

The Polish *Raison d'État*. Democratic Sovereignty vs the Liberal Minimum

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Every single populist movement is wired to fail and they usually last for a relatively short time, but populism in itself remains very much alive on every continent and nothing can spell its doom.

Jerzy Szacki

Fifteen years ago, when the Białowieża Forest had not yet been plagued by a bark beetle infestation, a conference titled *Philosopher in Polis* was held in a nearby village, Białowieża. The title of the paper presented by Professor Jerzy Szacki seemed quite modest, among all the elaborate topics of speeches submitted by the other participants. The invitation list included such prominent names as Barbara Skarga, Marek J. Siemek and Cezary Wodziński. The speakers attended the meeting

because they wanted to discuss some serious, fundamental issues, such as the relationship between philosophy and politics, or politics and the truth. They also talked about the independence of philosophy, and even about “the hell that is falling from heaven” in reference to the recent attack on the World Trade Center. Professor Szacki devoted his speech to a very detailed and, as it seemed at the time, a philosophically rather uninteresting problem in the area of public discourse. The topic was “Questions about Populism.”

In his presentation, Jerzy Szacki drew attention to the growing usage of the word “populism” in contemporary political discourse, and to the poor state of literature on the subject. The question of “what is populism?” seemed to explain the desire to fill the so-called “gap” in the relevant literature. He pointed out that the term “populism” is generally uttered with a certain critical intention in mind, denoting:

... a political rhetoric aimed at reaching the public and gaining absolute its support, full of demagogic claims and empty promises.¹

Because of doubts about whether stigmatizing this type of a rhetoric with a “much older and simpler term”—“demagogy”—was sufficient, he wondered what “populism, in the strict sense of the word, actually referred to.”²

It is worth considering the relationship between questions about populism, which Jerzy Szacki raised in his paper, and questions concerning liberalism, which he had tried to answer in a book ten years earlier. Clear evidence that such a relationship exists can be found in both publications. These two sets of questions have a few common points, including, on the one hand, questions about political rationality, and on the other, questions about the meaning of the word “state.” Jerzy Szacki admitted in Białowieża that in a democratic state, every politician is “to a certain degree” a populist, if they care about gaining support, and “if they do not, sooner or later they will suffer the fate similar to the members of Polish Unia Wolności (Freedom Union).”³ In his book, *Liberalism after Communism*, he noted that

¹ J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm (Questions about populism)*, [in:] M. Kowalska (ed.), *Filozof w polis*, Wydział Historyczno-Socjologiczny Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, Białystok 2004, p. 57.

² *Ibidem*, p. 58.

³ *Ibidem*.

... In the world today, as a rule the so-called liberal minimum is not rejected in toto, despite examples showing that its postulates are not respected in practice ...⁴

It can be presumed that, according to Jerzy Szacki, these two minima—a democratic (relatively “populist”) and a “liberal”—which were established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together set the boundaries of what could be called rational political practice in the modern democratic states of law. For this reason alone, it is worth looking at the answers he gave to the basic questions about the relationship between these minima.

The history of ideas today

To determine whether Jerzy Szacki’s research into populism was simply determined by *horror vacui*, or maybe something more, one should investigate the way he understood the role of the discipline he practised. The first question that arises here is whether it pertains to one or maybe several disciplines. In the preface to the new issue of the *History of Sociological Thought*, published in the same year as the materials from the conference in Białowieża, Jerzy Szacki committed himself to defining the tasks of the history of sociology, i.e. the discipline in which this particular and fundamental work was created. In order to determine his own research perspective, which he adopted in the book, he decided to treat the very history of sociology as a branch of the history of science in general, and then distinguished its three areas: the history of sociology (in its strict sense), the history of sociological thought, and the history of sociological analysis.⁵

Among these approaches to the history of sociology, differing in the scope or criteria they used to define their subject, Jerzy Szacki’s approach was to be distinguished by a more “substantive”⁶ criterion. While the history of sociology in the strict sense, guided by the formal criterion, was “tracking cognitive activity conducted under the name of ‘sociology’;” and the history of sociological analysis, guided by the methodological criterion,

⁴ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, Kraków 1994, p. 240 (translation—Chester A. Kisiel, *Liberalism after Communism*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995, p. 196).

⁵ J. Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej (The History of Sociological Thought)*. *Wydanie nowe*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2004, p. 16.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

revolved around “the development of a scientific method for the study of social phenomena,” his preferred subdiscipline of the history of science recognized “the development of sociological problems”⁷ as its main focus. Therefore, as the history of sociological thought (in its broadest sense), it was to deal with “all thinkers who had undertaken to study sociological problems, even if they had not considered themselves sociologists,” and even more so if they had been strangers to any “science standards”⁸ of sociology in the strict sense.

Jerzy Szacki believed that thanks to this approach, “one can most accurately present the historical background of contemporary sociology and follow the subsequent revolutions in thinking about social life.”⁹ This was his justification for the choice he had made; it was connected to an answer to the question about the tasks that sociology in general has to fulfil. All the other approaches Szacki mentioned in his work were only partially able to answer that question. The implementation of the task—i.e. the reconstruction of the historical background and the stages of development of thought (now referred to as sociological thought)—was not an end in itself, in Jerzy Szacki’s opinion. It was not intended to satisfy the “selfless curiosity of the past,” but to be relevant primarily from the perspective of sociology itself. He defined the sociological problems, whose development was observed by his discipline, as problems that are “the centre of interest of contemporary sociology.”¹⁰

Defining the tasks of the discipline he practised did not in any way detract from the scientific significance of the other approaches in the history of sociology. Nevertheless, in Jerzy Szacki’s view, only such a substantive problem-oriented approach was able to satisfy the basic, undoubtedly “selfish” curiosity of sociology practised today: namely, by helping to answer a fundamental question regarding what kind of a science sociology really is.¹¹ His approach was to be as much a historical criticism as a sociological self-criticism, because he claimed that “the formation of issues considered today as sociological”¹² was the subject of the history of

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 14–15.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 14.

¹¹ J. Szacki, *Refleksje nad historią socjologii (Reflections on the History of Sociology)*, [in:] id., *Dylematy historiografii idei oraz inne szkice i studia (Dilemmas of the Historiography of Ideas and other studies)*, PWN, Warszawa 1991, p. 22.

¹² J. Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej...*, p. 17.

the concept of sociology. The main challenge Jerzy Szacki set himself was to combine at least two perspectives in his study of the history of sociology. To paraphrase Leszek Kołakowski, we can say that he looked at the history of sociology with “two different sets of eyes”¹³: those of a science historian, looking at sociology “from the outside,” and of an actual sociologist, whose main issue was “not so much how to write history, as what exactly the subject that history writes about is or is to be.”¹⁴

Jerzy Szacki’s conviction, that combining both historical and problem perspectives in the study of the history of sociology was inevitable, was connected with his wide-scope research attitude. It stemmed from the methodology which he used as a representative of a more general scientific discipline, namely the history of ideas, in which the history of a sociological idea, as well as the history of the idea of science itself, were only examples of its practical applications. He presented this attitude both in his historical works from the 1960s, recognized as his contributions to the achievements of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas, and in his later works and articles, where he relied on the assumptions, or rather the methodological dilemmas, of this school. Jerzy Szacki drew the readers’ attention to the basic problem encountered by a representative of any discipline focused on the study of ideas, doctrines or beliefs. In his mind, just as in the mind of Leszek Kołakowski, this resulted from the fact that a historian of ideas, like any historian,

... practises both history and mythology: studies events which happened in the past, but at the same time reinforces values in the awareness of future generations which form and define the culture.¹⁵

Inevitably, the historian’s “binocular” view of intellectual facts resulted from the coexistence of two completely different, if not contradictory, approaches to the past used by the practitioners of his discipline. They were answers to two different kinds of expectations that historians’ work had to fulfil. It was widely believed that such work would, on the one hand, be a reconstruction of what was, and on the other, show its “benefit for life.”

¹³ L. Kołakowski, *Dwoje oczu Spinozy (The Two Eyes of Spinoza)*, [in:] M. Drużkowski, K. Sokół (eds.), *Antynomie wolności. Z dziejów filozofii wolności (Antinomies of Freedom. The Philosophy of Freedom)*, Warszawa 1966, p. XXX.

¹⁴ J. Szacki, *Socjologia współczesna a klasycy socjologii (Classic Authors and Modern Sociology)*, [in:] id., *Dylematy historiografii idei (Dilemmas of the Historiography of Ideas)*..., p. 74.

¹⁵ J. Szacki, *Dylematy historiografii idei (Dilemmas of the Historiography of Ideas)*, [in:] id., *Dylematy historiografii idei (Dilemmas of the Historiography of Ideas)*, ..., p. 12. also: L. Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu (The Presence of a Myth)*, Instytut Literacki, Paryż 1972.

Thus, “by providing knowledge of past intellectual events,” it would also create “conditions for allowing participation in them.”¹⁶ According to Jerzy Szacki, the internal contradiction of the complex situation that faced historians of ideas resulted from the fact that it was very difficult for them as “mere” historians to satisfy both of these expectations. He claimed that

... the deeper we delve into historical context, the less we believe in the constant nature of anything and worry about the relevance of past thinkers in the reality of today. In short, the revival of the past by a historian turns out to serve as its execution, as well. The more precise and “historical” the image of the event we possess, the less relevant to the reality of today it becomes.¹⁷

Jerzy Szacki’s use of a methodological directive, according to which a historian of ideas should be both a historian and a “mythologist” during his research, was more than a nod to the expectations of a wide audience. The conviction that past intellectual phenomena should be told in a “lively” manner, in order to create at least a sense of cultural continuity, was not only due to his sensitivity to the *vox populi* of the student population and the scientific laity. It was also an expression of awareness that these two approaches to the past, referred to in the literature he alluded to as “historicism” and “presentism,” inevitably coexisted in the historiography of ideas, and that opting for only one of them would mean a betrayal of its very essence. The dispute between historicism (or, as he defined it, “contextualism”) and presentism in the methodology of historical research was considered pointless, insofar as the entire history of the historiography of ideas, he wrote, “starting at least from Hegel, can be read as a series of attempts to deal with dilemmas resulting from this coexistence.”¹⁸

If one were to ask Jerzy Szacki where the inevitability of these dilemmas stemmed from, he would probably answer that it was rooted in the indelible human condition of a historian of ideas, and in the fact that the aforementioned *vox populi* also represented his own stance on the matter.

Truth be told, he pointed out, we begin by discovering a still alive thinker and only then do we undertake deeper historical study: ... the initiative does not belong to historians—unless they are more than that.¹⁹

¹⁶ J. Szacki, *Dylematy historiografii idei*, p. 15.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

Even if they justify the undertaking of specified historical research by the discovery of a terrifyingly massive gap, Jerzy Szacki would certainly state that they could not fully realize the meaning of their initiative, and they had not confessed the proper reasons why the gap had become a centre of their contemporary interest. The intellectual phenomena which are the concern of a historian of ideas, such as “populism” or “liberalism,” he wrote, “are marked by a double, one can say, chronological affiliation.” As he noted, “one who belongs to the past by virtue of one’s metrics ... also belongs to the present,” because engaging in research means undertaking a search for “answers to modern questions” that ignores, without hesitation, everything that seems to be irrelevant.²⁰

Polish liberalism—the challenge

Jerzy Szacki began his book *The Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes* with a statement proclaiming that it had not been inspired by an “intention to fill the gap in the knowledge on political movements of the Great French Revolution era.”²¹ While the proper “human” reasons for Szacki’s decision to make the visions of the world of French antagonists of the Great Revolution the main subject of his work, back in the 1960s, is still a mystery,²² the motives for his questions about “liberalism after communism” seem quite obvious. He openly says in the Introduction to his book that there is a “shadow of liberalism” circulating around Eastern Europe. He presents liberalism as an ideology that “seems to respond most fully to the challenge of the new historical situation that arose after the fall of real socialism,” and thus it is “an extremely important ideology that must not be ignored.”²³ He justifies undertaking the study of liberalism in post-communist countries with a claim that it would not only allow us to see new possible applications of “one of the most important ideologies,” but would

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 14.

²¹ J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy. Wizje świata francuskich antagonistów Wielkiej Rewolucji (Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes. French Antagonists of the Great Revolution) 1789–1815*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2012, p. 17.

²² The second edition of the book also contains this declaration, and Jerzy Szacki felt completely indifferent towards its heroes while writing it. Ibidem, p. 10.

²³ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 15.

also be a “contribution to our knowledge of liberalism in general, which suddenly finds itself in a new historical situation.”²⁴

Despite the author’s declaration that the same binocular research perspective that he had adopted in his earlier works is also noticeable in *Liberalism after Communism*, in which the direction of his approach to this phenomenon, as a historian of ideas, seems slightly reversed. It is certainly not without significance that, unlike his work called *History of Sociological Thought*, which constituted a critical “conversation with the classics,”²⁵ he defined this work as “a historical monograph on a fragment of most recent history.”²⁶ Also, Jerzy Szacki did not want to look for “a certain sociological problem in a more general sense” in one of the historical ideologies, where outdated visions of the world were reconstructed and expressed, because he had already written one book about French antagonists of the French Revolution.²⁷ In the book dealing with “liberalism in contemporary Poland,” he wanted to analyse this historical phenomenon from the perspective of its “timeliness,” or contemporary sociological significance. As Jerzy Szacki himself put it,

... it is worth thinking on the essence of this newly created, Eastern European liberalism, and how it relates to liberalism which was often described as “the modern embodiment of all characteristic features of Western practice,” “a general frame of the multi-century experience of Europe,” or even “the inborn attitude of every normal, civilized citizen of the West.”²⁸

According to Szacki, given the extent to which all intellectual events were characterized by the aforementioned “dual chronological affiliation,” making the phenomenon of modern history the centre of his interest did not, of course, determine the lack of binocularity of his research perspective. Therefore, like *Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes*, the study *Liberalism after Communism* was more “a book about ideas and problems than about events, people or organizations.”²⁹ Szacki was not interested in the “counter-revolution”

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 17–18 (translation—p. 12).

²⁵ A. Waśkiewicz, *Interpretacja teorii politycznej. Spór o metodę we współczesnej literaturze anglosaskiej (The interpretation of political theory. The dispute over the method in English literature)*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe “Scholar,” Warszawa 1998, p. 47 and next.

²⁶ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 20 (translation—p. 14).

²⁷ J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy...*, p. 18.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 18.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 21.

“as a more or less consistent defence of the old order, but as a defence of certain old values in the context of the new order;”³⁰ and in the same way, the main subject of his interest in *Liberalism after Communism* was hidden

... in ideas per se as in their encounter with the life of specific societies and in the processes by which ideas are transformed in the search for answers to questions different from those to which they had originally provided an answer.³¹

His work on counterrevolutionary visions of the world involved “digging through piles of emigrant books and brochures;”³² and the study of liberalism was no different. The sources he had used included books and materials that he describes in his work with the following words:

Sometimes it does not go beyond the spoken word, leaving a trace behind either only in the memory of the speakers or recorded in difficult to find places: minutes, notes, materials for discussion at some meeting or another, articles in the low-circulation press, etc.³³

Because the “metrics” of the intellectual phenomenon studied in the book on liberalism in contemporary Poland, as well as its past and present, intermingled as much as in any other similar work, Szacki decided to reverse the direction of his approach not chronologically but logically. This reversal is best seen in the fact that Szacki wanted to provide scientific, historical knowledge on liberalism as a new, “just emerging” phenomenon that *vox populi* did not “expect” to participate in. This phenomenon was a generally perceived social fact in his eyes, not an expectation. Considering that the path to accomplish this was built on research on the changes in the meaning of the “already established elsewhere” idea of liberalism, “transferred to completely different conditions than those in which it grew,”³⁴ it seems particularly important to answer the question of how well Jerzy Szacki “coped” with the dilemma of contextualism and presentism. In other words, how did he place the perspectives of a historian and a mythologist within it?

It should be noted that, despite his conclusions indicating the inevitability of this dilemma, he proclaimed there were a few, drastically

³⁰ J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 18.

³¹ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 19 (translation—p. 14).

³² J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 17.

³³ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 20 (translation—p. 14).

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

varied, ways in which one could deal with it. In the preface to the new edition of the *Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes*, he contrasted the historian of ideas' approach to intellectual history with the perspective of a politician or ideologist. According to him, the difference between them was not related to their approach to intellectual history in a contextual or presentational way, but to different types of historical presentism in the respective approaches. Although both of them referred to history in a fundamentally selfish way, Jerzy Szacki wrote that a historian of ideas, unlike an ideologist,

... must not form conclusions while selecting the literature and research subjects, because they should be interested in asking questions, not looking for clear, definitive answers, which will infallibly be found on the branches of their own genealogical tree.³⁵

With reference to the current dispute over the amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance, it can be said that Jerzy Szacki places the history of ideas in harsh opposition to any "historical policy." Such a policy could very well be described as historical populism, because it serves as an example of monocular presentism, where the history of ideas is treated as only mythology—and in this particular case, a "national" mythology. In his speech in Białowieża, he indicated a connection between mythology as the "presentism of only correct answers" and populism in the history of ideas. As a basic feature of any kind of populism, and therefore also the historical one, Jerzy Szacki mentioned

... the belief that the "people" are virtuous, wise, able to perfectly distinguish the good from the evil, and the just from the unjust. *Vox populi—vox Dei*, as the old proverb says.³⁶

In the book *Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes*, Szacki regarded the same example, of historical populism and the history of ideas as a theogony of the "divine voice" seeking the approval of the people, as more of a "historical materialism" than "historical nationalism" (although this was vaguely expressed due to censorship). He presented it there as a type of ideological approach to the past which, in order to legitimize the party's policy (ruling on behalf of the "people"), was nothing more than simply treating the past intellectual events "from the point of view of their greater or milder

³⁵ J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 10.

³⁶ J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 62.

reactionary nature in order to be able to disqualify or rehabilitate the thinker.”³⁷ This presentism, he noted, which was “eager and busy with the search for tradition,”³⁸ also (not unlike modern historical politicians) reduced the past to a “convenient fiction, which for some reason is invoked from time to time, without ever asking what it actually is.”³⁹

In *Liberalism after Communism*, Jerzy Szacki also unequivocally rejected the expectation, more or less openly formulated at the time by the liberal-democratic vox populi, that he would become an ideologist of the “Polish path to liberalism.”⁴⁰ He dismissed being treated as a spokesman for the “ideological climate” prevailing in early-1990s Central and Eastern Europe, who would, through his research, legitimize the then-shared “illusion” of finding “the final solution” for political dilemmas in Poland. He approached the “turn to liberalism,” happening at the time of his study, in the same way that he treated what he called “the conservative turn”⁴¹ in the new preface to the *Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes*, 20 years later. He saw in both the conservative and liberal “turns” examples of “careers” of certain ideologies, intellectual trends, or transient “victories” of certain types of historical-ideological populisms “in the broader sense of the word;” and he focused in his research on revealing their internal, “undecidable dilemmas and the range of choices available in every age” which could help deal with them.⁴²

While in the book about the visions of the world of French antagonists of the Great Revolution, Jerzy Szacki revealed the “dilemma of restoration and conservation” that troubled them,⁴³ in his later work he stated that

... In our case, what is most interesting is the dilemma: liberalism as the design of a good society to be realized unconditionally to reach a state close to selected Western models; and liberalism as a method of political action that excludes

³⁷ J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 18.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

³⁹ J. Szacki, *Dylematy historiografii idei*, [in:] *Dylematy historiografii idei...*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ C. Michalski, *Polska droga do liberalizmu. Wywiad z Ireneuszem Krzemińskim (Polish road to liberalism. Interview with Ireneusz Krzemiński)*, Newsweek 19. 02. 2005.

⁴¹ Jerzy Szacki recalled that “the great career of conservatism began after I had already started the study of its origins.” J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 9.

⁴² J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 10.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

quasi-Bolshevik ways of realizing ideas, and hence does not permit haste and compulsion.⁴⁴

Despite the different historical “metrics” of these phenomena, they seem to embody essentially the same dilemma. According to the “organizers of the counter-revolution, which must be a new revolution for the sake of success,” the dilemma of design and method was present, according to Jerzy Szacki, in the inevitable oscillation of their thoughts “between traditionalist flowery rhetoric and the fierce struggle to realize their ideal against all odds and against all opposition.”⁴⁵ In Eastern European countries, on the other hand, “where liberalism is devoid of tradition and infrastructure,” it was expressed in a “real temptation” (here he quoted Stefan Kisielewski) to “grab people by the throat and impose liberalism.”⁴⁶

It seems that referring to two intellectual phenomena at different times, and revealing the “inevitable” paradoxes of the Polish path to liberalism in the era of “shock therapy” and the “plan of Balcerowicz,” resulted in the discovery of completely opposite solutions to both of his own dilemmas, as a historian of ideas. In the book on “liberalism in modern Poland,” the logical reversal of the direction of his approach to the studied phenomenon, which this time was not an “update,” but rather assigned it a “historical” relevance,⁴⁷ resulted in the unavoidable inversion of Jerzy Szacki’s roles as a historian and as a mythologist. Although in both books his research perspective is equally binocular, in the study of French counter-revolutionaries he had dealt with mythology mainly in the sense of a “presentism of questions,” and he had been interested in their dilemmas from the point of view of their general significance for “the formation of issues considered sociological today.” In the book on liberalism after communism, however, he tried to delve as deeply as possible into its historical context, thus inevitably casting doubt on the presentist belief in its “ever-relevant nature,” and on whether its “restoration” or “instauration” in Poland was “even possible.” Even if the answer was affirmative, one should wonder “whether this would be the same liberalism to which the West owes so much.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 19 (translation—p. 13).

⁴⁵ J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 30.

⁴⁶ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 19 (translation—p. 13).

⁴⁷ J. Szacki, *Socjologowie wobec historii (Sociologists and History)*, [in:] *Dylematy historiografii idei...*, p. 294 and next.

⁴⁸ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 20 (translation—p. 13).

Liberal minimum and political rationality

As subjects of Jerzy Szacki's history of ideas, liberalism and populism were, in his eyes, "intellectual" phenomena, because they constituted certain social facts. He considered the "reasons" behind them only in their socio-historical context, from the perspective of the "role they played in their time."⁴⁹ As a historian, he "dismissed the question of their universal cognitive and moral importance."⁵⁰ Accordingly, he also stated that "Liberalism is not merely a set of technical directives that can be applied with the same success in all conditions."⁵¹ Jerzy Szacki treated the term "liberalism" rather as "a general name of an extensive collection of many practices," which are political, economic, cultural, and so on; they are "a selection of choices for those who will arrive later."⁵² However, he admitted that after 1989, the choice and application of a specific configuration of liberal practices in Poland served "as a somewhat natural counterproposal to the old order, which now must be replaced by a new one."⁵³ He immediately added, however: "In speaking of the 'naturalness' of liberalism as an alternative position, I by no means wish to aver that it is an absolutely correct position."⁵⁴

Jerzy Szacki did not speak about the Polish path to liberalism from the perspective of whether it was the right or wrong way; he did not question its political rationality. In accordance with the methodological directive he adopted, he put emphasis on presenting "indecisive dilemmas" that were associated with the choice of this path, and defined by the "range" of choices available to the rulers in Poland after 1989. These dilemmas were the result of the number of liberalisms he saw:

... There was not, is not and very likely never will be any orthodox liberalism, any quintessential liberalism, any consistency or inconsistency which could serve to determine whether someone's views are or are not liberalism, or are liberal to a greater or lesser extent.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ J. Szacki, *Socjologia współczesna a klasycy socjologii*, [in:] *Dylematy historiografii idei...*, p. 39.

⁵⁰ J. Szacki, *Dylematy historiografii idei*, [in:] *Dylematy historiografii idei...*, p. 16.

⁵¹ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 18 (translation—p.12).

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 16 (translation—p. 11).

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 23 (translation—p. 18).

On the other hand, their origin could be traced back to the restrictions and conditions established in the poor “historical background”⁵⁶ of liberal practices in Poland.

With reference to his own definition, it can be said that by providing a vivid historical context for the question of the rationality or irrationality of liberalism as an ideological choice in Poland, Jerzy Szacki also “executed” this question. In the early 1990s, however, the dilemma was an undisputed social fact, and the struggle to solve it was shared by the contemporary *voces populi*, both those who perceived themselves as liberal and those who declared themselves to be hostile to all liberalism. It is as relevant today as it was back then, being settled in various ways within the political spectrum of contenders to the role of *porte parole* of the “*Polish raison d’état*.” Despite the change that Jerzy Szacki presented in the approach to liberalism as an intellectual event—consistent with the maxim of *vanae voces populi non sunt audiendae*—one can imagine how it felt real and alive for him through the dilemmas and choices he had decided to mention. Using his own words, one can be tempted to reconstruct his view of “liberalism in modern Poland” with the eye of not only a historian, but also of a mythologist who “listens to the self-conceited voices of the people.”

This reconstruction, the subject of which would also be the way in which Jerzy Szacki approached the questions about the social relevance of the history of ideas, would have to focus not on what he presented as “undecidable” in his ideological dilemmas, but on what he determined to extend beyond the range of available choices. In his view, this restriction was not absolute. Regarding the social problem of “calling” the history of ideas a field of science, and its “positive role towards practical and personal”⁵⁷ life, he adopted the attitude previously presented by Max Weber. Just like Weber, Jerzy Szacki was of the opinion that in relation to social ideological dilemmas, as well as the choices made in their context, the history of ideas can help one find “clarity.” He was also inclined to consider these dilemmas as “approachable in a variety of ways,” and the real calling of a historian of ideas to be, at most, “forcing everyone or at least helping them realise the *ultimate sense of their behaviour* [*italics: MW*].”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 53.

⁵⁷ M. Weber, *Nauka jako zawód i powołanie (Science as Calling and Occupation)*, [in:] Z. Krasnodębski, Weber, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1999, p. 214.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

The positive role of “pressure” exerted by a historian of ideas on “the people,” a society or its self-designated representatives (in particular), was most noticeable in opening their eyes to the consequences of their choices. As Max Weber stated,

... If one presents a certain attitude, in order to realize it one is forced to use certain means. Perhaps the means in question are unacceptable enough for the one to reject them. Then, one must make a choice between the goal and the required means.⁵⁹

With regard to the political rationality of the “liberal choice” imposed on Poland after 1989, Jerzy Szacki had this to say:

... Whether some country or region is capable of assimilating liberalism apparently depends on whether it belongs to the Western world at least in some respects. Making efforts in this direction is always based on the conviction that the Western “process of civilization” is always beneficial and, at least potentially, universal.⁶⁰

Max Weber claimed that a historian of ideas (e.g. Jerzy Szacki) who analysed a fragment of modern history from the perspective of a historian, could “only present the necessity of making a choice, nothing more.”⁶¹ They could only preach the choice of liberalism as a practical one,

... which can be made as an internally consistent (thus: honest) choice on the basis of a specific world-view attitude; one, maybe a few different ones, but not ones completely different.⁶²

In accordance with this directive, Jerzy Szacki claimed that

... It is hardly surprising that in their own countries liberals, as a rule, have a pro-Western orientation and show the least fears of the possibility that modern innovations will threaten native values; their opponents, on the other hand, are wont to appeal to local values and to condemn modern Western culture. This is so even today.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 54 (translation—p. 44).

⁶¹ M. Weber, *Nauka jako zawód i powołanie*, p. 214.

⁶² Ibidem.

⁶³ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 54 (translation—p. 44).

Of course, Szacki chose the dilemmas of liberalism in modern Poland as the subject matter of his book in order to view it with both eyes open as an intellectual phenomenon. Even though he did adopt a binocular attitude towards liberalism, he was unable to present more arguments in order to be a historian of ideas, and not a “demagogue” (as defined by Max Weber).⁶⁴ He did not earn the label of either a liberal or a nationalistic demagogue, and he did not, at any point in his book, “eagerly search for traditions,” either liberal or religious/nationalistic. In the preface to the new *Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes*, he pointed out that he had never claimed a historian of ideas “should never” choose either of those roles. Szacki never forbade them from manifesting their support for certain traditions, nor from presenting them as “populistic” or demagogic arguments for the rationale of political choices. A historian of ideas, he wrote,

... Should be able to differentiate the roles, however, and remember that serious issues may be pointed out by people one would not easily agree with if the circumstances called for making hard ideological choices. Additionally, making a choice like that should not, and must not be associated with lack of assertiveness, whatever the opinion of people from one’s ideological camp, or absolute denial of anything believed by the people of one’s opposing camp.⁶⁵

Perhaps this remark was the reason for the aforementioned reversal of Jerzy Szacki’s approach to liberalism as an intellectual event. Maybe this is why he was so particularly sceptical of the “liberal populism” of the early 90s, and of the “return to Europe” rhetoric, which he treated as “oversaturated with demagogic platitudes and promises that could not be kept.” He claimed that “one cannot say that these countries of Eastern Europe definitely belong to the Western world without introducing many reservations.”⁶⁶ The tradition of “Golden Freedom” in the old Poland was, in his eyes, a liberal “myth.” Moreover, he found the non-economic causes for the mediocrity of liberalism and difficulties in its implementation (also during the era of Civic Committees) to stem from the years of the country’s subservience to a different state. He wrote that

... such a situation favours nationalism and reduces the attractiveness of par excellence individualistic liberalism. The nation takes the place of civil society in the social consciousness.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ M. Weber, *Nauka jako zawód i powołanie*, p. 214.

⁶⁵ J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 55 (translation—p. 44).

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 67 (translation—p. 55).

Reflecting on the necessary conditions for the success of the “instauration” rather than the “restoration” of the tradition of liberalism in Poland, Jerzy Szacki focused on the analysis of the availability of areas of life where it had the chance to succeed. He distinguished three main ideological circles among the practices/manifestations of liberal thought, which he described as “protoliberalism,” “economic liberalism” and “integral liberalism.” According to him, these circles were by no means concentric: the economic liberalism in particular, which emerged in the 1980s, was treated as a largely separate intellectual choice, which, although it was later almost universally accepted, at the time was a movement “against the opinion of the majority.”⁶⁸ The aforementioned dilemma of the “project” of liberalism as a practice to be implemented in Poland, and the “methods” for its introduction—in Weber’s terms the “goal” and the “means”—were to be realized in different, more or less harsh forms. According to Jerzy Szacki, each project had to face the same basic problem: “For the first time in its history liberalism had to be constructivist, though the dislike of constructivism is indigenous to its nature.”⁶⁹

Jerzy Szacki was most sceptical about the possibility of introducing an integral, political and civilizational liberalism, with the constitutive idea of a “liberal culture in which the postulates of the rule of law, ideological neutrality of the state would be realized, respect for minority rights of all kinds, tolerance, etc. of a liberal culture, in which the postulates of the rule of law, the philosophical neutrality of the state, respect for the rights of minorities of all kinds, tolerance, etc. would become a reality”⁷⁰ in Eastern European countries. The capitalism that formed part of the ideological content of economic liberalism was “impossible to design,”⁷¹ he wrote.

Designed capitalism, he said, “inevitably resembles other rationalist utopias, the starting point of which are usually abstract principles, not practice.”⁷² Protoliberalism was the least utopian option in Polish conditions, because it was free of this dilemma in a way. The name, in his opinion, might have been assigned to the concept hastily, however. In his book he presented a number of arguments for classifying the supporters of the views of the democratic opposition in Poland before 1989 “as communitarians rather

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 152.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 257 (*translation*—p. 210).

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 52 (*translation*—p. 41).

⁷¹ Ibidem, p. 184.

⁷² Ibidem.

than liberals.”⁷³ He noticed that if the word “liberalism” was mentioned in those discussions, usually

... it was used unthinkingly in the very broad sense in which people always speak of liberalism in cases of a revolt against dictatorship combined, as is common, with a revindication of such or other elements of the liberal minimum programme, especially human and civic rights.⁷⁴

If Jerzy Szacki ever looked at liberalism through the lens of a mythologist, it was by adopting a specific attitude towards the political rationality of choosing the “liberal minimum.” Nevertheless, by also dismissing the question of the absolute or unconditional rationality of this ideological choice, he could only “force” the readers to realize in what conditions it was, and perhaps still is, a rational choice. He justified the restrictions of this minimum as a certain conditional limit of political rationality in Poland, in a contextual manner. In a situation where the general “conditions for the expansion of liberal ideology in Eastern Europe were not favourable,” he believed that the expansion had only two advantages. In addition to the aforementioned fact that “the liberal solutions seemed to impose themselves naturally when some sort of counter-proposal for communism was needed,” according to Jerzy Szacki’s observation, its position in people’s minds was reinforced by

... the widely held belief that liberalism had been “tested” in the entire “normal” world and consequently also was the most obvious solution for the problems of the post-communist countries.⁷⁵

Jerzy Szacki was certain that the worldview attitude in which the choice of liberalism could be derived in an internally consistent manner, included not only “communism *à rebours*” and the search for the opportunity of assimilating of the liberal heritage of the Western world into Polish reality.⁷⁶ In *Liberalism after Communism*, he also presented some arguments in favour of the rationality of this choice as a certain local tradition. He admitted that in 1918, after years without independence, Poland was “reborn as a state that, with only a few reservations, may be

⁷³ Ibidem, p. 136 (*translation*—p. 111).

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 93 (*translation*—p. 75).

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 256 (*translation*—p. 210).

⁷⁶ On the differentiation of “tradition” from “legacy,” see J. Szacki, *Tradycja*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2011, p. 189 and next.

called liberal-democratic.”⁷⁷ Although he noticed that it soon began to lose this character, evolving towards autocracy, thus showing that the system of liberal-democratic institutions “lacked a strong political base from the very beginning,”⁷⁸ nevertheless Jerzy Szacki did not want to “underestimate” this “liberal-democratic episode” in the first steps of Polish statehood. In his opinion, “this episode left visible marks in political culture and was responsible for the fact that at least some principles belonging to the essential core of liberalism entered into the language of political discourse.”⁷⁹ They manifested themselves in the political vision of the democratic opposition and Solidarity, in the idea of autonomy of the individual and civil society, as well as in the “allegedly universally accepted” perspective of “liberal or parliamentary democracy,” which “excluded any continuation of the existing system in the future.”⁸⁰

Voces populi and the Polish raison d'état

Although Jerzy Szacki himself did not use this concept in his book, it can be said that he considered the choice of the liberal minimum in Poland after 1989 to be not only politically rational, but also compatible, under certain conditions, with the “Polish *raison d'état*.” Szacki’s abandonment of the inquiry into the rationality of the choice of liberalism as a certain political, economic or civilizational practice from the point of view of the emerging sovereign Polish state, and his own “rational opinion,” resulted from a very specific attitude to the concept of the “mythology” behind it. In the *History of Sociological Thought*, Jerzy Szacki briefly referred to the issue of the birth of the concept of *Raison d'État* in the Renaissance social philosophy, indicating that it was related to the governing authority at that time gaining independence “from religious tasks,” and its transformation into a tool for “defending secular or national group interests.”⁸¹ In a new preface to the *Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes*, he implicitly stated that the concept of the term’s modern “renaissance” was

⁷⁷ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 76 (translation—p. 62).

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 62

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 62

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 132, p. 139 (translation—p. 107).

⁸¹ J. Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej*, p. 50.

associated with the aforementioned “conservative turn,” and he rhetorically asked: “who could have imagined, half a century ago, that Carl Schmitt for example, would soon become the undisputed classic author of the 20th century political thought?”⁸² He treated the answers and the question about the compatibility or incompatibility of the choice of liberalism with the Polish *raison d'état* as problematic not so much in the field of the history of ideas, but rather in a specific, presentist “historical policy” or “historical nationalism.”

It seems that the need for each party to ensure public support for its political projects and the vision of state it represented, which Jerzy Szacki mentioned in the paper from Białowieża, would make him use the plural form when speaking not only about Polish liberalities, but also Polish reasons of state. The populist minimum of political rationality in a state of parliamentary democracy, and the need for parties to guarantee social support, resulted, by definition, from the state's constitutive liberal minimum, which includes the aforementioned human and citizens' rights—or “freedom rights.” As a historian of this idea, Jerzy Szacki would say that in a democracy the *raison d'état* is always a “*raison d'état*,” while in a parliamentary democracy “the voice of the people” is by definition neither “God's voice” nor a “selfish voice,” but a voice divided. Therefore, the essence of the reason of state in a parliamentary democracy is not, as Rousseau advocated, the myth of “universal will,” or, as Friedrich Meinecke put it, an equally mythical, “timeless,” “general egoism of the state,” grounded in the “drive to power and self-preservation.”⁸³ For Szacki, as a historian of ideas, the *raison d'état* in a parliamentary democracy was variable temporarily, constituting the function of various party egoisms. This is where the “will of the majority” emerges, which could determine it in numerous ways.

In *Liberalism after Communism*, written long before Poland's accession to the European Union, Jerzy Szacki did not explicitly analyse the internal dilemmas of Polish liberalism in relation to the “Polish *raison d'état*” as defined above. Nonetheless, in considering whether “there was political liberalism in Poland,” he also placed it in a certain way within the spectrum of post-communist party egoisms, and drew the main “dividing line” in the *vox populi* on this issue. At the same time, he pointed out that in the early 1990s the dividing line in the people's voice “on the subject

⁸² J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 9.

⁸³ F. Meinecke, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte*, Oldenbourg Verlag, München 1924, p. 20.

of political system, social reconstruction or culture as such” also served as a force dividing the voices of the liberals themselves.

Many a politician who regarded himself as a liberal and was regarded as one by others for his or her views on economic reform shied away from the liberal label on non-economic matters and preferred to speak of his or her conservatism, central-rightist views, or liberal-conservative stance.⁸⁴

According to Jerzy Szacki, “an inevitable conflict appeared between two different but not yet fully articulated tendencies within the heretofore relatively united anti-communist camp,” which appeared immediately on the day after the collapse of the old system, because it was supposed to. The main dispute over the Polish *raison d'état*, or as he put it, “the future of society,” was taking place between those who desired “possible restoration of the world of values that had existed before real socialism; and those who wanted to see modernization, which could to some extent mean undermining these values ...: paving the way for the appearance of a holistic model of the ‘open society.’”⁸⁵ Jerzy Szacki described these two main parties, not yet fully articulated politically, and therefore not utterly consistent in gaining public support, as “neotraditionalists” and “integral liberals,” respectively. While the former one considered it politically rational to implement “enthronement of the Truth, personified in religious and national tradition,” the latter presented the idea, consistent with the Polish *raison d'état* (in their opinion), of “introducing” Poland to a “an open society such as has never existed before in this region, a society patterned after the liberal democracies of the West.”⁸⁶

This open conflict of integral liberals with neotraditionalists, where the dispute about the Polish *raison d'état* was to inevitably evolve, was not yet irrational by definition, from Jerzy Szacki’s perspective. “The conflict between liberalism and the dominant religious tradition, represented in Poland by the Catholic Church,” was connected with a different understanding of the idea of freedom.⁸⁷ To the extent that for liberals it was a “negative” freedom, consisting in the absence of obstacles to the realization of the natural rights of the individual, in the Catholic social thought its idea was aligned with a specific “positive” image of

⁸⁴ J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, pp. 211–212 (translation—p. 173).

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 215, pp. 212–213 (translation—p. 174).

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 215 (translation—p. 173).

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 242 (translation—p. 190).

the good, the achievement of which should be the main vocation of a man and a community. The dispute was actually:

... not over whether morality is necessary in public life but over whether the government may be a party in conflicts over morality and whether such conflicts will ever be resolved once and for all.⁸⁸

The constitutive moral dilemma of post-communist liberalism, as analysed by Szacki, made him question the rationality of integral liberalism more than that of neotraditionalism.

For this reason, antireligious crusaders trying to establish the domination of secular morality and a secular world-view were very bad liberals. Unfortunately, they are often wrongly taken to be typical representatives of the entire species.⁸⁹

Szacki suggested defining the ideological conflict between integral liberalism and neotraditionalism, even if inevitable and very real, as a dispute over “the capabilities and boundaries of politics,” not over “the need for morality.”⁹⁰ He considered Polish liberalism as politically rational, and compatible with the Polish *raison d'état* under the condition of shedding its utopian social integrity and adapting a “minimalistic concept of politics,” which could help “preserve social peace and equilibrium in the existing conditions without resorting to methods of government that threaten the liberty of the individual.”⁹¹

The liberal minimum was deemed by Szacki to be a boundary of political rationality compatible with the Polish *raison d'état*, but only if it could be commonly accepted from the perspective of Catholic social doctrine:

It suffices to say that the idea of human and civil rights has changed over the last hundred or more years from an object of absolute condemnation to an essential part of Christianity, which does not mean that the Church simply approved the ideological legacy of modern revolutions.⁹²

Szacki recalls the “shock” felt by the liberals when the Church started criticizing liberalism after 1989. It seemed to be “a clear

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 245 (translation—p. 199).

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 246.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 200

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 233 (translation—p. 189).

sign that Catholic thought in many instances was returning to pre-communist ways of thinking, to the stereotype of Poland as standing aloof from the 'moral corruption of the West', ways of thinking that seemingly had been forgotten, or cast aside for good."⁹³

Post-communist populism

As a historian of ideas, Jerzy Szacki did not, in his book, take on the role of a *porte parole* for the voice of people on either side of the divided society. The personal political inclination of "Jerzy Szacki" as a representative of "the people whose sovereignty manifests in general elections"⁹⁴ can be guessed, of course, given the rhetorical signals scattered in his book, and the lack of a certain type of such signals in particular. Although he never wrote a book called "Neotraditionalism after Communism," he presented some important elements of the characterization of this intellectual phenomenon in his *Questions about Populism*. In his speech from Białowieża, he chose to discuss more than just a populist minimum constitutive to the idea of parliamentary democracy. The subject of his analyses was, above all, populism in the strict sense of the word; the basic constitutive features of which were, in Jerzy Szacki's opinion, "devotion to the people," with its "collection of wisdom and virtues" not personalized anywhere else, similar to a tradition.

Admittedly, the main subject of *Questions about Populism* was populism understood as a certain common intellectual phenomenon, not just Polish populism. At the same time, despite adopting his own, "substantive" perspective on the presentism of questions or "problems," Jerzy Szacki seemed inclined, even more than before, to search for the right answers in the recent history of this phenomenon. This is due to the fact that, apart from stating that a broadly understood populist minimum was inalienable in a democracy, he saw populism in its reconstructed sense as a theoretically "intellectual" phenomenon. It seemed deprived of any understood "reason," and by definition, incompatible with the "reason of state." However, Jerzy Szacki noted that even the more precisely defined

⁹³ Ibidem, p. 192

⁹⁴ J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, pp. 58–59, 63.

“word—populism, does not have to be an epithet ... There are even serious authors who openly sympathize with populism and try to rehabilitate it.”⁹⁵

The difficulty of rehabilitating populism from the perspective of the history of ideas was determined by the fact that Szacki was in favour of its definition, according to which

... populism seems to be an extremely lively, almost instinctive state of rebellion ..., occurring in the conditions of a serious socio-economic crisis and distinct violation of social justice.⁹⁶

Populism defined in this way, as Jerzy Szacki pointed out, seemed to be “a subject of interest to no historians of ideas, but for mentality researchers, crowd psychologists and, of course, for historians of social movements.”⁹⁷ Unlike conservatism, liberalism or communism, for example, it was neither an “ideology” nor a “specific system of views” or “a kind of doctrine.” This is why Jerzy Szacki referred to it as a “very special and difficult to grasp” phenomenon, “the study of which requires abandoning the many patterns that were used to study ideology.”⁹⁸ His binocular research perspective mainly concerned the extent to which populism, being an a-ideological and a-rational phenomenon by definition, could not become the subject of any sociological or cultural “mythology” for a historian of ideas. Unlike the instinctive, unreflective traditionalism that Szacki studied in *Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes*, populism could not become the subject of any “presentism of questions” or problems, which could reveal the “benefit for life” derived from his research, or even the self-criticism of contemporary sociology. Being “ideologically empty and shapeless” (even when juxtaposed with something else) and rid of “self-awareness,”⁹⁹ populism was also free from any dilemmas regarding the relationship between goals and means, the project and the method.

Jerzy Szacki explained his approach of asking questions about populism, and recognizing it as an “attractive research subject” from the perspective of the history of ideas, with the fact that it was a “momentous

⁹⁵ Ibidem, p. 58. Jerzy Szacki referred to a volume edited by Norman Pollack, *The Populist Mind*, Indianapolis, New York 1967. Today, however, he would certainly refer to E. Laclau, *On populist reason*, Verso, London 2005.

⁹⁶ J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 61.

⁹⁷ Ibidem.

⁹⁸ Ibidem, p. 60.

⁹⁹ J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 23.

and constantly reviving social phenomenon.”¹⁰⁰ According to the approach he preferred, “the unity of populism” came, as he wrote, “not from the unity of the content of the programme of various political movements, both past and present, but from the similarity of the situations in which they arose.”¹⁰¹ Contrary to what he said in the book on contemporary liberalism, Jerzy Szacki did not declare that his purpose in asking questions about populism was to treat it as a shadow haunting the contemporary Poland. There is no doubt, however, that the main motive for Szacki to undertake the research on populism was related to observing the “similarity of the situation” in Poland to other historical and social contexts, where the occurrence of “populism” in the strict sense of the word had already been noticed and justified. The “presentistic” approach to this similarity allowed him to treat certain phenomena on the Polish political scene as examples of not only minimal populisms, but also ones that could be referred to as “epithets.”

Because the history of populism, according to Jerzy Szacki, was mainly “a collection of unrelated episodes,”¹⁰² the analysis of Polish populism after communism could, in his view, only have the nature of a contextual comparative research. As he noted,

... If Andrzej Lepper exclaims: “Balcerowicz must leave!,” it is probably not related to the fact that in the past so many populists demanded the banishment of bankers taking advantage of poor people.¹⁰³

The similarity of the situation that provoked this exclamation to the phenomena described in a similar way in other European, African, Australian and Latin American countries justified the use of the aforementioned epithet; however, it also called for undertaking research on populism, in order to collect some real scientific data on it. In his speech, Szacki mentioned a number of reasons that made him “suppose that the topic of populism would not cease to be relevant in the foreseeable future.”¹⁰⁴ It is possible that, abiding by Weber’s recommendations, he also wanted to “contribute” to the research on nascent Polish populism, and help it “understand its own ultimate purpose.”

100 J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 65.

101 Ibidem.

102 Ibidem.

103 Ibidem, p. 59.

104 See note 58.

When, 15 years ago, Jerzy Szacki voiced his predictions of the “triumph of populism” in Poland, he presented only its main premises, and briefly summarized the forms its “service for the people.”

If one admits that critics are correct in their thinking of the concept of populism as ideology, he said in his paper, it does not entail ignoring its views and slogans while forming its definition.¹⁰⁵

Although the flagship slogan of Samoobrona (the Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland Party) became the most iconic symbol of the phenomenon of populism in the Polish context, its binocular characteristics, presented in the paper from Białowieża, seem to be helpful in identifying the populist conduct of other parties and political movements in Poland. The insight into the nature of populism found in Szacki’s work should make even its contemporary audience aware that the shadow of populism in Poland has not dissipated along with the electoral defeat of the Self-Defence Party in 2007. It should also make it clear what “victorious populism,” clad in political garments, inevitably transforms into.

Moreover, according to Jerzy Szacki, even though the aforementioned devotion to the people was, in the case of populism as a political liturgy, its constitutive feature, the “romantic idealization of the people” was not populism itself. He considered the populist rhetoric of “ordinary people,” “grey people” and the “silent majority” as derivative, on the one hand, of a certain mythologization of the idea of the people, and on the other hand, of the same mythologization of what stood in opposition to the people. He considered the irremovable basis of the episodic renewal of populism to be a rebellion, a “syndrome of emotions, expectations and very general convictions,”¹⁰⁶ so to speak, of the insurmountable reality of humanity’s worldly existence. Jerzy Szacki himself stated that “even if we agree that continuous progress is being made in the world, it is not as harmonious and comprehensive as the dreamers optimistically predicted it to be.”¹⁰⁷

The mythology of the people as the basic *topos* of a populist rhetoric showed a significant resemblance to all other idealizations of “collective unities,” examples of which include a proletariat or a nation under the rule of communism or nationalism. “It is not about empirical

105 J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 62.

106 Ibidem.

107 Ibidem, pp. 66–67.

understanding of the people, which could be distinguished by relatively objective social, economic or cultural criteria.”¹⁰⁸ However, in relation to “the people,” whose sovereignty plays an important role in general elections, in a democracy, and whose power is limited by the rights of minorities,¹⁰⁹ “the populist people constitutes an incomparably narrower category.”¹¹⁰ According to Szacki, the mythologization of this community relied on presenting it as a “monolith completely alienated from the existing political system,” which found its prospective members “among all the disinherited and persecuted; among those who are already aware of their marginalization and are ready to rebel against it.”¹¹¹

In Jerzy Szacki’s view, the constitutive element of the populist image of the people was “the belief that it is synonymous with opposition whose antagonistic powers consisted of the elites—demonized, sinister, privileged, and living at the expense of the poorer majority.”¹¹² Mythologized in the same way as “the people,” they were just as monolithic in their role of the main enemy to the people’s “healthy nucleus, supposedly representing the real interests and needs of the majority.” According to the reconstruction of the populist dichotomy of the “people” and “elites” presented in Białowieża, their image included:

... not only, which is perfectly understandable, wealthy business owners and bureaucracy, which favoured them, fortune—making brokers of all kinds and bankers maintaining high interest rates which forced the poor into huge debts, but also on the one hand, a variety of pen-pushers and egghead know-it-all, various experts and scholars completely detached from the “people,” and on the other hand, all kinds of politicians, including those who were democratically elected. The “elites” included even sworn representatives of the opposition, who—apparently on behalf of the “people”—were ready to respect the rules of the game established in the existing political system and did not believe in the possibility of improving anything over the span of just one day.¹¹³

108 Ibidem, p. 63.

109 G. Sartori, *Teoria demokracji (The Theory of Democracy)*, translated by P. Amsterdamski and D. Grinberg, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1998, p. 42.

110 J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 63.

111 Ibidem.

112 Ibidem.

113 Ibidem, p. 64.

National populism and the liberal minimum

Questions about Populism is undoubtedly a significant contributor to the criticism of Polish populism after communism, and this view is supported by the fact that Jerzy Szacki presented this phenomenon in his paper as “principally anti-liberal.” Szacki justified the use of the concept of “populism” as an epithet with his rejection of the liberal minimum commonly accepted in the contemporary civilized world. He presented all the qualities inherent in populism—namely “going beyond democracy—torn by conflicts between parties, towards the moral and political unity of the people,” and reaching for “unconventional and more spectacular means of political struggle” such as “violent demonstrations” and “tumults of all kinds”—as legitimized by the constitutive “resentment towards the elites,” and not by the sentiment for “the people.”¹¹⁴

Populism is principally anti-liberal, because not only is it hostile to free competition in which ordinary people have little to no chance, but also treats all guarantees for the rights of individuals and minorities, which by nature could be used to defend their interests against privileged individuals, with great suspicion.¹¹⁵

The dichotomy of “people” and “elites” hidden in the views and slogans of populism was described *in nuce* in *Liberalism after Communism*, in the confines of an inevitable conflict of tendencies within the unified anti-communist camp. While presenting “a process that has barely begun and has not led to any unequivocal results,” Jerzy Szacki noted that “already today, however, one can see what the dispute is about and where Polish liberalism encounters barriers which are difficult to surmount.”¹¹⁶ Generally, this dispute was sustained by the “sympathizers of some liberalism” and “enemies of all liberalism.” The latter were “prone to blame liberalism for everything that is the worst, especially for the fact that people today are supposedly living less well than under real socialism.”¹¹⁷ The author saw a rational basis for this growing dispute in a “rapid increase in social inequalities, combined with the poverty of some groups,” which resulted in the following: “To be sure, so far liberalism is criticized more as a controversial economic strategy (justly

114 Ibidem.

115 Ibidem, p. 65.

116 J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 238 (translation—p. 104).

117 Ibidem, p. 10 (translation—p. 5).

or unjustly regarded as liberal par excellence) than as a grand design for the society that would emerge from the pursuit of this strategy.”¹¹⁸

In *Liberalism after Communism*, Jerzy Szacki concentrated on the presence of views and slogans typical of populism in the “collectivist” attitude of the first Solidarność (the Solidarity movement). It defined itself as a “collective entity” which “by definition, ... represents the social majority, and hence its demands require no other validation apart from stating whose aspirations these are he pointed out,” and ultimately “goes through a far-reaching idealization.”¹¹⁹ Conflict between the two tendencies in the Solidarity camp, as well as its subsequent articulation in the dilemma of “anti-liberal democracy and liberal dictatorship,” was inevitable, and could be attributed to the aforementioned disharmonies of economic growth.¹²⁰ As a possible basis for the transformation of this dilemma into an open conflict between the neotraditionalist “people” and integrally liberal “elites,” Szacki considered the situation in which

... the hasty reconstruction of the economy does not improve the living standard of the population, or if this improvement is confined to narrow segments of the population. Unfortunately, such a development is not unlikely.¹²¹

Church criticism of the liberal idea of the state’s neutrality, and the debate on “what liberalism really is and how far it should go,”¹²² although fundamentally anti-liberal, did not yet possess, in the eyes of Jerzy Szacki, features of populism. He saw the possibility of establishing a dialogue between the self-limiting liberals and “open Catholics,” and he considered the “tendency in Poland to understand democracy archaically (etymologically)”¹²³ to be definitely more dangerous for liberalism as both an economic and a political programme. From the perspective of the constitutive idea of “the people as a monolith,” he could treat the assumption established in this tradition as potentially populist: “the political majority should have special rights in all areas of life and that

118 Ibidem (translation—p. 5).

119 Ibidem, p. 142 (translation—pp. 115–116).

120 “Someone gains but someone else loses, both in the context of the world and individual countries. Unfortunately, what grows is the number of people who suffer the absolute lack of wealth, sometimes even forced to bear its cost against their own will. One cannot expect that everyone will agree to such a state of affairs and accept the poverty and exclusion.” (J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 67)

121 J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 192 (translation—p. 156).

122 Ibidem, p. 238 (translation—p. 194).

123 Ibidem, p. 251 (translation—p. 204).

the restriction of these rights depends on the benevolence of the majority. Liberals, in contrast, appeal to the inalienable rights of individuals and on this basis argue that minorities have rights too.”¹²⁴ Jerzy Szacki was probably inclined to consider the view, deeply rooted in Polish political culture, that “majority rule should not be restricted in any way and that someone who has the majority behind him can shape things after his own fashion,”¹²⁵ as a condition for the existence of populism after communism.

Jerzy Szacki chose the aforementioned mythology of a nation as the basic context for the Polish path to populism, and presented it in *Liberalism after Communism*, as related to the tradition of struggles for independence and the weakness of civil society in Poland. In his article, “The Concept of the Nation in Sociology and History,” he noted that the issue of national identity was, for a long time, a major issue only in the peripheral countries; it became such in metropolitan regions in the era of decolonization and the crisis of “universalistic ideologies of the nineteenth century: liberalism and socialism.”¹²⁶ He associated the career of the national myth of “the filling the nation state is filled with,”¹²⁷ as well as the nationalistically inclined historical policy of Poland, with a “conservative turn” occurring in the 1980s, which also marked the beginning of a “golden age” of anti-enlightenment mainstream European thought.¹²⁸ In the early 1990s, he predicted the career of this myth in Poland, pointing out that, like all the other post-communist countries, it would also be

... leaning towards less liberal forms, in which the emphasis is put on the nation as the key group, not on the rights of individuals articulated through civil society.¹²⁹

In *Questions about Populism*, Jerzy Szacki claimed that the association of populism with nationalism, in many cases justified by the content of their slogans, is “somewhat misleading.”¹³⁰ Although its “absolute hostility towards the elites,” he noted, is usually reinforced by the “belief in the existence of a conspiracy against the people,” he also emphasized the fact that “generally

124 Ibidem (translation—p. 204).

125 Ibidem (translation—p. 204).

126 J. Szacki, *Koncepcja narodu w socjologii i historii*, [in:] *Dylematy historiografii idei...*, p. 353.

127 Ibidem, p. 362.

128 J. Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, p. 9.

129 J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 252 (translation—p. 206).

130 J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 65.

populism dichotomically divides the nation into upper and lower levels, and can do without strictly nationalistic vocabulary.”¹³¹ Because of its ideological formlessness and thoughtlessness, it could essentially be called “faith without theology and without the Church.” Szacki states that

... populism is not familiar with the postulate of national solidarity—unless, as it sometimes happens, the nation is identified as synonymous with the people and the elites are recognized as foreign and essentially anti-national.¹³²

The possibility that such an identification could ever occur, however, was by no means equal to zero. The triumph of populism foretold by Jerzy Szacki was, according to him, nothing more than a triumph of

... articulations of renewed tensions between the peripheries and the centre, the poor and the rich, the ruled and the ruling—tensions that occur both in individual countries and worldwide.¹³³

Because Jerzy Szacki delivered his paper in Białowieża when Poland was in the process of being admitted to the European Union, when the community known today as international “EU elite” was still a non-existent (a purely abstract) concept, he had not been able to discuss the issue of a “national populism” in very much detail. Neither did he ask questions about a “national-Catholic populism” and its relation to neotraditionalism, as defined in *Liberalism after Communism*. Traditionalism as such, which pertained within a systematic set of views, while ideologically supporting the social teachings of the Church, was not yet populism; nevertheless, from the perspective of the history of ideas, it does not mean that populism after communism could not be, from the same perspective, treated as a national-Catholic traditionalism. The concept of populism developed by Jerzy Szacki, i.e. this unsystematic and often “plagiarizing” set of “convictions that do not constitute any specific programmes of social reorganization,” did not exclude, “of course, the possibility of some populists adopting such programmes.” In this concept, he noted, “it is just that no populist programme can be attributed to populism as such.”¹³⁴

Integral traditionalism transformed itself, from the perspective adopted by Jerzy Szacki, into a populist “neotraditionalism,” to the extent that ideological movements and political parties made the slogan

131 Ibidem, pp. 64–65.

132 Ibidem.

133 Ibidem, p. 67.

134 Ibidem, p. 62.

“return to tradition” the basis of their programmes of social reconstruction in the search for social support. National-Catholic populism in the strictest sense of the word, which could be referred to as an epithet, did not become one until the dichotomy of the “people” and the “elite”—referring to the “national feeling of injustice”—became the dichotomy of a “nation” and a “foreign element” in the eyes of its most “rebellious” representatives. According to the reconstruction of a populist Catholic-national phraseology, presented by Jerzy Szacki,

... if there is poverty, there is also exploitation, deception, theft and unfair competition. ... Strangers are usually to blame: if it is not Jews or any other disliked nation, it can be, for example, foreign capital, colonialism, the World Bank, globalism or anything else that does not fit within the framework of something familiar.¹³⁵

From this perspective, neotraditionalism was submerged in a sea of views and slogans characteristic of national populism, in order to present it with the right ideological attitude—providing the “reason” for exceeding the boundaries of political rationality set by a liberal minimum. In *Liberalism after Communism*, Jerzy Szacki noted that

... it does not take a genius to see that fanning nationalism, the cult of native ways, or xenophobia are direct threats to the budding capitalist economy through their repercussions in such areas as privatization policy, the tariff system, international relations, etc.¹³⁶

In *Questions about Populism*, Szacki pointed out that the Catholic-national phraseology posed the same threat to the nascent Polish political-cultural liberalism. Because of its constitutive dichotomy of “the nation” and a “foreign element,” national populism, just like any other of its kind,

... usually turns against representative democracy and political parties. If it makes use of the tools, it does so in order to blow the established system up from the inside, and open the way for direct democracy or authoritarian rule where the will of “the people” would be fully expressed, with no regards to legal and administrative rules.¹³⁷

In Szacki’s *Liberalism after Communism*, the reconstruction of some elements of the worldview of Solidarity (which, in 1980, called itself “a community

135 Ibidem, p. 65.

136 J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 228 (translation—p. 186).

137 J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 64.

purified by the catharsis of rebellion”) included the belief that “politics is nothing but a search for an adequate expression of universal will.”¹³⁸ Referring to this reconstruction in *Questions about Populism*, he was sceptical of the view of Lawrence Goodwyn, an outstanding historian of American populism,

... who in his new, thick volume on Polish Solidarity, put a lot of effort in proving that the lower class workers could easily do without the presence of Warsaw intellectuals, who tried to introduce ideology to their movement.¹³⁹

There was a clear reason for this scepticism, namely the awareness of the collision course this movement’s policy was taking, against the “reason” of the dictatorship at the time, and against the rationality of the liberal minimum, introduced by the intellectuals from Warsaw. The questions Szacki asked were related to the possibility of “bypassing” this movement, or any subsequent ones, including the Polish national-populist ones related to the myth of “Solidarity,” regardless of the lack of respect for “official institutions and applicable law.”¹⁴⁰

Jerzy Szacki had no opportunity, either in his questions about populism or those concerning liberalism after communism, to refer in great detail to the views and slogans characteristic of the “good change camp” that was about to emerge. His reconstruction of the main premises and areas for, as inevitable as painful, predictable conflict between the Polish populist minimum and liberal minimum, however, allows one to rebuild the image that would have been created had he also looked at this camp with the eyes of both a “historian” and a “mythologist.” As a qualified liberal minimum mythologist, who made the minimum’s rationality dependent on adopting a historically unfounded ideological attitude, according to which Poland is an integral part of the Western world, he would probably provide the representatives of the aforementioned camp with a description of dilemmas between the goals and the means for their implementation. He would consider the following a reason for his calling: “perhaps to force them, or at least help them” realize the ultimate sense of conduct, the motto of which is the belief that what really counts is “the will expressed at a given moment by the people, not an institutional system dominated by elites, and corrupt system of institutions.”¹⁴¹

138 J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, p. 142.

139 The book the author referred to: L. Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland*, Oxford 1991; J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 62.

140 J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 64.

141 Ibidem.

Therefore, Jerzy Szacki would probably see the contemporary political crisis in Poland as a crisis of the Polish *raison d'état*. In his analysis of the choices available in the face of this crisis, he would probably indicate the presence of at least two schools of thought clashing with each other. On the one hand, he would present an ideological movement which considers trying to institutionalize a system of legal safety measures, protecting the freedom of the individual against political manifestations of the will of the people in conflicts on morality, in line with the Polish *raison d'état*. On the other hand, as a historian of ideas, he would probably delve deeply into the historical context of an ideological attitude that the Polish *raison d'état* requires the restoration of a political tradition which is “perfectly capable,” without instituting any bureaucratic restrictions to the freedom of the people’s will. Analysing the historical background of cases where the liberals tried to instil these restrictions in Poland, Jerzy Szacki noted that

... The freedom to which the Polish nobility was so strongly attached was an entirely different kind of freedom from the one professed by modern liberalism. Andrzej Walicki wrote that the freedom of the Polish nobility was “freedom conceived as participation in group sovereignty and not as a defense of the rights of the individual to pursue his individual life goals.”¹⁴²

It is possible that, taking into account the social, “noble” context of the neotraditionalist idea of freedom, Jerzy Szacki would be inclined to analyse the contemporary political crisis in terms of a clash of not really Polish reasons of state, but even reasons of “Polish states.” The historicization of “ordinary people” and “liberal elites” by the current opposition, as well as the equally important question about the possibility of “being able to do without” workers and Warsaw intellectuals, would induce him, perhaps, to make a presentistic attempt to find in them the embodiments of dichotomies that determined the “existence and identity of political culture” in Poland. One can only guess how Jerzy Szacki would choose to conduct his analysis of the neotraditionalists’ world-view from the “good change camp,” if the attitude itself was treated not as a “more or less consistent defence of the old order” but rather as a “defence of certain old values under the conditions of the new order.” One can only suppose what relations he would draw between the slogan of “the nation as sovereign” often uttered by the “good change” camp, and the nobles’ idea of freedom; and also what choices he would outline in relation to the dilemmas

¹⁴² J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, pp. 58–59 (translation—p. 47); see also A. Walicki, *Trzy patriotyzmy*, Res Publica, Warszawa 1991, p. 32.

of this idea, which finds itself “in completely new conditions than those in which it was created.”

In *Questions about Populism*, Jerzy Szacki’s answer to these dilemmas was a presentation of the processes by which an “ancient” idea of freedom transformed into a populist myth, in contemporary representative democracies. Together with the myth of the timeless “national interest,” from the binocular perspective of a historian of ideas, it appeared to be one of the tools used for a “temporary mobilization of the masses” in order to fight a “foreign element” represented by the liberal elites, and to win social support in general elections.¹⁴³ From this perspective, the political rhetoric of the “good change camp,” which combines the national and social slogans,¹⁴⁴ reveals more than simply the features of national or right-wing populism. To the extent that it includes, on the one hand, the promise that “one great act of social justice would suffice for a fundamental change of people’s situation,”¹⁴⁵ and, on the other hand, the myth of the camp’s representation of the “will of the nation” as a monolithic “filling” of the Polish state, this rhetoric also takes on the features of a certain “Jacobin-Bolshevik” ideology, “which uses the social anxiety induced by populism for its own purposes.”¹⁴⁶

In Białowieża, still free of a bark beetle infestation, Jerzy Szacki presented the mechanisms by which Polish national populism destroys the system of representative democracy from the inside, and its inevitable transformation into a system of authoritarian rule. In his view, what distinguished populist movements that were “doomed” from those which were “victorious” was the latter movements’ capability of creating an organization. He presented overcoming its “distrust of all institutions where obedience to rigid rules and discipline is mandatory” as the main condition for attaining victory (in the elections—first of all).¹⁴⁷ According to Jerzy Szacki’s analysis, the temporary use of the system of representative democracy by this movement put him in a dilemma situation, one very much relevant to populism itself: the choice between “charismatic leadership, which usually leads directly to autocracy,” and

143 J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 65.

144 Jerzy Szacki noticed, ten years earlier: “there are a lot of indications which tell me that trends which may focus on forcing economic policies, and remind a right-minded liberal of socialism, will be reborn on the right side of the political scene.” (J. Szacki, *Liberalizm po komunizmie*, s. 205).

145 J. Szacki, *Pytania o populizm*, p. 65.

146 Ibidem, p. 66.

147 Ibidem.

... a collapse, which makes space for other, better organized political movements, able to make use of populist slogans, but avoiding their actual implementation—becoming what people had hoped they would be.¹⁴⁸

In his paper, Jerzy Szacki also indirectly referred to alternative scenarios for the political future of the “good change camp.” All of the variants turned out to be scenarios of defeat due to their structural frailty, and the Pyrrhic nature of their political victory. It appeared that, from the very definition of populism, even if such a movement or “camp” created political institutions in favourable circumstances, their authorities or leaders would sooner or later become the main binding force for the whole group. When the leadership weakens,

... disputes and secession wars begin, because the concept of “people’s will” is inherently susceptible to multiple interpretations that cannot be agreed upon with democratic methods if the principles on which the representative system is based have been rejected.¹⁴⁹

In his opinion, the same definition of populism also implied that the “good change camp” was doomed to fail, even if the authority of the camp’s leader did not weaken, or even if “the will of the people” obtained an interpretation agreed upon by other methods.

The autocracy arising from populist movements destroys all expectations, and it drags the created illusions back into the light, so everybody can see what happens when impossible economic promises are realized. This can be clearly seen in the example of Peronism, or the few victorious populisms that history still remembers.¹⁵⁰

Translated by: Piotr Sarna

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem.

Andrzej Gniazdowski

The Polish *Raison d'État*. Democratic Sovereignty vs the Liberal Minimum

Abstract

The paper discusses *Liberalism after Communism* by Jerzy Szacki, in the light of the commonly accepted research method (including by Szacki himself), and his idea of history and the general attitude towards the past. The paper focuses on how Szacki tackles the problem of transporting the liberal ideas onto the Polish ground after 1989; on how he discloses the dilemmas and restrictions of Polish liberalism; on the historical dimension of Polish liberalism; and on whether the liberal *Weltanschauung* is universal or incidental. In the end, the paper attempts to examine the problem of the liberal minimum in Szacki's analyses, in the context of the Polish *raison d'état* and the question of populism, as well as the current political crisis in Poland.

Keywords: liberal minimum, populist minimum, democracy, history of sociology, Jerzy Szacki, *raison d'état*.

