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Social marginalization and access to public sphere in Poland – the case of “mohair berets”

Social and economical transformation in Poland created a demand for the emergence of the “new capitalist man”. This emergence was facilitated by a series of strategies for building new subjects in opposition to an imagined Other – the backward “homo sovieticus” (Dunn). At the same time, there existed a discourse, articulated for the first time by the democratic opposition in the middle eighties, which spoke of lower classes as a possible threat to the ongoing transformation (Ost). Those strategies and discourses met, during the term of office of the populist coalition-government in the years 2005-2007, in the form of a grass root campaign against the “mohair berets”, as are called the listeners of the politically active Catholic radio station “Radio Maryja”.

In this paper, I will attempt to analyze the discourse concerning “mohair berets” in the Polish quality press and in the internet. My aim is to explore the modes of exclusion from the public sphere because of gender, age, lack of education and “low market opportunities”. I also argue that the analyzed discourse is yet another form of a relatively stable strategy, which aim is to delegitimize the influence “lower classes” could exercise in the public sphere, and that its stylistics can be traced back to the practices of the creation of “new capitalistic” subjects.

I hope my paper can contribute to the discussion concerning the recent “clash” of two Polish public spheres – the plebeian public sphere (Habermas) based in the Catholic Church media and the “universalist” hegemonic public sphere of the emerging middle class. I also hope to demonstrate some of the strategies used in post-communist countries to delegitimize the political activism and democratic engagement of the sectors of society marginalized by social and economic transformation of the 1990s.