

Self-criticism in Public Discourse

A Device of Modernization? The Case of Eastern Europe

Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak

IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXXIV © 2015 by the author

Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact the IWM.



Abstract: This article discusses the vitality of the concept of self-criticism as a communicational and discursive phenomenon in Eastern Europe undergoing modernization. In the present study, self-criticism is understood as a reckoning of one's self and criticism directed at its own subject. The idea of self-criticism dates back to the ancient Greek maxim of epimeleia heautou ('care of the self') as well as the Christian call for examination of the self and the auto-da-fé rituals. In Eastern Europe under the communist regime public acts of self-criticism constituted an official procedure of expressing one's loyalty to the ruling party. Readiness to perform self-criticism could result from one's opportunism or from extreme pressure put on the individual e.g. in show trials of so-called "enemies of the party". Growing disillusionment with communism among intellectuals led to self-criticism aimed at self-reckoning with their engagement in the regime. In post-communist times, self-criticism condemning one's communist past has become an important element of public and political communication. It was quickly accompanied by transition disillusionment's self-criticism stemming from the disappointment with the political, economic and social outcomes of modernization implemented in Eastern Europe after the change. Nowadays, self-criticism plays the role of a litmus test of social tensions deriving from the contradictory approaches to modernization scenarios in the region.

Introduction

Thinking of Eastern Europe, we instantly associate the concept of self-criticism with a genre cultivated and extorted by the communist parties. At best, thanks to self-criticism, a person was at that time able to save their position and career, adapting to the party's discourse. An example of such a strategy are the acts of self-criticism by much appreciated writers and poets in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Poland, i.e. in times of the Stalinization of culture and art. At worst, an act of self-criticism made by the accused at show trials meant confirming a death sentence or sending them to the gulag. That happened during the times of the Stalinist purges in the 1930s or in the trial of

Czechoslovakian communists in 1952 charged as “Troskyite-Titoist-Zionist bourgeois nationalist traitors and enemies of the Czechoslovak people, of the people’s democratic order and socialism ...” (Shore 2013: 111). Whatever they might have said, their destiny was already decided. That is why it is difficult even to call their voice an act of *real* self-criticism. It was rather a declaration of helplessness, an attempt to shorten their torture and hasten their execution.

In communist times, an act of self-criticism could be motivated by threats of violence in case the individual refused to carry it out, or by opportunism and cynicism, or even by faith in the rightness of this ideological method of self-judging, or, finally, by the willingness to “remain oneself”: a writer, an actor, an artist etc. who, having ritually expressed his/her *loyalty* to the regime, is not deprived of his/her audience and his/her rights to perform or publish his works. Whatever the reason, the importance of self-criticism was based on the widespread conviction that words are strategically performative, i.e. they legitimize the official discourse of power, do not leave any space for the critique of the regime in the public sphere, and, as a result, opposition against the authorities is reduced to a private, *silent* experience.

However, the political and social need for self-criticism enacted in the public discourse did not disappear with “the wind of change” after 1989. In this paper I point to the vitality of self-criticism as a communicational and discursive phenomenon. What is more, I argue that in Eastern Europe in recent decades we have witnessed a proliferation of public acts of self-criticism. The need for self-criticism is connected to modernization, which in this region is treated as a constant work in progress, implemented both at the level of public discourse and institutional and social practices. I understand modernization in the context of post-communist Eastern Europe as, first, a macro-social process, its essence being “catching up” with the West. It consists in governmental and non-governmental “social engineering”: adapting the social order to a Western vision of civil society and standards of liberal democracy. Second, modernization is a micro-social process. There is a connection between modernization in Eastern Europe and a form of (neo)liberal power over individuals described by Michel Foucault and critically studied by Nikolas Rose (1999) as “governing through freedom.” In this perspective freedom is a necessary condition of power, as “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (Foucault 1982: 790). Power harnesses the individual through the very process of the individual’s self-identification and self-transformation into a subject realizing a particular imperative of *care of the self*.

In the first part of my paper I would like to address briefly what I understand as self-criticism in general terms and in terms of a public act of speech, and point to where I see its sources. In the second part, I make an attempt to compare communist and post-communist acts of self-criticism: its subjects, discursive functions and social meaning. In the last part I reflect upon the place of self-criticism in public discourses in Eastern Europe undergoing modernization, with a particular focus on Poland.

Origins of Self-criticism

Self-criticism is the examination of one's self, as well as the deeds and opinions stemming from it. The subject of self-criticism performs it through introspection, defining their faults and the boundaries of their responsibility. However, the intimate dimension of self-criticism is subordinate to its social dimension. Self-criticism points to its subject's not having fulfilled social expectations or to the intent of improving oneself as compared to society. In ancient Europe self-criticism *avant la lettre* was connected to the maxim of *epimeleia heautou*: care of the self. From Socrates it was believed that thanks to critical introspection of the soul one could approach the truth of one's existence. The notion of *epimeleia heautou* differs from the famous Delphic maxim *gnōthi seauton* ("know thyself", i.e. one knows one's limitations, is aware of one's mortality) since it emphasizes the constant human need for positive self-attention and self-improvement. While in ancient Greece practices of care of the self were supposed to serve to educate the political elite and, consequently, to serve the community, in the Roman period they meant mostly private aestheticization of existence and became "a general cultural phenomenon peculiar to Hellenistic and Roman" elites and, as Foucault claims, "constitutes within the history of thought a decisive moment that is still significant for our modern mode of being subjects" (Foucault 2005: 9).

Despite this ancient legacy, the appearance of self-criticism in the public sphere is strongly connected to Christianity. One should look for the sources of public acts of self-criticism not in the act of individual confession of sin, but in the pre-modern public "confession of faith" made by those who departed from the Church's teachings. In the 12th century the subjectivization of the religious experience began, which was soon reinforced by the Christian re-reading of Aristotle's concept of hylomorphism and immortal soul as particular human substance which is 'captured' in a defined material body. The call for examination of the self was connected to the promise of salvation of the soul, though not necessarily in the earthly life. The Inquisition's prisoners declared in front of the judges and audience their *auto-da-fé* directly before the execution, which could not be deferred by their fervent words. Modernity has taken over this call for self-examination in a secularized form, promising earthly salvation: civil rehabilitation and hope for a "brand new" life.

Paradoxically, communist self-criticism was also embedded in a certain vision of modernity and in a particular reinterpretation of the heritage of the Enlightenment, however, it was done according to the political interest of the new ideology's bearers. Communist self-criticism was supposed to be educational and to liberate one from the past at the same time. For Stalin (1928), inspired to a certain degree by the French Revolution, self-criticism was "a specific method, a Bolshevik method, of training the forces of the Party and of the working class generally in the spirit of revolutionary development," and a way to "raise the cultural level of the working class, enhance its fighting spirit, fortify its faith in victory, augment its strength and help it to become the real master of the country." The demand of self-criticism as a method of "moral control" appeared in Stalin's speech at the 15th congress of the Bolshevik party in 1927 but already in 1921 Lenin had justified the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) with an act of partial self-criticism on behalf of his party. "Experience has proved that we were wrong;" "This defeat [of the nationalization and collectivization of farming] ... was

expressed in the isolation of the higher administrators of our economic policy from the lower and their failure to produce that development of the productive forces which the programme of our Party regards as vital and urgent,” he acknowledged (Kołakowski 1978a: 484). In the following decades, self-criticism on behalf of the party, nation or other great collective entity, became an almost “extinct” genre, replaced with individual self-criticism.

In Poland a period of heightened intensity of acts of self-criticism came at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s: the era of Stalinism in public and cultural life. From 1948 to 1950, after the aesthetics of socialist realism was officially introduced, many recognized poets, writers and publicists e.g. Jerzy Andrzejewski, Jerzy Borejsza, Tadeusz Borowski, Kazimierz Brandys, Roman Bratny, Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, Adam Ważyk or Stefan Żółkiewski, published self-critical texts in the cultural press. In 1948 Żółkiewski, editor-in-chief of the Marxist literary weekly “Kuźnica”, accused himself and his journal of a lack of interest in Soviet culture presented by him, according to the party’s line, as more progressive than the “rotten” Western culture. The imperative of self-criticism aimed at discrediting one’s bourgeois or landowning gentry’s past was often justified with Poland’s backwardness in comparison to the Soviet Union, where society was believed to have already entered the *right*, non-bourgeois and non-capitalist way of development. At the same time, Poles perceived themselves as a more civilized nation than their Eastern neighbors and, thus, able to introduce *true* socialism, liberated both from the pathologies of capitalism and the terror of Stalinism (Bikont, Szczęsna 2006: 66, 95). One can therefore speak of a demand among the intellectuals to implement a partisan type of modernization which is an alternative to westernization and totalitarianism.

Communist self-criticism was derived from anticlerical Marxism-Leninism, but at the same time it was rooted in the Christian concept of guilt. It is worth mentioning that, although in the discourse of self-criticism one can often see a religious rhetoric in the notions of ‘sin’ or ‘examination of conscience’ (comp. Tubielewicz Mattson 1997), the doctrine did not define any procedures or language in which it would be possible to undermine the foundation of the totalitarian system itself, or, to put it in other words, to express one’s lack of faith in the system. For this reason, in the official discourse of the regime, self-criticism was not identified with *confession of faith* but with an element of the ideological work within the party. Self-criticism was regarded as a procedure of self-purification of the party as a whole and a tool of reinforcing the bond between the party’s members, united by *the moral judgement* on one of them (Mittenzwei 2001: 161). The metaphor “work on oneself” can be found in the self-critical discourse of its subjects as well as its executors. The Communist party could “work on” a promising accused, but otherwise he or she was “cut off” from the party. “Too little, comrades, we have worked on professor Kołakowski,” said Józef Kępa, party secretary in Warsaw, just before the decision to expel Leszek Kołakowski from the Polish United Workers’ Party in 1966 (see: Głowiński 1991: 98).

Above all, self-criticism was supposed to be an *educational* method. It is most clearly visible in communist cultural life. A literary critic was supposed to be not only a censor but also an “educator.” A prominent critic, Melania Kierczyńska, wrote in 1950: “we

should consider the author's self-criticism as completely natural and desirable; these are essential stages on the writer's creative way towards socialist realism" (Zawodniak 2004: 303). A poet, Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, published in the same year an article entitled *About myself*: "We, the poets, in public and together with the society settle accounts with our input into socialism and this cannot be done without washing our dirty linen" (idem: 304). Right after World War II the intelligentsia in the communist countries was asking how out of the "old" human fabric, woven in the former regime, one could tailor new members of society. Out of the demand for change grew a permanent need for self-criticism, destined to settle accounts with the past. Marci Shore sees its sources in "the rationality of the Enlightenment on one hand, and in modernity's emphasis on linear temporality on the other" (2006: 370). Revolution is started by those who are children of the overthrown regime. What is interesting is that a similar dilemma applies to the intellectuals presently examining the breakthrough of 1989.

From Communist to Post-Communist Self-Criticism

The Marxist method of self-criticism which was supposed to be a tool for self-improvement, "ideological growth" and "proceeding to a higher level of consciousness" quickly transformed itself into a ritualized mechanism of control, and an "ingredient of communist customs" deprived of any ideology (Zawodniak 2004), used for short-lived personal games. Leszek Kołakowski calls this ritual elasticity a "utilitarian morality" (1978a: 516), and Lorenz Erren (2002) terms it a discourse of a paradoxical "lack of self-criticism" hidden behind fervent confessions. A striking example of such a flexible and defensive use of self-criticism was György Lukács' numerous contradictory utterances about his own works and worldview. As Kołakowski noted, Lukács "was frequently condemned and attacked by orthodox Stalinists and frequently submitted to party discipline, recanting his previous opinions only to disavow or modify the recantation when times became easier. Thus, his works are full of palinodes, retractions, withdrawals of retractions, and reinterpretations of earlier writings, particularly in forewords and epilogues to reprints of his books that appeared in the 1960s" (Kołakowski 1978b: 253). Moreover, in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Poland, and later in Czechoslovakia, acts of self-criticism were mostly performed by members of the establishment who most of the time did not lose their posts; and for non-partisan citizens the public act of self-criticism was "a form of spectacular public access to the circle of co-founders of the new regime..." (Wołowiec 2000: 43, 47) and to material privileges inaccessible to the masses.[1] Thus, the purpose was a tactical and preventive use of self-criticism.

That is why, for the scholar of social communication, an act of self-criticism is a particular kind of speech, which is a result of a discursive strategy serving a game between the political authorities and the subject of self-criticism. In communist times this led to the ritualization of language, i.e. applying an artificial communist newspeak based on "evasive thinking" which produces schematic reasoning isolated from empirical reality (see Fedelius 1998, Głowiński 1990, Havel 1992). What is interesting is that guilt itself was generally expressed in these acts of self-criticism in a vague and imprecise way. As Grzegorz Wołowiec claims: "what was supposed to be condemned in its [self-criticism's]

text and judged negatively turned out to be completely unutterable, ultimately unprintable” (2000: 57). Those who did not follow this principle, e.g. the eminent writer Tadeusz Borowski, were charged with “perverse enjoyment of self-analysis.”

Soon, some of the former supporters of the communist regime turned against its cruel hypocrisy. In Poland, the progressive disillusionment of the intellectuals started around 1955, even before the revelation of the “Secret Speech” by Nikita Khrushchev about the cult of Stalin and his crimes. In Hungary, the brutally crushed uprising of 1956 was the turning point in the elites’ engagement in communism and in Czechoslovakia the Prague Spring suppressed by the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968 resulted in the crystallization of the dissidents’ movement. The disillusioned intellectuals began to perform, usually in the semi-public or unofficial public sphere, a new kind of self-criticism that served them to come to terms with their partisan activities during the first decades of communism in Eastern Europe. This revisionist, or anti-communist self-criticism, although it often employed ritualized political rhetoric as the only one mastered by the indoctrinated public actors, seemed to be the reverse of its communist equivalent. The enacting of anti-regime self-criticism required civil courage instead of opportunism and could lead to repressions instead of privileges. For these reasons, this type of self-criticism remained an uncommon act blocked by the self-censorship of the intellectuals, and authorities’ efforts in “silencing all dissenting voices” with material goods and public honors (see: Judt 2006: 566, 571) – but making fun of the regime’s speeches and solidarity with those who refused to perform the party’s rituals was the order of the day.

Since the democratic transition in the region, public acts of self-criticism have continued to serve as an element of the political game between the old and new elites forging the new political, economic and social order in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, we should not easily equate the weight of former and present acts of self-criticism. The subjects of communist self-criticism include victims of physical and psychological violence exercised by the regime. However, Arthur Koestler in his well-known novel *Darkness at Noon* (1966[1941]) claimed that self-critical self-accusations by ardent communists tried during the period of the Stalinist purges in the 1930s resulted from their radical loyalty to the regime based on their faith in the ultimate rightness and historical necessity of the party’s judgement. Still, in view of the declassified documents and testimonies revealed in recent decades, the impact of fear, torture and mental pressure on resorting to public acts of self-criticism in the Stalinist times should not be underestimated[2] (Wasserstein 2007: 199). Nowadays, those who criticize themselves risk most of the time only their careers and popularity. Nonetheless, I would like to consider paradoxical continuities and ruptures between former and present acts of self-criticism which are an answer of sorts to Western modernization; they are its product, its imitative realization, or, as in the Soviet regime, a device of a rival modernization.

For Marci Shore, the essence of communist acts of self-criticism is “the consummation of one’s own subjectivity by its liquidation, the individual’s dissolution into a seamless unity with the objective laws of History” (2013: 333). At present it seems that it is not about consummation, but rather *production of subjectivity*. Shaping of the modern self happens within constant chatter about the exceptionality of the individual, or even within a

“terror” of care of the self. Self-criticism is not only a tool for therapy of the self, which thanks to critical introspection explains and rationalizes its own place in the world (Illouz 2008, Jacyno 2007).

Self-criticism is also an element of public discourse of modern societies that affirms mechanisms of broad social participation but at the same time ascribes responsibility for failure towards the individuals in a more profound and credible way than in the times of the communist regime, since in a democracy citizens are perceived as free subjects shaping their own fate.

As Michael Walzer notices: “there is a difference between criticizing the self and criticizing the products of the self. Actions, words, even whole books of words, can be taken back, repudiated, apologized for; but I can’t take back myself” (1987: 40). Contemporary self-criticism can be as painful as the communist one (that in most cases focused on the subject’s words, works and deeds, not on the very self) but in both cases the honesty of self-criticism may be disputable, as it may be replaced by the act’s instrumental use. What is more, post-communist acts of self-criticism are confronted with the unpredictability of the public response. In communist times a final act of self-criticism was preceded by a four-stage preparation process. Firstly, the party appealed for self-criticism, putting a certain pressure on its members. Secondly, a public witch-hunt was launched in the press and during official reunions. Thirdly, the *victim* formulated a first draft of a self-critical utterance which repeated the party’s accusations and, fourthly, it was evaluated by the party’s representatives. In other words, self-criticism was made public only after the acceptance by the regime (Wołowiec 2000: 54-56). Today, self-criticism stopped being an object of ideological pre-evaluation; these are heterogenic, deeply divided audiences that first *consume* a public act of self-criticism and then decide if it satisfies their definition of democratic, *modern* standards.

Modernization as Social Self-Reckoning

In the last seventy years, Eastern Europe have been exposed to several waves of modernization, understood in various ways, contradictory and incompatible with one another. What they had in common, however, was the idea of an active subject who is equipped with political and social agency that enables them to shape the reality they live in. The Soviet concept, forced on the region, aimed at building large but easily mobilizing collectives out of single-minded individuals. That is why communist, and particularly Stalinist self-criticism was most often enacted by stigmatized individuals playing the role of a scapegoat, bearing full responsibility for political and moral failures in order to prevent the collective from falling apart. Eastern European elites, aware of the pathologies of the Soviet system, made several attempts at *re-modernizing* the concept and introducing “socialism with a human face”. The defeat of this project, in economic and political terms, led to the final symbolic *exhaustion* of the regime which could no longer respond to any epochal illusions.

In the times of democratic transformation, the need for pro-Western imitative modernization constituted a dominant narrative among the Eastern European elites. Since almost five decades of communism could not be easily wiped from the social

memory, self-reckoning with the past was perceived as a crucial precondition of modernization. The intellectuals appealed not only for self-criticism of both the former and new authorities, but also of the whole society allegedly “affected by the syndrome of *Homo Sovieticus*” (Sztompka 2008: 45), i.e. a syndrome of a passive personality, mentally rooted in socialism and unable to modernize him/herself. Thus, “disarmament” of this cultural phenomenon has become a primordial task for public intellectuals, the media and the post-communist public sphere in general (see Aronoff, Kubik 2013, Woźniak 2014). The results of the postulate of self-reckoning proved, however, to be different than those expected. The case of the Polish public sphere will illustrate the following remarks on self-criticism.

On the one hand, the ‘medialization’ of public life has resulted in the trivialization of self-criticism and the proliferation of many sorts of self-confession. In terms of quantity, the most common form of public self-analysis in Eastern Europe is *self-presentative self-criticism* in the media. The confessions of celebrities and politicians, the tears and apologies in the spotlight, meet the cult of quasi-authenticity, celebrated in mediacracy and developed via individual strategies of self-creation and self-promotion. Eastern Europe copies Western media formats, in which the participants have to account for their lives and undergo a metamorphosis. In Poland talk shows and make-overs such as *Rozmowy w toku* (*Conversations in progress*, inspired by *The Oprah Winfrey Show*), *Wybacz mi* (*Forgive me*), or *Perfekcyjna Pani Domu* (*The Perfect Housewife*) show ordinary Poles who cannot cope with their lives, all of which is often presented in an exaggerated way. The media expert “helps” them analyze their own mistakes and become better people. This “better people” most of the time reflect the neoliberal model of the *entrepreneurs of the self*, who can take care of themselves and adjust their ambitions to the goals of the whole society with the help of communicative strategies exposing in public one’s feelings and failures. “Thus, by an ironic twist of cultural history, the self-interested *Homo economicus* of Adam Smith has been recast by psychologists as a *Homo communicans* who reflexively monitors his words and emotions, controls his self-image, and pays tribute to the other’s point of view,” notes Eva Illouz (2008: 95). Although Illouz sees in the medialized therapeutic narrative a positive tool of making individuals responsible for their well-being, self-criticism indicates additionally one’s moral culpability towards both the present and the past. In other words, self-criticism does not mean one’s liberation *from* the past but self-reckoning *with* the past, sometimes carried out in a very banal manner.

On the other hand, public acts of self-criticism may have been a result of the intellectual elites’ self-reflection on the position of their societies in comparison to Western Europe. Self-criticism on behalf of the collective ‘us’ became, for intellectuals, an attempt to participate in the Western modernizing discourse and to remonstrate against the parochial or postcolonial character of their domestic reality. What is more, the democratic transformation led to a peculiar role reversal between the former victims of repression and its perpetrators: in the new situation the communist authorities were blamed for the social evil, while the role of judges was assigned to the new elites, populated with members of the former anti-regime opposition.

Soon, the black-and-white dichotomy “commissars vs. dissidents” turned out to be inefficient and misleading in the public communication. In the 1990s some of the representatives of the new elites initiated a disclosure of names of both actual and alleged former collaborators of the communist secret services (such as the so-called ‘Macierewicz’s list’ or ‘Wildstein’s list’ in Poland, or the special report of the 17th November Commission or ‘Cibulka’s list’ in the Czech Republic) that has captured the attention of the media for next two decades. “I do not intend to whine over myself; I am not looking for any excuses,” journalist Lesław Maleszka (2001) wrote in 2001 in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the biggest opinion-forming newspaper in Poland. He admitted to having become in the 1970s, under the pressure of the regime, a secret collaborator of the Security Service, and to having informed on his colleagues from the opposition. He took his pseudonym, Ketman, from Czesław Miłosz’s *The Captive Mind* (1990[1953]), a book about intellectuals blinded by communism. Maleszka appealed for his files to be “the first and the last ones” to be made public. However, this did not happen, as subsequent people were called to *lustration self-criticism*, and in 2006 the right-wing government prepared a project of a lustration law, obliging many public figures to disclose their ideological commitments to the former political system. This resulted in a series of refusals of submitting the so-called lustration declaration. “I won’t demonstrate that I’m not a camel,” wrote Konstanty Gebert (2007), a journalist and former member of the opposition, referring to the saying popular in Russia at the times of the Stalinist purges. [3]

Along with acts of self-criticism or refusals of self-criticism examining the elite’s engagement in the *ancien régime*, in recent years there has been more and more criticism of the current regime and choices made by the leaders of the democratic changes in the region. Already in 1992 Jan Urban, Czech publicist and a former dissident, published an essay “The Powerlessness of the Powerful”, travestyng the famous Vaclav Havel’s work. Urban bitterly settled accounts with young democratic authorities recruited from former dissidents, he argued that the Velvet Revolution “was a mess. We won it too fast and immediately forgot to think further” (Shore 2013: 34).

In Poland, in the face of growing social divisions, a split into winners and losers of the transformation, into the managerial class and the precariat, the elites started to express their disappointment with copying the economic models from the West, which had been implemented in the early 1990s. These are acts of *transition disillusionment’s self-criticism*, to a degree reactionary towards the pro-Western modernization, mostly within the sphere of the economy but also within the moral discourse of post-communist times. “We were stupid. In the 1980s we got infected with the ideology of neoliberalism, and indeed I had my share in this, I would talk Tusk and Bielecki^[4] into it.... I would scrupulously give them Hayek’s writings.... This zeal died in me pretty quickly. I realized that liberalism was being dominated by the element of individualism, which was gradually pushing out other important values and killing the community,” said one of the most prominent Polish public intellectuals, Marcin Król, in a well-known interview (Król, Sroczyński 2014). At the same time, Karol Modzelewski, the legend of the anti-regime opposition in Poland, in a recently published and award-winning autobiography, similarly analyses the former opposition from the position of an insider: “It was worse when it

turned out that we were winning and that ‘our guys’ were in the parliament and in the government. The bond between the co-fighters of the cause, heroes of the underground, who used to support one another as ‘one for all, all for one,’ was silently transforming itself into its own caricature known as the ‘republic of cronies’” (Modzelewski 2013: 420).

Both *lustration self-criticism* and *transition disillusionment’s self-criticism* indicate social disappointment with the democratic transition, capitalism and the change of elites. Modernization as such is not being rejected, its scenarios and outcomes, however, are more and more often contested by elites from different sides of the political spectrum. On the one hand, conservative and right-wing politicians, publicists and intellectuals, focus on the moral condition of the leaders of the post-communist Europe and exhort them to self-criticism concerning their commitments to the nation and motherland, understood in a traditional way as objective beings. On the other hand, liberal intellectuals and former opponents of the regime subject themselves to self-reckoning with their choices made in the transition period and their faith that self-regulating neoliberal market economy should not deprive people of the sense of social justice. It is worth mentioning that the acts of self-criticism oriented towards the more or less distant past are accompanied by acts of self-criticism focusing on current matters. For instance, it is the voice of academics exposing the level of Polish science and the superficiality of the educational boom that Polish authorities pride themselves on; or scarce, but existing, acts of self-criticism within the Catholic Church, when the clergymen criticize the Church’s closing itself to the needs of the believers, which are changing along with the development of science and westernization. The question raised once by Jerzy Jedlicki (1999), a historian of ideas, in his book on the 19th century Polish intellectuals’ approaches to the then Western political thought, “What kind of civilization do the Poles need?,” still seems valid, not only for Poles but for Eastern Europeans in general. Although public acts of self-criticism cannot provide “miraculous”, unanimous accepted answers to this problem, they play a crucial role in diagnosing the sources of social tensions.

Conclusions

Since modernization in Eastern Europe is still a work in progress, the eponymous question of whether self-criticism in Eastern Europe is a significant device of modernization must be left unanswered. However, it seems that self-criticism, both the one affirming and the one negating social processes taking place in the region, is based on the modern conception of the subjects’ emancipation from their limitations and their ability for self-development steered by the historical necessity and the concrete political context. “One of the principal advantages of a democratic society is its capacity for self-criticism,” argues Gerald M. Mara (2003: 739), pointing to a public genre, cultivated already in the ancient Athenian democracy and based on the conviction that an appeal to the collective conscience can prevent society from yielding to fundamentalist claims. One of the most profound ironies in the history of modernity is that it was the totalitarian Stalinist regime which institutionalized self-criticism – in order to liquidate any public space for the critique of the regime: each attempt to criticize the system might then have

been repudiated by its own subject. By contrast, in modern democracies' self-criticism, cannot result from a top-down coercion if it is intended to wake the social conscience effectively.

Taking into consideration this ambivalence of self-criticism, we can indicate various and sometimes striking connections of self-criticism in the 20th and 21st centuries with what Jeffrey Alexander calls the "Janus-faced modernity". According to Alexander (2013: 12), "Rather than modernity repressing moral substance and emotional imagination, we must see it as Janus-faced, as blocking and facilitating at the same time." Modernity has brought with itself the burden of destructive ideologies but also a number of critical discourses; it has set standardization of individuals against a process of individualization and existential therapy for modern entities. Since self-criticism is located at the junction of these phenomena, it can play the role of a litmus test of social divisions stemming from contradictory approaches to modernization scenarios and goals, as well as of their misuse in political games.

Eastern Europe, which with its load of the communist past is nowadays a place of turbo-modernization and at the same time of strong resistance to its pro-Western variant, constitutes a very tempting context for research on the discursive construction of modernity tailored to East European expectations or fantasies. Moreover, analysis of the order of the self-critical discourse and its place within public communication in Eastern Europe could indicate the procedures which, in a Foucauldian sense, regulate and select what can be articulated in public. Additionally, such an analysis can reveal different areas of weakening legitimacy of democratic power and its leaders who manage top-down processes of modernization in the region. Nowhere but in Eastern Europe has self-criticism shown its Janus-face so trenchantly and severely.

Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Łódź and Bronislaw Geremek Junior Visiting Fellow at the IWM (2014-2015). Her academic interests focus on social communication, discourse analysis, collective memory and post-colonial studies. Her current research project concerns public acts of self-criticism in Poland and Eastern Europe.

Works Cited:

Alexander, Jeffrey C. *The Dark Side of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2013.

Aronoff, Myron J. and Jan Kubik. "Homo Sovieticus and Vernacular Knowledge," in: Myron J. Aronoff and Jan Kubik (eds.). *Anthropology and Political Science. Convergent Approach*, New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books 2013, pp. 240-278.

Bikont, Anna and Joanna Szczęsna. *Lawina i kamienie: Pisarze wobec komunizmu*, Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka 2006.

Erren, Lorenz. "»Kritik und Selbstkritik« in der sowjetischen Parteiöffentlichkeit der dreißiger Jahre. Ein mißverstandenes Schlagwort und seine Wirkung," in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* no. 2 (2002), pp. 186-194.

Fedelius, Pert. *Řeč komunistické moci*, Praga: Triáda 1998.

Foucault, Michel. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, New York-Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan 2005.

Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power," in: *Critical Inquiry* no. 4 (1982), pp. 777-795.

Gebert, Konstanty [Dawid Warszawski], "Nie, nie zamierzam się lustrować," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, March 6, 2007.

Głowiński, Michał. *Marcowe gadanie*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PoMOST 1991.

Głowiński, Michał. *Nowomowa po polsku*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN 1990.

Havel, Vaclav. "On Evasive Thinking", in: *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, New York: Vintage Books 1992, pp. 10-24.

Illouz, Eva. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*, Los Angeles: University of California Press 2008.

Jacyno, Małgorzata. *Kultura indywidualizmu*, Warszawa: PWN 2007.

Jedlicki, Jerzy. *A Suburb of Europe. Nineteenth-Century Polish Approaches to Western Civilization*. Budapest, Budapest: CEU Press 1999.

Judt, Tony. *Postwar. A History of Europe Since 1945*, London: Penguin Books 2006.

Koestler, Arthur. *Darkness at Noon*, New York: Bantam Books 1966[1941].

Kołakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism. Volume II: The Golden Age*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978a.

Kołakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism. Volume III: The Breakdown*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978b.

Król, Marcin and Grzegorz Sroczyński, "Byliśmy głupi," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 8, 2014.

Maleszka, Lesław. "Byłem Ketmanem," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 13, 2001.

Mara, Gerald M. "Democratic Self-Criticism and the Other in Classical Political Theory," in: *The Journal of Politics* no. 3 (2003), pp. 739-758.

Miłosz, Czesław. *The Captive Mind*, New York: Vintage 1990[1953].

Mittenzwei, Werner. *Die Intellektuellen. Literatur und Politik in Ostdeutschland von 1945 bis 2000*, Leipzig: Verlag Faber & Faber 2001.

Modzelewski, Karol. *Zajeżdżymy kobyłę historii. Wyznania poobijanego jeźdźca*, Iskry: Warszawa 2013.

Rose, Nikolas. *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, London: Free Association Books 1999.

Shore, Marci. *The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe*, New York: Crown Publishers 2013.

Shore, Marci. *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918-1968*, New Haven-London: Yale University Press 2006.

Stalin, Joseph. "Against Vulgarising the Slogan of Self-Criticism," *Pravda*, June 26, 1928.

Sztompka, Piotr. "The Ambivalence of Social Change in Post-Communist Societies," in: Anna Śliz and Marek S. Szczepański (eds.), *Czy koniec socjalizmu? Polska transformacja w teoriach socjologicznych*, Warszawa: Scholar 2008, pp. 36-57.

Tubielewicz Mattson, Dorota. *Polska socjalistyczna krytyka literacka jako narzędzie władzy*, Uppsala: Uppsala University 1997.

Walzer, Michael. "Notes on Self-Criticism," in: *Social Research* no. 1 (1987), pp. 33-43.

Wasserstein, Bernard. *Barbarism & Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.

Wołowiec, Grzegorz. "Dwuznaczny urok samokrytyki," in: *Teksty Drugie* no. 1-2 (2000), pp. 43-59.

Woźniak, Wojciech. "From underclass to *Homo sovieticus*: Human constraints towards modernization," in: *Praktyka Teoretyczna* no. 3 (2014), pp. 171-199.

Zawodniak, Mariusz. "Samokrytyka," in: Zdzisław Łapiński and Wojciech Tomasik (eds.), *Słownik Realizmu Socjalistycznego*, Kraków: Universitas 2004, pp. 302-306.

Notes:

[1] Jerzy Stempowski, an emigrant Polish publicist, called this privileged part of Polish intelligentsia "a profitariat".

[2] One striking example of such extreme pressure put on the accused is the case of Bruno Jasiński, a poet and Polish communist, tried in 1937-1938 in Moscow. In September 1937, in his desperate letter to Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVK, he wrote: "Having been broken morally and physically after uninterrupted 'standing treatment' in a flood of despair I signed my name to testimony dictated to me in which I confessed to crimes that I never committed. I hoped for this price to buy myself death, since life deprived of the state's confidence is unthinkable for me..." (see Shore 2006: 147).

[3] Sometimes lustration has an intergenerational dimension. In Hungary there were well-known cases when children of former collaborators of the communist secret services discovered their fathers' past and, on their behalf, so to speak, they perform a kind of self-criticism. Writer Péter Esterházy in his novel *Revised Edition* from 2002 discussed his father's choices, and in the same year Zoltán Pokorny, an active politician of the party Fidesz, resigned from the party's positions when he acknowledged his father's past.

[4] Donald Tusk is a former Polish Prime Minister (2007-2014), in the 1980s he was a member of the "Solidarność" movement and in the early 1990s he was a head of a political party, Liberal Democratic Congress. Jan Krzysztof Bielecki is a former Polish Prime Minister (1991), an economist, and in the early 1990s he co-founded Liberal Democratic Congress.

Preferred citation: Nowicka, Magdalena. 2015. Self-criticism in Public Discourse: A Device of Modernization? The Case of Eastern Europe. In: Dimensions of Modernity. The Enlightenment and its Contested Legacies, ed. P. Marczewski, S. Eich, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 34.