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## The Ambivalence of Social Change in Post-Communist Societies

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**Piotr Sztompka\***

## THE AMBIVALENCE OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN POST-COMMUNIST SOCIETIES

Why ambivalence? Because the story of the almost eighteen years since the collapse of communism has been told in two opposing ways. The optimistic, heroic narratives describe an epochal success of countries that have come a long way from Soviet satellites to members of the European Union and Atlantic Alliance; the process of liberation, emancipation, modernization, Europeanization, Westernization. The pessimistic, gloomy narratives see the same process as the sequence of failures, excessive social hardships, growing inequalities, survivals of communism, unfinished revolution. But in social life, nothing is entirely white or completely black; as Ulrich Beck likes to put it, “either/or” thinking has to be replaced by “both/and” logic (Beck, 2006). And, as will be shown in this talk, there is a grain of truth in both pictures. Hence – ambivalence. But let us begin at the beginning.

### **The anti-communist revolution and post-revolutionary dilemmas**

In the year 1989, the world changed in East-Central Europe. It was a year of miracles. Several countries liberated themselves from the grip of the Soviet empire, and soon the empire itself disintegrated and collapsed. To these events we give the name of revolution, and deservedly so (Kumar, 2001). For even

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though they were not accompanied by the usual paraphernalia of revolutions: barricades, violence, bloodshed, they were clearly epochal, revolutionary events in a more important historiosophical sense. They constituted a major break in historical continuity, a complete and radical change at all levels of social life, for great masses of people.

At the political level it meant a shift from an autocratic, centralized, mono-party system to a Western-style democratic regime. At the economic level it meant a shift from central planning and state control to the capitalist market. At the intellectual and artistic level, it meant the shift from controlled and censored circulation of ideas and values to free and pluralistic expression with open access to world culture. And at the level of everyday life, it opened to the people entirely new experiences: instead of the eternal shortages and long queues at every store, the unlimited options of a consumer society; instead of the grey-ness and simplicity of uniform life-styles, the colour and diversity of living spaces, products and fashions; and instead of limited mobility and restrained foreign contacts, open borders and unlimited travel and tourism.

It was also a revolution in a more personal, emotional sense (Aminzade and McAdam, 2001); a time of tremendous popular enthusiasm, collective effervescence, elation with hard-won victory. The pictures of crowds of Germans dancing on the ruins of the Berlin Wall, or Czech students leading Waclaw Havel “na Hrad,” to the presidential palace, or Poles celebrating the first free elections – entered the iconography of the 20th century. It was a time of great national solidarity, regained dignity and pride. There was full support and trust for the new regime and sky-rocketing expectations and aspirations. Freedom and prosperity seemed just around the corner.

The more sober, distant observers were warning: a transition of that magnitude is not a matter of days, it needs time. Ralf Dahrendorf, a famous sociologist, in the first account of the “autumn of nations 1989” (Dahrendorf, 1990) was writing of three clocks running at various speeds: the clock of politics and changes in laws – the fastest, measured in months; the clock of economy and building the market – slower, measured in years; and the clock of civil society, that is, changes in values, mentalities, “habits of the heart” of the people – the slowest, beating in the rhythm of decades or even generations. In a similar message, Andrew Nagorski, *Newsweek’s* Eastern European correspondent, was giving a telling title to his report from the tearing down of the Berlin Wall: “The Wall Remains in the Heads.” Zbigniew Brzezinski, a well-known American politologist, was putting forward the contrast between rejoining the European house, that is, the Western institutional architecture of politics and economy, and settling in the European home, namely, “feeling at home” amid the intangible net of loyalties, attachments, customs, subtle rules of conduct pervading everyday life. The latter, he claimed, is much more difficult and cannot be

achieved overnight. We were also reminded of the famous sentence that Giuseppe Mazzini is reported to have uttered after the unification of Italy: “Now that we have made Italy, we have to make Italians.” Changing from *Homo Sovieticus* to the modern Westerners, abandoning the crippled and deficient East-European identity and acquiring a full-fledged, proud European identity required time.

In fact, the triumphant and jubilant mood soon passed, and a sort of “morning after” syndrome set in (Sztompka, 1992). People soon discovered that freedom is not only a gift, but an obligation and sometimes a burden. The newly established powers had to make numerous choices and most of them took the shape of dilemmas; no solution was perfect and each implied social costs, if not for these groups then for the others. The main problem of every democratic regime was faced immediately: major reforms are usually not highly popular, and yet they require a majority for their implementation. The post-communist governments had one tremendous asset: the credit of trust. And at least for some time a “window of opportunity” opened, allowing a fundamental reform of society.

The first dilemma appeared here: whether to introduce reforms immediately, by “shock therapy” or in an evolutionary, piecemeal fashion – the first was more effective but socially costly; the second would relieve some social hardships but was much less effective. Another problem, and the second dilemma, was grasped metaphorically by Jon Elster, Claus Offe and Ulrich Preuss: we were trying to “rebuild the ship at sea” (Elster, Offe and Preus, 1998). It was more difficult than building from scratch, when one may follow some pragmatic sequence, such as starting from the foundations and proceeding up toward the chimney. Here the ship had to be kept afloat; thus, it was not obvious where to start, which part to rebuild first without endangering the whole. The third unique dilemma was also manifesting itself quite early: we wanted to modernize, to catch up with the most developed societies. But the problem was that they were not waiting for us, but moving forward at high speed. It was a situation reminiscent of the Hollywood movie “The Vanishing Point.” And paradoxically, the most developed countries were even able to accelerate and escape further from us because of new opportunities they found in the transforming Eastern Europe: huge, new markets, new sources of cheaper labor, new terrain for direct capital investments. Thus, our pursuit became even harder.

Then the question arose: how to rebuild. To reform, yes, but in which direction? We knew that we wanted to become like the West. For decades most people had been looking toward the West and standing with their backs to our giant Eastern neighbour, Soviet Russia. There had developed an uncritical idealization of everything that is Western. But now that we were about to join the West, which West we really wanted became less clear: Sweden or Japan, the US or Switzerland, Britain or Spain? And should we imitate and import everything wholesale or rather selectively: Western institutions, life-styles, fashions,

ideas? Or also unemployment, homelessness, crime, pornography? Is it at all possible to bring only the good things and leave the bad things at the border or is the transaction inevitably linked?

More concretely, the following questions had to be resolved:

- ◊ Which democracy to adopt: the parliamentary or presidential system?
- ◊ Where should the center of power rest: in the strong, central government or in the civil society: local government, NGO's, grass roots associations, social movements?
- ◊ Which capitalism to adopt: the neo-liberal or communitarian, rampant individualism or welfare state, American free competition or German social economy? Or perhaps some "third way"?
- ◊ What to do with huge state assets: restitute to former private owners and privatize, sell to foreign companies and corporations or keep some strategic sectors in the hands of the state?
- ◊ What role for the church, which played such a crucial role at the times of democratic opposition and struggle against the communist regime? Should it retain a political role or return to its spiritual mission and moral leadership, separated from the state?
- ◊ How to deal with the communist past and the people who were supporting the old regime, who either belonged to the communist party, or even collaborated with the secret police? Should immediate "de-communization" and "lustration" be carried out – like de-Nazification in Germany after World War II – or rather, should the past be ignored, reconciliation to become the main goal and all citizens be given equal opportunities to participate in the building of the new regime.
- ◊ How to locate the country within the wider world: to adopt the policy of cosmopolitanism or parochialism, integration or isolation. And more specifically: how to relate to the only remaining superpower, the world hegemony – the US, how to develop links with the uniting Europe – the EU, and how to find some accommodation with the former imperial power of the region – Russia?

Such strategic decisions taken at the beginning of transformation were to determine the different paths that various post-communist societies have taken and the various outcomes of the process that we witness today, almost eighteen years later. Because the baffling fact is the great diversity of the region today, in spite of the more or less identical starting point. After all, the satellite societies were shaped exactly according to the common institutional patterns imposed from Moscow; the "Xerox effect" was enforced and at least in their political and economic system, the countries of Eastern Europe were copies of Soviet solutions. The current, varied mosaic proves how much earlier, coun-

try-specific history matters, how much a specific, cultural (including religious) heritage matters, how much the strategies adopted at the revolutionary moment of extrication from communism matter. But perhaps, most clearly, how the policies chosen in the course of transformation are crucially important. And these will be my focus in this presentation. I will also limit my angle of vision to only one country, my own, exemplifying the general points with facts and data referring to the Republic of Poland – but I have reasons to believe that several more general mechanisms of post-revolutionary social change, which we shall discover using Poland as an example, are also applicable to other post-communist societies.

### **The Polish trajectory of transformation: the take-off**

Three early political decisions have determined the course of Polish transformation and strongly influenced further political and economic developments, as well as the more intangible social “climate” and the mood of the people (Sztompka, 1991b). In the political domain, the parliamentary system was adopted, with a great role given to political parties and the government and limited competence left for the president. There was an unspoken reason for that: the agreement reached at the round-table talks (the Polish way of extrication from the communist system) was a sort of compromise between the democratic opposition and communist leaders, which suggested, among other things, the idea “our prime minister, your president” put forward by one of the leading activists of the movement of *Solidarność* Adam Michnik. And in fact, after the first democratic elections, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the former leader of the communist party, assumed the office of the president for some years, to be replaced only later by the legendary leader of *Solidarność*, Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Wałęsa. It was obvious that Jaruzelski’s powers, compared to those of the government and parliament, had to be curbed. There were also other important decisions at the political level; the creation of the Constitutional Court and the Office of the Ombudsman – the institutions that have attained strong positions and up to today play a very important role in Polish politics.

The second crucial area was the economy. Here the finance minister, the eminent economist Leszek Balcerowicz, decided to use the “window of opportunity” and impose what came to be known as the “shock therapy” or “big-bang approach.” All constraints on the free market were released, state controls minimized, prices liberated, convertibility of the currency safeguarded – in one reform package, almost immediately. In the long run, such a policy turned out to be very successful (much more so than the alternative, slow, step-by-step “evolutionary” way adopted in some other post-communist countries). It mobilized entrepreneurship and economic growth, curbed inflation, stabilized the

currency. In my view the economic success of Poland today is due in large part to this first push. But in the short run, it led to serious tensions and frustrations, as its side effects touched considerable segments of the population. And again, the fact that the economic reform started in this way was due to contingent factors: to the nomination of Balcerowicz and not somebody else to the crucial position of economic influence, to Balcerowicz's training in the neo-liberal school, and to the advisory role played by his fellow neo-liberal economists – Jeffrey Sachs and Anders Aslund.

The third decision of fundamental importance for the “social climate” had to do with the issue faced by all revolutions: how to treat the defeated enemies. The rule in several revolutions of the past was post-revolutionary terror: guillotines or firing squads or machetes. Not so in the Polish revolution. The first freely elected Prime Minister, the eminent intellectual and *Solidarność* leader Tadeusz Mazowiecki, decided on reconciliation rather than revenge. He declared the policy of the “thick black line” cutting off the past, proposed to ignore former communist party membership and even the collaboration with the secret police (as long as it did not consist of outright criminal guilt) and to focus on the contribution that all citizens together could make in building the future. In the short run, it was salutary for the social mood and allowed the use of the considerable intellectual and professional potential of the former communists, many of whom soon abandoned their earlier loyalties and joined the effort to construct a viable democracy and a functioning market. But in the long run, it left a ready argument with strong populist resonance to some political parties, which became quite successful in attaining power by blaming all difficulties and social frustrations on the supposed conspiracy of former, unpunished and unrepentant communists or communist “agents.” And in the preserved archives of the secret police, it left a ready weapon to shame and discredit political opponents for those who could get privileged access. The issue of “de-communization” and “lustration” was to resurface seventeen years later and to overshadow all really important issues of Polish politics. Once again, let us emphasize the contingency of history. Obviously “de-communization” and “lustration” could have been carried out immediately after the revolution (like in some neighbouring countries, Czechoslovakia or the DDR), were it not for the personality of Mazowiecki, with his strong Christian belief in forgiveness and generosity toward opponents. It is an invalid counter-factual argument to tell what would have been the consequences at that time of the decisions that were not taken. But one thing is certain: digging out the issue now, after seventeen years, is the cynical power game, which has nothing to do with high-sounding virtues of “truth” and “justice.”

## Legacy of the past

It is a truism that all societies are path-dependent, shaped by their particular history and tradition. Earlier events leave the traces and imprints – in material infrastructure, in institutions and in memories (Connerton, 1989). They may derive from near history or be transmitted through generations from quite distant history. In the case of East-Central European societies, a particularly strong impact was exerted by half a century of communist rule. This legacy became effective immediately after the revolution, producing various obstacles, barriers, blockages and frictions in the process of transformation. The impact of communism was predominantly negative; it must be counted on the side of liabilities. There were exceptions, though, which must be put on the positive side of the balance. Communism was a project of modernization. It was, of course, incomplete modernization; I have characterized it as “fake modernization” (Sztompka, 1995), but it had achievements in two domains: on one hand, the industrial and technological development, and on the other, the educational and cultural advancement of the population. The balance sheet in the case of earlier, pre-communist history is usually leaning toward the positive side. Earlier epochs usually left a more positive legacy, gave some societies the assets, shaped their particular strengths in the building of a new regime. But again, there were also some negative traditions, such as chauvinism, xenophobia, stereotypes and prejudices against some neighbouring countries, enmity toward minorities, anarchic tendencies.

In the case of Poland, the balance sheet may be formulated as follows. On the negative side, communism affected the political, economic and cultural-mental sphere. At the political level, we inherited a pervasive bureaucracy, an overabundance of inconsistent and obsolete laws, undeveloped political parties, a weak civil society, a “social vacuum” in the non-governmental sector, a non-existent, apolitical civil service, political elites untrained in democratic procedures and standards. At the economic level, we were left with nationalized property; huge, state-owned industrial enterprises stagnant and inefficient with obsolete technology; an overgrown and fragmented agricultural sector with almost 30 percent of the labour force employed in small, family farms.

But perhaps the legacy most resistant to change, the one featuring the most inertia, is to be found in the cultural-mental sphere, the domain of rules, values, norms, shared beliefs, ingrained “habits of the heart,” subconscious reflexes (Sztompka, 1999a). Some of them were directly shaped by communist propaganda and indoctrination, for example, egalitarianism, or shifting all decisions to the authorities. Some were spontaneously internalized as useful adaptive strategies, allowing passiveness or opportunism to survive more securely, for example.



I would classify those cultural and lasting mental traces of communism in two categories. I call the first one “civilizational incompetence” (Sztompka, 1993a), indicating by that term that people were left unprepared for the demands of modern, industrial and democratic civilization. They were missing modern political culture, organizational culture, the citizen’s ethos of responsibility and participation. They were not ready for modern labour culture, business culture, entrepreneurial and managerial ethos. And they were also lacking in some skills of everyday life: road traffic culture, computer literacy, punctuality, consumer discernment in view of unlimited options, scepticism toward commercial advertising, insulation to marketing tricks, care for the environment and public spaces. I call the second category “East-European identity” (Sztompka, 2004a). It is in the self-definition and associated emotions that culture and mental habits leave their strongest, synthesized imprint. And the identity inherited from the communist period was typically tainted by the following traits: insecurity of one’s position and status, a childish dependence on paternalistic authority, xenophobia and intolerance, an inferiority complex toward the West coupled with uncritical idealization of everything that is Western, a superiority complex toward the East (and particularly Soviet Russia), in the Polish case taking the shape of a myth of a *chosen nation*, providing the eastern defensive barricade for Christianity.

But of course, each of the post-communist countries could also search for strength and inspiration in earlier history. Thus, in the case of Poland, our historically inherited assets included: strong patriotism linked with Catholicism preserving the potential of national-religious community, even if suppressed and going underground at the time of communism, attachment to the idea of sovereignty, which for so many periods of Polish history could not have been taken for granted (for instance, the occupation by Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the whole of the 19th century), romantic readiness for a collective struggle for common, national causes even if seemingly hopeless (such as several failed uprisings in the 19th century or the Warsaw uprising of 1944 against the overwhelming Nazi forces), some democratic traditions dating as far back as the 18th century, when Poland had one of the first democratic constitutions in the world (the “May 3rd Constitution” of 1791), the proud memory of the strong monarchy extending under the Jagiellonian dynasty from the Baltic to the Black Sea, some popular heroes of free independent Poland after World War II, including Józef Piłsudski and Ignacy Paderewski, whose examples could be taken as inspiration for the current leaders.

All these forces of history, negative as well as positive, have proven to be of tremendous importance in the process of post-communist transformation. To these one may add a new, more recent tradition: anti-communist revolution. It matters a lot how each of the East-Central European countries got rid

of communism. Some, like Poland or Hungary, had long traditions of struggle against the regime and eventually used the strategy of round-table talks to reach some compromise between the democratic opposition and the communist rulers, leading eventually to their abdication. In Poland, the experience of *Solidarność* the biggest political movement of the 20th century (having some 10 million members at the peak of its mobilization), comparable only with the Civil Rights movement in the US, has left particularly strong traces in the social consciousness. Perhaps in a little similar way as France, which is still influenced by the tradition of the Great French Revolution of 1789, Poland will for a long time experience the repercussions of the revolution from below in 1980–1989 (Ekiert and Kubik, 1999). The events took a different course in Romania, which witnessed violent, bloody confrontation between the democratic forces and the strongly entrenched regime of Nicolae Ceausescu. Still another scenario was followed in the countries that experienced revolution from above, gaining or re-gaining independence in the wake of the dissolution of an empire (as the post-Soviet republics) or the disintegration of a federation (like in Yugoslavia). Finally, there was the unique case of the DDR, which was simply incorporated into the Federal Republic of Germany. Whether people conceived of democracy as a treasure won in their own hard struggle or as a gift received freely from above made a great difference (Offe, 1997).

Thus, to summarize, at the moment of take-off, the various courses of transformation taken by post-communist societies were determined by their different historical legacies, the strategies of extrication from communist rule and the initial policies adopted by the new, democratic governments.

### **The turbulence at the beginning: the initial trauma**

The quickest to change were the institutions. In the first year of transformation, most institutions of the free, democratic and market society were already in place: political parties, the parliament, the president, the constitutional court, the ombudsman, private enterprises, industrial corporations, banks, stock exchange, pluralistic media. The people found themselves in a completely reshaped institutional environment. It demanded certain skills, beliefs, rules and values. But initially, the people lacked them and even worse, they had been trained to develop radically opposite skills, to accept opposite beliefs and rules, and to follow opposite values. The syndrome of *Homo Sovieticus* was dysfunctional for new institutions; and mentalities and culture are, as we know, the slowest to change. A striking contrast emerged between the culture of communism, still remaining in the people's minds, and the culture of democracy demanded by the new institutional environment (Sztompka, 1996b). This can be

rendered by the following oppositions: (1) collectivism vs. individualism, (2) cooperation vs. competition, (3) egalitarianism vs. meritocracy, 4) mediocrity vs. visible success, (5) security of jobs, pensions, savings vs. the risk of investing, (6) belief in fate and providence vs. belief in the power of the human agency, (7) leaning on state support vs. self-reliance, (8) blaming the system for personal failures vs. personal responsibility, (9) political passiveness and escape toward private sphere vs. participation in public life, (10) idealization of pre-communist past vs. orientation toward the future.

To this split in the culture and its adverse, tension-producing consequences for the people, I give the name “initial trauma” (Sztompka, 2004b). Its symptoms were: disorientation, certain normative chaos (or “anomie”) with the lack of clarity about what is right and wrong, what is proper and improper, good and bad – and consequently the lack of clear guidelines for conduct. It bred feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. I extend here the meaning of the concept of trauma in two ways: first from the medical, psychological or psychiatric domain to the social domain, and second, from the consequences of some inherently bad events (a traffic accident, terminal illness, death in the family, etc.), to adverse, traumatizing consequences of fundamental and rapid changes, even if they are themselves positive, beneficial or wished for. There may also be a “trauma of success” – when success can change deeply internalized habits, accustomed ways of life, un-reflexive routines, strongly held convictions.

The initial trauma produces some turbulence and even blocks the smooth progress of transformation at its early phase. The new institutions cannot operate properly until they are manned, supported or utilized by appropriately trained people. But this in itself would be relatively easy to overcome. First of all, people are learning animals, and the institutional environment exerts a strong socializing influence, enforcing certain standards of behaviour. Second, people were not equally affected by the syndrome of *Homo Sovieticus*. There were intellectual, academic, artistic and oppositional elites – cosmopolitan and West-oriented – who were able to insulate themselves against this syndrome, and already under communism embraced – in imaginations, dreams and aspirations – the standards and values of the “free world.” Such elites became the carriers of the new mentality, spreading it to their followers and emulators. And third, even if this occurs more slowly, there is a generational change, when those who have been mentally “polluted” by the communist experience move to the margin of social life, and the young generation is made up of people already born, raised and educated in the new system. But this is made more complicated by another trauma, one which appears in the second phase of transformation.

## The aftershocks of reforms: secondary trauma

The fundamental, structural reforms of the political, economic and cultural domains undertaken in the first period of transformation bring about unintended and sometimes unexpected side effects. It is unavoidable. If the whole of society is being rebuilt, some social costs are inevitable, and the burdens of transformation touch many people. As Claus Offe puts it in a paradoxical metaphor, there is a “tunnel at the end of a light” (Offe, 1997). What makes things worse is that these burdens are unequally distributed, affecting some groups very strongly, whereas others are able to escape their impact. These hardships become new types of traumatizing conditions, resulting in the secondary trauma.

They may be classified into two types: objective and subjective. On the objective side, there emerge new forms of risks and threats: unemployment, still not controlled inflation, the growing wave of crime and delinquency and a new phenomenon of mafias, the immigration of culturally alien people from the countries further East, the ruthless competition. There is also a quick deterioration of living standards and social status, at least for some sizeable groups: the devaluation of savings due to the currency reform, the withdrawal of state welfare umbrella and the resulting poverty, even homelessness, and the overturn of prestige hierarchies, with the degradation of all whose rank was not linked with fiscal success (sociologists have called it the “fiscalization of social consciousness,” and it touched the academic elites and teachers adversely, for example).

On the subjective side there are two relative framings, which make the experience of burdens more acute, leading to the feeling of relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970). One is the comparison with the highly elevated hopes and aspirations of the revolutionary period. Another is the demonstration effect of Western prosperity now made more visible than ever due to free media, open borders and the invasion of consumerism (the “‘McDonaldization’ of Eastern Europe,” as George Ritzer would call it, see: Ritzer, 1993). People experience relative deprivation when they believe that they are justified in deserving more than they actually have. And several groups are touched by this painful condition. First, those who were fighting against the communist regime and safeguarded the victory of the revolution – and this means primarily the working class of huge industrial enterprises – feel cheated, as their lives have generally not improved, and for some have even become dramatically worse, with unemployment and lack of occupational prospects. This kind of deprivation becomes even more acute when the material success of other groups – entrepreneurs, businessmen, young professionals – is conspicuous and aggressively manifested (“the Great Gatsby syndrome” so aptly grasped by Scott Fitzgerald because early capitalism is replicated with the second birth of capitalism in Eastern

Europe). Second, on the other side of the social spectrum there is a sizable group of former owners whose property – real estate, industrial, agricultural – was nationalized under communism. Now, when the private property has become a constitutional principle, they feel that it is their right to demand restitution. And for many legal and practical reasons, this proceeds very slowly. Third, for all other people the frame of comparison has become the prosperous, consumer society of the West – reached either through travel and tourism or invading local life spaces via international supermarkets, shopping malls and galleries, sometimes even more luxurious and exclusive than those in major Western cities. People feel that now that they live in a capitalist society, they deserve the same level of affluence as those in the West. And yet, their incomes are still much lower, while prices become equalized. Becoming symbolically incorporated into the Western world, for example, by membership in the European Union, people also experience more acutely the deficiencies and shortages that accumulated through the period of communism and that they learned to accept before. They are unhappy with the obsolete infrastructure of roads; they protest against ecological destruction; they complain about low health and fitness standards.

In social life, subjective feelings count for the same as objective conditions. As the famous “Thomas Theorem” (introduced by American social psychologist William Isaac Thomas) succinctly puts it: “If people believe something to be real, it is real through its consequences” (Janowitz, 1975). Both the objective and subjective deprivations become traumatizing. The symptoms of secondary trauma emerge very soon. Three are particularly significant. First, there is a dramatic fall of trust: from its peak at the moment of revolution, trust clearly decays. It is particularly visible in so-called vertical trust: toward the institutions, the government, the parliament, the president, or even toward the most abstract idea of democracy (Sztompka, 1996a, Sztompka, 1999b). Second, there is growing political apathy, low participation in elections, withdrawal from public life toward the private sphere of families, friends and close business and professional networks. Third, there is a spreading nostalgia for the past, idealization of some aspects of socialism, especially job security, assured pensions, state provisions of free health and educational services.

### **The split of a society**

But of course, these symptoms of trauma are unequally distributed among the population. In fact the traumatizing conditions and resulting traumatic symptoms result in a split of society into two unequal parts. One consists of those who have been successful under the new system: they have advanced educationally, made business, professional or political careers, enriched themselves. There are also those who feel successful and satisfied in a more intangible way:

intellectual, artistic, academic elites for whom the very freedom of speech, unlimited access to information, reading foreign books and newspapers, ability to travel abroad – make up for any material shortages they may still experience. At the opposite pole, we find those who either objectively or subjectively experience loss and failure. There are the less educated, manual workers, but also several branches of more skilled workers, whose training and skills have become obsolete; there are the peasants, who lost the monopoly of food production and can hardly compete with imports from abroad; there are the low-level clerks of public administration or state owned firms, whose low salaries have not been raised and who lost various perks; there are retired people, pensioners and, of course – all the unemployed.

At the origins of such a split, there were unequal structural opportunities that people encountered in the first phases of transformation. Three kinds of circumstances seem decisive. First, the scope of initial resources – capital of various sorts: financial, social, educational – that people possessed. Those who had some savings or were able to pull together the financial resources of extended families (still typically surviving in Eastern Europe) could immediately invest, start firms and exploit the market, which had not yet turned highly competitive. But it was not only fiscal capital that mattered. For example, at the moment of privatization of huge state assets, the rich networks of acquaintances, connections, also of a political sort or, in a word – the social capital – inherited from communist times proved extremely helpful in obtaining information and privileged terms of trade. Youth and competence were also crucial for grasping opportunities. Having the most up-to-date educational capital and being in the right age bracket at the right moment, gave young people great chances for a good job in an infant private sector and a still un-saturated labour market. It worked in the opposite way for elderly people, who were either already retired or could not retrain themselves easily for new jobs. The second divisive factor was the place of employment. Those employed in the state sector, with strictly regulated and low wages based on the limited state budget, have been much worse off than employees in the private sector, even at equal jobs. The third factor had to do with where people were living. Usually, living in big cities offered more opportunities of various kinds, whereas living in desolate, industrial towns, based on some obsolete, uncompetitive and bankrupting domain of production, left people with no prospects for a better life. There were also big regional differences, with some parts of the country more modernized and other parts more backward. In Poland, for example, there were huge differences among three parts of the country, which, throughout the 19th century were ruled by three European superpowers: Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Up to today the western region is much more industrialized, with modern farming, whereas the Eastern and southern regions remain industrial-

ly underdeveloped, with primitive, fragmentized and family-run agriculture. We even coined the common terms for that split: Poland A and Poland B., or simply “two Polands”.

Once the transformation started on its way and produced secondary trauma of reforms, these structural differences also implied unequal access to coping strategies. The obvious way to cope with trauma is to extend one's resources, the capital which provides a kind of insulation against painful conditions. There are, therefore, three constructive, innovative ways for coping with trauma. One is to raise one's educational capital. We have observed a tremendous educational boom in post-communist societies, when, for example, in Poland the level of scholarization tripled, the population of students quadrupled and more than a hundred new institutions of higher education were started. Those who take the risk of educational investment usually land in the successful segment of the population (finding jobs and careers if not in the country, then abroad). Another coping strategy is entrepreneurship: starting firms, organizing business, saving and investing. Again, we have observed the true outburst of entrepreneurial activities, with millions (yes, millions) of new small firms started and some of them soon developing into serious enterprises. This was another road to success. And the third coping strategy was to raise social capital, join associations, foundations, clubs, organize NGOs. It led to the revitalization of civil society, and the participants have usually had some opportunities for advancement.

But not all people are ready and willing to take such constructive and innovative defences against traumas. Some are clinging to the old ways, accustomed life strategies, and cultivating ritualistic adaptations. Others turn to withdrawal and resignation. They remain passive, believing in the beneficial turn of events due either to providence and fate or to the emergence of a strong leader, the saviour, or to aid and help from foreign countries. There are also those who try shortcuts to success: unlawful or outright criminal acts, organizing mafias, corruption rings, etc. They may, for a while, land in the successful elite, but sooner or later law enforcement usually goes after them and they land in prisons. And finally, we have those who blame their failures on the new capitalist system and turn to anarchism or aspire to revive communism.

The split into successful and frustrated segments of the population is immediately replicated at the political level in the opposition of liberal, modern, pro-European parties and more conservative, populist, Euro-sceptical and parochial parties, who find their respective constituencies either among those who have succeeded (growing middle and upper classes), or – to the contrary – among those who are losing in the transformation game and become marginalized. The political dynamics of post-communist societies reflects the split quite clearly, with the political pendulum swinging from one side to the other in each consecutive election cycle. In countries like Poland, where the institutional

church has always played a strong role, the split in the church also emerges along similar lines: on the one side, the more modern, open, liberal, ecumenical wing and on the other side, the more conservative, fundamentalist, nationalist faction.

### **The interludes of success and, alas, the trauma of elites**

But in spite of all these problems, there are periods when the social mood changes toward optimism, and the traumatic symptoms are relieved. The indicators of trust go up (Sztompka, 1999b), more people vote in elections, civil society becomes livelier, with more grass-roots activities, associational life, multiplying NGOs. In Poland, we witnessed it in the second part of the 1990s when the delayed effects of the radical economic reforms of Leszek Balcerowicz and the boom in worldwide economy resulted in high economic growth and improved living standards. And then in the first years of the 21st century, when the accession to NATO, a successful European referendum and later the accession to the European Union raises the feeling of security, enhances trust in the irreversibility of democratic and market reforms and accelerates the modernization of the country. We are no longer alone but anchored in a strong family of highly developed economies and deeply rooted democracies.

This bright picture is spoiled again by the new, third wave of trauma, this time of a different order. It is not so much structural as personal. It originates not so much in the institutions of politics, but in personal frailties and weaknesses of the politicians. I call it the trauma of political elites. At the threshold of the 21st century, the political elites, irrespective of their ideological orientation – equally the right wing and the left wing – manifest both intellectual and moral incapacities. There appears glaring incompetence and errors in decisions, but even worse, grave abuses of moral and legal standards: egoism, cronyism, nepotism, factionalism, corruption (Kojder, 2004). The free media turn to investigative reporting, and a number of political scandals galvanize public attention. The parliament nominates investigative committees, whose proceedings are widely publicized and aired live on TV. Huge-scale corruption rings and mafia-type organizations are unravelled at the fragile border between the worlds of business and politics. The phenomenon described by sociologists as a “moral panic” (Thompson, 1998) breaks out. People start to believe – admittedly with some good reasons – that the whole of politics is completely corrupted, that all politicians do not represent the common people but only attend to their own interests, that nobody can be trusted any more.

The symptoms of new trauma become widespread. First, there is the revival of the old dichotomy: “we,” the common people, and “them,” the rulers. This was a defensive frame of mind under communism, pushing people away from public life – treated as alien, imposed from the outside – toward the security



and familiarity of the private world: families, friends. The same alienation from politics and the privatization of life become highly destructive in a democratic regime, where the participation of “we, the people” is the crucial precondition for political functioning. For example, the growing absenteeism at elections, when more than half of the citizens chose not to cast a ballot, allows for completely unrepresentative factions to usurp power by the skilful manipulation of coalitions. The second symptom of trauma is another dramatic fall of vertical trust, which in the case of major political institutions, reaches unprecedented low levels (Luhiste 2006, Shlapentokh, 2006). The third symptom is the open manifestation of grievances and discontent, coupled with demands and claims directed at the government. This sometimes turns into highly visible spontaneous protests, “street politics,” clashes with the police. In the case of Poland, an additional factor adding to the depressive mood is the death of Pope John Paul II, the only unquestioned, remaining charismatic leader and public authority, not only for believers but for the whole society. A feeling of bereavement sets in, manifested in a highly emotional way, particularly by the young generation in the days surrounding the Pope’s funeral. The enthusiastic welcome that Polish youth, as well as the rest of society gave – contrary to some expectations – to his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, indicates how a great craving developed among the people for authentic moral and intellectual authority.

### **The delayed echoes of the revolution: the trauma of backlash**

At the background of such moods, the political pendulum swings to the right in the elections of 2005. Skillful politicians of the party, whose name – “Law and Justice” – already reveals demagogical inclinations, are able to use the traumatic condition of society as the springboard to power. They promised major changes under a slogan of building the new “IV Republic,” which meant cutting themselves off from the errors and abuses of the “III Republic” constructed by round-table compromises and carrying a supposedly incomplete and fake transformation. They promised to complete the “unfinished revolution” by finally eliminating from public life all elites who had their roots in the communist system and who were supposedly guilty of all the problems. And on top of that they promised to build the “solidary state,” providing rich social benefits to all citizens. No wonder they have won the elections, both presidential and parliamentary. The instrumental exploitation of social trauma and the scapegoat mechanism have proven effective and not for the first time in history.

And yet the margin of victory was very low, not sufficient for a parliamentary majority, with the popular mandate only around 20 percent, given the fact that around 5 percent of the electorate did not take part in the elections. The pre-selection of the active electorate also seemed to work in their favour, as it

is usually those who are frustrated, unsuccessful and complaining who are responsive to populist and demagogical slogans.

The manipulation with earlier traumas did not suffice in the longer run. Ironically, once in power the new government had soon generated the fourth trauma. Playing with trauma produced new trauma. I call it the trauma of backlash. And it is pervading Polish social life at this moment. The classical traumatizing conditions appeared once again. First, the extremely elevated, populist electoral promises cannot be met. The frustrated, unfulfilled hopes of higher salaries and wages, lower taxes, massive provisions of cheap apartments (the famous 3 million subsidized flats!) and jobs for all, result in a wave of escalating protests and strikes: of medical doctors, nurses, teachers, coal-miners, policemen, etc. Second, the government, devoid of sufficient majority in the parliament, is unable to force decisions and spends several months on mounting coalitions, which for the people gives the impression of a selfish quest for power for power's sake and abandonment of the service for society, as well as any notion of the public good. Third, the eventual coalition with highly suspect, marginal, small parties of extreme populist and demagogical origins ("Self-Defence" and the "League of Polish Families") unravel the strategy of cynical "realpolitik" strikingly at odds with the proclamations of "moral revolution." Fourth, the slogan of the "IV Republic" implies a radical break, the extreme critique and rejection of the principles and practices of the "III Republic," that is, its sin of origins in the compromise of the round-table talks, its constitution, reforms of Leszek Balcerowicz, etc. People are told – contrary to all reason – that some 18 years of their lives and efforts were lost, that it was another in the chain of Polish disasters and failures, that we have to start anew once again, to build everything from scratch. Fifth, the obsessive hunt for some supposed communist conspiracy that ruled Poland for these 18 years and is guilty of all our problems creates a vision of completely untransparent public life, giving rise to anxiety and uncertainty. Sixth, there is a visible effort to suppress and dominate independent institutions, independent professional circles and independent leaders of public opinion: the Constitutional Court is repeatedly discredited; the Central Bank, as well as the committee regulating the media, are put in the hands of loyal politicians; the lawyers, academics, journalists, medical doctors are constantly attacked – sometimes personally. There are also clear attempts to instrumentalize the law and law enforcement for factional, particularistic political purposes and manifested contempt for the constitution. Nothing undermines vertical trust more than the growing appearance of unaccountability on the part of the rulers, and the limitation of checks and balances, mutual controls inbuilt in a democratic regime (and even the fact that the offices of the president and prime minister are taken by twin brothers is considered by many people to be a mockery of the principle of the division of powers). Seventh, as

a sort of subordinate theme to deflect the popular unrest, the government digs out the problem of lustration, rejects the policy of the “thick black line” separating the communist past from the future-oriented, constructive efforts and intends to open the archives of the communist secret police to unravel the identities of all former collaborators or agents. The process soon gets out of hand with self-appointed judges who reveal privately or illicitly obtained information and trigger a number of political scandals. The attack reaches the church, with some leading clergy accused – without convincing proof – of collaboration. In a deeply religious, Catholic society it has to enhance the “moral panic,” and many people start to believe that former agents and spies are everywhere, even among their priests, families and friends. The new lustration law passed by the ruling majority in 2007, which demands of some half a million citizens occupying upper positions in a society to write self-incriminating declarations of their possible collaboration of forty, fifty and more years ago, meets with a huge wave of protest and resistance, including cases of civil disobedience, and leads the still independent Constitutional Court to veto and scrap the law entirely. But a deep division between those who were opportunistically loyal to the obviously unconstitutional law and those who actively opposed it is a very unfortunate side effect, which remains, especially among the intellectual, academic and journalistic circles. The government does not capitulate easily and promises new moves in the battle for lustration.

All these facts are responsible for the re-emergence of the classical symptoms of trauma, the fourth in a row, the “trauma of backlash.” First, the people become disenchanted or outright disgusted with politics. The dichotomy of “we” and “them” becomes sharper than ever. Participation in public life is even more unpopular, and the privatization of life proceeds further. Political apathy sets in. Second, distrust in public institutions is at its lowest level: trust in the parliament falls to single digits below ten percent, trust in the president below three percent, with almost 50 percent declaring active distrust. Unfortunately, this spreads from vertical to horizontal trust with only 15 percent declaring generalized trust in other people, including strangers not known to them personally. Third, as a functional substitute for lacking internal trust, the externalization of trust becomes visible in the phenomenon of massive, temporal or even permanent emigration. With the opening of labour markets by some members of the EU, young educated people, professionals as well as manual workers emigrate in search of better life chances. Their motivations are most often economic, they are looking for jobs. But some research shows that their flight is also due to an unbearable political climate. Not accepting the current conditions, they decide on what Albert Hirschman has called the “exit option” (Hirschman, 1970). Fourth, anxieties, frustrations and pessimism are widely expressed, not only privately but in the still-independent media, which in

some sizeable part take a very critical view of current politics. A sane phenomenon in itself, it has a side effect – feeding the new wave of “moral panics” that are triggered even by minor, singular events. Fifth, we observe a rising demand for gossip, rumors, a new career of political jokes – which were a popular form of expression under communism, but later lost their importance. All these emerge as substitutes for authentic public debate.

### **The brighter side of the situation**

The picture painted above is rather bleak. But as usual, the reality is not just one shade. The theme of ambivalence comes back. Because it would be a mistake to believe that the current trauma of backlash is the return to the immediate post-revolutionary trauma. The similarity of some symptoms may be misleading. Grave as it is, the trauma is now experienced under completely different conditions, in an entirely different society, transformed deeply by the 18 years of transformation, so unreasonably discredited by current political elites. During that time we have gained some crucial assets which make coping with “trauma number four” much easier.

First, due to the wise “shock therapy” of Leszek Balcerowicz, the momentum of entrepreneurial mobilization was activated and consistently produces high rates of economic growth, much higher than those in the countries that have chosen evolutionary, step-by-step strategies. Second, due to the rigid monetary policy of the Central Bank, we have a strong, stable currency, with inflation at a minimum level. Third, due to opening toward the West and conducive business environment (a skilled labour force, usually cheaper than in the West, an unsaturated market), we have drawn considerable, direct foreign investments, which bring not only economic revenues but also models of labour culture and management standards. Fourth, we have a stable and secure position within the Western world, thanks to NATO and EU membership. The latter results not only in beneficial fiscal flows, but provides an insurance policy against any possible anti-democratic turn. Fifth, the educational boom has significantly raised the intellectual level of the society, with rates of scholarization tripled and the population of students growing fourfold as compared with the communist time. Sixth, at the level of civil society, a dense network of NGOs, associations, self-governing bodies, discussion clubs, philanthropic ventures, foundations, etc., which mushroomed immediately after the revolution, have in large measure survived and consolidated and cannot be easily destroyed by current centralizing and autocratic tendencies. Seventh, there is a considerable strength of national and religious community, usually latent, but emerging very clearly on extraordinary occasions – like the death of John Paul II or the visit of Benedict XVI. This reservoir of authentic solidarities may also

be mobilized, if the need arises, for political purposes, in order to block any possible drift away from democracy. Eighth, the current political elite antagonizes so many circles in society that it may unwittingly revitalize the critical public debate, which is always easier to mobilize negatively against some policies than for positive political projects. Re-awakened public opinion may effectively curb the abuses of power.

It was the civil society which won the seemingly impossible victory over communism, which “raised itself up by its boot-straps,” as Americans like to say. Its job now is much easier: not to allow the fruits of the revolution of 1989 to be wasted.

### **Theoretical coda**

Behind the reconstruction of East-European, and particularly Polish, history over the last 18 years presented above, there are some hidden theoretical assumptions, which give internal logic to the narration of facts and events. It is time to reveal them.

I do not believe in the Laws of History, in the determined, linear and irreversible course of human events and processes. I do not believe in historical necessity or inevitability, supposedly affirming itself irrespective of human actions. And I do not believe that history has some purpose, final goal toward which it proceeds. Thus, I reject the assumptions of determinism, fatalism and finalism – so often encountered in thinking about macro-sociological, historical change.

There has been nothing inevitable in the fall of communism. Most people, including all the taxi drivers in my city, have believed that that damned system must collapse one day. But it might have well outlived us all and still be around. And there has been nothing inevitable in the direction and course of post-communist transformation. The early concept of transition assumed that Eastern Europe would become like the West simply by replicating capitalist and democratic institutions. Similarly, the notion of convergence or modernization assumed that Eastern Europe must pass the same route toward modernity, as followed earlier by luckier countries of the West. As if all societies were moving on the same huge escalator, some higher, some lower but all destined to follow the same course.

History is made by the people, it is constantly becoming due to decisions and choices made by the people – great leaders, groups, social movements, political parties and common citizens in their everyday conduct. But of course these decisions are neither arbitrary nor voluntaristic; they are made in the environment of institutions, rules and beliefs, as well as in the material environment produced by earlier generations. Those are not God-given but have also been produced by the people, our predecessors. But the current generation fac-

es them as givens, as the field of possibilities for choice, neither entirely open nor entirely constrained. What shall become of the future is always, to a great extent, in the people's own hands. I call this perspective focusing on the transformative force of human agency a "theory of social becoming" (Sztompka, 1991a, Sztompka, 1993b).

Communism has fallen because there were brave, democratically inspired leaders – Wałęsas, Havel – who were able to mobilize the masses. It has fallen because there were brave people ready to join popular democratic, emancipatory movements, in spite of heavy personal risks, and who persisted in their struggle. And the fall has been made more peaceful and relatively victimless because there were enlightened communist leaders – Gorbachev, Jeltsyn, Jaruzelski – who realized that the system had exhausted its potential and that their time had come to an end.

Once communism collapsed and democracy was installed, the opportunities for making history were fundamentally enriched. Because the whole point of democracy is to make the field of options as wide as possible and as accessible as possible for meaningful, constructive action to as many citizens as possible. But again, democracy does not mean unlimited options. In 1989, each post-communist country inherited different structural conditions for transformation: different historical traditions and memories, different shapes of institutions, different legacies of communism, different economic resources, different levels of educational, cultural, civilizational capital. They had luck, or had no luck for wise, charismatic leaders, which, as Pascal already said, is the most unpredictable and random factor of history.

Of these resources, of these opportunities the people of Eastern Europe have made various uses. But in general they have gone a very long way toward making their countries and their lives better. This was not a road strewn with roses, but rather one that led "through blood, sweat and tears" in the clash of various interests, ideas, programs, political projects. With social costs, hardships and victimized segments of the population. With new pockets of poverty and injustice in place of the old ones. And the process continues in a similar, turbulent way. But no major transformation comes easy, and this has been perhaps the most fundamental, radical and comprehensive transformation in recent history.

Social becoming does not follow a smooth, linear trajectory but rather a dialectical course. Through facing repeated challenges and fighting reappearing traumas, it pushes society forward. This is what I have tried to depict in this article, and to which I gave a name: ambivalence.

## Abstrakt

Artykuł przedstawia syntetyczne ujęcie teoretyczne procesu transformacji post-komunistycznej na przykładzie Polski. Autor wprowadza i stosuje własną teorię traumy kulturowej dla wyjaśnienia wielokierunkowych i fundamentalnych zmian jakie dokonały się w okresie ostatnich 19 lat. Mimo niewątpliwego sukcesu transformacji dały o sobie znać uboczne i nieprzewidziane skutki negatywne. Dla opisanego tego bilansu zmian autor stosuje pojęcie ambiwalencji.

## Abstract

The article presents a synthetic theoretical account of post-communist transformations in Poland. The author introduces and applies his own original theory of cultural trauma for the explanation of multidimensional and fundamental changes that have occurred during the last nineteen years. In spite of the unquestionable success of transformation, some unpredicted, adverse side-effects have emerged. The balance of positive and negative changes is grasped by the concept of ambivalence.

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