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POST-COMMUNISM, LIBERALISM AND SOLIDARITY IN THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AFTER 1989

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to analyze the transition from communism to post-communism in the Eastern Bloc countries after 1989. Post-communism in Central and Eastern Europe gradually transformed into various forms of democracy. The political project implemented in post-communist societies is a selective kind of liberalism, which entailed a number of negative consequences. Unfortunately, in the process of transition from post-communism to liberal democracy, a very small role was played by the category of solidarity as an important virtue of social life. We need today a global expansion of solidarity as a new worldwide ethos.

Keywords: post-communism, communism, liberalism, solidarity, ethics of solidarity, human rights, *homo sovieticus*, ethics of post-communism

POSTKOMUNIZM, LIBERALIZM I SOLIDARNOŚĆ W KRAJACH EUROPY ŚRODKOWEJ I WSCHODNIEJ PO 1989 ROKU

Abstrakt

Głównym celem artykułu jest analiza przejścia od komunizmu do postkomunizmu w krajach Bloku Wschodniego po 1989 roku. Postkomunizm w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej przekształcił się stopniowo w różne formy demokracji liberalnej. Projekt polityczny realizowany w społeczeństwach postkomunistycznych jest liberalizmem selektywnym, który doprowadził do wielu negatywnych konsekwencji. Niestety, w procesie przejścia od postkomunizmu do demokracji niewielką rolę odegrała kategoria solidarności jako ważna cnota życia społecznego. Potrzeba dzisiaj globalnej ekspansji solidarności jako nowego światowego etosu.

Słowa kluczowe: postkomunizm, komunizm, liberalizm, solidarność, etyka solidarności, prawa człowieka, *homo sovieticus*, etyka postkomunizmu

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2017 marked the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the February Revolution in Tsarist Russia and the bloody seizure of power by the Bolsheviks that followed, commonly referred to as the October Revolution. The communist regime which emerged in 1917, subsequently spread from Soviet Russia all over the world (Ascher 2014; Ryan 2012; *The Russian Revolution* 2006; Pipes 1990). The system turned out to be the most barbarian and murderous of all totalitarian regimes in human history. The authors of a very important historical study entitled *The Black Book of Communism*, first published in French in 1997, have documented 100 million victims of the communist terror all over the world (*The Black Book of Communism* 1999).

Today, communist parties in countries like China, Vietnam, North Korea or Cuba still effectively maintain their dictatorship power and keep violating fundamental human rights. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, previously forming part of the Warsaw Pact and subordinated to the Soviet Union since 1945, a systemic transformation has continued for the past several decades, consisting in a painstaking removal of the negative consequences of communism, healing the wounds caused by atrocities perpetrated in the past, and building a new democratic society.

Unfortunately, the 100th anniversary of the emergence of communism in the world did not prompt any new scientific studies that would contribute to a better understanding of the nature and consequences of this barbarian system which enslaved millions of people. It is particularly thought-provoking and sad that hardly any in-depth philosophical, anthropological or ethical analyses have been undertaken to uncover the darkest aspects of the communist regime and the deepest-reaching evil roots of the system. This painful silence of politicians, philosophers, ethicists, journalists and the public opinion is a global phenomenon, in fact – not only in Western Europe, the Americas or Asia, but even in countries like the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Poland no inspiring or revealing analyses of communism can be found today, performed at the level of the history of ideas (*Post-Communism from Within* 2013; Williams 2013; Besançon 2007).

1. FROM COMMUNISM TO POST-COMMUNISM

The partially free parliamentary elections held in Poland on June 4, 1989 may be treated as a symbolic date beginning the transition from communism to post-communism in Eastern Bloc countries. In 1989, Central and Eastern Europe witnessed the emergence of post-communism, which then gradually transformed over the years into various forms of liberal democracy (Strada 2011; Kenney 2003; Argentieri 1994). The transition from communism to post-communism in Eastern Bloc countries, and then from post-communism to democracy, has not been

a homogenous process, and its intensity has differed as well. Consequently, we may speak of various speeds at which the phenomenon has developed.

It should be emphasized that nowadays countries like Russia, Moldova, Belarus, or Ukraine were at a different stage of parting with communism and post-communism than countries like the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary or Slovakia (Bunce and Gallo 2002; Holc 1997). An interesting intellectual event, analysing the processes of systemic transformation in ex-Eastern Bloc countries and reflecting its diversity, was, among others, the international conference on “Post-Communism and Identities: East-European Perspectives”, held at the University of Padua, Italy, on June 4–5, 2015.

During the symposium, speakers from many different countries analysed the nature of the systemic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, paying special attention to the historical and cultural aspects of the process which were common to all countries, as well as to those which were distinctive and typical for each ex-Eastern Bloc country. As far as books are concerned, one that stands out among those recently published on the topic is a study by Marta Rabikowska of the University of Hertfordshire in Great Britain, who analyses the transition from communism to post-communism from the everyday perspective of ordinary people. Her book, published in 2013, is entitled *The Everyday of Memory. Between Communism and Post-Communism*.

This book explores manifestations of the communist past in the everyday lives of post-communist societies today. Representing a wide range of disciplines including cultural studies, film studies, urban studies, sociology, media, literature and art, the contributors to this book question the myth of a homogeneous Eastern European identity. At the same time, they insist that those who experienced communism have a “right to remember”, and that their memories offer an alternative to the project of globalizing capitalism. The volume presents a critique of the current withdrawal of Eastern European politics from discussion of the communist past, in which the latter tends to be regarded as an obstacle to the neoliberal transition to democracy.

As the book’s microstudies of the everyday life of memory show, communism has never been isolated from its capitalist nemesis: the two systems have been intertwined in the post-Enlightenment interplay of the humanist ideals that underpin the modernist project. Through a close observation of the unconstrained ways in which memory works, this book offers an insight into the paradoxes of the two ideological powers which posited the subservient *homo sovieticus* against the civilized *homo economicus*. The book also invites debate about the contemporary relevance of the ideological polarization of communism and capitalism (Rabikowska 2013).

One of the first books on post-communism was published in 1997 by the Australian-British political scientist Leslie Holmes under the title *Post-Communism: An Introduction* (Holmes 1997). This inspiring publication depicts

the positive and negative aspects of the phenomenon in its political, economic and social dimension. Among the few Polish scholars studying the phenomenon of post-communism is the well-known sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis, a long-standing collaborator of Warsaw University. Her book entitled *Post-Communism. An Attempt at Description*, published in 2001, introduced the category of post-communism into the public discourse in Poland (Staniszkis 2001).

Staniszkis promoted this notion to the rank of a scientific concept, listed among such categories as totalitarianism, modernisation, secularisation, globalisation, or capitalism. The reconstruction of the phenomenon of post-communism presented in her book will most likely become part of the history of social sciences. How should post-communism be defined, then? What is its essence? How should this phenomenon be analysed today? Staniszkis says that one of the main elements in the transition from communism to post-communism is a radical shift in the understanding of public authority.

“One of the most fascinating phenomena in post-communist countries – writes Jadwiga Staniszkis – is the particular demise of the state. This process of decline consists not so much in the atrophy of the form itself (for, indeed, it even tends to expand), but rather in a radical shift in rationality. By the shift in rationality I mean the eclipse of that which in Weber’s concept of modern state, prevailing in social studies, represented its very essence. Namely, the end of the state as a hierarchically organized structure of procedures serving the best interests of all, based on formal rationality, homogenous in its logic and standards. According to Max Weber, it is precisely this kind of procedural rationality that represented the distinguishing factor of the modern state, next to the monopoly – also declining nowadays – of the legitimate use of physical force within the state’s own territory, its sole representation of the society on the outside, and subordination only to its own legislation” (Staniszkis 2000, 4).

In post-communist countries, the political institutions typical of democracy do not represent the main centres of power. To a degree, ex-Eastern Bloc societies have experienced a depoliticisation of public life. The main mechanism responsible for the decline of the traditionally understood state in post-communist countries is the legacy of communism and globalisation. In Central and East European countries, one additional factor is integration with the structures of the European Union, which – though in a different way than the legacy of communism and globalisation – also corrodes the institution of territorial state. Consequently, “cobweb states”, or “network states” have developed in ex-Eastern Bloc territories, in which no transparent political structure of centrally administered democratic power is possible.

After 1989, a de-centralisation of state power has taken place in post-communist countries. What does this mean? Staniszkis believes that an empty space has appeared in the place of a distinct centre, such as would be capable of managing the entire organism of the state. Consequently, the state is no longer the locus of trust or the point of reference for individual social or economic decisions.

Thus, the post-communist era in ex-Eastern Bloc countries has combined with a number of pathologies: the birth of oligarchy, the emergence of organised economic crime, scandals around reprivatisation, lack of de-communisation, the pillaging of public property, corruption, violation of fundamental principles of social justice, etc.

Staniszki says that post-communism never created a permanent institutional whole, and was not able to get Poland or other Central and East European countries out of their peripherality. Post-Communist players have proved utterly weak in competition with global economic entities. Consequently, ex-Eastern Bloc countries have remained on the peripheries of the Western world.

2. THE END OF HISTORY?

In 2009, Sergei Prozorov of the University of Helsinki, Finland, published a very interesting book entitled *The Ethics of Post-Communism. History and Social Praxis in Russia* (Prozorov 2009). In the book, he performs a radical re-interpretation of contemporary Russian politics using the categories of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who talks about the interpretation of history, the meaning of the past, the Messianic time, “the time that is left” – stretching from the first coming of Jesus Christ to the earth and the end of human history, when the work of redemption will be completed (Agamben 2005).

Prozorov, referring to the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Hegel and Alexandre Kojève, reconstructs Agamben’s notion of the “end of history” and uses it in his description of post-communist Russia as a post-historical territory, where no teleological dimension of politics and communal life exists. Prozorov’s comments concerning Russia are also relevant, to varying degrees, for other ex-Eastern Bloc countries.

It is worth noting that the author of *The Ethics of Post-Communism* questions the vision of the “end of history” presented by the American thinker Francis Fukuyama in his famous book entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992 (Fukuyama 1992). What was its main message? Fukuyama claims that the transformation of communism in Central and East European countries after 1989 means the death of history as understood by Hegel and Kojève – the end of the conflict of worldviews, the evaporation of ideological and axiological disputes, the ultimate victory of liberal democracy as the best form of government. Unfortunately, the American thinker was too hasty in his announcement of the global hegemony of this political concept. He forgot to mention the totalitarian systems which still survive in the world, and failed to take into account the possibility of new clashes between civilizations and military conflicts, today more and more often referred to as World War Three in episodes.

“It is hardly a coincidence – writes Sergei Prozorov – that one of the most influential theoretical responses to the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the

resurgence of the Hegelo-Kojèveian thesis on the end of history, propagated most forcefully in Francis Fukuyama's seminal *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Even as today Fukuyama's reading of the demise of Soviet communism as a confirmation of Hegel's original announcement of the culmination of the historical process in the Napoleonic state has lost its erstwhile popularity in the Western academic discourse, it ironically remains one of the most popular works of contemporary political thought in Russia, featured as compulsory reading for most university courses in political theory. (...) The discussion of Fukuyama's thesis both in and out of Russia quickly rendered the concept of the end of history purely metaphorical, obscuring some of the most topical questions that this thematic raises" (Prozorov 2009, 3).

The author of *The Ethics of Post-Communism* is right in pointing out that Fukuyama does not explain in his analyses what communism really was, where its atrocities stemmed from, and how the transition from communism to post-communism is being accomplished. The American philosopher also fails to address the very important question about the aftermath of communism in the political, social or economic dimension. How should the communist terror be evaluated? To what extent is post-communism a stage in the transition from communism to liberal democracy? Unfortunately, Fukuyama does not ask these questions (Simoncelli 2016). Thus, Prozorov is right in claiming that the category of the "end of history" as conceived by the American thinker obscures many of the fundamental questions involved in the transformation of communism in the Soviet Union and in Central and East European countries.

According to Sergei Prozorov, one of the surprising features of the studies of Russian post-communism "is the lack of philosophical reflection on the demise of Soviet socialism and its consequences for contemporary politics in post-Soviet states. The failure of the reforms of Perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the USSR have been automatically taken to confirm the Sovietological theories of 'totalitarianism', even as these very theories have been notoriously unhelpful in both predicting and explaining the course of events in the Soviet Union since 1985. On the other hand, critical theory, from neo-Marxism to poststructuralism, has contributed very little to the analysis of post-communist transformation and has generally exhibited little interest in late- and post-Soviet politics, eager to avoid any association with the utterly discredited socialist experiment" (Prozorov 2009, 4).

The author of *The Ethics of Post-Communism* rightly points out that the tradition of civilization in Russia practically prevents it from adopting the liberal-democratic model now. By taking into account the cultural differences between ex-Eastern Bloc countries, it is easier to understand the different speeds of their systemic transformation. Prozorov argues that "the end of history" in fact consists in the exclusion of the teleological dimension from social and political life, and not – contrary to what Fukuyama claimed – the victory of a particular political concept.

According to the scholar of the University of Helsinki, “the end of history” in contemporary Russia should be understood as a profound crisis, or even demise of the state, which he describes as an empty shell with no real power or significance. The crisis witnessed in the structures of state power is related to continued withdrawal of citizens from public life, and very limited development of the civil society. Such “end of history” becomes one of the telltale images of the post-communist condition in ex-Eastern Bloc countries.

Prozorov points out that post-communist societies today have a very hard time defining their own ethos. The difficult process of systemic transformation in these countries has little to do with the triumphalist victory of liberal democracy as depicted by Fukuyama. Therefore, he argues that with respect to ex-Eastern Bloc countries, Agamben’s understanding of “the end of history” is much more adequate. The Italian philosopher talks about the Messianic time and the experience of “the end of history” which we should keep interpreting most earnestly. Its essence is not the victory of any particular worldview project, but the Messianic understanding of time, and the link between “the end of history” and the profound crisis of government structures, referred to as “the end of state”.

“The experience of post-communist Russian politics – writes Sergei Prozorov – characterized by the widely discussed displacement of state authority by a bureaucratic–oligarchic matrix, in which the public and the private are no longer distinct, accords with Agamben’s reconstruction of the problematic of the end of history in the manner entirely opposed to Fukuyama’s triumphalist liberalism, for which it is precisely the liberal (universal-homogeneous) state that fulfills the historical dialectic. On the contrary, Agamben insists that we should think the end of the state and the end of history at one and the same time [and] mobilize one against the other” (Prozorov 2009, 29).

3. FROM POST-COMMUNISM TO DEMOCRACY

In 2003, a book entitled *Peripheral Democracy* was published in Poland by the well-known Polish sociologist and social philosopher Zdzisław Krasnodębski – Member of the eight European Parliament (Krasnodębski 2003). The analyses proposed by Krasnodębski are particularly valuable in that they emphasize a very important element in the process of transformation from post-communism to liberal democracy in ex-Eastern Bloc countries. What is the essence of his standpoint? The author of *Peripheral Democracy* claims that the liberal project implemented in post-communist countries was a selective kind of liberalism, which entailed a number of negative consequences in the political, social and economic sphere.

Zdzisław Krasnodębski points out that “post-communist countries took over certain ideas from the great wealth of liberal thought in a superficial and selective manner. In Poland, selective liberalism implemented as a model of

communal life has included a certain number of distinctive elements – the idea of moral pluralism and the neutrality of the state, the idea of fast modernization as the basic goal, distrust of and dislike for the national tradition, the prohibition of de-communization, etc. Selective liberalism proposed to privatize ethical norms and did not attach much significance to the issue of affirmatively shaping communal identity and memory” (Kobyliński 2009a, 141-142).

After 1989, in post-communist societies of Eastern and Central Europe not enough emphasis was put on democratic participation, unity and collective good, indeed, there was not enough respect for the individual and his rights. “That new political philosophy,” Krasnodębski writes, “the philosophy of peripheral democracy, hampered the emergence of any rational discussion of the fundamental dilemmas facing post-communist societies of Eastern and Central Europe related to the formulation of collective goals, the role of value and ethos, the problem of collective identity, and the issue of methods and ways of overcoming the communist past” (Krasnodębski 2003, 19).

Selective liberalism has equated democracy with liberalism, and liberalism with an open society. Selective liberalism approximates a synthesis of leftist and liberal thought. Such synthesis appears also in Western countries, but there it is marginal. The Polish model of liberalism, on the other hand, is its extreme version, lacking a number of essential elements, for example the idea of justice which for Rawls is fundamental. “Selective liberalism is thus neither classical liberalism, which was never based on the idea of relativism or pluralism, nor political liberalism as understood by Rawls, where the idea of equality, justice and morality plays such an important role. For the author of *A Theory of Justice*, consent among citizens goes beyond the constitutional, purely legal framework – it is a moral consensus” (Kobyliński 2009a, 142).

Unfortunately, after 1989 the great spiritual and intellectual legacy of the „Solidarity” movement and its ethos was almost entirely disregarded. This was the case even in Poland, where the movement originated in 1980 (Kobyliński 2016a; Kobyliński 2016b). It is worth stressing here that solidarity is one of the essential virtues related to social life. It could be defined as a strong and permanent commitment to common good, that is, the good of everyone and of all, as we are all indeed responsible for everyone.

The ethics of solidarity refers to the need for respect of the human person and his or her inalienable rights. This ethical concept is founded on a personalist view of man. One of the most important theoreticians of the ethics of solidarity in Poland was Józef Tischner. He placed his deliberations on the category of solidarity in the broader context of reflections on values and the dialogic structure of human existence.

For Tischner, our world is a world of values, in which things and matters are arranged in a hierarchical order. We cannot pin down exactly what right and wrong is, we cannot set precise boundaries – but we now there is a hierarchy.

A world without values would not be our world. It is values that make us always strive at something, give us the impulse to always prioritize one thing over another. Consequently, ours is a world of a hierarchical order, and our thinking is of a preferential nature.

According to Tischner, the experience of values is “the key to ethics, which is, above all, an attempt at a theory of values. Man exists between the ideal world of powerless values and the world of deeds. In man, powerless values became reality through actions. The primary source of ethical experience is not that of values as such, but of the discovery that another man has appeared beside us. It is not values that come first, but the presence of another person. A meeting with another person is the first source of all axiological experience” (Kobyliński 2009b, 46).

Tischner was aware that solidarity did not represent a complete ethical theory, but was merely one of many ideas. It was a kind of light, an idea to be reproduced. The ethics of solidarity wants to be an ethics of conscience. It is conscience that calls us to solidarity with or for someone. Solidarity is always that of a particular community, and of dialogue. The ethics of solidarity must be an ethics of conscience. The omission of the principle of solidarity and the implementation of selective liberalism has led to a great number of negative social consequences in the process of transition from communism to post-communism, and then from post-communism to liberal democracy in ex-Eastern Bloc countries.

CONCLUSIONS

Countries of Central and Eastern Europe still largely remain an unknown land (*terra incognita*) not only for citizens of Western Europe or the inhabitants of other continents, but for one another as well. Unfortunately, researchers from ex-Eastern Bloc countries very rarely engage in historical, philosophical or cultural studies together. The flow of information between these countries is very limited, and there is little mutual interest in the social or political life of particular countries in this part of Europe. Consequently, the public in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic or Slovakia, for instance, know very little about the current social condition of Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova or east Ukraine.

This mutual ignorance applies particularly to the nature of the systemic transformation that occurred after 1989. The awareness of the particular character of this transition from communism to post-communism, and then from post-communism to liberal democracy in each country leaves much to be desired. We need broad interdisciplinary studies into this matter, including all countries of the ex-Eastern Bloc. Thorough analyses are necessary first of all of the different models of post-communism which developed in each of the countries in this part of Europe, and secondly of the present condition of civil societies in these countries.

It appears that in the process of transition from post-communism to liberal democracy, a very crucial role should be played by the category of solidarity as

an important virtue of social life. The ethics of solidarity built on the foundations of a personalist view of man may be an effective cure on the road to reconstruction of social ties destroyed during communism, invoking respect for every human being, and creating societies that are just and democratic. The ethics of solidarity emphasizes the meaning of community, family, religion and tradition in the life of states and nations. It also points to the need for permanent moral and religious foundations in public life.

What we certainly need today is a global expansion of solidarity as a new worldwide ethos. Solidarity is most definitely a universal category, and is one of the important answers to the crisis of today's liberal democracy. A global ethos of solidarity is the best guarantee of peace and cooperation between nations in the age of hybrid wars and World War Three in episodes. It appears that Central and East European countries are a region where the ethics of solidarity has a special role to play in the difficult process of building new societies on the debris of communism and post-communism.

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