Troubles with Liberalism in East-Central Europe after the Fall of Communism.
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Firstly let us establish why it is worth assessing the state of liberalism in contemporary Poland, and the nature and force of the arguments proposed by its opponents. The debate (if it can be called that), and the institutional solutions that we have to find in Poland, reflect the fundamental problem which post-communist Europe, as a whole, is facing (albeit to different degrees). The problem centers on the issue of the kind of democracy we wish to build. The response is important not only for those countries which have emerged from the Marxist experiment; but also for the West.

In 1961 Nikita Krushchev, the First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, declared that within ten years industrial production in the Soviet Union would have overtaken that of the United States, and within twenty five years income per capita would exceed that of the US. By 1986 it had become obvious that collectivism - the belief that the wise state knows better than the market - had been defeated. The economic rift between the West and those countries where so-called “real socialism” was practiced had failed to decrease, it had actually increased. In 1989 “people’s democracy” – the name officially given to the political system in the satellite countries of the Soviet Union - ceased to exist. For the Poles, but also for the Czechs, the Slovaks and the Hungarians this year also meant the “return to Europe”. This “Europe” is, of course, the western World of liberal democracy. However, at this point, a strange problem arises as the process of returning begins. Firstly, the Europe to which we are returning is not the same Europe that we left more than fifty years ago. Secondly, we now have to construct in only few years what Western Europe took two centuries to build, thereby reversing the succession of cause and effect.

Liberalism and capitalism have a common history. In the West, liberal political thought evolved together with capitalism, after which there appeared the institutions of a liberal-democratic state. This process was completed after the Second World War. Our problem is
not simply that we were thrown off track due to 45 years of communist experiment, but rather than getting back on track we were forced to begin at the end. First we had to build the structures of a democratic state before being in a position to reform the economy according to free market rules. The year 1989 is generally accepted as being the moment of a historical and ultimate victory of liberalism over socialism (or communism). Francis Fukuyama (referring to Hegel) declared even the end of history, asserting that there was no longer any conceivable alternative to liberal democracy. However, as Jerzy Szacki, a leading Polish sociologist stresses, in 1989 we were in fact witnessing not so much the victory of liberalism as the rejection of communist dictatorship. The fact that it is not the same thing is clearly illustrated twenty years later. In the majority of the countries which came into existence after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In Poland, as well as in other Central-Eastern European countries, (exceptions being Bielorussia and Ukraine) at the beginning of the transformation process, the thesis that the economic as well as the political and social models we had to follow were to be that of Western Europe, went almost unquestioned. In other words, it was generally accepted that the only alternative to radical meliorism of Marxist doctrine is the moderate meliorism of liberals. For the average Pole, after the experience of a Marxist experiment which had persisted through two generations, liberalism presented peculiar charms, although it also brought with it some dangers (such as unemployment).

In 1994 Jerzy Szacki who is a very acute observer of the political scene, wrote that „at the moment liberalism is criticized more for the controversial economic strategy (which, rightly or wrongly, is regarded as being liberal par excellence) then because of a general project of a society which has come into being as a result of the application of this strategy“. It would be difficult to defend this thesis today. The same author wrote four years later: „It is not yet altogether certain whether liberalism has taken root in Poland for good, and whether it is any worth, but there is little doubt that there exists in our country an anti-liberalism, and that, with some exceptions, it is of very little worth“. We should add that this anti-liberalism of little worth plays a significant role in contemporary Polish political life. It is true that anti-liberalism in its most virulent form still finds expression in opposition to economic policies. For the participant in numerous demonstrations marching through the streets of Warsaw, liberalism, on which they blame their misery, has a face of a real man, namely Balcerowicz, the deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance in the first two non-communist
governments, and subsequently the president of the National Bank of Poland. However, in Poland today liberalism is increasingly attacked as a political or even philosophical doctrine, frequently in combination with the so called euroscepticism.

To understand certain political and philosophical aspects of Polish anti-liberalism we have to look back into history. In the 19th century, as the doctrine of liberalism was finally taking shape and the institutions of the liberal democratic state were becoming firmly established in Western Europe, liberal thought was not at all popular in Poland. The lack of developed urban centers and the presence of a large middle class, and especially the lack of an independent state, were not conducive to one another. The fundamental political issue for the Poles was how to restore Poland to independence. After World War I, when independence was achieved, four principal political trends emerged: national-Catholic, agrarian-populist, independent and socialist. For the first group liberalism was too cosmopolitan and free-thinking, for second too elitist, for the third, dangerously anti-federalist, and for fourth, too pro-capitalistic (although the socialists accepted some important liberal values, such as the freedom of conscience or the belief in progress). Therefore during the inter-war period liberalism played an insignificant role. It is then no wonder that the Polish democracy was weak and defective.

The communist system and ideology was imposed on Polish people after World War II, but it is difficult to deny that Marxist anti-liberalism exerted any considerable influence on the consciousness of the ordinary citizen. He was not very impressed by the danger of the so called „social atomism” emphasized by Marxism, but the Marxist critique of the liberal idea of negative freedom often seemed convincing. It is quite easy to convince a person who evaluates his social position as unsatisfactory (and such people were and are of the majority in Poland). The liberal conception of negative freedom is an abstract one that ultimately serves only a few, and for the majority is useless, in other words, this kind of freedom creates the basis for inequality.

And so, the Marxist critics of liberalism and the communist politicians did not so much assert that in the countries where there was „real socialism” freedom of speech existed, but rather they maintained that such freedom does not exist at all, that in other words it is only an ideological slogan or pure humbug. Let us recall that according to Marxist theory, ideology is a systematized collection of opinions which are the theoretical expression of interests of a particular social class or stratum. Thus, for example, liberal freedom of speech ultimately
serves class interests, favoring one class (or stratum) and handicapping the others. Freedom of speech is then merely apparent – newspapers, publishing houses, radio and TV-stations have to present the views of their private owners. Regardless of the different views of the owners, all of them are bourgeois, so the mass media present the views of bourgeois class exclusively. As a matter of fact it is not different in the case of the public mass media. They belong to the state, and the state – according to Marxist theory – is an „organization of a class rule“. So in liberal democratic countries freedom of speech is only apparent, whereas in countries of real socialism its limitations are only placed upon those who represent interests harmful for a society which is building a classless system.\textsuperscript{vii}

Although the lengthy reign of Marxist ideology has undoubtedly made it easier for many people to accept anti-liberal arguments, such argumentation itself, after 1989, does not play any significant role in theoretical discussions and political life. The main left-wing party, which stemmed from the former Communist party, has almost completely given up Marxist rhetoric and limits itself mainly to criticizing social consequences of economic reforms, but not, let us say, the liberal spirit of those reforms.\textsuperscript{viii}

Therefore when we talk about anti-liberalism in Poland, or about its revival in the last few years, we mean above all the right-wing critique of liberalism. Such antiliberalism has common philosophical roots throughout the entire Western civilization, characterized by names such as de Maistre, Schmitt, or the contemporary Strauss and MacIntyre. It is against the enlightenment tradition; it is mistrusting of science and accuses liberalism of a naive belief in progress. Other standard accusations are supposed social atomism, indifference to the common good, perception of an individual as an egoistic participant in an economic game, hatred of authority, and finally moral skepticism or relativism. Needless to say, these accusations appear also in Polish antiliberalism. However, I would like to examine two of its particular characteristics. One of them is certainly common to all post-communist countries in Central Europe, whereas the other is possibly particular to Poland.

As Stephen Holmes, the well known expert on liberalism, states, in order to effectively criticize liberalism one must distinguish between two objects of the critique: liberal theories and liberal societies. This is because in existing societies, liberal ideas are only partially realized ideas. However, the anti-liberals presume that the liberal society fully reflects the liberal ideas, and therefore anti-liberals study liberal theory not so much to point out its intellectual weakness, but rather to search for the sources of the crisis of contemporary
times. This is also the case with Polish anti-liberals. They, however, assume that the idea of liberalism has been fully implemented in Western democratic societies, but not yet in Poland. Therefore, firstly, pointing to the symptoms of the crisis in Polish society, they explain them as being the result of an uncritical adoption of Western patterns (and also as the heritage of the communist era). Secondly, the diagnosis having been made (as they think), they are not interested in liberalism as a theory. As a rule they use the notion as a discrediting epithet.

However, there is something more essential, which defines Polish right-wing antiliberalism, and which we may call its unnatural situation. The confession of one the representatives of the Polish Right well illustrates the Right's situation after 1989: „I must admit to... shall I say schizophrenia? On one hand I am the convinced prostate right-winger, but on the other hand I considered in 1989 and 1990 that the State could only be gotten back on its feet using pararevolutionary methods.” The dilemma of the Right can also be described differently: despite its anti-liberalism it realizes that it must participate in – and not merely put up with – the institutions of the liberal state. Hence it seeks to weaken the liberal character of the institutions it finds objectionable in order to criticize liberal values, while accepting the necessity of liberal state institutions which are based on those values. Examples are the moral and ideological neutrality of the state, the freedom of speech and equality of rights for minorities. A very good example is the battle fought by the Right over the preamble to the Polish Constitution, finally adopted in the referendum of 1997. The Right was particularly keen on the „invocatio Dei” and the formula „We, the Polish Nation”. In the first case the issue was to establish the religious basis of the State. The second issue may appear more mysterious. However, it becomes clear when we consider that in the consciousness of an average Pole the “Polish Nation” does not mean the same as the formula „We the people of the United States” which opens the American Constitution. “Nation” in Polish is a concept which has ethnic, but no political significance. Not every Polish citizen is simultaneously a member of the Polish nation. A foreigner, according to the Polish language cannot be “nationalized”; he can only be „naturalized” or become a Polish citizen.

While accepting the institutions of the constitutional state (Rechtstaat) the Right wanted to introduce into the constitution a clause stating the superiority of natural laws over positive laws, whilst equating natural laws with divine laws. This did not succeed, and the philosophical dispute – in essence – was settled by the following phrase: “We the Polish Nation – all citizens of the Commonwealth, those who believe in God and those without such
faith...” Naturally this did not satisfy the antiliberal Right which, before the constitutional referendum, advocated the rejection of the constitution. The constitution was finally passed by a narrow margin (52.7%) with less than half of the voters participating in the referendum (42.8%). In the ten-year-long history of the Third Polish Republic it was without doubt the greatest clash between a liberal and a conservative vision of the state.

Finally one should note a specific peculiarity of Polish antiliberalism which has its intellectual source in the teaching of Pope John Paul II. He enjoys enormous authority in Poland not only because Poles are rather attached to Catholicism or because he was the head of the Catholic Church, but above all because he was a Pole occupying the papal throne. He was seen as the Father of the Nation, and this is how he was received on his visits to Poland. For example during his pilgrimage in June 1999, every fourth Pole had the chance to meet him. In the West John Paul II was fairly generally considered to be a conservative head of the church, with a tough attitude to celibacy or abortion. In Poland the Pope was not perceived as a conservative, and the majority of Poles do not understand why such a term is applied to him. Against the background of the conservative Polish Church, he can be considered progressive. He supported the Christian – Judaic dialogue, as well as dialogue with other Christian Churches. He was also an advocate of political dialogue (including with the post-communist left wing), and a liking for such dialogue is far from common in the Polish Church. Hence, John Paul II enjoyed almost unquestioned authority and the average Pole speaks of him not as „the Pope” but as „the Holy Father”.

Although the Pope was a supporter of democracy (in line with the changes in Catholic teaching brought about by Vatican Council II), he was also a confirmed opponent of liberalism. He criticized economic liberalism as being pervaded by a spirit of egoism and holds it to be the cause of an unjust distribution of wealth both internationally and within individual countries. He criticized political liberalism for eliminating the religious or broadly spiritual dimension from public life, and for causing society to become secular. He criticized philosophical liberalism for a false concept of freedom, for moral relativism and for the hostility to the Church. He used a rather strong phrase – „the civilization of death” – to describe the liberal basis of Western civilization. By this he mainly had in mind the phenomena of the tolerance of abortions, euthanasia, and the abandoning of the sanctity of human life in general.
The Pope criticized liberalism during his earlier pilgrimages to Poland. For example, in Wrocław in 1997 he accused democracy “inspired by liberal ideology” of attempting “to build the order of liberty without Christ and even against Christ”. The tremendous authority of the Pope meant that most of the players on the Polish political scene could not ignore his teaching. The problem is that his anti-liberalism had an intellectual or philosophical dimension; its “translation” into political practice bears very different fruits. An example is the dispute over the crucifixes in Auschwitz in 1998/1999, where both sides referred to the words of the Pope.

Unquestionably, a non liberal effect of the Church's teaching (and its colossal influence on public life) is the unregulated case of in vitro fertilization. When a self-proclaimed liberal party Platforma Obywatelska, which governed (in coalition with a smaller party) since the autumn of 2007, announced preparations for a legislative act to regulate the in vitro case, the Church immediately responded: the only way to formulate this act is to ban this “unnatural” form of conception, a form that involves infanticide (The Church bases its ideas- without clearly articulating them around the Aristotelian-Thomistic distinction between potency and an act, and treats an embryo as a human being). The biggest opposing political party- Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) - which strictly follows the “voice” of the Church, oscillated around public support reaching 25 to 30 percent in public polls in the last five years. But the Church's stance is also respected among many (more or less conservative) liberals. The result of this was that the members of Platforma Obywatelska created two drafts of this said legislative act (a conservative one, which does not fully ban in vitro, and a liberal one). The fear of scission among the party members resulted in neither of those two drafts being subject to voting, leaving Poland as the only country of the European Union that has not regulated the procedure of in vitro.

It is worth mentioning a political campaign that took place in 2005, which resulted in a takeover of power by a coalition of euro-skeptical and anti-liberal parties. In this campaign a line of political division was clearly defined by a moderately euro-skeptical, anti-liberal party of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość. In its aggressive television (and radio) advertisements they presented two visions of Poland - a liberal Poland, and a solidarity Poland. The project of a solidarity Poland was not clearly defined, whereas the vision of the liberal Poland was quite clear. Namely it was a country in which egoistic liberals rob the rest of society.
There is a phenomenon connected to anti-liberalism in Poland, which also deserves attention, and which I would call passive anti-liberalism. By this I mean a considerable degree of acceptance of any non-liberal or only partially liberal systemic solution or political procedure which is present in society. It is associated with something that may be described as low social sensitivity to the limits and guarantees of civil liberties. This would appear to be the result of the peculiar way in which a democratic state has been constructed in Poland. Western countries constructed their liberal-democratic systems (with a greater or lesser degree of upheaval) over almost 200 years. In our country introduction of the system was the result of an actual, if non-violent, revolution. Moreover it coincided (not accidentally) with the regaining of independence of which Poland had been totally or partially deprived for fifty years. It is evident that this national collective freedom pushed the problem of individual freedom into the background, which was commonly held to be secondary to the former. This is not conducive to liberal thinking. Thus all attempts to defend liberties were understood literally as to meet with moderate acceptance. However, they usually provoke sharp critique from rightist anti-liberals who think they can scent a disguised attack on the state, the nation or the Church (religion) behind what is said. In addition, it is commonly held that the freedom gained by the Poles, unlike other people in this part of Europe, was not a gift bestowed by history, but a trophy hard won. It was the result of a long-lasting social resistance which in 1980 found its institutional expression in the “Solidarność” (which was in fact a social movement and only formally a trade union), and to which almost one third of the entire population belonged. It was this resistance which finally forced the Communist (whose Communism consisted in upholding a few slogans – that is why they converted so easily into social democrats) - to share their power with the democratic opposition (or, as the opposition thought, with society). This belief that freedom is a prize achieved with a great effort is a good basis for a thesis that we in Poland do not need to imitate completely the form it takes in the West, that we should give it our own shape. This has given rise to a myth of the „third way”, which was already popular in the Solidarność movement in the 80s.\textsuperscript{xv}, and in the early years of transition. It is not clear exactly what the third way was supposed to consist of. It is more of a slogan whose aim was to emphasize that although we firmly reject socialism, Western liberalism is not the example to follow. This is reason why mixing politics with religion in Poland doesn’t arouse heated emotions. There is even a political custom whereby the highest representatives of State participate in the Catholic Church ceremonies, and the Church dignitaries are amongst the most important guests during solemnities of State occasions on official holidays. During the official meetings of the former president Lech
Wałęsa with politicians, the President’s personal confessio was always present.\textsuperscript{xvi} Anyone who postulates a total separation of Church and State may easily be suspected of hostility towards the Church.

It is worth noting that, according to the newest research (from June 2012), the acceptance level towards authoritarian political solutions has slightly changed (for the better). In the year 2000, public polls said that 24% of the subjects had authoritarian views, with the same number having anti-authoritarian views. In the 2012 polls, 21% of the subjects showed authoritarian stance, while 28% had anti-authoritarian views. Around half of the subjects “drift” somewhere in the middle, which means that they are ready to accept some authoritarian political practices.\textsuperscript{xvii}

Thus when we talk of liberalism in Poland we mean, firstly, quite a considerable number of intellectuals (economists, philosophers or social thinkers, journalists) who have for the most part quite recently discovered a liberal tradition; and secondly a relatively small group of politicians who would be ready to defend liberal ideas and values. Yet, when we speak of anti-liberalism, we mean above all a rather superficial attitude on the part of politicians and the society at large; the attitude which holds liberalism responsible for almost all sins and the spread of evil (poverty, unemployment, moral decline, the increasing crime rate, pornography, violence, etc.). This anti-liberalism has three important ideological sources. The first is the social teaching of the Catholic Church. The second is the „national idea” whose reference point is sovereignty as the highest expression of the national being, and which stresses its individuality (in contrast to liberal universality). The third one is the egalitarian ideology which became deeply rooted during the time of „real socialism”. It may seem strange, however, that Polish society, although so prone to anti-liberal arguments, has been able to lay down the well functioning foundations of liberal-democratic state. This could be explained as follows: there is a kind of an unwritten contract among the Polish political elite which says more or less „most of us are anti-liberals and we will proclaim our anti-liberalism loudly. Nevertheless we will collectively create the basic institutions of a liberal state. Otherwise Poland will not be where every Pole would like to see it – in the better part of Europe, or, how it is popularly called, in the West. This might be why Poland, unlike many eastern European countries (like Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia or, nowadays, Hungary and Romania) has not had a government, which practices could be defined as authoritarian, since
1989 (the fall of communism in this region), but it built and strengthened institutions of liberal-democratic state.

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1 Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, in *The National Interest*, No 16 (Summer) 1989. Its rather interesting that the ultimate victory of capitalism, after almost 75 years unrelenting confrontation with socialism, was declared some months earlier by prominent American Marxist Robert Heilbroner ( *The New Yorker*, 23 January 1989, p. 98).


iii Ibid., p. 10.


v Polish euroscepticism has two faces. Firstly it is a radical, rather negative Catholic-nationalistic attitude which emphasises various historical and cultural differences between Poland and Western Europe. Therefore, imitating Western political institutions, or, even worse, integrating with them would be a national calamity. In June 1999 leader of a small parliamentary group “Our Circle” Jan Lopuszański, declared that in last nine years Poland has lived through a succession of disasters, and that the joining the European Union would be the ultimate one, as it would mean the loss of independence. In its more moderate form Euroscepticism accepts the necessity of Poland’s integration with the West, but argues that this future united Europe will have to be changed. It must abandon its „materialistic”, liberal lifestyle, and restore to community life a spiritual dimension based it on „true” values. The task for Poles, their mission, is of course to inject Christian values into the future „Europe of the Fatherlands”. This form of Euroscepticism, in the nineties and in the first 5 years of XXI century, was represented by the very influential Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe (Christian National Union), which was the member of a broad right-wing coalition Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność (Electoral Action Solidarność), the biggest group in Parliament in 1997 – 2001 which created a coalition government with a smaller liberal party.

vi Poland, at the end of XVI century, was the biggest European country, but slowly losing its economical power it lost its independence at the verge of XVIII century to three neighbouring countries- Russia, Prussia and Austria.

vii It is interesting that in many countries of so called soviet block (for example in the USSR and GDR) an institutionalized censorship did not exist. The result was that in Poland, that had a national censorship institution, there was much bigger freedom of speech. This is an apparent paradox. In Poland, authors, and editors did not do any self-censorship, because of the fear of political repressions, leaving the decision what to print to the officials from the censorship office.

viii John Gray discussing the attacks on liberalism in Europe observed that the only acceptable form of conservatism appeared to be liberal conservatism, and where socialism achieved any successes this was only due to its having absorbed the essential elements of liberal civilisation (John Gray, *Liberalism*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, ch. X) One can remark, that in Poland the post-communists rapidly took over fundamental liberal values and transformed into successful (the biggest party in Parliament) social democrats, whilst on the right of the political spectrum liberal conservatism plays only a minor role.


x It does not mean that the theoretical critique of liberalism is absent in Poland.


xii Few people in Poland would accept the definitions of the nation given in Anglophone dictionaries: „a large territoral group with common citizenship rights and possessing characteristics differentiating it from similar groups”, or „an independent political unit” or „a state which is coterminous with a society”. (Hugo F. Reading, *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, London, Boston and Henley, 1977)

xiii *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4 April, 1999.

xiv „Both sides” here means the Polish sides. One side supported the protest of some Jewish organisations against the presence of the crucifixes in close proximity to the place which is, not only symbolically, the biggest Jewish cemetery in the world. One argument referred to minority rights in the democratic country. The other side argued that we the Catholic nation have the right to place our holliest symbols on our own soil.

xv Characteristic of this myth are the first sentences of *Preamble to Solidarność Charter* adopted in 1981.

xvi It should be added that during Wałęsa’s last term of office, Father Cebula ceased to attend meetings in the Presidential palace. One may imagine this to be because of the President’s advisors who were anxious that it
might reduce his chances of re-election. According to public opinion polls the majority within Polish society consider that the Church has too great an influence on political life. According to public opinion polls the majority within Polish society consider that the Church has too great an influence on political life.

\textit{Gazeta Wyborcza}, 15 July, 2012: the answers for two (out of seven) sentences are worth mentioning. The first sentence was: „The freedom of speech is not worth anything if we consider the dangers of radical views”. This is how people responded to this question: in the year 2000-53\% percent said “Yes”, 25\% said “No” and 17\% of people responded “Hard to say”. In the year 2012 47\% of subjects responded “Yes”, 30\% said “No” and 23\% chose “Hard to say”. The second sentence said: “It is better to live in a disciplined society, as giving to much freedom to people can be destructive”. This is how people responded to this sentence: in 2000-44\% said “Yes”, 36\% said “No” and 20\% responded “Hard to say”. In 2012-46\% said “Yes”, 41\% said “No” and 13\% were undecided.