

1989–2009: ‘In Poland everything is possible, even changes for the better’

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I came across my title in a book prepared for Adam Michnik’s sixtieth birthday by some of his close friends and admirers. The book included many reminders of an earlier Poland, including a transcript of a telephone conversation of 1986. Michnik was in Poland, recently released from yet another stint in jail. On the other end of the line was a group in New York, celebrating the publication of the English version of his *Letters from Prison*. Holding the phone and relaying questions from the group in New York was Czesław Miłosz. My title comes from the answer Michnik gave to the question how are things in Poland at the moment? ‘As my master, Antoni Słonimski used to say, “Poland is a weird place where inexplicable things can happen: in Poland everything is possible, even changes for the better”.’

I begin with this line for two reasons: one, because I am struck by how easy it is to forget what life in Poland (and throughout the Communist Bloc) was like, and what was imaginable, only 20-odd years ago. The other is to remind those who have forgotten, or who never knew, how much has changed in this relatively brief period.

I first visited Poland in 1985. It was a deep experience for me, personally, morally, politically. I had followed the fortunes of *Solidarność* very closely, read everything I could, and knew a lot about communism; I was a long-time anti-communist, indeed congenitally so since I had inherited it from my parents, who were refugees from Nazism, exiles from communist Poland. I even spoke a version of Polish, albeit nurtured on Bondi Beach. I cared about what was happening in Poland, and I thought that I knew, more or less, what was going on there. I had no expectations, however, of some of the most striking things—as striking indeed as many of them were banal—that I found there. I was so affected by them that I started to write a kind of intellectual journalism—quite un-academic, baring my soul—for the first time in my life.

My first article—which appeared in Australia, the United States, Italy and, I believe, in Poland in 1986—was called ‘Stalemated in Poland. Life as if’. The

title comes from the discordant combination that Poland presented of, on the one hand, almost total stalemate between what it became conventional to divide as '*społeczeństwo*' (society) and '*władza*' (the power), and on the other, of what Timothy Garton Ash called 'the principle of *as if*': try to live as if you live in a free country. Garton Ash captured well the extent to which Solidarity had made that principle flesh in the lives not merely of the Polish *inteligencja*, but of pretty well everyone. As he wrote:

The Solidarity revolution was a revolution of consciousness. What it changed, lastingly, was not institutions or property relations or material circumstances, but people's minds and attitudes...millions of people across the country...suddenly found that they no longer needed to live the double life, that they could say in public what they thought in private...For a few months it really was *as if* they lived in a free country.

And even when, after martial law was imposed, it no longer was possible to believe they were in such a country, people spoke without restraint even to foreigners like me.

That was all exhilarating and exciting, but it was also what I had been led to expect by my reading. What I had not expected was much more mundane. It was the unrelieved pallor, the *greyness* of everyday life in Poland; pallid and grey and sad and *hard*. The greyness was real and inescapable but it was also a kind of representation, a metaphor, for the pervasive tone and texture of everyday life. I wrote at the time:

The image that kept recurring to me was of a curtain, not iron any more, too full of holes; but thick, drab, shabbily patched, unrelievedly grey and draped over nearly everything one saw; everything that didn't move...it is not simply to do with specific material things. It pervades all public space: the identical half-empty shops with identical and identically drab signs; the weary shoppers standing in the omni-present queues; the dilapidated but not old buildings; the uneven pot-holed roads; the shoddiness of cars and other finished goods; the drabness of clothes.

Anyone who was there then will know what I am talking about.

It was hard to find optimists at the time, but there was one. It was Adam Michnik. He argued, in one of those letters smuggled out of prison:

They [the rulers] are much too confident. They forget that the sociology of surprise is hidden in the nature of the Leading System [communism]. Here, on a spring morning, one may wake up in a totally changed country. Here, and not once, Party buildings burned while the commissars

escaped clad only in their underwear. Edward Gierek, so beloved by Brezhnev and Helmut Schmidt, so respected by Giscard d’Estaing and Carter, within a week travelled from the heights of power into oblivion. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

I admired Michnik greatly; still do. But though I wanted to, I did not believe him; certainly did not imagine he would get even the *season* right. Not many other people did either, at the time. I remain grateful that it never occurred to people like him to listen to people like me.

I returned to Poland in 1989, a month *after* the 4 June elections, which we now know to be the beginning of the end. But did we know it then? I wrote a piece for *The National Interest* in Washington, DC: ‘Life in an abnormal country.’ It started thus:

Poland, as any Pole will tell you, is not a normal country. The Polish economy is a surreal shambles; everyday life is hard, drab, and exhausting; queues are everywhere for everything; wages are low, prices high, and inflation galloping. Not only is life nasty, horrible, and brutish, but everything takes such a long time. And the whole country needs a coat of paint.

To those adjectives that came to me in 1985—grey, drab, sad, hard—I had added another: surreal. The texture of everyday life had not changed, or if it had it was for the worse. There was runaway inflation, so that taxi drivers had given up altering their meters. They just changed the piece of cardboard with which they covered them pretty well daily: x 12; x 14; x 16. Queues were everywhere for everything; pensioners were rented to stay in queues while others worked; Polish currency, for which you could buy virtually nothing, was legal; foreign, ‘hard’ currency, for which you could buy most anything, in government hard-currency (Pewex) shops, was illegal; the dumpiest hotel in the world was Warsaw’s ‘Hotel Grand’. This was no way to live a life; it was laughable, except it was not funny.

Those elections paved the way for the collapse of European communism. But was that what people thought? Solidarity had not planned to win the game, only to be allowed to play in it. And the communists had certainly not planned to lose. Both had difficulties coping with the results. What did they mean? What would they evoke? What tricks were *Oni* (they) playing? On my last night in Warsaw, in August, Jacek Fedorowicz, that admirable satirist, cartoonist, comic, brave and intelligent man, told me with concern that General Kiszczak, head of the secret police, had conceded that he could not form a government, and invited Lech Wałęsa to do so. What was he up to? Are they just out to tar *us* with the brush with which *they* had so comprehensively smeared themselves?

And so many other questions that everyone was asking: what would the Russians do? And what about the neighbours? I left Warsaw the next day for London to stay with an Australian friend, the eminent philosopher and friend of Poles and Poland David Armstrong. He said he thought something might be changing in East Germany. In my wisdom, I looked condescendingly at him. These philosophers: so clever, so naive. I went to Edinburgh for a conference where there were young Solidarity Poles and old regime time-servers. The former were nervous and suspicious; the latter seemed confident.

Last year I was in Warsaw, where I teach for a few weeks each year. I have become used to it. Though it is special to me, it is basically just another European capital; a bit shabbier than many, but also with some lovely renovations and innovations. It all seemed pretty normal to me.

Because I was there during the twentieth anniversary of those first Polish (semi-) free elections, however, I tried to work out just what had been achieved. Among other things, I re-read my old articles. I discovered how much I had forgotten. In particular, what I had to make some effort to recall was just how much had had to change to seem so ordinary. No queues; food and goods of all sorts, colours, shapes, sizes; restaurants in every nationality and every quality, rather than one nationality and no quality; more than two sorts of car—in fact, every sort; radio taxis (!), and ones you could hail rather than seek out the stops where they stood unmoving until *you* found and came to *them*; more toilet paper than you could dream of; bookstores in which you could actually touch and choose, rather than point and plead with surly intermediaries—and so *many* books and magazines from all over the world; huge shopping malls; advertisements—some gaudy, some classy; all this jostling for your attention. Bustling energy; taut not slack. If you do not like it, leave. If you miss it, return. Pretty simple, really.

Leszek Balcerowicz, the architect of Poland's economic transformation, tells me that systemic indicators pretty well all now point in the right direction. He would say that, a critic might say, and I would not know, but Poland has so far managed to weather the global financial crisis (GFC) better than most of its neighbours, and indeed most of Europe—no small feat.

So ordinary had all this seemed that I failed to register the historical novelty of it all, until I went to visit Michnik and asked him how he summed up Poland's past 20 years: 'a miracle', he said. Independent for 20 years, no war looming, free, democratic, unprecedentedly prosperous, in NATO, in Europe, comings, goings, open to everyone, to everywhere. Who could have imagined any of this 20 years before, indeed two *hundred* years before? I had to admit: only one person I could think of.

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Other things are normal, too, and they are not all nice. Though there are still villains, there are no heroes any more. Michnik is still a hero of mine, but you do not find many people saying that. I guess it is hard to be a hero in a normal country, and that is perhaps a good thing. But those of us who remember the heroes of the past might feel some nostalgia for the recognition that some Poles really were outstanding then.

Indeed, I am struck by the rhetorical nastiness and brutality of Polish politics, the apparent polarisation, suspicion, the accusations, complaints, angry resentments that animate so much of the noise and bluster of Polish public debate. It is mainly bluster, it appears, since no-one seems endangered; but it is ugly bluster. Particularly when one sees former allies dividing into bitter and hostile camps, as much or more than do former foes. It is not hard to explain this sociologically, and it is probably true, as Balcerowicz said to me, that Italian politics are worse. But that is not complete consolation, and I cannot help but regret the passing of some of that perhaps illusory moral clarity that seemed once so readily available.

And though many of these resentments are fomented and manipulated by little men who, in the words of a taxi driver, 'since they are too small to be seen are determined to be heard', there are reasons for many of them.

Many were unavoidable. Some hopes were unreasonable. Some disappointments were inevitable. No political order can deliver on the former or guarantee against the latter. Moreover, when something such as freedom becomes normal, it seems altogether less precious than it did when it seemed an impossible dream.

And not everything about post-communism is normal, not everything is nice and not every vice was inevitable. Some people believe—with reason—that they have been dealt out of the successes that others have achieved. More to the point, some blame the tribunes of transformation for siding with their former enemies against their former friends, and for conspiring with the former against the interests of the latter. There *is* a great deal of corruption, there are 'hidden structures', 'networks of dirty togetherness', as the sociologist Adam Podgórecki used to call them; winners who do not deserve to win, losers who do not obviously deserve to lose, crimes that go unpunished, sacrifices that have gone without reward. There is a lot that is specific to post-communist transformation that is already built into economic, social and political structures, is not pretty, and is not what people had in mind when they dreamt of living in a normal society.

And yet one still needs to ask, when assessing unprecedented social experiments such as the aftermath of communism: compared to what? That question can be

further broken down into three alternative versions, which lead in potentially different directions: one—compared with where we were. Another: compared with where others in comparable circumstances are. A third: compared with our ideals. On the first comparison—the past—the answer seems to me obvious: at least in the past few hundred years, Poland has never had it so good. On the second—others—Poles have it better than almost all their neighbours. On the third—ideals—there is room for argument. Certainly, baseline values—freedom, democracy, development—appear secure, though this is a part of the world where such security is always relative. Higher aspirations are more complex, and there can be debate about how closely they have been approached or whether there were better ways to approach them. My own impression, for what it is worth, is that the balance is overall very positive. And even if I exaggerate here, let me conclude with the title and refrain of one of my favourite rock songs. It is by a singer—Meatloaf—who is not Polish, so far as I know, but has a lesson to teach: ‘two out of three ain’t bad.’

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