Poland
The Weight of History

Ursula van Beek

Abstract

This contribution to the journal issue begins with a literature review of the main underlying causes of societal divisions considered by the various authors as giving rise to the emergence of polarization in many countries around the world. A discussion of the process of the pole formation then precedes the main section of the essay, which focuses on polarization in Poland. Its objective is to offer insights into the unfolding process in a country once considered a regional leader in post-communist democratic transformation, but now is listed among those in which democracy is under threat.

Keywords: Economic inequality, identity, Poland, polarization.

Academic commentators are divided about the subject of polarization. Some insist polarization is good for democracy, while others aver that it is a potential source of its obliteration. Why the discrepancy?

As early as during the 1950s, Seymour Martin Lipset noted, "Inherent in all democratic systems is the constant threat that the group conflicts which are democracy's lifeblood may solidify to the point where they threaten to disintegrate society."[1] Since the potential for conflict was identified in the literature such a long time ago, it seems that the discrepancy among opinions is about something else. First, it is about the difficulty in pinpointing exactly when the desire for democracy's political fragmentation turns into potentially destructive polarization; second, it concerns the unanticipated forces that prompt emotional temperatures to rise; and third, it is about the catalyst that finally moves the process into the red zone.

Fragmentation, or open pluralist contestation based on polarized opinions and divergent values crisscrossing a society, is unquestionably the lifeblood

Ursula van Beek is the founding director of the Centre for Research on Democracy (CREDO) at Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa. <uvb@sun.ac.za>
[1] Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 83.

of a democracy as it facilitates the building of parties and the mobilization of constituencies. Partisan cleavages, in turn, assist parties to overcome their internal differences, enabling them to build common identity. In this way, parties help to manage competing societal interests in a peaceful manner by giving voice to a wide range of voters' preferences and anxieties.[2] Polarization is known to help protect the status quo.

There is an inadequate appreciation of the impact of affective polarization, or the emotional attachment citizens display toward their particular cultural or ideological identity. According to Yilmaz Esmer, this is one of the major reasons why a deeply polarized society is bad news for the healthy functioning of a democratic system.[3] The core of the problem is that when the electorate base their votes on identity rather than on an evaluation of candidates and parties' policies, voting is no longer a *bone fide* election but becomes a census of the population.

Opinions are divided on what drives mass-level affective polarization. Some contend it is a reflection of elite-level ideological polarization,[4] while others claim it is driven not by ideology but by disparate values and beliefs.[5] There are also those who hold that affective polarization is the result of economic inequalities,[6] or is a recurring phenomenon subject to ebbs and tides over the course of history, as argued in the essay by Laurence Whitehead in this collection.

What is not in doubt is the inherent capacity of affective polarization to erode the civic foundations on which democratic institutions rest. Affective polarization not only is more likely to favor co-partisans and discriminate against partisan opponents in economic transactions[7] but also reduces trust in government when the opposing party holds power.[8] Significantly, affective polarization spurns social and political actors who uphold cross-cutting

[2] Charles Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650−2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Adam Przeworski and John D. Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Adrienne LeBas, "Can Polarization Be Positive? Conflict and Institutional Development in Africa," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 59-74.

[3] Yilmaz Esmer, "Identity Politics: Extreme Polarization and the Loss of Capacity to Compromise in Turkey," in *Democracy under Threat: The Legitimacy Question*, ed. Ursula van Beek (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[4] Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "The Ideological Foundations of Affective Polarization in the US Electorate," *American Politics Research* 45, no. 4 (2017): 621-647.

[5] Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018).

[6] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crow, 2018).

[7] Christopher McConnell, Yotam Margalit, Neil Malhotra, and Mathew Levendusky, "The Economic Consequences of Partisanship in a Polarized Era," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 1 (2018): 5-18.

[8] Marc Hetherington and Thomas Rudolph, *Why Washington Won't Work: Polarization, Political Trust and the Governing Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

attachments; it favors actors who display unyielding exclusionary positions and promote a rhetoric contributing to the process of building antagonistic political identities. In the long run, affective polarization undermines the institutional and psychological foundations on which to build and sustain democracy.[9] This is because affective polarization helps transform multiple conflict lines into an antagonistic bipolar formation where accommodation and compromises seem, or actually are, no longer possible. The process cements ingroup loyalty against what is perceived as outgroups amid rising mutual hostility. Once that dynamic has been set in motion, it can become self-replicating and may spiral out of control with damaging consequences for democracy.[10]

The key question is what triggers the switch from democracy-strengthening pluralist contestation to a pernicious confrontation. Invariably, positions harden when illiberal leaders—and especially a single demagogue—gain power and start mobilizing political support under the slogan of "us" versus "them," galvanizing existing socio-cultural divisions. In many instances, the activated trajectory leads to the degeneration of democracy into its electoral form, in which regular elections might still be held but in which basic freedoms and the rule of law are curtailed. In some cases, the trajectory may terminate in a permanent regime change.

Data provided by the 2022 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Report[11] ring alarm bells. This report shows that polarization is one of the most significant drivers of globally progressing, what it calls, "autocratization." Defined as a phenomenon eroding respect for counter opinions—the hallmark of deliberative democracy—the report also shows that polarization is a dominant trend in forty countries, an increase from five in 2011. Even more concerning is the presented evidence that polarization intensified across all world regions—regardless of the size, economic performance, or level of democracy in a given country.[12]

The Pole Formation

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet... .
Rudyard Kipling

Roots

Ronald Inglehart, a preeminent American political scientist, and Christopher Lasch, a somewhat controversial American historian, differed sharply on the impact of cultural values on polarization, but they both had reached the same conclusion on inequality, which they considered to be the

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[9] Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, "Déjà Vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 3-15.

[10] Murat Somer, "Cascades of Ethnic Polarization: Lessons from Yugoslavia," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 1 (2001): 127-151.

[11] Democracy Report 2022: Autocratisation Changing Nature—NextIAS, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden (accessed May 28, 2022).

[12] Ibid., 32.

major driver behind polarization and ultimately a political question. Although their deliberations referred primarily to the social and economic cleavages in the United States, the underlying dynamic feeding the pernicious form of polarization can be applied to most democratic states.

Inglehart and Lasch shared the view that the key political conflict was no longer between the working class and the middle class and instead between the rich and the rest of society. Writing in the 1990s, Lasch observed that in the United States the top tenth owned more than half of the country's wealth, and he predicted that the decline of pensions and savings would lead to the collapse of the middle class.[13] Some two decades later, Inglehart wrote about the divide between the one percent and the 99 percent and about an economy that concentrates wealth and political power in the hands of a small minority, while undermining existential security for most of the population. He quoted some figures to illustrate the point: while in 1965 the average CEO across the largest U.S. companies earned twenty times more than the company's average worker, in 1989 the figure had grown to fifty-eight times as much, and it increased to 354 times as much by 2012. He concluded with the sobering reflection: "We are living in a world where the people who drove General Motors into bankruptcy were able to retire with huge bonuses, while the workers lost their jobs and benefits."[14]

The skewed proportions are mirrored in the political realm, with negative consequences for the proper functioning of democracy in its core principles of representation and responsiveness. A report produced by a task force established by the American Political Science Association made it clear that the privileged are increasingly politically active and better organized in pressing their demands on public officials, who, in turn, are more responsive to them than to average citizens. As the report observed: "Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policy-makers readily hear and routinely follow."[15]

Economic and political inequalities are embedded in and are amplified by the underlying incompatible values. Lasch traced this unsustainable trajectory back to the cultural radicalism of the 1960s, maintaining that the movement eroded common values and created a gulf between social classes. He pointed out that if there were no shared values to hold people together, there was nothing to stop the rich and powerful from trampling over the rest of society. Lasch also blamed societal divisions on the capitalist market. He underscored

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[13] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

[14] Ronald F. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution: People's Motivations Are Changing and Reshaping the World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 150.

[15] American Political Science Association, *Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy*, DraftReport.indd (apsanet.org), 2004, p. 1 (accessed November 3, 2021).

the market-driven tendency to encourage instant gratification indulged in mostly by members of the new elite who could afford it. Members of this new class, who in his view started to treat "Middle America" with contempt, cultivate global trends of fast-moving money, glamour, and fashion. They are the winners of the knowledge economy, displaying many of the vices of the erstwhile aristocracy but retaining none of its virtues.

Inglehart also regarded the upheavals of the late 1960s as the turning point that has prompted a new set of values, not just in the U.S. but also around the world. He labeled the transformation of values "postmaterialism" and popularized it in decades-long and ongoing World Values Surveys, which map empirically the changes in the orientation of global values. But whereas Lasch considered the cultural revolt of the era in entirely negative terms, Inglehart saw it as a progressive development. The cultural revolt, or what he termed the "silent revolution," shifted traditional survival-focused values toward orientations advocating environmental protection, individual rights, self-expression, and gender equality. Inglehart was fully aware that the shift threatened the erosion of the old familiar norms and, from the very beginning, therefore was bound to be met with strong negative reactions by the older and less secure strata of the population. He concluded for that reason that postmaterialism might have been "its own gravedigger."[16] The recent sharp rise in polarization appears to prove this assumption to be right.

Inglehart placed the discussion about values conflict in a wider context by drawing attention to two other key aspects. The first is inequality brought about by the drastically reduced number of industrial workers and the concomitant weakening of the traditional labor-oriented electoral base of political parties that once had enabled the implementation of the welfare state. In conjunction with automation and outsourcing, the bargaining position of industrial workers largely has been swept aside. Second, echoing concerns Lasch expressed about the collapse of the middle class, Inglehart noted the reduced bargaining capacity of the middle classes inherent in the rise of the artificial intelligence economy, citing the domain of law as an example. What was once considered a secure and well-paid profession no longer belongs in that category. In the past, large numbers of new law graduates were hired by law firms to sift through thousands of pages of pretrial documents; today, the process of discovery is much faster, cheaper, and more accurately executed by computers. As a result, some 40 percent of law graduates in the United States either do not get jobs requiring a law degree or are unemployed or underemployed.[17]

What is relevant to the current discussion and echoes the above concerns is that the shift away from traditional values has produced a new mode of identity formation. The traditional value of frugality has been replaced by consumption-

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[16] Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*, 130.

[17] Ibid., 155.

based forms of self-realization. The consumer market has become the arena of identity construction, while consumption-based lifestyles have emerged as a mode of self-articulation. But as economic growth rates move downward, consumption-based forms of self-realization can be sustained increasingly only by some. The simultaneous scaling down of redistributive policies affect not only specific social groups but also all individuals who want to retain their emancipatory achievements and further their aspirations. The outcome is increasing exclusion and inequality.[18]

Political Context and the Role of Social Media
At the heart of polarization lies cultural identity defined by specific sets of values. The clash of values alone is natural and mostly innocuous in a democratic polity. For conflicting normative attitudes to become toxic, two other conditions must come into play. The first is the clustering of people who share not just common cultural values but also common feelings about real or imagined social deprivation, which they experience as restricted social participation imposed by a lack of material resources. The second indispensable condition is the entry into the fray of a political party or leader capable of both manipulating these popular sentiments and exacerbating social grievances for political gain. When the resentful target group becomes large enough to secure a significant vote for the relevant party, the course for destabilization of democracy has been set.[19]

Since the party-voter relationship is symbiotic, the intriguing question is whether popular support for illiberal parties implies voters no longer care much for democracy or have been duped into believing they are doing their democratic duty. Initially, the latter is not difficult to achieve, given that illiberal parties are democratically elected and often start as being—or pretending to be—democratic. Then systematically, and typically over a period of more than one electoral cycle, they work on shrinking the political space for the opposition, while still following constitutionally mandated procedures as they climb the political ladder. In cases where they have managed to reach the top, they invariably violate at least some of the very procedures that brought them to power.[20] At that point, they no longer uphold the democracy pretence

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[18] Ingolfur Blühdorn and Felix Butzlaff, "Rethinking Populism: Peak Democracy, Liquid Identity and the Performance of Sovereignty," *European Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 2 (2018): 191-211.

[19] According to a study utilizing annual Freedom House data that downgraded a country from Free or Partly Free and traced the percentage of all democratic breakdowns between 1973 and 2018, incumbent-driven democratic subversions accounted for nearly 90 percent; of the 197 downgrades, 88 were ascribed to executive takeovers. See Milan W. Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 20.

[20] Jozef Niznk, "Populism as a Corruption of Democracy," paper presented at the conference of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), Prague, November 10, 2016, and Marc F. Plattner, "Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 5-19.

and instead assume an overtly illiberal character—and yet they continue to enjoy popular voter support, suggesting that voters place partisan interests above democratic principles.

One convincing explanation of why presumably democratic publics support overtly nondemocratic parties arises from empirical evidence in countries where the shift toward illiberalism is in progress or already has run its full course. The evidence proves that voters support parties that vocalize the voters' own convictions, their individual awareness of self/group (identity politics), and/or their collective sense of injustice (inequalities). Most significantly, the relationship is reciprocal: voters become the unwitting accomplices in helping aspiring autocrats to subvert democracy.

The results of an experimental survey conducted in Turkey, Venezuela, and the United States help to clarify the process. The survey asked respondents to choose between hypothetical candidates categorized by the candidates' respective policy platforms, party affiliations, and demographic characteristics. Some of the candidates were shown to display tendencies that would violate one or more key democratic principles in varying degrees of severity but approximating some violations elected incumbents have or have attempted to use in the given country. The object of the candidate-choice experiment was to establish whether voters valued democracy enough to punish politicians who disregarded democratic principles and, more to the point, whether they were still willing to do so when it required them to vote against their own political interests or partisan loyalties. Significant number of respondents in all three countries turned out to be partisans first and democrats second, with centrists constituting the key democratic force.[21]

The same survey placed a question mark over the conventional method used to measure citizens' commitment to democratic values. For over half a century, survey research on democracy has been based on the concept of popular civic culture,[22] that is, on the assumption that prodemocratic publics safeguard democracy by keeping opportunistic elites in check. The experimental survey revealed that large majorities in countries experiencing democratic erosion continued to express solid commitment to democracy. The conclusion drawn from the findings was that asking respondents directly whether they support democracy elicits socially desirable and politically correct responses. A change in methodology has been suggested as a corrective: rather than measuring support for democracy by what respondents say, they should be asked to make choices that would reveal whether they are ready to place democratic principles above their partisan interests.[23]

[21] Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy," 21-32.

[22] Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

[23] Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy."

Nowadays, the party-voter relationship is strongly underpinned by social media, which connect popular values and emotions to political parties. The power of the so-called echo chambers as promoters of polarized views and unsubstantiated beliefs that take root and flourish within a society cannot be stressed strongly enough. Furthermore, social media's influence to spread extreme popular views and beliefs is amplified by the ability of politicians to manipulate polarized positions for political gain with mutually reinforcing effects. A significant phenomenon in this scenario is that of post-truth politics, in which facts are no longer relevant. What matters is the acceptance of a particular narrative, which blinds people to any alternative moral universe.[24]

One of the increasing number of studies examining the phenomenon drew attention to what has become known as "correlation neglect." The term refers to the shortcut voters take in processing and comprehending the overload of information they receive from various traditional offline and online media as well as from social media sources. The method involves treating all sources as if they contained independent information, whereas, in fact, news items often are copied multiple times and broadcast across different outlets.[25] Voters adopting correlation neglect are more prone to accept extreme beliefs. According to Gilat Levy and Ronny Razin, voters are also at a greater risk of being cheaply and effectively targeted in political campaigns that tend to bombard would-be voters with information confirming their beliefs, although these voters are unaware that ultimately the information often comes from the same source.[26] A model offered by Gilat et al. documents the effect of the combination between correlation neglect and political campaigning. The analyses show that the permutation has differing effects on the target groups: extreme voters become more extreme and moderate voters become more confused and unpredictable.[27]

Poles Apart

The Past Informs the Present
In 1989, Poland transited to democracy and not long thereafter became the regional poster child for a highly successful post-communist transformation.

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[24] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

[25] One study found that only 32.6 percent of online content was original. See Julia Cagé, Nicolas Hervé, and Maie-Luce Viaud, "The Production of Information in an Online World: Is Copy Right?" CEPR Discussion Paper 12066 (2017), wp72-cage-herve-viaud.pdf (sciencespo. fr) (accessed October 10, 2021).

[26] Gilat Levy and Ronny Razin, "Social Media and Political Polarisation," *LSE Public Policy Review* 1, no. 1 (2020), Social Media and Political Polarisation (lse.ac.uk) (accessed October 20, 2021).

[27] Gilat Levy, Moreno de Barreda Inés, and Ronny Razin, "Polarized Extremes and the Confused Centre: Campaign Targeting of Voters with Correlation Neglect," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 2: (2021): 139-155.

Today, the country is ruled by an illiberal government and is one of the most polarized in Europe. The evolution of polarization, driven by the inequality and clash of values described in the previous section, applies fully to Poland—although not necessarily to every other case, as each one is idiosyncratic. However, no case can be wholly understood without taking path dependence into account.

In the case of Poland, two major historical factors merit a mention. The first long-term influence bearing on the present is the character of a historically formed cultural identity. Since the unification of Poland in 966 C.E., known tellingly as the country's baptism, cultural identity has been shaped by the Catholic religion. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Catholicism and nationalism became tightly intertwined following Poland's disappearance from the map of Europe for 123 years. Partitioned by neighboring Russia, Prussia, and Austria, the stateless but proud and politically conscious Poles anchored their cultural identity in the Roman Church as a means by which to maintain a common sense of belonging to a national community across all the occupied territories. Upon regaining independent statehood in 1918, both the Catholic identity and the position of the Church remained strong. German occupation policy in Poland during World War II decimated the Catholic clergy and largely destroyed the economic base of the Church through confiscations of property and the closure of many seminaries. Yet, though greatly weakened, the Church entered the communist period of Polish history as an enduring national symbol of unity and resistance against Marxist atheism.[28]

The election of Karol Wojtyla as Pope John Paul II in 1978 was another milestone in the Catholic-Pole symbiotic relationship. The Pontiff's first visit to his homeland the following year endowed the Polish society with a shared feeling of national and ethical oneness that shattered the societal atomization manufactured by the communist regime. Millions of Poles attended the Pontiff's masses and lined the routes of his procession in a disciplined and well-coordinated manner, managed by an army of volunteers. A year later, in August 1980, this resource was successfully remobilized to form the trade union, Solidarity. Within the first few weeks of its existence, the social movement evolved into a proto-civil society of over ten million people, opening the door to a previously unimaginable public discourse. Outlawed by the imposition of martial law in December 1981, Solidarity survived underground while its spirit was kept alive by the Church.[29]

Throughout the communist period, the fault line ran between the religious majority and the secular elite, separating "us"—the real Poles—from "them"—the Soviet-imposed ruling communist puppets. In this divide, the Church

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[28] Ursula van Beek, ed., *Democracy under Scrutiny: Elites, Citizens, Cultures* (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2010).

[29] Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski, "Vicissitudes of Ethical Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 20, no. 1. (2007): 33-46.

assumed a civic dimension and stood on the side of "us," in firm opposition to the regime.[30] A development of significant consequence occurred when the "us," comprised of a coalition of ordinary people and Catholic intellectuals, were joined by dissident Left intellectuals who were able to put aside their long-standing anticlerical tradition and engage in a dialogue. This unlikely alliance ultimately gave rise to the trade union, Solidarity.[31]

More to the point in the context of the current discussion is the fact that popular resistance to the communist regime under the Christian umbrella became the voice of liberty. During the years of severe Stalinist repression, the traditional model of the Catholic-Pole came to be linked to the secular principle of the rights of man. Invoking the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski called for freedom of assembly, arguing that only voluntary association—not association imposed by the regime—could eliminate the existing vacuum between the citizen and the state. He championed the defense of one's own rights, something he regarded as a matter of inner freedom that promoted an atmosphere in which "the citizen will not be afraid to defend his rights when they are being violated."[32]

The second relevant factor to consider is the type of autocratic regime from which a country transits to democracy, since each type creates different problems after transition.[33] In the case of Poland, and communist regimes in general, the Marxist ideology of predetermined historical processes tended to instill passivity and a heavy reliance on the state by citizens. Such attributes would not have augured well for an easy adjustment to a competitive market economy associated with liberal democracy, even under ideal conditions. In practice, the arrival of capitalism brought with it unemployment, social divisions, and inequalities, traits unknown under communism. In addition, the hugely successful "shock therapy" that had transformed Poland's stale planned economy into a thriving market economy created a new middle class and financial upper class. Given the absence of policies ensuring an equitable development of the society as a whole and the simultaneous reduction of the role of the state, the soaring hopes for a just and participatory social order widely associated with liberal democracy did not materialize for most Poles.

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[30] Miroslawa Grabowska, "Religijnosc i Kosciol w procesie transformacji w Polsce" [Religiosity and the church in the process of transformation in Poland], in *Pierwsza dekada niepodleglosci* [The first decade of independence], ed. Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski and Marek Ziolkowski, Proba socjologicznej syntezy [A sociological synthesis] (Warsaw: ISP-PAN, 2001).

[31] Adam Michnik, *Kosciol, Lewica, Dialog* [The church, the left, the dialogue] (Warsaw: Swiat Ksiazki, 1998).

[32] Adam Michnik, *The Church and the Left* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 116.

[33] Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1991): 115-144, and Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972−2006* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Three distinct areas of conflict have been identified as present from the outset of the systemic transformation.[34] The first was the clash of worldviews in the public sphere. The contemplation by the new state of implementing polices aligned with the teachings of the Church and reflecting the Catholic doctrine in public life with regard to abortion, same-sex unions, or homosexuality, was strongly criticized by parties on the Left of the political spectrum.

The second set of disagreements had to do with the political process. The critique focused on the way the "round table" negotiations toward democracy between the erstwhile regime and the opposition had been conducted, with the result that there was no definite break with the communist past. Right-wing parties accused moderates in Solidarity who participated in the negotiations of being too soft, creating conditions which, instead of lustration and bringing former functionaries to book, enabled creation of so-called "nomenklatura capitalism," with members of the former communist elite becoming beneficiaries of the new system. The way the economic and social transformation was unfolding was the third bone of contention, in step with inequalities and falling standards in education and healthcare becoming evident.

Many commentators recognized the potential for the emergence of conflicts early on. They sent warning signals that democracy in Poland was not as solid as was generally assumed outside the country. As one author noted, no one expected that the highly coveted and much idealized democracy would bring with it capitalism of the kind that would result in cultural paucity, a philosophical vacuum, Poland's dependence on foreign countries, and generally falling standards, especially in education and healthcare. "Nor did anyone anticipate the emergence of deep economic inequalities, or that street smarts would become a trait to be admired."[35]

For the above reasons, the arrival of democracy failed to meet popular expectations. Over the course of time, many citizens came to equate liberalism with all evil, seeing it as an ideology that was devoid of moral values, responsible for social divisions, anti-Catholic Church (hence anti-Polish), and guilty of perpetuating neoliberal exploitation globally.

Furthermore, and significantly, members of the ruling liberal elite came to be regarded as detached technocrats who, obsessed as they were with the market, had lost all interest in the welfare of ordinary people. The political elite indeed were preoccupied mainly with "catching up" with the West. In

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[34] Joanna Sanecka-Tyczyńska, "Ocena III Rzeczypospolitej — płaszczyzna polaryzacji współczesnej polskiej sceny politycznej" [Appraisal of the state of the Third Republic — Polarization of the current political scene], *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Politologica* [Pedagogical Annals of the University of Cracow: Political Studies] 14 (2015): 99-114.

[35] Maria Szyszkowska, *Filozofia Polityki, Filozofia Prawa, Filozofia Tworczosci* [Philisohpy of politics, philosophy of the law, philosophy of creativity] (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 1993), 54.

the process, they neglected to promote the broader aspects of liberalism and to impart to society as a whole the emancipatory essence of liberal values; the last omission sometimes has been attributed to their reluctance to openly promote those values for fear of evoking the animus of the Catholic Church.[36] The liberal leadership collapsed the political and normative spheres into the economic one, creating the overwhelming impression that liberalism was essentially about everybody becoming rich, or at least better off.

Other voices warned about the absence of political thought, including the general lack of a vision that would mobilize genuine support for liberal democracy among the majority of the people and offer to them some measure of a new political identity. According to one author, the articulation of a target goal was of critical importance for the democratic political project to succeed in the long run because average citizens needed a reference point for the formulation of their political preferences: "If there is no vision, there is nothing to identify with and there is nothing to support,"[37] with the result that values morph into interests.

The warnings fell on deaf ears. The detached liberal elite failed to appeal to people's minds and hearts. By so doing, they had opened political space for critics who were unafraid to stir up passions and paint a black and white picture of "us," the good guys, versus "them," the bad ones, and who started promoting emancipation from the "dictatorship" of global capital and from the European Union (EU). The new actors entering the political scene became highly adept at unscrupulously manipulating societal apprehensions. The skillful conflict entrepreneurs invoked the familiar calming symbols of the Catholic Church and the Polish nation under its moral guidance in an alien world. The messages fitted perfectly into the troubled *Zeitgeist*, with all its anxieties.[38]

The first cracks started to appear with the disintegration of the nationwide Solidarity movement, which had splintered into several ideological groupings and parties. The disintegration facilitated the entrance onto the political scene of many new actors, including some old communists now regrouped under different guises. This development was not exactly surprising, given the ideologically varied components of the alliance and the disappearance of the common "enemy." In fact, the disintegration could be regarded as a step in the right direction on the road toward democratic multiparty politics. But in the case of Poland, it has led to extraordinarily deep cleavages, with the various parties clashing over—and unable to comprise on—most key issues, ranging

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[36] Jerzy Szacki, "Antyliberalizm po komunizmie" [Postcommunist anitliberalism], *Tygodnik Powszechny* [Popular Weekly], September 8, 2002.

[37] Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski, *Demokratyczna rekonstrukcja. Z sociologii radykalnej zmiany spolecznej* [Democratic reconstruction: From the sociology of radical social change] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1996), 271.

[38] Ursula van Beek, "The Return of a Nationalist Ethos: The Loss of Liberal Democracy in Poland," in *Democracy under Threat: The Legitimacy Question*, ed. Ursula van Beek (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 93-120.

from the merits and demerits of a market economy and privatization to what is called decommunization.[39] The political squabbles and the ensuing societal polarization moved toward a general divide between the pro-EU liberal and pro-Catholic Church nationalist factions.

Antagonistic positions have hardened significantly since October 2015, when the populist Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc*, or PiS) gained an absolute majority in the Polish Parliament. The party's Manifesto (Program PiS)[40] leaves no room for doubt on which side PiS stands politically. Couched in nationalist rhetoric with frequent references to history and tradition, the Manifesto singles out the Catholic Church and the mass media as key players in the essential task of sustaining a national identity that is supposedly reflective of true Polish values. Since attaining power and with increasing intensity, the radically conservative party supports the position of the all-powerful Polish Catholic Church on such issues as abortion, in-vitro fertilization, feminist issues, homosexuality, and immigration. In short, PiS stands against most of the values seen as progressive in Western democracies.[41]

The illiberal policies extend to Poland's foreign affairs, especially in the context of the EU. In contrast to Poland's post-communist liberal administrations, when membership in the EU was coveted and seen as a chance for the country to enjoy prosperity and find security within NATO's structures, PiS regards Europe not as a chance but as a risk—if not a danger—to Poland. The party vows not to tolerate any outside interference in Poland's sovereign affairs, even if the existing or newly implemented laws should be perceived to have been broken, a stance contributing to Poland's diplomatic isolation and the country's distancing from mainstream European politics.

The collision course with the EU has been set over PiS's introduction of media gagging laws and, above all, new rules governing the Constitutional Tribunal. PiS started to implement regulatory amendments of the latter in November 2015. The initial revisions undermined the functioning of the Constitutional Tribunal by executive usurpation of the rights to verify the Tribunal's decisions and refusal to accept and/or implement them. According to the European Commission, PiS violated the separation of powers principle

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[39] Wojciech Roszkowski, "From Communism to Where?" in *After Communism: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Radical Social Change*, ed. Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1995), 203-212; Miroslawa Grabowska, "Civil Society after 1989—Rebirth or Decease?" in *After Communism: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Radical Social Change*, ed. Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1995), 191-201; and Jacek Wasilewski, "The Crystallization of the Post-Communist and Post-Solidarity Elite," in *After Communism: A Multidisciplinary to Radical Social Change*, ed. Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1995), 117-133.

[40] Program, Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc: PiS [Program, law and justice: PiS], 2014, http://pis.org.pl/dokumenty (accessed October 11, 2016).

[41] van Beek, "The Return of a Nationalist Ethos."

by tipping the balance in favor of the executive against the judiciary by means of its majority in the legislative body. Later amendments tipped the scales further in favor of the executive by its nominations of sympathetic judges.[42]

By October 2021, most of the judges of the Constitutional Tribunal were government nominees, with the body effectively becoming the government's mouthpiece. In that capacity, the Tribunal has declared a number of EU treaty articles to be incompatible with Poland's Constitution, thus questioning the agreed upon primacy of EU law over laws regulating the member states. The declaration sparked mass protests in Poland amid fears of Polexit.[43]

The declaration also has evoked strongly critical responses from both the Committee of Legal Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the deans of Law Faculties at Polish Universities. In their respective statements, the two bodies declared the ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal in case K 3/21 of October 7, 2021, to be in violation of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and made by persons not authorized to adjudicate in matters of judicial decisions, including those taken by the EU's Court of Justice.[44]

The saving grace preventing a wholesome subversion of the judiciary by PiS, or any ruling majority party, is the built-in safeguard provided by article 178 of the Constitution that regulates the country's judiciary system. The system consists of three-tier lower courts (regional, district, appellate) and the Supreme Court. Article 178 allows the lower courts to play a surprisingly important role in that it vests in them the right to interpret the Constitution if or when the Constitutional Tribunal is unable to do so. What this means in practice is that even if PiS were to replace all the senior judges of the Constitutional Tribunal with justices sympathetic to the causes of their own party, any unconstitutional legislation could be overturned by any judge of any of the lower-tier courts. To bypass this obstruction, PiS would have to gain control of the Supreme Court, which is a court of appeals for the lower courts. Controlling the Supreme Court not only would make it easy for PiS to infringe on the Constitution in any way it pleased but also would make it possible for

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[42] In 2016, the European Commission launched a formal investigation into PiS's alleged disempowerment of the checks and balances principle protecting the independence of democratic institutions, the first such action taken by the EU against one of its full member states. See Ireneusz P. Karolewski and Roland Benedikter, "Is Poland Really Lost? Poland's Contested Governance Reforms and the Further Role of the Central Eastern European (CEE) Area in the EU," 2016, https://fsi.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/poland-cee-and-eu-karolewski-benedikter-2016-final3.pdf (accessed October 21, 2016).

[43] Liberal Culture Foundation, "Trybunał Konstytucyjny" [Constitutional tribunal], *Kultura Liberalna* [Liberal Culture], no. 665 (October 7, 2021), Trybunał Konstytucyjny Archives - Kultura Liberalna.

[44] Resolution No. 04/2021, Committee of Legal Sciences of the Polish Academy, in regard to the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal of October 7, 2021, Committee of Legal Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences resolution on the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling of 7 October — Rule of Law (accessed November 3, 2021).

the Supreme Court, invested with the power to do so, to invalidate an election should PiS lose the vote.[45]

From Atomism to Worldviews

In the scientific rendering of the word, atomism refers to the notion that all matter in the universe is composed of basic components, or *atoms*. In the field of *sociology*, atomism casts the *individual* as the basic unit of analysis in the study of social life. The theory refers to "the tendency for society to be made up of a collection of self-interested and largely *self-sufficient* individuals, operating as separate atoms."[46] Therefore, all social values, institutions, developments, and procedures evolve entirely out of the interests and actions of the individuals who constitute a particular society.

John Locke and Thomas Hobbes extended social atomism to the political realm, asserting that the social atoms forming an aggregate society must sacrifice a portion of their individual rights to form a social contract with other members of the society. According to Charles Taylor, atomism is used loosely to characterize the doctrines of social contract theory and the successor doctrines that inherited a vision of society constituted by individuals for the primary fulfilment of individual ends.[47]

In Poland, the fulfillment of such ends has been undermined by the radical political and economic transformation from communism to democracy that has changed all the familiar structures. The ensuing diminished capacity of many to fulfill their individual needs has been amplified by the absence of a new ideological compass that might have led the most economically adversely affected citizens of the newly established democratic state in the normative liberal direction.

It is therefore not very surprising that PiS, with its promotion of a historical narrative harking back to the old familiar, was voted into power in 2015 and, at the time of writing, continues in government. In the latest parliamentary election of 2019, with an unprecedently high (for Poland) 62 percent voter turnout, 44 percent of the electorate cast their votes for PiS, giving the party a 51 percent majority in the Lower House. Better coordination of the election campaign by the three opposition blocs resulted in their gaining a majority in the Senate, at least potentially enabling the opposition to put some brakes on

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[45] *Stopniowa erozja rządów prawa w cieniu sprawiedliwości okresu przejściowego* (2020– 2021) [Gradual erosion of the rule of law in the shadow of transitional justice (2020–2021)], *Concilium Civitas Almanac*, Almanac of the Concilium Civitas, a group of outstanding Polish social scientists currently working at leading universities globally, such as Stanford, Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Cambridge, and others (accessed October 19, 2021).

[46] Andrew Heywood, *Global Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[47] Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in *Philosophical Papers, Volume 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187-210.

the preceding four years of PiS's unconstrained ability to repeatedly violate various provisions of the Constitution.[48]

The election was free, but it was by no means fair because of the highly biased partisan nature of the main public media. This leverage notwithstanding, the election results revealed that PiS had failed to tip the scales decisively in favor of the party's own conception of the "common good," despite holding the reins of power for some years as a majority government. In other words, having had the opportunity and the means to exert social pressure on the electorate, the conservative option PiS promotes has not won the day outright but remains one of two main political orientations, best described as conflicting worldviews.

In the conservative worldview, it is the collective—upheld by the authority of the political rulers and the Catholic Church—to which the individual must defer. The community is understood to be bound together by tradition, patriotism, a sense of national identity, and Catholic religious faith and practice. In this context, the historically defined role the Church as the long-time defender of the Catholic Pole seems to have morphed into the position of a state within a state in democratic Poland. The new position is actively supported by the incumbent leader of the ruling PiS, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who during the latest election campaign stated: "The Church was and is the preacher of the only commonly known system of values in Poland. Apart from that we have only nihilism, which we reject."[49] The reference to nihilism is, of course, a reference to the core values inherent in the opposing liberal worldview whose concepts of the individual and the community are intertwined.

According to a recent in-depth study of polarization in Poland, which followed Talcott Parsons's approach,[50] the drive for change of the social system promoted by the ruling conservative PiS has been an attempt to satisfy the interests and values of the majority. The party's aim on taking power was to push through institutional changes as a means by which to mobilize the conservative element of the electorate and reach beyond to overcome the resistance of the liberal opposition to what the party calls the "Good change." This policy assured PiS of partially realizing its strategic goal, as evidenced by its electoral successes in 2018 and 2019. However, the approach has been only minimally successful in meeting the vested interests of the liberal segment of the electorate, particularly in the realm of values, and therefore has led to a perceptible deepening of polarization in the country since 2015.

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[48] Radoslaw Markowski, "Plurality Support for Democratic Decay: The 2019 Polish Parliamentary Election," *West European Politics* 47, no. 7 (February 17, 2020): 1513-1525, doi.org/10.1080/0 1402382.2020.1720171.

[49] Liberal Culture Foundation, "Rozdział Kościoła od państwa w Polsce. Niewykonalny?" [Separation of church and state in Poland: Undoable?], *Kultura Liberalna* [Liberal Culture], no. 572 (December 2019), kulturaliberalna.pl.

[50] Talcott Parsons, *System społeczny* [The social system] (Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS, 2009).

The empirical section of the same study considered a number of key variables accounting for the support of one or the other competing worldview. Two determinants are worth mentioning. The first is membership in a particular social class. More concretely, those socialized in the "old" strata of the population, formed during the communist period, show a strong preference for the conservative worldview. Members of the "new" classes that emerged during the democratic transformation and the formation of new social orders, inclusive of the new economic and status hierarchies, typically lean toward liberal values.

The second variable refers to the rural versus urban setting. Utilizing survey data from the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS),[51] the study showed that 62 percent of the interviewed rural dwellers supported the conservative PiS, with only 28 percent having a negative view of the party. The numbers were more or less reversed for urban dwellers of towns with a population of over 500,000; 66 percent of these respondents expressed negative opinions about PiS and its worldview, with 26 percent expressing support for the ruling party.[52]

The study concluded that the relative strength of the opposing conservative and liberal factions, with their sharply differing worldviews, is comparable; that is to say, the potential for garnering support and exerting social pressure by either side is more or less equal. This situation led the authors to assert that the country's polarization is a symptom of a chronic state of uncertainty and social tension. In their opinion, this societal anxiety is unlikely to ease, even if the liberal democratic opposition were to gain the upper political hand. What is needed, in their view, is the emergence of a new concept of the social system, one able to straddle the two opposing worldviews of the current divide.[53] Meanwhile, the fact that the illiberal party and its electorate do not dominate the political scene outright leaves room for some guarded optimism that democracy in Poland might not be in as precarious a state as it is often assumed.

Furthermore, while it is true that, given the reciprocal church-state relationship, it is possible for the former to implement religious precepts with the help of the state's instruments, there is growing opposition to this undemocratic symbiosis, as evidenced by the results of a survey conducted in May 2019. In response to the question whether the two institutions were too

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[51] CBOS, "Ocena rządów PiS po ponad trzech latach sprawowania władzy" [Assessment of the Law and Justice Party rule after more than three years in power], *Komunikat* [Bulletin], no. 18 (2019), CBOS, Centrum Badania Opinii Spolecznej: Centre for Public Opinion Research, Warsaw.

[52] Pawel Ruszkowski, Paweł Maranowski, and Andrzej Przestalski, "Polaryzacja światopoglądowa społeczeństwa polskiego a klasy i warstwy społeczne" [Polarization of worldviews of the Polish society by class and social strata] (Warsaw: Collegium Civitas, 2020), 29.

[53] Ibid.

close to each other, 62.5 percent of respondents answered in the affirmative, with only 8.7 percent considering the relationship to be not close enough.[54] Opposition to the absence of separation between the church and the state has been repeatedly the object of protests. A recent example of the trend were the mass demonstrations in October 2020 in reaction to a further tightening of the anti-abortion legislation that had brought more than half a million Poles onto the streets in some five hundred cities and towns across the country. It is worth noting that the leader of PiS defended the Supreme Court's stringent anti-abortion ruling. He condemned the protesters and called on Poles to defend the teaching of the churches "at all costs."[55]

In simplest terms, polarization is defined by the absence of tolerance. In Poland, where the ecclesiastical and the secular combined forces, tolerance is the loser.

Postscript

Each case in which the scourge of polarization has taken root is somewhat different given that each one is sociocultural and context-specific politically and has traversed its own characteristic path-dependant trajectory. Nevertheless, the cases all share at least two common features. As mentioned earlier, citizens are divided by a real or imagined sense of social and economic deprivation and/or by incompatible emotional attachments to a particular cultural or ideological identity, even if these divisions differ in degrees of intensity.

A key overarching factor that has yet to be taken into consideration is the impact of globalization on promoting and aggravating polarization and, by so doing, deepening the gulf in both attitudes and wealth in individual countries. The phenomenon has been well captured by David Goodhart who cast citizens into two categories: Anywheres and Somewheres.[56] The Anywheres derive their identity from their education and careers and are professionally mobile, meaning they can work anywhere. The identity of the Somewheres is rooted somewhere in the heartland and is defined by a particular place and the people around them. The Somewheres are socially immobile and feel threatened by the rapid social change, while at the same time being most affected by the disappearance of traditional jobs. Goodhart argues that the Somewheres have drawn the short straw. They are perceived as second-class citizens by their compatriots, while politicians ignore their concerns, especially regarding mass immigration and national identity. Globalization, in short, has been eroding

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[54] Liberal Culture Foundation, "Rozdział Kościoła od państwa w Polsce. Niewykonalny?" [Separation of church and state in Poland: Undoable?].

[55] Marek Strzelecki, "Polish Ruling Party's Backing Plunges on Abortion Ban," Bloomberg, November 2, 2020.

[56] David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).

social solidarity within nation-states by deepening the gulf between elites and those they govern or employ. The global eruption of the coronavirus has further entrenched inequalities across the world, exposing the fragility of global networks.

There is no doubt that overcoming polarization presents a great challenge for democracies because even the removal of a polarizing incumbent from power does not automatically eradicate the entrenched political and societal mistrust—if not hatred—of the "other." It will take painstaking consensus-building through public deliberation by skillful political elites and the implementation of prudent policies by the succeeding political parties. Much will also depend on convincing the often sizable noncommitted center to actively participate in the democratic renewal process.