

Author: Maciej Kurak

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The Polish Tent

From a historical perspective encompassing the so-called long duration (*longue durée*), the tripartite division of Europe into three zones – the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery – as proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein becomes discernible.¹ The core comprised primarily parts of Western Europe, where the capitalist economic system developed. This system constituted one of the principal factors stimulating the growth of the global economy and subordinating other territories to its logic. As Fernand Braudel observes, the birth of capitalism was an exceptional phenomenon that has never subsequently been repeated.²

The system is distinguished by a multiplicity of features that merit consideration in the context of the formation of art and culture. One of its key characteristics is its capacity to link the core with other regions – even those organised according to different economic or social principles – into a single, expansive system. Another significant property is its ability to absorb new modes of operation, such as trade, finance, and industry. Attention should also be paid to the political frameworks within which the capitalist economy was able to develop. Giovanni Arrighi places considerable emphasis on this issue, noting, *inter alia*, that as the political power of the nation-state increases, so too does the potential of capitalism.³ There is, however, another correlation – this time within the sphere of culture: its development proceeds in parallel with economic expansion. As Jan Sowa observes, centres functioning as system cores – such as Florence, Venice,

¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The End of the World as We Know it: Social Science for the Twenty-first Century*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

² Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, 3 vols, London: Fontana/Harper & Row, 1973–1979.

³ Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times*, London and New York: Verso, 1994.

Amsterdam, and Paris – were simultaneously sites in which new artistic trends, movements, and styles emerged.⁴

This schematic outline of issues related to Europe's development and the emergence of a dominant economic system allows for a fuller understanding of the functioning of contemporary states. Although the theses outlined above constitute abstract, methodologically grounded idealisations, they cannot be ignored in any consideration of contemporary culture. By adopting a strategy that sets aside excessive complexity and concentrates on dominant developmental factors, it becomes possible to reveal structural dependencies that shape the organisation and functioning of social structures and contemporary culture. In everyday life, numerous examples of such dependencies may be observed – the introduction of so-called 'bio' sections in supermarkets, systems of waste segregation, and packaging return schemes appeared in Poland with a considerable delay in relation to Western Europe. An analogous situation is evident in the sphere of art, where, beyond the core, various phenomena emerge, such as the self-colonisation described by Piotr Piotrowski and the persistent 'catching up' with Western Europe undertaken by countries of Central and Eastern European countries.⁵ This results in the reproduction of institutional models governing the operation of art institutions – museums and art academies – as well as in the replication of the creative strategies of individual artists.

Put simply, values that – paradoxically – arise from the not always advantageous geographical and historical position of the countries of the region tend to be overlooked. The capacity to transform externally imposed characteristics into values capable of contributing to a universal process of socialisation constitutes a creative potential that cannot be underestimated. The assimilation of such values is linked to the possibility of shaping supranational processes. At the same time, however, it is necessary to acknowledge processes that distort these possibilities by drawing upon negative traits rooted in national or cultural complexes. This concerns various myths – particularly Romantic visions of an inverted world – in which the periphery is presented

⁴ Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Universitas, Kraków 2011.

⁵ Piotr Piotrowski, *Globalne ujęcie sztuki Europy Wschodniej*, Rebis, Poznań 2028.

as the sole space of possible development for the global system, without the articulation of genuine alternatives. One example is the Polish Sarmatian myth, which advances a fantastical vision of the nation combined with selective and frequently inaccurate references to the myth of noble democracy. This myth continues to affect contemporary behaviour and culture. It constitutes a distorted vision grounded in the need to emphasise possession and the status of the landowner. Its essence lies in an inverted model accessible not merely to a narrow elite but to anyone who values national roots. Consequently, anyone may construct a house whose appearance alludes to landed estates. Such houses are modelled on the manor houses of the nobility, themselves drawing upon Roman villas associated with latifundia, which were later echoed in the colonial haciendas of South America. The visual schema of the 'Polish manor house', thus shaped and rooted in myth, inscribes itself within a specific mode of operation of Polish culture when set against developed Western societies. Materiality associated with ownership is intended to confirm 'success' and to serve as a bastion of the national habitus, yet in practice it perpetuates social elements that do not favour positive processes of socialisation.

The assimilation mentioned earlier should instead encompass other, more constructive features – particularly those of a social character – which, although often imposed from outside, may nevertheless constitute the foundation of a modern, open society.

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