

## **Alternatives to Nationalist Education: Lessons From Poland**

**Article by Anna Dzierzgowska**

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After almost a decade of national-conservative rule in Poland, the country's school system is increasingly oriented towards preserving an antiquated view of the past rather than empowering students with the tools for critical thinking. Anna Dzierzgowska, a teacher working in both state and non-state schools in Warsaw, explains how the roots of the problem can be traced even further back than the reforms introduced by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) and makes the case for a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of history.

### **Green European Journal: How would you describe the approach of the PiS government to education and school policy since it came to power in 2015?**

**Anna Dzierzgowska:** Before I answer this question, I need to clarify the position from which I'm speaking. For most of my professional life, I taught history in the non-state school system; at present I work in both the social and the public education sectors. I also have a family background in teaching as the daughter of one of those responsible for the educational reforms brought in by the centre-right coalition government [now in opposition] from 1997.

Among other changes, these reforms resulted in the creation of gymnasia, a middle tier between primary and post-16 education. Data from studies such as PISA showed that their creation led to improved educational outcomes, while also reducing the gap in the quality of education between cities and the countryside. After initial problems due to the fact that these schools were for pupils at a particularly difficult age, many teachers developed a certain fondness for teaching in them.

I started with this aspect of the Polish education system for a reason. One of the key PiS electoral promises was to abolish gymnasia and return to the old system of eight years of primary school and four of secondary education instead of the "6+3+3" format. Restoring the school system of the past was a way to appeal to the specific conservatism of their voters. I didn't believe they would do it, but they did. Chaos ensued. Secondary schools got more pupils but not more teachers, increasing numbers of whom left teaching for other professions.

### **PiS made major changes to the curriculum in 2017 to promote a certain understanding of Poland's national story. What were this reform's goals? Who and what is included, and what is obscured from this telling of Polish history?**

History is at the vanguard of this conservative counter-revolution, but then it has always been conceived of in a nation-centric manner in Poland. The political role of history always

trumped its social or economic aspects. Now this trend has been turbo-charged, to the point that I am thinking of leaving teaching altogether.

The changes introduced by PiS are starting to leave less room for teaching through the lens of freedom or Europe, for example. Instead, the focus has shifted to three pillars: Greek culture, Roman law, and Christianity. What's more, the Christian pillar has become narrower, excluding the Judeo-Christian aspects of its former interpretation. Rather than looking at the past and recognising the complexity of human history and the various areas of struggle and of cultural interchange, we now have a narrow, propaganda-style narrative of a great Poland in a mighty Europe. But this type of history does not help us to understand the roots of the modern world (dis)order, let alone question it.

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Similar trends can be observed in other subjects. The course previously known as "Knowledge of Society" has become "History and Today". Despite its name, it offers very limited scope for the discussion of contemporary issues. More time is spent on the obsessions of the current minister of education, Przemysław Czarnek, with his anti-gender, anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQI+ outlook. I am sometimes tempted to start teaching this subject so I can talk about these issues in my own way and, by doing so, undermine what the ministry is trying to achieve.

This shift came about despite the popularity of Knowledge of Society classes among pupils. Discussing contemporary issues is a source of real enthusiasm. For example, during the recent humanitarian crisis on Poland's eastern border – which was more of a massive human rights violation crisis – I talked with my students about the war in Afghanistan and watched documentaries on the recent Taliban takeover with them. The aim was to understand where some of the refugees coming to Poland were from and why Poland is at least partially responsible for their situation. The contemporary history of western and central Asia is a topic we would be very interested in doing more on. Instead, we are having to endure a subject that treats any new way of thinking, including ecology, as a possible threat to the conservative standpoint, from which teenagers need to be protected.

**How does this differ from the curriculum in place previously, and what effects can be observed after five years?**

These changes have led to a lack of a wider, more global view of events. This is a programme that closes us off from the world. It also results in a false sense of knowledge. People leave school believing that they know a lot about the world and what constitutes knowledge and history. They may not remember all the facts, but they know that history means politics and not the histories of women or sexual minorities, for example.

This leads us back to the previous question on whose history we're talking about. We are operating within a national perspective that developed in the 19th century alongside Eurocentrism, colonialism, and xenophobia. We learn about Mieszko I as the creator of the

modern Polish state, but we omit to mention that this narrative has little or no standing within contemporary historical research.

What is worse, this 10th-century duke is presented as one of the key actors in the contemporary world: a world of climate and refugee crises. We make students memorise Polish rulers from the past, but don't consider it a problem if they don't know what Asia looks like or who lives in western Asia and that some of them are not Muslim – not to mention that Muslim people should not be equated with Islamists.

*In Poland, the political role of history always trumped its social or economic aspects.*

This already gives you an idea of whose history this is. It is a narrow interpretation of the past in which communities other than states and nations are sidelined. We learn very little about the history of peasants as a class, the historical position of women, or different forms of societal organisation such as hunter-gatherer societies. When talking about slavery in the United States, there are even some teaching materials that focus more on white abolitionists than the experiences of African Americans.

All of this is happening in the context of an overloaded curriculum with a lack of time for critical analysis and learning about how to interpret and discuss history. As a result, final history exams have nothing to do with assessing whether teenagers have gained the tools they need to understand the world; instead, they test the rote learning of facts of little relevance to today's world and students compete to see who can achieve the best results.

**The shade of government pursued by PiS is distinctive for its conservative, family-based welfarist policies, notably a substantial child benefit system. Does this investment in the welfare state extend to education?**

I would object to this take on PiS policies. While it is true that some support programmes were introduced, including the famous 500 zlotys per child, this does not translate into creating a modern welfare state. It is also true that schools are now better equipped, and some local authorities are investing more in teacher training, but our earnings are still relatively precarious.

The pandemic laid bare the lack of investment in the system. Online classes were given using teachers' private equipment. Many pupils had serious mental health problems – a topic discussed but not tackled – and some basically disappeared from online lessons for weeks and months at a time.

The situation is even more dire in the other spheres that should form the backbone of a modern welfare state. We have a crisis in the public healthcare system and lack a coherent housing policy. Cultural institutions, instead of being seen as important sites for civic dialogue, are places to be captured for conservative politics. Public transport options, especially beyond the larger cities, are limited.

**In 2019, there was a major strike by Polish teachers. Could you explain the dispute and the political relationship between the teaching force and the**

### **government today?**

The problems I have described led to rising discontent with and anger towards the government. The result was weeks of strikes and the cancellation of lessons. PiS used headteachers to put down the strike, people who often privately supported industrial action but who, because of their role, had to obey orders from above. They were forced to hold final exams and that eventually caused the strike to fizzle out.

This was a bitter experience. For many weeks the government seemed not to care that children weren't receiving an education. The teachers were not listened to but rather exhausted into compliance. While the strike was officially suspended, it continued in the form of people leaving the teaching profession. More and more of us teach in more than one school, a situation that leads to better incomes for teachers but that is terrible for school communities. We roam from one part of the city to another, lacking the time to bond with pupils and parents.

The way teaching is monitored has also been subject to major changes. Dialogue between school board representatives and teachers, pupils, and parents has been replaced with bureaucratic formalities. All that matters is that the paperwork is properly filed. This has undermined real communication and the proper functioning of schools.

### **What alternatives are there for parents who wish to avoid an overly nationalistic education for their children? Can turning to non-state education reinforce urban/progressive and rural/conservative divides?**

I was a pupil at the first non-state school in Poland, but that doesn't mean I'm a fan of this model. I got quite a lot from the school, and it provided some basic security to teachers and pupils, but the availability of private education can lead to parents with high social capital drifting away from the public school system, which in turn petrifies social divisions. It is yet another example of how a decision that is good and rational on an individual level (i.e. due to the fact that pupils learn in smaller classes) can lead to negative social outcomes.

Some problems are universal. The whole education system is currently designed in a way that hinders cooperation between parents and teachers, leading to difficulties when teachers prioritise teaching the curriculum – because it is beneficial in terms of state exams – over critical thinking. This adds to broader tensions around the question of who should be in the driver's seat: public institutions or parents.

The extended social isolation caused by the pandemic also led to widespread problems. When we see youngsters coming back to school, we notice how difficult it is to teach them basic social skills. This in turn may lead to rising disengagement from the public school system through home- schooling, causing even wider social stratification.

### **How does your teaching experience in a multicultural school in Warsaw inform your thinking on education and particularly history?**

My dream would be to teach history by taking my students to Berlin in September, to Tehran in October, to Rio de Janeiro the next month... While I know this may not be realistic, the idea of not limiting ourselves to the four walls of the school building and learning critical thinking by exploring public spaces surely is.

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My “minimum programme” for the education system involves reading at least one true historical book (and not just a textbook) per year, allowing pupils to be confronted with different narratives. In my lessons, we discuss these sources and learn about the development of history as a science. Luckily, we now have more online sources that can be put to good use as well, such as recordings of discussions. I said “more”, but it’s still not enough, even for topics that should not be a problem, such as the women’s suffrage movement. Sometimes these materials – such as documentaries on ARTE about colonisation or sexuality and gender – are only online for a limited period of time, which limits their usability.

This kind of source-based education is possible in a non-state school where there are 20 students per class; it is much harder in a state school with 36 pupils in a single room. It’s why we need to cut class sizes. Limiting the frequency of formal testing is also important to allow space for discussion and the exchange of ideas. We need fewer tests and more perspectives, including ones from outside Europe.

### **How can history be used to create shared but non-exclusive identities, build bridges, and expand the imaginary for good?**

First of all, in the Polish context, we need to make the system coherent. Teachers often say that when you close the classroom door you are basically free to do whatever you want as long as you jump through all the bureaucratic hoops and your students pass their exams: it’s a sort of a guerrilla tactic. But you can’t build an education system on such a premise. Universal education should give us all the tools we need to understand the difficult and complicated reality in which we live.

In our class we recently read *In Desert and Wilderness*, a 1911 novel by Polish Nobel laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz; not as a literary work, but as a historical source. It is the story of a Polish boy and an English girl living in Egypt who are kidnapped by Sudanese rebels. They fight for survival and meet stereotypical “natives”, including Arabs and Black Africans. Confronting the racism present in this book was a traumatic experience, both for me and for my students. But the book is just a normal part of the curriculum for primary school children and is taught and read without giving the wider context that explains its racist overtones. So a critical approach is essential.

We face an everlasting discussion about a canon, a set of texts with which all members of a certain community are expected to be familiar. I would like to shift this discussion to thinking about ways in which we promote reading in general and present a more diverse set of materials, including contemporary literature, which is largely on the sidelines of the current curriculum in Poland. We should not limit ourselves to a national perspective here. We also need to recognise and strengthen another tool for understanding the world: the arts, giving people the possibility to express themselves and learn to cooperate instead of competing with each other. This could certainly help us to build a better future.



Anna Dzierzgowska is a history teacher, feminist activist, and translator. She is co-creator of the Public Monitor of Education project and co-editor of *Szkolne gry z historią* (*School Games with History*), published by the Polish Teachers' Union in 2018.

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