
The Peripheral Literary Myth as a Way to Copewith Workplace Flexibility¹

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Abstract

This article uses a concept of “organizational historiography” as a way of critical reading the business past, including the literary representations of this past. The author analyzes – as a particular example – some historical contexts of narrations about workplace flexibility as a human challenge.

Article refers to a psychological narrative about flexibility accumulated in the early 90s. in Protean Self-concept by Robert Jay Lifton and followed by the contemporary concepts of Resiliency. As the main themes the text outlines the selected literary antecedents of struggle with workplace flexibility on the example of belles-lettres. The author focuses on the intercultural, yet provincial, myths of “Lozdremensch” and “Silesian fate” that was developed in the belles-lettres, which focus of the experiences of the people who were living on Polish territory at the turn of nineteenth and twentieth century and later. According to the author, these myths carries the narrative of a cultural heritage, valid also (or even especially) regarding psychological problems of workplace flexibility today. Such reading of the novels, poetic essays and stories seems to be consistent with the Deirdre McCloskey’s idea that nothing like the work of writers helps to understand and “calibrate” economic reality.

Keywords: Organizational Historiography, Workplace Flexibility, Resilience, Literary Representations of Economic Reality

1. Introduction: Literary Narrations about the Past and Psychological Issues of Workplace Flexibility

The article uses a concept of “organizational historiography” as a way of critical “reading the business past” – including the literary representations of this past – while avoiding both “organizational forgetting” and “presentism”. This relatively new sub-branch of organizational study is practically orientated and can serve reflective managers as a source of inspiration, warnings and – more generally – development of contextual thinking by critical enriching of the reading of various stories about the past, including the past representation in belles-letters. It is worth reminding that history of historiography is a branch of sciences about the past, which critically reflects on researching, writing and teaching (including also promotional activities) history. In Poland, the community of historians of historiography, associated with Andrzej Wierzbicki, has for several years intently incorporated organizational issues into the scope of their interests. Summing up, according to the terminology suggested by Monika Kostera, based on scholarly practices of Western authors (e.g., [5], [2], [17]), organizational historiography means using the cognitive apparatus of history of historiography both for research purposes to cater for the needs of management, as well as in order to enrich the reading of publications concerning the past (and various other stories about it) by a reflective manager, who thereby seeks inspiration for his/her own practice [11].

The second reference point of this article consists of a psychological narrative about flexibility, accumulated from the early 90s. in “Protean Self” concept by Lifton [6] and followed by the

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contemporary concepts of Resiliency [20]. Flexibility category in psychological aspect seems to be deeply associated with highly traumatic challenges, which are tested both by Lifton (in his studies of “crushing” history phenomena) and by current experts in Resiliency (see the work about psychological consequences of World Trade Center Attack, [20]).

More than twenty years ago, Lifton [6] described the “The Protean Self” which, in his opinion, is a characteristic of the modern man. That is why man is capable of unexpectedly high flexibility and variability, even fluidity, of behavior and psychological processes. In this context, Lifton wrote about resilience of the human psyche in the era of “fragmentation”. However, recent research on psychological difficulties in changing human behavior, habits or beliefs - especially in organizations [3], makes us treat the mentioned theoretical construct, proposed by Lifton (“The Protean Self”), as a description of a certain potential rather than as traits given once and for all. Furthermore, these are the potentials that need to be spent within reasonable limits, and yet there is no precise research data defining these boundaries. However, this does not diminish, but, on the contrary, enhances the importance of the modern man’s resilience. The term “resilience” was borrowed from engineering science, where it stands for the physical resistance of materials, expressed by rapid return to their original state after deformation. Initially, the term was used by clinical child psychologists, then, the concept was gradually adopted by theorists and practitioners working with adults, indicating a type of psychological toughness. It is not about resistance in terms of hardness (“managers do not cry”), but – generally speaking – a flexible approach to stress, easily returning to normal functioning after a failure or misfortune, after encountering adversity, including traumatic experiences ([19]; [17]; see also [9]). Currently, there is a discussion among psychologists whether it is necessary to commonly implement training in resilience, at least in professional groups that particularly need it, or whether the natural ability to achieve this competence in individuals should be checked first, and help be given only to those, who have deficiencies in this area (cf. [19] vs. [17] and [20], [12]). Another point of view, between these options, also emerges. There is a recommendation that resilience of the particular person could be improved spontaneously by reading belles-lettres. Zvi [24], the American psychiatrist with Jewish-Polish roots, mentions, for example, how his love for reading books helped him cope with dramatic life experiences related both to family problems and to the twentieth century history.

The cultural look at workplace flexibility also shows – *toutes proportions gardees* – the traumatic side of this phenomenon in the context of modernization processes. This article suggests treating the current narration promoting flexible work, both in the main management and economic theories, as well as in opinion journalism, as an up-to-date manifestation of a cultural process, constituting the core of modernization (previously known as the industrial revolution). The transition from farm to factory meant not only uprooting, as Erich Fromm wrote many years ago, but it also brought about a lot of workplace insecurity both from employee as well as employer’s perspective. Writers were quick to spot that phenomenon and the speed of their reaction depended solely on the development of modernization processes in the respective countries where they wrote. Further market changes followed, insecurity developed like cancer, until mainstream management strategies began to turn it into a virtue. Reaching for belles-lettres, in particular those created outside of globalization centers aims to “push through” another point of view.

Article outlines the selected literary antecedents of struggle with workplace flexibility on the example of belles-lettres, which describes the particular of Eastern Europe experiences. It is advised to focus especially on the pro-entrepreneurial and intercultural, yet provincial, myth of “Lodzremensch” that was developed in the belles-lettres emerging in Polish, German and Yiddish at the turn of nineteenth and twentieth century on broadly speaking Polish land. On the examples of writings of Wladyslaw Reymont (“The Promised Land”), Joshep Roth (“Hotel Savoy”); Isaac Bashevis Singer (“Scum” and “The Estate”); Israel Joshua Singer (“The Brothers Ashkenazi”), Sholem Alejhem (various novels and stories), Symch Symchowicz (*Stepchild on the Vistula*) and Charles Dedecius (“European from Lodz”) it could be assumed that the Lodzermensch myth can be read as a tale, grown on the Polish, provincial territory, of a businessman and worker as well more or

less aware of the tension between the “human factor” and the struggle for profit, who without a doubt faced with such challenges as previous versions of workplace flexibility (compare [10], [13]).

“Lodzermensch” has been formed and experienced its “golden age” during the first wave of globalization (XIX/XX). So, cultural heritage carried by the literary narrative of the myth may prove to be important also today (e.g., struggle with the tension between the requirements of the pursuit of profit and respecting basic cultural values, which were/are embodied in spiritual traditions).

According to the author of the article, this myth carries the narrative of a cultural capital, valid also (or even especially) regarding workplace flexibility.

While researching this topic in belles-lettres, the author realized it was necessary to account also for another myth, created on the broadly understood Polish territories, closely related to that of Lodzermensch, i.e. the literary image of experiences of the inhabitants of Silesia. For the purpose of this text, the myth has been called “Silesian fate” and it is represented by “Anakonda” by Goetel [4] (1964/2014, set in the inter-war period) and “The Fifth Part of the World” by Kazimierz [7] (2010, a saga encompassing timeframe from the 19th century until the contemporary times). The “Silesian fate” is characterized by multiculturalism and the temporary nature typical of the Polish-German borderland inhabited historically also by Jews.

The cultural reading of the “Lodzermensch myth” and “Silesian fate” seems to be consistent with the Deirdre McCloskey’s idea that nothing like the work of writers helps to understand and “calibrate” economic reality [8]. The term “myth” is understood here after Michel de Certeau [1], which defines it as a “fragmentary discourse connected with varied dealings of some society, which express them in symbolic way”.

2. The Literary Vision of the “Culture of Temporariness”

According to the author of this article, the most complete representation of temporary work as a source of suffering of various market players, is conveyed by the metaphor of a hotel presented by the Austrian writer Joseph Roth in his first novel “Hotel Savoy” written in 1924. The action of the novel is set in Lodz, a city in central Poland, established in the first decades of the 20th century solely as an industrial center, whereas the industry itself was originally developed mainly by newcomers from German countries, Jews, and also by Poles. The abovementioned city, referred to as the “Polish Manchester”, helped coin the “Lodzermensch myth” (even though this phenomenon was not limited to Lodz), stressing the triadic – in national terms – structure of the myth¹. When Roth wrote about Lodz after World War I, using grotesque style, the city’s past was marked with economic prosperity. “Hotel Savoy” (which has a real counterpart that exists until this day) is inhabited or visited by representatives of different “market participation” echelons. The higher up their flats are located, the lower their material and social status. The people living on the top floors try to earn their living by working for those living on the lower floors, or for the guests visiting the hotel restaurant.

The symbol of degradation, manifested by “getting” increasingly worse temporary jobs just “to survive” are young girls whose “professional career” is crowned by becoming naked dancers, performing for factory owners in the above-mentioned restaurant.

Henry Bloomfield has been largely successful and is at the very top of the social class structure. He no longer lives in Lodz, he only comes here from time to time from the United States, awaited by others like a Messiah.

“Don’t you know Bloomfield?” – wonders one of the characters of “Hotel Savoy”. Bloomfield is a child of this city, a billionaire in America. The whole city is calling: “Bloomfield is coming!” “I swear I talked to his father like I’m talking to you now” ([15], following the Polish translation by I. Berman).

The above-mentioned character from Roth’s novel embodies the fulfillment of the “American dream” and, at the same time, shows how the global business model related to the American dream gives rise to the also global workplace flexibility. When Bloomfield is to arrive in Lodz, local entrepreneurs virtually suspend their business activities, waiting to meet him at “Hotel Savoy”. Even

the tiniest business decision depends on what Bloomfield will say or do and his intentions remain impenetrable and almost mythical to everybody. In the meantime, the billionaire comes to Lodz only to visit his father's grave... he has absolutely no plans regarding any business activity.

The most elaborate yet concise description of the conditions of "temporary work culture" comes from an inhabitant of the higher floors of "Hotel Savoy" – Abel Glanz. He's a minor money-saver who combines an artistic and financial flair. Abel is a prompter at a small theater, who dreams about becoming a director, but for the time being exchanges currency. He provides a very realistic description of his "way of life", summarizing the deepest conditionality of the "fashion" for temporary work, current until this day – i.e., the unpredictable character of the financial markets.

"Trading currency is not easy (...) You have to risk your life – this is the Jewish destiny (...) This is an enchanted thing." ([15], following the Polish translation by I. Berman).

It's hard to defy the impression that the cited excerpt reveals important characteristics of the participants of the "Lodzremensch" myth, in particular the poor ones, who dream only about its fulfillment. The point is to be able to phrase slogans of universal dimension, which seem to be words of wisdom, providing natural summary of everyday struggles with the free market reality and its temporary character. Therefore, it was not only in small towns as Słomiński used to write, but also in the wealthy Lodz, that a shoemaker was a poet and a watchmaker (or currency trader) was a philosopher.¹

Many years later, just after World War II, the Warsaw poet Jerzy Zagórski in his "Financial mediations" dealt with and broadened a reflection very similar to the cited one, in one of the first literary attempts at presenting the phenomenon of contemporary financialization, seen from the perspective of peripheries (the cited text was written during the author's trip to the south of Germany in 1945):

"Money that's based neither on gold (respective banks don't have it) nor on resource rent as physiocrats would want it, nor on coal (Polish projects after World War I), nor even on some determined obligations understandable to an average person receiving the money (...). It's like some gigantic poker game. Colorful pieces of paper moved around the map of the world. If we took a huge photo of Europe, with rays that could penetrate the content of human pockets, we'd see a thrifty anthill-like frenzy of means of payment across Europe. It would be highly engaging, just as roulette with a ball in the form of living organisms capable of thinking" (Zagórski [22], reprinted in Zagórski [23]).

The "insecurity associations" spotted by Roth, that connect the rich and the poor – the owners of different capital, with those, who have only work on various levels (or not even that) – took on an international dimension in Zagórski's work. It is worth reading the excerpt from "Meditation..." cited below, forgetting about presentism or historical peculiarities of the presented reality and treating the text as a metaphor of the processes that – among others – led to globalization of temporary work.

"Who's the winner in this roulette?" asked Zagórski and replied "It's not the economically developed countries as it may seem, because the currency leaks to the weak ones. The economic circle, propelled by the pockets of emigrants and soldiers – circulation of food and vodka." The essay writer suggested that, to a certain extent, the "purchasing power of our (i.e., Polish – T.O.) society, its ability to provide itself with the assets and items, is based on high prices of vodka and food on the free market and low value of the German mark when exchanged into zlotyies".

The literary myth also outlines the final consequences of the "culture of temporariness". "Hotel Savoy" ends with a vision of burning the building down as a result of riots that cause "plenty of victims" [15]. The characters who survived, leave Lodz, still dreaming their American dream. Aber Glanz says:

"When I come to my uncle in New York..."

I think that Zwonimir (a friend of the main character, who went missing during the riots – T.O.) would say now "America". Just: "America" (Roth [15] following the Polish translation by I. Berman).

3. The Literary Discussion with “American Dream”

The Silesian version of the discussed myth, which came a bit later than that reflected in Roth's novel written in his youth, is devoid of overseas illusions. It provides a description of a collective memory of a “wave of poverty coming to America at the end of the twenties” (of the 20th century, i.e. not long after the time in which the action of “Hotel Savoy” was set – T.O., [7]).

An emigrant's dream-come-true may be impersonated by the character of Bruno Liszek, who made a business career in the U.S. and Canada and who later came back to his home town “for a month (...) to find a new wife from Silesia. He calculated, that she would be better than his former wife, because she would be much cheaper (...). Throughout all those years he never read anything besides what's printed on banknotes. He converted everything into dollars, as if a roulette mentality had been implanted in him” [7]. It's therefore possible to fully adapt to the temporariness resulting from the instability of the financial world, that is documented by professional success yet comes at the expense of extreme cultural depletion. “I listened to the stories of the balding red-haired man as to some dreary fairy tale” says the character in “The Fifth Part of the World”. “Besides converting everything into dollars, there was no other topic for discussion with him. His head was as empty as a dead dog's!” Common-sense reasoning, typical of Kutz's novels, allows for a deeper interpretation of the cited excerpt, than that of a swan song of an author from the intelligentsia circles “bearing a grudge” against successful people. It rather points to the threat of the “temporary work cult” that has so far escaped the discerning eye of the authors of specialist books devoted to the subject matter. This cult threatens to destroy the intellectual culture as collateral damage, in the process of adapting to the “commercial roulette”. The famous work of Readings [14] titled “The University in Ruins” fits into the framework set by the above-mentioned fear, that found its representation in the provincial belles-lettres. After all, why cannot the likes of Bruno Liszek, after achieving ultimate success in the business world, become “healers” of the academic world, which is troubled by plenty of organizational and financial problems.

Friderick Goetel, author of “Anakonda”, presents the “American dream” in the Silesian province in the inter-war period literally as a “ghostly fairy tale”. He clearly shows that this dream, which from the provincial perspective boils down to over-valued orientation of all the activities towards generating profits for an anonymous entity (frequently located overseas), brings about the inevitable temporariness affecting both the workplace, as well as company management. “In the frenzy of work, few realized the gravity of the process taking place in Zagłębie (the part of Silesia – T.O.), when after the end of the great post-war crisis, mines and factories began regaining their momentum (...). Blocks of shares, pulled by an invisible hand, kept moving, presidents and owners kept disappearing to give place to representatives of some new, anonymous ownership title, who frequently could not explain who they were actually representing.” [4]. The mine headed by director Radziejowski was impacted by the above described processes and acquired by an American concern – the eponymous “Anakonda” – which forced it to embark on an over-exploiting production interfering with stable business operations and leading consequently to artificial fluctuations in employment. Mining shafts which, until then, represented a symbol of stability, changed their metaphoric meaning. The director, who, until recently was keen on the “healthy, dynamic rhythm” of the mine's equipment, now “listened to it carefully with anxiety, trying to fish out all the interruptions, whistles and scrunches (...). As a matter of fact, the mine had its special and exploited place that was capable of cooperating with the rest of the organism only for some time. Which one of them was to be the first one to disobey? Where would the lethal blow come from? Why wasn't the old factory allowed to rest for a while? Why weren't its painful defects taken care of?” [4].

4. Human Beings in the Face of the “Culture of Temporariness”

The primary victims of the “culture of temporariness” are people. An old, honored miner Gugąła, a minor character in “Anakonda”, dies as a result of an accident, having received no long-term social help. His family is left virtually deprived of means of subsistence. This incident is reminiscent of the most dramatic demonstration of “employment temporariness”, i.e. the relatively short period of work attributed to the short life of laborers forced to work in conditions posing a threat to their health.

Employees of the brush factory in Lodz, described in “Hotel Savoy”, had no choice but to inhale the lethal dust, because the owner of the enterprise preferred to pay a “double child benefit” rather than follow health and safety rules. Miners and all the people living in the vicinity of Silesian mines or factories faced direct threats to their health. As a result, men working in different “promised lands” lived only to be forty or fifty and then died, leaving their wives and children behind, often without any means of subsistence, unless the family got into trouble earlier because of an accident or unemployment. It is worth remembering this element of the literary myth in times, when contemporary promotion of temporary work is openly aimed at cutting down “social expenses” of the companies.

“Temporariness” also constitutes a burden for the human psyche, which is sometimes too much to take, regardless of the position one has in the company’s hierarchy. The wife of director Radziejowski from “Anakonda”, who tries to improve laborers’ life, yet at the same time is deprived of happiness in her marriage due to her husband’s frustration, commits suicide. The same fate awaits the more sensitive main characters of “The Fifth Part of the World”. Others (applicable to both mentioned novels), leave their small fatherland, emigrate to foreign countries or remain lonely, impersonating temporariness in their life and in their work.

In his last work - the famous “Legend of the Holy Drinker” – Roth [16] makes a dramatic, yet at the same time fable-like reference to the tragic version of the ending of the “Silesian Fate” (first printed in 1939). “The Legend of the Holy Drinker” was later filmed by Ermanno Olmi in 1988. It is worth reminding, that the main character of the short story – Andrzej Kartak (Andreas Kartak in the Olmi’s movie) is a Pole, who emigrated from Silesia. Having killed his lover’s husband (acting in her defense) and doing time in prison, he lost the opportunity to find legal employment. The short story presents Andrzej as an alcoholic and tramp, living under a bridge in Paris. One of the few miraculous events that helped him get money was temporary work. Andrzej got a temporary job, which however did not considerably change his situation. The motif of the hotel is also present in this short story, which is typical of Roth. When the character visits the hotel, he leaves it without some cash, which prevents him from paying off a debt of honor.

“The Legend of the Holy Drinker”, being a fable, is also a kind of metaphor, summarizing the tragic fate of a man “immersed in temporariness”.

But “The Legend of the Holy Drinker” is also a fairy-tail. Andrzej drinks himself to death, but pays off his debt. Above all, he proves to be a man of honor.

Tekla and Jerzy, minor characters of “Anakonda”, choose a vagabond life, yet at the same time they are capable of establishing a lasting relationship and facing life’s adversities together.

A resourceful Marianna from “The Fifth Side of the World”, by coming up with an idea to set up a shop and bringing her husband round, intuitively harnesses the unpredictability of the Silesian fate for many years to come.

The Lodz street, described by Roth in “Hotel Savoy” is vividly reminiscent of the so-called guerilla capitalism, i.e., a form of spontaneous collaboration of people of different material status or level of achievements, who share one common way of thinking and acting when faced with free market reality: “I kept on wondering and saw black groups of swift Jews wearing caftans, I heard loud whispers, greetings, words full of energy and long speeches – feathers, interest, hops, steel, coal, lemons, all that flying in the air, catapulted by lips into the air and targeting human ears”. ([15], following Polish translation by I. Berman).

Unemployed Silesian miners also organized themselves consciously against the temporariness of employment, building clandestine pits, which led to a common framework of activities and customs, that should now be referred to as social and cultural capital. In Goetel's novel, such initiatives are destroyed by the police. However, prior to that, despite their illegal nature, they win director's Radziejowski's appreciation. For him, pacification of miners – makers of the bootleg pits – by the police is almost like a personal tragedy. His quandary gives hope for a pact against the “culture of temporary work” made in the spirit of the contemporary understanding of solidarity. This issue, however, goes too far beyond the framework of these considerations.

Even in its rather pessimistic, Silesian version, the provincial literary myth is not only an accusation or expression of helplessness. It also carries some hope through the personal potential of at least some of the characters. Potential, that defied even the “steam roller of temporariness”.

5. Conclusions

It is the role of potential readers to evaluate whether or not the myths presented in the sample works discussed in this article are still up to date. The author of these fragmentary analyses purports to bring them to an end by voicing an assumption, that the above-mentioned novels and short stories offer an opportunity to build resilience of the contemporary Proteus facing today's challenges posed by the hegemony of temporary work. Maybe it would be reasonable to verify the validity of the following the porte-parole thought of the author of “The Fifth Side of the World”, according to which “a half of each human being comes from books” [7]. If this was the case, then this article would fully accomplish its goals.

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