

CES BRIEFS

A PRESENTATION OF THE CES DIRECTOR'S SEMINAR

Poland at the Crossroads Between Authoritarianism and Democracy

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Polarizing Symbolism of “Thin” and “Thick” Populism in Poland: From Solidarity to “The Fourth Republic”

Standard explanations of the recent rise of populism emphasize either the supply or demand side of politics. On the demand side, as Inglehart and Norris argue (in their 2016 study based on the World Value Survey), cultural explanations (cultural backlash related to “disorientation” in the “new” world) perform better than economic ones (rising inequality).

On the supply side researchers focus particularly on institutional arrangements such as electoral systems, but the role of cultural entrepreneurs, who remodel cultural systems in order to influence people’s political behavior, for example electoral choices, is understudied. Our analysis focuses on the cultural dimension of the supply side and revolves around the concepts of symbolic thickening and symbolic polarization, both featured prominently in the symbolism of populism. In particular, we trace the symbolic transformations accompanying the evolution from thin to thick populist symbolism in Poland.

In *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power* Kubik argued that the success of the Solidarity movement in Poland had its roots in the unprecedented mobilization of the counter-hegemonic culture. A cultural revolution preceded and accompanied the political revolution of Solidarity. Its essence was intense symbolic polarization that allowed “the people” to construe themselves in a sharp contrast to the communist regime and carry out a successful “refolution.”

The utility of such polarization in a polity consolidating liberal democracy is however questionable. As many theorists argue, to function well a democracy needs a pragmatic political culture that enables the search for compromises. A symbolically overheated and polarized culture is not helpful, as it exacerbates any tendency to understand the society as sharply divided into two, hostile and incompatible, camps: “us” and “them.”

A version of such polarization, the division of polity into “good people” and “bad elites,” is the hallmark of populism. Under this definition, Solidarity was a populist movement, as its ideology challenged the communists in the name of the mythically or ideologically constituted “people.” But it is not the type of populism most observers think about these days. Over the last several years a number of populist parties and movements emerged in Poland, most prominently the ruling right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS).

Do PiS and Solidarity (1980-89) represent the same type of populism? Do they rely on the same or similar repertoire of symbolic tools? In order to answer these questions, we work with the distinction between thin and thick populism and compare their respective symbolic systems. We trace the change in meaning of several key Polish symbols such as the White Eagle, the Cross, or the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. We show that the symbolic overheating of the Solidarity period, while polarizing, was based on a “thin” symbolic ensemble organized around a multi-vocal dominant symbol, the famous logo of the movement. Such ensembles, having one or relatively few dominant symbols with rather simple connotations, are amenable to many interpretations and are therefore potentially attractive to a large group of people. Symbolism of this kind is congruent with thin populism. It can be “thickened” by combining mutually reinforcing sets of symbols, for example of national and religious provenance.

Symbolic ensembles that are often displayed in the public sphere by right-wing populists are “thick” in this sense. They include many inter-locked symbols that – in combination – allow for a narrower range of possible interpretations and thus attract a smaller, in this case right wing leaning group of people. They constitute the symbolic base of Polish thick populism, an exclusionary and polarizing political-cultural formation, that at the moment is supported by well over one third of the Polish population, controls the government, and slowly dismantles Polish liberal democracy.

Monika Nalepa

Poland at Crossroads: The Institutional Context

Whereas most scholars and pundits focus on societies' preferences for electing nationalists and populists, my explanation hinges on subtle institutional shifts taking place over the last decade or so in Poland, most notably in executive-legislative relations, which allowed the ruling party to rapidly implement sweeping illiberal reforms. These institutional factors can be summarized as follows: 1) recorded voting has allowed leaders to exercise party discipline on the floor of the legislature and effectively put an end to free mandates; 2) the Open List PR electoral system gave parties an incentive to recruit for cohesion contributing to strong parties that can sustain temporary swings in voter volatility; 3) reforms to standing rules of the Sejm have concentrated agenda setting power in the hands of a representative of the ruling party allowing whoever is in government to use the legislature as an extension of its executive power.

With these institutions in place, it is practically impossible for the opposition to have any influence on the legislative process. In light of this, what we are observing in Poland is not at all that surprising. Furthermore, the institutions allowing for such rapid authoritarian backsliding have been in place since 2007 and were actually exploited by the previously ruling PO, which had, however, a much more liberal agenda to implement. In short, institutions put in place as the party system institutionalized failed to provide adequate representation for the forces behind long-standing divides.

The claims made above can be substantiated with evidence from the Sejm that we have been collecting over the years. Our data range from elite interviews, to roll call data to co-sponsorship data and information about all stages of the legislative process. I have also collected data on mass political preferences to examine if any shifts would explain the dramatic changes among the political elites, which we do not find.

Karolina Wigura (with Jarosław Kuisz, University of Warsaw, Kultura Liberalna)

Effects of Poland's Long-Term Lack of Sovereignty: The Round Table Outburned Generation, The End of Post-Communist Myth of the West, and Total Opposition as a Habit

Explanations of the recent populist rise in Poland often take into account the model of Poland's democratic transition. A component only rarely analyzed, however, is that transition since 1989 concerned not only state or market institutions, but also a collective psychological process. In this process, factors from beyond 1989 played a crucial role. Those were not only type and duration of predecessor regime, as argued e.g. by Pridham (2001). We argue that another factor plays here yet larger role: effects of long-term lack of country's sovereignty (200 years almost without interruption, 1795-1989).

The famous classic theorist of democracy Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about what he called "habits of the heart", by which he understood certain societal customs, based on long-term repetition, travelling somewhere between human passions and reason. A certain type of habits of the heart seems to be active when it comes to the current Polish society:

- The Round Table "out burned generation". The democratic transition in Poland was an accomplishment of the generation of dissidents. The same generation, 28 years later, still has predominant symbolical and real influence on Poland's politics, and the division in the former Solidarity – with conservative nationalists on one side, and liberal conservatives on the other – still has a decisive influence for Poland's political scene. The current de facto leader of the country Jarosław Kaczyński and former leader of Solidarity as well as President Lech Wałęsa, today standing at opposite sides, belong to the same generation. Within the years the dispute between those two sides have become ever more radical, and personal. The former dissidents did embark the country on democratic trajectory, they are, however, unable to look into the future.

- The end of post-communist myth of the West. After 1989 the Poland's transformation was predominantly imitative. Since the collapse of communism in 1989, an almost absolutely uncritical attitude toward Western Europe and the United States, has dominated in Central and Eastern Europe. This was partly due to people trying to extract themselves from impoverishment with Western tools of economic transformation. And yet, Europeans emerging from behind the Iron Curtain were not motivated by simple material aims. Following the fall of communism, western states also represented a better world in a moral sense. This myth, however, for several reasons has come to an end. Poland has been, for a few years before 2015, in need of finding anew its identity, suitable from the point of view of tradition, history, and geopolitical location. Alas, such vision has not been delivered by the liberal elites, and this PiS filled this vacuum with its populist and hostile attitude to the West.
- Total opposition as a habit. In 2016, the leaders of Poland's opposition announced that because PiS is breaking the rule of law, there is a necessity of forming a "total opposition". They meant that they would oppose literally every step of the government. The concept did not have much to do with the true state of the matters from the very beginning: as Radoslaw Zubek argues (2017), the Civil Platform Party (PO), being the biggest opposition party, has voted identically to PiS in 57 percent of all cases since 2015. "Total opposition" does exist in Poland, though, but in a form of a process. What we observe today is rather a next stadium of the process started much earlier. One can point at the years 1997-2001, when Leszek Miller and his Democratic Left Alliance party (SLD) invented this strategy. This is also, however, an echo of another habit of the heart, dividing the society between "us" and "them". In the times of lack of sovereignty any government would be "them". But in the lack of "them", sent by USSR, car Russia etc., "them" become those who are currently at power.

Brian Porter-Szűcs

Synecdoche as Explanation: How Not to Explain the Rise of PiS

This past year we've been besieged by news headlines proclaiming that "Poland has turned to the right" or "Poland has abandoned democracy." I trust that the journalists and editors involved are well aware that "Poland" is not some homogenous collective entity, and that many (perhaps most) Poles oppose the direction PiS is taking the country. So perhaps I shouldn't be concerned about this literary shorthand, which is really nothing more than a synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a part stands in for the whole, or vice-versa). Yet I am concerned, because what begins as a casual rhetorical abbreviation often ends up infecting our thinking in unanticipated ways. In this particular case, it leads us to seek macrocosmic explanations for microcosmic phenomena. PiS won the elections of 2015 with just over 37% of the vote: 5,711,687 supporters out of an electorate consisting of 30,639,165. Thanks to details of Poland's electoral law, they could transform this position into a thin majority of delegates in the Sejm. It is worth comparing this to their showing in 2007, which is widely remembered as a humiliating loss for Mr. Kaczyński and a decisive triumph for the forces of liberalism, modernity, European integration, perhaps even secularism. At the time, PiS got nearly as many votes as they did two years ago: 5,183,477. It is very easy to imagine plausible scenarios that would have placed Poland in an entirely different situation today. For example, had a mere 70,000 additional people voted for the United Left in 2015, they would have had enough support to enter the Sejm, and PiS would have fallen short of a majority. The point of considering such counter-historical alternatives is to emphasize that PiS did not sweep to power on a wave of popular support. Quite the contrary: the size of their movement has remained roughly consistent since the party's creation, ebbing a bit upwards and downwards but always hovering around 1/3 of the electorate. With this in mind, our analysis of what has happened to Poland should not look for large-scale, sweeping changes in Polish society or Polish culture, because there have not been any. "The Poles" and "Poland" have not embraced populism, any more than they embraced liberalism in 2007 and 2011, or for that matter democracy in 1989 or communism in 1947-48. The link between the social and the political is actually quite tenuous, now more than ever.