

Izabela Kopania

The Flaws in Normality

Normality

Seemingly there are no problems with normality. It appears to be obvious and easy to define. A vast majority of contemporary dictionaries and popular encyclopedias describe normality as the condition of being regular, functioning according to generally accepted standards or the state of being mentally and physically healthy. Nevertheless, giving it a little more thought will surely provoke numerous questions and raise further doubt, starting from an attempt to determine the limits of normality as well as what it really is and what being normal actually means. Leaving aside the fact that there are different indicators of normality in different cultural circles, which proves the relativity of the notion, we will find that creating the substantial definition of normality is in fact impossible. “Normal” is the term used to describe (indeed with little precision) someone whose behaviour, status, health and social condition do not deviate significantly from the average. As a side note, it is worth pointing out the paradox of this definition. A similar line of reasoning, namely perceiving social behaviours which occur frequently as normal, once allowed the French sociologist Emile Durkheim to acknowledge crimes as normal acts for they are observed in all societies.¹

A state of normality just like a state of health is a purely theoretical model. As a matter of fact both norm and normality are terms, which have been deep-rooted in medical discourse, especially in psychiatry and the related clinical psychology. Medicalisation of these terms occurred in the early nineteenth century. However, the key term for contemporary physicians was not so much *norm* as the deviation from the norm – *pathology*. François-Joseph-Victor Broussais, the French physician and professor of general pathology, introduced it into the medical terminology on a large scale and Auguste Comte, the French philosopher, applied it in his studies on society. Normality on one hand and pathology, aberration and degeneration on the other were placed on opposite ends of the pole. Pathology, aberration and degeneration became a reflection of normality, a symmetrical phenomenon and an element of a conceptual apparatus used for creating its definition. For it is much easier to define normality through a set of negative terms and formulas indicating a spectrum of phenomena existing out of its realm. As such it appears to be a phenomenon of postulational nature and striving after normality is in fact striving after a desired state which, on an imaginary level, reveals traits of a utopia.

The notion of normality adapted for the needs of the project “The oxymoron of normality” serves as a key to an insight into the condition and social realities of two countries situated on the eastern edges of Europe. The project includes works that investigate social problems resulting from economic and cultural policy of Poland and Turkey but also pieces whose authors focus on studying

¹ E. Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, ed. by S. Lukas, New York 2013, s. 50–100 (Polish edition: *Zasady metody socjologicznej*, Warszawa 1968).

fundamental issues like evil, national myths or individual and collective identity. The phrase “oxymoron of normality” adopted as the title of the exhibition alludes to the title of the text by the Bulgarian historian Alexander Kiossev. The phrase itself is a collocational, grammatical and, above all, semantic aberration. This linguistic formation does not in fact mean anything. It does not bear a coherent message. The essence of an oxymoron, a figure of speech composed of contradictory terms, is best represented by its Greek etymology: *oxys* (sharp, pointed) and *moros* (dull, foolish). Based on the principle of a semantic contradiction, an oxymoron is closely related to a paradox, whose nature is contradictory not only semantically but also logically.² Attention has been brought to its cognitive function many times, which has been considered to support the bringing out of complicated meanings, exposing hidden content as well as revealing the dialectical complexity of states and phenomena.³ Redefining the original meaning of the words constituting an oxymoron results in the decrease in the power of its internal contradiction and enables a new value to be brought out from the semantics of such a combination. Speaking of an oxymoron or the oxymora of normality in the context of the exhibition, we examine the phenomena, which fester and aggravate this purely postulational state of homeostasis.

Normality between East and West

As indicated by Kiossev, “normality” had always been a key word in the political discourse in former Communist Bloc countries at the time when their fate was being played out.⁴ This is when the wishful nature of this state fully revealed itself – the desired condition, different from the current one, yet defined imprecisely. This fluidity of understanding the new normality is expressed well by the comparison to the clearly stated regulations imposed on a society functioning in the reality of regime. Having examined normality in socialist countries, Dana Koleva defines it as the common ground where norms imposed by ideology meet those springing from the practice of social life.⁵ This kind of “normality” lacks alternatives; centralised government does not find a counterbalance in a democratic society, instead it spreads the control over individuals and defines their needs and possibilities. The margin of tolerable anomalies is narrow and the project itself is likely to be realised only due to the individuals approving of social roles tailored for them. Returning to normality as postulated in the times of revolutions meant adopting new social functions (or going back to the old ones whose continuity had been interrupted by years of subjugation), reorganising institutional life anew and restoring the “normal” state. These demands were accompanied by the symmetrical watchword: the

² L. Banowska, *Paradoks poetycki i formy pokrewne jako tworzywo literackie*, “Pamiętnik literacki”, XCII, 2001, issue 2, p. 169–171.

³ W. Chlebda, *Oksymoron versus oksymoron*, “Przegląd humanistyczny”, 1984, no. 4, p. 131–139.

⁴ A. Kiossev, *The Oxymoron of Normality*, text here: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-04-kiossev-en.html> (accessed: 15.05.2014)

⁵ D. Koleva, *Socialist Normality: Euphemization of Power or Profanation of Power?*, in: *Negotiating Normality: Everyday Lives in Socialist Institutions*, ed. by D. Koleva, New Jersey 2012, p. XIV.

return to Europe.⁶ And so normality had its model – the western neighbour separated from the Eastern bloc by the Iron Curtain. The perception of normality in Eastern Europe was obviously conditioned by the social anxiety, the chaos in public administration as well as the instability of both collective and individual identity. The anticipated state of normality was imaginary and symbolic and had its basis in ideas of freedom, truth and justice, which were slightly naïve. As Kiossev noticed in his discourse, entering normality, which for many countries from the former Eastern bloc meant joining the European Union in the process, led in fact to a situation where the preconceptions about Europe / normality met head-on with the reality of the European social and economic policy.

The vision of normality identified with the Old Continent has been present in both Polish and Turkish experience. For Poles it first meant longing for what was behind the Iron Curtain, then access to the EU and finally the attempts to find Polish identity in the context of the Old Europe's economic, civilisational and cultural achievements. Political debates on Turkish EU access are still relevant and the episodes of searching frames of reference in Western Europe had taken place in Turkey much earlier. Orhan Pamuk tackles this subject in a very suggestive way in one of his essays. He describes Europe as an imaginary territory: something to aim for; a model of life on the one hand and a threat on the other.⁷

Normality, Policies, Metaphor

The political East-West axis is one of the key notions considered when discussing the identity of Polish society after joining the European Union. Symbolically marked geographical notions are connected with a number of relatively stable stereotypes. In relation to these stereotypes, auto-stereotypes are created by Polish people and the conventional image of Poles is constructed by societies of other countries. The aforementioned Kiossev used the East-West opposition as a starting point for defining the condition of the post-communist countries. The Bulgarian historian called them *self-colonising cultures*.⁸

Postcolonial research methods have become one of the instruments used to describe Polish social reality, as well as the cultural statements arising within its boundaries.⁹ This discourse – revealing the roots of aberrations, hidden in literature, theatre or visual arts, that shape the condition of

⁶ A. Kiossev, *The Oxymoron of Normality...*

⁷ O. Pamuk, *Where is Europe?* in: idem, *Other Colours. Writings on Life, Art, Books and Cities*, London 2007, p. 189–192 (Polish edition: *Inne kolory*, Kraków 2012).

⁸ A. Kiossev, *Notes on the Self-Colonising Cultures*, text available here: http://www.kultura.bg/media/my_html/biblioteka/bgvntgrd/e_ak.htm (accessed: 15.05.2014); idem, *The Self-Colonizing Metaphor*, text can be found here: <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html> (accessed: 15.05.2014).

⁹ See: A. Chmielewska, *Czy i jak możemy korzystać z badań postkolonialnych?*, in: *Perspektywa (post)kolonialna w kulturze*, ed. by E. Partyga, J.M. Sosnowska, T. Zadrozny, Warszawa 2012, p. 15–27. Basic literature can be found there.

contemporary society – is used by **Jadwiga Sawicka**. In the installation *Maria Janion* (2014) she refers to the work of a literary scholar, an emblematic figure on the Polish ground for these types of studies, who for the purpose of the analysis of the romantic ideas adopted the thesis developed by Edward Said for the studies of European Orientalism. Janion's writings belong to a canonical treatises dealing with national myths, mentality, and collective feeling of superiority and inferiority. In *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* [Uncanny Slavdom] (2006) the researcher wrote directly about a common tendency for Poles to feel inferior to the West, about their sensation of inability to overcome their own deficiencies whilst despising everything that is Eastern and a paradoxical sense of moral superiority over the decayed West. Janion sees the sources of split identity and national complexes in the constant negation and displacement of Slavic heritage, and an internalised need to strive to Old Europe. Examining, from the perspective of considerations of normality, the fundamental issue of the position of Poland on an attitudinal map of Europe, Sawicka referred to another Janion's work – a collection of essays *Do Europy: tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi* [To Europe: Yes, but Together with our Dead] (2000). In that work, published before the accession of Poland to EU, the researcher wrote about the necessity of going through the past (romantic messianism or the Polish-Jewish relationships) and accepting the eastern origins – as an inevitable condition for building an integrated identity that is the guarantor of a stable functioning in new reality. The artist selected the key quotes from Janion's book, fragments of analysis containing social diagnoses, which she included in the range of books-objects created by herself. They are accompanied with collages made of grey photographs of grungy and shabby walls, and taken out of context, printed on a characteristic flesh-coloured background, precise expressions from the researcher's essays. Statements and symbols depicting the mood of the street life, together with expressive announcements (“life is somewhere else”, “The nation and the country”, “nobody will love us anymore”), become here the sign of an undervalued community, marked by the past and excluded.

The condition of the aforementioned group is also presented by the installation of **Konrad Smoleński**, in a more symbolic, and less historical and contextualised way. *Volume Unit* (2014) is a makeshift construction built from sound signal gauges mounted to a stand. Electricity is sent to the gauges by means of four channels which are connected and disconnected by electrical drivers in due time. Meters register a whole spectrum of voltages, different levels of load. The indicator exceeds the scale when the voltage is too high, when it is low it goes down to zero, and there are plenty of compromises between the two extremes, voltage separation on several gauges, taking the power over by the combined devices. In an unstable community in regard to its identity the states of extreme depression change into quivering obsession, and externally stimulated intermediate stages that are within the limits of what is normal, constitute a social, economic and political condition on which a group functions.

Sawicka's and Smoleński's works define polar opposites when it comes to the subject of normality: political, strongly placed in reality and the sphere of symbolical tension of two countries

located on the edges of politically perceived Europe, and metaphysical, referring to universal issues, frequently hidden under the surface of social and historical context.

Normality of Self-Colonising Cultures

Created for the needs of the project, the map of phenomena regarded as aberrations, consisting a negative definition of normality, arose mainly from observations of social behaviour, professed values, stereotypes and self-stereotypes present in the collective imagination. The question of the element of the heritage being beyond the mainstream of culture, the problem of religiousness and patriotism, regarded as constitutive feature of Polish identity, the issue of the collective taste of Poles as well as the place of culture in the policy of the country – became a starting point to expose the appearance of normality.

The processes of forgetting and denying realised on many grounds, along with inevitable consequences of cultural and economic transformations are presented in the video *A Study of Memory* (2014) by **Franciszek Orłowski**, made in The Museum of the Village in Białystok. Workers from a professional cleaning company were taken into of the cottages and using modern equipment, which was in contrast with the archaic household furnishings, they cleaned the inside. The gesture of tidying up consecutive chambers has a double meaning. On one hand dusting is tantamount to a typical for postmodern purification of space, and at the same time it tears other layers of meanings, traces of life of the objects, their biography growing almost independently from ongoing human life. On the other hand – mechanical cleaning of folk culture can be interpreted as throwing its authenticity on the scrapheap, closing it in disregarded ethnographic museums, taking only these elements from its oeuvre that after reinterpretation match the modern, usually pop cultural vision. An important element of the legacy, or what is more, as once considered the roots of Polish culture share a lot with other elements of the heritage, giving space to the overcoming global values.

Sealed reports (2014) by Can Altay can also be perceived in similar categories. In this context *Lotus flower pedestal databent with 'The Meaning of Vietnam' by Chomsky* is special. The photograph presenting the plinth in the shape of a lotus flower in the temple, in the Vietnamese Culture Centre “Thang Long” was made by Altay during his stay in Warsaw (2010). The Centre together with the temple were destroyed soon after, due to the organisation of Euro 2012 and the construction of the National Stadium. The photograph shows the moment just before the demolition of the building, after the Vietnamese removed the figure of a Buddhist goddess from the plinth. This picture, being evidence of the influence of an intense revitalisation of squalid parts of the town on the Vietnamese community, was almost imperceptibly processed by digitally adding Chomsky’s (1975) text, referring to the policy of the United States towards South-East Asia. In Altay’s shot local is defeated by global, minority by majority, Vietnamese spiritual oasis gives in to the pressure of economy and prestige, which are within the notion of western standards.

The object of **Franciszek Orłowski** (2006) – bearing the words said by John Paul II during his pilgrimage to Poland in 1979 – is not only a result of indirect deliberations on the aspects of stereotypical Polish religiousness, but a commentary on the presence of spiritual elements in society. The often-cited fragment of this homily: Let your Spirit descend! Let your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth. This land!, having both the spiritual meaning – a call for revival – and political (because of the political system in Poland at that time), was embossed on a new tyre tread. The way that Orłowski used such a symbolical sentence for Poles, allows for an interpretation in two categories, that is religious spirituality, but also secular. Words themselves along with the artist's gestures reveal the values dominating in society, the values related to the material sphere of life, the well-being regarded as luxurious goods and lush consumption.

The issue of faith and religion is presented from a different perspective by **Piotr Wysocki** in his multimedia sculpture *The Cross* (2011). This is related to the cross which was spontaneously set on Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw during the time of mourning for the victims of the Polish plane crash with the national delegation to Smolensk. Video material shown on 14 screens was recorded by the artist and Mieczysław Zieliński, an amateur film maker, patriot and former scout, who has been documenting Masses and national celebrations. The shots of collective contemplation and grief immediately after the crash intertwine with the frames from the funeral of the presidential couple, and also with subsequent events i.e. “the fight for the cross”. Simultaneous projections constitute a cross section of social attitudes and moods: ranging from people focused on the prayer and scouts with flags to fanatics blinded by ideology; from religious and secular dignity to baleful nationalistic rhetoric, extreme Catholicism, anti-government, anti-Semitic and anti-Russian slogans. All the fragments recorded after the plane crash reveal the entanglement of society in fanaticism, politics and misunderstood patriotism. The latter became the subject of ironic deliberations of **Oskar Dawicki**. The work *This is not a flag* (2014) presenting the corner of a room with white walls and the floor covered with a red carpet, with a human silhouette shaped underneath, can be treated literally as the expression of being overwhelmed by national rhetoric, both verbally and visually. White and red fill the entire space, the sense of emptiness is smoothed out by the excess of symbolism. Both national symbols and the word patriotism itself appear quite often in the context of state events and political discussion, therefore they become trivialized and deprived of their initial meanings and values.

The series of photographs *Happiness* (2008) by Marek Wasilewski refers to consumption models in a new, post-revolutionary reality. Economic changes, particularly the ones related to the goods and service market, constituted the driving force behind the transformations in the sphere of private life. Unknown to the communistic society the possibility of choosing among different patterns and materials allowed for an individual expression, not regulated or manipulated by the state-controlled economy. Wasilewski's project shows the fiasco of this perspective. The ideas of Poles regarding happiness and well-being, which are materialised by a detached house, seem to be similar. Constructions built are usually realised according to catalogues, standard architectural designs.

Individual expression is subordinated to a collective taste, and creating one's own image, despite the potential liberated by the power of imagination, has never been so hindered by the need to follow popular trends.

Freelancer (2013), a photographic self-portrait of Zbigniew Libera as a social exile has an allegoric dimension, and the main character of the triptych – a man, living wild and captured by a railway worker – is a figure of the artist placed in the legislative and socio-economic reality of contemporary Poland. Libera's work which shapes the image of the author as both a freelancer and outcast, ironically referring to the autonomy of freelancers, is in fact a question about the place of art in the reality of a still developing country that aspires to be in Europe. The answer is in absolute terms pessimistic – according to governmental priorities culture loses with the economy, and the artists fall into the trap of freedom at the same time broadening the circle of people who are excluded by the regulations of social life. Libera has paid attention to the material status of artists multiple times, such as during the event A Day without Art – a Poland-wide strike by artists (2012).

Encounters with the *Other*

In the process of shaping the picture of normality that emerges from the exhibition, an important space is given to deliberations about the *other* – next to the aforementioned observations of own society or remarks made about it from the distance perspective. *The others* are both the strangers coming from the outside, pervading the culture, unwanted and omitted, whose presence is strongly perceptible – and also the neighbours that have been placed in the cultural landscape for ages. The video *Foxes* (2005) by **Can Altay** deals with the experience of the contact with the *other*. The artist builds a metaphorical picture of observation, cognition and gradual closeness to the otherness and the attempts to domesticate it. Both the observers and the observed take a defined attitude towards each other, they negotiate the space and the rules of the meeting, at the same time preserving their autonomy.

Diptych by **Ali Taptik** refers to much earlier, than the current negotiations with the EU, encounters with Europe. The artist brings back the years of the authoritarian regime of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1923–1938), and his aggressive politics of modernization and Europeanization of the Ottoman Empire, on the legislative, social and economic level, but also on cultural plane. Diptych *Trans-Kript* (2012) consists of a photography of the monument that outlines the borders of a military exercise area, with a poem curved in stone, written in the Ottoman alphabet in the honour of an infantry rifleman, and a printout of the transcription of this text into modern Turkish. There is an inscription “Down with fascism” both on the monument and on the printout, respectively in Turkish and Arabic script that is used to write down the Ottoman language. Taptik brings back *Dil Devrimi* – a radical reform of the language and the Ottoman alphabet conducted rapidly in 1928 that is crucial for the culture of the ancient Empire. The language was cleared out from Arabic and Persian influences, which were replaced by Turkish equivalents, archaic Old Turkish or borrowed from European

languages; Latin script supplemented with Turkish diacritical marks was adopted for writing. The process of Europeanization conducted by Atatürk in Turkey is treated by the artist as cultural discontinuity between the traditions of the Old Empire and modern Turkey. One of the results of *Dil Devrimi* is the silence of the history, being the result of the impossibility of deciphering the archival resources, written before. This causes the lack of continuity between the past and the present experiences.

Fatma Bucak and Hera Büyüktaşçıyan concentrate on the religious identity and political tensions which are now present in Turkey. In a meditational, being almost a ritual performance *Blessed are you who come - Conversation on the Turkish-Armenian border* (2012) by **Fatma Bucak**, she tests, so essential for Turkish traditional society, relationships coming from the gender hierarchy and ethnic differences. The identity of the artist is important here, for the way she talks about a varied society – she is a woman born in a Kurdish family, whose members had a strongly critical attitude towards the politics of the country.

Against the background of a ruined church, Bucak wearing a black dress is breaking the bread and giving it to twelve elderly men. The participants of the performance are clearly confused, their somehow forced neglecting poses along with a clear undermining of the sense of the whole event clearly demonstrate the attempt to define the situation. Bucak arranged the meeting on a difficult ground, for various reasons: in a Turkish border village, which used to be the residence of Armenians, the place where Christian Europe meets Muslim Middle East, a thought-provoking place to think about the Turkish-Armenian conflict from the 20's in the last century, and the massacre of Armenians during the First World War. The artist builds a situation of alienation, where artificial, geopolitical divisions are not so obvious any more.

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan refers to the functioning of the minority communities within Turkish society. *Panarchy* (2012) is built from massively produced Fabergé eggs, which are close shut and blocked by a stone inserted into. In the initial, the fullest version of the installation it was composed of 1500 objects, which gave it a symbolical meaning: 1500 is the number of Greek minority living in Turkey.¹⁰ The title of this work, associated with its significance constitute a figure that is close to paradox. The term panarchy refers to a utopian state system, where all forms of governments coexist and the systems of values, needs and beliefs are legitimate. This radical socio-political model is based on affirmatively perceived diversity, extreme compromise whose basis is an unconditional acceptance of the otherness. Fabergé eggs blocked with stone bring back to mind authoritarian and totalitarian systems that only guaranteed the freedom of speech to the dominant group, whose policy towards the minority was based on xenophobia. In a popular culture Fabergé eggs are used to keep nick-nacks, which have a personal or sentimental value. Half open, with a stone inside they remain silent – the oppressed history and tradition of the expelled are quietened by the authorities.

¹⁰ Data concerning the number of Greek diaspora in Turkey come from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate.

In the project realised in Istanbul *In the same city, under the same sky...* (2013/2014) **Anna Konik** gives the chance to speak to illegal immigrants from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. However, they do not speak directly – Turkish women speak on behalf of them, as full citizens of their country. The fate of the immigrants is similar – escape track, in case of these Afghan women it was forced by the Taliban persecution, led through Pakistan, Iran and really difficult mountain passes full of police stations, without water and food. The life of almost each of them was influenced by politics and the rules of a traditional society regarding getting young women married. In Turkey, they found refuge from the war but they have to deal with the problems of illegal refugees, the consequences of their unregulated legal status, no chance of finding a good job or the lack of possibility of sending children to school. Their fate is the fate of social alienation, the life in confinement and dominating solitude. The memory of Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria is full of war, death and insecurity concerning the fate of their relatives. The thread of normal life is present in their narrations – the desirable and at the same time so inconceivably distant condition. Konik's work deals with a growing wall of strangeness, the ghettoization of immigrants taking place both in Europe and Turkey. The character of the exiled *other* described by anthropologists and sociologists in the video becomes exceptionally realistic.

The Legacy of Romanticism

The debate about the romanticism brought back by Jadwiga Sawicka through the personality of Maria Janion and her work is back in **Hubert Czerepok's** work, where it is devoid of a strong commentary on Polish present situation, therefore it gets a universal dimension. In *Lux Aeterna* (2011) the artist brings back the fragments of writings by mad reformers – Thomas Jefferson, Adolf Hitler, the assassin Ted Kaczyński and Anders Breivik¹¹ – who crossed the borders of unimaginable evil in their enthusiastic plans concerning the reform of the world. Their postulates and manifestos, being the echo of great romantic ideas, allow Czerepok to show the perverse nature of 19th century cultural legacy. Artist's deliberations bring closer two characters, whose biography is surprisingly similar: the extremist Breivik, who assassinated several dozen of people on Utøya, and Kordian the romantic character from the drama by Juliusz Słowacki. Both of them experienced an internal metamorphosis, at the same time declaring the need of active battle. The juxtaposition of two distant characters and events, reality and fiction reveal the madness rooted in seemingly no-nonsense attitudes and manifestos. Rational madness here is another part of oxymoronical nature of reality and human fanaticism hidden under the surface of normality.

¹¹ Respectively: *Letter to William Stephenson Smith* (1787), *Mein Kampf* (1925–27), *The Free Information Society* (1995), 2083 – *A European Declaration of Independence* (2011).