Hope and Disappointment: Democracy in Poland after Four Years

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.03.14

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.03.14
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol3/iss1/14

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a long time, and I keep on burping up the taste of those damned Vienna Sausages. It hasn’t been as long for you; in fact, you’ve made out on this bargain. If only I got paid by the word. Concise, they wanted concise, and this my future, my academic tomorrow. Short said Simons, short, talk about money. But instead, money talks. (And when money talks, General Motors listens.)

—And the Masons know it all, in league with the powers—that-be, in leagues of nations, IMF—get it? —I’m a Freemason. But this is not conspiracy, this is erecting, building, cementing, revelation. Mortaring walls that shelter us from the things outside ourselves. And that wind, whispering through the vents and cracks, is barely noticed, moved through dull riveted ductwork hung from the ceiling. Instead, a span of greenbacks, as far as the eye can see. It’s people like the masons and the IMF that have brought tomorrow into sight, through a green-lined and notarized tunnel with a golden glow, and perhaps a doctor’s slapping hand, a high-five note on your backside, at the end. It’s people like them, and countless others, who brought about this shiny, golden time, and thank God it’s here. Green means go. So polish up your credit cards, keep your accounts well oiled, and your checkbooks balanced. Hop on your bikes and cars. We’ve got cash to flow, and the future to see, I can see it, there it is.

—Postpartum

*A new cycle of the ages.

Hope and Disappointment: Democracy in Poland after Four Years

By Leszek Koczanowicz
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The chain of revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe posed again the question of the nature and domain of democracy. People who struggled against the totalitarian state in the name of democracy had to answer the question of what democracy is. In the course of the fight the answer was relatively simple: the reverse image of the existing situation. But after the success the leaders of the underground movement had to cope with the problem of setting up the structure of state and social institutions, while at the same time being under the pressure of hardships of the economic situation inherited after the communist state. The task was even worse because the majority of these countries did not have a strong democratic tradition and even if they did, this tradition had been forgotten. For that reason, the general agreement as to the necessity of creating a democratic state goes along with stormy discussions connected with the real shape of such a state. The countries with a long tradition of democracy have worked out their models for the years of trials and failures and the differences between them reflect this complicated history. People in Eastern and Central Europe do not have enough time to consider various models, as they have to solve their problems now. On the other hand, the success in this enterprise could prove the relevance of democracy not only for highly educated and rich societies but also for societies having much worse conditions. The success is not guaranteed: on the contrary, the voices are rising up in the region that a moderate authoritarian regime could be a better system in these circumstances. Every generalization is, of course, risky as the region is highly differentiated in political as well as social dimensions.

Focusing my considerations on the case of Poland, I would like to separate two topics, namely the categories marking the theoretical field of discussion on democracy and some examples of political activity in Poland. These two topics are, of course, interwoven but not identical, as the first is mainly connected with the intellectual’s reflection on political life, whereas the second is concerned with political praxis. The gap between them is an interesting sign of changes in political thought. Under communist government, democracy was a purely intellectual matter having nothing in common with real life. The collapse of the communist regime had to bring these problems from the domain of thought to the confrontation with real social needs. Presenting two ends of the process of democratization in Poland should, I hope, show the tension between the conceptual framework and the play of political powers.
disClosure: Fin de Siècle Democracy

(1) Past and present, or the burden of history.

To foreign observers, Polish society seems to be obsessed with history. Some people are prone to condemn much of our history. Some express pride in it. There are various reasons for this interest in the topic. For many years the discussion about these questions replaced a real debate on contemporary issues. Therefore, a future historian can wonder why people spent so much time and energy discussing abstract historical problems. This replacement was possible as the Polish political life was frozen in post-war circumstances, frozen in the sense that real political differentiation had almost nothing in common with the formal political participation in communist organizations, at least until the rise of the political underground movement in the middle seventies. It was possible to meet in the communist party people from Leftist to extremely nationalist orientation. Not being able to present their political views openly, they tried to smuggle their personal points of views as merely different opinions on historical topics.

Of course, the other dimension of this problem was connected with the communist party’s attempts to “colonize” the past. Traditionally, we had two main trends in Polish history, one which recognized the main enemy on the East and the second which considered Germany as a main threat for the nation. The Communist Party referred to the second but it was developed by the nationalist and bourgeois movement in pre-war Poland. So as the communist slogans were losing their power, the Party was using nationalist rhetoric more and more extensively but it could not come to its logical conclusion because then the power of the Soviet Union would be at stake.

This discussion about historical issues became even more vivid after the transformation. The first reaction was thus to return to the pre-war political reality by referring back to the argumentation and the ideas supporting it. I think that the most important event from this point of view was the discussion about the so-called “coming back” to Europe. The proponents of this slogan tried to persuade us that the history of Poland was closely connected with the history of Europe, except for the brief break during the communist period. Coming back to Europe was to mean the adoption, or strictly speaking the re-adoption, of the values and the social and political institutions of Western civilization. The opponents of such an idea of Polish history put emphasis on the particularity of the history of the country showing that the exceptional character of Polish fate enabled us to preserve and develop the values forgotten or neglected in the West. This discussion to some extent reflected Romantic attitudes in Polish thought.

In this period Poland, then under the power of Russia, Austria and Prussia, was perceived by some thinkers as the “Messiah of Nations” in the sense that the necessary condition of her regaining of independence was to break down these conservative states, which would to mean the achievement of freedom for the whole of Europe. This attitude was reinforced by the events of the recent decade. Poland was seen as a hero of any anti-totalitarian movement in the socialistic camp and as the first prey of repression under Martial Law in 1981. When the chances for the dismantling of the totalitarian state appeared again in 1989, many people expected a prize for their persistent resistance against the communist state. Poland should be rewarded by the massive international aid from Western countries. When, for many reasons, this did not occur, resentment against the West rose again. The history of Poland was depicted as a chain of sacrifices on the Polish side and betrayals on the Western countries’ side. The argument referred to the Polish uprising in the nineteenth century, the Yalta agreement, and even deeper in the past. The moral result of this reasoning was a serious doubt about whether Poland should follow Western culture and politics in every respect.

(2) Democracy or common ill.

At the beginning of the transition period in 1989 there was a stormy discussion in Poland dealing with the shape of the model of the democratic state. The roots of this discussion had to be sought in an understanding of the unique experience of the Solidarity movement. “Solidarity,” as constituted in 1980, presented a patchwork of different political orientations unified by an agreement as to the ethical values expressed in the name of the union. For that reason, “Solidarity” abandoned the traditional branch scheme of organization of the trade union movement as leading to the partition of the union and adopted instead the model in which only regional, not professional, branches were permitted. This model of organization as well as the name itself, was to emphasize a deep unity grounded in ethical values. Of course, such a concept of social unity was in obvious disagreement with the liberal model of “civil society” as an institutionalized manner of seeking compromise in a struggle of contradictory interests. Even if, as under Martial Law, the term “civil society” was extensively used by underground Solidarity, it meant the organization of society against the totalitarian state and all the more the unity of the movement was recognized. When the compromise reached at the “Round Table” enabled the limited free election, there was much pressure to maintain the unity of the Solidarity movement. The justification of this claim was not only the need for focusing all strength in the confrontation with the still dangerous totalitarian regime but also the common background of shared values. This strategy was proposed by some intellectuals as the best way to develop democracy in Poland. They were afraid that the unique experience of Solidarity would degenerate in the struggle for power between various political parties and interest groups. This concept, of course, got entangled in political games as the “ideology” of groups involved in the Round Table compromise. It also had a tactical role as the idea that any struggle between non-communist groups of
interests should be suspended until basic changes in transformation were completed. I think, however, that behind the political meaning of this idea there was a fear that something important could be lost if normal political rules were accepted.

(3) Christian values and the state or Catholicism and democracy.

The role of the Catholic Church in Poland is unquestionable. Historically, it was a major factor in resistance to foreign powers, and under the communist regimes it protected efforts aiming at changes in the political system. The Solidarity movement was to great extent inspired and led by the Church although some leaders came from the so-called secular Left, i.e., the group accepting some ideas of the Left but opposing the communist program. The alliance between the Church and this group was possible due to the Church's emphasis on the human rights and the evolution of the social ideas of Catholicism toward accepting some forms of the welfare state. This tendency was reinforced under Martial Law when people believed that the Church was the only institution able to compete with the communist state. The issue was not only the material power of the Church that enabled it to support the underground movement but also it seemed to be the real source of values that survived after the bankruptcy of communist ideology. Therefore, the coalition between the Church and the Solidarity movement was possible as far as the latter was an expression of values opposing communist dogma.

And again the moment of reflection appeared in 1989 when the process of creating new state institutions began. Then, it turned out that the values endorsed by the Church did not need to be shared by the whole society. The most general problem was connected with the discussion of the ideological impartiality of the state. This idea, usually coupled with liberal democracy from the French and American Revolutions, was hardly accepted by the Church and intellectuals associated with it. Criticizing the concept of the impartial character of the state they put forth different kinds of argumentation. The most popular was to point out that more than 90% of Polish society identified itself as Catholic so that if we defined democracy according to the wish of the majority, the Polish state should somehow reflect Christian values. The other argument consisted of claiming that the state had to accept any set of values organizing the life of society, for instance, schooling or public health. Christian values, as the most universal and the most grounded in the Western civilization, should play such a role. There is a great split in the Church itself as to the extent and function of these values in society. Voices demanding that all state institutions be based on Christian values are rather rare and so far marginal. But, on the other hand, there is an agreement between people connected with the Church that the enlightenment model of the democratic state should not be set up in Poland.

(4) Revolution but ... against whom?

The Round Table Agreement that was the end of communist rule in Poland turned out to be a trap for a great part of the Polish opposition. Discussing the form and method of sharing power with communist authorities meant in fact to legitimize them. Therefore when massive support for changes in Poland and in the Soviet Union enabled people to get free of any kind of communist ideology, the new leaders had to solve the moral dilemma of whether or not they should hold to the agreement in this situation. This dilemma was also a political problem consisting of two issues: (1) how to carry out changes without massive resistance on the side of people supporting the old regime, and (2) how to define a revolution that was organized in accord with its enemies. It is probably true that the Round Table Agreement enabled us to avoid bloodshed in Poland and in other countries where it serves as a model of solving conflicts. But, on the other hand, it made it much more difficult to discuss the communist past because such a discussion became automatically involved in the assessment of political programs carried out by people who worked out this deal. In 1980 Solidarity claimed that its revolution was “self-limited” as it did not aim at a total change in the political system. Paradoxically, what was thought to be a tactical strategy later became a very serious problem for Polish democracy.

II

(1) Walesa and the presidential wars.

The astonishing career of Lech Walesa made him for Poland and the world a symbol of the struggle against a totalitarian regime. But his case is a bit more complicated: he always tried to act as a medium of the common people's frustration. Hence, his political evolution, which sometimes seems to be unbelievable for Polish and foreign observers, is a logical consequence of his evaluation of the political moods. In 1989 he led Solidarity to the Round Table and in fact he became the first prey of this agreement. His colleagues took positions in the cabinet, his enemy Gen. Jaruzelski became the president, and for him only the position of Solidarity leader was left. And then Solidarity became less and less important as politics moved from the trade union movement to the parliament and elections. So in 1990 he decided to act against his former colleagues, and he raised two topics in this struggle: (1) a critique of the speed of changes in Poland as going on too slowly, and (2) a critique of economic and social policy in Poland as being over-influenced by the International Monetary Fund and the European Community. In this way he played on the two topics I mentioned above, the relation to communism and feelings aroused by disappointment after the success of the Solidarity movement. Also, he presented himself as a person who could renew the Solidarity ethos in the form of authoritarianism. The image of the “president with an axe,”—i.e., the president who could punish if necessary and also make things better—could appeal to people lost in the new reality of various parties and the growth of the free-
market economy.

In 1990 Walesa won the election, defeating in a second ballot the very strange person Stan Tyminski, a Canadian businessman and citizen of Poland, Canada, and Peru. Stan Tyminski's success showed that the values of Solidarity, or that part of them that still had ideological meaning, had lost much in a populist program in which Poles were to be better off almost instantaneously. It was the first serious warning that people could look for easier ways of transformation and that they could decide to get rid of the leaders of the former underground movement. Walesa understood this situation and the history of his presidency can be described as the attempt to solve the unsolvable problem of being a president and a leader of the opposition at the same time. He himself formulated this dilemma in one of his *bon-mots*, "I am pro and even more contra." In political terms Walesa is getting more and more alienated from any serious political power in Poland and his position is based on the notorious weakness of subsequent governments and governing coalitions.

(2) The first free election, or parties without programs.

In 1991 the first free election was held in post-war Poland. They were dominated by the issues which previously appeared in the presidential election, in fact by rather vague ideas dealing with the speed of transformation, the need for condemning the communist past, and to some extent Catholic values and their role in the state. The main problem of the Polish political state is that there is no correlation between the political parties and the interests of social classes or groups. It is not possible here to count all the factors influencing this situation; the important determinants of it are simply so complicated by circumstances of economic and social life that it is almost impossible to identify the real political interests of different social groups, and all the more for people to be aware of them. The only exception is the peasantry, which has more clearly described aims and thus is able to support proper parties. No wonder that in such a situation and in an extremely proportional election system the results were very ambiguous.

The first position was gained by the Democratic Union, a rather loose coalition of different political groups united by the remaining of Solidarity ethics and the personal ties of some of its leaders. The next place was obtained by former communists, then using the name of Social Democrat. Also, this party is inconsistent in its program as it is unified rather by fears of anti-communist revenge than by real political interests of party supporters. But in fact, the Social Democrats, if anybody, could be called winners, together with the nationalist-populist Confederation of Independent Poland and the Polish Peasant Party. As to the last party, it is interesting that among several peasant parties, the party that was a continuation of the peasant party under the communist regime had the best results. The main problem with forming the coalition government was not connected with the lack of a decisive majority in the parliament, but with the situation in which the coalitions formed rather on the basis of current political purposes, than on more general interest. The only taboo which still exists is to include the former communist party in any kind of coalition. But, it is very difficult to maintain this principle, especially as after the split in the Democratic Union, the Social Democrats became the biggest party in the parliament. So there are frequently repeated attempts to gain the support of the social democrats but without paying the price for it. This strategy, however, was not very successful, for being in opposition can bring much more profits than sharing responsibility for the current situation. So far Poland is ruled by a coalition tied together by the fear of new elections, the results of which would probably be devastating for the parties who created the coalition. The main principle of the coalition is not to touch "ideological" questions. In fact the phrase "ideological question" is a euphemism for the political claims made by the Catholic party participating in the coalition.

(3) The issue of abortion or, again, Catholic values and the state.

The party which gained moderate but surprising success was the Christian-National Union. This success was possible due to massive support by the Catholic Church which in turn probably expected the representation of its political views in the parliament. The problem the Catholic Church recognized as the most important was to reverse the law on abortion. Achieving this goal was to endorse two points in Church politics: (1) giving the example for Europe and the rest of the world, and (2) supporting the doctrine that the state cannot be impartial on the ethical issues. Before this election the Church already had won the battle for introducing religious classes into the schools. Changing the law on abortion could mean the next step in identifying Catholic values with the goals of state institutions.

Resistance to this project derived from different motivations. Some people opposed the idea of introducing Christian values as laws, pointed out that the Church can influence their members by using moral persuasion. Others argued that the proposed new law would lead to many paradoxes and in fact it would not be possible to enforce such a law, which in turn could damage the willingness to obey the law, which was already very low. Therefore, the line of division on this issue turned out to be very complicated and even some Catholic intellectuals were involved in opposing a change in the law. The opponents of the prohibition of abortion organized committees to gather support for solving the question by a referendum. These committees consisted of people who sometimes had very different views on other issues and belonged to different, often opposing political parties. They were successful in collecting the support for a referendum as they were able to gather about a million petition signatures, but were not successful in executing a referendum because the constitution allowed parliament to avoid it. So the new law on abortion was voted on in
parliament in a slightly less severe form than was originally demanded. This case shows the weakness of Polish democracy, for the major political parties as well as public opinion according to all polls opposed the prohibition of abortion. Only the opportunistic attitude of politicians who were afraid of the power of the Church, as well as the unrecoverable split in the coalition enabled parliament to introduce the new law. They calculated also that changing the law was a price which had to be paid for the Catholic Church’s support for the economic changes in Poland. But the most important result of this discussion was that a kind of “Rainbow Coalition” was constituted, a loose confederation of different groups united by a common goal. Even though it was defeated in this case, it became a new kind of experience; it was the first time since the fall of communism that people of different views struggled together.

(a) Revolution ... against whom, or everybody was a government agent.

The ghost which haunts Polish politics is called “de-communization” or "iustracja," which is a kind of security clearance. The idea is to some extent rational. Decommunization is considered to be a barrier to people connected with the former regime from taking influential positions in the new social reality. Iustracja is to eliminate from public life those people who were the agents or intelligence operations. But in practice both ideas seem to create unsolvable problems. Decommunization provokes unending and sophisticated discussions as to the rank of former regime people who should be moved away from positions in the new administration. The other problem is with elected positions. What if people choose former officials of the communist regime? The worst problems arise if you would like to judge who was an agent and who was not. The archives are destroyed or incomplete, the proofs of collaboration very ambiguous, and it is hard to describe what was real collaboration or only an attempt to cheat the police. Opinions on this topic are very ambiguous among political leaders. They are prone at least to some extent to support such attempts as they should demolish ultimately the communist power in Poland. But, on the other hand, the only serious attempt to do that resulted in the collapse of the government. This happened because the government led by prime minister Olszewski, used the police archives without critical analysis and then turned out that a number of people who were leaders of the underground movement were registered by the police as their agents. The government revealed the names and almost immediately was overturned by an angry parliament, but the problem still exists. The paradox of this situation is that former communists are free from such an accusation, for the security police was not allowed to recruit party people as agents. The other paradox is that the main authority in judging who was an agent is in the hands of former police officers as they have the best knowledge on the topic. Today, a big part of Polish political life is concentrated on the question of whether or not President Walesa was a plant using nickname “Bolek.” If it turned out to be true it would, of course, greatly damage not only Walesa’s image but the whole Solidarity movement. Although, this accusation is supported by some of his former colleagues from the underground, the moral certificate is given to him by former Minister of Internal Affairs Gen. Kiszczak and former president Gen. Jaruzelski. They claim that if Walesa had collaborated with the security police, they would have taken advantage of such a situation.

III

Conclusions, or between optimism and pessimism.

The image which appears from the previous considerations seems to be rather pessimistic and it would be possible to show even more drastic examples of hopelessness in setting up the system of democratic institutions. It is visible in any segment of political life from local democracy to the capacity for using democratic procedure in parliament. On the other hand, common people seem not to see any clear advantages to democracy. In the last election, the first free elections since World War II, only 60% of voters participated and according to sociological polls the number of voters is going to be even less in the next election. The gap between the political class and the common people is getting wider and wider, the parliament is perceived as a very inefficient institution far beneath such institutions as the Army or the Church. People demand a “strong hand,” a soft version of the authoritarian regime. All these facts could suggest that democracy is in peril, that it will not survive the problems which one can predict in the near future.

But I would not like to end my paper with such pessimistic conclusions. The main source of optimism is that democracy works in Poland in spite of the limitations and the failures I have mentioned above. There is no real political power which would declare hostility to democracy and would be indeed interested in making an antidemocratic coup. This is unimaginable. Therefore, if we are to evaluate the development of democracy in Poland, we have to precisely describe the points of reference. It is true that the procedures of democracy in Poland as well as in other countries of Eastern Europe often do not keep up with the standards valid for Western democracies. On the other hand, however, if we treat democracy as a process and not as a fixed state, then we can discuss the distance from the starting point and evaluate the trends and counter-trends in this process. Adopting such a strategy, we notice that the starting point of democratic change was the situation in which almost the whole official social life was under the control of the state and this circumstance was treated as normal for at least two generations. On the other hand, the resistance to the state created the illusion of principle unity among different social groups and a tendency to neglect the possibility of conflicts between them. The trends which make us more optimistic concerning the development of democracy assume two reinforcing processes: people should understand that their votes can change something in their own lives, and, on the other hand, the leaders
have to learn to take into account the real interests of their supporters. It may sound trivial but I am afraid that it will take some time until one starts to do politics in this way. Also, I think that the development of democracy will not be an automatic process: on the contrary, I predict failures, blind alleys and perils in its course. But I believe that the already created framework of democratic institutions should survive and become the basis for further development.

I disClosure: Fin de Siècle Democracy

Late one afternoon
as the sun died in the west
a bookshop proprietor
heard the books on his shelves
die. His yellowed
gentipips stopped moving from one
worn spine to the next;
he had been feeling for
a story that might explain
his suffering.
Instead, he was struck still
by the whispering spines—
a thousand threads
loosening in their bindings—
decomposing, decomposing.
"Damn," he mutters,
"I think it's closing."

I said "shelves" a moment ago,
but "shelves" is not exactly right.
He hears the rotting like cockroaches
trotting, even when he lays in bed.
He knows a doctor's findings will explain it all and attribute it to some post-modern, gerontological blight.

Still, the quiet sound of death provides an inkling
of just how fast his shop is sinking
(as a memento mori should). I think you ought to know
that aside from selling used books,
drinking bourbon, and killing rats,
this book shop proprietor maintains
four or five bowls of candy that stud his aisles
in sweet defiance of the rottint.
Tootsie rolls and butterscotch lifesavers spill over every
brim of every bowl—
he thinks sweets might help
a child hunt his shop—