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Round Table Talks Did Not Happen in a Vacuum: The Political Solidarity Model of Social Change and Polish Transition to Democracy

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Abstract

Theories of social change developed within social psychology are rarely employed to interpret historical events. This is a serious neglect, as a social-psychological perspective has the capacity to inform our understanding of long-term processes that prepare the ground for major political breakthroughs. In this commentary, I utilize the political solidarity model of social change (Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868308323223>) to examine Poland’s path to democracy. Using a tripolar division for the authority (i.e., communist leaders), the minority (i.e., democratic opposition), and the majority (i.e., unengaged citizens), I argue that the Round Table Talks of 1989 originated from two interdependent social processes that precipitated in the late ’70s. Whereas one of these processes encompassed the loss of popular support for the Communist Party, the other one involved an increase in the majority’s identification with the democratic opposition. I propose that without the co-occurrence of these two processes, the Round Table agreements would not have been possible.

Keywords

social change, political solidarity model of social change, democratic transition



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Democratization, defined as a country's transition from a nondemocratic to a democratic political system (Huntington, 1991), is one of the big topics in social sciences. Depending on their area of expertise, scholars provide various explanations of this phenomenon. For instance, an economic account would point to certain degrees of wealth (e.g., Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000), a sociological perspective would focus on cultural factors (e.g., Gift & Krmaric, 2017; Welzel, 2014), and political scientists would make references to institutions or international relations (e.g., Huntington, 1991). Social change, including that from an authoritarian regime to democracy, has also attracted considerable attention of social psychologists. Numerous theories have been developed to identify the situational conditions and psychological factors that prompt people to seek changes in the status quo. One such theory is the political solidarity model of social change (Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008), which underscores the role of identity shifts among the majority members in changing intergroup power relations.

Informative as they are, theories of social change developed by social psychologists are not commonly employed to interpret the past (for some exceptions, see Zaremba, 2012). The potential reason for this is that the analysis of historical events usually does not meet the requirements of contemporary scientific psychology, which uses a strict quantitative or qualitative methodology. At the same time, it does not reveal new facts, which is appreciated by academic historians. However, I believe that theories formulated by social psychologists may inform our understanding of past events. This potential should not be neglected. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I briefly review the political solidarity model of social change and use it as a tool to interpret the events that preceded Poland's transition to democracy. I propose that the Round Table Talks (Grzelak, 2020, this issue; Reykowski, 2020, this issue) and the opposition's solid result in the parliamentary elections of 4th June 1989 would not have been possible if it was not for the identity shift among the general community.

Most psychological research and theorizing on social change (e.g., Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) adopt a binary view of intergroup relations. Specifically, social change is thought to result either from conflict or cooperation between two groups – the privileged (e.g., party officials in communist Poland) and the disadvantaged (e.g., the democratic opposition). The conflict approach, also known as the collective action model of social change (Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012; Wright & Baray, 2012; Wright & Lubensky, 2009), proposes that the shift in intergroup relations is achieved through the collective protest of the disadvantaged. Facing inequality and discrimination, members of low-status groups resort to various forms of collective action (e.g., demonstrations, strikes) and force the dominant group to share resources or privileges they strive for. By contrast, the cooperation approach (also known as the prejudice reduction model of social change; Dixon et al., 2012; Wright & Baray, 2012; Wright & Lubensky, 2009) points to the advantaged as the primary agent of change. In this perspective, social change is attributed to favorable attitudes of high-status group

members who voluntarily share their resources and privileges with the disadvantaged. A shift in attitudes toward the low-status group may be obtained in numerous ways, e.g., through intergroup contact.

While the contribution of conflict and cooperation theories of social change should be appreciated, conceptualizing intergroup dynamics in dualistic terms may be considered an oversimplification. Social reality is much more complex and, therefore, cannot be characterized adequately with crude binary divisions (e.g., the privileged and the disadvantaged, in-group and out-group). This limitation has been addressed by several theories in social psychology that proposed viewing intergroup relations as a tripolar structure (Drury & Reicher, 1999; Mugny & Perez, 1991; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Zagefka, 2019). The tripartite dynamic is also adopted by the political solidarity model of social change (Subašić et al., 2008). According to this theory, conflict between the minority (i.e., those who are deprived of power and strive for social change) and the authority (i.e., those who occupy the position of power and are motivated to defend the status quo) is observed by the general population (i.e., those who belong to a numerical majority). Following self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), the model proposes that the way in which majority members think of themselves and the broader social context is fluid and occurs along two interdependent dimensions. Specifically, the majority define the meaning of their identity in relation to both the authority and the minority. The interaction of these two dimensions creates four possible outcomes. First, societal audience may share norms, values, beliefs and the meaning of superordinate identity with the authority and distance themselves from the minority. When this is the case, the status quo prevails and the position of the authority is enhanced. Second, the majority may reject sharing their identity with either the authority or the minority. Such a situation also results in the maintenance of the status quo. However, the prevalence of the societal order is more a matter of the majority's disengagement than their active support for the authority. Third, the majority may align with both the authority and the minority. For instance, the general audience may think that power holders fulfil their important needs and, at the same time, sympathize with the persecuted minority. Although this situation results in the short-term maintenance of the status quo, the authority may lose its legitimacy in the long run. Finally, the majority may reject the authority and solidarize with the minority. When these two conditions are met, social change is possible.

To advance their interests, the authority and the minority compete for the meaning of the superordinate identity that is shared with the majority members. Using social influence, the two sides of the conflict attempt to convince the general audience to endorse their understanding of social reality. At the same time, they try to compromise the norms, values and beliefs represented by their opponents. There are several strategies that those in a position of authority may employ to maintain the status quo. For instance, power holders may elicit a sense of internal or external threat, which increases legiti-

zation of the existing order (e.g., Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). Next, minority members may be discredited as “lunatics,” “strangers,” “radicals,” or “traitors”. On the other hand, the minority may point to the ruling elite’s alienation from ordinary citizens, which is done by, for example, populist movements (e.g., Müller, 2016).

Prior to using the political solidarity model of social change to analyze the communist period in the history of Poland, one needs to indicate social actors that played the role of the authority, the minority and the majority. The most obvious to match is the role of the authority that belonged to the high- and middle-rank members of the Polish United Workers Party. They were the biggest beneficiaries of communism – except for power over other people, they had access to limited resources and enjoyed various privileges. At the same time, party officials were not homogenous in terms of their attitudes toward reforms and the opposition. Next to the tough-minded leaders who opposed systemic changes and accepted violence against political adversaries, the party elite included individuals who recognized the need for reforms and preferred to avoid bloodshed (Reykowski, 2020, this issue; Stola, 2000). The proportion of each subgroup in party leadership fluctuated over the years. The minority, on the other hand, consisted of those who opposed the communist rule. Like the party leadership, this group was heterogeneous and evolved over time. Following the Second World War, the minority was composed of people who had been deprived of power, privileges or property by the newly established regime (Osiatyński, 1991). As such, it included some members of the Polish Underground State, Catholic clergy and nobility descendants. In 1968, it was joined by a new generation of leftist intelligentsia, disappointed with the system’s inability to fulfil the promise of “socialism with a human face.” As a result of the strikes that broke out in the late ’70s, workers’ leadership sided with the opposition. Finally, the majority encompassed those who were not directly involved in the power struggle, such as peasants, regular workers, and craftsmen.

I propose that the period between 1947, when the People’s Republic of Poland was established, and 1989, when the first partially free elections were held, may be characterized by two interdependent processes. First, after the initial increase and twenty years of relative stability, the majority’s alignment with the communist authority began to decrease. Second, the general public was developing an ever-stronger attachment to the vision of reality provided by the anti-communist minority. Had these two processes been absent, the peaceful transition to democracy would have been impossible.

Throughout the first years after the Second World War, the communist authority enjoyed considerable support (Osiatyński, 1991). Although some segments of Polish society, such as pre-war property owners, the Catholic Church or the army opposed communism at the moment of its instalment, the majority of Poles (mostly peasants and workers) had a favorable attitude toward this ideology. This was due to several reasons. First, the Soviets were perceived as liberators, who brought Nazi occupation to an end. Second, the agrarian reform of 1944 expropriated landowners without compensation

and divided their land between the state and the peasantry. Confiscating the nobility's land had not only a material, but also a symbolic dimension. Except for providing the landless residents of rural areas with their own property, it made amends for centuries of serfdom (Leder, 2014). Third, fast industrialization increased opportunities for upward social mobility, which was applauded by urban and rural workers.

By contrast, the minority, which at the time consisted of pre-war establishment, had nothing to offer to the majority. Longing for the Second Polish Republic with its vertical social structure, the anti-communist opposition could not win the support of the general population, whose status in interwar Poland was predominantly low. Even severe repression by the new regime did not elicit the majority's sympathy for the minority. In line with the political solidarity model of social change, the majority's high identification with the authority and low identification with the minority translated into the survival of a new political order.

In the next phase of communism, which lasted from 1956 to 1968, the authority attempted to consolidate its legitimacy. By adopting nationalist rhetoric, the party officials claimed to speak on behalf of the nation. However, more and more groups in Polish society started to notice the weaknesses of the regime. One of them was left-wing intelligentsia (Friszke, 2010). Supporting the principles of socialism, leftist students and intellectuals called for reforms of the ostensibly socialist state. They appealed for relaxing censorship and allowing greater intellectual freedoms. These demands were met with a negative response from party officials. Student rallies organized in March 1968 were violently dispersed by the police and false "worker activists." Following the unrest, almost 3,000 people were arrested and numerous students expelled from universities. Moreover, the authority launched a propaganda campaign, which aimed to smear the protesters.

The political solidarity model of social change suggests two reasons as to why the 1968 protests did not win popular support. First, the minority did not manage to build a common identity with peasants and workers. Students' demands, such as freedom of speech, were hardly relatable to the experience of the working class, whose primary concerns were economic in nature. Moreover, the communists were successful in portraying the minority as strangers acting against the interests of ordinary people. The authority emphasized not only a class disparity between intelligentsia and workers, but also highlighted the Jewish origin of some opposition members. By interpreting the 1968 protests in terms of ethnicity, the power holders capitalized on the blend of anti-Jewish prejudice that persisted in Polish society. They simultaneously exploited several types of anti-Semitism: traditional prejudice rooted in religion (Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013), Jewish conspiracy beliefs (Kofta & Sędek, 2005), the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism (e.g., Śpiewak, 2012), and negative anti-Israeli attitudes (Cohen, Jussim, Harber, & Bhasin, 2009) that peaked after the Six-Day War. Protesting students and intellectuals were discredited as "Zionist revisionists," more strongly attached to Israel than Poland.

The second reason as to why student rebellion did not initiate social change was high support for the authority. After discrediting the reform-seeking minority as a “Zionist” threat to the Polish nation, party leaders, including the First Secretary Władysław Gomułka, could play the role of its defenders. As the anti-Jewish campaign provoked some protests in Western countries (Stola, 2000), the communist propaganda claimed that the threat to the nation came not only from the inside, but also from the outside. Pointing to inner and external enemies allowed the authority to maintain or even enhance its legitimacy. Party leaders employed explicitly nationalist rhetoric, which was delivered to the majority through the media and obligatory meetings organized in factories, associations and trade unions. Importantly, such gatherings were intended not only to transmit the official interpretation of current events, but also to mitigate people’s frustration with poor living conditions. Focusing aggression on the nation’s enemies diverted workers’ attention away from economic hardship. At the same time, the anti-Jewish campaign of 1968 created an excellent opportunity to absolve the party of the misdeeds of the Stalinist period. Utilizing a common belief in the extraordinary zealotness of Jewish communists, the propaganda blamed them for the crimes committed in the first years of the People’s Republic of Poland. A purge of “Zionist elements” left the party morally renewed and, therefore, worth identifying with. Taking all these into account, it may be concluded that, instead of questioning the authority, the 1968 protests made the communist rule stronger. Legitimacy gained in the 1968 crisis allowed the authority to survive the strikes of 1970 and was further solidified by economic prosperity in the first years of Gierek’s rule.

However, social support for the authority started to shrink in the late ’70s. The cynicism of party leaders and middle level apparatchiks was becoming more and more visible. They treated the official doctrine instrumentally – not as guidance for policy-making, but as a cover for the pursuit of their personal interests (Osiatyński, 1991). Moreover, despite foreign loans taken a couple of years earlier, the economy was inefficient and unable to satisfy the increased expectations of people. In 1976, the government’s plan to increase the price of food sparked strikes and demonstrations by factory workers. Again, the protests were violently suppressed, their participants fired and detained.

Meanwhile, the minority was revising its strategy. Instead of fighting solely for their own interests (e.g., freedom of speech), as was the case in 1968, they sought to build a broad anti-communist coalition. To attain this goal, three important steps were taken. First, left-wing and Catholic intelligentsia – two groups with different beliefs, values and priorities – started to cooperate. Second, the minority reached out to workers. They established the Committee for the Defence of Workers (KOR) – an underground organization that provided the arrested workers with financial and legal aid. Third, conceptual work was done. The minority abandoned thinking in terms of in-group values, and adopted the language of human rights (Osiatyński, 1991). This framework made it possible to simultaneously address various concerns, ranging from freedom of speech to protection against unemployment. As such, intelligentsia and workers could fight for

a common cause – human rights for everyone. The majority’s identification with the minority was ready to grow.

This is exactly what happened in 1980. Following the government-imposed increase of prices, workers started strikes and demonstration across Poland. In contrast to the previous waves of unrest, however, they had the assistance of the opposition. This cooperation allowed for transforming sheer dissatisfaction into a more coordinated form of resistance (see [Klandermans, 2004](#)). Having established Solidarity – an independent trade union – they formulated a programme and started negotiations with the authority. The talks proved successful for the protesters. The agreements signed in Gdańsk and other cities guaranteed workers with the right to strike and addressed their economic demands. Solidarity was legalized and evolved from a trade union to a social movement, which in its heyday consisted of more than 9 million members. The majority (formerly not involved in the power struggle) and the minority (anti-communist opposition) shared an overarching superordinate identity.

At the time of the “Solidarity carnival” conditions necessary for social change were met – the majority showed stronger identification with the democratic minority than the communist authority. The power holders recognized that such a distribution of popular support posed a threat to the status quo. Facing the majority’s preference for Solidarity, economic difficulties and increasing pressure from the Soviet Union to neutralize the opposition, the communist authority imposed Martial Law in 1981. Thousands of anti-communist dissidents, of both a worker and intelligentsia background, were detained. The army entered the streets and a curfew was established. These changes contributed to the further erosion of people’s support for the authority. The loss of legitimacy continued after Martial Law was formally ceased in 1983. Economic collapse, food rationing, repression and the cynicism of party bureaucracy caused the majority members to dissociate themselves from the communist authorities. Although party leaders tried to regain popular support with some minor economic reforms, these efforts were rather fruitless, as economic collapse seemed inevitable. The decline of the majority’s approval for the party and its ideology was visible in public opinion research. As noted by Janusz [Reykowski \(2020, this issue\)](#) in the target article of this issue, surveys conducted in the late ’80s showed that the majority of Poles preferred democratic institutions and a free-market economy to nondemocratic system and central planning. When Gorbachev abandoned the “Brezhnev Doctrine”, and announced that the Soviet Union would not intervene militarily in satellite states, Polish communist leaders decided to start negotiations with the opposition. Solidarity, which was banned a couple of years before, was weak in terms of numbers and structure. Nevertheless, it still enjoyed some degree of the majority’s support (at least 70%; see [Reykowski, 2020, this issue](#)) and could represent the opposition in the Round Table Talks. In terms of the political solidarity model of social change ([Subašić et al., 2008](#)), the potential for societal transformation was high– the general

public showed extremely low identification with the authority and had a positive attitude toward the opposition.

In this social, political and economic landscape, party leaders and democratic opposition entered into the Round Table Talks. The combination of high support for the minority and low approval of the authority predisposed the negotiations to initiate the transition to democracy. However, claiming that the success of the Round Table was certain at the beginning is not warranted. An identity shift among the general public created a window of opportunity, which had to be used by party and opposition leaders. Without objective interdependence between the two sides of the conflict and the proper design of a negotiation process (e.g., equal number of participants from the government and the opposition, rotated presidency of sub-tables, intentional avoidance of the most galvanizing topics), the negotiations could have collapsed (Reykowski, 2020, this issue). As such, it was a unique constellation of political (the passive politics of the Soviet Union), economic (long-term inefficiency of the centrally-planned economy), social (identity shift among the majority), technical (the structure of Round Table negotiations), and individual (the dominance of doves over hawks on both sides of the Round Table) factors that enabled the Polish transformation.

Poland's path to democracy is a common subject of inquiry for (predominantly local) historians, sociologists or political scientists. This commentary aimed to provide a social-psychological perspective on this topic. Employing the theoretical framework provided by the political solidarity model of social change (Subašić et al., 2008), I examined how the 42-year existence of communist Poland and its collapse in 1989 depended on the majority's identification with the authority (the party) and the minority (the opposition). Although the identity shift among members of the general public cannot be interpreted as the sole cause of the 1989 transition to democracy, it created circumstances that determined the start and the shape of the Round Table Talks. Thus, comprehensive analyses of the 1989 negotiations should take it into account.

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