

The Rebirth Of Civil Society

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Introduction

I would like to start by quoting Alexis de Tocqueville, the French writer who contributed so much to our thinking about politics. De Toqueville writes in his Recollections:

"I mixed with people who lived by their pen who described history without interfering with politics, as well as with politicians who were engaged solely in creating events without any intention of describing them. It always struck me that the former would see general causes in everything while the latter, living in an entanglement of day to day facts, tended to imagine that everything was caused by minor incidents, and that the world moves thanks to small wheels similar to those that their hands are pushing. I believe that both of them are mistaken." And that is the motto of my considerations. Where did civil society come from in Central and Eastern Europe, or why did Communism fall?

Whenever I happen to consider that topic – why Communism failed – I know that in Washington, everybody is sure that Communism failed as a result of the American policy – how else? But which American policy? Was it Nixon's and Kissinger's Détente policy, or was it Carter's and Brzezinski's Human Rights policy, or was it the Evil Empire policy of Reagan and Schulz? Whenever I am in the Vatican, it seems perfectly clear that Communism fell as a result of the activities of the Apostolic See and John Paul II, our Pope. But again, we have to ask – which policy was it? Was it the policy of shrewd diplomacy, or was it the policy of testimony and of heroism? Whenever I am in Asia, I have no doubts that Communism was lost in Afghanistan. That it was just there where the Soviet Union broke its teeth. And whenever I am in Moscow, it is absolutely obvious to me that Communism was toppled by Russians, the only thing that remains unclear being whether it was by Gorbachev or Yeltsin. And finally, we Poles know and are convinced that it was we who toppled Communism and that the world received freedom from Communism from us, as a gift. But even we in Poland are not able to decide quite when it was that this happened. Was it in 1976, when the first structures of democratic opposition came into place on the wave of the workers' protests in Radom and Ursus – that is when the Committee for the Defence of Workers was founded and the first institutions of the parallel society emerged. Or was it in 1978, when the Cracow Metropolitan, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, was elected as Pope, or was it in 1980, when Lech Walesa jumped over the fence in the Gdansk shipyard and three days later he was the most famous man in the world?

The Characteristics of the 1989 Revolutions

We have no clarity and will never have it. There is one thing, however, that can be stressed with full conviction: the final dismantling of Communism, which happened in 1989, had many different causes but it also had its two specific characteristics which are worth noting. Firstly, it was an act of dismantling by means of a velvet revolution, to use the words of Vaclav Havel. With the exception of Romania, this

dismantling avoided the use of violence. It used the logic of negotiations, not the logic of barricades and firing squads. Secondly, this change was not undertaken in the name of a utopia. This was a revolution without a utopia. It was a revolution whose utopia meant recovering normality, regaining the right to a normal national, civic, religious, economic and political life. There might have been one utopian motif in this revolution – in this negotiated, peaceful, self-restrained revolution – and that was the utopia of the West. People in Central and Eastern Europe had a utopian image of the West. They had a deeply held belief that by building a democratic order they would quickly achieve a living standard similar to that in the Manhattan, social security similar to that in Sweden while being able to work as they did before, under Communism, when it used to be said that the principle of Communist style economy was that the government pretended to pay the wages and the people pretended to work. The whole movement of democratic opposition had certain common features. In Russia, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia or in Hungary these common features were rejecting the philosophy of a violent revolution. Our knowledge about the mechanisms of Bolshevik dictatorship led us to reject violence as a way of fighting for freedom. We were convinced that should we fight for freedom by resorting to violence, we would not only be doomed to fail, but at the same time we would deny freedom a chance to prevail after the defeat of the Communist dictatorship. And if we look today at all those countries, starting with Afghanistan, where Communism was fought by violence – Communism did lose in these countries, but freedom did not win. One dictatorship was replaced by another. As Simone Weil would say "Justice turned out to be a refugee from the winners' camp".

The second specific feature was the philosophy of creating institutions of parallel society. This started in Poland. In December 1970, in a few Polish towns, during workers' protests, the buildings of the Regional Headquarters of the Communist Party were burned. That was a symbolic de-legitimising of Communism: the movement which claimed that it was limiting political freedom in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat had its legitimacy taken away by the proletariat itself. In 1976, when we started to create the first institutions of the civil society, we had the following slogan: "instead of burning Party Committee buildings down, create your own committees which will allow you to defend yourself against the system of the dictatorship, and will allow you to realise your needs in your own individual way." That is where the philosophy came from, the philosophy which Havel called "the power of the powerless". The philosophy which Konrad, the Hungarian writer, called "antipolitical politics". This politics was based on a consistent rejection of the hope of ever reforming the Communist system. The role of these institutions was not to reform the Communist State. The role of these institutions was to allow people to defend themselves against the Communist State and, at the same time, to meet their specific needs which were not being met by the Communist state. What were these needs? One example was the need for a thorough education, and so different forms of what we called "flying universities" came into existence. That meant seminars and lectures for students who were curious to learn other aspects of history, sociology, literature than those offered by censored official textbooks. We built up a system of publications distributed in "second circulation", beyond the reach of censorship. Literary magazines, historical periodicals, books by Polish and foreign authors, all these made up a different framework for the exchange of thoughts, and for a reflection.

All that allowed the society to change, and the building of enclaves of independence under the Communist dictatorship. Why was this possible? It seems that here, two causes coincided, each totally different from the other. Poland was always a Catholic country, where the Catholic Church played a huge role. The Church was the only independent institution in our conquered country. This independent Church became slowly, step by step, an institution of the civil society. It was the only place where the Polish language was not reduced to its own caricature; where an ordinary person could on the one hand hear words of truth, not propaganda, and on the other hand could hear that by nature he or she is endowed by such great dignity that he is only permitted to go down to his knees before God and nobody else. This was important. On the other hand, it was the time of Détente, the time of the Helsinki Agreement, part of which was a so-called third basket – a basket of human rights. And this basket, which in the eyes of our Communist leaders was just a decoration without any importance, became for us, opposition people, an instrument in trying to loosen the tight corset of Communist dictatorship. What used to be a closely guarded internal matter of every Communist regime became a subject of international monitoring, and international institutions – like the Helsinki Watch which were

then created, and gained huge importance monitoring repression of human rights in Communist countries.

And finally, the third Polish phenomenon is the phenomenon of the grey zone. This is the zone where it was possible to live between – shall we say – the censor's pencil and the letter of the Criminal Code. It was the sort of life which may not have provided any material comfort but instead it provided good moral comfort. And this zone provided space, for example, for periodicals which appeared officially, under the protection of the Church, as the *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly, or the *Znak* and *Wież* monthly. There was also space for a number of Catholic Intelligence Clubs whose function, at the beginning, was purely confessional but whose role changed with time and they became an extremely far reaching element of the civil society.

Another important fact was that in Poland there was a tradition of workers' protests. And what I call civil society was created at a certain crossroads, at a certain meeting point of what I would call the intelligentsia's opposition, represented by people from intellectual, academic, literary and students' circles, and of what was then the workers' opposition – first budding independent trade unions which were created then – and of the Catholic church. In August 1980, this stream bore *Solidarnosc* or Solidarity – a mighty movement of millions of people which was a confederation brought together to achieve emancipation – of our nation, culture, religion, civic life of the world of labour. And despite the fact that a few months later martial law was introduced in Poland and that Solidarity was made illegal and its leaders were jailed, it was never possible to break the Solidarity movement. It survived all in the form of civil society's institutions.

It survived until the end of 1989, when it came back to its – let us say – legal place at the Round Table, where the representatives of the Communist rule sat down on one side, and Solidarity representatives sat down on the other. There, the dismantling of

the dictatorship and an opening to democracy was negotiated. It was a point in time when Communism has already lost its sharp teeth and at the same time it was a moment of such a whirl in the Soviet Union that a margin for free, liberated initiatives opened up in this part of the world, in these countries. And they sprung up practically everywhere. They sprung up in Poland and in Hungary and later spread in a wide wave to all countries.

Many people say that the Round Table in Poland was a mistake. That Communism would have fallen anyway, and so why sit down to negotiate with all these criminals? I would like to give the following answer to those who ask that question. If you are so sure that Communism would have fallen, I envy you for your faith. That sort of faith in the historical necessity of events surpasses the faith of Marxists Leninists. But if you still think that you know the future which we didn't know then, tell me please – give me some dates – when will Communism fall in China, in Cuba, in North Korea and in Vietnam. And if you cannot quote me a date today, do not try to tell me that you were able to forecast it then. Secondly, we, people with a thorough Marxist schooling, know very well that historical necessities don't exist, that this is the biggest illusion produced by the Marxist utopia. There is no historical necessity; specific details are decided by what historians used to call Cleopatra's nose.

On June 4th 1989, two important events took place. We in Poland voted for the first time in parliamentary elections. These elections were not fully democratic, as a certain number of mandates was set aside in advance for the representatives of the Communist rule, but for the first time they were fully free and the elections into the upper chamber, the Senate, were 100% free. And these elections were overwhelmingly won by the Polish democratic opposition. But on the same day, June 4th, on its TV screens, the world was watching the massacre on the Tiananmen Square – the Square of Heavenly Peace in Peking. And these were the two ways which the events in Communist countries could take. A question beckons now: did we do the right thing in Poland to strike a compromise with the Communists? That it was us, political prisoners until recently, who made a compromise with our prison guards? I think that we did the right thing. In 1989 in Poland, two weaknesses met: the Communist government was too weak to destroy us – us the oppositionists – and we were too weak to topple it. The Leninist definition of a revolution as you will remember, goes as follows: The people do not want to live in the old way, and the government is not capable to govern in the old way. And that is when a revolution happens. While a definition of a velvet revolution is that the opposition is too

weak to topple the government, and the government is too weak to destroy the opposition. And in this unique constellation, the roundtable became possible.

A symptomatic thing: hardly anybody believed in it then. Hardly anybody believed that this was the beginning of the end of Communism. I was told recently in Washington that in 1989, the State Department and the White House received two reports. One was from the American Ambassador in Warsaw, the other from the CIA. The CIA wrote in its report that this is another Communist masquerade without any real meaning, and that Washington has no reason to revise its traditional policy. On the other hand, John Davis, the American ambassador in Warsaw, wrote: "The round table means the end of the Communist system in Poland. In this sense I consider my mission as fulfilled and would like to receive new instructions." And when I was reading the CIA report, I thought about how secret services were the same all over the world. I mean, they don't understand anything, they do not have a language allowing them to correctly describe reality, and they are like children watching adults through a keyhole. When you try to watch something through a keyhole, you always see the same: the keyhole.

Speaking in simple terms Communism fell because it was a very bad system. Everything else was an accident.

After Communism

Immediately after Communism, the following problem arose: we all both the Communists and the anti Communists – were bastards of the Communist system, who were mentally shaped by this system. And so a tendency immediately emerged of wanting to replace the Communists, as soon as they were removed from power, by Solidarity structures. So that after – as we used to call it – the leading role of the Communist Party comes the time of the leading role of the Solidarity trade union. And further, from the churches' pulpits you could easily hear: "For 45 years, we had Communists in power – now it is time for us, the Catholics".

Alexis de Tocqueville writes in his Recollections as follows:

"If many conservatives defended the government only in order to preserve various gratifications and positions, I have to say that many oppositionists seemed to attack the government only in order to achieve these. It is indeed a fact, a deplorable fact, that a favour of public positions and a desire of living off the taxes are not at all a disease which would plague one specific party in this country. It is a big and persistent defect plaguing the whole nation, it is a hidden disease which has been consuming all previous governments and will consume all new governments in the same way".

And exactly this problem surfaced immediately after the change of the system of government, the problem of this disease described by Tocqueville. But of course nobody will say about themselves that they want to be in government for the perks, or that they want to eliminate somebody else in order to take their place, or their flat, no. This person will say that time is ripe for historical justice and he or she is that sword of history doing that justice. And so, ideologies of so called "lustration" or of "de communizing the society" appeared in our countries. The principle of de communizing, the idea behind it, is that a certain number of Communist functionaries of the Communist regime, or of the Communist party, would be stripped of their constitutional rights en bloc, only for that reason – that they held certain positions in the Communist party. The lustration idea is that using the materials of the political secret police, the past of various personalities active in public life would be examined. In other words, the de communizing idea is a direct continuation of the Bolshevik concept of citizens' rights, summed up by the English writer George Orwell in his novel "Animal Farm", that all animals are equal but some are more equal than others. This philosophy of de communizing was drawing directly on the Bolshevik principle according to which so called representatives of the bourgeois order and of the Tsarist regime would be deprived of citizens' rights. In other words, the only ones entitled to run for a seat in parliament were those permitted to do so by the new rulers. This was a principle of inequality before the law, not equality.

I thought about how to call it, and came up with a term – anticommunism with a Bolshevik face. On the other hand, lustration means a posthumous triumph of the Communist secret police. Suddenly it turns out that files assembled by this police become a foundation for judging a person. It doesn't matter what I wrote in those days, how I behaved, what I said in meetings, what I did in the underground movement what matters is whatever the agents and officers of the political police wrote about me. And today, these papers are a basis for judging me as a human being. Why did the KGB gather materials about people like us? Was it in order to establish factual truth? Were these people historians, trying to establish credibility of certain documents? No. They gathered these materials in order to obtain what they called "compromats", or compromising materials, which would allow them to blackmail every citizen.

And that leads us to the question of how we should settle with the past, because every revolution must settle with the past. Firstly: if we have to de communize – and de communizing is necessary – let's de communize institutions. That is, create a real parliament out of a fictitious parliament. To de communize a country means to introduce procedures of a state of law, to open borders, and perhaps most importantly – to de communize society means to allow space for the institutions of a civil society. The less there is of the State, and the more there is of the civil society, the higher the guarantee for a democratic order. Because procedural democracy alone means apathy and passivity of citizens. Only thanks to the institutions of the civil society do we have a living organism of democracy; many disputes about the shape of new politics are really disputes about the relationship between the State and the civil society.

How else do we settle with the past? I think that the most reasonable formula would be along the line of "amnesty – yes, amnesia – no". The system of Communist dictatorship equalled a civil cold war. And after every war comes the time of peace. As the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska writes; after every war, somebody has to do the cleaning... has to clean the rubble, the ruins, the human tragedies... that is why we need amnesty. That is why, in the name of new democracy, we have to reveal the truth without discriminating people. We have to open our cupboards and take out the skeletons hidden in them, so that there are no skeletons in our cupboards – but without witchhunts, however red the potential witches are. And lastly, it is necessary to understand all the complexities of the human fate under Communism. Should we accept the logic of hard line anti Communists, we would have to bless Pinochet today and de communize Djilas, who spent 15 years in a Communist prison in Yugoslavia, or Frantisek Kriegel, the Czech Communist who – as the only one present – refused to sign the Moscow protocols of 1968, or Imre Nagy, the Hungarian Communist who was shot after the trial in 1956. Making sense of these biographies is the same as understanding the whole drama of the 20th century.

The basic problem of a country like Poland is also a problem of the collapse of a certain solidarity ethos. The ethos of solidarity was an ethos of joint emancipation of the world of labour. Suddenly, after 1989, the market economy came about, as did shock therapy and privatisation. The ethos of solidarity was replaced by the ethos of competition. We now have an ethos of getting rich and an ethos of profit. I am not saying that it is bad. I am only saying that there is a price to be paid for it a measurable, yet high price. The workers in the Gdansk shipyards who, I would say it like that, struck Poland out of Communism and into freedom, became victims of their own victory because they worked in an anachronistic enterprise which was unwilling, and unable, to restructure. The shipyard was unable to become competitive, but it could not continue to receive state subsidies.

Ten Years Later

After ten years, we can talk about a gigantic success of the Polish transformation. I can say it as the boss of a newspaper that is the same age as Polish democracy. Our first issue appeared in May 1989 – it was the first daily made by the people from the anti Communist opposition who came to our editorial offices from the underground movement, from jail and so on. For us, this has been not only the best decade of our lives but also the best decade in the last three hundred years in the history of Poland. But we feel that our success is not final. We brought about four big transformations: from a satellite State to a sovereign State, from the Warsaw Pact to the North Atlantic Treaty, from

dictatorship to democracy, from an economy of – let us say after Janos Kornai – shortage to a market economy, from empty shelves to economic growth. For the first time in our history we have good relations with all our neighbours and no problems with national minorities, but at the same time we – as a newspaper – want to be a part of the Polish civil society.

For us, working in a newspaper does not simply mean earning a living it means contributing to the democratic order in Poland. We want to be part of the fourth estate. At the same time we know that we can only achieve this by being financially independent. For that reason we always take great care to make an interesting and bold paper but also to run the paper in a business like way, so that it is self supporting. Because only then can we be sufficiently strong and not to fear conflicts with any political or economic power in our country. And such conflicts are unavoidable because reality sets us two traps which force conflicting solutions. Firstly, it is the problem of marginalised groups, of the under classes which do not fit into the political system of our State; they have to be offered something, or this margin will create a culture of destruction. And secondly, it is the problem of corruption as an element of the political system. This corruption may not have a scale comparable with that in Russia, but it is like a cancerous growth attacking an organism.

However, as long as there are civil society institutions in my country, like my newspaper, for example, and as long as I am not afraid to come to London and pronounce these heresies here, in this famous School, about what is happening in my part of the world, I think I can stay an optimist.