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From Conflict to Dialogue? Lessons of the Polish Round Table '89

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Our special issue presents a social-psychological analysis of an important historical event: the Polish '89 Round Table Talks, which opened the gates to a rapid transition for Poland, as well as the rest of post-communist Eastern Europe, to become part of the democratic world. What made us to look for the psychological underpinnings of the Talks? Why were we interested in a psychological understanding of why they were initiated, how they proceeded, what happened to the attitudes of the negotiators and how they saw each-other, what led to the success of the negotiations, and what were the immediate and longer-term consequences of the Talks?

Let us first note that these Talks did not only create profound political and economic changes in Poland and elsewhere – leading to a rapid transition from a single party system presiding over a centrally controlled economy towards a liberal democracy and a market economy – they also led to equally profound changes in human mentality.

Second, the Talks resolved a conflict (between Communist power and society) that had previously been seen as unchangeable and unmanageable. This makes the Round Table a rare example of a process that culminated in the successful resolution of a seemingly intractable conflict.



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Third, two eminent social psychologists – the authors of the target papers in this special issue – had important roles in the negotiation process. Professor Janusz Reykowski was the chief Government representative at the so-called Political Table (a key part of the Round Table as a whole). Together with Professor Bronisław Geremek, chief representative from the Solidarity side, they negotiated the entire shape of the new political system for Poland.

Professor Janusz Grzelak was a chief adviser to Solidarity on negotiation strategy, and deputy negotiator at the Education Table (another component of the overall Round Table process which, as the name suggests, was responsible for reshaping Education at all levels in the new Poland). In recognition of their contributions to the resolution of such a significant social conflict, Columbia University awarded both of them the prestigious Morton Deutsch Award for Social Justice. Professor Reykowski was also awarded the Nevitt Sanford Award by the International Society of Political Psychology, for his use of Political Psychology in making an important real-world contribution (and it can be fairly said that, in the entire history of the award, no-one's contribution has been greater than that of Professor Reykowski, and indeed Professor Grzelak).

Thus, our target paper authors are not only social psychologists with a deep interest in the theory of conflict resolution, but also practitioners, personally engaged in hard but ultimately successful negotiations. Thus, besides purely intellectual insights, this special issue allows us to see what was going on behind the scenes, what the atmosphere was like, how the mutual relations between participants from the opposite sides of the Table evolved during the negotiations, and so on.

In 2016, when it was held in Warsaw, both Januszs were invited to deliver talks on their Round Table experience *at a special symposium during the General Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP)*. Then, through the initiative of Stephen Reicher and Miroslaw Kofta, (two of the co-editors of this volume) ISPP funded a small group meeting in Warsaw (February 2018), which allowed for a more detailed focus on the psychological underpinnings of the '89 Round Table. This meeting started with talks and a conversation between Janusz Grzelak and Janusz Reykowski. This was followed by shorter presentations by leading authorities addressing different psychological aspects of the Round Table and the Polish transition to democracy. In view of the success of the symposium and the small group meeting, we decided to develop a special issue of the *Social Psychological Bulletin* devoted entirely to understanding, from a social-psychological perspective, the Round Table process. Why did such deeply conflicted sides decide to sit down and talk? What happened during their talks? What were the consequences (not only positive, as you will see) that these historical talks brought about?

The special issue starts with a scene-setting essay by Stephen Reicher (2020, this issue), in which he provides an outline of the history of the Round Table process and explains why studying the Round Table experience is important for social and political psychology. He argues that the Round Table requires psychologists to develop a more

complex and historical analysis of intergroup processes, and he points to the way that the very notion of ‘sides’ in the negotiations was transformed during the process. Last, but not least, he raises questions as to whether some of the limitations of the Round Table process may be linked to the recent rise of populist and authoritarian politics in Poland and elsewhere.

Then, two target papers by Janusz Reykowski (2020, this issue) and Janusz Grzelak (2020, this issue) present comprehensive analyses of the Round Table from the perspective of the involved participants as well as researchers in social and political psychology. In his contribution, Janusz Reykowski (2020, this issue) describes the organization of the negotiations, the sources of an initial deep antagonism between the two sides, and the main psychological factors that made it possible for this antagonism to be overcome – and also for the development of an agreed plan to democratize the Polish political system. This includes an analysis of the initial definitions of the negotiating situation, the psychological characteristics of the situation that fostered cooperative attitudes amongst the negotiations, and the role of group forces. Reykowski (2020, this issue) also discusses the general relationship between psychological factors and objective conditions in achieving positive outcomes to negotiations around entrenched conflicts.

In his contribution, Janusz Grzelak (2020, this issue) also discusses the relationship between ‘objective’ and psychological factors. He analyzes the role of a number of external circumstances and opportunities that made the Talks possible, including Michail Gorbachev’s perestroika in the East, Ronald Reagan’s anti-communist policies in the West, the support of the Catholic Church, as well as the support of the vast majority of Polish society. Critically, he points to the fact that the Government/Communist Party and the Solidarity movement were both too weak to overcome the crisis on their own and so needed the other. Within this societal context, and at the psychological level, Grzelak presents the whole Round Table story as a transformation from a zero-sum game to a cooperative non zero-sum game in which the outcomes were optimally distributed between the various parties (sometimes referred to as a Pareto optimal solution).

We then have a Commentaries section, with eight contributions that discuss different aspects of the target papers. The first three commentaries by Sabina Čehajić-Clancy, Nurit Shnabel and Michal Bilewicz all deal with issues relating to the formation of an inclusive moral community as a basis for the success of the Round Table and for reconciliation in general. Čehajić-Clancy (2020, this issue) argues that the notion of moral community activates constructive intergroup emotions and allows for the building of a common identity among negotiators. Shnabel (2020, this issue) points out that relations between Solidarność and the Government were asymmetrical and therefore concerns about moral image were more salient for the Government as the high power group. By contrast, what mattered most for Solidarność was agency and access to the decision-making process. Bilewicz (2020, this issue) stresses the way in which the formation of a

new moral community requires detachment from an immoral past – an act of historical closure.

The next two commentaries, by Peter [Krekó \(2020, this issue\)](#) and by [Miroslaw Kofta and Wiktor Soral \(2020, this issue\)](#) introduce a more critical note concerning the strategy of seeking to build moral communities. They pick up on a point already acknowledged by Shnabel to the effect that the trading of power for morality amongst Government and Solidarity negotiators could easily lead to the rise of conspiracy theories about an elite who betrayed their followers. [Krekó \(2020, this issue\)](#) examines the rise of such views in Hungary to the extent that, now, they form the dominant interpretation of 1989. Moreover, the concept of a ‘stolen transition’ is crucial to the rise of populism, being used to ground anti-elitism and the promise of a “second transition” in Hungary.

[Kofta and Soral \(2020, this issue\)](#) provide convergent evidence-based, large-scale survey data from Poland. They show that endorsement of conspiracy theories about the Round Table is a key marker of the political divide in the country. Voters for populist parties (including the governing PiS) endorse conspiracy theories of the transition to a greater extent than supporters of liberal democratic parties. What is more, conspiracy theories help explain the stability of voting preferences in Poland, affecting people’s decisions about which party to choose in the next elections.

Moving on, two more commentaries, one by Paulina Górska, as well as one by Anna Kende and Martijn van Zomeren, draw on psychological models of social change to address the Round Table process. [Górska \(2020, this issue\)](#) draws on the political solidarity model of social change to explain the post-war history of Poland as a struggle between the Communist regime and the Opposition to gain the support of the wider population. Her critical look at the Round Table raises the key issue of legitimacy – an issue that is equally central in the contribution by [Kende and van Zomeren \(2020, this issue\)](#). Indeed, they question the legitimacy of the Round Table itself, asking if it is right to see the negotiations as a success when stark structural inequalities of resources persist and when most people in Polish society retain a feeling of impoverishment.

Finally, [Daniel Druckman, Dominika Bulska, and Łukasz Jochemczyk \(2020, this issue\)](#) question received wisdom about the Round Table in a different, but equally profound way. Most commentators tend to treat the negotiation process in a linear way, as a smooth and continuous transition from conflict to cooperation, from communism to democracy, and from state economy to free market. In actual fact, the debates were quite turbulent, with moments of crisis and moments of setback as well as progress. This is well documented in both target articles. Accordingly, [Druckman et al. \(2020, this issue\)](#) explore the dynamics of negotiations using theoretical concepts developed in dynamical social psychology. They show how the turning points in the negotiation led to change in the very representation of conflicts among its participants. And so we come full circle; connecting back to [Reicher’s \(2020, this issue\)](#) introductory comments about the need

to analyze how the most important outcome of negotiations is not just to change the relations between sides, but to change the way people think about the sides themselves.

In conclusion, the collection we have assembled addresses a remarkably wide range of issues and theories and questions. But it is, of course, far from exhaustive. Another eight sets of contributors could have addressed an entirely different set of issues using entirely different conceptual approaches. But our aim is not to present the final word on the Polish Round Table or on the transition from conflict to harmony. It is hopefully to generate more interest, more data and more debate around a psychology rooted in events of real world significance.

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