The Contribution of the Polish Intelligentsia to the Breakthrough of 1989

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In his recollections of the events of June 1979, the former Solidarity advisor Adam Michnik has described this moment in history as a time of three Polish miracles. First, John Paul II returns triumphantly to Poland as the Pope, making a mockery of Stalin’s jibe about the Pope having no divisions; then the second miracle occurs a little more than a year later in August 1980, when Lech Wałęsa leads the shipyard strike and the first non-communist trade union is formed within the Soviet Bloc. The third miracle occurred some two months later when the exiled poet Czesław Miłosz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Michnik wrote:

John Paul II became the emblem of Poland’s Catholic Church at its best. The Gdansk strike and Lech Wałęsa became symbols and the crowning point of the Polish workers’ rebellion and Czesław Miłosz symbolized the defiance of Poland’s intelligentsia. Those three symbols marked the three trends within Solidarity. One of them stressed the movement’s national and Catholic character, another followed the working class vindication line, another still concentrated on democratic and humanist values. These tendencies were neither inconsistent nor conflicting; for us they were complementary.¹

This chapter will focus on the humanist values of the Polish intelligentsia, which were not only significant for the third miracle of 1980 but greatly contributed to the final breakthrough of the summer of 1989. For a whole decade, they offered sustained intellectual critiques of existing Marxism and reflections on the alternatives available in Western political thought. Included within this body of work were the contributions of Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II), who was both a Polish intellectual and a powerful world figure.

¹ Michnik (2005).
While members of the Polish intelligentsia were offering critiques of various forms of totalitarian government from the 1930s onwards, the work of anti-communist scholars and writers became more organised in the 1970s with the formation of the Workers’ Defence Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników), known by its initials KOR. KOR was distinctive in that it was an initiative of intellectuals to assist workers and their families, particularly those prisoners detained after labour strikes in 1976. It raised money through the sale of its underground publications, through fundraising groups in Paris and London, and grants from Western institutions. KOR sent open letters of protest to the communist government as well as organising legal and financial support for the families of detainees. The group also smuggled in printing machines to produce its underground publications such as Robotnik, a biweekly that had a circulation of about 20 000 by 1978, and to publish books under the banner of its own publishing house called NOWA. The latter were often Polish translations of works published in Western countries that were regarded as politically dangerous by the communist authorities. George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, with its esoteric critique of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and Günter Grass’s The Tin Drum were prominent in this category. Jan Józef Lipski concluded that the achievement of NOWA was ‘truly impressive’, with more than 100 publications including political and economic works, which were ‘indispensable to an understanding of intellectual and political culture’.

In 1977, KOR leaders collaborated with intellectuals in the Warsaw community to establish the ‘Flying University’ (Uniwersytet Latający), a series of lectures organised by unofficial student groups to discuss political topics that could not be debated in public. The concept was revived from a similar organisation that had operated between 1885 and 1905 in the context of Imperial Russian domination of the Polish capital. As a consequence of their collaboration with the organisers of the Flying University, KOR members were harassed by the secret police, beaten up and in some cases jailed. KOR, however, became an inspiration for the nation when the Polish government declared amnesty for jailed workers in the spring of 1977. The work of KOR was thus a precursor to the formation of Solidarity. Its leading members included Jacek Kuroń, Jan Józef Lipski and Adam Michnik.

In addition to the political agitation and publication work undertaken by KOR members, there was a significant body of scholarship being published by intellectuals not formally associated with KOR in the field of political theory. Far from having uncritically accepted the tendency of many Western scholars to reduce the study of politics to issues in public administration, Polish scholars

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3 Ibid., p. 179.
throughout the 1980s published essays on the entire tradition of Western political philosophy in the journals Res Publica, Kontakt, Libertas, Arka, Więz, Znak, Christianitas, Gazeta Wyborcza and the newspaper Tygodnik Powszechny. Many of these essays sought to uncover the foundations of the totalitarian mind-set in the fact–value dichotomy.

In 1980, Paweł Śpiewak published as essay in the journal Więz, then under the editorial guidance of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who was to become in the summer of 1989 the first Solidarity Prime Minister. The article endorsed the argument of Robert Nisbet that the fundamental cleavage in modern political discourse is not between the left and the right but between those who want to separate politics from the domain of values and those who do not.5 Those who argue that politics and values should be kept chastely separate speak of the moral neutrality of the state as a new kind of civic virtue. They reject the idea that there is a list of goods of human flourishing whose promotion and defence by the state fosters the common good.

Two of the leading Western political theorists of the twentieth century who wanted to distill the ether of values from the political process were professors at Harvard University. One of them, Robert Nozick, was of the view that no political action on the part of the state can be undertaken or justified on the ground that it promotes an ideal of the good or on the ground that it enables individuals to pursue an ideal of the good; while his colleague John Rawls thought that those who believe in concepts such as the common good were ‘irrational’ and ‘mad’, and to underscore this principle he said that if a human being wants to spend his life counting blades of grass then that is his good, and the rest of us have no grounds upon which to judge otherwise.6

While the idea that moral neutrality is a virtue was one of the dominant themes in late twentieth-century Western political theory, it did not sit well with many of the Polish anti-communist dissident intellectuals. With reference to such currents of thought in Western countries, Zdzisław Krasnodębski observed that for neutrality theorists it is wrong to assume that the distinction between good and evil can be clearly discerned, that we could have any claim to know the whole, to be the advocate for the universal subject—and since nothing is morally certain we are all simultaneously victims and executioners. All that Poland could expect from a Western culture penetrated by such ideas was something as mundane as a supermarket. He lamented that the lost paradise of Europe could not be rejoined because pre-modern Europe no longer exists; the Western Europeans had sold their souls to utilitarian and other materialist

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5 Śpiewak (1980:117).
6 Nozick (1984:312) and Rawls (1972:554).
currents of philosophy, no less than the communists. There was no archaic Ithaca to which Poland might return, because Penelope did not wait faithfully; she had submitted to some rather low-minded suitors.\(^7\)

While Krasnodębski identified the problem of the moral equivocation of the West, Marcin Król, who was then the editor of the Warsaw-based journal *Res Publica*, argued that Nazism was possible in the Weimar Republic precisely because many citizens of that republic no longer aspired to ideals and values that formed a bridge between politics and ethics. The sense of aimlessness, or what Weber described as ‘disenchantment’, had created a moral vacuum in the political realm such that it was difficult for the opinion makers to make moral judgments. Król refers to the condition generated by the fact/value dichotomy as the ‘terrorism of the lack of ideals’. He argued that the idea that we can make no rational judgments about values, only about facts, imported the Machiavellian separation of politics from morality and the separation of descriptions of reality from considerations of how societies ought to be.\(^8\)

In his article ‘The problems with Machiavelli’ (*Kłopoty z Machiavellim*), he further argued that the Machiavellian error can in modern political life take three forms. First, there is the attitude that politics is always immoral so the moral citizen should avoid the political sphere altogether. Second, there is the attitude that politics is the realm of pure tactics, and thus those operating within it are free from the operation of moral imperatives. Third, there is the attitude that moral behaviour is always determined by politics—in other words, that there are always political explanations for whatever it is that we believe about values. It was this third version that was at the basis of the Marxist idea that what humans believed to be right or wrong could always be explained by their class status. According to the communists, bourgeois morality was one thing and proletarian morality something else. Having set out the three different forms that the separation of politics from values had taken in the twentieth century, Król noted that common to all three was a denial of the human capacity for the exercise of free will.

Król concluded that if ideas such as justice, goodness and human rights are not related to any objective reality then one can use them at will; there is nothing to stand in opposition to their arbitrary use because there is no external and transcendental perspective. Principles of justice must not be dependent upon the state for their definition. If they are then the state can acknowledge as law whatever it will and the state might very well become not merely the executive committee of the ruling class, but even worse: the executive committee of the ruling party. Król suggested that there is much to fear from conceptions of the

\(^7\) Krasnodębski (1991:74).
\(^8\) Król (1984).
state whose functions obey a rationality divorced from conscience. The moment that legitimacy is founded on or confused with rational bureaucratic legality, there is a risk that legitimacy and conscience will be absorbed by the state and ordinary citizens will exit themselves from the scene of the crime.\textsuperscript{9}

These ideas resonated strongly with those of the Czech dissident intellectual Václav Havel, who coined the expression ‘the power of the powerless’. In his essay ‘Anti-political politics’, Havel argued that for all the complex historical detours, the origin of the modern state and of political power could be sought in the moment when human reason broke free of humanity, of personal experience, personal conscience and personal responsibility and also from the framework of the natural world. Havel observed that in contemporary politics, ‘good and evil, categories of the natural world, are obsolete remnants of the past which have lost all meaning and that the sole method of politics is quantifiable success, that is, the teaching of Machiavelli’.\textsuperscript{10}

Therefore, Havel did not equate his rejection of Soviet-style communism with an embrace of the political styles of the West. To the extent that they are based on the rational technology of power, they were rejected by him. In an interview with the \textit{Times Literary Supplement}, he described Soviet totalitarianism as an ‘extreme manifestation of a deep-seated problem which equally finds expression in advanced Western society. Both systems, Soviet and Western liberal-democratic, have in common Belohradsky’s “eschatology of the impersonal”, the trend toward mega-machines that escape human control.’\textsuperscript{11} When asked for his analysis of the causes of the problem, Havel replied:

\begin{quote}
It has something to do with the fact that we live in the first atheistic civilization in human history. People have ceased to respect any so-called higher metaphysical values…I am not talking about a personal God necessarily, I’m referring to whatever is absolute, transcendental, supra-human. These fundamental considerations once represented a support, a horizon for people, but now they are lost.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Adam Michnik also addressed the subject of the Machiavellian foundations of much contemporary political theory. In 1990, one year after the breakthrough of the summer of 1989, he began an article, ‘After the revolution: the new dangers to the new democracies’, with the observation that many think of politics as the art of achieving what is possible in a given situation. In this respect, the consideration of what is good and what is bad, what is fair and what is unfair, what is honest and what is dishonest, is external to politics and in this way it

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\item[12] Ibid., p. 81.
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can be said that politics and ethics belong to different worlds. With reference to Havel’s concept of the power of the powerless, however, he then moved on from this commonplace observation to assert that the men and women of the anti-totalitarian opposition movements had a different view of politics:

We are engaged in a great experiment of confrontation between the idea of politics based on the power of the powerless and a social reality that was shaped when politics was based on the power of the powerful… We are children of a certain tradition. And we know that this tradition does not permit us to renounce the truth with impunity. We are the children of our Judeo-Christian culture, and we know that this culture, which recommends loyalty to the state, commands us to bend our knees only before God. We know therefore, that we should put faithfulness to truth above participation in power. We know, by reaching for our roots, that the truth of politics resides, in the end, in the politics of truth… We reject the belief in political utopia. We know that our future is an imperfect society, a society of ordinary people and ordinary conflicts—but, precisely for this reason, a society that must not renounce its ethical norms in the name of political illusions.\(^\text{13}\)

Many of the above criticisms of the quest to sever the connection between the political and the moral can be found in a more synthesised form in the works of John Paul II. For the young Karol Wojtyła, a major problem facing the church in Poland was the persuasive influence of visions of the human person that denied the human capacity for free will. For the Marxists, human beings were products of their class, driven by economic interests. In the words of the Bolshevik theoretician Nikolai Bukharin, human beings are ‘concentrated collections of social influences united in a small unit as the skin of a sausage is filled with sausage meat’.\(^\text{14}\) After World War II, Wojtyła, along with the Dominican scholar M. Albert Krapiec, set about developing a philosophical anthropology that would defend the dignity of the human person by focusing on the human capacity to rise above all manner of social, economic and psychological conditioning through the exercise of a free will. This anthropology took its final academic form in the publication of his work *The Acting Person* in 1969.\(^\text{15}\) One of the most famous axioms presented in this work is that ‘action reveals the person’. Having been influenced by currents in mid-twentieth-century personalism and phenomenology, Wojtyła was interested in the relationship between truth, freedom and human authenticity, and he set out to offer a sustained intellectual analysis of the inadequacies of the Marxist treatment of these themes. In particular, Wojtyła was critical of two types of inauthenticity he believed

\(^{13}\) Michnik (1990).
\(^{14}\) Bukharin (2008:98).
\(^{15}\) Wojtyla (1979).
fostered the success of totalitarian ideologies in the twentieth century. These are similar to the Sartrean notion of bad faith. The first he described as servile conformism; the second as non-involvement.

Wojtyła acknowledged that the term ‘conformism’ denotes a tendency to comply with the accepted custom and to resemble others—a tendency that in itself is neutral, in many respects positive and constructive or even creative, and indeed, this constructive and creative assimilation in the community is a confirmation and also a manifestation of human solidarity. Nonetheless, he also observed that when this normal and healthy social tendency to ‘fit in’ begins to sway towards servility, it becomes highly negative. Conformism ‘consists primarily in an attitude of compliance or resignation, in a specific form of passivity that makes the person to be but the subject of what happens instead of being the actor or agent responsible for building his own attitudes and his own commitment to the community’. The servile conformist ‘fails to accept his share in constructing the community and allows himself to be carried with and by the anonymous majority’. Inauthenticity, which takes the form of a servile conformism, equals ‘a weakness of personal transcendence and a weakness of the capacity for self-determination and of choice’.

This pathology was well illustrated by Eugène Ionescu in his play The Rhinoceros written in 1959. The play belongs to the school of drama known as the Theatre of the Absurd. Over the course of three acts, all except one of the inhabitants of a provincial French town believe that they are rhinoceroses and behave accordingly. At first, the majority regard those who are walking about on all four limbs and trying to make the sounds of a rhinoceros a joke, but by the third act almost the entire town is behaving in this manner, because this is what other people are doing.

While Ionescu’s play made fun of the totalitarian mentality by imagining a village in which people think of themselves as rhinos just because this is what other people are doing, a similar artistic device was employed throughout the 1980s by the leaders of the Orange Alternative Movement. Their aim was also to point out the absurdity of the totalitarian mentality through recourse to comedy. The movement started in Wroclaw and was led by Waldemar Fydrych, commonly known as the Major. Its main purpose was to offer a broader range of social groups an alternative way of opposing the communist regime by means of a peaceful protest that used absurd and comic elements. By doing this, Orange Alternative participants could not be arrested by the police without the

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16 Ibid., p. 289.
17 Ibid., p. 289.
18 Ibid., p. 289.
19 Ibid., p. 346.
20 See: <www.pomaranczowa-alternatywa.org/iindex-eng.html>
authorities becoming a laughing stock. For example, students were encouraged to celebrate secret policeman’s day by wearing red socks; people were encouraged to take their dogs for a walk exclusively on the left side of pavements during propaganda broadcasts; and, most effective of all, people dressed as dwarfs. On 1 June 1988, in an event known as the revolution of dwarfs, more than 10 000 persons marched through the centre of Wroclaw wearing orange dwarf hats. The police were aware that if they asked the participants the question ‘Why did you participate in an illegal meeting of dwarfs?’, they would look utterly ridiculous. The Orange Alternative Movement had its intellectual origins in Dadaism and surrealism but it illustrated in a politically powerful way Wojtyla’s more densely philosophical criticisms of the capacity of ‘servile conformism’ to undermine human freedom and dignity.

The second form of inauthenticity identified by Wojtyla—that of ‘non-involvement’—is defined as a stoic egocentrism according to which the person deliberately withdraws from making decisions and taking social actions. Whereas servile conformists tend not to question or judge, those who take a stance of non-involvement are fully conscious of the wrong that is being done, but they lack the courage to intervene on the side of those being oppressed. Much of what happened in the mid-twentieth century could have been avoided if these two forms of inauthenticity were not common dispositions.

Where did these social pathologies come from? Wojtyla argued that in a sense they have been around since the time when things went wrong in the Garden of Eden. He believed, however, that the intellectual history of post-eighteenth-century Europe fostered the tendencies by promoting a false notion of freedom. In a speech he delivered to the scholars of Lublin University (KUL) in 1987, he expressed the idea in the following terms:

The human person must in the name of the truth about himself starve off a double temptation: the temptation to make the truth about himself subordinate to his freedom and the temptation to make himself subordinate to the world of objects; he has to refuse to succumb to the temptation of both self-idolatry and of self-subjectification: *Positus est in medio homo: nec bestia—nec deus.*

In his 1985 essay ‘Communism as a cultural foundation’, Leszek Kolakowski offered a similar reading to that of Wojtyla. Communism, he said, emerged from the tradition of the Enlightenment, and, in conditions where traditional beliefs had been abandoned by educated elites, it took the form of a secular religion. He observed, however, that as a religion it suffered from an internal dialectic; it simultaneously demanded blind obedience or faith and acceptance of it as a

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rational interpretation of the world. According to Kołakowski, ‘communism’s hovering between the two irreconcilable concepts led in time to a collapse within its empire of both rationalism and religion; and its ideological bankruptcy was at the same time a defeat for the Enlightenment, of which it was the ultimate, most consistent, and thus most self-destructive expression’. This general critique was expressed somewhat more poetically by Professor Krasnodębski, who said that Marxism was not an exotic venereal disease brought into Europe by those whose natural habitat can be found in the seedier quarters of Asia; it resulted not from the betrayal of the values of modern (Enlightenment) humanism, but from the radical and consequential realisation of them.

These various contradictions within the political culture of the West led Wojtyła to argue that the Western world is currently at a crossroads between what he termed ‘a culture of death’ that acknowledges no absolute truth or goodness and for which in such circumstances power is the only legitimate political currency and a civilisation of love built upon notions of the sanctity of human life and culture-transcendent truth and goodness. In poetic form, he expressed the price of this choice in the following words:

Freedom—a continuing conquest  
It cannot simply be possessed!  
It comes as a gift, but keeping it is a struggle  
Gift and struggle are inscribed on pages, hidden yet open.  
For freedom you pay with all your being, therefore call that your freedom  
Which allows you, in paying the price,  
To possess yourself anew.  
At such a price do we enter history and touch her epochs.  
Where is the dividing-line between those generations who paid too little  
And those who paid too much?  
On which side of that line are we?

In 1979, in the first year of his pontificate, Wojtyła returned to Poland for a nine-day visit that had a dramatic impact upon Polish morale. His message, at its most simple, was ‘be not afraid’. The then US National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was later to say that the Polish people ‘all of a sudden discovered that they all shared the same aspiration and the same resentments, and the regime discovered that it was weak and isolated’. In an interview given at the time of Wojtyła’s death, Brzezinski explained Wojtyła’s strength in the following terms:

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24 Wojtyła (2005:84).  
He grew up as a young adolescent under the Nazi occupation. Then he lived under Stalinism. I think that taught him what happens when violence is institutionalized and tramples the human being. And then that became deepened with a philosophy, a theology in which he really placed fundamental and central emphasis on the sanctity of the human being and on the mysterious divinity within each human being.²⁶

Throughout the 1980s, the treatment of such themes as freedom, courage, human authenticity and human dignity in Wojtyła’s literary and philosophical works was popularised by the chaplains of Solidarity, foremost among whom were the philosopher Jozef Tischner, author of *The Spirit of Solidarity*, and Jerzy Popiełuszko, whose speeches were broadcast over Radio Free Europe.²⁷ The following passage is typical of Popiełuszko’s eloquence and his faith in what Havel called ‘the power of the powerless’:

> Do not struggle with violence. Violence is a sign of weakness. All those who cannot win through the heart try to conquer through violence. The most wonderful and durable struggles in history have been carried on by human thought. The most ignoble fights and most ephemeral successes are those of violence. An idea which needs rifles to survive dies of its own accord. An idea which is imposed by violence collapses under it. An idea capable of life wins without effort and is then followed by millions of people.²⁸

Such was Popiełuszko’s influence that in October 1984 he was murdered by agents of the *Służba Bezpieczeństwa* (Security Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs). Some 250 000 people attended his funeral and news of this tragedy heightened Western awareness of the brutality of the communist regime. In 1997, the Catholic Church started the process of Popiełuszko’s beatification; in 2008, he was declared to be a Servant of God and, in June 2010, he was beatified.

At the same time, throughout the 1980s, Wojtyła used the papacy as a platform from which to heighten world interest in the problems of countries caught within the Soviet zone of influence, and the Vatican diplomatic service was kept well informed of US intelligence on Soviet strategy vis-a-vis Poland.²⁹ On 13 May 1981, Wojtyła survived an assassination attempt by a Turkish gunman who had links to the Bulgarian secret police. Although the KGB denied any involvement, it is broadly believed that the Soviet government was using one

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²⁶ Ibid.
of its surrogates to rid itself of the problem of an anti-communist Polish pope. Mikhail Gorbachev was later to say that ‘the collapse of the Iron Curtain would have been impossible without John Paul II’.  

The Polish intelligentsia (including Wojtyla) offered an intellectual critique of the social pathology that was communism; and, united with the workers through the agencies of KOR and Solidarity, and under the patronage of the Catholic Church led by Wojtyla, it was able to change perceptions of what was politically possible and desirable. Communism as a twentieth-century form of the applications of the principles of Machiavelli was ultimately defeated by a set of contrary principles, which included the notions of the power of the powerless, living in truth, and solidarity between the social classes. It was also defeated by the spiritual strength of characters such as Michnik, Wałęsa and Wojtyła. One might conclude that the moment the image of a newly elected Wojtyla kneeling in front of the throne of St Peter with his arms around the Cardinal Archbishop of Warsaw was beamed into Polish living rooms, no amount of Soviet propaganda could contend with it.

Poles as a national group have a reputation for being romantics, for putting principles above pragmatics. In many moments of history, this does not seem to have helped them, but in the summer of 1989 truth and courage and romantic ideals triumphed over lies and thuggery. A coalition of intellectuals, workers, students and the Catholic hierarchy asserted sufficient moral and professional authority for the communists to have no choice but to peacefully surrender their power to a new generation of Polish leaders. This particular chapter in Polish history has become the model for students of political theory of how to transform a totalitarian society without recourse to violence.

References

Bukharin, N. 2008. Historical Materialism, Maclachan Bell Press, USA.


30 Mikhail Gorbachev quoted in La Stampa (3 March 1992).


