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AGENCY AND HISTORY IN 1989

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Abstract

This paper is based on interviews conducted at a 1999 conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which brought together key players from the Polish Round Table of 1989. It addresses the question: how did the victory of a movement rooted in labor activism lead to an anti-labor capitalist regime? Our interlocutors repeated that they were surprised by this development, that few in Solidarity had even thought clearly about what sort of Poland would arise after communism.

Was this an example of liberalism stepping into the void that remained after communism fell? Or was there something about the Solidarity movement that facilitated the triumph of liberalism? The absence of explicit markers of liberal thought can distract us from the presence of underlying rhetorical patterns that set the stage for the triumph of laissez-faire ideology. The interviews reveal a pattern of story-telling that de-legitimized the assertion of individual or collective will, on behalf of the irresistible forces of history. The dominant worldview of 1989 was one which naturalized political and economic developments, insisting that there was only one “normal” way of organizing society, and that history was pushing all of humanity towards this condition.

To what degree did the opponents of communism believe in freedom? This might seem like an odd question, given the sacrifices that the Solidarity leadership made in their fight against the *ancien régime*. Although there was enormous diversity among the democratic activists of the 1980s, they all appeared to share a deep personal commitment to liberty – so much so that they were willing to go to jail in defense of their ideals. The interviews we are studying, however, reveal more philosophical ambiguity than the public actions and biographies of our subjects might have led us to expect.

Ironically, nearly all the delegates to the Round Table de-emphasized, even explicitly repudiated, the idea of human volition; few of those involved in the events of 1989 demonstrated much confidence that they (or anyone) could resist the power of history. The only determined and insistent rejection of history on behalf of a voluntarist affirmation of free will came from those who opposed the talks. Solidarity and government negotiators alike had embraced a vision of historical development that ascribed motive force to “history,” “necessity,” or (more trivially) “circumstances.”

This was perhaps the only revolution in history in which the revolutionaries refused to accept the very concept of revolutionary action, understood as a faith in the power of humans to make or remake their world. It may even be that the peaceful transitions of 1989 were enabled precisely by the fact that the cultural dynamics of our *fin de siècle* (in such sharp contrast to the one a century ago) allowed such little room to imagine the willful, intentional, and consequential act.

It seems that the boldest thing one can suggest today is, as Ryszard Bugaj put it, to “protect large groups [of people]” while still accepting “evolutionary change.”¹ The forces of history have become too strong to allow for any alternatives. Bugaj would like to argue that “not everything was completely predetermined,” that there were and are alternatives to the existing “reality.” But because the power of history has been so widely accepted, because the structure of the social-science interpretation of the world has taken hold so firmly, Bugaj seems unable to clearly articulate what his alternative might be. He can play around the edges of the status quo, but he cannot change the world.

¹ All citations in this essay refer to the transcripts of the interviews conducted as part of the project, “Negotiating

This skepticism towards free will, in turn, contributed to the outcome of the anti-revolutions of 1989: the hegemony of liberalism in the 1990s. If Bugaj, one of the most left-leaning figures in our pool of interlocutors, feels compelled to affirm that “there is no good alternative to the capitalist-type order,” then we have indeed entered an era of liberalism. And at the heart of liberalism there has always been a deeply rooted uncertainty regarding the relationship between volition and history. On the one hand, the rhetoric of “freedom” has been important to liberals from John Locke to the present; on the other hand, liberalism has been linked to a teleology of “progress” and “development,” a historical process that crushes any effort by individuals – or even entire societies – to stop it.

It is precisely this inconsistency that has given liberalism its power and endurance over the last two centuries: under different circumstances, the rhetoric and ideals of the liberal tradition can flexibly buttress both struggles for liberation and regimes of oppression. But an important question for political philosophers has long been the relationship between the two sides of liberalism’s Janus face. Are the dehumanizing dynamics of “historical progress” and “market forces” somehow embedded within liberal discussions of freedom? Are the inequities of unrestrained capitalism inevitable emanations from the very idea of liberty? Was Marx ultimately right in claiming that “bourgeois liberalism” is fundamentally incapable of realizing its emancipatory promises? Or, to bring this down to the specifics of the Polish case, was Balcerowicz-style capitalism rooted in the nature of the anti-communist struggle before 1989?

No superficial exploration of the democratic opposition of the 1970s and 1980s would suggest that its ultimate victory would bring to power someone like Leszek Balcerowicz. Bugaj articulated the surprise shared by many when he told Maria Krissan: “I assumed that [the reborn Solidarity]... would be an authentic, strong trade union, and that therefore the whole program of economic change would have to respect the position of that trade union.... I thought that at the time that the shock-therapy program, which was later introduced, would be rather unlikely, that it would provoke much stronger opposition than it actually provoked.”

Revolution in Poland: Conversion and Opportunity in 1989.”

How, indeed, did the victory of a union movement (at least, a movement rooted in labor activism) lead to an explicitly anti-labor capitalist regime? Again and again, our interlocutors repeated that they were surprised by this development, that few in Solidarity had even thought clearly about what sort of Poland they imagined would arise after the fall of communism. It seemed irrelevant during the 1980s to waste time articulating one's vision of that which might lie beyond the PRL, and insofar as anyone did consider this matter, they imagined either a vaguely defined "third way," or an "independence" that was devoid of specific socio-economic content. Jacek Merkel put it succinctly: "for me it was obvious and natural to take up the struggle, which was motivated by elementary patriotism. However, I must say that I did not define a clearly perceived goal." Helena Łuczywo commented similarly (and darkly) that "we did not have a clear vision of Poland, because a clear vision would have been one of disintegration."

They wanted to be free *from* the PZPR, free *from* the Russians, free *from* the stifling bureaucracy, but few thought much about what they might do with this freedom. Lech Kaczyński put it simply: "The union [Solidarity] had no economic vision." Yet what did emerge, with startling rapidity, was an elaborate set of socio-economic policies and a well established ideology to back them up. The Round Table accords included wide-ranging measures of social-welfare, but these were uniformly and unceremoniously abandoned within months of Mazowiecki's rise to power. As Stefan Bratkowski put it bluntly: "that which was arranged at the table regarding economic matters had no meaning."

Was this an example of liberalism stepping into the void that remained after communism fell? Zbigniew Janas suggested as much to Andrzej Paczkowski when he described Balcerowicz offering concrete and well-developed plans at a time when others had only "naive" ideas. Or was there something about the Solidarity movement that facilitated (or perhaps even generated) the triumph of liberalism? As I will argue here, the absence of explicit markers of liberal thought can distract us from the presence of deep, underlying rhetorical patterns that set the stage for the triumph of laissez-faire ideology.

These interviews reveal a pattern of story-telling that effectively de-legitimized the assertion of individual or collective will, on behalf of the irresistible forces of history. Adam Michnik, talking with Jan Kubik, expressed the frustration he felt as he rejected the philosophical premises of cowboy

capitalism but simultaneously perceived it as the “only path.” The metaphor of the “historical path” is a powerful one, even *prior* to identifying the specific markers along that path or envisioning its end-point. The narrative form itself exerts its own force, shaping how people see themselves, their relationship to historical time, and their alternatives in the present.

There are three ways one could tell the story of 1989. First, one could construct a narrative with a clear subject or hero (Lech Wałęsa, Wojciech Jaruzelski, the Solidarity movement, the reformist wing of the PZPR, the Polish working class, the Polish nation, etc.). In this story, the identified actor would begin with a goal, strive to achieve it against the resistance of an enemy, and ultimately succeed in a moment of glorious triumph. Most tellings of Poland’s re-attainment of statehood in 1918, for example, take this form. Historians and publicists may quibble over the relative importance of Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski, and they may prefer to ascribe agency to “the nation” in the abstract rather than to any specific individual, but nearly all presentations posit *some* subject in the tale of Poland’s triumph after WWI.

In the broadest and most popular version of this story, we are told of the adventures of generations of independence activists, from Kościuszko and Dąbrowski through the insurgents of 1863 to the Legions of the First World War. The Polish persistence and devotion towards the national cause are the key elements of this narrative. The broad forces of geopolitics may have rendered the First Republic an anachronism by the late eighteenth century, and the evil trinity of Russia, Austria, and Prussia may have vanquished the nation, but “as long as we still live” Poland will survive, and someday be reborn. The “we” of the national anthem is an active subject, the national collective that will raise Poland up from the ashes. Within that “we” reside many more specific heroes, later to be enshrined into the pantheon of national memory. Even many communist-era histories – not to mention popular underground texts and oral narratives – describe the years of partition and occupation in terms of the “pursuit” of independence, the “struggle” for freedom, the “rebuilding” of Poland.

A second way to cope with 1989 is to remove it from history altogether, by taking it out of the narrative form and embracing what we might call the “one-damn-thing-after-another” approach. This bears a superficial resemblance to the hero-story, insofar as individual choice and action can play a role in

the account, but it lacks the narrative dynamic, the underlying structure of crisis and resolution. Instead, we are offered events linked *only* by contingency, or at best the most immediate sort of proximate causation. This sort of story need have no subjects, no moral, no structure, no purpose, no coherence.

Although surprisingly popular among our interlocutors (as we will see), this approach rarely appears in formal history-writing, where explicit argumentation, deep causation, and above all *explanation* are granted center stage. The stories told by most historians are highly structured narratives, with details included only insofar as they contribute to some overarching message. If history (as either a professional genre of writing or a public means of remembering) is rooted in the fable and the novel, then this alternative manner of describing the past has its origins in the medieval chronicle or the Old Testament litany of “begats.”

This is a means of talking about the past that eschews interpretation in favor of description (often in microscopic detail). The chronicler revels in specificity, but is unable or unwilling to frame that specificity in a way that makes it explicable. In its more elaborate versions, this style of story-telling is akin to photo-realistic painting, with loving attention to detail for its own sake. Some self-proclaimed “postmodern” historians have experimented with this form precisely in order to escape the “tyranny” of the traditional narrative form. More commonly, people utilize the “one-damn-thing-after-another” approach because a more structured apparatus of understanding is unavailable or unsatisfying. In the absence of a convincing framing mechanism, the chronicle provides the only way to talk about the past.

Finally, a sharply contrasting way to fit 1989 within a broader historical picture would be to focus on process and development. A good example of this approach would be the way non-revolutionary (generally academic) Marxists have described the predicted emergence of socialism. Here the working class is the agent of history, but not in the sense that the proletariat actually *makes* the future. Rather, history itself is the motive force behind its own development. The laws of progress brought capitalism into being, and those same laws will lead to its eventual collapse. That day of reckoning, when it arrives, will not be the result of revolutionary action, but the unstoppable resolution of the contradictions and tensions integral to the system of capitalism itself. Human will, in this vision, becomes trivial.

Similarly, but from a very different ideological perspective, scholars have often been drawn to this style of writing as they try to make sense of nationalism. Following writers like Karl Deutsch, Ernst Gellner, and Miroslav Hroch, a whole generation of historians have portrayed nationalism as the natural or inevitable outcome of deep processes of development and modernization. As polyglot populations aggregate into urban spaces, and as individuals are subordinated to the larger needs of rational production, the pressures of cultural conformity overwhelm those of ethnic separatism, and homogenizing nationalism is born. People don't make nationalism; nationalism makes people, and modernity in turn makes nationalism. This means of coping with the past is most pervasive, obviously, in the social sciences, where the task of explanation often pushes narrative itself into the background. Contingency and will are substantially or entirely effaced – indeed, the very possibility of contingency is often treated as a threat to coherent social-science scholarship.

These three contrasting modes of recounting the past – for sake of simplicity let us call them narrative, teleology, and chronicle – can all be seen in our interviews. The chronicle form was, for me, the most unanticipated; I was struck by the fact that some of our discussants seemed to have *no* framework for interpreting 1989. As Zbigniew Janas put it succinctly when expressing his reluctance to offer a genealogy of the Round Table, “I’m a man of action.” Of all the answers I expected to receive to our question about how future historians might describe 1989, I did not anticipate Hanna Świda-Ziemba’s response: “I have no idea. It all depends on their point of view.”

Here was a recognition that the Round Table had no *intrinsic* meaning, that it needed to be *assigned* significance by future scholars. I would have expected that such indeterminacy would have been hard to sustain among those who actually participated in the events of 1989, because to recognize that meaning is extrinsic to experience undermines the effort to construct an interpretive scaffolding around one’s own life. Nonetheless, a few of our subjects did take this approach. Andrzej Stelmachowski was quite clear: “We don’t know what historians will write. You see, amidst a wave of a huge number of facts, some of them later have meaning in the course of events, and others do not, and we only know *ex post* which in reality leave their tracks in the history of a given country. So I don’t know.”

For those who refuse to place 1989 in any clearly defined narrative of causes and effects, everything comes as a surprise. "In my opinion," Stelmachowski said, "1989 was something unanticipated, as extraordinary as the Miracle on the Vistula of 1920."

An example of what results from this uncertainty – or rather, this explicit repudiation of certainty – can be seen in the rambling commentary of Henryk Wujec. When Maria Krissan asked him to place the Round Table in historical perspective, he gave a long-winded (2,038 word) response, moving with no apparent direction from one event in the 1980s to another, without drawing clear causal links between them. Finally he concluded, "I think that those elements were essential so that in the end... eh... it was possible to sit down at that Table." He punctuated this with a definitive and conclusive "O," but in fact he had offered no conclusion. He had answered the question, "what key events led to the Round Table?" by literally listing a bunch of events, making little attempt to put those events into a narrative form or interpretive framework.

This approach, which was seen in several of the interviews, seems to reflect an uncertainty about how to make sense of 1989. For these interlocutors, the Round Table doesn't yet have a clear historical meaning, an established place in any familiar story about the past, present, or future. One might say that in their minds the Round Table resides in past, but it is not yet history. Władysław Frasyński actually said that he did "not have, unfortunately, the memory of a historian," as he justifies his inability to identify a clear cause for the fall of communism. 1989 was a moment in the lives of people like Wujec and Frasyński, linked (albeit loosely) to other events in the 1980s, but the significance of those events is still unclear to them.

To give a moment in the past meaning, it must be positioned in some sort of story, some sort of interpretive framework. The past, to become history, must be extracted from the chaotic flow of experience, it must be perceived through the prism of *some* conceptual guide. As long as such a prism is lacking, the actions of historical figures (indeed, one's own actions) cannot be ascribed any clear direction, purpose, or goal. There are no real heroes in a chronicle, only a bunch of people who did

things; there are no stories in a chronicle, only events. And in Wujec's case, there exists only a chronicle of anti-communist struggle.

Perhaps such memories predominate among those who have not yet identified an end to the story, since they cannot construct a narrative around an unfinished tale. That is, because they have not yet conceptualized or articulated clearly what was accomplished in 1989, they can't construct a coherent narrative of their actions. They can't either describe 1989 as the outcome of historical processes, or the result of decisive actions. All they can do is put it at the end of a list of events.

Significantly, one of our interlocutors described a transition from a chronicled understanding of the past to a more purposeful one. Janina Jankowska, in her conversation with Padraic Kenney, related her belief that she was participating in a long tradition of insurgency, stretching back to the nineteenth-century rebels against Russian rule and moving forward to her son's predestined continuation of a similar fight. These revolts accomplished nothing: they were part of an unending national reality, not a set of transitional moments. The very idea that such a rebellion might succeed – might lead from one reality to another – seems precluded by the way in which Jankowska embedded her resistance in a static "tradition" rather than a narrative of historical time.

However, from about 1987 Jankowska began to adopt another perspective, gradually realizing that communism might fall and another reality might emerge – in other words, that Poland might not be locked in an unending cycle after all, but might instead be part of some sort of historical dynamic, filled with meaningful rather than trivial change. Stanisław Ciosek demonstrated a similar ambiguity, but from the other direction. In general he considered the fall of communism inevitable because of broad historical forces, but he protested against his interviewer's (Jan Curry's) effort to uncover rationality and purpose behind each decision and each moment. "Chance [*przypadek*] often governs," he said. "Intuition, emotion... honor, image... it wasn't a game of chess, it was chaos, but in the theory of chaos – it is said in mathematics that chaos, that everything has its regularities [*prawidłowości*]." Ciosek, who also warned us during the Round Table conference to guard against excessive trust in written archival evidence,

seemed acutely sensitive to chance, contingency and agency, even though this competed in his mind with a broad vision of inexorable historical trends.

Adopting this mode of understanding – or rather, this mode of re-telling – frees one to assign a great deal of agency to specific individuals. If everything at every point is contingent, and no sense (or a limited sense) of process, structure, or historical dynamic is in place, then the role of the free individual is elevated. Wujec is able to argue, for example, that “if Mazowiecki had not become premier, things would have certainly turned out differently. Then it was possible that it could have been Mazowiecki, it could have been Geremek, it could have been Kuroń, it could have been Wałęsa.... Then all those activities had a very fundamental meaning, and if it had happened differently, if any one of these essential elements had been otherwise, then the reality that is today and the situation in which we are now in would be entirely different.” He used similar terms later in his interview when he claimed that if Wałęsa had behaved differently in the 1980s, “then Poland would certainly be different.”

Most audaciously, Wujec claims that “there would not have been the fall of the Berlin wall, there would not have been the fall of the communist system, there would not have been the fall of the Soviet Union, without Poland, without that which happened [here], without the rise of Solidarity, without the Round Table and without the rise of the those elections and without the rise of the Mazowiecki government.”

As might be expected, the man most of our participants identified as essential to the Round Table process, Wojciech Jaruzelski, was inclined to accept that individuals could shape history, but his image of history was not one with a clear narrative. Indeed, it could not be, because to imagine an immutable historical dynamic is to strip humans of their power to shape the world. “It is hard for me to find any sort of moment,” Jaruzelski told Michael Kennedy and Marysia Ostafin, “during which I would say, ‘We are resigning from something here. We are capitulating.’ It was a sort of movement [*chodzenie*], a creeping [*pełzanie*], you know, a sort of intellectual maturation, just as wheat, fruit, and humans mature into something based on the facts that arise from a situation, with [in turn] develops and which develops on several levels.” This picture is more akin to a flow-chart than a timeline: we move from one circumstance

to another, with each decision altering the shape of decisions to come. Jaruzelski's metaphor of maturation is not that of Aristotle's acorn with a potential oak tree inside it; rather, it is an image of a human child growing from a genetic foundation but shaped and altered at every turn by unpredictable environmental conditions – some of which are determined by the child's own actions. It is a story of chance, not of predestination.

But the chronicle was not the most popular form of story-telling in these interviews. Most of our interlocutors had developed a somewhat more cohesive interpretive framework with which to make sense of 1989, a teleology into which they could insert the Round Table. The key question in our interview guide was, in this regard, "was the fall of communism unavoidable?" Most responded to this question decisively in the affirmative. For Solidarity activists and government officials alike, 1989 tended to be embedded in powerful historical and sociological forces that made the survival of state socialism impossible and the victory of democracy and liberalism preordained.

The triumph of the latter and the crushing defeat of the former was not so much the end result of a decades-long struggle, as it was the working-out of the modern world's "realities." Neither the government nor the opposition can be assigned a clear heroic role, because most of our subjects agreed that both sides were too weak to successfully push through their goals. In Józef Czyrek's words: "without the opposition the government camp was too weak to introduce reforms, and the opposition without the government camp also lacked strength and potential, because they didn't have in their hands the economic and state apparatus."

There are variations on this theme. For some, communism was doomed because it was inefficient and unable to promote Poland's "growth." Here economic development becomes the motive force of history, an imperative that could not be denied or avoided. Mieczysław Rakowski and Marian Orzechowski offered clear articulations of this theme – indeed, it seemed to be most popular among the former communist elite. Rakowski told David Ost that the PZPR was doomed to defeat, regardless of what the leadership tried to prevent this fate. Broader changes in society, he argued, had made it inevitable that a "bourgeois" party was going to rise, and that in the future the role of the communists

would be more akin to the German Social Democrats (interestingly, the topic of Rakowski's doctoral dissertation) or the US Democrats under someone like Roosevelt.

Rakowski recognized that Solidarity was not fighting to establish a capitalist system, regardless of what eventually happened, but this did not matter: intentions, goals, conscious actions, explicit decisions—none of this mattered in the face of fundamental historical change. When David pressed Rakowski on how he felt in 1989, the former premier shied away from exploring his subjectivity. Whatever he thought or felt mattered less than the basic fact that “a certain epoch had ended,” and people had to accommodate themselves to this fact. But even this sort of concession to human volition – the implication that people could adjust to or resist the inevitable – was not really part of Rakowski's world view. When asked if the SLD was still a “leftist” party, Rakowski replied that “it became a prisoner of the historical situation.... I cannot say ‘certainly yes.’ but it could not now be otherwise.” Lest we think that all this is just a reflection of Rakowski's Marxist training, he concluded the interview by arguing that Poland's “national character” determined the specific shape of communism's fall. Rakowski considered his countrymen to be particularly prone to compromise because they lacked the resolution and consistency to carry anything through to its logical conclusion.

Like so many others, Orzechowski responded with the one-word answer “nieunikniony” [inevitable] to our question about the fall of communism. The source of its doom came from its economic failings, particularly its inability to develop. “Sooner or later,” he said with some resignation, “it would have fallen under the weight of its own imperfections and weaknesses. It was an open question, of course, when.” For Orzechowski, the only role for the individual was “to come to an awareness that the social-economic system could not be reformed.” There could be no doubt, he insisted, that “the fundamental matter was the economy.”

The uncertainties of history, in this view, are only in the details. “I don't think anyone during the period of the Round Table foresaw what happened, for example, on June 4, 1989. Neither the Solidarity side nor the party-government side foresaw that it would end with such an ignominious electoral disaster.” Since what *really* mattered in the flow of history was economic development – and its

impossibility under the status quo ante – then surprises are still possible in the political sphere. But when it came to the basic march of capitalism towards its global supremacy, Orzechowski could have no doubts about the futility of resistance: “I was not naïve any more, nor idealistically inclined [enough to believe] that it would be possible to preserve the socialist system, but [I still hoped] to give the free-market system, the capitalist system to put it simply, some sort of humane, social dimension.”

Others saw “democracy” as the irresistible force of late twentieth-century life, something that no dictator could resist. As Helena Łuczywo put it: “there was a chance, and that chance appeared, to obtain a free and democratic Poland, and not to take advantage of that chance would have been extraordinarily foolish.” The opportunity for democracy arose (in the passive voice – indeed, Łuczywo switches to the passive voice as if her initial use of the more ambiguous to-be verb was inadequate), and the only role for Solidarity was to capitalize on this opportunity. The democratic opposition (according to Łuczywo) didn’t *make* Poland free – they just picked up freedom when it came along.

Others finally – and this returns me to the point raised in the introduction to this study – embraced the teleology of liberalism, according to which free market capitalism marked the dénouement of history, and no act of human will could permanently derail the march towards this end. The Leninist project had been such an attempt, a mark of hubris that was doomed from the start. The only variable, the only space for contingency in this account, was the timing. Helena Łuczywo projected the possibility of another century of communism (an extreme claim), but even she considered it doomed in the face of history’s march. Most would have projected the inevitable fall much closer to the present. 1989 had to happen, our interlocutors believed, although it might not have happened in 1989.

This variable in timing opened a small and carefully framed window for human volition. The PRL had to collapse, but *how* it collapsed depended on the actions of individuals. As Ciosek put it, “we took advantage in Poland of the opportunities given us by history.” Bogdan Borusewicz offered the most striking version of this approach, because he placed it within an admission of fallibility (a truly rare commodity among our subjects). “I recognized that I was in error in not joining the Round Table negotiations.” Borusewicz commented to Paweł Kowal. “I was in error in judging them to be premature.

When the conflict in Romania followed, I realized that there might be an alternative [to negotiation]....” Later in the interview he reiterated this with evocative brevity: “the alternative could have been Bucharest.” He did insist, however, “that if there had been no Round Table, there might have been the Romanian variant, but even then the system would have crumbled. This was evident.”

Jacek Merkel echoed this reference to Romania, tossing North Korea into the mix to further darken the picture. “If in the Kremlin they had taken a different decision such as (if you’ll excuse the comparison) North Korea, then of course America would still have triumphed, would still have become a new Rome like it is today, but Russia could have been stuck in a besieged fortress for a long time yet.... One can imagine that we would have had a development of events in the Romanian version.” Gabriel Janowski also cited Romania, adding further complexity to the picture by imagining a whole range of options from peaceful change through a “violent” [*gwaltowny*] transition without actual bloodshed, all the way to a full-fledged revolution. So there was some space for human intervention in history, and the Round Table was not entirely superfluous. Such intervention, however, could only alter the form of the transition and the details of history. The basic shape of the future was set.

It seemed clear from many interviews that the narrative form has a strong appeal, that people want to identify heroes and describe them as overcoming obstacles in the creation of history. Our question about the individuals who were essential to 1989 drew our interlocutors towards an affirmation of volition, even as the power of a structural or teleological style of presentation drew them away. An excellent example of this ambiguity could be seen in Merkel’s quick reaction to Robert Pytlos’ question, “without which individuals would there have been no Round Table?” Decisively Merkel said “Wałęsa and Jaruzelski.” However, he also stated that “reality has many directors, and there is also a whole range of feedback loops” that complicate the efforts of any single individual to make history.”

Władysław Frasyniuk was similarly drawn towards ambiguity, even self-contradiction. In response to Pawel Kowal’s query, “was the fall of communism inevitable?” Frasyniuk replied “You know, today everyone will say that it was inevitable. I began to believe this at the time of my second conviction. At the time of my second conviction I began to believe deeply in this. In 1985 I was certain

that it would fall.” Yet earlier in his interview Frasyński had argued, “it is not true that communism would have left all by itself. Had there been no August 1980, had there not been those determined people after December 13, had there not been those remnants of organization still in 1988, there would have been no 1989, no free Poland.”

The contradictions within Frasyński’s presentation are eloquent, because they speak to the competition within many Solidarity activists between (on the one hand) claiming for themselves and their movement an instrumental role in destabilizing communism, and (on the other hand) recognizing that communism was doomed anyway. A similar line is adopted by Stefan Bratkowski, who affirms the centrality of Generals Wojciech Jaruzelski and Czesław Kiszczak. “However,” he quickly added, “it is necessary to say right away that in no way did they predict the collapse of the regime or the surrender of power. We can exclude that possibility right away. Nonetheless, no event presented such a force that it could compel them to do anything.

On the other hand, they recognized the complete stalemate. Society had turned against them.... The force that placed the authorities against the wall was the inflation. It wasn’t us – they put themselves [in that position]. The inflation was a catastrophe which proved to the authorities that they didn’t know how to govern. That inflation in reality hastened the decision, that it was necessary to talk with society.

Notice the string of qualifiers: “*nie mniej... natomiast...*” Bratkowski was answering a question that strongly urged him to locate historical agency in specific individuals, yet he could not escape from macro-causal factors like economic decay and social alienation. “Society” makes a brief appearance as an active force, yet here too we see uncertainty: Bratkowski switches back and forth between society-as-active-subject (“society had turned against them”) and passive object (the impersonal economic crisis made it “necessary to talk with society”). In any case, “we” did not bring about the fall of communism. There are no positive heroes in this story.

Even the Pope becomes, in a later remark by Bratkowski, a “trump card” possessed by Solidarity rather than a creative force for change in his own right. Even though Bratkowski wants to argue that “without the talks it would not have come to the total break-up of the regime,” he finds it hard to specify

any conscious agents behind those negotiations. In rejecting the idea that his side might have committed some sort of error, he insists that “it could not have been done differently.”

Significantly, when talking about the more distant past Bratkowski changes his tone dramatically. As suggested above, the story of Poland’s fall, occupation, and rebirth from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries is customarily cast in the form of an active narrative, and Bratkowski offers no exception. Here the ambiguity is gone: if Bishop Załuski (an early eighteenth-century bibliophile and reformer) “had not assigned Stanisław Konarski (a leading figure of the Polish Enlightenment) to read the old Polish laws, and if Konarski had not initiated the intellectual revolution, then many things would not have happened.” The distant past seems to be a time of heroes, a time when individuals could launch a chain reaction of events that would alter the course of history, but there are no late twentieth-century Załuskis or Konarskis in Bratkowski’s account.

Some of the negotiators at the Round Table were more willing to accept the *principle* of human will, though here too the stance was equivocal. Józef Czyrek told Robert Pytlos that the peaceful transition was “voluntary [*dobrowolny*], because there were no necessities such as some sort of particular event or particular threat.” After identifying the key players in the negotiations, Czyrek stated firmly that “without them, there wouldn’t have been either the Round Table or that which happened afterwards.” For people like Czyrek, the alternative to the active intervention of individuals in the course of developments was “stagnation, decay, decomposition,” because history itself did not appear in his account as a motive force.

But in such accounts the specific agent of change was not really any individual or group in Poland: most fundamentally it was (as Jacek Merkel emphatically proclaimed) “Russia, Russia, Russia.” Mikhail Gorbachev was, here, the ultimate progenitor of the changes of the 1980s. To cite Merkel again, “The Round Table was possible in the times of Gorbachev. It would not have been possible in the times of Brezhnev, in my opinion. The fact that Gorbachev decided to disassemble the empire (from his perspective this was a conscious or unconscious [*przemyślana lub nieprzemyślana*] decision) began to

take apart that Kremlin wall, dismantling it brick by brick, and later it turned out that those bricks could not be laid back again.”

So Gorbachev was able to make a “decision.” but note how this particular agent occupies a very special location for Poles. He becomes a sort of *deus ex machina*, a far-off being who created the conditions for change in Poland. This is closer to a story which grants “Moscow” causal force, while portraying Poles on all sides as pawns, or at best as creatures with highly constrained agency of their own. This is a reiteration (structurally) of Marx’s famous dictum, “people make history, but not under circumstances of their choosing.”

So where are the stories of struggle, the tales of individual or collective victory over evil, the narratives in the traditional form? They are, in fact, present in our interviews, but only in a select group. Very few of our subjects definitively affirmed the power of human will and the indeterminacy of history, and those who did tended to look with suspicion upon the accomplishments of the Round Table negotiations.

Leszek Moczulski was certainly the most insistent in his acceptance of free will, although he was more inclined to attribute agency to nations rather than individual human beings. No other subject in our survey could have said the following with such clarity and consistency: “The resolution which took place in the spring of 1989 could have happened differently. It was, from the point of view of the political possibilities at the time, decidedly the worst resolution.” The key term for Moczulski is “political”; this is the sphere of the indeterminate, a space for conflict, struggle, and victory for the strongest and wisest. Even he recognized that this was a bounded space, constrained by “the possible” and “reality,” but he pushed those frontiers back further than anyone else. The Round Table, he argued, “accomplished 25%, 33% of the possible.” To have achieved a higher figure, in his view, it would have been necessary to push forward with mass work-stoppages – with a “social explosion” – and force the communists out of power without any compromises.

Why was this course not followed? In Moczulski’s memory, it was because his “independence camp” did not have as much influence among the intellectual elite as the “Solidarity camp” had, and

rather than risk a fraternal dispute that would have only benefited the “*komuna*,” he let his opponents have their way. The veracity or accuracy of this story is not important here; what matters is the form of argumentation Moczulski uses. Rather than referring to grand forces of history or the unsatiated demands of economic development, Moczulski places the initiative firmly in the hands of human beings. He implies that he could have tried to stop the Round Table had he firmly resisted the compromises of the others in the opposition. Communism would have fallen anyway if – and this is a key qualifier – the political will had been present to sustain a wave of mass protests and strikes.

Like just about all our interlocutors, he felt that the USSR had reached an impasse, but he characterized this as an erosion of its “potential” and its “strength.” That is, the Soviets no longer had the force of will needed to sustain their hegemony over Poland. This, in turn, was always the main issue for Moczulski: the inability of Poland to act as an independent player on the international stage. Although Moczulski uses the rhetoric of “democracy” a few times in his discussion, he is more attracted to the imagery of international actors engaging each other on a grand stage, rationally deploying their strength and power. He openly describes his “instrumental exploitation” [*wykorzystanie*] of human rights concerns as a means of moving towards his ultimate goal: “national autonomy [*samostanowienie*], i.e., independence.”

The singularity of the national wills casts into doubt any talk of “democracy,” but more distinctive and characteristic of Moczulski is the way in which volition (whatever the source) appears as the motor of history. “Independence” matters here not because of the form Moczulski imagines pouring into a liberated Poland, not because he is dissatisfied with the governing principles of the PRL *per se*, and not because he wants to promote individual rights not granted by the PZPR. Instead, independence matters because only a nation which can stand alone (literally “*samostanowienie*”) can exert its will among the other global players in the game of “politics.” This embrace of agency and contingency might seem to draw Moczulski closer to the “chroniclers” discussed above, but there is a key difference. For Moczulski history is emphatically *not* one-damn-thing-after-another; it is the very source of national being, because only in history do we find meaning and purpose. This is not the sort of meaning that the

teleological stories established, ones which embedded individuals within the grand sweep of “development” or “progress.”

Instead, this is a significance that comes from identifying with heroes of the past who had imposed their will upon the world. Moczulski is the only one of our subjects to utter the loaded phrase: “Piłsudski talked about this.” For Moczulski there could be no more appropriate source of knowledge than the past. He described the focus of his opposition activities in the 1970s: “we developed the so-called ‘historical action,’ which was aimed at the education of the young generation, where we advanced to the foreground patriotic – that is, historical – values. These, we show, these... these made sense, we search for the sense in those armed efforts, or in general all sorts of efforts...” Meaning, here, comes not from a master narrative about historical progress, but in the ongoing exertion of will.

Interestingly, but not at all coincidentally, another example of a firm assertion of free will came from Alfred Miodowicz, sitting on what might seem like the opposite end of the political spectrum, but in fact sharing a great deal with Moczulski. Indeed, according to Rakowski it was Miodowicz who first used the term “conspiracy of the elite” to denounce the (still impending) Round Table Talks – a phrase later embraced by the right. Miodowicz actually describes the Round Table as an “accident” that arose from the “conjuncture of events” and the fact that the authorities “didn’t know what to do.” He contrasts this with the sense he had of the period of martial law, when he initially believed that “finally there will be order in this country.”

In other words, the decisive act of Jaruzelski on December 13, 1981, had the power to re-establish social discipline – the will of a ruling authority could confront and vanquish the masses. Broad social forces or historical dynamics are entirely missing from this imagery. Again and again Miodowicz regretted the lack of other comparable examples of firm action from the communist authorities. “If someone else had stood in Jaruzelski’s place,” Miodowicz believes, “and had held power in the state, things could have turned out differently (literally “*wypadki [accidents] mogłyby potoczyć się inaczej.*”) Similarly, had the USSR and the Warsaw Pact “intensified the so-called cold war, then we would have the

iron curtain here. There would be that gray, everyday day, safe for society, [with] free health care, apartments for the workers of the big firms, cars by allotment, etc.”

Marcin Król, as a serious and unusually consequential conservative intellectual, was another of the few people interviewed to explicitly declare, “first of all, nothing is inevitable, because all things are in the hands of fate [*opatrność*]. That is, we don’t know what is inevitable and what is not. In other words, there is simply nothing that is inevitable.” Król is saying here what he must say to retain intellectual consistency: his Catholicism and conservatism virtually compel him to refer to “fate,” that is, the will of God that is known only to God. The Catholic approach to free will is complex and subtle. Freedom does indeed stand at the very foundation of Catholic theology, because the alternatives of heaven and hell depend upon one’s ability to make unfettered choices between good and evil.

On the other hand, God’s posited omnipotence necessitates a recognition that everything is foreordained, and that the parameters of the real and the possible are tightly drawn. The problem is only that we can’t always perceive what those parameters are. The Church, as the vehicle for God’s revelation, is assigned the task of teaching mankind what is right, natural, just, good, and according to the will of God (all these things correspond, for Catholics). One may choose to rebel against these things by opting for deviance, evil, or heresy, but such rebellions cannot alter what is real or natural. Free will means that people have the freedom to do what they are supposed to do: sin is when people exercise that free will to make the wrong choice, rebelling against nature and God. Catholic freedom does not imply that we can alter the dictates of moral authority or change the boundaries of the possible.

Thus revolution is, by its very nature, sinful, because revolutionaries strive to alter the social dynamics of the world, which were established by God and which are thus immutable. All this places Catholic intellectuals – those who would like to take the catechism seriously and remain a consequential Christian (thus, a subset of those who consider themselves to be Catholics) – in a difficult position when faced with an opposition struggle against an unjust regime. In the nineteenth century the Church’s position was clear: since the monarchs of Russia, Austria and Germany were legitimate powers, one

should obey them and pray to God for redemption and the restoration of Poland. To *act* against the social-political order could only be sin.

Things were different in the PRL. This was a regime that was founded in sin, not in legitimacy. The very goal of socialism was to build the world anew upon a model established by human reason and driven by human desire. It was, in this sense, the institutionalization of sin. So Catholic opposition to communism had to be uncompromising on a fundamental level, even though a day-to-day *rapprochement* could be worked out to avoid social conflict and to preserve the Church's position. Both Bishop Orszulik and Bishop Dembowski were insistent on this point: each emphasized repeatedly that the Church was, above all else, *consistent* in its approach to the communists (how one differentiates between tactical flexibility and strategic consistency is another matter). But having resolved that it was ok – indeed, mandated – for a Catholic and a conservative to be opposed to communism, how does this same Catholic conceptualize his own power to change things? Marcin Król, for all his perceptiveness and all his deep familiarity with Catholic conservative political thought, simply confronts the contradiction and leaves it unresolved. Having proclaimed that *nothing* is inevitable, he goes on:

On the other hand, certainly communism was going to fall. But first, no one can answer the question how long communism might yet last. And second, what form would this collapse take?... So, if we speak of facts and not of suppositions [*domniemaniach*], it is a fact that the Round Table was one of the turning points of the twentieth century.... Nothing would have been possible without Gorbachev, and so on. Anyway, Those facts create history, and not suppositions, processes – pro – processes of dissolution, etc. Processes of dissolution may just as well last for five years, as for one hundred fifty years. On the other hand it was a fact that the Round Table happened, that it ended with the result with which it ended. And that is the first thing that obliges a historian in any sort of account.

This is perhaps the strangest and most indecipherable passage in all these interviews. On the basis of what we have here, we cannot say how Marcin Król thinks about the place of human will in history, or about the power of deeper historical “processes” (a word which seems to give him some difficulty, though I’m not sure how much we can read into his stutter). Clearly one part of Król wants to refute the idea that the Round Table was the end-product of a certain historical process or structure. He contrasts “facts” with “processes”, and insists that the latter are little more than “suppositions,” not the

sorts of things that can actually cause events. He is quite comfortable arguing that a single individual could alter the course of history: as he says of Lech Wałęsa, “without his presence it would have happened differently.” But elsewhere in his interview, Król blatantly contradicts himself: “In my opinion, what was decisive was not one event, but a certain process, and namely a process that combined two phenomena at the same time: first, the internal dissolution of the [communists’ own] conviction that they had the ability to govern this state, and at the same time the process of growing private property and, so to speak, a recognition of the profits flowing from the economics of the free market.”

This tension between process and volition, even among those who want to emphasize the latter, is the key element of all these interviews, because consistently the economy is located in the realm of the inexorable, rather than the contingent. Wojciech Jaruzelski is perhaps clearest on this point, when he sharply differentiates “politics” (that which one can control and shape) and “economics” (which are impervious to human will). “One can arrange political matters off the cuff [*od jednej ręki*], we might say in a revolutionary manner, but in the economy certain processes must mature. That isn’t the sort of thing that one can carry out in a day.” Helena Łuczywo was revealing when she said to Paweł Kowal: “I was an optimist my whole life, and I always believed somewhere deep inside – this was my dream – that it would end, that we would once again be a normal country, that this would be realized for me someday [*że to mi się kiedyś ziści*].”

The phrase “normalcy” was typically juxtaposed in the 1980s against the existing circumstances in Poland, in a way that naturalized the non-communist world while labeling the PRL, the USSR, and other such systems as artificial and abnormal. In this powerful dichotomy, the West was the product of “natural” historical forces while actually-existing socialism was the creation of free will – deviant and misguided will, but nonetheless free. In the “normal” world people don’t try to tilt with windmills; instead, they reconcile themselves with the status quo, warts and all. Władysław Frasyniuk does recognize an underground writer of the late 1980s – Janusz Beksiak – as having singular importance, but only insofar as he convinced people like Frasyniuk to abandon their unrealistic dreams and accept that

“the situation is changing,” that a free-market economy was coming and that “union activists had to think differently.”

By embedding his comments within a move from communism to normalcy, Frasyński is able to grant that a number of individuals (he lists six from the Solidarity side) were irreplaceable in the late 1980s, without implying the sort of voluntarism that our interlocutors seem to have shunned. The leadership of Solidarity, argues Frasyński, had “real power” and could make decisions with “real consequences,” but once communism fell these opposition leaders felt uncomfortable in an environment when such exertions of unfettered will became impossible. Not only was it troublesome, as Frasyński complains, to manage things in collaboration with “fifteen or sixteen people.” More deeply, it was no longer possible for individual volition to shape reality: such power only existed in an “abnormal” world.

Józef Śliz took an almost identical approach, listing 13 people and two pivotal events (the election of the Pope and the rise of Gorbachev) in order to allow for human volition and contingency, while still insisting that the fall of communism was inevitable. The key here is the *reason* the old system was doomed: “that was a system which could not be accepted by a normal person. It was sick.”

So the terms line up neatly:

Chronicle/Narrative		Teleology
Subjectivity		Historical Destiny
Politics	vs.	Economics
Pathology		Normalcy
Communism		Liberalism

It may not be that the utilization of teleology as a mode of story-telling inevitably draws one towards liberalism, but in the absence of a viable Marxist alternative it certainly seems likely to do so. At the very least, in the particular circumstances of late twentieth-century Poland, with Marxism in general disrepute, the tendency of the above terminological line-up to fall into place seems overwhelming. In other words, there was indeed something about the world-view of Solidarity – and, equally, the elite of the PZPR – which set the foundation for the liberal hegemony of the 1990s and the twenty-first century. Virtually no one circa 1985 would have imagined that in less than a decade liberalism would have assumed a greater hold over Polish public life than socialism ever had, but nonetheless the basic framework for this development was already established. It would certainly be ironic for me to claim here that this was all predestined, but I would argue that one's narrative choice – or the choice to embrace or eschew narrative – is far from trivial. Indeed, the way one tells a story determines what story one tells, and this in turn strongly influences the way one carries that story into the future.