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The Origins of Post-dissident Liberalism in Poland: Revolution, Thermidorianism, and Regenerationism

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Abstract

WCIŚLIK, Piotr. The Origins of Post-dissident Liberalism in Poland: Revolution, Thermidorianism, and Regenerationism.

In discussing the roots of post-dissident liberalism, the interpreters of the events of 1989 cast the leaders of the transition as moderates in the revolutionary drama, deftly fending off Jacobin populism. But what if we use other analytical categories, like those employed by the French Revolution historiography to reflect on the origins of that political identity? The moderatism of the post-dissident liberals can thus be productively reinterpreted as pre-emptive Thermidorianism. According to B. Baczko, Thermidorianism is not only an anti-Jacobin moment, but also “the key moment when the Revolution must carry the weight of its past and admit that it will not keep all its initial promises.” While anti-Jacobinism is a commonly recognized feature of dissident thinking, the aspect of revolutionary disillusion merits more attention. Abandoning Solidarity’s promise to harmonize the civic, political and social entitlements of citizenship in favour of recognition of the incompatibility between “classical” liberties and social rights, the dissident leaders came to see in the revolution not only a bad historical choice, but an imminent danger which was understood in terms of a lack of synchronization between the regime change and the regeneration of political culture—the core preoccupation of the French Revolution according to M. Ozouf. Post-dissident liberals opted for a transitional politics of exception, which justified the need to delay the democratic opening not for fear of backlash from the old regime, but increasingly also due to anxiety against uncivil effervescence. While the inability to think beyond the transitional imaginary of democracy in constant peril became a permanent feature of the liberal centre, it hijacked the political space in which moderate conservatism could have thrived. From this perspective, the emergence to its right of its nemesis, Jacobin populism, appears to be a chronicle of death foretold.

This essay aims at understanding better the foundations of post-dissident liberalism in Poland by deconstructing the long-standing narrative of the events of 1989 as a revolution, which has been central in developing that political identity. Taken historically, the affinity between liberalism and revolution has been rather ambiguous.¹ *Nota bene* in the case of 1989, that ambiguity has been articulated through the many qualifications (self-limited, lawful, velvet etc.) of the revolutionary frame. But why insist on the analogy in the first place?

One reason for such an ambivalent embrace is that revolutionary roleplay articulates the core values of post-dissident liberals, who pose as moderates and distinguish themselves in this way from the people

1 See e.g. DIJN, Annelien de. *Freedom: An Unruly History*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2020.

of the old regime on one hand, and from the Jacobin radicals of their own camp on the other.² As we get further away from 1989, in the liberal narratives of the revolution, the figures of the old regime fade typically into the background, devoid of any counter-revolutionary longings. Rather in a Tocquevillian way, the ex-communist politicians—notably President Aleksander Kwaśniewski—were quick to take credit as supporting actors of the drama for creating the conditions necessary for transition from within the old regime, and fully accommodating the new. In struggles over serving justice to the old regime, they were the object but not an actor. The development of post-1989 politics in Poland was driven, to a large degree, by conflict within the revolutionary camp, a dispute which the post-dissident liberals are keen to portray as a conflict between moderatism and radicalism. Not unlike the protagonists of the 18 Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte who, according to Karl Marx, conjure the spirits of the past Revolution not to pay tribute, but to inject grandeur into the struggle, with its purposefully grey and unheroic horizon.³ At the same time, within this repetition there is difference, as the moderates of the Polish revolution not only kept their heads, but actually managed to short-circuit the revolution, avoiding the terror and proceeding straight to the Velvet Restoration.⁴

This essay seeks to deconstruct this narrative of 1989 as a revolution and to read it against the grain, doing so by replacing the self-serving historical analogy of the post-dissident political writings with a reflexive use of a set of analytical categories which were devised to study the French Revolution. If these categories remain productive in the 1989 context, what does that tell us about the revolutionary genealogy of post-dissident liberalism?

All history is refracted. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, refraction is “the action of distorting an image by viewing through a medium.” Refraction is what makes a straw appear to bend when dipped in a glass of water. Obviously, unmediated access to the past does not exist and therefore our image is always distorted. Historians can only learn something about their objects by reflexively examining the medium, which is called “context.” Of course, that can be many things.⁵ Context can be internal or external to a text. It can relate to circumstances of time and place or to social conditions, but in our case, it is the intellectual context, connecting acts of political meaning-making. When historians invoke context, it is usually with the intention of fine tuning interpretations. They correct the lenses, to correct the view. The intent in these pages is less corrective and more experimental. The object in our case is post-dissident liberalism and the medium in which it is dipped is the narrative of the revolution, which itself contains a complex of references to 1989 and the Solidarity

2 SMOLAR, Aleksander. Revolutionary Spectacle and Peaceful Transition. In *Social Research*, 1996, vol. 63, no. 2, pp. 439–464.

3 “Thus the awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not recoiling from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk again.” In MARX, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 1852; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm> (last accessed 29 October 2023).

4 MICHNIK, Adam. Velvet Restoration. In TISMANEANU, Vladimir (ed.) *The Revolutions of 1989*. London : Routledge, 1999, pp. 239–46.

5 BURKE, Peter. Context in Context. In *Common Knowledge*, 2002, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 152–177.

movement, as well as to the broader meta-historical vocabulary of the revolution, which enables further past entanglements. These entanglements provide grounds for experiments in methodological trespassing. Indeed, does contemporary scholarship on the French Revolution of 1789 allow us to better understand the origins of post-dissident liberalism in Poland two centuries later?

Since “moderantism” is the political virtue that the liberal narrative of the Revolution of 1989 highlights, how about we read it through the concept of “Thermidorianism?” In a revolution, there are different forms of moderantism. Condorcet is a moderate who begins the revolution optimistic about its progress, and for whom it gets out of hand. But there is also the moderantism of the disillusioned revolutionaries who finally see to its end. Both share a baseline of anti-Jacobinism, but according to Bronisław Baczko, Thermidorianism is not only the anti-Jacobin moment, but also:

Thermidor is the key moment when the Revolution must carry the weight of its past and admit that it will not keep all its initial promises. It is above all the moment when the protagonists proclaim that they wish neither to recommence its history nor remake its experience. Thermidor is the moment when the revolutionaries retain only one desire, are motivated by only one wish: to end, finally the Revolution.⁶

If the foundational moderantism of Condorcet is the Revolution’s song of innocence—in the sense that its agenda is not yet informed by the infighting comes after—Thermidorianism is its song of experience, irreversibly shaken by the trauma of the Terror and assuming that terror is a latent possibility in every revolution. It is a political strategy aimed at avoiding the repetition of the vicious revolutionary cycle. This is why, faced with a new revolutionary moment, Thermidorianism intends to short-circuit the Revolution, pre-emptively strike against radicalism and go directly to the phase of restoration. This essay argues that both of these features, revolutionary disillusion and the pre-emptive political strategy, are foundational features of the emergent post-dissident liberalism in Poland that the concept of “thermidorianism” brings up to the foreground.

Poland’s post-communist liberal centre is not homogenous, it consists of at least two groups: the intellectual leaders of Solidarity, who before 1989 were recognized as the left, who were key actors of the transition of 1989 and who embraced liberalism in the aftermath of the break-up of the Solidarity camp; and the self-professed neoliberals, with two main groups clustered around Mirosław Dzielski in Kraków and Donald Tusk in the Gdańsk area. These two strands came together to form a single party, Unia Wolności, only around 1994 and their relationship had been rather strained before the merger. The question is: what led to consolidation of this alliance? Coming to terms with Solidarity’s Revolution creates a fertile ground for building bridges between the two.

Revolutionary disillusion

As Thermidorianism properly should have, post-dissident Liberalism in Poland emerged out of the disillusion with Solidarity’s revolution of 1980–1981.

⁶ BACZKO, Bronislaw. *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 260.

Before it consolidated in the course of the transition, the current's ideological profile was built upon reckoning with the rise and demise of Solidarity in 1980–1981.

First and foremost, this was because most of the future liberals are Solidarity's men. While liberalism in Poland has had its mavericks, such as Stefan Kisielewski, Janusz Korwin-Mikke or Andrzej Walicki, it is important to realize that most of the dissidents who would build the liberal centre in Poland after 1989 were, in one way or another, aligned with Solidarity, and many would remain loyal to the underground Solidarity until 1989. Despite that allegiance, a protracted war of position between Solidarity's revolution and Jaruzelski's counter-revolution would trigger a critical reckoning of reasons for its defeat and the broader revolutionary promise.

In a prosopographical essay about the Gdańsk liberals, their leader and future prime minister Donald Tusk provided a good illustration of that process, arguing that despite his wholehearted involvement in the Solidarity movement of 1980–1981, from reckoning with its defeat he concluded that Solidarity was the end, and not the beginning of an era:

Solidarity grew out of a specific social circumstance and was an heir of a specific history. It was the highest achievement of the Poles, while at the same time reflecting their political culture and social consciousness. The Union was created, and later led, by elites, which were rooted in communism, entangled in a web of anachronistic ideas and categories, often contradictory and thus making it impossible to cut the socialist-etatist loop. And this concerns not only the elites, it was even worse at the bottom.⁷

A more radical break was needed to achieve an exit from communism, and liberalism was attractive not only as a globally ascending political ideology, but also as an ideology that was absent from the pool of local traditions in current circulation. Tusk and his circle would embrace liberalism not despite its lack of roots, but precisely because of it. Here Tusk makes Benjamin Constant's gesture, his liberalism championing a modern concept of liberty far superior to the one which came before. The embrace of liberalism as a break with past political traditions is not unique to Tusk, but rather common to post-dissident liberalism of different stripes, as Michal Kopeček's comparative work on "human rights facing national past" suggests.⁸

Exploring how post-dissident liberalism emerges out of reckoning with the legacy of Solidarity, this reckoning should be discussed as a double turn, from what Albert O. Hirschman called a synergy illusion to a jeopardy narrative in understanding democratic citizenship, and—borrowing another category from French Revolution historiography—as a turn from optimistic to sceptical regenerationism.

From a synergy illusion to a jeopardy narrative

Talking about revolutionary disillusion presupposes an understanding of Solidarity's own promise, an issue that this essay can offer only a shorthand for.

7 TUSK, Donald. Droga i wybór. In TUSK, Donald (ed.) *Idee Gdańskiego Liberalizmu*. Gdańsk : Fundacja Liberalów, 1998, p. 75.

8 KOPEČEK, Michal. Human Rights Facing a National Past Dissident 'Civic Patriotism' and the Return of History in East Central Europe, 1968–1989. In *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 2012, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 573–602.

The promise and the disillusion can be related by using concepts coined by Hirschman in his discussion of arguments for and against the expansion of democratic citizenship in the West.⁹ Hirschman was writing against the Whiggish perspective of the progressive march of democracy through history to show that establishment of each of the fundamental bundles of rights—the civic, political and social entitlements of citizenship—was the object of rather fierce debates. Hirschman saw he could arrange the arguments used in these discussions into repeated patterns or theses. Two such theses are particularly useful for describing revolutionary disillusion in ideological terms.

The jeopardy thesis proposes that reform or social change, desirable in itself, involves unacceptable costs that would endanger previous accomplishments or an equally precious social good. It would deplore the civic freedoms enshrined in traditional institutions, which the masses would trample upon with the expansion of universal suffrage or pitting the welfare state against both liberty and democracy. For Hirschman, the jeopardy thesis revealed the hallmark of neoliberal arguments, which rarely criticized reforms in absolute terms but rather in the name of values, goods or accomplishments that the progressives cherished.

The jeopardy thesis inverts the hallmark of progressive rhetoric, the synergy illusion thesis, which sees these different entitlements of citizenship not only as compatible, but also mutually supportive and inter-dependent; civic freedoms could not be entrusted to arbitrary rule and democracy could be reconciled only with a certain degree of economic inequality and made more stable with the help of intermediary institutions representing labour.

The political promise of Solidarity was the synergy illusion. Solidarity as a trade union was unique in that it combined the defence of workers' economic entitlements with the defence of civic rights—free speech and religion in particular—and the struggle for the democratization of government in socialist Poland. Solidarity's *Action Program* emphatically declared: "History has taught us that there is no bread without freedom." It celebrated the mutually dependent relationship between different aspects of citizenship. The synergy illusion was the glue that held together the eclectic ideological sources that Solidarity considered its inspiration, from the social teachings of the Church to the radical cooperativism of Edward Abramowski. This is much in patent from the preamble to the *Action Program*:

Solidarity combines multiple societal currents, unites people of different world-views, political and religious views, independently of ethnicity [narodowości]. We stand united in protest against injustice, the abuses of power and against the monopoly of defining and expressing the national aspirations. We stand united in protest against treating the citizen as property of the state, against depriving labour of genuine representation in conflicts with the state, against the mercy of the rulers who know better how much freedom the ruled need, against gratifying absolute political submission, rather than initiative and autonomous action. We are united in rejection of the lie in public life, in protest against squandering of the fruit of the hard and patient labouring of the nation.¹⁰

9 HIRSCHMAN, Albert O. *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Cambridge : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991.

10 *Statut. Uchwała Programowa z Aneksem. Dokumenty Zjazdu*. Gdańsk : Biuro Informacji Prasowej Komisji Krajowej NSZZ "Solidarność," 1981, p. 24.

The neoliberal critique of Solidarity that emerged after Martial Law unsurprisingly brought an incompatibility between the different types of rights to the fore. The crucial distinction that the late-socialist neoliberals carried into the dissident debate was the difference between liberty and democracy. This discrepancy was largely derived from Hayek's writings and became the cornerstone of their political vision. According to the neoliberals, Solidarity identified liberty and democracy, and that conceptual mistake translated into an erroneous political strategy. Economic liberalization should have priority over democratization. As Gdańsk liberal Lech Mażewski put it in a nutshell:

We are facing the great challenge of transforming the etatist society into a market society. Eliminating the hypertrophy of the state from the social body will certainly not be painless. The reconstruction of civil society will not happen by means of a premature democratization, but by evolutionary liberalization, and the emergence of a democratic institution can only be its crowning.¹¹

Among the neoliberals, there was a consensus that the road away from serfdom led through the creation of a strong minimal state without political democracy, whose task was to engineer a social infrastructure in which the market society of owners and entrepreneurs would thrive. The Kraków and the Gdańsk groups differed over whether a Pinochetization scenario was feasible with communist cadres (e.g. the Kraków liberal Dzielski), or whether the transition stage of "lawful authoritarianism" should be the endgame of Solidarity in negotiations with the state (e.g. Mażewski). But they shared the conviction that premature democratization was an obstacle on that road. This point was best expressed below by intellectual historian Andrzej Walicki:

Solidarity must be seen as a socialist mass movement, one striving for at least a share of political power, but not one seeking to limit political power in the name of individual freedom. It is a movement aiming not so much at the separation of economics from politics, but rather the democratization of political decision-making. It is a democratic movement, but can hardly be called liberal, because it opposes authoritarian bureaucratic collectivism not in the name of individualistic values, but in the name of democratic collectivism of the masses. It wants to divide political power, but it is not sufficiently aware of the desirability of limiting the scope of all political power, including democracy. In this sense we can even say that the political thinking of the leaders of Solidarity (to say nothing of its ordinary members) is contaminated to some extent by the spirit of socialist totalitarianism—in spite of the verbal condemnations of all kinds of totalitarian power.¹²

Walicki believed that in Poland, de-totalitarianisation was advancing with the space of negative freedom expanding and reforms of the planned economy maturing. The emergence of Solidarity arrested that development.

How did the dissident left achieve the same turn? Brought to its utmost conclusion, the jeopardy thesis was not palatable to the dissident left, who strongly opposed Walicki in a vivid polemic that emerged on the pages of the journal *Aneks*, a space where his views were first published. Then again, let us keep in mind Hirschman's observation that the jeopardy thesis is a particularly cunning sort of critique; at once embracing progressive values and demonstrating their

11 MAŻEWSKI, Lech. Cel doraźny: porządek autorytarny. In TUSK 1998, *Idee*, p. 111.

12 WALICKI, Andrzej. Notes from Jaruzelski's Poland. In FEHÉR, Ferenc – ARATO, Andrew (eds.) *Crisis and Reform in Eastern Europe*. New Brunswick : Transaction Publishers, 1991, p. 354.

mutual incompatibility. In that quality, the jeopardy thesis is an attractive bridge between left-revisionist and liberal thinking. One could still cherish Solidarity's synergy illusion as a noble dream while taking it exactly for what it was: an illusion. The intellectual who best expressed this line of thought was Aleksander Smolar, *Aneks'* editor and éminence grise of post-dissident liberalism, in a text published in 1993, but expressive of the longer intellectual road travelled:

The revolution of 1980–81 promised the full restoration of individual rights and liberties, brought hope for progress in the domain of political rights, while maintaining security and relative equality in the social and economic domain. In 1989, the ideals were confronted with reality. Instead of the expected expansion of the existing rights, society faced the choice: restoration of individual and political rights and liberties, the possibility of effective economic development, however at the price of withdrawing real or mythical social and economic entitlements [...]. Modernization of the country, the return to the “normal” path of development, is conditional upon restoration of inequalities eliminated by communism, and deprived of rights.¹³

While the dissident left remained loyal to Solidarity, and up until 1989 did not criticize its core assumptions but only its tactics, Smolar's *Aneks*, which was the platform of the dissident left in exile, became a midwife of the intellectual evolution from synergy to jeopardy. That happened not so much due to providing a platform to neoliberals such as Walicki, but principally because of the evolution of convictions of the authorities of the dissident left, the most important being Leszek Kołakowski, a liberal-conservative-socialist philosopher of anti-politics.

The paradox is that while keeping the authority of the philosopher defining for the left what was morally right and politically reasonable, in his writings from the 1970s and 1980s published in journals such as *Aneks*, *Encounter*, *Merkur* and *Dissent*, Kołakowski in fact abandoned that moderate position of equal distance from the political doctrinaires of the day and became a true prophet of jeopardy.¹⁴ In these writings, his primary concern was the peril that progressivism has brought for Western democracy. If Václav Havel famously remarked that totalitarian regimes in the East are a mirror of the West's own latent tendencies, Kołakowski's main concern was that those tendencies have in fact already developed into threats, and the synergy illusion was to blame. Kołakowski repeatedly reminded his readers that among different components of democratic citizenship, human rights had a distinctive character, which amounted to a recognition of the limits of political intervention in the life of the individual, including the intervention that political and economic entitlements implied. Considering these entitlements as an extension or supplement of human rights was to misrecognize the tension and potential incompatibility between one and the other. It was an instance of

13 SMOLAR, Aleksander. Od człowieka socjalizmu do obywatela. In MARKIEWICZ, Barbara (ed.) *Obywatel. Odrodzenie Pojęcia*. Warszawa : IFIS PAN, 1993, p. 125.

14 Essays from this period are collected in KOŁAKOWSKI, Leszek. *Modernity on Endless Trial*. Translated by Stefan Czerniawski, Wolfgang Freis, and Agnieszka Kolakowska. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1990.

“self-poisoning of open society.”¹⁵ In particular, the idea of social democracy was a suspect of arousing totalitarian temptations:

The notion of social democracy, once created, set in motion ideas that revealed the dangerous potential latent in the very democratic principle. We are doomed if that principle is adopted without constraints; that would amount to negation that there exists a domain of personal life and choice, in which no majority is entitled to intervene.¹⁶

In other words, whereas traditional liberal democracy was conscious of the need to constrain the democratic principle, social democracy took constraints on freedom for its higher form and triggered a process of “gradual and continuous backsliding into the abyss of democratic totalitarianism.”¹⁷ Kołakowski did not turn his critique directly against Solidarity’s legacy, however. Unlike the Kraków neoliberals, his crusade against democratic totalitarianism targeted mostly the progressives in the West. Throughout his émigré years, he remained a loyal supporter of the democratic opposition and had only praise for its struggle against the totalitarian dragon. Intellectual leaders of the opposition, including Solidarity’s dissident left, continued to consider Kołakowski their sage. Even though he did not mention Solidarity by name, Kołakowski echoed the jeopardy narrative underlying the neoliberal critique in his writings. The conviction that the condition of reaching the liberal-democratic promised land was to waive the welfare promise made inroads into the dissident left thanks to the authority of Kołakowski, much more than the impact of Dzielski, Walicki or Tusk.

From optimistic to sceptical regenerationism

As the great historian of the French Revolution Mona Ozouf observed, revolutions tend to incline its actors towards a regenerationist way of thinking. Revolution aspires to achieve a break not only in the realm of political institutions, but also in the domain of political culture, and its obstacles are the residue of the old regime persisting in the mentalities and habits of the people.¹⁸ For revolutionaries, the fate of the revolution depends on whether the institutional and the cultural change operate in sync. There are two ways of thinking about regeneration, Ozouf proposes. There is the optimistic perspective, assuming a natural harmonization between regeneration and revolution achieved in the collective act of regime change. The revolutionary experience alone is sufficient to achieve regeneration and a new political culture springs forth fully formed from the spirit of the Revolution. To that “miraculous” way of thinking about regeneration, Ozouf counterpoised thinking in terms of “laborious” regeneration, e.g. the sceptical perspective that comes to terms with the realization that putting regeneration and revolution into sync requires work; a negative-purgatory phase of undoing the past mindsets and habits—sometimes

15 Title of one of the essays in the above volume, KOŁAKOWSKI 1990, pp. 162–176.

16 KOŁAKOWSKI, Leszek. *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań*. Londyn : Aneks, 1984, p. 264.

17 KOŁAKOWSKI 1984, p. 263.

18 OZOUF, Mona. Regeneration. In FURET, François – OZOUF, Mona (eds.) *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass. : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 782–791.

together with their bodily carriers—and a pedagogical phase of inculcating the new culture through education, public festivals, cockades etc. Ozouf suggested that the language of miraculous regeneration was more characteristic for the liberal and moderate beginnings of the French Revolution, and the language of laborious regeneration was more typical of the Jacobin and Thermidorian phases, but both these rival philosophies remain active throughout the entire revolutionary cycle and cannot be univocally associated with different groups, thinkers or phases.

Regenerationism was definitely an important feature of dissident political thinking, infusing the conceptual double of “civil society” and “homo sovieticus.” Some subtle irony must be noted here; although the dissidents rejected the Bolshevik ambition of creating a new man, they continued to be concerned with the persistence of socialism in the minds and habits, considering that the incivility of socialist political culture was an obstacle to their emancipatory designs. Michnik’s “new evolutionism” was a strategy of civil society regeneration and “psychology of slavery,” the thing that stood in the way. Michnik used that concept to identify precisely what required regeneration in a society exposed to decades of the socialist experiment; it was the psychological residue of the old regime. Importantly for Michnik, not only was societal indifference to the dissident activities indicative of that psychology, but also the anomic instances of civic protest—the workers rebellions of 1956, 1968, 1970 and 1976—burning out in violent acts but unable to negotiate any lasting gains due to a lack of organized, civic-minded form.¹⁹

The breakthrough of Solidarity in 1980–1981 was obviously a moment of optimistic, miraculous regenerationism; a festival of freedom. For Michnik, the essence of Solidarity was both the synergy illusion and the restoration of civil society:

The essence of the spontaneously growing Independent and Self-governing Labour Union Solidarity lay in the restoration of social ties, self-organization aimed at guaranteeing the defence of labour, civil, and national rights. For the first time in the history of communist rule in Poland ‘civil society’ was being restored, and it was reaching a compromise with the state.²⁰

For Timothy Garton Ash—at least in 1981—that essence was the expression of the Arendtian capacity for unexpected new beginnings, which is another way of saying a miraculous capacity for regeneration.²¹ Though, in the aftermath of the imposition of the Martial Law, the pendulum would swing in the direction of sceptical regenerationism. In that regard, Left and neoliberal thinkers began from different starting points only to arrive at the same end-point.

Under Martial Law, Solidarity would adopt the strategy of “underground society,” which inherited from “new evolutionism” the same regenerationist idea of establishing a space of intermediary institutions in which desired forms of civility could be practiced for the sake of creating fertile ground on which democracy

19 MICHNIK, Adam. *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1987.

20 MICHNIK 1987, p. 124.

21 GARTON ASH, Timothy. *Polish Revolution: Solidarity*. New Haven; London : Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 352–353.

could one day thrive. That strategy was designed not only as means of self-defence against the communist dictatorship, but also against conspiracy. In his prison writings, Adam Michnik in particular warned against anti-democratic habits that the underground fosters among the staunchest freedom-fighters, who become impatient with unreformed society which is too uncivil to defend itself. For Michnik, not only the Russian Revolution, but also interwar Poland was an example of the tragedy that results from regeneration and revolution not being in sync. The rationale of the long-march scenario was to achieve that harmonization, to create a resilient civil society that can defend itself not only from the old regime, but also from its own Jacobins in the event of a revolution. That labour of regeneration received a boost with Solidarity, but had to be continued as the residue of a “psychology of slavery” remained.²²

The neoliberals, as we have seen, shared the belief that civil society required regeneration, only their vision of civil society was very different from the image of the intermediary civic associations radiating democracy. It was basically a vision of market society to which democracy was of secondary importance. As Tusk observed, “Ideas connected with the ‘third way’, the ‘non-bourgeois civil society’, the ‘socialism with a human face’, and so on, are a utopia and political fiction, regardless of their source. The idea of civil society in the traditional meaning of this term (the only one that was validated) is immanently related with economic freedoms.”²³

Obviously, after forty years of the communist experiment, a transition period was necessary to achieve the reconstruction of civil society in Poland, before Poles could enjoy democracy without the temptation of backsliding into dictatorship. This proposed strategy of liberalisation first and democratization second, informed by the jeopardy narrative, was how the neoliberals proposed to get regeneration and revolution into sync:

Communism brings about a decay into barbarism. To revive the good mores, the return of democracy is not enough, contrary to what supporters of primacy of political freedoms among Polish anti-communists believe. I doubt whether in our situation democracy would consolidate. In contrast, a temporary, even long lasting forsaking of democracy in the name of compromise with the interests of the police and the military might lead, in case of institution of economic liberties, to gradual betterment of the mores, which would prepare society as a whole for future freedom, including the political one.²⁴

If a market society was not in place before the democratic opening, the democratic opening would serve to backslide into socialism. In hindsight, neoliberals thought that was likely to have happened had Solidarity emerged victorious in 1981, for the kind of regime that Solidarity wanted was characterized by a weak and omnicompetent state that would easily yield to popular pressure. In other words, it was the politics of democratic totalitarianism. Liberals should be embracing a strong minimal state, which is not only the correlate of a market society, but also a tool to resurrect it. Civic energy, trapped in conflict with the state over redistribution, could be released if the state scaled-down its

22 MICHNIK 1987, pp. 60–61.

23 TUSK 1998, *Droga*, p. 78.

24 DZIELSKI, Mirosław. *Potrzeba twórczego antykomunizmu*. In *Duch nadchodzącego czasu*. Cz. 1–2. Wrocław : Wektory, 1985, p. 134.

redistributive capacities and was strong enough to resist popular pressure in that regard.²⁵ It is worth observing in passing that this argument was different from the debate about equating egalitarianism with a longing for the strong man, which would become popular after 1989. Here the strong man is the good guy, the adult in the room who resolves a conflict between children by taking away the toy. That tutelary dictatorship tendency was strikingly popular among Polish liberals, even after 1989.²⁶

Thermidorianism and the transitional politics of exception²⁷

While at the point of departure, the dissident left and the neoliberals had quite different understandings of civil society in service of rather different political projects, they held in common the assumption that societal regeneration must precede political revolution, and if acting upon that assumption, when the revolutionary moment arrives, you can either embrace the miraculous regeneration perspective—the popular consciousness instantly remade by the revolution—or come to terms with the awareness that your regenerationist political strategy has run out of time; that the harmonization is not there and exceptional measures will need to be taken to prevent the revolution from getting derailed.

The great paradox of 1989 is that while it has been celebrated worldwide as a Spring of citizens—a revolution whose victory was secured by the masses of citizens acting in concert—what actually drove the dissident strategy in Poland for most of the revolutionary year is that second conviction, the sense that revolution operates out of sync with regeneration.

Immediately preceding the revolution, dissident circles debated the problem of underground fatigue, a concern that entrenchment of the opposition underground failed to produce any effects on civil society, which was unravelling and growing more and more anomic as Poland's economic meltdown deepened. This was also the diagnosis glaring from the first statements of the Civic Committee to Lech Wałęsa, a body of veteran activists and public authorities that started as the Chairman's *conseil des sages* but in 1989, took the reins of the revolution. This is why in the spring of 1988, the strikes, which triggered the Round Table negotiations, were not seen as symptoms of the rebirth of civil society but rather as an outburst of the masses in despair. The preceding state of dissident opinion about societal anomy privileged such a conclusion, but also the fact that the spring strikes were spontaneous, emerging without any coordination with the Solidarity underground structures, even though the restoration of the Solidarity was among the demands of the new generation of workers that organized them.

In turn, that perceived lack of harmony between the regeneration and revolution triggered a turn among opposition leadership towards a transitional

25 KAPCZYŃSKI, Piotr. Gospodarka jako wyzwanie programowe dla opozycji. In TUSK 1998, Idee, pp. 80–90.

26 As late as 1999, the post-communist Right would travel to London to pay tribute to Pinochet, who was held in custody awaiting the British government's decision on his extradition to Spain to face trial for crimes against humanity (which never happened).

27 This section draws from Part IV in WCISLIK, Piotr. *Dissident Legacies of Samizdat Social Media Activism: Unlicensed Print Culture in Poland 1976–1990*. Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 167–220.

politics of exception, which postulated a narrowing down of the space of political agency to the oppositional vanguard in the name of greater democracy in the future.

In a fateful meeting on 18 December 1988, during which the *Conseil des sages* of Lech Wałęsa transformed into the Civic Committee and assumed the mandate to negotiate with the authorities on behalf of society, arguments about a lack of unity between revolution and regeneration provided justification for assuming the mandate and for rejecting a more democratic structure of the organization in favour of a more hierarchical one, in which the final decisions belong to Wałęsa and a handful of his advisers. Mazowiecki observed, “The time is of paramount importance. The time, which the authorities measure by maturation of their own position, and which for us is the time of [growing] social impatience. The matter of time to reach solutions is today the main concern.”²⁸ During the same meeting, Michnik justified taking up the negotiations in the name of the entire opposition with an “obligation to remember that the fundamental quality of Stalinist communism is the decomposition of social bonds, decomposition of the legal culture—the rebellion of such society is the rebellion of the slaves, a rebellion of people who know best how to build guillotines.”²⁹ In other words, the compromise was necessary since Solidarity failed to accomplish the task of civil society reconstruction. Marcin Król held a similar opinion:

If we were in a position in which a grassroots movement could gradually transform the country, I would totally support it, because that is the right way. But that is simply impossible. Whatever law on associations we have, however active we are, it is already too late for the associations to gradually emanate their representations and so forth, leading to change. In this sense, taking a political risk is necessary [...]. We want democracy, that's simple and not sophisticated at all. So, if we know what we want, if we know well what is our final destination, we can sacrifice something on the way.³⁰

Ironically, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Aleksander Hall, who would become the principal figures of the first non-communist government, withdrew their candidacies in the elections motivated precisely by the lack of internal democracy.

Subsequently, the exception, the idea of narrowing down political agency in the name of greater democracy in future, was at the core of the political philosophy of the Round Table negotiations. Here is how Bronisław Geremek defined it in his opening speech:

The political philosophy, which we adopt in thinking about the immediate horizon of change is a philosophy of transition [filozofia okresu przejściowego]. It posits that in that period, which should enable the evolutionary passage from totalism to democracy, in that transitional period the social accords are a form which in a way furnishes the public life with institutions and arrangements of one-off validity, that are transitional and that serve to realize the principles of the political horizon of the changing Republic.³¹

28 Posiedzenie Komitetu Obywatelskiego przy Przewodniczącym NSZZ “Solidarność,” Warszawa, 18 Grudnia 1988. In STRASZ, Małgorzata (ed.) *Komitet Obywatelski przy Przewodniczącym NSZZ “Solidarność” Lechu Wałęsie*. Warsaw : Rosner & Wspólnicy, 2006, p. 178.

29 Posiedzenie Komitetu Obywatelskiego 1988, p. 189.

30 Posiedzenie Komitetu Obywatelskiego 1988, p. 215.

31 *Okrągły Stół: Zespół do Spraw Reform Politycznych: Stenogram z pierwszego posiedzenia Zespołu do Spraw Reform Politycznych w dniu 10 lutego 1989 r.* Warsaw : Biblioteka Sejmowa, 1990, p. 19; www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm7.nsf/stenOkrStol.xsp (last accessed 29 October 2023).

The mandate to rely on temporary institutions and arrangements, which do not properly belong in a democracy—this is why they are one-off—but which are necessary to produce an evolutionary exit from communism, are the exceptional measures the political leadership of the dissident camp claimed as part of the contract. However, the leaders of the self-limiting revolution of 1989 defended the continued validity of the contractual arrangement and the mandate for politics of exception from which it was derived, despite it becoming clear towards the end of that year that the empire would not strike back, despite the contract being so spectacularly annulled at the ballot box in June 1989, despite the rapid differentiation inside their own ranks, despite Havel being elected president at the end of 1989 and Hungarian ex-dissidents receiving mandates in fully open elections in spring 1990.

The justification of this position was built around the regenerationist argument that emphasized the need to control the pace of the post-totalitarian evolution due to a surplus of incivility that accumulated under communism, and that included older layers as well. That surplus was easy prey for political radicalism and populism of different signs and if let loose, could derail the whole process. The jeopardy narrative of transition became the genre of commentary that was most typical for the powerless in power³² and their supporters. A good example is Bronisław Geremek's essay, *Polish Framework of Hope*. Remarkably, the essay, published in June 1990 with rebellion against the contractual arrangement already in full swing, was a swan song of Thermidorianism, a last attempt at its defence.

Geremek opened with a paradox. With the restoration of popular self-determination and democratic public life, the contractual arrangement, that led to these spectacular effects, seemed not to have a further purpose. But that was only an appearance. The rejection of totalitarianism by popular will did not automatically set Poland on the path towards democracy. Democracy was a matter of solid institutions, civic political culture and a pluralist political scene. Central Europe lacked all that and thus required a transitional stage, which the contractual arrangement was meant to provide. In particular, three types of threats justified such an evolutionary approach: the danger of populism feeding on “egalitarian illusions” specific for the post-communist mind-set; the deficit of a democratic way of thinking and authoritarian temptations of the politician, feeding on the former and coupled with institutional weakness; and nationalism, which had been the simplest form of articulation of resistance under the old regime but became explosive as the country was undergoing a massive social transformation. These three dangers, Geremek argued, “neither erase or diminish the chances that open for the Central European countries in the transitional period. They justify, however, the gradual character of the changes and account for a philosophy of action which requires a necessary transitional stage in the passage from authoritarianism to democracy.”³³

32 This appellation alludes to Vaclav Havel's characterization of the dissidents as the “powerless” in the canonical essay *Power of the powerless*.

33 GEREMEK, Bronisław. Polski układ nadziei. In *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 17 June 1990.

In line with these tenets, the need for further societal regeneration required narrowing the political space to the reform-minded elite. However, in reality, pre-emptive Thermidorianism actually produced the reality of civic passivity and anomy it was supposedly reacting against, undercutting the growth of intermediary institutions, which it placed on the uncivil side. The first important lesson in that regard is the case of the movement of the local civic committees, which was the fulcrum of the 4 June 1989 electoral campaign. After the victory—a victory of these masses of activists in a substantial way—the movement was ready to remain active in transitional politics as the “civic wing” of Solidarity. At the time, the committees and not the local offices of the trade union were the go-to place for everyone who wanted to get involved in achieving a political breakthrough. As such, the committees were evidence of the rebirth of the civic society just as much as the striking trade unionists of August 1980, and just as well they could be read as a case of miraculous regeneration.³⁴ However, June 1989 was a very distant place in terms of the intellectual road travelled by the dissident revolutionaries, and Thermidorian anxiety imposed itself over these signs of rebirth.

In the democratic effervescence of the day, the powerless in power preferred to see a factor of instability rather than a manifestation of civic energy. Right after the election, upon the advice of trade union leaders, Lech Wałęsa asked the civic committees to disband. That decision was met with resistance by the committees themselves, but also with surprise by members of the parent Civic Committee, who subsequently drawn up an alternative plan to subordinate the committees to the political wing of the movement and use them to build local structures of the Civic Parliamentary Club. That plan was also stillborn. The head Committee proposed to share control over local committees with the trade union, but little room was left for the bottom-up representation of local leaders that the movement had already produced through the course of the electoral campaign. The leaders refused to bow, the plan of integration fell apart and the committee movement fizzled out after the 1990 local government campaign, its structures disbanded or taken over by different political parties.

The failure to integrate the civic committee movement is the most glaring example of how pre-emptive Thermidorianism shaped political realities in the image of its regenerationist imaginary. Cutting that reality to size, it undercut the existing intermediary institutions.

Another example in that regard is the case of the unlicensed publishing movement, which *Gazeta Wyborcza* was designed to phase out. Again, while in 1980 the proliferation of the unlicensed press was taken to be an index of the vigour of civil society, in the course of the Revolution of 1989, the independent press was seen as a factor of instability, in particular since many underground activists continued to voice their opposition to the Round Table in these spaces. During the Round Table negotiations, a decision to establish an independent newspaper which would present a spectrum of public opinion “moderated in

34 SŁODKOWSKA, Inka. *Komitety obywatelskie 1989–1992: rdzeń polskiej transformacji*. Warszawa : Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2014.

the spirit of the compromise” had the opposite effect of reducing the unlicensed print culture to something like “anarchists and gays handing out leaflets of Paris Bolewards” (Michnik’s words). Indeed, *Gazeta Wyborcza* had not only the imprimatur of the official organ of the opposition, but also an immense competitive advantage over the independent outlets as it benefited from the state monopoly in the realm of public communications, which continued until at least mid 1990 and for which control over paper rationing and distribution networks played a more important role than censorship. *KOS*, *Wola*, *PWA*, *Arka*, *Z dnia na dzień* and other landmark samizdat journals went out of business by that time, and their journalists were only selectively accepted at *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the few formerly official newspapers taken over by dissident circles, such as *Rzeczpospolita* or *Życie Warszawy*.

Finally, the Thermidorians insisted that incipient politicians emerging from the oppositional camp should reign in their ambitions for the time being and postpone the formation of political parties. In a rather circular reasoning, supporters of the Mazowiecki government argued that since Solidarity was the only entity enjoying universal social recognition, contenders should not be allowed to compete as that would introduce too much uncertainty into the transition process.³⁵ Others, with a more dissident feel, argued that political parties belonged to the past and Poland could reimagine the institutions of democracy under the Solidarity umbrella.³⁶ The problem is that the transitional politics of exception were an offer of loyalty without voice. For this proposition to work for everyone, the Solidarity camp would need to be structured in a more participatory fashion.

Thermidorianism would soon backfire, dealing a fatal blow to the first experiment of the powerless with power. Obviously, the ultimate reason for the defeat of Mazowiecki’s government was the unfulfilled leadership ambitions of Lech Wałęsa and the emergence of a dual power structure inside the Solidarity camp. However, the attempt at marginalizing Lech Wałęsa and the exceptional politics of undercutting intermediary institutions had the same roots in dissident regenerationism and revolutionary disillusion. The first defeat of post-dissident liberalism in the presidential elections of 1990 only exasperated the conviction about the lack of sync between revolution and regeneration. A few years later, Adam Michnik would express one of the cardinal assumptions that accompanied post-dissident liberalism to its grave, “We have reached democracy without the political culture appropriate to a democratic order.”³⁷

Conclusion

The rise of post-dissident liberalism out of the spirit of revolutionary moderation is a myth. Seen through the prism of an entangled historiography of revolution, 1989 as the foundational moment of post-dissident liberalism har-

35 SKALSKI, Ernst. Bieda Partii. In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 7 April 1990.

36 KOZŁOWSKI, Maciej. Rzeczpospolita Bezpartyjna? In *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 18 March 1990.

37 MICHNIK, Adam. Three Kinds of Fundamentalism. In MICHNIK, Adam. *Letters from Freedom: Post-cold War Realities and Perspectives*. Edited by Irena Grudzińska Gross. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 182.

bours a deep irony. In its imperative to avoid the Jacobin phase of the revolution, the powerless now in power sleepwalked straight into repeating the phase of Thermidorian reaction, bloodless, but disturbing in how it pushed to the foreground the need to constrain democracy for democracy's sake. The dissidents found the communist ambition of creating a New Man despicable, but how different is this ambition from the urge to purge the society from the remnants of *homo sovieticus*? In its revolutionary disillusion, and in the inability to see revolution and regeneration reconciled, post-dissident liberalism created the political imaginary of democracy in constant peril, founded on the shaky grounds of incivility, a democracy that is never truly consolidated and forever populist-ready, a democracy whose elections might always be its last. Thermidorian rather than just moderate in spirit, that liberalism has occupied the ideological space in which moderate conservatism could have thrived. Historically, the jeopardy narrative of democracy, as well as a suspicion towards the civility of the people, was the domain of conservatism. In the context of the weakness of the left, either burdened with the bankruptcy of socialism or representing the interests of nomenklatura capitalism, the rise of an illiberal and populist Right presents itself as a self-fulfilling prophecy; the only other game in town.