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# The Constructive Power of Slogans in Post-Socialist Poland

Jaro Stacul *University of Victoria*

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**Abstract:** Slogans can tell us a great deal about the ways states attempt to legitimate their neoliberal reform policies, and how the contradictions of the neoliberal project are concealed. Civic Platform, the political force in charge of such reforms that governed Poland from 2007 until 2015, deployed the slogan “We are building Poland” to convey ideas of solidarity and positive change in the face of widespread inequalities. I argue that because slogans have a temporal dimension, understanding their appeal (or lack thereof) entails understanding the ideas about historical time that they mobilise among the people who are exposed to them.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, Poland, political discourse, post-socialism, slogans, state

**Résumé :** Les slogans peuvent en dire long sur la façon dont les États tentent de légitimer leurs politiques de réforme néolibérale et occulter les contradictions du néolibéralisme. La Plate-forme civique, force politique en charge des réformes néolibérales qui a gouverné la Pologne de 2007 à 2015, a déployé le slogan «Nous construisons la Pologne» de façon à suggérer des idées de solidarité et de changement positif face aux inégalités généralisées. Dans la mesure où les slogans ont une dimension temporelle, je soutiens que leur attrait (ou manque d'attrait) ne peut être compris qu'en tenant compte des notions de temps historique qu'ils évoquent parmi les individus qui y sont exposés.

**Mots-clés :** néolibéralisme, Pologne, discours politique, post-socialisme, slogans, Etat

## Introduction

The twenty-fifth of October 2015 signified a big change for Poland: Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*), a political party running a platform built on conservative Roman Catholicism, resistance to the European Union (EU) and opposition to immigration, won the parliamentary elections by a large majority. It defeated the governing party, Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*), which had advocated a vision of Poland as an integral part of a larger EU dedicated to market and pluralist principles, and had overseen the country's transformation into the “tiger economy” of Central and Eastern Europe (Hardy 2009). This article discusses the symbolic order propagated by Civic Platform when it was in office, and particularly the role played by slogans in the construction of consent.<sup>1</sup> What makes slogans an intriguing object of research is the fact that they both challenge and reinforce neoliberal ideals (e.g., inclination toward transparency, competition and responsibility) and identities (Junghans 2001; Kipnis 2007, 383–385; Knight 2015, 230). Yet, they also model the economy linguistically and communicatively (Holmes 2014, 10) and tell us a great deal about the ways the contradictions of the neoliberal project are concealed and naturalised (Benson and Kirsch 2010, 45–46; Holborow 2007, 2016). As the main goal of neoliberalism is the removal of the social and political constraints that were dominant in the context of the welfare state (Collier 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Harvey 2005; Ong 2006), neoliberal states do not seek to mobilise crowds around high ideals but rather to create favourable conditions for business and capital accumulation (Harvey 2006, 25–27). However, they also need to legitimate these reform policies by appealing to individual freedom, private property and entrepreneurship as sacrosanct values (Harvey 2005, 39–41), and ultimately to reorganise the very social and political imaginary in terms of which citizens relate to them.

Neoliberal slogans, then, should be understood in the context of the promotion of structural adjustment,

fiscal austerity, privatisation and market liberalisation. As such, they have largely been analysed as “keywords” or “vocabularies of the economy” that have extended beyond the area of economics into other fields (Holborow 2016, 43–44). Yet the possibility that some of these slogans express the social and economic programs that have been promoted as alternatives to the market-based solutions (listed above) advocated by the supporters of the Washington consensus has not yet been allowed for. In the context of such programs, the state and the market are conceptualised as complementary forces promoting economic development and growth; likewise, the “social” is not cast as antithetical to the “economic” but is instead celebrated as “social capital” (Muehlebach 2012, 93). The emphasis on the state as a complement to the market does not entail a commitment to a theory of society and the economy that undermines neoliberalism’s structural features; rather, these are left untouched (Muehlebach 2012, 94). In order to achieve their appeal, then, neoliberal slogans need to have a “social” dimension: they have to be phrased in such a way as to make people believe that they too can play a significant part in the transformations occurring at the national level (Holmes 2014, 215–218). Thus, they have to carry within them notions of collective responsibility, accountability and national solidarity, and they must involve the public in neoliberal reforms (Holmes 2014, 1; Knight 2015, 232).

Poland lends itself very well to an examination of neoliberal slogans. The political and economic changes that it has undergone since the 1980s signifies the exposure of Poles to a wide range of slogans communicating completely different values – namely, those associated with socialist ideology and those emanating from the political forces that were formed after the Cold War. After 1989, Poland witnessed dramatic transformations, among which the adoption of a market economy and the subsequent accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1999 and the EU in 2004 are the most significant. The adoption of a market economy signified a complete break with the institutions and policies associated with socialism; and the introduction, in 1990, of economic measures in the form of so-called shock therapy resulted in rising levels of unemployment, Polish firms’ exposure to international competition and large-scale redistribution of income away from workers and in favour of entrepreneurs (Hardy 2009, 28–29). Thus, the role of the Polish state as provider of welfare was diminished. Upon their accession to the EU, Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe were pushed toward adopting specific neoliberal reforms. A thorough discussion of such reforms is outside the scope of this article; suffice it to say, for now, that these opened up

previously protected sectors to trade and investment and disciplined public spending. In this sense, the Polish state was left with very limited room for wage increases and social policies, and Polish citizens were encouraged to take responsibility for their own economic well-being (Galbraith 2008, 16; Hardy 2009, 45–47).

Despite the economic crisis in Europe, by 2008, the Polish economy was growing steadily, as shown by widespread privatisation and the largest flow of foreign investment, and then prime minister Donald Tusk, affiliated with Civic Platform, could state that “There is no crisis in Poland” (*Nie ma kryzysu w Polsce*). Yet, the economic reforms promoted by the post-socialist state have so far benefited primarily the entrepreneurial fraction of Polish society and have marginalised the people who lacked the resources to achieve economic prosperity (Dunn 2004; Galbraith 2008; Hardy 2009; Kalb 2009a; Ost 2005; Shields 2007). As international aid agencies and political advisers encourage post-socialist and other governments to redefine the role of the state as that of a “consumer state” as opposed to a “citizen state,” then, Poles become vulnerable to “corporate decisions that undermine an established sense of what citizenship is worth” (Ong 2006, 160).

In the context of these developments, the post-socialist state must reconcile two tasks: on the one hand, it has to follow the directives of international and supranational agencies; on the other hand, it has to legitimate itself and appeal to people who have lost faith in politics (Hardy 2009, 200; Kolankiewicz 1994). Poland’s adoption of a market economy resulted, *inter alia*, in a proliferation of commercial slogans to which many Poles were not yet accustomed: during the socialist period, most slogans were an integral part of the propaganda of the party state and were grounded in the language of national, socialist and moral values. As such, they were meant to promote governmental ideas or social restructuring and advertise the party state’s role in Polish society and its link to national values and history (Johnson 2009, 29–31; Kolankiewicz 1994, 143). This does not mean that neoliberal slogans are not grounded in the language of values; if anything, at a time when Poles are exposed to a wide range of messages emanating from different sources, the meanings of certain slogans may be so ambiguous that it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether they are meant to deliver a political message or advertise a product. Most of these do not necessarily emanate from the centres of political power, yet they mediate people’s encounters with market forces and the ideology of neoliberal globalisation, particularly with a “grey area” in which the domains of politics and consumption seem to overlap.

In contemporary Poland, slogans circulate from one domain to another. As a result, those that are meant to be politically significant are often altered and subsequently take on a “non-political” dimension and vice versa. In 2008, for example, mobile phone operator and Internet provider Netia used the slogan “Freedom of choice” (*Wolność wyboru*) to advertise its products. The choice is not accidental, for it brings to mind “Freedom of elections” (*Wolność wybór*), which refers to the first “free” elections held in socialist Poland in 1989. In his 2010 presidential campaign, the candidate of Law and Justice and former prime minister Jarosław Kaczyński made extensive use of the slogan “Poland is the most important thing” (*Polska jest najważniejsza*). Shortly after the election that resulted in Kaczyński’s defeat, his party split because of internal disagreements. Dissidents subsequently established a new party, naming it “Poland is the most important thing.” In 2011, discount retail chain Pepco appropriated and altered the party’s name and advertised its own products with the slogan, “The price is the most important thing” (*Cena jest najważniejsza*).<sup>2</sup>

The neoliberal character of slogans can be very explicit, sometimes with a nationalist flavour: in the spring of 2015, Dove, a personal care brand owned by Unilever, ran a print advertisement on huge billboards on the main streets of Warsaw. Entitled *NaroDove Piękno* (National Beauty), the advertisement shows a slightly overweight woman, explaining, “I am beautiful, because I am spontaneous, because I am not perfect, because I believe in myself, because I am Polish.” Yet the term *NaroDove* can hardly be understood unless it is borne in mind that it is a wordplay: while *Dove* is the brand’s name, the Polish term *narodowe* means “national” with reference to the nation-state. National identity and the domain of consumption, then, merge seamlessly.

My interest in this article is not so much in the “migration” of slogans from the domain of politics to that of consumption, but in the ways their meanings change from one era to another, as well as in their role in mediating people’s encounters with the new Polish state. I analyse such phenomena in the city of Gdańsk, on the Baltic Sea, which has occupied a central role in Polish history ever since the end of the Second World War. One concept that mediates Poles’ encounters with the post-socialist state is the idea of *building* (*budować* in Polish). The concept played a central role in slogans such as “We are building Poland” (*Budujemy Polskę*), deployed by Civic Platform while in office. While the slogan was used in connection with the promotion of large-scale projects partially funded by the EU, such as the construction of roads or the improvement of infrastructures, it was also an implicit reference to the project of rebuilding

the Polish state according to free market principles. The same idea figured prominently in electoral propaganda, too: in his successful 2010 presidential campaign, Civic Platform’s candidate Bronisław Komorowski availed himself of the slogan “Unity builds” (*Zgoda buduje*) when he promised the construction of a united, conflict-free Polish society in the face of political divisions.<sup>3</sup> Later, in the 2011 electoral campaign, Civic Platform used both “We are building Poland” and “Poland under construction” (*Polska w budowie*) in brochures and video clips, illustrating what it had accomplished and what it was planning to achieve.

Yet the emphasis on “building” is not entirely new: both “Unity builds” and variations of “We are building Poland” were extensively used by the socialist state in an effort to promote the construction of a new society, as well as in the physical reconstruction of Polish cities in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this sense, who “builds” and what place the idea of “building” occupies in the collective imagination in Gdańsk and elsewhere may affect Poles’ understandings of the changes that Poland underwent after the Cold War. In this sense, the meanings attached to such slogans may be both time- and place-specific. To what extent, then, do they revolve around common assumptions about the free market? What kind of ideas do they mobilise among the people who were exposed to them?

## Building and Rebuilding Poland

What characterised Polish history from the late eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century and from the outbreak of the Second World War until the demise of socialism was subjection (direct or indirect) to foreign rule. During this period, the idea of “Poland” was associated with a nation, a culture and a religion (Roman Catholicism), but not with a state or a clearly bounded territory (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006; Mach 2007; Zubrzycki 2011). In this sense, the idea of building a nation with its own state and territory has long occupied a central place in the Polish collective imagination. After the Second World War, building took on both a material and a symbolic dimension: the new Polish state was very different from the one that appeared on maps before 1945, given that Poland’s territorial losses in the East had been compensated by expansion in the North and West. The new Poland was also different in terms of size and composition of its population: approximately 20 percent of its people perished during the war, and ethnic minorities had almost completely disappeared. Moreover, the most devastated country in Europe, Poland suffered extensive material destruction (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006, 281). In the

aftermath of the Second World War, then, the use of terms such as *construction* (*budowa*), *reconstruction* (*odbudowa*) and *We are building* (*Budujemy*) became conspicuous in the propaganda of the new state. Such terms were instrumental in reproducing a “collectivity of belonging” (Yurchak 2006, 121–122): they were central to the state-produced slogans hung on the facades of buildings and factories or carried by the crowds marching during parades, and they figured prominently in patriotic poems (Paluch 1997).<sup>4</sup>

The idea of *reconstruction* was extensively used in official discourse, particularly in the former German cities, like Gdańsk, that had become Polish and were still reduced to rubble and ash. However, such cities were not so much rebuilt as they were discovered and reinvented as Polish cities (Friedrich 2007; Kenney 1997, 141–142). The reconstruction (or reinvention) of the country was also accompanied by revolutionary transformations. On the one hand, the economy was transferred from private hands into the hands of the new state; on the other hand, the Communist Party gained control of the Polish state and Polish society (Kenney 1997, 4). *Building* also signified the beginning of a new era and a break with the past: in socialist countries, it was associated with postwar enthusiasm and a “teleology according to which society was developing towards communism, a version of modernity” (Laszczkowski 2011, 82). The construction of modern housing, for example, was expected to produce new social forms (like socialist subjects) and moral values (Humphrey 2005, 39–40; Schwenkel 2013, 254–255). In the context of Stalinist rapid industrialisation, the construction of gigantic steelworks and “socialist cities,” such as the Southern town of Nowa Huta, was instrumental in “building socialism” (Lebow 2013, 14–15); and so was the glorification of socialist workers dedicated to “building the nation” (or the capital city of Warsaw). Thus, the 1950s saw a proliferation of posters depicting labourers in the act of building,<sup>5</sup> and the party state’s monopoly over public discourse played a crucial role in propagating such images.

The idea of building regained a central place in official propaganda in the 1970s, when the party state led by Edward Gierek availed itself of the slogan “We are building a second Poland” (*Budujemy drugą Polskę*) to begin an era of technocratic pragmatism (Bralczyk 1987, 158–159; Głowiński 1993, 196–197; Kubik 1994, 51). At the root of this project was easy access to western credit, which resulted in a rapid (albeit temporary) expansion of the economy through the introduction of modern technology. Economic expansion was accompanied by an improvement in the standard of living, and by the construction of gigantic industrial plants.<sup>6</sup> More importantly,

improving economic conditions enabled the state to undertake the construction of housing blocks throughout the country in an effort to reverse the chronic housing shortage (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006, 281).

While *building* was meant to be an epitome of positive change in the context of the socialist state, the emphasis on the collective “we” in several slogans was also designed to evoke images of unity, egalitarianism and social cohesion, and to construct some aura of legitimacy for the state’s practices (Kubik 1994, 71). Although building played a lesser role in political rhetoric after the Cold War because of its association with socialism (Siewierska-Chmaj 2006, 90), material construction did not, as shown by the big redevelopment projects undertaken in Poland following its accession to the EU. Thus, because it may be a convenient metaphor for positive social change (Laszczkowski 2011, 81), the concept of *building* became incorporated into the political messages of Civic Platform. The deployment of the variation of a socialist slogan by a post-socialist state needs to be understood in the context of the political changes that occurred in the last few years, particularly Civic Platform’s victory in the parliamentary elections of 2007 and its endeavours to legitimate itself and increase its electorate.

Thus, in 2011, Civic Platform ran its campaign under the slogan “We are building Poland.” While the slogan was a specific reference to the huge modernisation projects that the Civic Platform–led government had undertaken with EU funds, it also referred to the project of narrowing the gap between Poland’s living standards and economic productivity and those of its Western neighbours. *Building* had a primarily neoliberal dimension, for *we* was meant to convey ideas of social cohesion and accountability and legitimate neoliberal reforms. Yet while the actual content of the slogan is neoliberal, its form is not necessarily so. Because it brings to mind the myth of the construction of a new Poland that was central to the propaganda of the socialist state, “We are building Poland” could also appeal to the many dissatisfied supporters of the party of the Left, whose popularity has been steadily declining since 2005. Most Poles have been distrustful of the discourses of politicians ever since the socialist period (Kubik 1994, 185–194), however, and the conviction that the country is still controlled by communists is widespread among those who had been hard hit by the processes of economic restructuring. Anger is not directed at capitalism per se, but at the governing parties that allegedly allow communist control to continue (Ost 2005, 108) and at the foreign countries (especially Poland’s potential foes such as Germany and Russia, not to mention the EU) that are believed to keep the Polish economy under control. To what extent, then,

did this slogan allow Poles to connect socialist forms of collective representation to those of neoliberal capitalism? I turn to this issue next.

## Who Is Building What?

Many residents of Gdańsk have long been familiar with building as a material and symbolic process. Until 1945, the city was inhabited largely by a German-speaking population, and it became part of Poland only at the end of the Second World War. Most of the Poles that settled there after 1945 were new to the area, having just come from territories that had been lost to the USSR to replace the German expellees (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006, 279; Tighe 1990, 224–225). Gdańsk's physical and cultural landscape has been altered by the many conversions of rule over the city: when Gdańsk became Polish, the socialist state endeavoured to assert its Polish identity by reconstructing it solely in terms of its Polish heritage (Czepczyński 2004, 279; Friedrich 2012, 121–123; Tighe 1990, 205–207); later on, in the 1970s, the socialist state adopted the “new development strategy” to modernise the country's economy (Kubik 1994, 22–24), and Gdańsk witnessed the construction of the Northern port and of housing blocks on its outskirts. To a certain extent, then, Gdańsk's twentieth-century history represents a history of reconstructions, each marking the beginning of a new era and obliterating another.

In the 1980s, Gdańsk became the cradle of *Solidarność* (Solidarity),<sup>7</sup> the mass social movement guided by the principle of labour self-government, with a clear Catholic identity, contributing to the downfall of the socialist state. While *Solidarność* sought to protect workers' interests in the face of the socialist state's increasing pressures on the workers themselves, it also endeavoured to question the state's claims to “truth.” During the labour unrest of August 1980 that resulted in the establishment of *Solidarność* as a trade union, anti-state slogans could be seen all over the city centre, especially on the walls of the shipyard that was the heart of the strike (Kubik 1994, 190).<sup>8</sup> The content of such slogans varied, yet what united many of them was the conviction that truth (*prawda*), as a value, had been violated, and that the messages propagated by the state-controlled media were lies (*klamstwa*).<sup>9</sup> In the 1990s, *Solidarność* split into several smaller parties and eventually disappeared.<sup>10</sup> However, its rise in 1980 is described in official discourse as the beginning of a new era in Polish history.

In the context of the transformations that resulted in the city's shift from an economy of production to one of consumption after 1989, Gdańsk is endeavouring to attract tourists, investors and potential residents. Its incorporation into the political economy of the EU

appears in material structures, given that several major public works in the historical centre are funded by the EU itself, and the Civic Platform-led municipal council is implementing a large-scale project of urban recovery. While in theory such initiatives set out to improve the living conditions of the people residing in certain areas (e.g., the lower city), many of these were part of the Polish state's neoliberal agenda and were consistent with Civic Platform's vision of Poland as an integral part of a EU dedicated to market and pluralist principles. In this sense, they are primarily meant to attract investors and raise the value of land and of historic buildings.

In the summer of 2010, the slogan “We are building Poland” (*Budujemy Polskę*) made its appearance on billboards on Gdańsk's main thoroughfares in connection with the large-scale projects (particularly road construction) promoted by the Polish state. Most of these were undertaken in preparation for the European soccer championships (Euro 2012), played in Poland and the Ukraine in 2012, and were partially funded by the EU. Because Gdańsk would be hosting some games, extensive work had to be carried out in the city.<sup>11</sup> In 2011, the year of the parliamentary elections that gained Civic Platform a second consecutive term in office, slogans such as “We are building Poland” and “Poland under construction” were repeated ad nauseam, especially on TV, and appeared on electoral leaflets illustrating the party's (and the government's) achievements. The remark “But at least something is being built” (*Ale przynajmniej się buduje*), often made by locals in response to other people's concern about such unprecedented levels of construction, is very telling about the meanings attached to construction itself as a conventional metaphor for positive change.<sup>12</sup> Yet in Gdańsk, *building* is not simply tantamount to *construction* in the material sense but also involves dealing with the city's socialist past.

Outside the historical centre, an extensive area that is earmarked for redevelopment is the Gdańsk shipyard. The shipyard has a complex legacy as simultaneously the embodiment of socialism and a site of dissent. Formerly a German shipyard, after 1945 it became the pride of the Polish state and was meant to be the material form of socialist ideology. When socialist states were installed in the aftermath of the Second World War, housing blocks and factories became key arenas of ideology (Buchli 1999; Humphrey 2005; Kenney 1997), and the Gdańsk shipyard, as the largest shipbuilding company in the Eastern bloc, was expected to play a significant role in the creation of a new working class (Jarecki 1985, 24–25). Ironically, in 1980, it became the cradle of the *Solidarność* movement and the location where socialist ideology itself was contested.

Because of its legacy as a site of opposition to the socialist state, in official and popular discourses, the shipyard is referred to as the cradle of a “national myth” (*mit narodowy*) such as *Solidarność*, and many state-sponsored ceremonies taking place in Gdańsk are held in front of its main gate. After the demise of socialism, the shipyard was privatised. Yet, it was totally unprepared for the challenges posed by free markets and the rapid decline of heavy industry, and in 1996, it went bankrupt. The shipyard is still in operation but is much smaller than it was in the socialist era. Despite its significance in Polish history, past its main gate, visitors face a scenario of desolation: most warehouses are abandoned and earmarked for demolition, and huge open spaces are densely overgrown and littered with scrap metal.

In the years that followed Civic Platform’s rise to power, the municipal council pushed for the redevelopment of the grounds no longer devoted to shipbuilding and for the reinsertion of the site into the city. At the core of the redevelopment is an attempt to reinvent the area’s public image, not only as a former shipyard but particularly as an area for living, leisure and business. Thus, in the summer of 2009, the municipal council organised an outdoor photographic exhibition (which I visited) and some symposia on the state of decay of the shipyard. The purpose of this and other related initiatives was not to make the residents of Gdańsk aware of a situation they already knew very well, however, but rather to influence public opinion as to the necessity of redeveloping the site. While the photographs’ captions in the exhibition were informed by a rhetoric of “development” (*rozwój*) and “heritage” (*dziedzictwo*), the identification of “ruins” or “empty spaces” without economic value was designed to legitimate redevelopment.<sup>13</sup> The redevelopment, as it has been designed, does not differ significantly from others undertaken on the city’s outskirts or in other Polish cities (except in size): it will entail a comprehensive redesign of a post-industrial site according to different principles, and it will involve the construction of luxury apartments on the waterfront, as well as offices, hotels, a shopping mall and a big supermarket (Grabkowska 2006, 91–92).

The organisation of urban spaces through the creation of an atmosphere of leisure is found in former industrial towns that shift their economies from production to consumption, promote revitalisation projects based on culture and heritage, and use the past for commercial purposes (Zukin 2010). The construction of luxury apartments on the shipyard grounds contributes to the aestheticisation of the place: while the socialist era was characterised by housing shortages, and dwellings often took the form of huge housing blocks, nowadays, the

availability of luxury apartments has become an indicator of Poland’s expanding middle class (Pozniak 2013, 118–121).<sup>14</sup> Yet the redevelopment is not aimed at evoking nostalgia for the time when *Solidarność* came to the fore, nor at reconstructing the past, but it is meant instead to obliterate part of it and to make the site accessible only to those who have the financial (and cultural) capital to buy property there (Zukin 2010, 87). Whereas *building* once offered the promise of care, renewal and inclusion in a global socialist polity, the luxury apartments to be constructed in the shipyard point instead to a future of exclusion (Schwenkel 2013, 273).

Although the shipyard was expected to become the principal material emblem of the mayor and the municipal council’s policies, it eventually became a contested object of planning. The several state-sponsored ceremonies held in Gdańsk gave factory workers opportunities to contest the redevelopment project, as well as the Polish state’s neoliberal agenda. Many of these expressed their discontent on 4 June 2009, when the grounds outside the shipyard became the scene of the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the first “free” elections in the country (which I attended). During the event, shipyard workers, angered at the European Commission’s pressures to have the shipyard closed down and at the Polish state’s compliance with these requests, made their voices heard: they hung a big banner beside the main gate, which read (in English), “Dictator from the East has not destroyed our shipyard. Now Brussels officials play the cards.” While the slogan set out to convey the message that Poland was losing sovereignty (Golanska-Ryan 2006, 162–163; Kalb 2009a, 217), behind it was another message: that history repeats itself.

When the 2011 electoral campaign was in full swing, Civic Platform made extensive use of slogans such as “We are building Poland” and “Poland under construction.” However, most of the industrial workers and students I spoke with said that they were largely indifferent to such slogans, often referring to them as “empty words” (*hasła*). However, a distinction needs to be made: for those who lived through the socialist period, such empty words may bring to mind the “lies” (*klamstwa*) circulated by the socialist state in the past; by contrast, young people’s indifference to them seems to express a rejection of modernist and utopian political projects that has been recorded in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe (Greenberg 2014, 39–44). Yet this attitude did not mirror an inability (or reluctance) to create new meanings out of such slogans and to engage with propaganda and its language forms (Yurchak 2006).<sup>15</sup> For example, soon after the 2011 parliamentary elections that resulted in Civic Platform’s re-election, many of my respondents contested

the slogan “We are building Poland” by producing counter-slogans such as “We are destroying Poland” (*Rujnujemy Polskę*). Although this counter-slogan was not used in the anti-government demonstrations that I witnessed, people often deployed it in conversations I overheard and in blogs. The construction of a conceptual opposition between building and destroying is not accidental and should be understood in relation to another slogan circulated earlier: in 2010, Civic Platform’s candidate for presidential elections Bronisław Komorowski availed himself of the slogan “Unity builds” (*Zgoda buduje*), which is part of the popular Polish proverb “Unity builds, division destroys” (*Zgoda buduje, niezgoda rujnuje*). By creating their own slogan, then, those disillusioned with politics tried to convey the message that the Polish state and the governing party were not keeping their promises.

*Building* stirred up anger when it became clear that the optimism deriving from the flow of global capital and EU funding into Poland after its EU accession had to be taken with a pinch of salt. Popular anger reached its peak a few months before the beginning of Euro 2012, when the mayor of Gdańsk contemplated the idea of turning some landmarks associated with the history of Solidarność into heritage sites in order to make the shipyard more attractive to potential investors. One of these landmarks was Gate Two, where Solidarność movement’s leader (and then Polish president) Lech Wałęsa addressed the crowds during the labour unrest of 1980. After the collapse of the socialist state, it was adorned with national and religious symbols. The shipyard’s image as the symbolic terrain where Poles articulated their relationship to the Polish nation and national history (as a history of martyrdom) is indicated by the Polish flag and the vases of flowers that hang on the gate. The Vatican flag and pictures of John Paul II (the late Polish pope) and the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, in turn, highlight the connection between national identity and Roman Catholicism (Kubik 1994, 195).

In 1967, the shipyard was named after Lenin, and until 1990, it bore a dedication to him over Gate Two. In May 2012, the mayor, with the backing of municipal and regional conservators, pushed for the return of the Lenin dedication. Behind this initiative was the idea that restoring the original Cold War appearance of Gate Two would help turn the area into a protected heritage site. Moreover, the mayor stated that the initiative was also designed to make young people aware of the shipyard’s significance as the cradle of the revolution that had led to the demise of Lenin’s political project. Despite the mayor’s efforts to endow his plan with an aura of legitimacy, the initiative stirred up nationalist feelings among supporters of Law and Justice and members of

the Solidarność trade union, who fiercely opposed it (see *wybiezepske 2012*). A few days after the dedication had been reinstated, someone covered it with the logo of Solidarność, and over a hundred people staged an anti-government protest in front of the gate and threw eggs at photographs of Lenin and then prime minister Donald Tusk. In sum, although the conflicts that emerged were class-driven (Kalb 2009b), they became articulated as conflicts about identity (Ost 2005, 179), and the language workers used to make their concerns heard was not that of class but that of national or religious identity.

Soon after Euro 2012 had come to an end, Tusk announced on television that the country’s economic situation was about to worsen, and Poles woke up to the news that Poland was not immune to the crisis. Such developments had repercussions in Gdańsk, too, given that the project of the shipyard redevelopment had not yet attracted the hoped-for investments, which were conditional on the existence of a road linking the shipyard site to the city centre. As it turned out, the construction of the road would drain public funds that in the past had been allocated to social programs, and a barrage of complaints was aimed at the municipal council. Meanwhile, the Solidarność trade union proposed a referendum to recall the mayor, forming a “committee for the deposition of the mayor of Gdańsk.” It also produced several posters, plastered across the city – one of which depicted images of Lenin and the mayor being thrown into a large litter bin, bearing the heading “We do not want Il’ich and Adamowicz” (*Nie chcemy Ilicza i Adamowicza*).<sup>16</sup> Because of the fierce opposition encountered, the mayor decided to have the dedication removed, and the referendum was not held. Yet he did not stop the works he had already approved, and in the spring of 2013, the shipyard saw the beginning of the long-awaited road construction. While such works did not involve bulldozing existing dwellings, they generated much anxiety among the factory workers and their families living in the apartment blocks next to the shipyard, alerting them to the possibility that their houses might be targeted by investors for “renewal.”

As soon as construction commenced, some local cultural institutions organised a series of meetings with the families residing in the neighbourhood. Such meetings set out to provide explanations as to what the works would involve, and to reassure residents that construction works would not have any negative impact on the local community. Such explanations failed to convince most people I interviewed, evoking instead nationalist sentiments. Some interviewees seized the opportunity to criticise the mayor on the grounds that he only pursued the interests of the so-called developers’ mafia

(*mafia deweloperska*). But works commenced when the economic crisis began to bite Poland; therefore, while some residents were worried about the possibility of gentrification of the area, others expressed, instead, the concerns that such works would never come to completion and that the shipyard would remain a pile of rubble.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, some respondents commented that the promises of a better future made by the mayor and the Polish state (expressed by the “We are building Poland” slogan) were mere propaganda. As such, they could not be taken seriously. “It’s just like in Gierek’s time” (*Tak jak za Gierka*), said one of the residents, a retired industrial worker in his late sixties: “They will run out of money, and the construction of the road will never come to completion. Same as in the communist period.”

The man’s reference to Gierek’s era is not accidental. When Gierek came to power in 1970, he set out to modernise the Polish economy and improve the supply of food and consumer goods. As stated earlier, what enabled him to undertake this ambitious project was easy access to western credit and the import of technology from the West. Building, then, was central to both his rhetoric and his economic policies. However, the improved performance of the economy was only temporary; both mismanagement and unstable agricultural policies resulted in market imbalances that had disastrous effects in the late 1970s (Kubik 1994, 22–25). In this sense, the ambitious economic plans undertaken by the Civic Platform-led government three decades later were interpreted through the prism of recent Polish history. The reference to corruption (expressed by the concept of a *developers’ mafia*) is not accidental either, as it brings to mind the language of the anti-state resistance of the same era (Hann 2002, 11; Kalb 2009a, 210; Porter-Szűcs 2014, 355).

In the summer of 2014, the company in charge of the redevelopment undertook a project called Open Garden (*Otwarty Ogród*), which promoted backyard gardening and collective action among the families residing next to the shipyard. While the aim of the project was to encourage the local community to join forces and sow and plant herbs and vegetables in handmade boxes, its coordinators also organised several walking tours around the shipyard to engage residents in discussions about its legacies. Thus, whereas this initiative has the potential to promote an image of the shipyard as a desirable place to live, it may also promote a sense of solidarity. However, it also echoes hegemonic neoliberal discourses extolling the virtues of civil society and calling for its empowerment through various forms of engagement to solve its own problems with little or no cost to the downsized post-socialist state.

I joined one of the Open Garden project sessions a few weeks after it had been launched. This session

was meant to give residents a chance to get together on a Sunday and share the vegetarian food that they had cooked themselves. I arrived when the session was already in progress to find that the only people who had turned up were the organisers and a few close friends. When the session came to an end, I asked the university students in charge of the event about the extent of residents’ participation in such initiatives. One of these, a graduate student in urban planning, replied that even though several people had participated when the project had been launched, keeping their interest alive turned out to be more challenging than anticipated. One problem, she added, was their very limited interest in buildings dating back to the time when the city was under German rule – that is, buildings not deemed part of Polish history. The other problem was that most of those individuals who previously worked in the shipyard and subsequently lost their jobs were not eager to see their former workplace falling to pieces.

Paradoxically, while the Open Garden initiative was designed to build some form of solidarity among local residents, the construction of the road resulted instead in the demolition of several warehouses dating back to the late nineteenth century. Thus, by the time these works came to an end, most of the shipyard site was indeed reduced to a pile of rubble. The redevelopment project became the target of sharp criticism when it turned out that the new road had been built very close to historic housing blocks and that its construction was the execution of a plan conceived in the socialist era. When I attended the opening of the European Solidarity Centre on 31 August 2014, I found that the project was still an issue of heated debate. This became clear during the speech given by one of the distinguished guests, Bronisław Komorowski: he started with a reference to the shipyard as a special place with an extraordinary architecture; yet when he described it as the “gate to Polish freedom” (*brama ku polskiej wolności*), some of the Solidarność trade union members in attendance started chanting, “Cheaters, thieves!” (*Oszuści, złodzieje!*). It seems arguable, then, that “building Poland” over 20 years after the demise of socialism did not necessarily convey ideas of a break with the socialist past; if anything, the legacies of socialism form the background against which the post-socialist state is understood.

## Conclusion

On 24 May 2015, Law and Justice’s candidate Andrzej Duda was elected president of Poland, defeating Civic Platform’s candidate and incumbent president Bronisław Komorowski. He ran his campaign under the slogan “Hope” (*Nadzieja*), which, besides being a theological





Figure 1: Warsaw, August 2016: Banner in front of the prime minister's office

virtue, echoed the slogan used by Barack Obama in 2008 as a candidate for US presidency. A few months later, in October 2015, Duda's party won parliamentary elections by a large majority and ousted Civic Platform from power. Yet despite its promises, Law and Justice has so far set about dismantling many of Poland's democratic institutions and seizing control of the state media, judicial system and constitutional court, and its conservative agenda has aroused widespread discontent. When I revisited the capital city of Warsaw in the summer of 2016, I saw several banners in front of the prime minister's office displaying slogans such as "We have a dream" (in English) and "We, the people of Poland" (*My, naród Polski*) to express opposition to the government's proposal to amend the constitution (see Figures 1 and 2). Although these two slogans and Duda's were meant to convey different messages, they had one thing in common: they echoed American political slogans, which had migrated across borders.

Their temporal "migration" brings us back to the questions asked at the outset – namely, to what extent do neoliberal slogans revolve around common assumptions about the free market, and what kind of ideas do they mobilise among the people who were exposed to them? *Building*, in the form of reconstructions and redevelopments, is not new in Polish history: in a country that has been the theatre of conflict, these have been functional to the revitalisation of communities after a period of crisis; yet they have also served to rewrite local and national history. While building takes on a material dimension when it is associated with urban development, it also brings to mind images of social solidarity, epitomised by the idea of the construction of a new society. Yet the idea of building propagated by Civic Platform was not meant to evoke nostalgia for the socialist past, nor did it celebrate the achievements of communal labour, although it was clearly designed to create a sense of participation in Poland's history. If anything, because *building* in official



Figure 2: Warsaw, August 2016: Banner in front of the prime minister's office. It reads, "We, the people of Poland. All the citizens of the republic"

and popular discourses has long been associated with positive change, one of the messages encoded in the slogan in question was an exhortation to look to the future and leave the socialist period behind.

While the slogan "We are building Poland" was meant to draw a sharp line between the socialist era and the present, it could also appeal to the largest number of people by communicating with them in terms with which many are already familiar. Because the idea of building figured prominently in the rhetoric of the socialist state, the slogan was expected to achieve its appeal by allowing people to connect socialist forms of collective representation (but not ideology) to those of neoliberal capitalism. Thus, behind the slogan is also a vision of society within which the mechanism for mediating social relations is the market rather than the state. However, the meanings attached to these slogans at the local level were not necessarily those intended by the political establishment.

If anything, the temporal context of slogans mattered to their intended recipients: behind the idea of building, as it was conceived by the governing party, was a vision of history as progress and a conception of time as linear that was not altogether at odds with that championed by the socialist state. Building entails the beginning of a new era in the sense that epochs follow one another in a linear fashion. Implicit in this notion, then, is the idea that history does not repeat itself. However, as we have seen, these ended up mobilising different ideas about historical time: on the one hand, a notion of linear time that was advocated by the governing party, and on the other, a notion of repetitive time, or simply a sense of historical continuity between the socialist past and the present.

While the propagation of neoliberal values was high on the agenda of the post-socialist state after Poland's EU accession, appealing to the same values in the face of widespread inequalities would marginalise those unable

to achieve the prosperity promised by the neoliberal project. Because of the allegedly “inclusive” message that “We are building Poland” seems to encode, the slogan could achieve the appeal that explicit references to individualism could not. This inclusiveness brings to mind what Fife (2004, 63–64) has called “semantic slippage”: “the process by which an original artefact or sign justifies the authenticity of a ‘similar’ reproduction.” Slippage happens when what is deemed to be the “original” meaning of an object “largely collapses into the contemporary meaning of an object” (63–64). What made semantic slippage possible, in the case of the slogan in question, was the fact that the entity that created earlier versions (the socialist state) no longer exists.

The slogans whose content is vague are good examples of semantic slippage. They lend themselves to reinterpretation because they migrate across a wide range of domains such as those of politics, consumption and everyday life, for example. However, they are conceived in the centres of economic and political power and are often decontextualised from specific local contexts; as such, they are tethered to markers of universal human experience to foster a sense of shared values across gender, class and locality lines. It is arguable, then, that slogans have a temporal dimension and that they mobilise ideas about historical time. As such, they need to be understood in relation to the social and cultural contexts within which they are given meaning, and their neoliberal content may or may not matter to their intended recipients (or may not be understood). Because such slogans may be interpreted in ways that are at odds with the logic of neoliberal capitalism, then understanding their appeal (or lack thereof) entails understanding the declining significance of modernist political projects as metaphors for positive change.

**Jaro Stacul**, *Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC. E-mail: jstacul@uvic.ca.*

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## Notes

- 1 I draw on fieldwork carried out in the city of Gdańsk in several spells since 2008. I base my discussion on informal conversations, attendance of official events, examination of published and unpublished information and observation of different projects as they unfold.
- 2 The appropriation of political symbols and slogans for commercial purposes is a frequent occurrence in contemporary Poland. For example, while *Solidarność* (Solidarity) is the name of the mass social movement and trade union that contributed to the downfall of the socialist state, it also became the name of a brand of chocolates sold in most supermarkets throughout Poland. For an analysis of the commercialisation of Polish national symbols, see Zubrzycki (2011, 47–52).
- 3 The slogan forms part of the popular Polish proverb “Unity builds, division destroys” (*Zgoda buduje, niezgoda rujnuje*).
- 4 One of the best-known slogans is “The whole nation is building its capital city” (*Cały naród buduje swoją stolicę*), which can still be seen on a building of Warsaw’s main street. Moreover, slogans such as “Today we build tomorrow’s Poland” (*Jutra Polskę budujemy dziś*) still decorate the main entrance of abandoned state factories.
- 5 The socialist state produced countless posters with slogans conveying this idea. The following are some examples: “Come with us to build a new home – People’s Poland” (*Chodź! Razem z nami budować nowy dom – Polskę Ludową*); “We are rebuilding the country” (*Odbudujemy kraj*); “We work as a trio – We do the (building) work of twelve” (*Pracujemy w trójke. – Budujemy za 12-tu*); “United we build the strength and future of Poland” (*Zjednoczeni budujemy siłę i przyszłość Polski*). Additionally, “We are building socialism” (*Budujemy socjalizm*) was the title of a newspaper. On official propaganda in socialist Poland, see Bralczyk (1987), Głowiński (1993), Kuroń and Żakowski (1995) and (Zblewski 2000). For an analysis of “building” in Vietnam in the 1970s, see Schwenkel (2013).
- 6 Such works included, in particular, the Katowice Steelworks and Gdańsk’s Northern port.
- 7 *Solidarność* came into being through a dialogue between workers and intellectuals. However, as Kubik (1994, 232) notes, it “was a multistranded and complicated social entity from the beginning of its existence.”
- 8 Such slogans include, “We demand the truth in the press, radio and TV” (*Żądamy prawdy w prasie, radio i TV*); “TV lies!” (*TV kłamie!*); “The Polish United Workers’ Party lies” (*PZPR kłamie*); “Polish United Workers’ Party + TV news = falsehood” (*PZPR + DTV = fałsz*); and “(We have had) enough of the lies of TV” (*Dość kłamsTV*).
- 9 This was an explicit reference, *inter alia*, to the discrepancy between the image of Poland’s economic success that informed the propaganda of the state led by Edward Gierek in the 1970s and the actual economic situation. The salience of the conceptual opposition between *truth* and *falsehood* should be understood in a social and political context within which communism and Catholicism drew clear-cut lines between them (Porter-Szűcs 2014, 291).
- 10 It is important to make a distinction between *Solidarność* as a trade union and *Solidarność* as a political party. As a

party, it splintered into a number of political forces with a broad range of platforms, and some of these parties turned against the workers. However, as a trade union, Solidarność continues to represent the workers, although not in the way it did before the demise of socialism.

- 11 The slogan's appearance was very timely, for it coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of Solidarność as a trade union. As a consequence, both the anniversary and the upcoming works provided opportunities for the governing party to lay claim to the legacy of Solidarność.
- 12 I am grateful to Agata Bachórz for drawing my attention to the significance of *building* in local discourses.
- 13 For comparisons with Vietnam and Germany, see Schwenkel (2013, 257) and Weszkalnys (2010, 61–65).
- 14 For a comparison with Hungary, see Fehérváry (2013).
- 15 A distinction must be made between the slogans propagated by the socialist state and those to which Poles became exposed after 1989. While engaging with propaganda and its language was almost inevitable during socialism, given the state's monopoly over public discourse (Kubik 1994; Luehrmann 2011; Yurchak 2006), in a world saturated with slogans of different sorts, propagated by the old and the new media, the dismissal of certain slogans should not come as a surprise.
- 16 *Il'ich* refers to Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, and *Adamowicz* to Paweł Adamowicz, Gdańsk's mayor since 1998.
- 17 Such concerns derived from the awareness that many large-scale projects undertaken by the Polish state in preparation for Euro 2012, like the construction of major motorways, had not yet come to completion. For details about these unfinished projects, see Grzeszak (2012).

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