

**"The Colorado Beetle's Attack"**  
**Or: the potato bug in the Cold War propaganda service in Poland<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

In 1950, *Trybuna Ludu* (*People's Tribune*), the official newspaper of the ruling communist party in Poland, published an article entitled "Incredible Crime of the American Imperialists" about how American planes dropped a "significant amount" of the potato bug (*Leptinotarsa decemlineata*) on the territory of the German Democratic Republic. That was the beginning of the "environmental" Cold-War propaganda that would last for two decades. The role of an imperialistic saboteur responsible for food shortages and famine was imposed on the potato bug.

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the epistemic figurations, or certain regularities in the thought typical of a given period, and the identification of discursive formations of the hegemonic discourse in reference to the most popular environmental topic in post-war Poland. The propaganda which grounded the figure of a "pest" as a threat for safety and health in the collective mind will be discussed in three sequences of similar structure (the bug attacks; the struggle against the bug continues; modernity's superiority towards the bug) but in different rhetoric:

- from the early '50s – sensational-ideological sequence;
- from the mid-'50s – organic-modernizing sequence;
- from the early '60s – technical-modernizing sequence.

The research material consists of the articles dating from 1950 to 1965 from *Trybuna Ludu*, selected on the basis of the chronology and topic key. The Methodology is based on the Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA) as understood by Maartin Hajer as well as a semantic-pragmatic analysis of the Polish newspeak.

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The article has been prepared within the framework of a research project "Public communication in Poland - an inter and multidisciplinary perspective" implemented by the academic consortium "Discourse Analysis" and financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland (National Program of Humanities Development, agreement no. 0114/NPRH2/H11/81/2013).

In February 1946, just before the elections to the Soviet Committee, Joseph Stalin gave a famous speech in which he pointed out that the development of capitalism was inevitably connected with crises and wars. He foretold that the capitalistic world would soon divide into two camps which would lead to wars over access to the market and resources. One

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the conference "Ecolinguisticum Graz", October 24-26, 2015.

month later, Winston Churchill spoke about the Iron Curtain which divided Europe. These two events marked the beginning of the Cold War (Holzer 2012: 50).

The crisis was sealed in December 1947 with the fiasco of negotiations between the foreign affairs ministers of the four WW2 victor countries over their politics towards Germany. In February 1948, another communist coup d'état happened, this time in Czechoslovakia. This overthrow played an important role in the development of the Cold War, as many Western politicians viewed that country as a kind of bridge between the eastern and western parts of Europe.

Stalin's dictatorship, marked with violence and the rigor of total civil submission, raised hopes on the one hand and fear on the other. As R. J. Crampton (1994: 213) points out, socialism in 1945 seemed to be a good alternative to capitalism. At that time capitalism in a common understanding appeared as a system which had failed during the economic crisis in the 1930s and the weakness of which led to fascism, war, and the horror of the Holocaust. However, the central-eastern European countries behind the descending Iron Curtain faced the threat of Soviet socialism with its collectivization, famine and terror.

The cultural project to manage the new social-political reality in the satellite states of the USSR was social realism (Applebaum 2013), which led to the invention of a new language. New vocabulary was coined and spread through constant repetition, as goes the rule *Wielokrotnie powtórzone - zapamiętane i utrwalone* (Polish for 'repeated many times – memorized and grounded'). This repetitiveness was in fact the basis of Stalin's philosophy of re-education. As Marci Shore (2011: 121-122) notes, social realism was designed to instruct 'masses', instill socialist ideas in their minds, and inspire them to revolutionary action. The new ideologically instrumentalized and 'codified language of the Stalin era' served this aim.

Discursive engineering – according to witness and the victim of these events, leftist Polish writer Aleksander Wat – was the basic function of social realism. He writes that “[it was] an ingenious invention by Stalin to shift the human language beyond truth and falsity, beyond honesty and lie, [...] the overcoming of feeling, knowledge and measurement in relation to word and an object, which is giving semantic values of a language a perfectly-flexible consistency and, above all, an algebraic syntax”(Wat 1991: 164).

These characteristics were to be found in the social communication from the first half of the '50s in Poland. Social communication processes were at that time completely institutionalized, instrumentalized (subordinate to Marxist-Leninist ideology), and

monopolized (the ruling party and their bodies were the only authorized public senders). Abiding the institutional sender's instructions in all means of mass communication led to schematic communicates, the content of which was prepared in accordance to the specifics of the Stalinist discourse. As Paweł Nowak (2002: 52) notes, it is very difficult to evaluate the informational value of the texts printed then as "with all certainty they are neither objective nor reliable, although they do deliver properly adjusted knowledge of the world". The 'falsity' or 'artificiality' of these texts, as perceived today, stems from the fact that they do not contain the description of the reality but they aim at creating or interpreting it instead.

In this briefly-described historical context and under these social-communicational conditions, a potato bug (*Leptinotarsa decemlineata*) came into existence in the Stalinist propaganda in Cold-War Poland<sup>2</sup>. It came with a surprise, as never before had its population been that numerous in the Central-Eastern European countries. It had become a threat to potato crops only after WW2. On 24 May 1950 *Trybuna Ludu* ("People's Tribune"), the official newspaper of the ruling communist party in Poland, published an article entitled 'Incredible Crime of the American Imperialists' about how the American planes dropped *significant amounts* of the potato bug on the territory of the German Democratic Republic. That was the beginning of the 'environmental' Cold-War propaganda that would last for two decades. The role of an imperialistic saboteur responsible for food shortages and famine was imposed on the potato bug. This campaign is believed to have been an attempt to hide the reality with its more chilling international issues, such as the conflicts in Korea and in Vietnam. Apart from that, social attitudes are reflected there as well, influencing the projection of the reality on each field, also on *traditionally bucolic* (Francoise Thom's term, 1990: 15) ones, like farming.

The aim of this article is to analyze the discourse in which the potato bug begins to function as an emblem symbolizing and accumulating common social attitudes and imaginations about vermin and the meaning of the fight against them. The very term 'emblem' is deployed here following Maartin A. Hajer's (2005) understanding who used it in his environmental discourse analysis, trying to leave the false – according to him – methodological dichotomy *detail versus relevance*. In this view, emblems function as symbols of a wider problem, focusing public attention and public discourse (Hajer 1995:20).

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<sup>2</sup> The potato bug propaganda campaign took place not only in Poland but also in e.g. Czechoslovakia and Eastern Germany.

Concerning social communication they tend to play the role of key words which, thanks to their vagueness and prevalence, enable reduction of the discursive complexity while at the same time they widen the field of the stereotypical images in relation to the issues symbolized.

The propaganda which grounded the figure of a 'pest' as a threat to safety and health in the collective mind will be discussed in three sequences of similar narration (the bug attacks; the struggle against the bug continues; modernity's superiority towards the bug) but with different rhetoric:

- from the early '50s – sensational-ideological sequence;
- from the mid-'50s – organic-modernizing sequence;
- from the early '60s – technical-modernizing sequence.

The research material consists of three articles selected from a corpus consisting of 100 publications concerning widely-understood environmental subjects from 1950 to 1966 from *Trybuna Ludu*. Firstly, 22 articles concerning the potato bug subject were selected on the basis of their chronology and key topic. Next, referring to the criterion of significance (typicality), the three texts were chosen and the rest will be treated as expletive.

The first one, "Incredible crime..." stands as a typical example of the Stalinist discourse in which a Manichean, black-and-white image of the world, divided into two contrasting camps – Eastern ('Us') and Western ('Them', 'the Other') – is reflected. In this conspiracy vision a prosaic environmental issue such as the migration of species<sup>3</sup> is entangled into the Cold-War conflict. The titular 'incredible crime' is a never-confirmed raid of American planes which supposedly dropped 'tons' of the vermin onto the farming fields of the GDR. This misdeed, as emphasized in the article, done under cover of night and with the violation of the other country's borders, was depicted with the use of hyperboles and with the 'negative pathos' characteristic of the epoch's language, such as: *incredible crime, criminal misdeed, unbelievable action, terror attack modeled on fascists' demeanor*. The load is described as a potato bug *bomb*. The name of the insect appears in each and every

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<sup>3</sup> The potato bug, according to the most credible trajectory; in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries made its way from the natural habitat in Colorado (the USA) to France on the trading cruises and subsequently moved to Germany and Poland during WW2.

sentence of that peculiar account. Loaded with pejorative meaning, it would enter the unequivocal marking vocabulary of the Cold-War dictionary. Periphrastic species names would become more of an idiom – linguistic peculiarity of the epoch, in which the vermin functions in an ideologically-instrumentalized manner, totally subordinate to the conflict rhetoric as: *dangerous beetle from Colorado, farmer's no. 1 enemy* or *striped/colourful saboteur*.

What is striking in the article is the richness of the designations of the representatives of the Cold-War polarized parties. However, their depiction is not parallel. In reference to the 'enemy', simple ritual invectives are employed, the emotional load of which is gradually increased. The title mentions the well-spread idiom *American imperialists*, followed by the culturally-implicated epithet *American gangsters*, the institutionalized ideological phrase *American monopolistic capital agents* and the combined formula<sup>4</sup> *imperialistic warmongers who cultivate the politics of exploitation and colonization in West Germany*. 'The Other' in this propaganda vision are epitomized by the USA, defined through differentiating parent categories: imperialism and capitalism. 'Us', on the other hand, are presented in a more neutral manner and selectively: people, particularly farmers and workers, who stand as positive protagonists of the article. The class division appears as transnational, concentrating the Eastern Bloc countries around the socialist idea. The article ends with the declaration of unity in the fight against the enemy – both the potato bug and the USA, the fight for... peace:

However, that plot [to spread the plague of the bug] will fail. It will shatter over the vigilance of our laborers and farmers. Our answer will be the reinforcement of the National Front and an even firmer fight to maintain peace.

The article 'Incredible Crime...' commenced a new front in that fight, passing through the potato farmlands, on which the farmers would regularly launch 'lustration campaigns' during the cropping season in order to destroy the vermin. In the propagandistic vision of the world, the bug ceased to be an ordinary insect. As Vladimir Macura (1994: 113) writes, "the bug transformed into a symbol, an animal – an emblem of the West. Its characteristics

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<sup>4</sup> This particular mechanism of the Stalinist discourse was probably referred to by A. Wat, when speaking about its *algebraic syntax*.

seemed to reflect the basic characteristics of the imperialists, mainly, of course, the Northern-American ones". The *striped saboteur* was a *hideous worm* (the readers were not spared the descriptions of how a larva becomes an adult insect), it attacked from hiding, nesting under the soil surface. *Aggressive and voracious*, it spread swiftly and reproduced quickly, leaving behind leafless, destroyed crops.

As a result of the escalating propaganda campaign from the early '50s, the bug became a significant element of *the Eastern man's imagination*, a threat comparable to the atomic bomb and mass destruction, as illustrated by the following excerpt from the speech by Bolesław Bierut (1950: 4), the first leader of the Polish People's Republic, in which he appealed to quickly:

(...) uproot from the human psyche the morose image of the Middle-Age superstitions as well as the bacteria of the perversions of the capitalist times poisoning the social life, the predatory instincts of the fascist degeneration, represented today by the imperialist camp, the camp of the warmongers, the ideologists of the atomic bomb and mass murders, the propagators of sabotage and *szkodnictwo*<sup>5</sup> on a global scale.

The hysterical conflict rhetoric, dominated by war metaphors, gradually gave space to more rationalizing and socially-normalizing approaches<sup>6</sup>. The potato bug remained in the social imagination of Poles as *a political insect*<sup>7</sup>, strictly-connected to the standing ideology and world division. However, in the mid-'50s when *the perfectly-nested fear of war* (Zaremba 2012: 409) slowly withered for *the small stabilization*<sup>8</sup>, *Trybuna Ludu* offered a modified approach to informing the public about the threat.

A typical example of that can be found in the article "Caution: Potato Bug!" from 1955. The fundamental change is that the pest ceases to function in reference to

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<sup>5</sup> Polish for 'wrecking'; however, it is connected to 'szkodnik' – 'vermin', 'pest'.

<sup>6</sup> As Michał Głowiński (1995: 142) noted, the language of the Stalinist propaganda was the *language of the Martial Law*, which was heard also later in the times of especially cruel political campaigns: "In such situations the language falls for rabies, it becomes aggressive and cruel. Public speaking becomes a squabble".

<sup>7</sup> Ryszard Kapuściński (2008: 9), famous Polish journalist, wrote in 1958: "This is an evil land, he says. Socialism won't settle down in here any soon. A tractor won't pass. It will pass, says the village mayor, of course it will [...]. The potato bug has arrived. The potato bug is a political bug."

<sup>8</sup> Small Stabilization was the period of improvement of social attitudes in the first years of Wiesław Gomułka's ruling (1956), connected to hopes for a gradual improvement of the situation in Poland.

international politics but instead is limited to the territory of Poland – and even to specific places. The article opens with enumerating voivodeships (later also provinces and even villages) threatened by the bug population:

Dangerous vermin of the potato crop have already appeared. The reports come from the following voivodeships: Poznan, Szczecin, Zielona Góra and Opole. The first specimens have been spotted even in the Kraków Voivodeship.

Another difference is taking into account such 'objective' factors like weather conditions, for instance: *belated spring* curbing the invasion or *heavy rains* obstructing the field controls. A special emphasis is put, however, on planning and adequate realization of the anti-bug campaign. It was, of course, the effect of the planned economy at the time, in which the targets and aims of the country's economical development were planned centrally in the macro-scale but also for each individual sector. After the fiasco of the Six-Year Plan (1950-1955) in farming, special attention was given to reducing the obstacles in reaching the next targets. Because of that, the article contains criticism of various shortages, such as tardiness of the workforce, incompetence in using the sprayers, and delays with fixing the sprayers. In this way, the latest achievements in the fight against the vermin (collected mostly by farmers into jars with kerosene, lamp oil) are highlighted. The modernizing ambitions go hand-in-hand with the reinforced efforts, as *Trybuna Ludu* convinces:

This year we have more devices, more chemicals, as well as more of the full-time specialists in plant protection.

The focal point of the anti-bug propaganda lies, however, in mobilizing people to fight the vermin. It is worth adding at this point that the volunteers were not only farmers or inhabitants of the villages but also those who did not deal with food production on an everyday basis. *Teams of potato bug busters, the leaders of plant protection, the anti-bug units* are just a few of the names created via propaganda to describe those who more or less

voluntarily joined the campaigns: pupils, teachers, students, people on holiday<sup>9</sup> who were encouraged not only to take part but also to compete against one another. A constant component of these 'field lustration' accounts is enumerating the most successful provinces, teams, and individuals based on productivity and efficiency.

The mobilization was massive. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to judge its scale. The fact remains that 'hunting the bug' lay its roots in the collective memory for many years. When in 1996 a Polish journalist, Lidia Ostałowska from *Gazeta Wyborcza* (1996), asked the readers to share their personal experiences, several dozen people called. One account portrays the effects of the invasive propaganda:

Anna D. from Nowy Sącz: One time my aunt volunteered for the campaign. She lived in a city and came here for holidays. She wanted to fight the bug with a pitchfork. She only saw the bug on a poster and simply thought that its size was as big as its depiction.

The article in question also ends with a call to social involvement:

Our country does not spare means on fighting the bug. The increased funding for this year's campaign to fight the bug should be accompanied by a sacrificial and understanding effort on behalf of the village.

The effect of the mobilizing anti-bug propaganda of that period was above all, the internalization of the 'enemy'. The emblem of the West was transformed into *the first vermin of the Polish People's Republic*, which was obstructing the ambitious economic plans drawn by the Communist Party threatening the well-being of citizens. The metaphoric shift is also noteworthy: "vermin" or "bug" referred now to those who acted to the detriment of the socialist system by, for instance, tardiness in the *social deed*, or other examples of sabotage. One of the propaganda posters exemplifies this notion, depicting as a 'uniform'

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<sup>9</sup> This may sound surprising today, but in the first years of the Polish People's Republic the holidays packages offered by the Party were often connected with *a social deed* for the sake of the local community. Leisure and work were narrowly connected in the communist ethos.

bug, a crowd of military pensioners who at the age of 35 cease to work and *prey on the fruits* of others' labor.

A new social ritual was created during that time, namely the yearly massive participation in bug-catching in the fields. Taking part in *fighting the bug* served as a kind of test of class belonging. As Beata Penderecka (1996), daughter of a famous Polish composer, Krzysztof Penderecki, recounts:

My dad was forced to participate with the children from his grade. He was so appalled by the activity that he decided to wear gloves to pick the bugs on the crops. The next day my grandfather was called in to school. The school administrators accused him of raising his children in the *bourgeoisie* spirit.

The social ritual was accompanied by discursive practice which can be reconstructed through *Trybuna Ludu* publications. It consisted of the following recurrent components:

1. planning the campaign in specified voivodeships;
2. announcing the schedule of the actions;
3. a call for action and mobilization of the volunteers;
4. field lustrations, as specified in the instructions;
5. information about the known 'nests' and, subsequently, their liquidation;
6. a call to increase the efforts in fighting the vermin.

Each summer until the late '50s, the pages of the Communist Party's paper were filled with accounts from various parts of Poland, written in accordance with this scenario. They played the role of a linguistic ritual that, in the communist propaganda, is not only a verbal act but also a mental one, influencing the consciousness of the readership, and the reality (Dytman-Stasieńko 2006: 18).

This second sequence of the anti-bug propaganda lasted the longest. A new shift can be noticed with the early '60s. First of all, the environmental theme became much wider. The problems connected with the rapid industrialization of the country, such as water and air pollution, became the focal ones. In the mid-'60s most attention was given to the necessity of water purification, and publications on air dust and smokiness started appearing in large numbers. The interest in the potato bug, however, received less and less attention.

Secondly, due to a virtual decrease of the bug threat, the pest became one of many to be fought against – the most important but not the only one. In the article “Before the Season of the Chemical Battle” from 1964, alongside *the potato plague*, other endangered crops are mentioned: beetroots, colza, hop, tobacco. A new periphrasis, based not on metaphor shift but on metonymy, is worth mentioning here. It conceptualized the vermin in a wholly new way, rather in reference to the domain of health than in the spirit of antagonism. The bug as the *potato plague* is a disease, not an enemy; the plague is more of an epidemic than an invasion. Therefore, other means are to be taken to fight it.

In the field of the discursive practice not much was changed. The above-mentioned linguistic ritual was still rehearsed every summer. However, the theme of hoarding the chemicals to fight the vermin replaced the call to mobilization. The subtitle of the article in question reads “Assassination of the weeds! More Chemicals! Not enough sprayers!”. The text itself refers to big numbers, for instance:

The amount of chemicals increases from 65,960 tons used in the last year to 83,480 tons in the current season.

Subsequently provided are descriptions of various herbicides, pesticides and fungicidal agents, their efficiency and reach. There are appeals to industry to intensify the production of locally-produced chemicals (e.g. Pielik, Chwastox).

Apart from the ‘ammunition’ in this chemical battle, also the ‘weapon’ is needed, that is, adequate equipment. The article contains their peculiar overview: from various types of sprayers (backpack or tractor types) to employing planes to spray the fields. ‘Uniforms’ are also mentioned, e.g. adequate clothing and masks which should ensure the safety at work.

It is clearly noticeable that the emphasis of the anti-bug propaganda, in which the military metaphor is still employed, shifts in the third sequence towards the exposition of the force of the modern technologies in the fight against the vermin. Modernizing ambitions, at that time well-satisfied as an effect of the rapid industrialization of the country in the ‘60s, required replacing the *production masses*, who had been earlier involved in the fight against the bug, with *tons of chemicals* which were supposed to efficiently liquidate the crop problems. The article mentions *scientific projections* in reference to vermin

occurrence or the help from the *Soviet scholars* in devising more advanced chemicals. This belief in science as well as the industrial-economic advancement, especially increasing the quantity and quality of production, was unshaken in the propaganda. The less predictable factor turned out to be ... man. In the articles from this period all kinds of wastage was stigmatized, such as badly-sealed bags with chemicals which would open during the transport or delays in equipment delivery. The propaganda of this period applauded *reliable jobs*, which in reference to the bug meant efficient reduction of the plague.

Interestingly enough, even when the *potato plague* struggle came to an end, certain traces of discursive practices could be found in official discourse. As Michał Głowiński (1993: 58), an avid observer of the Polish newspeak, recounts, these practices were not meant to mobilize but rather to calm or even to sedate the audience. In the end, the substitute magic formula to distract readers' attention from the substantial social-economic problems went: 'The crops are beginning...'

The bug gained a new meaning in the discourse after the system change in 1989. In the early period of capitalism in Poland yet another symbolic shift took place. *Touristic potato bug* became the phrase to denote economic tourists who travelled across the country and abroad to buy en masse goods either unavailable or just more expensive in their hometowns. Soon afterwards, as the economy stabilized, this meaning was replaced with another neosemantism, which put its roots down into the contemporary Polish language so much that it appears in the newer editions of dictionaries. Nowadays, the second metaphorical meaning of the entry 'potato bug', qualified as pejorative and contemptuous, reads: 'holiday-takers, mostly burdensome, noisy, destroying everything around them' (USJP – Universal Dictionary of Polish Language, 2003), 'a big group of noisy people, often destroying everything around them' (ISJP – Different Dictionary of Polish Language, 2000)<sup>10</sup>. In both of these neosemantisms, the basis for the figurative meaning are those characteristics of the bug which the Cold-War propaganda emphasized: invasiveness, voracity, destructiveness and, above all, otherness. 'Bug' is something (someone) that plagues local communities or touristic attractions, oftentimes natural monuments, much to

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<sup>10</sup> This meaning is not present in the earlier dictionaries: by Szymczak, by Polański or even *Praktyczny słownik współczesnej polszczyzny* (ed. H. Zgólkowa). In the last one, accompanying the zoological meaning, the contextual ones were mentioned: 'In the '50s the propaganda views the bug as the imperialistic enemy'.

the fashion of itinerant locusts: it obstructs the peace, devastates, destroys and then leaves to plague another place. 'Bug' as a sign has therefore an undoubtedly negative value.

## **Conclusion**

The diachronic analysis of the 1950-1965 potato bug discourse shows the complexity of the fundamentals of problems in the propaganda-constructed social reality. Nowadays, these issues are perceived as being connected to the environment; however, this was not the case in earlier decades. The potato bug – a commonplace crop vermin – had in the Polish People's Republic various incarnations: as a *striped saboteur*, it was the emblem of imperialistic Western forces (especially the USA), plotting against socialism; as *the Polish People's Republic's vermin*, it symbolized the internal threat, the enemies of the people, secretly attempting to damage the system; as *the potato plague*, it represented the obstacles the Communist Party faced in achieving the increase of production required by their economic plan. It appeared and remained for many years in the propaganda agenda as a substitute subject, hiding other problems (including the environmental ones) of the Polish People's Republic, which could not be expressed in the official discourse. It could be therefore said that the bug played the role of a social distraction to larger issues.

This instrumental use of the potato bug in serving the ideology of the Communist Party clearly shows the absence of legitimate environmental content in the official discourse of the period in question. While the societies from behind the Iron Curtain discussed the problems of the industrial societies, such as air pollution (the emblem of the '50s: smog) or the pesticide overuse (the emblem of the '60s: chemicals), in the Eastern-Bloc countries the propaganda created phantom beings in the same discursive field, which were subservient to the Party's political aims.

Dryzek (2005: 150) notes that the environmental discourse only emerged within industrial society and is always strictly connected to industrialization:

Of course, industrial societies experienced various competing ideologies, such as liberalism, conservatism, socialism, Marxism or fascism, but all of them are connected to industrialization. From the environmental perspective one can view them as different variants of the same problem. This likeness may surprise the supporters of those ideologies who are usually more aware of the ideological

differences than the similarities, which, in fact, result from industrialization. However, all of those ideologies ignored or sedated the social anxieties connected to the environmental changes for a long time.

It might be so, indeed, but at the same time this argument contains a certain threat of universalization. It is important to note that the industrialization process, as well as modernization projects connected with it, took place in the industrial societies in the second half of the twentieth century (not to mention the earlier times) in different ways. Central-Eastern Europe is a telling example of the aforesaid.

Additionally, the examples of the anti-bug propaganda illustrate that the instrumentalization of the discourse, when entangled with ideological struggle, may result in as much harm to public perception – or lack thereof – of environmental issues as the domination of the growth ideology. It is difficult to draw general conclusions on the basis of a singular case, even if it is an emblematic one. However, it appears that the contemporary attitude of Poles towards environmental issues, one of ignorance and skepticism, might have been inherited from that peculiar political campaign featuring the potato bug many years ago, which is still well-engrained in the collective memory. The potato bug phenomenon forever (or for a long time to come) condemns those who speak out about issues pertaining to the environment.

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