

Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer,  
*Reshaping Poland's Community after  
Communism: Ordinary Celebrations*,  
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ss. 206.

There is an organic community besides the nation. There is more to civil society than formalised interest groups. Belonging matters and it is forged by people themselves. These seemingly straightforward, yet often overlooked, observations about the nature of contemporary society are the main takeaways from Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer's captivating book *Ordinary Celebrations: Reshaping Poland's Community After Communism*, in which she analyses Poland's changing social imaginary resulting from everyday practices. Chmielewska-Szlajfer masterfully investigates commonplace popular 'celebrations' that construct new interpretations of Poland's history and have been giving meaning to people's social existence since 1989.

*Ordinary Celebrations* is a dextrous investigation of popular religious rituals, of secular community-building events, and of initiatives challenging the monopoly of the state, which reveals a 'society in the process of significant transformation in the ways it images itself' (p. 181). Chmielewska-Szlajfer describes and brings a closer understanding of that apparently obvious, yet uncanny, process, which took off under conditions of liberal democracy, by focusing on the overlooked dimensions of civic life. Her research, completed before 2014, is a highly prophetic piece of scholarship with regard to the route Poland has taken since 2015. Yet, at the same time, it offers hope for a way out of the current democratic backsliding through the power of civil society.

In *Ordinary Celebrations*, Chmielewska-Szlajfer analyses the new, and increasingly popular, yet mundane cultural practices enabled by Poland's systemic change to democracy, and hence pluralism of the public sphere, which has long been the object of her study (Chmielewska-Szlajfer 2010). These are practices people engage in

every day (religiosity, charitability, civicness) – so they are ordinary, yet they are also celebrated because they symbolise values and shared beliefs. Ultimately, because they are in equal measure ‘practised, mediated and imagined,’ they enable different modes of community building through the reproduction of shared imaginaries. This is how new ideas of community originate and become popularised, claims the author. Her investigation of everyday cultural practices – images, stories, myths – that are felt rather than articulated, practised but not really consciously communicated, closely follows Taylor’s concept of ‘social imaginary’ who defines it as mutual understanding through common practices which enable a sense of legitimacy in society (Taylor 2008). Chmielewska-Szlajfer takes this further and focuses on the transformation of practices, which through collective imagining enable community building. Her analysis focuses on the agency to shape oneself in a rapidly changing world, drawing on the myths of the past (Smith’s *ethnie*) (1986) – and reconfiguring them through the ordinary and the mundane (akin to Billig’s *banal nationalism*) (2005).

*Ordinary Celebrations* is composed of five chapters, three of which are highly textured investigations of distinct cultural and social spaces where agency, community and power are negotiated. These are based on original research at three distinct sites: a new Catholic sanctuary where new practices of religiosity take place; an open-air music festival where new forms of mutual recognition are forged; and online portals dedicated to civic scrutiny of the state’s power.

In Chapter 2, Chmielewska-Szlajfer analyses the meaning-making and community-building capacity of the most-visited Catholic shrine in the country, Licheń. This, the fifth largest basilica in Europe, built in the middle of a crop field in provincial Poland, boasts a mix of a familiar *folkish* theme-park aesthetic together with the gilded grandeur of the Holy See. On a discursive level, Licheń is a site where Catholic nationalism reigns supreme, through the glorification of Poland’s long-gone imperial past, the emphasis of the unity of state and church, and the mythical mission of Poles as defenders of the faith – it constructs and maintains the symbolic dominance of the Catholic church. However, as Chmielewska-Szlajfer discovers, the mix of leisure and spirituality enables community formation. Although its openness to others is selective, driven by a fear of the outside world, it is an organic community which explains the complexity of

the contemporary world to its members and where pride of belonging can be experienced and felt.

The Woodstock Festival is the subject of Chapter 3. A charity-oriented music festival, which is an explicit homage to the American Woodstock of 1969, and resembles LiveAid from 1985. Recently renamed the Pol'and'Rock Festival (for copyright reasons), the event is a tribute to the thousands of volunteers who help out with Poland's largest charity run – the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (WOŚP) which has been providing hospital equipment for the perennially underfunded healthcare system since 1993. According to Chmielewska-Szlajfer, this extraordinary festival fosters a 'community of recognition, caring and mutual responsibility' because it is a gesture of gratitude towards charitable individuals, in a culture where empathy outside the family has not been widely practised. Furthermore, it is aspirational, in so far as it promotes secular empathy beyond confessional, national, or ethnic boundaries.

Chapter 4 is devoted to pro-voting campaigns and local watchdogs that foster an informed citizenry. Chmielewska-Szlajfer identifies how online electoral and community-based mobilisation transforms atomised individuals into members of a shared democratic community. This re-emergence of civil society online, amid declining voter participation, which picked up only in 2019, is resurrecting the noble traditions of *Solidarity* from the 1980s and filling Polish society's 'sociological void,' observes Chmielewska-Szlajfer. What distinguishes these campaigns and local websites from national politics is that they are closer to home and hence more adept at equipping people to be active citizens. These seemingly mundane practices are an exercise in the redistribution of power, away from the centre of politics that is Warsaw, and are enabled by the internet, as brilliantly elaborated by the author in subsequent publications (Chmielewska-Szlajfer 2018).

One of the main analytical frames of *Ordinary Celebrations* is the 'catching up with the West' narrative. Chmielewska-Szlajfer adopts an almost post-colonial perspective on Central-Eastern Europe, and Poland specifically. And while the book provides ample evidence that the myth of a 'happy-democratic-ending' to history enables those meaning-making practices in the public sphere to take place the author does not take enough credit for the more ground-breaking insights into societies in post-democratic transition, and contemporary societies in general (Kaldor 2003). *Ordinary*

*Celebrations* offers a remarkably textured insight into the reflexive relationship between practices, which give people the opportunity to shape the world around them, and the understanding of the social self. Chmielewska-Szlajfer argues that these changes had been more rapid and fundamental in Poland than in older democracies. Since the 2016 Brexit vote, we now know that is no longer the case, and that Central-Eastern Europe is not a unique case of regressive nationalism or democratic backsliding, though it has become an exemplary one. In this instance, *Ordinary Celebrations* proves to have been a prophetic work with regard to the clash of civilisations in Poland that ensued after 2015 following two and a half decades of Poland's transition to democracy. Now the weakening of substantive democracy throughout Europe is at a critical moment (Kaldor et al. 2019).

In *Ordinary Celebrations*, Chmielewska-Szlajfer observes multiple competing visions of community. She invokes the myth of Poland's *Solidarity* as the precursor of the freedom to engage in such ordinary celebrations, to embrace civic nationalism, and to practise civiness. The potential sites for democratic renewal she has identified have just been galvanised by the Women's Strike in response to the increasing restrictions on women's reproductive rights in Poland. The hundreds of thousands of people who have been taking to the streets throughout Poland since October 2020 prove that her work on the shaping of the 'Polish imaginary' post-1989 helps us to better understand the roots of the current social mobilisation against creeping authoritarianism in Poland, and confirmed that civil society remains a site where freedom is not only consciously practised, but also (though often somewhat ordinarily) celebrated.

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