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# Memory and Politics of Memory in Terms of the Memes Theory. With Reference to an Example of the Idea of Polish Heroism

**Abstract:** The purpose of the article is to verify the hypothesis that the idea of Polish heroism constitutes an effectively duplicating and spreading meme, and stories of the past constructed in the framework of Polish politics of memory will be effective precisely when they refer to memes duplicated most often in the community. The article proves therefore that the Polish state politics of memory should be shaped on the basis of memes that replicate the most in Polish society, because only then does it have a chance to achieve its goals. What is more, this principle can also be applied to other countries that pursue a politics of memory. It was possible to obtain answers to the research questions raised in the text (in order to verify the hypotheses) due to the use of mutually complementary research methods: analysis of narrative structures and content analysis. The article presents the results of the author's own research with comments and conclusions.

**Keywords:** *memory, politics of memory, meme, memes theory, idea of Polish heroism*

## Introduction

Memetics, constituting one of the theories of cultural evolution<sup>1</sup>, is considered an inspiration for many scholars on phenomena occurring within society and its culture. Thus, it has become one of the ways to explain the complexity of social life and the processes of its transformation, often treated as the basis for reflection on the grounds of social sciences

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural evolution assumes that culture is transformed as a result of processes of cultural change, which leads to civilization development and the increase of human adaptability (Czarnocka, 2012, pp. 96–101; Daszkiewicz, 2015, pp. 69–84; Lejman, 2008, p. 239; Szymczak, 2008, pp. 225–238).

and humanities, as well as biology. Therefore, memetic theories have been treated in science many times as the basis for the explication of existing, emerging and changing in time social facts, among which there are phenomena such as: memory and politics of memory. The purpose of this article is to consider the issue of constructing the content of memory, as well as building the politics of memory by the state, in terms of the theory of memes. Importantly, the considerations in the text have been transferred to the Polish ground, referring the issue of memes to the problems of the memory of Polish society and the Polish politics of memory.

### **What Is the Meme and How Does it Work?**

Richard Dawkins is considered to be the precursor of memetic theory, who, in his book *The Selfish Gene*, 1976, referred to the culture replicators – units of imitation, or memes, among which he mentioned: melodies, ideas and colloquial phrases (see: Dawkins, 1996). The word *meme* was created in analogy to the word *gene* and as a reference to the following words: English *memory*, French *le même* (the same) and Greek *mimesis* (imitation). Simply, the meme can be defined as the smallest unit of cultural information transmitted by non-genetic means, in particular through imitation (Blackmore, 2002, p. 9; Wężowicz-Ziółkowska, 2018).

The above definition should be extended with considerations regarding the fact that there are two ways of memetic transmission: vertical (in which memes travel vertically through generations) and horizontal (in which memes propagate in parallel) (Blackmore, 2002, p. 10; comp. Łaszczyca, 2017, p. 21). The dissemination of memes in populations is observed on the basis of their phenotypic effects, and the memes that reproduce and spread fruitfully are considered successful (those, which fail at this attempt – lose) (Blackmore, 2002, pp. 9–32). Memes therefore have the characteristics of replicators – longevity, fecundity, reliability, as well as mutability. Longevity of memes is an important element due to the fact that the longer the form of the replicator persists, the more copies can be made from it; fecundity, in turn, increases the advantage of the meme over others (the more replicators are produced, the higher the lever of their domination). Reliability of the meme increases the probability that this meme will still resemble the original pattern despite being copied any number of times. Importantly, beside meme reliability, the mutability of the meme is also essential, though not very often, to allow for the work of different replicator variants (Dawkins, 1996, pp. 37–39; Łaszczyca, 2017, p. 19).

The replication capabilities of memes have prompted some scholars to accept that the meme consists in information that infects the mind like a virus (Brodie, 1997, p. 83). Glenn M. Grant referred to the concept that memes were perceived as viruses by writing: “What if ideas were viruses? Consider the T-phage virus. A T-phage cannot replicate itself; it reproduces by hijacking the DNA of a bacterium, forcing its host to make millions of copies of the phage. Similarly, an idea can parasitically infect your mind and alter your

behavior, causing you to want to tell your friends about the idea, thus exposing them to the idea-virus. Any idea which does this is called a «meme». [...]. Unlike a virus, which is encoded in DNA molecules, a meme is nothing more than a pattern of information, one that happens to have evolved a form which induces people to repeat that pattern. Typical memes include individual slogans, ideas, catch-phrases, melodies, icons, inventions, and fashions [...]. An idea or information pattern is not a meme until it causes someone to replicate it, to repeat it to someone else. All transmitted knowledge is memetic” (Grant, 1990; 2005, pp. 69, 73). It is worth noting that the definition provided, considering the major assumption that a non-replicated information pattern is not a meme – lists elements that can be considered as such. An attempt to set out detailed boundaries in the collection of memes was also undertaken by other authors, including Piotr Łaszczyca, who defined memes as: ideas, scientific laws, law, rules of social behavior, concepts, cultural creations (such as games, paintings and music), instructions, regulations, skills acquired through imitation or instruction, habits of behavior, acting and mime theater (Łaszczyca, 2017, pp. 17–18). Scientific theories, gossip, stories, anecdotes, habits or elements of the curriculum are also considered to be memes by other authors (Blackmore, 2002, pp. 30–31; Kaczmarzyk, 2018; Marszałek-Kawa, Plecka, 2018).

### **From Meme to Memory and Politics of Memory**

German Egyptologist Jan Assmann distinguished four areas of memory in his reflections regarding the subject. The first one was the *mimetic memory*, responsible for storing patterns of various types of actions and behaviors, intended for imitation in everyday life (its task should be to facilitate ordinary everyday existence). The second area was the *memory of things*, present in objects surrounding the person (which activate the hopes, plans and expectations of the individual towards the future, and recall memories to which they relate), the third – *communicative memory* based on the reports of direct witnesses of past events. According to Assmann, the fourth area of memory is *cultural memory*, expressing the attitude of a given community to the past. This memory, updated with the help of socio-cultural instruments developed by the community, arises when the communicative memory disappears (which happens with the death of an eyewitness of an event). The time period of cultural memory is thus constant (independent on the length of life of a human being), and this makes it possible to store the most important issues for the duration of the community in its area (Assmann, 2008, pp. 66–68; Rajewski, 2013, pp. 187–202; Ratke-Majewska, 2018, p. 352).

It should be noted that when considering the Assmann model in the context of ways of constructing memory, it can be concluded that the content of mimetic memory, memory of things and communicative memory is shaped both by the experience acquired by an individual and its participation in culture. Benefiting from the fourth area of memory, i.e., from cultural memory, should be perceived as an intra-cultural phenomenon. In other words,

the memory of the human individual is built in two ways: on the one hand, it can be created in accordance with individual experience, while on the other – it is a structure based on stories about the past that are present in the culture, in which the individual participates. These stories of the past are historical narratives, characterized by the fact that they reflect not so much the past itself, but rather its interpretations, understood as the images of bygone events functioning in the culture. The memory of past events – alongside experience – also creates stories. These stories include, among others, scientific and popular science works, media and journalistic messages, witness accounts, products of art, symbols, myths, as well as the content of the politics of memory. Meanwhile, the politics of memory is used by the state authorities to define the components of collective memory in order to protect the continuity of a community and to achieve benefits in the sphere of current politics (Maruszewski, 2001, pp. 79, 117–118; Ratke-Majewska, 2018, p. 350, 353; Schacter, 2003, p. 22; Szacka, 2006, pp. 44–45; Tokarz, 2005, pp. 4–11; Topolski, 1996).

Can it be claimed that human memory consists only of memes? This question was posed by many scholars analyzing memetics, especially with the assumption that everything that is not biology is a culture<sup>2</sup>. Deliberations on the meme concept from the perspective of the reflection on memory have led many authors to the conclusion that the meme is not so much a unit of cultural information, as it is a unit of memory. This, in turn, has inspired certain scholars to assume that every element of human memory is a meme; on the other hand, others have claimed that the meme is the only one which is subject to replication (Łaszczycza, 2017, pp. 11–42; Wężowicz-Ziółkowska, 2014, pp. 11–26). With regard to the above considerations, it should be noted – without resolving the above dispute – that interpreted stories about the past in the presented meaning (historical narratives) should be considered as memes (we can even assume that they are meme complexes – memplexes – built from memes such as, inter alia, ideas, rules or customs) (Blackmore, 2002, p. 17; Grant, 1990; 2005, pp. 73–74).

## **Memory and Politics of Memory in Terms of the Memes Theory – In Reference to the Case of Poland**

In order to raise a cognitive value of the reflections presented in the text, the theoretical considerations regarding the relation between meme, memory and politics of memory (built on the basis of historical narratives determined by the state authorities) have been clarified by reference to a specific case. In this way, this article refers to the case of Poland and one of the overriding goals of the text was an attempt to answer the question of how – in the approach of the memes theory – a state entity politics of memory should be created. This research problem is very broad; therefore, the assumptions of the presented considerations did not constitute a definitive answer to it but merely an attempt to resolve this issue on the

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<sup>2</sup> This perception of culture has found its established place in science (Linton, 1947; Malinowski, 1958).

basis of one example. The example is the idea of Polish heroism, understood in the meme category, as one of the units of cultural information transferred by an individual imitation that is relevant for the duration of the Polish national community (that is one of the elements which we want to remember as a nation and what we consider as the foundation of the nation's existence). Based on the discussion of this example, the hypothesis was verified that the idea of Polish heroism is a meme that is effectively duplicated and spread, which proves its effectiveness, while memes constituting any denial of it are doomed to fail. At the same time, stories of the past constructed in the framework of Polish politics of memory, which can be treated as memplexes, will be effective when they refer to memes duplicated in the community most often, including the meme of Polish heroism. The Polish state politics of memory should therefore be shaped on the basis of memes that replicate the most in Polish society, because then it has a chance to achieve its goals. And although this hypothesis, referring only to the case of one idea, is narrow, it can be extended to the statement that the state's politics of memory should be built upon the basis of memes that replicate in the community, regardless of reliable historical knowledge.

It was possible to obtain answers to the research questions, in order to verify the above-mentioned hypothesis, due to the use of mutually complementary research methods: an analysis of narrative structures (which allowed to identify the narratives of memory, to discover structures generating specific senses and functions that they performed), and content analysis (enabling the reading of goals and values carried by messages of public institutions, politicians, media and society). Their use gave the opportunity to examine state narrations of memory relating to the idea of Polish heroism, contents that have questioned Polish heroism, as well as their public perception. The research of the author focused on the materials of the Institute of National Remembrance (published on the Internet and presenting initiatives undertaken by this state institution as part of the Polish state's politics of memory), as well as the materials of individuals and private organizations (content posted on the Internet as a response to Polish politics of memory), including (both social and political) responses to cultural creations that touch upon the issue of Polish heroism.

The idea of Polish heroism can be read in the context of narratives referring to various kinds of thematic areas concerning the history of Poland. However, it is worth paying special attention to these stories about the past, which are related to the attitudes and actions of Poles during World War II and immediately after its end. This text therefore presents the analysis of historical narratives touching upon two threads: the behaviors of Poles towards the Jewish population during World War II and the Cursed Soldiers.

The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation is the main institution creating and popularizing the state's official narrative about the relations of Poles and Jews in the years 1939–1945. The basic element of this historical narrative is to underline and commemorate the contribution of Polish citizens in saving the Jewish population. A great emphasis is placed on individual stories about those Poles who, despite the danger to their own and their family's life, hid and protected

Jews during World War II. Initiatives undertaken by the Institute of National Remembrance related to the popularization of the narrative's direction adopted in this area comprise the following activities: promotion of publications, projects realized as part of the educational sphere (methodical courses, educational portfolios), commercial spots, film productions (such as the documentary: *Paszporty Paragwaju* – Eng. *Passports of Paraguay*), meetings, scientific conferences, competitions, exhibitions, as well as dissemination of information on the celebration of the Polish National Day of Remembrance of Poles Rescuing Jews under German Occupation (public holiday celebrated on March 24 since 2018) (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2018; 2019a; 2019b; n.d.).

In the mainstream of the Polish memory, stories of heroic and even epic acts include narrations concerning the relations between the Polish and Jewish populations during the war (what is essential – despite the fact that after 2016 more emphasis was placed on their promotion – they were present in the Polish politics of memory much earlier) (see among others: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2010; 2015; „*Życie...*”, 2009). In turn, raising the threads that contradicted these heroic attitudes has often aroused controversy, reluctance or strong opposition. It is worth paying attention to the issue of the massacre in Jedwabne on July 10, 1941. The event has divided the world of science, as well as the political scene and society. The release of the book *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* by Jan T. Gross in 2000 has also made a major contribution to the increase of interest. This publication triggered a sharp public debate, which was followed a year later by the appearance of the book *100 kłamstw J. T. Grossa o żydowskich sąsiadach i Jedwabnem* (Eng. *100 lies of J. T. Gross about Jewish neighbors and Jedwabne*) by Jerzy Robert Nowak, whose theses sharpened the tone of ongoing discussions in the Polish society (*Opinia...*, 2003). On September 5, 2000, an investigation over the massacre in Jedwabne was initiated by the Institute of National Remembrance (it was started as the first proceeding of the Branch Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Białystok). On June 30, 2003, the investigation was discontinued. As a result of investigative activities, the probable course of events on the day of the massacre was established, assuming that the crime in Jedwabne (committed against not less than 340 citizens of Polish citizens of Jewish nationality) was made by a group of several dozen of Poles acting as a result of German inspiration in the sense of German consent and full impunity (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2003; Machcewicz, Persak, 2002). Moreover, on July 10, 2001, during the commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre, the President of the Republic of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, officially apologized for the massacre in Jedwabne on behalf of himself and “those Poles whose conscience is touched by that crime.” This act was criticized by some political spheres, and discussions about accepting (or lacking) responsibility for the massacre committed under occupation lasted in the following years. Opinions, formed on basis of repeated debates (for example in connection with such film productions as *Pokłosie* – Eng. *Aftermath* – by Władysław Pasikowski in 2012) were creating extremely different attitudes in Polish society – from agitation, regret and remorse to postulates to end the “politics of

shame”. For some people, forgetfulness of the massacre, for others getting rid of guilt, were supposed to be the remedy for shame. What is important, from time to time there were also voices expressing the need to review the adopted arrangements on that crime and to resume the investigation, which could clear the honor of the Polish society (Babińska, Bilewicz, Bulska, Haska, Winiewski, 2018; Czuchnowski, 2016; *Jedwabne...*, 2016; Sułek, 2011, pp. 39–49; Wilk, 2018).

The Institute of National Remembrance – as an institution reflecting the directions of the Polish state politics of memory – also carries out narratives referring to the second of the threads indicated in the text – that is, the Cursed Soldiers. It is a name given to the soldiers of the Polish postwar independence and anti-communist underground. The activities of the Institute of National Remembrance related to their commemoration, which are aimed at maintaining and consolidating the tone of historical narrative based on emphasizing and honoring the members of post-war organizations and underground groups, their unwavering patriotic attitude and attachment to independence traditions, have become very diverse and developed. Those included the following initiatives: promoting the celebration of the National Day of Remembrance of the Cursed Soldiers (celebrated on March 1, pursuant to the Act passed by the Sejm on February 3, 2011), dissemination of studies and materials on the institution’s official website and educational portal, promotion of publications, commercial spots and film productions, as well as meetings, competitions, conferences and exhibitions (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2011; 2017; 2019c; Pamięć.pl – educational portal of IPN, n.d.). However, similar to the issue of the massacre in Jedwabne, the topic of Cursed Soldiers has divided society, provoking disputes in both scientific and political spheres at the same time. The commemoration of controversial, heterogeneously evaluated characters, whose conduct evoked extremely contradictory assessments became a problem. However, while in the public discourse there were, from time to time, questions about whether to commemorate ambiguous characters (Dybic, 2014; 2016; Konarski, 2012; Krajewski, Wąsowski, 2015; Moroz, 2016; Rokicki, 2015), it seems that an opinion about the need to pay tribute to all the Cursed Soldiers, which does not question the validity of their actions, began to win in social perception. It was possible to make such conclusions, due to the analysis (made by the author of this article) of Polish patriotic accounts on Facebook. There are several hundreds of such accounts on this website, most of which have been created over the last few years (especially after 2012), and moreover – they enjoy popularity from several to several hundred thousand people (based on the numbers of followers or likes). One of the guiding themes chosen by users is Polish heroes, among whom the Cursed Soldiers occupy the leading position. However, the commemoration of members of the Polish post-war independence and anti-communist underground, does not take the form of a discussion of their attitudes or behaviors, regardless of the described figure. The memory of the Cursed Soldiers (maintained by accounts on Facebook, defining themselves as patriotic) is therefore a tribute focusing in particular on slogans, maxims, symbols and influencing emotions

through image, without aspiration not only to incite historical polemics, but also to stimulate a deeper reflection on the past<sup>3</sup>.

## Conclusions

An example of the idea of Polish heroism (considered in the meme category), analyzed in the context of two events that may undermine it (but to some extent), brings closer a positive verification of the hypothesis that the state's politics of memory should be built upon the basis of memes that are most often reproduced in the community. In this way, the effectively propagating and spreading meme of Polish heroism has a greater chance of prejudging the success of the state narratives of memory than other memes, negative to it. Stories that negate Polish heroism, although they do not die in existing historical narratives, are not able to achieve an advantage in society. They arouse discussions and give rise to contradictory opinions, but they do not obscure those narratives which confirm this heroism. What is more, they are often rejected as doubtful. Therefore, the considerations carried out have allowed to prove initially that in the confrontation of the Polish heroism meme with reliable historical knowledge, members of Polish society are, in a significant part, inclined to raise the postulates of revising the accepted picture of the past, or relativizing known facts, rather than abandoning ideas which they perceive as important.

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<sup>3</sup> The research discussed by the author was carried out at the turn of 2017/2018, the results obtained were verified and updated at the beginning of 2019. Among the analyzed websites, there were: I'm proud to be Polish (Pol. Jestem dumny, że jestem Polakiem); Lechistan of Patriots (Pol. Lechistan Patriotów); Patriotic education (Pol. Wychowanie patriotyczne); Patriotic Poland (Pol. Patriotyczna Polska); PATRIOTISM (Pol. PATRIOTYZM); Patriotism is in Poles (Pol. Patriotyzm jest w polakach); Patriots. Out of concern for my Homeland! (Pol. Patriotci. Z troski o Ojczyznę!); Poland for the True Patriots (Pol. Polska dla Prawdziwych Patriotów); Young Patriots (Pol. Młodzi Patriotci) (names of websites in Polish are written in accordance with the source spelling).



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