Introduction:

The realness of reality

"New reality"

On July 30, 1989, less than two months after the first partly free elections which showed nearly unanimous support for the democratic opposition and became a milestone in the rapid dismantling of state socialism in Poland, the main edition of the news bulletin on national television aired a public announcement of great importance. The government, still an extension of the Polish United Workers' Party, had decided to take a crucial step towards the marketization of the economy. Faced with apparently insurmountable difficulties with the provision of food to the market, the Council of Ministers decided to deregulate the trade of agricultural products and liberate their prices.

Up until that point, only state-run buy-up centers could purchase produce from farmers and only at officially set prices (before distributing them to shops or food processing plants); from now on, meat and crops, as well as processed foods, could be bought and sold by all market participants and at market prices (official prices were to be maintained only for two-percent milk, lean cottage cheese, baby formula, and regular bread). At the same time, food rationing was lifted—meaning no more ration cards for staple foodstuffs, such as sugar, meat, flour and kasha, candy, alcohol, coffee, and cigarettes.[1]

This decision was among the first acts of "*urealnienie cen*," or "*realification of prices*": the replacement of a system where prices were set by fiat and provision of goods centrally controlled with one where prices would reflect the relationship between supply and demand, and trade would be decentralized and deregulated.[2]

Urealnienie was one of the keywords—and key elements—of Poland's systemic transformation:[3] the *realification* that started in the summer of 1989 with prices of food was soon carried out in full by economic "shock therapy" reforms (Sachs

2005) which rapidly transformed Poland's economy from a socialist to a market model. The reforms consisted of other key *realifications*: of the currency exchange rate (allowing the Polish złoty to become exchangeable on the international market and stopping hyperinflation) and of the interest rate (in order to create the conditions for commercial credit). Each was designed to do away with one or another *fiction* of the socialist economy. The term *urealnienie*, then, strongly suggested that the ongoing changes were, at their core, about a "return to reality," making reality *more real* than it had been under the arbitrary, centrally controlled, and by that time excruciatingly inefficient economy of socialism.[4]

Urealnienie, importantly, was used almost synonymously with two other words, *urynkowienie* (marketization) and *uwolnienie* (liberalization, setting free). Taken together, they made up a triad of *reality*, *market*, and *freedom* as opposed to *fiction*, *central planning*, and *dependence*—an opposition, more generally, between *rationality* and *normalcy* that the free market and democracy were expected to bring and what was commonly described as the *absurdity* and *abnormality* of state socialism (Skultans 2007; Verdery 1996: 204–205).

This supposed "return to reality" was not only a matter of economics. In politics, the end of the single party system also carried a promise of greater *realness*. As the outcome of the 1989 election made blatantly clear, the Polish United Workers' Party was no longer able to sustain legitimacy of its rule.[5] The pretense of representing the people, whether defined as the working class, the citizenry, or the nation, was commonly perceived as a lie, even by those who actively participated in party politics—a lie brought to light for all to see by the June elections. The idea of representative democracy, in which citizens could vote for a variety of options and themselves run for office, or could organize a "civil society" under conditions of freedom of speech and assembly, again juxtaposed lie and truth, dependency and freedom, and promised that reality—the way things *really* were—would be brought to bear on official discourses and politics in a new, more immediate fashion. Similarly, the end of censorship not only allowed subjugated and excluded oppositional discourses to enter the official sphere, turning it into a liberal public sphere, but also meant that previously silenced historical events could be publicly discussed,[6] as was rapidly becoming the case. In other words, the term *urealnienie*, or realification, can be taken to denote a broader process central to postsocialist transformation in Poland: the closing of the gap between experienced reality and its official representation. Or, as I discuss below, between reality as experiential and referential.

Two decades after the "shock therapy" reforms, I embarked on an ethnographic project trying to make sense of the apparently soaring rates of depression in Poland. Exploring knowledges and practices in the social field of depression, from its public representation to clinical practice to doctors' and patients' own narratives,

I gradually became aware of the different ways in which *urealnienie* also permeated the treatment and conceptualization of this increasingly common disorder.

Many depressed patients' problems were framed as basically problems *with reality* and relating to it. I found it striking. Questions of reality in psychiatry would seem primarily to concern psychotic disorders, which involve delusions and hallucinations. The problems of depression, however, were largely of the explicitly non-psychotic kind. While they did not have a distorted perception of their surroundings, it was still patients' relationship to reality that was at issue in their illness and their recovery. Reality and the challenges of relating to it had long been very much at stake in a variety of psychotherapeutic schools, but the practice of psychotherapy had itself only started to become widespread in Poland, mostly among the emerging middle classes, in parallel with the economic and political realification. Reality, in other words, was taking on a new role in the changing field of mental health just as it was being called upon and brought out by the postsocialist reforms.

Newspapers and psychiatrists tend to agree that the "new reality" of the market has since its arrival added to the overall burden of stress leading to depression (Czabała et al. 2000). In clinical practice, it is clear that, for many, reality has become unbearable, either in harshly materialist terms of lost job security or in insidiously phantasmic terms of always coming short of expectations and hopes and things not being right. Yet, it holds an ambiguous position. "Entering reality" can shatter a person's mental wholeness, but it is also held as a crucial element of healing, in so far as avoidance, or refusing to accept "what is," is often proclaimed to lie at depression's very root.

My contention here is that there is more to these figures of reality looming across different fields of discourse and practice than merely a metaphoric semblance. Indeed, this book argues that Poland's rapid postsocialist transformation and protracted capitalist formation must be understood in terms of changing modes of producing reality and that psychiatry at once *registers*, *administers*, and *is itself the object of* a change in the ways that reality is constituted and related to. It *registers* it in the form of increased rates of mood disorders—patients who fail to function in the competitive and desire-driven market economy; it *administers* it via treatment that seeks to transform patients' relationship to reality, whether by medication, psychotherapy, or both; finally, it *is the object of* that change as a biopolitical discipline whose forms of expertise, practice, and organization become increasingly formalized and technicized.

Sociologist Nikolas Rose observed in the 1990s that the end of socialism in Eastern Europe and the construction of liberal democracy in the region would likely, just as it had in "the West," give a special political role to the technologies of psychology and psychiatry, that which he calls the "psy-" disciplines:

> As the apparatus of the party and the plan is dismantled, other forms of authority are born, other ways of shaping and guiding the choices and aspirations of these newly freed individuals. … Perhaps the transition to market economies and political pluralism will require … not just the importation of the material technologies of liberal democracy but also their human technologies. (Rose 1996: 100)

My research explores this abstractly and hypothetically described importation in ethnographic detail and shows the ways in which it has and has not converged with formal understandings of "liberal democracy" and how it continues to play out in the specific political, economic, and cultural circumstances of people's lives. Moreover, placing these "human technologies" in the broader framework of the locally salient claim to realness, I detail how this claim, central to Poland's historical present, has inevitably frayed and transformed over time and in practice.

In this book, I understand reality not as simply "what is," but as socially available and practicable ways of relating to "what is." In other words, I am not concerned with reality as such so much as with the *realness* of reality and the ways that realness is produced. In contrast to the socio-phenomenological tradition that defines reality as the taken-for-granted, transparent, and passive environment of experience (see especially the classic study by Berger and Luckmann 1966), to speak of the *realness of reality* means seeing reality in terms both dynamic and active; as having a demanding, corrective, and confrontational dimension. To speak of realness, therefore, means to see reality as what inevitably and stubbornly just *is* and, at the same time, as something always mediated and usually approached in more or less roundabout ways.

If *reality* is typically understood as independent of our recognition and running its course whether or not we are "in touch" with it, *realness* comes with the recognition of the demands it places on us. As a concept, realness denotes the quality of reality that renders it recognizable as such (rather than transparent), that is, as binding, impossible to effectively avoid. Realness becomes an issue when it is in deficit; it is then that it may produce a dissonance—and it is as such that it comes up in the context of depression. When realness is not lacking, it may be understood as productive of a "reality effect" that naturalizes a state of affairs, allowing it to fade into acceptance, turning it into the unquestionable. In this aspect, realness bears resemblance to hegemony in the tradition of Gramsci and the Frankfurt School (Williams 1977a: 108–114). Thus understood, the production of realness was a challenge to the socialist state—it left a gap through which its legitimacy was constantly escaping. And thus understood, it seems again a challenge to the current market technocratic regime.

The "yawning gap" between what was proclaimed to be and what actually was is a recurrent theme in analyses of socialism that note and explore descriptions of life as absurd, abnormal, or replete with fictions (Burawoy and Lukács 1992; Havel 1985; Kharkhordin 1999; Sloterdijk 1987; Žižek 2008; c.f. Yurchak 2006: 16–18). Against that backdrop, the "new reality" of postsocialism was offered as decidedly more real than the previous one: socialism had failed and now it was going to be everyone's own responsibility to take care of themselves rather than rely on the state for care, protection, and provision of basic resources, such as housing and income. Poles were to become masters of their own fate, for better or for worse—but *for real*. In that respect, *urealnienie* amounted to equating reality with capitalism, a conflation Mark Fisher has called "capitalist realism" (Fisher 2009).[7]

This "new reality" was not only new but also constituted as real in a new and more binding way. At once a top-down imposition and a bottom-up unconcealment, it was effected through confrontational, self-legitimizing disclosure: the occurrence of layoffs meant that layoffs were necessary; budget cuts were only to bring reality out from underneath the fictional "soft" financing of institutions and enterprises; the sharp decline of domestic purchasing power was a consequence of realification of the currency. In other words, it was the reality of a "reality check," of a crisis as a "moment of truth" (Roitman 2013: 3).[8] If, however, that shift in realness produced distress (which it did), that distress was not yet being registered in psychiatric diagnoses—these, as Chapter One below shows, came later, with the imperfect formation of the category of depression and its displacement of other idioms of distress.

The revealing of reality through economic "shock therapy" gradually gave way to a different modality of realness: one of formalized, technicized, and sustained production in which reality was constituted and known predominantly by reference to free market mechanisms and via a number of stabilizing operations (economic calculation, technicization of budgeting, application of international formal standards and predictive data). These stabilizing operations, characteristic of neoliberal governance (Rose 1996; Collier 2005a, 2011), served to translate the demands of market rationality into objective "reality plain and simple," thus naturalizing and legitimizing them. Over time, these stabilizing operations began to produce their own "fictions" and "absurdities," but of a new and different kind. Their strong hold on reality—their claim on objectivity, novelty, and faceless technicality—rendered new fictions hard to name and critique. This is where depression as a problem of a relationship to reality arises.

The "reality gap" of late socialism, the "reality check" of revelatory confrontation, and the "neoliberal formalization" were three modes of producing realness. They also offer a chronology: the "reality gap" was characteristic of late

socialism of the late 1970s and 1980s in Poland; the "reality check" was the dominant mode of producing realness during the economic and political reforms introduced between the late 1980s and late 1990s, particularly during the peak of the transformation from 1989 to, roughly, 1993; the third, formalization, in the particular case of mental health care, became predominant in the 2000s, following important diagnostic and financial reforms of the health care system (discussed in detail in Chapter Two).

This chronology complicates periodizations of popular political and economic histories of Eastern Europe that center on the iconic year 1989 as *the* turning point. Certainly, 1989 was rich in symbolic moments of transition: from the roundtable talks and the first semi-democratic elections in Poland to the fall of the Berlin Wall. I recognize the significance of symbolic and ritual acts in political life (e.g., Kubik 1994), and I also heed to the sweeping reforms that fundamentally and concretely reshaped the economic and political system and ushered in what was commonly called the "new reality."[9] At the same time, however, such chronologies obscure other, more subtle processes of both change and continuity. It is those that I bring out in this historically informed ethnography of depression in Poland that keeps its analytic focus on the modes and techniques of producing realness from the 1990s into the second decade of the 21st century.

While the notion of "reality" as used in the context of economic "shock therapy" and psychotherapy may seem to have rather different referents, I argue that it refers to essentially the same imagined gap and warrants comparable symbolic and material operations. The "new reality" meant that Poles' *relationship* to reality needed to change. Psychiatry and psychology are crucial sites where this need is registered as a problem and where new subject dispositions, new ways of relating, are produced. Thus depression, as the most common complaint bringing Poles into mental health treatments today, simultaneously functions as a new idiom of distress and demarcates a space in which realness works to remake subjectivity and reality in contemporary Poland.

Reality in psychiatry and psychotherapy

In my fieldwork with physicians, therapists, and depressed patients in Warsaw, reality appeared repeatedly, and in several ways. Trying to account for the rise of mood disorders since the 1990s, many psychiatrists, apparently combining their professional experience with culturally available narratives of the transformation, explained that under socialism people had been insulated from reality by artificial job security in the fiction of full employment; they had been kept in an unreal—unsustainable—relationship of childlike subjection and

dependence opposite the state. With that dependence came ignorance—insulation not only from risks and insecurities but also from desires and expectations. The painful confrontation with reality marked a "coming of age" of a populace that was separating from the paternalist state and becoming mature, responsible, and independent. The theme, recurrent in my research, of immaturity as a characteristic of individuals and society as a whole, testifies to it.[10] This confrontation produced social costs, of which depression was a part, as when brought on by the stress of unemployment. The more demanding reality of today has caused many to break down and rendered them unable to cope. Treatment and recovery are conceived of in terms of managing the relationship to this reality, typically by helping the patient or client to see it "adequately" and to accept it, sometimes by supporting them in enduring the pressures put upon—and pushing upon—him or her.

Consider the following quotes from psychiatrists and therapists referring to the new reality and to reality as such. The first comes from a 1992 press article from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the leading liberal daily supportive of the market and political reforms. It features Dr. Jerzy Pawlik, the director of a psychotherapy center in a psychiatric clinic near Warsaw that is at risk of being shut down due to budget cuts—very common at the time. He describes what he calls "social depressions" (*depresje społeczne*), that is, cases of patients "with a healthy psyche" (*o zdrowej psychice*) who are nonetheless in deep depression. These are patients with "life problems," or whose problem is coping with the surrounding reality. These "social depressions," he says, first appeared during the socially, politically, and economically trying period of the martial law in the early 1980s, but now, in the new post-1989 reality, they are not only back, but have become harder to diagnose. Dr. Pawlik is quoted as follows:

> In the past [before 1989], reality was psychologically simpler. Its structure was clearly black and white. Today, there no longer is such polarization. It is hard to find one's place in reality, and that produces frustration. New problems arise that didn't exist in the past: related to losing one's job, lacking success. (Staw 1992)

This brief and anecdotal mention in a newspaper is characteristic of the way the difference between old and new realities and its bearing on depression were described in the difficult and disorienting time of the early 1990s—not only by psychotherapists, but also in public and popular discourse more generally. This change in the order of reality and its interpretations produced experiences that matched the symptomatic manifestation of depression; people, at once healthy and "in deep depression," came to seek professional medical help with their "life problems."

Here is another short fragment, this one from one of my conversations with Dr. Hanna Bugajska, a senior psychiatrist with nearly fifty years of clinical experience. Although formally retired, at the time of our meetings she still works part-time, dividing her commitments between a public and a private mental health center in Warsaw. She starts with a description of the socialist past, then moves on to compare this past to her work with patients today—now in a private clinic, which caters to better-off clientele:

> I think there used to be less of that [of people seeking help with life problems]. You know, there was job security [*bezpieczeństwo pracowe*]. And most people were able to earn their daily bread. And there were none of those drastic layoffs. I think families were more stable, too. There weren't such sudden crashes. And people were so naïve, they didn't know that somewhere out there was the rich world. … I always find it funny … because now people see that one can have [things]. … But back then, apparently, people weren't aware of that … and so they didn't have such [aspirations] … they didn't take such risks. But today, these young people go to work and: take out a mortgage loan for a house, because it's not cool to live in a housing project; take out a loan for a car; … buy their furniture on credit, because it also needs to be like this or like that … —and they have their directorial jobs—it's not a fairytale, that's how it is. And when they lose their jobs, they stick their thumb in their mouth and cry! A mixture of terrible annoyance and great compassion always comes over me, because the stupidity of their actions is so evident, and they're not dumb people, you know? …

Varying notions of reality meet in this fragment. First, there is the insulation from a certain kind of harsh reality of life that the socialist state provided in the past—albeit at the cost of economic inefficiency. It was that "unsustainable fiction" that made the painful "reality check" appear as a necessary corrective and condition of recovery after 1989. People who lived in that "artificial reality" were, predictably, naïve, unaware of the greater ambitions, desires, and *things* and experiences—in other words: lives—they could be having. Their limitation was the price of their security. Now, the security no longer there, reality itself, along with its constitutive burdens, responsibilities, and risks, becomes the source of life problems that produce depressive symptoms. But this life, supposedly more "real," is immediately described in terms of its own fictions; reality is inevitably wrapped in a veil of illusions the successful navigation of which is what mental wellbeing hinges on, illusions fueled by those very aspirations and desires the lack of which defined the socialist fiction of yesteryear. What Dr. Bugajska sees as people's naïveté and immaturity, rather than an element of their social and existential security, is what puts them at risk:

> Losing one's job, which, as you know, is quite [common] in those better firms, banks—[those young people] make very quick careers there, have high positions, also probably in a fraudulent way [*w sposób załgany*] each is a director, an executive, or whatever, and they really believe it!—and then in five minutes they have to pack up and leave, like in an American movie, they can't even get access to their computer and some are walked out by a security guard or something. … I understand that that's a [source of] serious stress, however it's still a pretty long way from a psychiatrist's office. But they do seek that kind of help, both psychological and medical.

Dr. Bugajska admits to being old-fashioned and critical of the expansion of diagnostic categories. These patients, she contends, are not *really* ill. Still, they have symptoms and feel they can't go on. Reality "gets them" because they lacked critical distance and failed to recognize it, failed to recognize their own disposability, the instability of their credit-financed consumption reflecting the instability of fictitious capital, or the burden of stress that the achievement of success would put on them. Depression can be an effect of a confrontation with reality as well as of *avoiding that confrontation* (as I discuss later, in such cases the diagnoses often combine depressive episodes with a personality disorder). Following the introduction of new diagnostics, the category of depression has been broadened to apply to cases like these, making both the disorder and its treatment modalities more prevalent.

Below is another experienced physician, psychiatrist, and psychotherapist Prof. Jerzy Matej, describing a change he had noticed in his patient population since the early 1990s. Again, we see here an emergence of a new kind of patient, a patient whose problems—"life problems"—have to do directly with their relationship with "reality." Matej segues between different registers—that of particular patients and society at large, that of clinical practice and economic and political transition. He, too, paints a picture of life under communism as conducive to greater psychic stability, but also resembling infantile fantasy as opposed to reality and maturity, which capitalism demands (here discussed as hope as opposed to hopelessness):

> J. M.: [The statistical increase in rates of depression] concerns those patients who are unable to function; [it] concerns people who have personality disorders … and people who … well, what is going up is also the number [of people] coming in [who use] psychoactive substances, but they, in my judgment, are mostly people who [similarly] decompensate depressively in a situation that is difficult for them. That's how I see it.
>
> G. S.: And those situations are more frequent than before, in your opinion?
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> J. M.: Of course. In communism [*w komunie*] there was nothing to do in the

> afternoon, one didn't have the option to take extra work, everyone had their "social" ["*socjal*," social insurance/security], there was not such great stratification [*rozwarstwienie*], you know, at most one person had a Big Fiat, another a Little Fiat,[11] and a third didn't have a car, but there were no greater desires and therefore frustrations, possibilities …

Life under socialism, in other words, was less likely to produce difficult circumstances that would precipitate mental crises. There was less opportunity, but also fewer challenges and risks. There were also, Matej suggests, fewer objects of desire and less inequality of socioeconomic and cultural status. This image, however, brings up the notion of hopelessness—a lack of horizon and prospects of a better future associated with late socialism with its political and economic crisis and largely futile attempts at reform. Asked about hopelessness, Matej disagrees:

> J. M.: I think the opposite—that there was more hope during communism. In my opinion the whole phenomenon of "Solidarity"[12] came from the fact that people had great hope that someday—no one knew when—everything would change, and we would be in paradise. And now we are in that paradise, and we see that it's no paradise at all, but a situation in which everything depends on each person and no one else will do anything for us. And [yet] attitudes such that the Pope, or whoever, will fix everything for everyone, such demanding attitudes [*roszczeniowe postawy*] that communism—incapacitating people as it did—[had produced, persist]. … The phenomenon of the people [who used to work on state farms] and now, after the state farms were dissolved, do nothing, because they had been shaped [in such a way that it is] someone else [who] organizes their life. … Here there is freedom, but there is no welfare [*opiekuńczość*]. Everyone's on their own, and a lot of people are not capable of that. And so before there was the hope that when communism came tumbling down, things would be different and it'd get better, or that the system would change, ease off or something. … But now there is no [such] hope anymore. … Because those who are more entrepreneurial, the new generation, yes, they have hope and are able to draw from that [*czerpać z tego*], but most people are, as I call it, not satisfied but adapted [*nie zadowolonych a zaadaptowanych*]. But, well, they don't have hope. The retired don't have hope they'll start vacationing in the Canary Islands every year, my generation doesn't have hope either that they will receive a decent retirement pension from the state. I have to manage my money myself so that I have a pension. I alone need to [make sure I have] some resources.

Matej paints a familiar picture: under socialism, life was dull and limiting but safe. However, it wasn't "real." It was an artificially sustained fiction which