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A POLISH GAZE AT THE NORTHERN IRISH CONFLICT AND ITS SOCIAL AFTERMATHS IN ALEKSANDRA ŁOJEK'S *BELFAST. 99 ŚCIAN POKOJU* (BELFAST. 99 PEACE WALLS)

ABSTRACT: The following article scrutinizes the situation of Polish immigrants in Northern Ireland with regard to the ongoing denominational local conflicts and the official policy of the peace process. As a literary point of reference, the article is based on a reportage written by a Polish immigrant Aleksandra Łojek – *Belfast. 99 ścian pokoju* (Belfast. 99 Peace Walls) (2015). The publication well illustrates the process of immigrant assimilation on an individual level, showing how the author undergoes a transformation from a tourist to a member of the local community as well as how other Polish immigrants face the same problem after having moved to Belfast. The initial lack of knowledge about the denominational division of the city's space, and the complexity of the social relations in the Northern Irish capital, allows Łojek to make interesting observations, which even the journalists well-acquainted with the issue often fail to notice. Thus, Łojek provides a fresh look at the ongoing social conflict between Loyalists and Republicans, challenges many stereotypes associated with Belfast and Northern Ireland as well as gives voice to the Polish diaspora trying to (re)build their lives in this part of the UK.

KEYWORDS: Polish diaspora, Northern Ireland, Belfast, the Troubles, Northern Irish peace process

In 2015, *Newsweek Polska* reported that Belfast had been flooded with Polish immigrants, which had resulted in Poles being the second biggest nationality after the British, thus exceeding all other nationalities who do not have British

citizenship, including the Irish from the Republic of Ireland.[1] Contrary to the expectations of many experts, the number of Polish immigrants in the UK did not fall after the Brexit referendum, which was built on a heavily anti-immigrant rhetoric, but actually rose up to over one million in 2017.[2] The situation in Northern Ireland appeared to be analogous. According to a poll of the Department of Social Development, Poles constituted one fourth of all immigrants living in Northern Ireland, slightly overtaking the number of the Irish born in the Republic.[3] These numbers indicate that Polish immigration is a fact of life in Northern Ireland and that Poles not only live but also (re)shape the socio-cultural fabrics of the province, transgressing their status as temporary additions to the Northern Irish society. Therefore, the present article argues that it is worth looking at how the Polish diaspora adjusts to the territorial and symbolic divisions that permeate Northern Ireland and defines its precarious status within the United Kingdom. The paper tackles this issue through a 2015 reportage *Belfast. 99 ścian pokoju* (Belfast. 99 peace walls)[4] written by Aleksandra Łojek, a Polish immigrant living in the capital of Northern Ireland. The text, it is argued, well illustrates the process of assimilation on an individual level, showing how the author undergoes a transformation from a tourist to a member of the local community. When, however, Łojek turns to other Poles who have embarked on a similar path of emigration, she asks some vital questions about their ability to find their place in a city defined by its sectarian past as well as about the readiness of the city to accept the Poles – a homogenous Catholic group which lacks knowledge about the reality of the Troubles.

Łojek presents herself as an (integrated) outsider, who *reads* Belfast and Northern Irish reality from a certain cognitive distance. This distance, as Franco Moretti once said, marks the condition of knowledge; the greater the distance, the less knowledge one has about a given text, but, paradoxically, this lack of knowledge allows one to "focus on units that are much smaller or larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems".[5] Putting it differently, Łojek, who grew up and lived in Poland for the majority of her life, is mapping Northern Ireland for her Polish readers through the prism of her

[1] *Belfast zdobyty! W Irlandii Północnej więcej Polaków niż Irlandczyków*, (Belfast Conquered! Poles Overtake the Irish in Northern Ireland), "Newsweek Polska", 10 Dec. 2015, date of access: 31 Mar. 2019, https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/w-irlandii-polnocnej-zyje-wiecej-polakow-niz-irlandczykow/6s91bhd.

[2] *Urząd Statystyczny: Rekordowa populacja Polaków w Wielkiej Brytanii* (Statistical Office: Record numbers of Poles in the UK), "Dziennik Związkowy", 2018, date of access: 1 Jun. 2019, http://dziennikzwiazkowy.com/spoleczenstwo/urzad-statystyczny-rekordowa-populacja-polakow-w-wielkiej-brytanii.

[3] S. McGonale, *More Poles Live in North than People from the Republic*, "The Irish News", 9 Dec. 2015, date of access: 24 May 2019, http://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2015/12/09/news/more-poles-live-in-ni-than-those-born-in-republic-347881.

[4] A. Łojek, *Belfast. 99 ścian pokoju* (Belfast. 99 Peace Walls), Czarne, Wołowiec 2015.

[5] F. Moretti, *Conjectures on World Literature*, "New Left Review", no.1 (2000), p. 57.

own experience, learning on the job about the complexities of Northern Irish identity. It makes her story invariably subjective, yet valuable when it comes to thematising the Polish diasporic experience in Northern Ireland as essentially different from the one the Poles may expect to have in other parts of the United Kingdom. From the perspective of Poland, the United Kingdom may seem a homogenous state and a cosmopolitan centre of the world, where one may blend in based on one's skills, education and willingness to work. Thus, Łojek's reportage places great emphasis on the sectarian atmosphere of Northern Ireland, which constitutes an interesting lesson for her Polish readers considering migration, or those already involved in the process of relocation or assimilation into the Northern Irish community. However, it needs to be clearly stated that Łojek's concerns about the Polish minority's preparedness for the life in Northern Ireland do not change the fact that she shows Polish presence in the region as an added value. A somewhat naïve attitude of the Poles about the seriousness of cultural divisions they are about to face, paradoxically, forces the Northern Irish to bend their well-established rules.

In many respects, Łojek admits to having been a typical Polish immigrant who had a very misguided vision of the UK and little knowledge of Northern Ireland. Her education and studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków were supposed to prepare her for a cosmopolitan, transnational life. Indeed, she managed very well during her doctoral studies at University College London and then as a journalist for "The Guardian"; however, London proved too expensive for a young, aspiring journalist form Poland and Łojek was forced to move to the more peripheral city of Belfast:

> I came to Belfast by chance, treating the place as my exile. […] After a scholarship at University College London, which I was granted during doctoral studies at the Faculty of Sociology at Jagiellonian University (I was working on jihad ideology and how the holy war is being interpreted by particular Muslim and Islamic social movements), I decided to prolong my stay in Great Britain and I was working as a freelancer for Polish diaspora journals. One day I got an offer of a stable employment in Carrickfergus near Belfast as a General Editor of a journal for the Poles. (*B* 21)[6]

As one may note, though Łojek thought of herself as sensitive to the subtleties of the disparate cultures and communities, she admits to having been surprisingly ill equipped for the confrontation with the Northern Irish reality. Significantly, she sees her journey as an exile, which implies that she looks at Belfast as inferior to London and remote from the cosmopolitan, energetic centre. Belfast, then, is a peripheral space within the United Kingdom; in this understanding, peripheries are socio-cultural areas which operate within the realms of a centralized nation-

[6] A. Łojek, op. cit., p. 21; all the quotations are translated from Polish and hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*B* 21).

state. It is their physical and symbolic distance from the capital that marks their peripheral status. As Marija Anđelković-Stoilković et al. write, "[a]lthough border regions are not always underdeveloped (for example, Basel in Switzerland, Gibraltar in Spain, etc.) […] the prevailing opinion is that the border regions have been economical, socially and demographically downward".[7] To Łojek, then, Belfast appears an anti-thesis of London rather than a place in its own right. For the British, in turn, the mention of the city triggers even more negative connotations, some of which may be traced as far as to the times of the British Empire. "When I told my erstwhile British employer that I am going to Northern Ireland she shrugged with repulsion", Łojek relates; "[o]ne could see that she dislikes this part of the world" (*B* 33). Northern Ireland is for her "the embodiment of evil incarnate, which may spread across the rest of the United Kingdom" (*B* 33). "There are so many beautiful places in Great Britain", she told Łojek; "[a]re you out of your mind? Go to the frontline? To the savages?" (*B* 33). Using the term "savages" [dzicy], the woman sounds distinctly colonial as the Irish have always played a very particular role in British colonial discourse – the role of *the other*.[8] If seen though such a lens, Belfast seems an unlikely place of migration. This image of the city was solidified in the British imagination during the Troubles and not really challenged by the media after the Good Friday Agreement (10 April 1998). As Łojek relates, during the Troubles the biased British mass media[9] typically silenced the stories of British brutality inflicted upon the Irish, and they rarely said a word about how the IRA terrorists were interviewed in prisons (five investigation techniques used on culprits were tried by the European Tribunal of Human Rights); they also liked to neglect the mention of Protestant paramilitary organizations supported by the state (*B* 33).

In Łojek and her employer, there meet two stereotypical perspectives on Belfast, namely of an outsider and an insider to the British internal politics. However, as Łojek is soon to discover, contemporary Belfast reflects not only the conflicts of the past, but also the challenges of modernity. A close look at the city discloses tensions that define today's Europe, namely the clashes

[7] M. Anđelković-Stoilković, M. Devedžić and G. Vojković, *The Border Regions of Serbia: Peripheral or Marginal Areas*, "TRAMES", vol. 22, no. 2 (2018), 211.

[8] For a long time, the Irish, alongside the African slaves and non-European others, played the role of the colonial other in the British imagination. Ireland was one of the first areas where the British tested their colonization methods, from plantations, to religious conversion, to political assimilation. In British texts, the Irish were dehumanized and described as the savage inferior race as opposite to the cultured British, which justified the British moral superiority and right to colonize the land and its people (H. Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 114). The colonial rule ended only in the 1920s, leaving Northern Ireland impossibly stretched in-between two states.

[9] The author does not specify which British mass media in her opinion provided a biased image of the Troubles. Her statement, then, is quite general. However, there exists academic scholarship into the coverage of the Troubles by the British media which draws attention to misrepresentations of the conflict, implied by Łojek in her statement; see, for example, R. Savage, *The BBC's "Irish Troubles": Television, Conflict and Northern Ireland*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2017.

between the cosmopolitan and traditional worldviews, transnational and tribal identities and unequal wealth distribution. Łojek puts forward an interesting thesis that a neoliberal tourist economy has produced a fake image of the city, which she calls "export Belfast" [eksportowy Belfast] (*B* 11) and which may be described as a city-break haven for the upper-middle class – a transnational, global capitalist city. This image is tellingly embodied by the museum of the Titanic, which celebrates Belfast's contribution to the British maritime industry and its global, rather than local, history. Also the Troubles has become a good business venture, not only for taxi drivers, who specialize in peace walls tours, but, and most of all, for the IRA[10] and UDA[11] dissidents who actively participate in the reconciliation projects financed by the European Union and the British government (*B* 103). Under the layers of the *export Belfast*, however, there lies a post-conflict city, inhabited by the underprivileged and forgotten, who have not benefited from the raging tourist industry. Thus, the author devotes her work to Loyalist and Republican dissidents and their families, who continue to live in divided districts and societies in post-Troubles times. As Łojek says:

> My protagonists – the British and the Irish – often deprived of the chances that a different address would offer – poorly educated, or educating themselves in senior age through online courses, are forgotten by the British, and thus the worldwide media. Their world does not interest anybody but for pre-election times of course […]. (*B* 9)

The city, then, "suffers from a split consciousness" (*B* 10), which here does not so much stem from the ageless divisions between Catholics and Protestants as from the disparities of wealth and opportunities inherent in the global economy. The University district has created its own narrative, which essentially differs from the narrative of the districts of the Falls Road, Shankill or Ardoyne, with their council houses and idle teenagers who have never been on holidays. The middle class and the underclass live here side by side, but at the same time apart from each other (*B* 10). On top of this, the historic ghettoization of the city is still a visible mark of the Troubles and some districts are not safe for visitors and tourists (*B* 12). These divisions are still reflected by transportation routes that break suddenly between Catholic and Protestant districts, especially

[10] Irish Republican Army – initially it was a republican army founded in 1917 to fight for the independence of Ireland. After the War of Independence (1919-1921), it turned into a paramilitary organization, whose aim was to reunite Northern Ireland with the Irish Free State (1921-1923 the Irish Civil War), by the same token rejecting the Anglo-Irish Treaty from 1921, which ended the war between the Irish and the British. In the 1960s the IRA was partially reorganized into a paramilitary group – the Provisional IRA, which was militarily active during the Troubles (1968-1994).

[11] The Ulster Defence Association – a paramilitary loyalist organization found in 1971 in Northern Ireland, active during the Troubles. Its original aim was to protect Protestant areas from the IRA's paramilitary activity.

those which identify themselves as Loyalist or Republican, as well as the titular peace walls, solid concrete constructions traditionally dividing the Catholics and the Protestants, the longest of which runs for five kilometres (*B* 12). Hence, the Polish immigrants, somehow unbeknownst to themselves, enter a complex environment in which they have to find their place in-between the sectarian identities of the city and its local inhabitants.

After coming to Belfast, Łojek too changes her career path and becomes a community worker whose main task is facilitating the integration of the Polish immigrants into the Northern Irish society as well as helping them deal with everyday problems. Unsurprisingly, her new job takes her on many literal and metaphorical journeys through Northern Ireland and its history, exposing her to many shades of its sectarian history. The narrator's first encounter with the reality of social and cultural divisions takes place in a trivial enough situation, namely on a platform when she asks a local man whether he knows what time "a train to Derry" (*B* 14) arrives. His polite answer "it is a train to Londonderry", while pronouncedly stressing the last word, aims to make an ignorant tourist more careful when talking to local people, since some words, and especially place names, may be read as statements of political loyalty. "[I]f he [the man] took me for a tourist, I displayed ignorance characteristic for these bloody newcomers who for years have been fed on a pro-republican Hollywood propaganda" (*B* 15), notes Łojek. Every Northern Irishman knows that Derry has two names; it is known either as Londonderry (for Loyalists), or Derry (for Republicans). It is customary, as for example for the BBC, to adopt a quantitative balance; namely, when mentioning the city for the first time, to use the name Londonderry and, then, follow with Derry (*B* 15). On yet another occasion, Łojek called a taxi in Belfast from the Rex pub on Shankill Road (a famous pub where Protestant dissidents meet) to her house in a Republican district. The taxi driver could not help laughing, giving a bet that she is a foreigner: "[t]here are no such routes in this city. I have never driven from Rex to this district, it was impossible till the immigrants appeared – he said – it just staggers my imagination" (*B* 97). These seemingly ridiculous situations confirm the first man's assumptions about Łojek's perspective on Belfast, namely being that of a tourist rather than a local. As a teenager growing up in the eighties and nineties in Poland, Łojek's knowledge about Northern Ireland came predominantly from American movies. It was "a romanticized vision of a dirty war was the only one I knew" – a vision advocated and paid for by the Irish-American diaspora, which wanted the world to see the IRA in a very particular way (*B* 30). For example, *The Crying Game* by Neil Jordan and *The Devil's Own* by Alan Pakula are the two 1990's films watched by the "whole of Poland" (*B* 30). Terrorists from the IRA were viewed by the Polish audience as handsome, charismatic and sensitive, fighting for their homeland occupied by the British. For the Poles, well familiar with the struggles for independence and the price one needs to pay for freedom, this image was very relatable and appealing.

Therefore, it is only when Łojek comes close to those from the other side of the conflict that she starts to realize how impossibly complex the history of the struggle for independence was in Northern Ireland and what effect it still has on her life and work. During the first meeting with the community workers, Łojek meets a former Ulster Defence Association member. The man

> is very open, and asks why I came to Northern Ireland. He brightens up when I tell him that my father is an admirer of British culture. We share the same passion – the interest in the history of the United Kingdom. We differ in terms of our emotional involvement. I am an emigrant; my feelings are fresh, though strengthened by my father's fascination, while John fought for his country, for its Britishness, during the time of The Troubles. (*B* 19)

Her innocent fascination with British culture here takes on a completely different meaning and, potentially, puts her on the side of Loyalists. The idea of Britishness, or being British, is a cornerstone of the Unionist and Loyalist[12] identity; it makes them fiercely loyal to the United Kingdom, sometimes to the point of being uncritical towards the British authorities. Though the term is often used in political discourse, it seems that, much like the idea of a peripheral space, it is merely a discursive concept. There are many problems with trying to precisely define what being British truly means; firstly, Britain is not a homogenous nation state, so Britishness is not precisely tantamount to a national identity; some may say that it is a "state" of identity, namely the identity of those who live within the realms of a single political entity. Over the years, however, many things that bound the British together, such as the Empire or centralized administration, disappeared or were devolved;[13] research shows that many young Scots and Welsh "think of themselves as Scottish and Welsh rather than British", while many new immigrants, especially in England, find the concept of Britishness applicable to their experience.[14] On top of this, the sense of being British is not reserved solely for the inhabitants of the British Isles, as many former colonists would lay their claim to being seen as part of this collective concept. For the Northern Irish Unionists and Loyalists, however, it seems fairly simple, and their Britishness is defined through the sense of loyalty towards the state – the United Kingdom – as opposed to the Republic of Ireland.

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[12] Unionists are those British citizens of Northern Ireland who want their country to remain within the United Kingdom, whereas Loyalists intend to achieve this very goal though paramilitary means.

[13] V. Uberoi and I. McLean, *Britishness: A Role for the State?*, [in:] *Britishness: Perspectives on the British Question*, ed. A. Gamble and T. Wright, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2009, pp. 41-43.

[14] Richards, L., *The Challenge of Social Corrosion: National Identity, Social Divisions, and Disengagement*, [in:] *Social Progress in Britain*, ed. A. F. Heath, E. Garratt, R. Kashyap, Y. Li and L. Richards, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, p. 172.

Paradoxically, after the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement,[15] some argue that it is more difficult to be a Protestant than a Catholic in Northern Ireland. Though the Irish are the ones who have been discriminated against for years, today the Protestants seems to be the biggest losers of the conflict. Nationalists and Republicans[16] identify themselves as Irish, and such they are perceived by the rest of the United Kingdom. Outside Northern Ireland, however, Unionists and Loyalists are also perceived as Irish, and especially so by the English. For those who fought to preserve their Britishness, it is not only horribly unfair, but also openly insulting (*B* 36-37). As one Loyalist recalls, "For many years we had everything given at hand. The job was waiting, Catholics were discriminated against, we did not even have to learn in order to get any job, it always was there. Nobody had to worry about it. Catholics had to strive and fight for anything, so they chose education. We did not feel like doing it" (*B* 57). As one may rightly suppose, economic differences galvanize conflicts and the echoes of these local problems are very well visible in the international debate on the so called Irish backstop, which posed a threat to the Good Friday Agreement.[17] Both the Leave and the Remain campaigns, targeted mostly at the English voters, ignored the Northern Irish question. Some of the leading British politicians openly admitted that they do not understand the complexities of Northern Irish politics, or that they treat the issue of the border as a local, rather than international, problem.[18] At the same time, the DUP,[19] having long supported the Tory government, was torpedoing any attempts at adopting a backstop and thus, accepted separating, albeit temporarily, the Province from the UK even at the expense of the Good Friday Agreement. They turned against the Tory party only after Boris Johnson's concession to the border on the Irish Sea. This solution, as some commentators argued, in the long run would be worse for the DUP than for the Remain campaign in the Brexit

[15] The Good Friday Agreement is a name used by the Irish, whilst, the Belfast Agreement is a British term for the same document.

[16] Nationalists are those Irish citizens of Northern Ireland who are for the reunion of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. Republicans believe that this aim may be achieved only though military means.

[17] One of the key points of the Good Friday Agreement was the assurance of the free movement of people and goods between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Brexit introduced a problem of the restoration of the border between these two states. The backstop was one of the negotiated options, which was fiercely opposed by Loyalists and Unionists, since it was to introduce a border on the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and Great Britain to keep the integrity of Ireland.

[18] R. Carroll, *Karen Bradley Admits Ignorance of Northern Ireland Politics*, "The Guardian", 7 Sep. 2018, date of access: 30 Sep. 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/07/karen-bradley-admits-not-understanding-northern-irish-politics.

[19] The Democratic Unionist Party – a party that represents the interests of Northern Irish Unionists in British parliament; after the elections in 2017, the DUP were in a coalition with the Conservative Party till the 2019 elections.

debate, as it would, effectively, bind Northern Ireland closer to the Republic than to the UK.[20]

Such debates have also had a very tangible effect on the lives of the Polish immigrants who started going to Northern Ireland after Poland had joined the European Union in 2004. Interestingly enough, Poles, including Łojek herself, receive protection from both communities. Loyalists took her for an innocuous and gullible Catholic and thus they felt obliged to educate her about the reality of the working-class Belfast. They provided her with many pieces of advice such as "to close the door during the day, to hide all goods in some clever places and [to be] beware of drug dealers" (*B* 42). Republicans, in turn, feel close to her due to their shared denomination. Mindful of their own experiences and the image of their city, they do a lot to be viewed as open and friendly to immigrants, lending a helping hand to the Polish diaspora and, for example, allowing the Poles to have their own programme on a local radio (*B* 38). When it came to renting a flat, Łojek, as an immigrant from a Catholic country, naturally chose a Republican district, instead of the "leafy suburbs", as the locals ironically name cosmopolitan areas full of foreigners and upper-middle classes (*B* 42). Her Protestant colleagues, however, did not approve of her decision, though they accepted it as an expression of her religious allegiance. After all, she was a Catholic, even if "a Polish one [which] makes a huge difference" (*B* 44). The greatest paradox of this whole game of loyalties is the fact that both groups see the Polish community as a potential ally to their cause. Therefore, Łojek benefits from her status of an outsider and is seen as an impartial judge of their conflicts – a somewhat ironic role for a Pole largely ignorant of Belfast's history. With a dose of irony and humour, Łojek remembers how Loyalists and Republicans put her in charge of negotiating a time-division of a single building which serves various needs of the local community. She was to lead the negotiation between the Loyalist historical club and the Republican historical club. Łojek admits to having been shocked at how uncompromising both groups were, as well as surprised that the meetings of any historical club could receive so much attention. In Poland, they would attract only the most passionate amateur historians. "[A]s a Pole born in the seventies [I] would not negotiate, but divide equally, prepare the announcement and post it – let other people worry about it" (*B* 22-23), she says. It is only after she lives through her first marching season[21] that she realizes her own gullibility; only then does it dawn on her what the so-called

[20] A. Kane, *Boris Johnson's Betrayal Will Leave the DUP With One Option – to Back Remain*, "The Guardian", 28 Oct. 2019, date of access: 29 Oct. 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/28/boris-johnson-dup-remain-arlene-foster-union-northern-ireland.

[21] The Marching Season is a local name for the period between April and July when different groups organize marches to commemorate important historical events for their Republican and Loyalist identity. The period begins with the Republican commemoration of the Easter Rising on 24 April and finishes with the Loyalist parade of the Orange Order on 12 July.

'historical clubs' truly are. Not only do they teach the new generations about the Republican and Loyalist versions of the past, but also they organize and control the marches and other events. Moreover, they have links to former paramilitary organizations, which used to specialize in bomb attacks; they control their respective areas, look after teenagers, especially those who get involved in drug dealing, retaining a very high status in the community.

It is through moments like these that Łojek realizes how essential historical knowledge and cultural sensitivity are for the Polish migrants who come to work and live in Northern Ireland. From then on, she takes the task of familiarising the Polish diaspora with Belfast's reality very seriously. She also recognizes the need to explain Polish idiosyncrasies to the Northern Irish as she is well aware that, due to their essentially different upbringing, the Poles may come across as gullible, which in Northern Ireland may have serious consequences. The life of the Polish minority is overshadowed by the cases of Polish immigrants being the victims of attacks organized either by Loyalists or Republicans. One of the most infamous examples since the Good Friday Agreement happened when a Polish pizza delivery man became an accidental victim of a shooting targeted at the British army barracks in Massereene in 2009. Two soldiers were killed, whereas two other soldiers and two delivery men were wounded. The Real IRA[22] in its official statement claimed that, to their mind, the man collaborated with the British army because he accepted a delivery order from the British soldiers (*B* 34). Łojek regrets not asking the man why he took the order, whether he was aware of the risk, or if the restaurant simply sent him on purpose, hoping that – as an immigrant – he would be safe. It is also possible that nobody else wanted to take it. The Poles reading such accounts in Poland may be shocked by the absurdity of the situation. After all, one would want to believe that one is protected from being dragged into the local conflict by a sheer status of being a foreigner who exists beyond the Irish and British politics. However, the closer one gets to Belfast, the more shocked one may be by the recklessness of the Polish immigrants themselves – a problem which, as Łojek admits, she encounters more often than she would want to. The status of a naïve foreigner that guaranteed Łojek protection from both communities here put the life of her fellow countryman in danger, showing how complex and serious political (dis)loyalties are in Northern Ireland. In Belfast, cultural and historical knowledge saves lives.

A similar story pertains to Julia, a Polish nurse, and her husband who have bought a house in Belfast. Much like Łojek, they had been tempted by financial reasons and imagined Belfast to be a smaller and cheaper version of London where they had lived for two years and where they could not dream of owning

[22] The attack was condemned by all political forces in Northern Ireland. The Real IRA was formed in 1997 in response to Provisional IRA's ceasefire. It was an illegal, militant organization which represented itself as the successor of the original Irish Republican Army.

such a property: "Northern Ireland was supposed to be a much smaller England, of course, cheaper, more green, though [placed] farther from the homeland" (*B* 175). Julia's idea of what Northern Ireland is reveals a lasting misconception prevalent among the Poles that the UK is a homogenous, centralized national state, much like a post-war Poland, with no serious regional or denominational differences. Now it is Łojek's turn to be amazed at Julia's naivety.[23] Łojek cannot imagine how it is possible that Julia and her husband did not notice that neighbouring houses are empty and that all the windows have bars (*B* 169). She also notes that the Poles were a godsend for the owner as, for the locals, the house was simply unsellable. The local population, hence, may even capitalize on the ignorance of the Polish newcomers, who remain unaware of such idiosyncrasies while being determined to make their lives work in the United Kingdom. Julia and her husband had no idea that the interface is no man's land – an area between two conflicted districts (*B* 172). No wonder that now their house looks like a fortress. As Łojek writes:

> She [Julia] never thought of herself nor of this place as a part of any Great Narration, some important Being, History changing in front of her eyes – she came to Northern Ireland, as other immigrants, treating it as a part of the United Kingdom. *Belfast was for her a British city*, such as Manchester or Glasgow, *with universal problems of the civilized world*, with similar advantages and disadvantages. Previously they lived in London, where they struggled with commuting problems, many hours spent in the underground, saving, yearning for Poland, soothed by the presence of Polish shops, Polish television, and dinners in a Polish socio-cultural centre. (*B* 175; emphasis ours)

Now Julia, whether she likes it or not, is part of History in terms of the on-going Northern Irish peace process. From such a perspective, the constant nagging of the European and Irish politicians drawing apocalyptic scenarios for the post-Brexit border could be perceived as sounding a bit more serious, while their dismissal by the leading Tory politicians could send shivers down one's spine.

To Julia's mind, the civilized and economically developed world she expected to live in turns out to be surprisingly uncivilized, and her lack of knowledge about the region breeds fear and distrust towards the two communities that surround her. This fear manifests itself best when Julia learns from a local community worker that the mediation centre plans to open one of the gates in the peace walls next to her house. Initially, the Polish couple is the

[23] The couple bought a house on an interface, which is a local name for the areas which divide Republican and Loyalist districts. For safety purposes, interface areas were not inhabited by the local communities, with peace walls having been built to protect neighbour districts from the escalation of the conflict and a better control of the British army over the problematic areas of the city.

only family in the area who does not agree to sign the documents accepting the new peace project:

> [s]he [Julia] wishes the peace wall to remain and the gate to be permanently closed; she is the only person, who says that she feels safer when the teenagers are kept in isolation on the other side, whoever or whatever the other side is. She trusts neither Catholics nor Protestants, and she wishes the police were on the interface twenty-four hours to monitor every movement of any child over ten. (*B* 176)

Julia's demands for the constant surveillance of the local community is what the Northern Irish associate with the darkest days of the Troubles; thus, they did what they could to change the mentality of the local communities, including Julia and her husband. As Łojek notes with some relief, after several years of living in the area, the Polish couple had got used to the situation. They have grown accustomed to the opened gate, and they gradually became accepted by the local youngsters, though they still see the Poles as a curiosity. The determination of the Polish couple to stay in the UK forced them to adjust, though unwillingly, to the new situation. Some optimists may even say that their continuous presence in the interface area is a sign of change and a better future to come.

In truth, however, one should be very cautious in claiming that the presence of the Polish immigrants has in any decisive way changed the reality of sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland. Łojek's 2015 reportage is rather a story of a very slow cooperation between the locals and the newcomers, which had the potential to bring about fruit and reshape the city, had it not been overshadowed by Brexit and the possible restoration of the Northern Irish border. Not long after the book was published, there were many red flags signalling a possible return of violence that the British authorities seemed to ignore; one of the most significant was the murder of Lyra McKee and the subsequent response of Brian Kenna,[24] a leader of Saoradh – a group formed by dissident Irish republicans, who refused to condemn the actions of the New IRA.[25] One therefore reads with a heavy heart Łojek's remarks on how a Protestant boy describes people living in a Catholic district as "pigs", and the exact same comment from a Catholic boy in her area directed at the Protestants. "[U]nfortunately, there is some secret knowledge, which tells them [the boys] who the Other is", Łojek says, "it is an instinct, which during the time of war

[24] M. Edwards, *Saoradh Leader Says Continuation of Dissident Republican Violence "Inevitable"*, "Belfast Telegraph", 27 Aug. 2019, date of access: 26 Oct. 2019, https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/saoradh-leader-says-continuation-of-dissident-republican-violence-inevitable-38442074.html.

[25] The Real IRA mentioned previously was one of many dissident organizations which claimed their links to the original IRA. In 2012, the RIRA merged with smaller militant groups and the media started to call this 'new' organization the New IRA.

helped them to survive" (*B* 45). Such and similar examples make one realize that tribal identity politics was still strong, especially in the neglected working-class districts such as the Falls Road, Shankill or Ardoyne. As Zygmunt Bauman warns in *Retrotopa*, when identity is perceived in terms of values that bind a particular community together against a different community, the conflicted sides no longer seek communication and exaggerate the image of the foe, demonising the opponent. This, in turn, may quickly galvanize the conflict and lead to violence.[26] Playing on such sentiments, then, is irresponsible or even dangerous. Nonetheless, as Łojek is well aware, combating such prejudices would require challenging yet another characteristic Northern Irish social phenomenon, namely that of a political and collective amnesia (*B* 46).

As Anna Burns brilliantly writes in her novel *Milkman* (2018), awarded both the Booker Prize and the Orwell Prize for political fiction, through the years of the Troubles the people in Northern Ireland have developed many mechanisms which helped them face and cope with violent reality.[27] There are some things about which people in Northern Ireland simply do not talk and about which they seem to have forgotten; for the newcomers, their attitude may be easily confused with indifference towards the past. One of such controversial topics is the role the IRA and UDA dissidents still play in their respective communities. What marks Łojek's reportage as remarkable is the fact that she, as an immigrant from a country with no direct involvement in the Troubles, managed to interview several of them, revealing how fragile the balance between peace and violence still is and how irresponsible it is to toy with the idea of reintroducing borders and accentuating differences in this particular area. Former IRA and UDA paramilitaries have devoted their best years to the fight for the cause, hence, now being usually over fifty, they have no education, no work experience, no skills, they only know how to fight. The peace process funding has been their 'business plan' for the last twenty years and they do everything so that it remains so in the future. They all live on pensions and money from the peace process funding, which means that the Northern Irish peace has a very measurable price; endangering this fragile balance may have disastrous consequences. With hindsight, it transpires that the peace process in Northern Ireland is still an unfinished project, which continues to face new obstacles, Brexit being one of them.

As one may thus conclude, there are two sides to Łojek's 2015 reportage. On the one hand, as a Pole living in Northern Ireland, she writes about the Poles and for the Poles, filling in a gap in conceptualizing the experience of the Polish diaspora living now in the UK, but in other parts than London. These groups get

[26] Z. Bauman, *Retrotopia*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2017, p. 51.

[27] Anna Burns, *Milkman*, Faber & Faber, London 2018. Another interesting book which offers the readers a glimpse into the complex history of Northern Irish silence is *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*, a reportage by Patrick Radden Keefe (William Collins, London 2018).

significantly less exposure in the Polish as well as the British press, which makes Łojek's work not only interesting, but also valuable. She explains local contexts and the complex Northern Irish history, somewhat disproving the myth that, after Poland's many years in the EU, the cosmopolitan or European identity overtook local differences and tribal identities. On the other hand, she provides her readers with an interesting perspective on Belfast and Northern Ireland as a place which is both deeply divided and cosmopolitan; it does welcome Polish immigrants even more openly than other parts of the UK, while struggling with social and economic inequalities which overlap with ageless religious and national differences. She makes one realize that the local communities continue to negotiate co-existence even years after the momentous Good Friday Agreement. Her position of an outsider allows her to have a glimpse at Belfast of the working-class, the dissidents and the neglected, so much undesired by the city's authorities. In the reportage, one sees how the trauma of the Troubles has become a good selling product and a substantial source of income among former 'freedom' fighters from IRA and UDA respectively. The Troubles have caused an insurmountable trauma for the Northern Irish society, but for too many people it has remained an event on the basis of which they continue to define themselves. Thus, Belfast in a very schizophrenic way tries to forget about the painful past at the same time continuously feeding on it. Belfast has taught Aleksandra Łojek a lesson of humility and continues to do so to every Polish immigrant who comes to Northern Ireland in order to experience a 'little England'. For the Poles, in turn, the book should be a lesson on how much there still needs to be done on our part to facilitate multi-cultural understanding so as to make the lives of our future migrants easier. It is a strong and clear voice for informed and deep education in the history and culture of contemporary Europe, which may truly change lives.

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