, a nationalist logic, and a traditionalist logic, trying to capture the various aspects of the 'illiberal turn' in the country. 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;

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.

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 alien cultural elements. These are the ‘rules’ governing the neo-traditionalist discourse.

RQ2: 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 1). The context of justification of the hypothesis (context of discovery) was best shown by the political logic (Chapter 7). 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, the empirical manifestation of neo-traditionalism and the ontological categories of discourse theory are schematized and integrated in Table 8:

Table 8. Schematization of the neo-traditionalist hegemonic strategy.

<i>PDT abstract category</i>	<i>Empirical manifestation</i>
Lack within discourse/Failure	Ontological insecurity
Performance of crisis	Political and Cultural displacement
Articulation of equivalent demands	Neo-traditionalist counter-reaction
Antagonistic division of the discursive space	Discursive construction of the establishment, cosmopolitanism, and modernity as the enemy
Nodal points of sublimation	Poles, Poland, Polishness

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 –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 illiberal side tries to replace dynamically 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 as we do?”. With regard to the Polish case, the political logic provided the answer. Equivalence and antagonism ‘quilt’ 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.

RQ3: 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 explaining *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.²

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 successful. 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 transformational 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 initial lack of non-liberal counter-hegemonic contestations as being neutralized at the imaginary level by the liberal democratic fantasmatic logic that underpins

² 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.

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'.³

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 8, that took place in two moments. First, by 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.⁴ 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

³ 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'.

⁴ 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.

(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. In this light, 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 post-modern values. 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. By structuring their ‘enjoyment’ and gripping subjects to a traditional concept of Polishness, fantasies promise to achieve again the real Polish way of life.

RQ: How has the illiberal and neo-traditionalist discourse in Poland emerged as a counter-hegemonic project against liberalism, seeking to resignify 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 significant implications. The discourse coalition includes different actors that belong to different and rival political formations. This position might raise objections: can figures as diverse as Jarosław Kaczyński and Krzysztof Bosak,

Ryszard Legutko and Robert Winnicki, Andrzej Zybertowicz and members of *Młodzież Wszechpolska* truly be considered part of the same coalition, however informal and discursive it may be? 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 the same neo-traditionalist demands, the same fantasies, and envision 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 illiberal 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 collective imaginary, which is essential for deploying a successful counter-hegemonic project.

To conclude, the book reinforces the counter-hegemonic thesis explaining the ‘illiberal turn’. Rather than a mere political shift or an electoral turbulence, the rise of illiberal neo-traditionalism in Poland signals that we are witnessing a cultural discursive shift or, at least, a crucial struggle for the signification of the social. 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.

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