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Relational View on Totemism: The Case of the Polish Lord vs. Boor Opposition and the Symbolic Role of the Aristocracy

The paper will present a relational perspective on the role of aristocracy and its memory in present-day Poland. It will be based on empirical research on the social and symbolic role of the milieu of descendants of the former wealthiest landowning families in Poland, mostly of noble origin, and on their relation to the elite of the intelligentsia and other social strata. As it will be argued, the persistent role of the old feudal elite in contemporary Poland may be explained primarily by its crucial role in defining a symbolic relation constituting the backbone of the social order in Poland, namely the so-called lord vs. boor opposition (formerly: noble elite vs. peasants). The place of the aristocracy in this relationship is mostly symbolic; in particular, it may be perceived as a totem for the intelligentsia elite, which took over its leading role from the aristocracy, and more broadly for the entire Polish society, linking it with the historical past and idealized European historical elites. That totemic relationship in turn translates into “real” effects, that is not only symbolic effects, which allow, among other, the aristocracy to maintain an unusual level of social cohesion, high social prestige, and access to diverse assets. At the same time, the lord vs. boor relationship functions on a very abstract level in Polish society, that is it may function as a contextual relation between actors located in different positions in any field related to Polish culture. Symbolic superiority in such a situation is expressed by homological claims to contextual “nobility”, while inferiority is projected as relational “boorishness”. The relational nature of this significant opposition makes it almost universal within the Polish culture, while at the same time, its interpretation in different contexts may appear to be a challenge, given its disconnection from earlier clear frames of social hierarchies, in particular, the material dimension of class relations.