

Humanism Under Siege: The Janus Face of the Modern Revolution of Dignity

Nina Witoszek

Oslo University, Norway

e-mail: Nina.witoszek@sum.uio.no

ORCID: 0000-0002-5354-4664

Abstract

The article interprets the crisis of liberal democracy in the 21st century as the result of an ongoing, dual revolution of dignity. One such revolution is the work of “humanist outliers”: small groups and individuals dedicated to compassionate social emancipation. Thus anti-authoritarian revolutions like that of Solidarity in Poland (1980–81) succeed in large part thanks to cultural and political innovations springing from the work of such small groups. However, the humanist revolution of dignity – featuring altruism and cooperation – has its “tribal doppelgänger”: a twin revolution that strives to reclaim national dignity and pride at the price of submission to authoritarian rule.

Keywords

Humanism, altruism, small groups, emancipative movements, revolution of dignity

Mapping the Crisis

There have been numerous interpretations as to why countries like Poland – which was the locus of the greatest anti-authoritarian revolution in Europe between 1980 and 1989 – have embraced the ‘new authoritarianism’ in the second decade of the 21st century. A number of sociologists and historians¹ have spoken about

¹ See, for example, Tadeusz Kowalik, *From Solidarity to Sellout: The Restoration of Capitalism in Poland*, trans. Eliza Lewandowska (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012). See also David

the “defeat” and “sell-out” of *Solidarność* and its key ideals as flowing from the arrogance and selfishness of political and intellectual elites and their indifference to the human costs of neoliberal acceleration. The ongoing retreat of liberal values in 21st century Europe has been labelled a ‘counter-revolution’² by Jan Zielonka: a situation where complacent political and intellectual elites are again seen as the villains of the piece. One of Zielonka’s proposed remedies is a shift from studies of populism to shining a light on liberal elites’ self-image, a quest that would unearth their complicity in manufacturing the incremental derailment of democratic politics.

But there is also research that suggests that fashionable elite-bashing may simplify understanding of the mechanisms behind the neo-authoritarian turn. In a sociological study of a small Polish city that had overwhelmingly voted for the Law and Justice ‘neo-authoritarians’, the conclusion was that the majority that had voted for the PIS were not paupers or losers, but members of the middle class who did not care about politics: they were anxious to preserve their positions and reclaim “national security and pride”. Similarly, feminist scholars, such as Magdalena Środa, unimpressed by the ‘arrogant elites’ theory, have pointed to the religiously bolstered entrenchment of patriarchy in Polish society and the electorate’s political illiteracy – societal flaws that provoke acquiescence in the face of the “rule of imbeciles and priests”.³

An intriguing interpretation of the current neo-authoritarian turn in Eastern Europe has been offered by Ivan Krastev.⁴ Krastev speaks of parallels between the growth of populist aggression in Eastern Europe and the dynamics of ethnic integration in the West. The first generation usually perceives its integration as a success. Fundamentalism emerges in the second generation, whose representatives were born in the new country. Inevitably, they begin to register the loss of indigenous tradition, the humiliations of being different, as well as noticing weaknesses and derelictions of the hosts to whom their parents had previously looked up. In this reading, the populists in Eastern Europe can be perceived as the ‘second generation of immigrants’. This new generation discovers that trying to imitate Western Europe is an unattainable ideal. They are split. One imperative says: ‘Be as in the West’, the other: ‘Don’t be a copy, be yourself, Germany is as corrupt as Bulgaria: just think of the Volkswagen scandal’.

There are other, more psycho-social interpretations of the crisis of democracy in Eastern Europe. Andrzej Leder in his Lacan-inspired study of the post-WW2 Poland,⁵ argues that the Polish fascistoid decade in the 21st century has its deep roots in a suppressed, triple trauma linked to the horrors of the twentieth century:

Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

² Jan Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ Magdalena Środa, “Po co kościół obesesyjnie zajmuje się seksem?” *Rzeczpospolita*, 4 May 2009; Nina Witoszek and Magdalena Środa, “Kvinnelige ofre i nytt katolsk-nasjonalistisk Polen”, *Aftenposten*, 29 May 2016.

⁴ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Allen Lane, 2019); I. Krastev, “Naśladowanie zachodu już się wyczerpało,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 28 December 2019, www.wyborcza.pl/naszaeuropa/7,168189,25549011,nasladowanie-zachodu-sie-wyczerpalo.html

⁵ Andrzej Leder, *Prześlona Rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014).

a forced transition from a peasant to an urban society; the German extermination of the Jews which benefited large parts of the Polish nation; and the liquidation of the Polish middle classes by the Nazis and the Bolsheviks. All three tragedies have not just led to the ‘peasantification’ and brutalization of society; they provoked a largely ‘unprocessed’, savage revolution – orchestrated both by the former German and Soviet occupiers and by the Poles themselves: a symbolic and existential catastrophe that haunts the present.⁶

To move to a broader context, Francis Fukuyama interprets the populist turn not as limited to Orbán’s Hungary or Kaczyński’s Poland, but as rife in a number of societies, from Trumpian America to Modi’s India. This regression, Fukuyama argues, is partly a social response to economic and technological shifts of globalization, and partly due to what he calls the ‘rise of identity politics’.⁷ Before the twenty-first century, politics had been dominated by economic issues; today it is less defined by economic and ideological challenges and more by questions of identity, such as the rights of marginalized groups, immigrants, LGBTs, feminists, or environmentalists. The right, on the other hand, has successfully reinvented itself as a patriotic incarnation of national identity, explicitly connected to race, ethnicity and religion.

Fukuyama’s diagnosis is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, one could argue that in the last decades of the twentieth century, the Left gave in to the Right not just by practising identity politics, but by its visionless disregard of important economic issues. Secondly, Fukuyama’s panacea – promoting ‘creedal national identities’⁸ anchored in society’s core values and beliefs – ignores the fact that that these values are not necessarily benign. On the contrary, in many cases, they are anchored in resentment and hostility to the Other.

The Dual Revolution of Dignity

In this essay, I shall argue three points: Firstly, there is, in fact, not one ‘counterrevolution’, but *two revolutions* going on simultaneously and polarizing societies in many corners of the world. Though they have different programmes – one invoking aggressive tribalism, and the other calling for a more inclusive and humane society – they share the same telos: a profound social desire for dignity, recognition and respect. This desire – captured by the Platonic concept of *thymos* – is part of human evolutionary equipment. As has been argued by the third wave of evolutionary science, apart from competitive, selfish genes, humans share an altruistic impulse and cooperative skills.⁹ In what is now termed a ‘coevolution’ – equally influenced by genes and by cultural heritage – there is constant feedback

⁶ Leder, *Prześlona Rewolucja*, 2014, 10–11.

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, “Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy”, *Foreign Affairs*, 97, 5 (2018), 95–115.

⁸ Fukuyama, “Against Identity Politics”, 106.

⁹ For example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and Its Evolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); David Sloan Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist? Culture, Genes and the Welfare of Others* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

between that part of a culture that strives for reclaiming dignity through cultivating selfish and competitive behaviour, and the other part, which seeks recognition and self-respect through altruistic deeds.

My second point relates to the findings that indicate that the authoritarian turn in Poland after 2015 cannot be seen merely as a reaction to economic hardships. On the contrary, in the second decade of the twenty-first century – before the onset of the Covid 19 Pandemic – all the indices of Polish economic performance were exemplary: one of the highest growth rates in Europe (5 per cent), low unemployment (around 3 per cent) and relatively low Gini coefficient.¹⁰ We should look for other, pivotal, but non-economic sources of the Polish electorate's support for the despotic regime.¹¹ Some of them have to do with a long historical legacy of Poland as a borderline country, suspended between the West and East, and navigating between the experience of being an autonomous agent on the one hand, and a disempowered vassal on the other. This predicament is not just geopolitical but cultural as well, and it has accounted for an enduring national agon: the defenders of the European as well as cosmopolitan dignity have always been challenged by the 'necromancers', feeding national identity with narratives of past wrongs (and, occasionally, doubtful glories) and dreaming of a strongman who would recover national pride and ensure the protection of the national home against the 'alien hordes'.

Thus the revolution which strives to ascribe intrinsic value to women, children, ethnic and gender minorities, and – increasingly – to Nature, clashes with the revolution feeding on a sense of injustice and the cult of the 'whisper of blood, and the pleading of bone', to use Knut Hamsun's metaphor. But, in the last instance, both revolutions are two different responses to modernity's Janus face: one expands the individual self, and the other submits it to the rule of the tribe.

My third point runs counter to the assaults on the elites as the main culprit in the antidemocratic regression. I contend that, certainly in Poland, the nationalist, closed-society movement has been counterpointed by the Polish intelligentsia's ongoing struggle against dehumanizing, authoritarian forces. As I have argued elsewhere¹², the humanist revolution of dignity is far from being a conceit, projecting Western tastes and values onto the rest of the world. On the contrary, it is a universal, altruistic project – driven by courageous activists, lawyers, teachers, thinkers and artists everywhere – all of them attesting to the better part of our humanity. The non-violent movement that challenges the authoritarian regime by reclaiming human dignity has become as vigorous as the inverse process of the retribalization of the world. It was *Godność*, *Wolność* and *Solidarność* ('dignity', 'freedom' and 'solidarity') that were the rallying cries of the anti-communist Solidarity movement in 1980–81, and the 2014 'Revolution of Dignity' in Ukraine. Similarly, the leaders of the Hong Kong pro-democracy *Umbrella Revolution* in the same year defined reclaiming human dignity as one of their chief objectives.¹³

¹⁰ See OECD data: <https://www.oecd.org/sdd/oecdmaineconomicindicatorsmei.htm>, 2019.

¹¹ See Timothy Garton Ash. "It's the Kultur, Stupid," *New York Review of Books*, 7 December 2017, www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/12/07/germany-alt-right-kultur-stupid/

¹² Nina Witoszek, *The Origins of Anti-Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹³ Joshua Wong, the leader of the democratic protesters insisted that 'by vetoing this electoral reform proposal, we are able to keep our dignity'. See Ishi Iyengar, "Barricades are down..." *Time*, 24 September 2015, www.time.com/4047648/hong-kong-umbrella-revolution-occupy-anniversary/

In 2011 in Cairo, the protesters at Tahrir Square demanded that their rulers give them back their work and their dignity.¹⁴

That said, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the humanist revolution of dignity seems to have suffered a dramatic backlash. Most emancipative movements – from Egypt to Libya – plunged back into a dictatorship or a long and vicious war, full of unspeakable bestiality and countless casualties. Poland, once the best pupil in the democratization class, elected a reactionary, nationalist-socialist government in 2015. Needless to say, the crisis of democracy and the resurgence of diverse forms of extremism, have encouraged scepticism about the prospects for a humanist revolution in the twenty-first century. One may ask: what is the point of resistance to dictatorial regimes if the price is so high? Why not wait until influential political players (say, a new Gorbachev), or a concert of great powers change the geopolitical map? Why not conform, consume or condone?

One answer to this question is that, if pragmatic survivalism was the only ‘game in town’ and stories and rites of dignity stopped being replicated, humanity would have never managed to generate modern, enabling welfare states. The Scandinavian case illustrates that the most successful examples of fair societies are as much products of mixed economies and well-functioning institutions as *moral* outcomes of strong humanist traditions.¹⁵ Here I contend that, while there are countless differences between the revolutions of dignity in various corners of the world, the future and sustainability of the humanist revolutions everywhere is ultimately dependent on the existence of *small, brave, altruistic groups* – the catalysts of change.

The Anti-Authoritarianism of the ‘Humanist Outliers’

Influential studies of the anti-authoritarian mobilization in Poland in 1980–89 have drawn attention to the paramount role of the labour movement, the Catholic Church and religious and political networks.¹⁶ I argue that the humanist revolution of dignity happens as it were *behind* social movements and organized networks. Though the democratic paradigm shift ultimately needs the critical mass of protesters, it is first contemplated and designed in the work of altruist individuals

¹⁴ Paul Danahar, *The New Middle East: The World after the Arab Uprising* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.

¹⁵ Nina Witoszek and Øystein Sørensen, “Nordic Humanism and the Welfare State,” in Nina Witoszek and Atle Midttun, eds., *Sustainable Modernity: The Nordic Model and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁶ E.g. Neil Ascherson, *The Polish August: The Self-Limiting Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1982); Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings* (Budapest: Central European University, 2003); Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity: A Political Sociology of Poland’s Working-Class Democratization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Maryjane Osa, *Solidarity and Contention: Networks of Polish Opposition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Cornell University Press, 2006); Alain Touraine et al., *Solidarity: Poland 1980–1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).