

Swarthmore College

Works

Theater Faculty Works

Theater

4-1995

Translation Of "Democracy In Poland: A Few Skeptical Comments" By M. Król

M. Król

Allen J. Kuharski , translator
Swarthmore College, akuhars1@swarthmore.edu

P. Guzik , translator

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-theater>



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

M. Król; Allen J. Kuharski , translator; and P. Guzik , translator. (1995). "Translation Of "Democracy In Poland: A Few Skeptical Comments" By M. Król". *Periphery: Journal Of Polish Affairs*. Volume 1, Issue 1. 4-6.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-theater/63>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theater Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Marcin Król

is Professor of the History of Ideas at the University of Warsaw, and Editor of the independent monthly, *Res Publica Nowa*. His recent publications include *Konserwatyści i niepodległość* (1985), and *Słownik Demokracji* (1989). The following article was originally published in *Res Publica Nowa*, No. 4 (1994).

Democracy in Poland:

A Few Skeptical Comments

After the fall of communism in 1989, Poland wanted to build — more or less — the kind of society that exists in the West. “More or less” was thought to be an adequate description of that vision. It was “more or less” supposed to be a democracy. In the name of this democratic vision, it was decided to carry out all of the needed and possible societal reforms. It is not clear, at least not to me, what vision of society spawned the reforms that were eventually undertaken.

Naturally, it could be argued that there was not any such vision, that since the downfall of the socialist system with its central planning, no reforms could effectively be applied. First of all, I believe this notion to be untrue. Secondly, it contains a serious logical flaw, particularly in the Polish case. If we are in transition, then our journey must have a destination. While we may know our point of departure, I doubt if our direction is clearly established. A manifestation of this lack of direction occurred during the most recent parliamentary elections in Poland, and it would be wrong to blame the electorate for being politically inexperienced. I am assuming that the transition is from decrepit totalitarianism to democracy and a market economy. Nevertheless, as it soon became apparent, it is still not known towards what model of democracy and to which market economy we are moving. What was considered obvious five years ago, is not so obvious today. The theory and practice of a democracy and a market economy — as already proven in some parts of the world — can yield good results in countries with a history of authoritarian government. It remains unclear whether the same results can be achieved in semi-democratic states, and Poland could conceivably remain such for many more years to come. Poland could enter into a phase of officially declared democracy, in which only a minimal effort is applied in actual practice.

The illusion of societal unity initiated this process, with total disregard for the real and presumed social issues, which were nevertheless sufficiently tangible to affect many socio-economic groups. Collective astonishment swept the country when the first political and economic conflicts occurred. After all, if we had just regained sovereignty and had just begun building democracy with

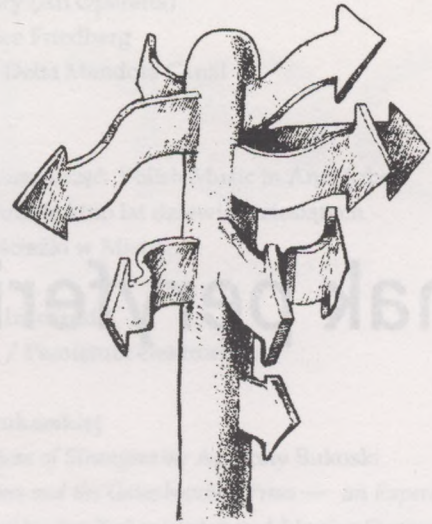
the best possible economic system, then what was the point of this conflict? Perhaps this question was incorrectly stated from the beginning; perhaps the essence of all these Polish problems — easily viewed as needless disputes, a demonstrated lack of democratic maturity, a narrowness of political interest, etc. — lies elsewhere.

Let us therefore propose two hypotheses for consideration, and explore their possible implications:

1. Democracy by definition means a system which guarantees the freedom of the individual; but in Poland, such individual freedom is still not espoused as the highest value, and is accepted as such neither by the society at large nor by the major political forces within the society.

If we assume, based on non-socialist principles, that the aim of a democratic system is to create and uphold the freedom of the individual, fostering his or her growth along with unobstructed popular influence on political institutions, and moreover, if we assume that the state's only reason for existence is to defend and guarantee the individual's freedom, and therefore the public domain exists only as a platform for the ambitious, then none of these conditions have been achieved in Poland. Democracy in Poland was murdered by politics at the very beginning, and so far there are no signs of its imminent resurrection. Individual freedoms are real in the sense that the restrictions in effect under the old regime have been eliminated. However, governing institutions, busy with other matters of great importance, have not taken any necessary steps to create conditions for the development of these freedoms. We have political rights, but indispensable to their intelligent and sensible exercise is the existence of tangible political alternatives — and not merely parliamentary elections in which we are forced to choose (if we even want to vote at all) between fictions.

It should not be surprising that the people themselves have attached relatively little value to those freedoms. The new freedoms are still primarily associated with the elimination of legal restrictions, such as those connected with the right to possess a valid



RYSZARD DRUCH

passport for foreign travel, or the abolishment of media censorship. All these factors reflect a minimalist interpretation of individual freedom in Poland. Recently, in response to a parliamentary initiative, Michał Strąk, the prime minister's chief of staff, indicated that the government can not legally impose media restrictions on freedom of speech because we now live in a political environment where the enforcement of such a policy would no longer be feasible. Freedom of speech is not considered an absolute and fundamental value, but rather only a legislative fact.

Freedom in a democratic society primarily concerns freedom in the political realm. In Poland, however, we are dealing with the gradual autonomization of the political arena. The media tactics of the various recent governments provide good examples of this. There are ongoing complaints that the government provides insufficient information regarding even its day-to-day agendas. This is in marked contrast to government and media relationships in all the Western democracies, where everything is done to provide the media and the public with current information — which does not necessarily mean that such information is always entirely truthful and that there is no conscious effort at manipulating the public's perception. Such information has been withheld in varying degrees by Polish governments since 1989; however, the current coalition government has gone further in this regard than any other. It could even be said that based on such conduct the state's democratic vision has become severely impaired. This demonstrates an extreme autonomization of the political arena pursued more or less consciously by every consecutive government administration. Such a tendency may be unavoidable, since real democracy is an impediment and obstacle for every governing power group that puts a high priority on effective and efficient governing. Politicians, firmly believing that they know what they are doing and why, often begin subconsciously to develop a disdain for those who are not familiar with their true motives nor have the opportunity to discover them — in other words, the average citizen.

Why then does democracy assume the involvement of its citizens in the consideration of all political decisions? It has nothing to do with courting the free press, mass media, and the electorate in order to gain victory in the next elections; it is a recognition of the tangible rather than merely fictitious political rights of citizens. Participation in political life is closely dependent upon knowledge of political issues, politicians' motives, and legislative outcomes. The entire democratic world is currently facing a "crisis of democracy" as active participation of voting citizens in the arena of state policies, becomes increasingly difficult due to the increasingly complicated and technical nature of many economic or military issues. Because of the active presence of the mass media, however, there are no indications of politicians attempting to escape from public scrutiny. Politicians regret and lament that they are unable to inform adequately society about their actions, rather than being satisfied with the situation. All the successive governments of newly independent Poland have demonstrated their contempt for the notion of political freedom, both in the formal sense as well as in the practical possession of real political rights, but the current government has carried this contemptuous attitude to new extremes. Ironically, it is very much in line with an old political

principle from Poland's past, namely "the governing of the Poles without any Poles" (an idea that brought sound defeat to its originator, Aleksander Wielopolski).

Current economic policies provide a different example of the autonomization of political life from societal values, especially in regard to the issue of political freedom. I am not concerned about the outcomes of various political decisions (the overhaul of our tax system, for example), but about the process of decision making. Naturally, such decisions occur within the formal framework of a democratic process, that is a piece of legislation proposed by the government is debated and voted upon by the parliament, and then signed into law by the President. It is rather the long term consequences of the enacted economic policy decisions which are not subject to public debate, and that successive governments, either knowingly or unintentionally, have concealed the true extent of those consequences. Even assuming that the first decisions enacted by Leszek Balcerowicz (Finance Minister in the first post-communist administration in 1989) had to be imposed more or less by force, all subsequent ones did not have to be. Lacking any sensible answers and fearful of public backlash, successive administrations have consciously ignored the two paramount issues in the future of Poland's economy: coal mining and agriculture. As a result, we continue to live in a country in which energy and food are subsidized out of our own pockets, without knowing the extent of these subsidies or whether it makes any sense to provide them at all.

These are matters of enormous significance for us today and for the future of our children. We often hear the reply that the intolerable possibility of economic anarchy looms as a consequence of public debate on economic strategy. Sensible it might be (though of this I am not certain) but beyond those supposed pragmatic principles lies an assortment of values, a choice which some politicians do not realize or don't want to acknowledge its existence. The choice has to do with the primacy of the economy over democracy, or, in other words, whether the political domain's rights are superior to all other values, or whether in a quest for other aims, especially economic ones, the values of the political domain can be overlooked. This dilemma could be considered in even more dramatic categories, by posing the following question: is it the opinion of politicians at large that the role of good government is to assure a minimum level of well being (meaning the minimum of social rights, which, after all, were guaranteed even under communist rule), or is it rather the creation of such freedoms as would allow the citizens themselves to maintain their own prosperity? Is it then sufficient to maintain a state of democratic appearances while applying an authoritarian policy if it brings about sound economic results? Or instead, do democratic principles need to be applied in more than a formal sense?

The kind of answer this question receives, which incidentally cannot and should not be expected from politicians themselves, determines whether democracy is really needed in Poland (as well as in other postcommunist countries) and why. So far, it does not seem that democracy is in the slightest sense necessary for the success of economic reforms, whose objective is to implement market mechanisms and re-establish principles of private owner-

ship. It is not at all certain whether democracy is required to maintain law and order, or for the achievement of individual freedom, since the espousal of this right is not yet valued highly enough. It is not even certain whether democracy is needed to control and maintain the reins of power. Large scale political corruption, reflected in an almost complete disappearance of the connection between political life and truth, make it impossible for public opinion to exert any control over the situation. Therefore, democracy's purpose resembles one's clothing and wardrobe: each item of which is intended for a specific occasion. In a sense, democracy is like a tuxedo, which must be worn in order to come to the party thrown by the European Community, if indeed we ever hope to be admitted to such an affair at all.

A demonstrated lack of interest in defending the freedom of the individual as a social value together with an utter lack of government interest in real democracy are mutually re-enforcing tendencies. While I doubt if we will soon embark on a course of repealing democratic ideals (especially those having to do with the need for the tuxedo), at the same time I do not think that the process of democratization is progressing. After all, the biggest and most drastic changes occurred during the first year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the conditions existing in the Fall of 1990 are essentially identical with the state that we are in today. What will be the consequences of all the new economic policies with the equivalent lack of democratic reforms, minimal or complete lack of progress in the domain of civic responsibility, discontinuance of the pursuit of the ideal of truth in the realm of politics, indifference to the quest for de Tocqueville's ideal of equality of opportunity? That is the subject of the second hypothesis.

2. Any lack of progress, be it in the domain of democratic and political reforms or in the realm of public morality, leads to the creation of a disgruntled society divided into economic classes and castes, inevitably inviting the possibility of a socio-economic revolution or at best a dictatorship.

It would be difficult to adopt de Tocqueville's ideals of equality of opportunity as fundamental attributes of democracy in any of the contemporary Eastern European societies. Moreover, it should be realized that the implementation of free market reforms — an endeavor whose aptness I do not question — is bound to cause economic disparity and limit equality of opportunity. Remembering that, one can consider not only the validity of economic reforms in general, and the need for a social safety net intended to cushion their brutal impact, but also the behavioral, psychological and mental effects economic reforms bring, further restraining the democratization of the public and moral realm. I should emphasize that I do not subscribe to the socialist point of view which proclaims simply, that when freedom threatens equality of opportunity, the latter must be defended. I do not support this view for two reasons. First of all, I am in fundamental conflict with such a notion, and do not believe that under current circumstances in Poland that a trade-off between individual freedom and equality of opportunity is inevitable. Secondly, in Poland individual freedom in fact does not threaten equality of opportunity — to the contrary, the inadequate

desire for freedom and the already mentioned lack of progress in systemic democratization of political freedoms puts the very existence of the ideal of equality into question.

Convincing and universal examples are hard to find, and so I will confine myself to describing only various outward signs. The meaning of equality is not only or even especially confined to material equality. First and foremost, equality means equal access to the roles that are held in high esteem by the society. Equal opportunity also exists as an element of what we call civil society, and call for a parity of means for the realization of one's ambitions in the public arena. The current state of the post-secondary educational system is a glaring example of the absence of such equalities. Let us call attention to the following issues: the deficiency of access — on material grounds — for people in difficult economic situations; the absence of any positive, educational role models; the scarcity of "good Samaritans" in regard to educational issues motivated by selfless participation in the political arena; and finally the scant demonstration of the relationship between the pursuit of higher education and resulting social status. Polish institutions of higher education find themselves in a deep crisis of not knowing to whom, why, and on what level they should serve as educators, while the continuing decline in educational standards has given birth to elitist and private academic institutions, which will educate only the few. While elitism may not necessarily be bad, an elitism that leaves in its wake large uneducated ghettos among the population could produce incalculable consequences, and lead to the eventual radicalization of the uneducated, ignorant masses.

All such examples describing the long term consequences of dividing society into economic classes and castes by their nature can only define mere tendencies, rather than provide an empirical description of the actual situation. So, while my next example no better fulfills the criterion of methodical verifiability, it does illustrate the possible consequences of a growing separation between freedom, equality of opportunity, and democracy on the one hand, and tactical pragmatism, political corruption, and "tuxedo" democracy on the other. What I mean — and it may sound paradoxical considering that Waldemar Pawlak's administration with its Peasant Party coalition is currently in power — is that the peasants and a portion of the working class have been brought down to the level of second class citizens. Obvious here is the role played by the economic situation, but even more important are the social and psychological consequences of this situation, specifically the imposition of ecological-zoological-botanical garden status to 95% of Polish farmers. Because, from an economic standpoint, the farms are autarchic in character, and unemployment and lack of any alternatives for earning a living on the farm preclude the generation of even the most farsighted and bold vision of the proper place for this segment of the Polish population. Therefore, the current temporary and transitional state — as so declared by politicians — is in fact being consolidated in place, instead of real change proceeding full steam ahead.

The Polish peasant farmers, after a history of struggle with feudal and then communist persecution, after finally being granted