



Two concepts of freedom in Polish: the example of Edward Abramowski

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how two Polish words for freedom — *wolność* and *swoboda* — can lead to two separate philosophical concepts and how these concepts differ. Following the Introduction, a particular theoretical background is described: Barbara Cassin's project of philosophical "untranslatables" (*Vocabulaire européen des philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*) — as well as its philosophical context, including Jacques Derrida's views on language and translation and Roberto Esposito's views on community. After that, linguistic differences between *wolność* and *swoboda* now and at the turn of the 20th century are presented based on dictionaries and other examples of usage. The two words-concepts are then analyzed in selected philosophical writings of Edward Abramowski: *Co to jest sztuka?* [What is art?] in the case of *swoboda*; and *Zmowa powszechna przeciw rządowi* [A general conspiracy against the government] for his understanding of *wolność*. The works *Zagadnienia socjalizmu* [Issues of socialism] and *Etyka a rewolucja* [Ethics and revolution] serve as a more general background for our analysis. Finally, some conclusions are drawn on the concept of *swoboda* and its broader philosophical interest.

KEYWORDS

concept of freedom; untranslatables; Edward Abramowski; Polish philosophy; *swoboda*

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INTRODUCTION

Although the Polish language has two words that can be translated as “freedom”, “liberty”, *liberté* or *Freiheit*, only one — *wolność* — has been widely used as a philosophical concept. The term *swoboda* remains a word used somewhat haphazardly — to avoid repetition or in describing some aspects of *wolność*, but without introducing any separate concept or discussing particular aspects of freedom that are (or might be) conveyed by this term. In any case, *swoboda* is used less and less nowadays, so the meanings it used to have faded. For example, for Jerzy Bartmiński, a Polish cultural linguist born in 1939, *swoboda* still meant personal freedom while *wolność* was understood more as collective, especially national freedom in a Polish context (Abramowicz & Bartmiński, 2019: 190). Today, both these meanings are usually expressed with the word *wolność*, while *swoboda* is rarer and sometimes one has the impression that it has adopted part of the meaning of *swawola* — a rather outdated word that can be translated as “frolic” or “excessive behaviour”. The only regular use of *swoboda* is in the legal and political context: *swobody obywatelskie* (civil liberties) and *swoboda działalności gospodarczej* (freedom of economic activities). It seems that the status of English is causing Polish terms to progressively lose their unique character, becoming more and more defined by two English words. A similar phenomenon can be observed with the Polish word *troska* which at the beginning of the 20th century was much more often used as “sorrow” (like the German *Sorge*) but now is mostly used in the sense of “care”. This movement of Polish words towards the meaning of hegemonic English terms can be seen as what the French call *pensée unique* — a unified way of thinking reflecting the values of the dominant culture (and often the dominant ideology). To put it differently, a range of words, especially in more peripheral languages, are progressively losing their uniqueness and their untranslatability.

This article aims to show how the two terms were used at the turn of the 20th century, when both were still equally present in the Polish language and the influence of English was far lesser. After presenting the theoretical framework and the semantics of the two terms, I will describe how the “two freedoms” were used and how they influenced other concepts in selected writings of Edward Abramowski, a Polish political thinker and theoretician of cooperativism. The theoretical framework of this paper is inspired by the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Cassin, 2004) project (VEP). My account will relate both to the manner in which the Polish at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries distinguished between the two concepts and to the way in which Abramowski used them in his philosophy at the time. I have chosen two texts to illustrate the difference: *Co to jest sztuka?* [What is art?] (Abramowski, 1927) for *swoboda* and *A general conspiracy against the government* (Abramowski, 2023c) for *wolność*, but other writings are also referred to, especially

Ethics and revolution (Abramowski, 2023b) and *Issues of socialism* (Abramowski, 2023a) which provides a broader context for Abramowski's political and ethical thought. Finally, more attention is given to the concept of *swoboda* and how it can enrich today's understanding of freedom.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One intellectual project designed to push back against the aforementioned hegemony of the English language and Anglo-American culture is the VEP lexicon directed by Barbara Cassin. In this work philosophers from different European countries and intellectual traditions collect philosophical words deemed “untranslatable”. Of course, the untranslatability does not mean the literal impossibility of translation, quite the opposite — the lexicon is in fact also a homage to translators of philosophical texts across Europe and other regions. What is at issue is not the possibility of translation, but the irreducible plurality of languages, meanings, texts and philosophical words. The phrase “philosophical words” is important here. The lexicon does not present “terms” or “concepts” — which would imply that there exists stable philosophical terminology, in which particular signifiers possess more or less clear signifieds but which are nevertheless to some degree universal. At most these are semantic networks that may transcend specific languages. Still, Cassin lives in a (post-)Derridean world and she certainly is a Derridean girl, so she knows how words work in texts and that there is probably no *hors-texte* (Derrida, 1967: 227); she knows how diverse meanings can all be relevant simultaneously and how looking at a foreign word and its origins can inspire philosophical thought (though in the end it's all just literature). So the *Dictionary of untranslatables* is a lexicon of philosophical words in different European languages which shows not only the “untranslatable rest” that remains after rendering one word by another, but also (and this is probably the most interesting phenomenon here) how new meanings arise with translations. Although she does not refer to Derrida's idea of *traduction relevante* (Derrida, 2005) in her introduction, it is a view on translation that seems very relevant in the context of untranslatables. In fact, many philosophical translations are like Derrida's suggestion for a verse from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*: “Quand le pardon relève la justice”. The French verb *relever* is used to translate the English “to season”, because it can also be used in a culinary context (meaning not exactly “seasoning”, but “allowing the taste of the dish to present itself fully”). It has also other meanings, including one that can be used as a translation of the Hegelian *aufheben* (Derrida, 1972: 102). In the context of Portia's speech in favour of mercy and forgiveness, the sense of mercy as the element that allows justice to enter a sort of “higher level” is relevant, although this is far from obvious if we look at the

original verse “When mercy seasons justice” in isolation. So, translation allows new senses and interpretations to emerge and the VEP lexicon is a wonderful record of this process throughout history.

Žižek once wrote that “Aristotle misunderstood Plato, Thomas Aquinas misunderstood Aristotle, Hegel misunderstood Kant and Schelling, Nietzsche misunderstood Christ, Heidegger misunderstood Hegel” (Žižek, 2004: ix). The “misunderstanding” here may be one of his jokes, but it is also an argument against the idea of understanding as something that should be, or even could ever be reached. Gadamerian *Horizontverschmelzung* (Gadamer, 1990: 323) is impossible between different languages and cultures and probably also within one language-culture (*langue-culture*), as we are always speaking a “language of the other”, as Derrida put it (Derrida, 1996: 113–114). So the direction of the untranslatables project is not towards some universal understanding but just the opposite, towards more and more plurality or — as Cassin put it in the title of one of her books — complicating universality (*compliquer l’universel*; Cassin, 2016): revealing our particular differences, denying ourselves the satisfaction of understanding (Fink, 2014). Paradoxically, it is only through this process of complicating universality that we can we achieve a non-colonial community of sense(s), in the sense of Esposito’s *communitas*. This community of sense can never realise the full transparency of meaning that Rousseau and others dreamt of, but in fact it is only possible *because of* this impossibility: the original lack of community makes us a community of lack (Esposito, 2013: 25).

Studying philosophical untranslatables can also be viewed as a kind of history of ideas, although “complicating universality” means that we cannot really speak of “an idea”, *une idée, eine Idee* — that is, some “one” idea that can be studied. Studying one idea always means that we are trying to force-fit the reality of other languages, cultures and philosophies into our language’s framework, so this kind of research will always be limiting if not colonial. An example of research of that kind can be found in Polish cultural linguistics, in the aforementioned *Axiological lexicon of Slavs and their neighbours* project (LA-SiS). Although its various entries (concerning many languages, as “neighbour” is used more in the ethical than the empirical sense) do present the particularities of each language-culture, from the third volume on the entries only concern one word in each language, with possible equivalents only considered in the “synonyms” section. So, in the forthcoming volume on *naród* there will only be one French word, *nation*, and all the semantics and philosophical heritage of *peuple* will be made secondary. An opposite method of simplifying the complicated would be dissecting our worldview into simple unit-ideas, as in Arthur Lovejoy’s project (Lovejoy, 1960: 9). But ideas as we understand them, feel them and live by them are not “unit-ideas” but complex ones and this complexity is perhaps most evident to translators, who are not arithmeticians calculating which unit-ideas got lost and which ones appear in the target text.

Translation is not an arithmetic correlation between two language systems, at least not in the field of philosophy or the humanities in general. With philosophical writings, authors often force us to break with our habits of thought, new ideas are introduced which work their way into the text in a new way in order to shed light on other ideas, and so forth. You cannot really describe this process as a sort of analytic spreadsheet listing all the possible unit-ideas. Translating philosophical writings can be compared to reconnaissance missions — you are never prepared enough to know what is going to happen and you have to make your decisions on the (textual) terrain — what Jean-René Ladmiral calls “punctual interpretations” (Ladmiral, 1981: 22–28). And these very particular (and sometimes very strange) decisions may shape future understandings (or the lack thereof) and even influence how a given “idea” or “concept” will function from there on in the target language-culture. And that is what makes studying untranslatables a fascinating, never-ending task that can only get more and more complicated.

Perhaps the most exciting entries in VEP are those where you discover not how an (one) idea you had can be separated into more ideas in other languages, but precisely the opposite. This is similar to how it can be more difficult to learn to pronounce a single sound in a foreign language (for example the Dutch “s”) when your own language (like Polish) has six, than to learn to pronounce new sounds. An example of this is the entry *sens* in VEP, which would be impossible to translate with any Polish word and which therefore is fascinating. From the perspective of Polish, the different meanings of “sense” are more of a homophony than polysemy (if we indeed consider this distinction meaningful), so discovering how often they were related throughout the history of philosophy can be shocking.

Of course, this situation is not the same as the fact that *liberté* or *Freiheit* are a unified concepts for what in Polish is expressed by two different words. As mentioned above, only one of the Polish terms is systematically used in philosophy nowadays and we in fact tend to think of freedom as one concept. The VEP methods are used here *à rebours*, not to examine the untranslatability of a foreign term, but to rediscover our own conceptual framework and the implications for philosophical inquiry and the understanding of freedom.

WOLNOŚĆ AND SWOBODA

Having considered the theoretical background, I will now come back to the question of two freedoms as they appear in Polish in general and in Edward Abramowski’s work in particular. As mentioned above, the main objective is to revive a certain set of ideas related to freedom, ideas associated with the Polish word *swoboda*. First of all, to complicate and perhaps enrich the way we think

about freedom. Secondly, to decolonise Polish philosophical vocabulary and liberate it a little from the global English semantic framework which lures us with the illusion of its universality.

When we look at today's dictionaries, *swoboda* is defined as “freedom” or “liberty” to do as one pleases, but also as “ease” or “naturalness”, as in the phrase *swoboda ruchów* (ease of movement) (Password, 2014). As a plural noun, it is usually equivalent to “liberties, rights or privileges” (Doroszewski, 1958–1969). According to the *Frequency dictionary* available for the Polish national language corpus (NKJP, 2012), *wolność* is ten times more frequent than *swoboda* in the corpus established between 2008 and 2010. When looking at collocations with adjectives, apart from “full” and “large”, the most frequent adjectives used with *swoboda* are *seksualna* (sexual) and *obyczajowa* (related to customs and morality) (Pęzik, 2012). A similar context can be found in the volume of LASiS on freedom, which may reflect the authors' personal views on freedom, but which are probably not far from the mainstream idea that freedom can be used in a bad way, for example when young people want to enjoy freedom without limits (Abramowicz & Bartmiński, 2019: 192). So we can see that apart from the legal use in plural, *swoboda* is associated mostly with sexuality and is seen as an abuse of freedom to be judged negatively. The moral judgment is just the opposite when it comes to *wolność* — a “very important” value for almost 80% of Polish society (Kantar, 2019).

The linguistic and cultural image of the two freedoms was quite different at the turn of the 20th century and it is interesting to see what has been lost along the way, especially the specific meanings of *swoboda*, once an important term related to freedom, but with a different character than *wolność*. According to the so-called *Warsaw dictionary* from 1915 the first meaning of *swoboda* is “freedom (*wolność*), independence, a state not limited by anything”, while the second refers to naturalness of mind, posture or actions (Karlłowicz, Kryński, & Niedźwiedzki, 1915: 527). As for *wolność* it is defined first as free will, exemption from taxes or other imposition, an easiness in speech, casual manners, promiscuity and... diarrhoea (*wolność żołądka*). It is only in the second definition that we find “self-governance according to one's free will, *swoboda*, independence, sovereignty” (Karlłowicz, Kryński, & Niedźwiedzki, 1919: 690). In both entries we will also find a number of other examples, as well as meanings categorised as obsolete. The first conclusion we may draw is that the differences between the two semantic fields seem to correspond to some extent to what has already been mentioned above: *swoboda* refers more to lack of constraint and naturalness on a more individual level, while *wolność* is used more in political and collective contexts (although the terms are often used as synonyms, for example in the context of tax exemption and noble privileges). Secondly, *swoboda* seems to be a more general term, while *wolność* is illustrated by more different uses. It is worth mentioning that in contrast to *swoboda*, *wolność* was formed as a noun from the

adjective *wolny*, which, in turn was formed from *wola*, “will” (Brückner, 1927: 630). We can also assume that the two terms were used with equal frequency, a supposition corroborated by the four volumes of Edward Abramowski’s works available online where *wolność* is used 260 times and *swoboda* 218 (Abramowski, 1924–1928). In the following section I will try to show how these two concepts of freedom were used in some of Abramowski’s writings and how the difference between them may have influenced his philosophy. It is important to stress that Abramowski did not explicitly distinguish between the two freedoms in his work, so this is rather a difference already present in the language of the time — a situation influencing how he used the two terms and subsequently how these two terms function in some aspects of his philosophy.

TWO FREEDOMS IN ABRAMOWSKI

Edward Abramowski was a Polish political thinker living at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries, mainly associated with the cooperativism movement. Although his key ideas revolve around fraternity, the commons and what he calls “stateless socialism” (Błesznowski, 2020; Rudnicki, 2018) — individual freedom (*swoboda*) is only a secondary category in his thought. It can be seen as a necessary element in the construction of a future egalitarian society, one in which the individual self does not get dissolved, but is rather empowered and liberated from the deindividuating experience of the capitalist regime where the struggle for bare necessities takes up all the worker’s time. As said, the main difference between *wolność* and *swoboda* is that the former term refers mainly to collective freedom, while the latter designates individual freedom. This is certainly true in Abramowski’s writings, but the difference there is not only quantitative but qualitative as well: the freedom of an individual is of a different nature and has different characteristics than the freedom of workers as a whole or the freedom of the Polish nation. Abramowski makes this explicit but this probably reflected a common worldview of his time.

First of all, *swoboda* refers to free time and unoccupied space: it is about creating an emptiness. It was used this way until at least the middle of the 20th century, for example to talk about apartments left (*oswobodzone*, left free) by former tenants. For example in *Ethics and revolution* Abramowski writes a lot about the fight for more free time (*czas swobodny*) for workers and he frequently uses words like “breach” (*wyłom*) or “tear from” (*wydrzeć*) (Abramowski, 1924a: 305; Abramowski 2023b: 218), which underline the claim that simply creating breaches or holes within the capitalist regime is in itself a revolutionary act. So *swoboda* is, first of all, a very concrete spatiotemporally limited freedom where one can live one’s life without having to work or worry about survival — for some time. It can be therefore related to Berlin’s negative freedom (Berlin, 2002),

being mainly about being free from compulsion and oppression. However, as I will try to show later, it is also a necessary element of positive freedom.

Apart from being concrete in space and time, *swoboda* is also related to the material human body of a worker (or of any other human being). In almost all of his writings, Abramowski stresses the importance of concrete, particular human lives when considering sociological, economical or philosophical questions. It is also the case of *Co to jest sztuka?*, a discussion of Lev Tolstoy on the role of art in the rapidly changing society of the turn of 20th century. This essay clearly demonstrates how *swoboda* as individual freedom differs from the collective *wolność* and how it underscores certain aspects of freedom that we no longer see as the most important.

According to Abramowski, the “life necessity” for art should appear but this is only possible when workers’ individual freedom (*swoboda*) is no longer “burdened by the troubles of a daily struggle for a piece of bread” (“zgnębiona kłopotliwością codziennej walki o kawałek chleba”). However, apart from free time and material security there also has to be an “idle state of the muscles” (“próżniaczy stan mięśni”) and the “deep breath of the contemplative person” (“głęboki oddech ludzi kontemplujących”)¹ (Abramowski, 1927: 2). So *swoboda* is something felt in a bodily, even a physiological way. Unlike some abstract “legal liberty”, true in theory, *swoboda* refers to experience that is felt and lived. Later on, Abramowski writes that future art will have to be incorporated into everyday life and he calls this process the “birth of a new psychological environment” (“poród nowej przyrody psychicznej”) (Abramowski, 1927: 5). So, the free (*swobodne*) experience of art is not only bodily, it is also a part of nature — both material and spiritual. This natural freedom in experiencing art is for Abramowski a pre-intellectual state of mind, in which the soul is free both from abstraction and utility. This pre-intellectual, affective state of mind is an important element of Abramowski’s philosophy in general. In *Issues of socialism* this level of experience is associated with the individualism from which one has to liberate oneself to be able to experience collective thought — the “immortal essence of humanity” (Abramowski, 1924b: 60; Abramowski 2023a: 83) — the progress of humanity. On the other hand, this individualism provides the material for apperception, so it is a necessary stage in the development of the collective intellectual experience, one that can never be abandoned or overcome. Emotional states “sustain and nourish” the vitality of each ideology and its moral notions (Abramowski, 1924b: 118; Abramowski 2023a: 300) and the attitude of “goodness” (*dobroć*), crucial to Abramowski’s idea of ethics, would not be possible without this affective dimension.

Another important element of artistic experience in Abramowski’s description is its individual character. In spite of being a fervent agitator for

¹ All translations from *Co to jest sztuka?* by Krzysztof Adamski.

collectivism, the Polish thinker criticises Tolstoy precisely for identifying art and the collective experience of fraternity. For Abramowski the “joining of people” (“zespalandie się ludzi”) is only an “accompanying feature of art” (“współobjaw sztuki”) (Abramowski, 1927: 29) and one could also be an artist in the middle of the desert. Fraternity is not a “community of sentiment” (“wspólnota wzruszeniowa”), but a more complex phenomenon in which individuality plays an important role. The description of artistic experience in *Co to jest sztuka?* gives us a sense of the role of individual freedom in his political philosophy. First of all, as already mentioned, *swoboda* is a moment of emptiness, a breach in a life otherwise revolving around utility — both for the capitalist employer and for other members of the community. This in itself makes it an individual experience, one which also liberates us from “the grey band of intellectualism” (“szare pasmo intelektualizmu”) (Abramowski, 1927: 32) and allows us to enter the pre-intellectual realm of contemplation. In other words, individual artistic experience allows one to look at reality “through the eyes of a pan-human entity” (“okiem istoty wszechludzkiej”) (Abramowski, 1927: 31), to grasp a universal dimension of humanity: “Individualism, when it reaches its full depths, becomes the negation of individualism” (“Indywidualizm dochodząc do głębin swoich staje się zaprzeczeniem indywidualizmu”) (Abramowski, 1927: 32). So it is only through the solitary moment of freeing ourselves from material and social bonds that we can experience universality, enabling us to form true fraternity, in which neither the particularity of human beings nor the universality of humanity are fully reduced to the social. On the contrary, the latter is formed through the individual experience of a universal dimension and is not possible if we spend our whole life only fulfilling our social roles.

However, this process should not be considered a kind of elevating Hegelian *Aufhebung*, one leading from the individual to the absolute. First of all, Abramowski rarely adopts the all-encompassing perspective of “the pan-human entity” and never abandons the perspective of a concrete human being. According to this point of view, what is achieved through artistic experience, rest, collective fun or other uses of free time, is not some kind of unidirectional spiritual progress, but rather a sort of porosity in the system — a multitude of breaches, breaks, holes and voids within a reality that is imposed on the workers by capitalist state. These breaches begin as simple a negation of utility (of being useful to and used by the system), but then fill themselves with spontaneous, creative and plural ways of enjoying life. In the conclusion of his essay Abramowski writes that “art will have to differentiate itself infinitely as it is brought into the ownership of the wider masses” (“sztuka będzie musiała różniczkować się do nieskończoności w miarę przechodzenia na własność coraz szerszych mas ludzkich”) (Abramowski, 1927: 33), and later that art will be liberated through respect for each human individuality and freedom (*swoboda*) allowing beauty to manifest itself in all possible ways (Abramowski, 1927: 34).

The moment of individual freedom (*swoboda*) — understood both as a concrete (yet rather short) time liberated from everyday work and concerns and as a philosophical moment necessary to form true fraternity — is also important from other perspectives. It allows us to see another qualitative difference between *swoboda* and *wolność*. Individual freedom means not only that you have less agency than as a collective, but also — and most importantly — individual freedom is less about agency. It is not only the fact that you can do less as an individual than as a group. *Swoboda* means first and foremost that you need to be able to breathe freely, to experience some empty space and time, to do nothing or at least nothing useful for a while. And yet it is an end in itself, as it is connected with the plurality of human creativity and our experience of joy and happiness (which should be a main purpose in life). It is also a necessary condition for fraternity which in turn is essential to fight for the collective freedom (*wolność*) of workers being able to actively define their own life conditions.

As for the idea of *wolność*, it is well illustrated in *A general conspiracy against the government* — a sort of manifesto to revolt against the Russian Empire. First of all, the context is very political and much less anthropological or ethical than the texts already cited. *Ludzie wolni*, free people, are those who do not obey or participate in the institutions of the oppressive state and who encourage others to join strikes and resistance. So unlike *swoboda*, *wolność* is not a temporary state of mind but rather a constant almost always associated with nouns in the plural form, most probably referring to the collective identity achieved through apperception, as described in *Issues of socialism*. Further in *A general conspiracy...* the political substance of *wolność* is developed, as Abramowski writes about the necessity of creating an independent Polish parliament (*sejm*) and about civil liberties and rights such as the freedom of speech, assembly, the freedom to strike, the freedom of association and religion. *Swoboda* also appears in this text, mostly as a goal to be achieved through the resistance and fight for independence — a freedom of life in the future world.

It might be said that in the above mentioned texts *swoboda* is negative liberty, while *wolność* would refer to positive liberty — and this would not be entirely false. In fact, in Abramowski we can read about being *swobodny od* (free from), a phrase that is no longer possible in Polish. However, other semantic differences between *wolność* and *swoboda* shed light on the distinction itself. The spatiotemporal boundaries and bodily character of *swoboda* show how negative liberty cannot be absolutised and universalised in the same way as *wolność*, positive liberty, can. Absolute *swoboda* is impossible, as this would mean having no interaction with the outer world whatsoever. It can only ever be a moment in a more complex process of involvement both in the natural world and the social sphere. It is always human-sized, so it does not need to be preventively “neutralized” (Esposito, 2013: 56) — as the idea of absolute positive liberty would.

CONCLUSION

Like many others before and after him, Abramowski saw collective action as the best way to oppose oppression. But at the same time, even though he did encourage political and even armed resistance, he always acknowledged the weakness of the workers and their defencelessness in their predicament of work overload. This attitude often becomes highly patronising, but on the other hand a failure to acknowledge the weakness of citizens can lead to a delusion of agency and the attempt to transpose the idea of collective freedom (*wolność*) onto individual freedom — as if an individual were able to define his or her life conditions in the same way as a self-governing group. This can easily lead to frustration, as our genuine individual agency and capacity for choice² is usually in fact limited to a certain number of paid occupations — none of which are liberating in the sense of achieving self-realisation and joy. Moreover, if we think of our individual freedom in the same way as collective freedom, we will tend to do the exact opposite of what Abramowski recommends — we fill every gap of free time with “activism” (be it slacktivism, signing petitions or calling out the evils of this world on social media). Instead of creating actual breaches in the capitalist machinery, we deprive ourselves of the right to idleness, of time that is really free of useful purpose. We may think we are enjoying positive liberty, but viewed from the perspective of Abramowski’s philosophy this would be just the opposite, because it is the moment of individual *swoboda* that allows us to shape the future in a collective, but also creative way, that allows for something new to appear.

Moreover, without underestimating the importance of collective battles for freedom (*wolność*), we should not forget that for most of history the oppressed could only achieve relative *swoboda* — making breaches in the system. Here *swoboda* is used in a collective sense, but nevertheless without the capacity to (trans)form one’s reality through direct action in the foreseeable future. Jan Wasiewicz, in his essay about peasant revolts, calls this “cultural resistance”, a resistance which involves the celebration of pagan traditions, popular art and most especially songs and stories shared by communities (Wasiewicz, 2014: 154). They were not free in the sense of *wolność*, but they could enjoy some *swoboda* but for a limited amount of time and not in every place. In fact, the spatial dimension here may be as important as the temporal — when we compare the situation of 18th century peasants or early 20th century workers to today’s “free” citizens. The point can be illustrated by the blessing given by the rabbi in the *Fiddler on the roof*. When asked how do you bless the tsar, the

² Choice as a crucial category when thinking about freedom appeared with Latin translations of Greek terms for freedom and was later reinforced by the Christian idea of free will (Cassin, 2004: 341–345).

rabbi responds “God, bless the tsar and keep him... far away from us”. He does not have the freedom of speech that would allow him to say, “Down with the tsar!” In fact, he and his community in the Russian Empire have very few liberties and they are eventually forced to leave their village. What he can wish from God for his community is only as much *swoboda* to live their lives and celebrate their traditions as possible. Today, citizens of the so-called first world enjoy the legal guarantee of their liberties, but they keep their biopower tsars on their bedstands or even attach them to their bodies, allowing them to measure their pulse or count their steps.

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