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Nature and Equality – Moral Panic Around Boys Failing at School in the 1990s in the Perspective of Feminism- and Posthumanism-related Concerns in the 21st Century

Until recently, the notion of moral panic has functioned in the Western social sciences. Today, due to the atmosphere of concern created by the media in relation to equality-related phenomena, this notion starts to be used in Poland as well. This paper aims to have a closer look at one of the earlier examples of moral panic in the Western world (Great Britain, United States of America, and Australia), i.e. the one concerning the discovery of the phenomenon of boys failing at school. I shall discuss its essence and the most important topics that shook the public opinion in relation to the recently announced “crisis of masculinity”. I shall then sketch the basic parameters of two contemporary varieties of moral panic: the identity crisis related to the progress of the gender equality discourse, and the concerns related to problems discussed on posthumanist grounds. However, the essence of this text is not related to the practice of archiving social anxieties of the past or present. I suggest that the examples of moral panic under analysis be treated as types of provoked anxiety reactions in connection with social changes and the progressing equality. Some commentators of the contemporaneity closely connect the attempt at halting these changes with the notion of “nature”, which they perceive as a guarantor of the unchangeability of the old social order. They thus clearly antagonise nature and the equality discourse.

The interest in the phenomenon of social anxiety (moral panic) has been observed since the 1970s. The theory of moral panic was developed in 1972 by Stanley Cohen, who analysed the media reactions to riots caused by youth gangs. The manner in which the media reported on the riots triggered a reaction in the form of an increased anxiety among the youth themselves. Cohen defined moral panic as the activation of the so-called moral stereotypes by the media in relation to the phenomenon they describe, resulting in the specific magnification of the phenomenon’s scale (presenting it as more dangerous, having more extensive effects, greater power, etc.). The author argues that moral panic leaves certain long-last-

ing institutional traces in the form of new institutions, and provisions of the law (Zielińska 2004, p. 161). According to Maciej Soin, moral panic is an effect of the activity of the dominating social structures able to impose norms of social order, through which an event which initiates it may – due to its processing by the mass media – take an unreal, magnified size, and function as a threat to recognised social values (Soin 2011, p. 154).

Scholars researching the phenomenon of moral panic indicate that it has the structure of a wave – which grows in strength, reaches its culmination, and dies (disappears). However, its effects do not vanish – as a result of moral panic, the society's moral boundaries are set up (and strengthened). The setting up and strengthening take place through numerous stigmatising actions and the branding of the social groups that the media present as morally evil.

Moral panic around boys' school failures

In the 1990s, West European, American and Australian educational research was dominated by the problems of the social, cultural, school-related, economic, and political marginalisation of girls (women). The problem of the functioning of girls at school was shown as one of the main causes behind the maintenance of an unequal status of men and women in present-day Western societies. For this reason, schools in these societies became the area of educational and emancipatory actions undertaken for the benefit of girls (Arnot, Gubb 2001). Feminist researchers managed to identify and describe many unfavourable phenomena, processes and mechanisms functioning in the school space that result in the replication of the structure of social inequalities (the unequal status of men and women). Feminist studies diagnosing the reasons for the above, including educational ones, turned out to be very helpful in designing many “corrective actions” and educational initiatives such as: inclusive curricula, anti-discriminatory programmes, and programmes supporting non-stereotypical school interests of girls in such fields as mathematics, physics, and computer science (Rogers, Kaiser 1995). Feminist works also contributed to placing in the centre of public debate problems related to the emancipation of marginalised social groups, equal opportunities, justice, and social concern for the weakest groups (in cultural and political understanding). All the actions in question created the ground for a substantial change of the functioning of girls at school – their school success (Marry 2007) – and changes in the work-related functioning of women in Western Europe: maintaining the continuity of employment despite maternity (Maruani 2007). At the same time, as a sideline of the debate on the school functioning of girls, grows a belief that it is necessary to focus more research attention on issues related to masculinity and men in educational references (Kimmel 2000; Mac an Ghail 1996; Weaver-Hightower 2003): the functioning of boys at school, their achievements, school failures, violence and aggression, destructive behaviour, and school consequences of the socialisation training of masculinity. In many countries, in particular Great Britain, the United

States, and Australia, the “problem of boys” appeared in the mass media in an atmosphere of moral panic (Kopciwicz 2012, p. 55). Participants of debate on the functioning of boys at school and their school failures included the environment of teachers, educational activists, parent associations, politicians, religious activists, as well as activists of the sexual minorities movements and other associations of men, psychologists, and therapists. The increased interest of the mass media in the topic of “boys” gave fruit in the form of a large number of pop-sociological and pop-psychological publications. They shared an alarmist tone and a belief in a social catastrophe caused by boys failing at school.

“The problem of boys” soon emerged also as a subject of scientific reflections. These resulted in publications: theoretical ones diagnosing the situation of this group of students, and practical ones – designing many corrective actions. However, it is worth underlining that the research environment studying problems related to masculinity and education is divided by one basic question: their attitude to feminism, and in particular the degree of acceptance for the backlash rhetoric. Backlash relates to the wave of right-wing blows to feminism and its achievements in education, and in social, cultural, and political spheres that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. The backlash rhetoric included slogans postulating a return to the natural order of things, recovery of the disturbed balance, and withdrawal of cultural achievements of progressive social movements (including the feminist movement) as artificial supports of falsely understood equality (Faludi 1991). An educational side of the backlash in the United States, Australia or Great Britain was the debate which experts on the subject labelled a debate around the question: “What about the boys?” (Kimmel 2000). Its gist boiled down to “regaining the field” and recovery of the boys’ advantage in the educational sphere – the advantage that was reduced as a result of the war declared on boys (Sommers 2000). At the same time, opponents of the *backlash* who undertook research on the problems of masculinity and education, guided by concern for democratic values and the inclusion of the “problems of boys” in the debate on gender equality, are referred to as participants of “the boys turn” (Mac an Ghail 1996; Weaver-Hightower 2003).

Michael S. Kimmel and Marcus Weaver-Hightower indicate that the source of the increased interest of the scientific environment studying gender-related problems in education was the appearance of pop-psychological and pop-sociological publications devoted to boys. The publications reflected a moral panic and announced a “crisis of masculinity” as one of the symptoms of a social crisis – a crisis that has a clear cause and, hence, the belief that there are persons who are guilty and socially responsible for it who need to be made accountable. Martin Mills, when describing the atmosphere of a backlash, uses a phrase *backlash blockbusters*, turning attention to revanchism, the climate of settlements, and tension around feminism (Mills 2000). Another popular science work was authored by William Pollack and entitled *Real Boys* (Pollack 1998). The author indicated the mental injuries sustained by boys and young men living in the contemporary Western societies in the age of late capitalism. According to him, the “castrating” potentials of mod-

ern culture are reflected in the increasing number of suicides committed by boys and young men, depression, addictions to psychoactive substances, acts of violence, and the rapidly growing wave of this group's school failures. A similar pop-psychological analysis was developed by Christina Hoff Sommers in her broadly commented upon book *The War Against Boys*. The author focused on a number of adverse phenomena related to the functioning of boys at school – their failures, school leaving, rejections from school on disciplinary grounds, aggression, and violence. Christina Hoff Sommers identified the source of these failures in feminism, which – according to her – in the educational sphere placed the issue of the school success of girls to the fore, thus leading to the “pathologisation” of the male nature of boys (Sommers 2000). Very similar reflections were presented by the guru of the so-called single-sex education¹ Michael Gurian. He demanded that the American educational system be tailored to reflect the differentiation between female and male brains, as well as the gender-differentiated educational needs and possibilities of the particular groups. He argues that in its current shape, the feminised school is detrimental to the male nature of boys, leads to their “girlification” and strips them of everything that is masculine. These “silent murders” take place on a daily basis in the school space and are committed by crypto- or openly feminist teachers (Gurian 2001). The same type of school critique was developed by Steve Biddulph in Australia. The author's arguments are based on an essentialist conception of gender (testosterone and the related natural developmental needs of boys) and the conservative, revanchist concept of educational policy (Biddulph 1998). Works by Biddulph, just like those authored by Gurian, Sommers, and Pollack, reflect the rhetoric of the “war of the sexes”, “settling accounts”, and “showing feminists their place”, and proclaim a return to “the natural order of the sexes” along with the biological determinism, divine plan, and other arguments marked by a clearly extrasocial nature.

Some grounds for the intensified interest in the problems surrounding the functioning of boys at school was also prepared by feminist researchers who have explored the problem of gender roles incessantly since the 1970s. Feminist studies showed the way in which gender roles are shaped and the manner in which modification and substantial reconstruction of feminine roles, the emancipation of women, becomes a fact in contemporary societies. For this reason, many researchers studying issues related to masculinity (even those openly antifeminist ones) referred to the feminist theory of gender roles with a view to carrying out an analysis of family-related, economic, social and physical aspects of men's life in the context of work, emotions, health, body image, divorce, childcare, violence, and many other areas (Farrell 1993). Many of these works maintain the specific rhetoric layer of the radical feminist theory of the 1970s, where the position of the woman

¹ The concept of the segregation of the sexes in education is grounded in the belief on respect for natural differences between them. According to supporters of single-sex education, differences between genders have significant educational consequences in the form of sex-typified strategies of learning, knowledge creation, and – generally speaking – they concern all cognitive processes.

as a victim of the patriarchal society is taken by the man – a victim of oppressive socialisation (Kindlon, Thompson 2000). Jane Kenway and Sue Willis argue that the reasons behind this increased interest in boys as the “great losers” of the school race include the reckless and non-critical use of indicators of gender equality in education, in particular the results of school achievement tests, and indicators of the male representation in the population of learners/students. The uncritical belief in these two indicators led to a premature proclamation of the “school success of girls”, and even the announcement of the end of gender inequality in education by some sociologists (Kenway, Willis 1998). What is more, due to the wide dissemination of the belief in the environment of sociologists of education, a “crisis of masculinity” was hastily announced when girls in the United States, Australia and Great Britain began to reach higher scores than boys in school mathematical tests.

Another important factor intensifying the research interest in the topics related to masculinity and education was the neoliberal educational reforms (undertaken in the 1980s in Great Britain by Margaret Thatcher’s government and in the USA during Ronald Reagan’s presidency). This is not only about a stark anti-feminist meaning of the undertaken reforms, but most of all about their structural aspect – the related processes of privatisation, competition supported with objectifying procedures in the form of standardised tests of school achievement and the construction of the educational market. Neoliberal educational reforms in Great Britain had significant consequences from the point of view of gender-related problems (and, even more, ethnicity). Since boys definitely endured the poorest school achievements, they started to be perceived as a danger to the local school policy of “quality management” (the improvement of the school scores in the ratings of schools). This new manner of the treatment of boys made many British educational activists undertake issues related to the equality of the sexes with boys – the new victims of the oppressive educational market – in mind (Lingard, Douglas 1999).

As aforementioned, many researchers exploring masculinity-related problems in education treat the backlash as one of the most important factors intensifying the research interest in boys. The backlash rhetoric discussed the school functioning of girls in terms of a race and rivalry finishing with success – a victory over boys. Such a feel to the debate resulted in many open attacks on feminism and its impact on the school reality through postulates announcing the necessity of a change of the “female nature” of the contemporary school. The most important works analysing the backlash phenomenon include one by R. Lingard and P. Douglas (1999), who analysed the backlash acting in the form of educational policy. Important also here is the work authored by Kenway and Willis (1998), who performed an analysis of the backlash from the bottom-up school perspective – from the point of view of local “resistance” actions undertaken by teachers, school coordinators of equality programmes, as well as students of both sexes in the context of right-wing educational reforms.

Economic changes leading to deep changes in the field of work and employment introduced a lot of modifications in the identity policy, including the gen-

der policy. The authors of many works argue that late-capitalist societies and the model of the post-Fordian workforce led to a substantial turn towards the feminization of employment (Maruani 2007). Additionally, the culture of the place of work in “new capitalism” to a large extent values “female” ways of action such as cooperation networks, distancing itself to the model of action based on individual competition and individual achievements as economically ineffective. As Madeleine Arnot rightly points out, the contemporary school is entirely unable to find its own place in this new context, since it does not prepare the contemporary men even in the smallest degree to cope with these changes, especially changes in the area of professional identities and the crumbling conception of the dominating patriarch (Arnot, Gubb 2001, p. 125). The cultural redundancy of the hegemonic conception of masculinity is sometimes described in relevant sources as a global crisis of masculinity caused by macrosocial factors (Melosik 2006; Mac an Ghail 1996). Susan Faludi very insightfully described the crisis of American masculinity as a broken promise related to the “patriarchal dividend” guaranteeing men, over a considerably long period of time, superiority over women in every sphere of social life (especially professional life and politics). The breaking of the promise of this superiority resulted – according to Faludi – in a wave of masculine violence in the family, school, and the social dimension (Faludi 1999). The scale of the crisis, which mainly affected young men experiencing economic and civic exclusion, keeps growing. Judith Butler and Susan Sontag argued that exceptionally brutal symptoms of the crisis include ritualised attempts at the restitution of “real masculinity” that may have been followed in the mass media giving coverage to American military operations, and in particular scandals related to the torturing of prisoners of war (Abu Ghraib), attacks of the US army on civilians (including children) and the broadly commented wave of violence in the US army that was motivated by homophobia (Sontag 2010; Butler 2011).

Guidance literature concerning the problems of boys and young men and directed towards practical goals deserves separate discussion. Together with the mass media, the literature became one of the tools used for stirring moral panic around the school failures of this group of students and for consolidating beliefs on a crisis of masculinity. The most numerous group of publications focused on the problem of boys’ aggression at school: ways in which it can be pacified and channelled, and ways in which the school, family, and society may cope with it in their daily work. Another strongly represented thread in the guidance literature is the therapeutic aspect of working with boys and young men, concerning two interweaving dimensions: learning and its results (with the marked problem of boys failing at school), and the psychological and social consequences of the boys’ failure. According to the authors, effective prevention and decrease of the size of boys’ failures would have beneficial effects for stopping the crisis of masculinity, limiting the increasing aggression at school that takes on new, previously unknown or described forms such as shootings at school, for eliminating the problem of violence on the grounds of gender, sexuality and ethnic origin, and for the alleviation of cyberbullying (Martio, Berrill 2003). The authors of many publications

offer preventive and therapeutic programmes related to anti-sexist education. The most important works representing this trend include *Challenging Macho Values* (Salisbury, Jackson 1996) and many books by Jackson Katz, including *The Macho Paradox* (Katz 2012). These works offer teachers many valuable strategies and solutions to be used in their daily practice, many organisational suggestions, as well as guidelines for school psychologists aimed at minimising boys' aggression.

In literature oriented towards effective actions aimed at solving the problem of school failures, the authors most often suggest that isolated school topics should be replaced with block topics, special attention should be paid to the selection of the appropriate teaching staff (as far as possible increasing male representation), the training of future teachers should involve gender-related problems, effective motivation for change should be introduced, and manners of working with boys that do not infringe their dignity and do not make them guilty of failures should be developed, along with the competence of critical reading of meanings of masculinity in culture-based texts (Mills 2000).

An increased interest in boys' school problems has also been reflected in the feminist research – mainly in view of the rhetoric of the backlash and the gender revanchism inscribed in it, which could be noticed in many works written as a part of the debate "what about the boys?". The most interesting aspect of feminist works devoted to boys is related to the question of boys as victims of the repressive action of school. This question not only opened the debate on the real dimensions of school oppression of this group of students, but it was also a voice in the discussion concerning the financing of educational (anti-discriminatory and equality) programmes addressed to boys as "new victims" of school oppression. The question did not contain any suggestions related to undermining the validity of the thesis on the oppressive training of masculinity. It was motivated by an attempt to assess which groups of boys really most need school support and whether the status of the "new oppressed" was not granted to some of them prematurely, which was important in the perspective of serious reductions of financial resources for education and social actions in many countries suffering from economic crises (Arnot, Gubb 2001; Yates 2000).

Apart from the above topics, many feminist publications also discussed the question of the social price of the moral panic related to the functioning of boys at school. The main point was the social anxiety verbalized in public discourse that resulted from the girls' school successes (making them explain their success, or even apologizing for it), as well as public announcements of politicians and educational activists concerning the "prevention" of girls' success in future, since – as indicated by many defenders of the new oppressed – girls' successes victimise boys (Epstein et al. 1998). Another type of feminist criticism was related to the postulated corrective measures aimed at the strengthening of boys: in particular the proposed remedy in the form of single-sex classes/schools. As Kenway and Willis pointed out, the social consequences of segregation at school may be a lot different than expected. Instead of an improvement in the boys' successes at school (as was the case with girls), we should expect even poorer achievements due to discipli-

nary problems, including intensified violence on racist and homophobic grounds. The authors argue that the school problems of boys and girls are marked by different historic and social conditions, different dynamics, and a different course both in the quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Apart from this, educational movements supporting single-sex education carry an antidemocratic message: the need to separate, the impossibility to be together, ghettoization, and a closed, divided society. Such a message needs to be carefully analysed in modern societies committed to democratic values (Kenway, Willis 1998).

The common denominator for feminist works and works for which the feminist critique was one of the theoretic sources was the belief concerning the fatal practice of the "economisation" of school achievements in the gender aspect: girls should lose so that boys might win. Their joint message is a democratic concern in the search for new ways and manners of the achievement of social equality and justice that would be beneficial to everyone.

The reconstruction of the problem field of the debate concerning the functioning of boys at school which swept the societies of the West more than a decade ago, is very significant in the Polish socio-cultural and educational context. Firstly, we are witnessing a significant change in gender-related models of school success to the disadvantage of boys. Secondly, since the end of 2013 a moral panic around the so-called gender ideology and genderism can be clearly observed in Poland². What is the cause of the conservative, anti-equality attitudes manifesting themselves after twenty five years of Polish transformation? What is the genesis of this anti-modernisation turn towards "nature"? Is it only rooted locally?

Crisis of equality and a return of naturalism

Thirty years ago, equal division of labour and power was a great hope for women's emancipatory social movements. Equality-related hopes were included in the formula: a half of the world (for women) in exchange for a half of the house (for men). It might seem that the political, social, and cultural work (education, socialisation) brings women closer to the goal, and that we are certainly on the home run to achieving it. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Europe, the USA, and Australia have been witnessing a growing belief in a serious crisis of equality that has a fundamental significance in connection with a series of economic crises. As it turns out, their consequences (mainly the uncertainty on the labour market and the exclusion of women from the labour market, especially those with the lowest educational and economic capital) seriously halted the emancipatory endeavours observable in the last decades. Elisabeth Badinter indicates that the subsequent economic crises promote the intensification of psychological discourses that are protectionist in relation to men (e.g. highlighting the significance and value of work for the identity of men, showing the father's joblessness as more destruc-

² These notions were not defined as a part of this debate; they have an empty meaning.

tive for the family than the mother's unemployment, etc.), and discourses unveiling new obligations of women who are mothers towards children (Badinter 2013, p. 11). Such a discursive entanglement only strengthens men's resistance against the introduction of equality.

Statistical data show that women in Europe continue to carry out 3/4 of the household chores. Nevertheless, the economic crisis is not the only reason behind the persistence of inequality. A more serious cause is the identity crisis – one, which – as Badinter pointed out – is unprecedented in the history of mankind (Badinter 2013, p. 35). Its essence is the belief on the non-existence of traditional “dogmatic” boundaries and divisions, which protected the sense of men and women's identity. What, one may ask, has been left of these dogmatised differences, since men and women may perform the same roles and tasks in the public and private space?

Due to the subsequent economic crises, the forgotten idea of naturalism reappeared: we are increasingly reminded of women's special bond with nature, about the maternal instinct as the essence of femininity, etc.. This time, however, naturalism emerges as a discourse of progress and modernity: ecology (including the ecological model of motherhood rejecting everything that is artificial in the child's world: cosmetics, hygienic personal care products, washing powders, processed foods for children, and disposable nappies for the benefit of natural products), ethology reintroducing the question of the maternal instinct to the sphere of science, and essentialist feminism describing the gist of femininity (e.g. women's ethics of care thoroughly analysed by Carol Gilligan (2015)). Today, what is at stake in naturalistic discourses are children's welfare and the future social balance.

The discourse of science is currently additionally surrounded by the aura of the contemporary spirit and ethics. As was the case in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's times, there are attempts to convince women (and not only them) that they should renew their contact with nature and return to their roots – the natural role of the mother. Nature becomes here the guarantor of the past division of power and labour. It is tantamount to a certain order of things which belongs to the past, but gives hope for being refreshed – it is enough to reach for the source. Therefore, women are now encouraged to give back a half of the world in exchange for getting back the entire home.

Nature and posthumanism

The 21st century was announced the age of biotechnology, which in the context of social theory brought about many significant changes in our thinking of who we are in relation to non-human forms of life and technologies (Bakke 2010, p. 7).

The dynamically developing posthumanism adopts an unmasking trait of critical-emancipatory social theories, indicating the necessity to detoxicate Western thought from the idea of nature. Among the functions fulfilled by nature, Bru-

no Latour places to the forefront its ideological functions – the validation of the idea of social order and its antagonistic placement in relation to the social sphere, which subsequently enables the emergence of many false dichotomous divisions, such as divisions into active subjects (people) and passive object (things), and many other ones. “Westerners were the ones who turned nature into a big deal, an immense political diorama, a formidable moral gigantomachy and who constantly brought nature into the definition of their social order” (Latour 2009, p. 43). Posthumanists, however, deal in a much more intensified way with the problems of the construction of boundaries dividing nature and culture – problems of division and the foundation of two fundamentally different zones, under which people were placed on the one side with their interests, power, and politics, and non-people and objects were placed on the other side. Latour indicated that modernity was considered the beginning and triumph of humanism, the “birth of man” and subject. However, he maintains that one aspect of this process was overlooked – “the birth of non-humanity”, i.e. objects, i.e. things and animals considered to be fundamentally different than people (Latour 2011, p. 13). The gist of the posthumanistic project can be understood as an attempt at searching for interrelations, continuities, and cooperation between various types of beings and artefacts outside the cognitive framework determined by this fundamental division.

The year 2000 was announced as a breakthrough year in view of the degree of progress of research on the genome (the code of codes of human nature), allowing effective sequencing of genetic code, its modification and synthesizing (generation); in consequence, this allows the creation of minimal viable genomes fulfilling the function of “spare parts” (DNA components), and the construction of entirely new cells and synthetic biomolecules. In 2010, Craig Venter (a representative of the so-called synthetic biology) created the first self-replicating synthetic bacterium, thus successfully carrying out an operation of creating life from non-living elements. The progress of biotechnology, genetic engineering and nanotechnology is related to bringing to life beings with an unclear status: transgenic organisms, hybrids, organs and tissues raised for transplants, cell lines, stem cells, frozen embryos, chimeras, and *semi-living* beings sustained solely owing to modern technologies (Catts, Zurr) as biomass – a kind of “extended body” used in laboratories. As far as a body cannot function without tissues and cells, today, owing to developments in biotechnology, cells and tissues can freely live without bodies. Naturally, these developments are heavily criticized by bioconservatists fearing their consequences (their greatest fears are related to the image of “raising humans” with specific qualities). Regardless of these concerns, we can still witness an increased interest in problems related to liminal life that challenge the boundaries between individual human and nonhuman bodies and elements (Bakke 2010, p. 76), as far as the spheres of science, artistic practice, and popular culture are concerned. Liminal lives test the boundaries of the functioning taxonomies: social, ethical, biological, species-related and economical ones. Since medical interventions change our ways of insemination, birth, growth, ageing

and dying, liminal lives surround us in our schools, families, professional and institutional life, and representations – in all the areas where the form or course of life change under the impact of biomedicine.

Nikolas Rose, when describing modernity, turns attention to the view that we are in the centre of a significant cultural process which imperceptibly leads to many transfigurations owing to which we begin to notice numerous interrelations, dependencies and continuity in the places in which we previously saw only boundaries (Rose 2011). The most significant consequences related directly to the existence of posthumanism include a set of questions concerning the status of man in relation to nonhuman forms of life and artefacts. As far as there is a consent concerning man's losing his exclusive (special or superior) status, individual authors vary as to the interpretation of the fact. Some of them announce the "end of man", relating it to the dynamic progress of biotechnology and digital technologies, indicating that a cyborg (technologically improved man-machine) or post-human will become a new normative "target point" of the technicised development (More 2014). In turn, others maintain the conception of a "decentred human" (developed outside the conceptual framework of anthropocentrism) – an organism located in a network of vital interdependencies with nonhuman forms of life and technologies (Bakke 2010, p. 8). However, it is important to note that man as such does not vanish from the horizon of social or philosophical reflection, but that what vanishes without any doubt is the human privileged position resulting from man's species. The intensification of posthumanist discourse progressing along with the dynamic development of biotechnology and digital technologies has an important influence on the way in which life and its course are interpreted. Digital technologies, and the development of pharmacology, genetic engineering, and molecular biology clearly promote the division into what has sprang up by itself (nature) and what has been made (culture). At the same time, many biotransfigurations (such as actions related to the modification of genomes resulting in the existence of transgenic organisms) and technological hopes vested in the construction of a better human embodiment – the "blending in" of people with the world of things (*life in silico*) – promote the introduction of nonhumans (animals and objects) into the domain of agency (social action) and the domain of ethics. I have already pointed out that posthumanism in its many orientations (bioconservative or transhumanistic) and interpretations (optimistic and pessimistic), questions the dogmatic divisions functioning within the Western social thought concerning actively operating subjects (people) and passive objects, complicating the notion of agency and extending it to include subjects other than people. One of the most interesting examples of such an understanding is the actor-network theory. Latour's theory is relatively well described in Polish literature – therefore, I shall only refer to its most important elements. Its most significant posthumanistic property is the acknowledgement of the relational nature of beings, their existence in relations, and defining their properties, attributes, or features not in essences ("stable natures") but in synergy – the adoption of various properties (attributes or features) in heterogenic networks connecting various

types of materials and beings. Latour points out that reality cannot be found in essences, but in connections and mixtures, in rhizomes of culture and nature, where humans and nonhumans remain in close cooperation. Hence, properties, attributes and essences result only from the fact of inclusion into a definite network, from where they affect its other elements (Latour 2011). The neomaterialistic tone of Latour's theories is also manifested in the assumptions concerning social action: both things and nonhumans can be causative actors and actants. Latour therefore sketches a radically new democratic order that does not omit anyone in the networks of social agency, and that does not exclude anyone and anything, since everything is a part of a network and everything is included in a concrete programme of action. In this sense, posthumanism, and neomaterialism as a part of it, can be called a new political theory, the gist of which is an extended conception of democracy covering nonhuman subjects (Olsen 2003).

Posthumanistic questions of life, interpreted outside the framework of the positions the West considers dogmatic, such as nature-culture, human-nonhuman, living-dead, relate to ethical traditions superseded by the traditional humanities. Posthumanism is therefore also an attempt at sketching an ethical proposal omitting anthropocentrism. What is particularly worthy of attention in this perspective is Rosi Braidotti's conception affirming *zoe* – a generative vitality of extrahuman and prehuman life carrying on independently of and regardless of rational control (Braidotti 2006, p. 37). Braidotti's conception reflects the neomaterialist spirit: it is vitalistic and egalitarian. It is not a type of relativist or nihilist ethical conception. Its gist lies in the materialistic interpretation of the foundations of life, which is embodied and symbolically linked with other bodies (Bakke 2010, p. 88). Life in the egalitarian sense (every life) goes on regardless of individual deaths, and multiplies everywhere in the intensity and diversity of forms. It is not free from violence, but it is also deeply sympathetic. Therefore, it always goes on at the boundary between life and death. Although concrete individual organisms die, life (*zoe*) continues to exist. Together with its dynamics of multiplication, nourishment, merger, infectiveness, dying and killing, *zoe* takes place outside moral choices and individuals' decisions. Therefore, the author argues that there are no significant differences between the malicious multiplication of cancer cells and the gentle multiplication of cells during pregnancy. Life is unavoidably accompanied by death and immortality (Braidotti 2006, p. 223).

Analyses of the ways of the construction of nature and its functions fulfilled in relation to the social gave fruit in the form of the development of nonanthropocentric conceptions of politics and ethics, the gist of which (in the area of social theory and practice) lies in the search for positive, productive ways of sustainable coexistence, cooperation and exchange taking place between nonhumans, humans and objects. Posthumanism was also the ground on which political theories of radical democracy, justice, and equality extended to include nonhuman subjects were formed. On the one hand, we therefore have the action of the language of a moral panic, which is a symptom of the contemporary societies failing to cope with the problems related to the difference and cultural diversity within a com-

munity, a language in which we can hear an announcement of the elimination of differences in the name of “nature”, while on the other hand we are confronted with a huge challenge in the form of the blending of “nature” and technology – a relation which strongly transforms phantasies about the “purity of [our] species”. In coming years, this process will bring about significant consequences for social theory, and in particular for the possibilities of the theorisation of the difference, subjectivity, and emancipatory theories.

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Summary

Nature and Equality – Moral Panic Around Boys Failing at School in the 1990s in the Perspective of Feminism- and Posthumanism-related Concerns in the 21st Century

The article explores 'failing boys' discourses that circulate in the Western media and how this relates to policy and practice, ultimately shaping the gender politics of schooling.

It explores what crisis of masculinity means, what gender politics are and why the idea of (there being) a moral panic provides a critical analytical tool for looking at current debates around gender, democracy, equality, sexuality, and education in Poland.

Keywords

nature, equality, feminism, masculinity crisis, posthumanism

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