Citizenship and adult education under totalitarian regimes: The People's Republic of Poland

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One of the many activities we undertake almost instinctively is ‘learning’. When we think of learning, we often mean schools, teachers and curricula, which inculcate everything we should learn. It is a well known fact that teaching is not a monopoly of school. Reality frequently offers us many more educative possibilities, obviously different from those typical of school, yet not less meaningful. The co-existence of educational institutions with everyday life creates an educational space in which people are trying to find their own place. Schools and everyday life are both influenced by the state and the authorities, which are strongly reflected in the content of education, norms and social roles. From their youngest years onwards, individuals are shaped according to the accepted social, cultural and public mores. This happens, with various degrees of intensity, all the time and everywhere. Intensity is the key word here. It regulates the influence which the authority exerts on education and society, while at the same time, it can create ideally subordinate citizens, or gives them an apparent chance to be themselves.

The twentieth century brought many changes, among them the experience of totalitarian regimes. Mankind experienced the ‘brown’ and the ‘red’ totalitarianism, with millions of dead as the result of their activities. This is not to mention the masses of people who were deprived of their self-awareness, incapable of independent thinking, looking for support in the machinery of the state which took advantage of their naïve faith that it was acting for the benefit of the peoples. Education in the conditions of a totalitarian state was a painful proof that an omnipresent ideology deprives people of everything. However, the lack of permission for unrestrained thinking, books and press censorship, or an information embargo did not mean the end of dreams about freedom. Education accompanied by the construction of a civil society created an unparalleled form of struggle in the conditions of a total oppression. Conscious individual were becoming ‘demiurges’ of not only his or her reality, but also of social reality. The functioning of educational forms created independently from the official system in the Polish People’s Republic became the best example of this phenomenon. This chapter will examine how the war for minds and awareness, which was supposed to become an element of the reform of the system, led to its complete transformation - a certain kind of a supplement to Orwell’s 1984 based upon the image of a civil education in the Polish People’s Republic.
A totalitarian state: the total state

In his song *Imagine*, John Lennon was talking about happy, free people, about places where welfare exists, and he infected millions of listeners with his dreams about this utopia. Masses of people imagined something equally extraordinary when they saw how powerful the states in which they had been living so far had become. How the political, military and economic power brought electricity to the furthest villages, how teachers were appearing, and peasants were becoming workmen, whereas authority was ‘apparently’ in hands of common people. And, as in Lennon’s song, no boundaries, no property and the brotherhood of free people were proclaimed. With one little difference, while the song has become a beautiful concept, totalitarian state was a violent reality. In the words of Kuroń (1995:312-313):

*Totalitarianism is a system in which the whole of economic, social and political life is subordinated to the nerve-centre, and, according to the principles, it should function merely on the basis of the centre’s decisions. Therefore, people are incapacitated and thus the social fabric is destroyed. We can see it and we know it, but we cannot notice a limited power of such a deception. A frustrated man resorts to the simplest way of understanding the world: to dividing it into ‘we’ and ‘they’. ‘They’ are the enemy power, ‘we’ are, above all, my weakness.*

A totalitarian system creates an imaginary enemy and personalizes it by presenting the object of a potential threat to all the citizens. In addition, it develops a conviction in them that the only thing which can ensure survival is obedience to authority. Thus beguiled citizens are afraid not only to oppose authority, but they support its power through their own activity, trusting that such behaviour will ensure survival for them and their families. The state authority — in all its majesty — not only protects them, but it also ensures employment, education and health services. It incapacitates individuals by having their absolute support. It interferes not only with education, working places, social life, but also with private matters. It permits only the right forms of thinking and explicitly shows what is right or wrong. It creates a human being according to its needs and abilities. The state becomes total as well. It develops awareness in which no kind of civil initiative is allowed, as it has the overtones of every objection. The state is a bureaucratic muzzle for a citizen who is unaware of its existence. This muzzle is composed of all the things that the citizen consumes — usually for free — material products, but also ideas and views served-up in such a way that a citizen accepts them as his or her own. Subjugating activities in the name of the community’s interests change an ordinary man into a bureaucrat, who, first of all, takes

care of following the rules regulating all of his activities, while abandoning the possibility and the necessity of thinking. Ideally beguiled societies become the most demanded goods for the authority. In such conditions, education appears to be a supplement which enables the most effective allocation of the human resources possessed by the system. Thus, somebody will be made a workman, somebody else a teacher, and still another person will be made a doctor, while all of them will be working for the state's interests. The system has created an ideally programmed individual *homo sovieticus*: an ideal citizen who cedes his ability to judge, to think critically, or to be responsible for himself, to the state. In return, he receives goods which he loves to consume – free holidays, education, health care and guaranteed work. Actually, it is difficult to wonder at a man who wants to possess. The problem is that, being an ideal product, he or she does not realize that it is also possible ‘to be’.

The education of adults in the Polish People’s Republic consisted of all the levels of teaching, starting from primary schools, through the courses in working places, to higher education. The educational system started to function immediately after the war, giving adults, perhaps for the first time, a chance to receive education which enabled them to achieve social advancement. Educational activity by the communist authorities embraced a large number of people. It made access to education easier than ever before. Teaching adults, together with a guaranteed working place, strengthened the power of the state, since it not only educated, but also employed people immediately, convincing them that they are necessary to the state and that they need the state to exist. One educator at the time, Urbanczk (1973:136) wrote:

>....teaching adults in educational institutions, thanks to disseminating the ideas representative of this culture, contributes to building friendly relations among all the social groups within a nation, thus increasing its cohesion, it is an integrating factor.4

The educational contexts of the system could not dispense with its ideology, which was included in the curricula, as well as in activities connected with school in form of various political organizations, including the Polish United Workers’ Party itself. Ideology appearing as one of the educational elements was perceived as something normal, because it was impossible to imagine a different solution. Accepting it as a component of the educational system was natural in a situation where people had no ability to separate the ‘educative’ content from ‘indoctrination’. Actually, this lack of ability was culturally programmed in the technological model of education – the only one they experienced. In such a system according to Malewski:

The basic task of a teacher of adults is to ‘pour through a funnel’ a ready non-problematic knowledge to the empty crypts of the learners’ minds and reflecting in their consciousness an image of the world in which they were going to live and work, or they were already living and working). This image is presented as a system of naturally existing institutions, social roles, moral norms, and procedures of conduct [...].

Everything created in a manner which did not require critical thinking, asking questions, expecting an answer. Everyone knew perfectly that any reservation means one thing: a conflict with the authority, which may immediately result in losing privileges there had been, to a great extent a bonus for civil obedience, for being an obedient citizen, not demanding anything from the authority, except for the fact that it exists, lasts and gives a calculable social support. The People’s Republic created people perfectly copying the established patterns. Accepting a specific order and easily abandoning questions about the truth, obviously until a certain moment. A passive man created in the conditions of a total state appeared to be, however, a surprisingly competent participant of the fight for material goods whose availability on the market was negligible. Perhaps the hidden curriculum of the state’s activity was to direct the citizen’s actions at this goal, discouraging them from the necessity of thinking about something different from material goods. The educational system itself, on the other hand, mastered to perfection the ability of producing people who are professionally competent, but mentally passive. According to Muszyński (1983:29-30):

Marxism showed a human being in the entirety of their real bonds with the social life. It also proved the fallacy of different points of view....A socialist morality is, consequently and to the whole extent, a morality of a social movement. What is more, it gives this movement a specific, wide range and a real sense....A socialist morality is a morality engaged in everything which means acting for a better present and future of other people, no matter if this acting is performed in terms of interpersonal relations, life of someone’s own community, solving the matters of their own nation or state, or in terms of relations among nations.

In accordance with this curriculum, the absolutism of this morality rejected pluralism in practically every question. With the support of Makarenko’s theory of collective upbringing – in which subordination to the group was the superior aim – it was not difficult to create people who would have accepted the system’s as-

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sumptions as their own. In fact, the educational opportunity that people received from the communist authorities, together with the reconstruction and the development of the state, gave them a unique possibility of social advancement. This involved the possibility of migration to the cities, receiving a flat, welfare support and professional training. This was basically a way to fulfil the dreams of many people. It was also the source of their enormous grudge against the authorities after 1989 when the state left the people without their hitherto protection. These possibilities became the substitute for the desire for individual freedom. However, as history has proved, they did not replace them completely.

Opposition

In spite of the efficiency of the working of state structures in filling almost all of the activity spheres each of every citizens, total authorities failed to build a society of completely subordinated individuals. A political, but also a mental opposition appeared. Individuals who noticed the disadvantages of the system started to organize themselves in order to create an alternative for the reality in which they were living. In the situation where authority controls society, any activities different from those officially accepted and thus controlled had to take on a form of opposition, which the state fought against in planned ways. Straightforward activity, aimed at the authorities - such as, for instance, The Open Letter of Kuroń and Modzelewski - ended with sentences of imprisonment for acting to overturn the state. The strong and effective constraint machinery did not enable anybody to think of a protest different from an ideological one which could only come into being through quasi-educative activities and whose task was to evoke reflectiveness in people that could lead to changes. In the words of Kuron (1984:51):

We acknowledged here depriving the society of organizations, and as, a consequence, the social atomization and disintegration of social bonds as the basic characteristics of a totalitarian system. Hence, the principal element of any activity supporting democracy is a social self-organisation, which means creating autonomous organisations, independent from the authorities, in uniting the majority or, at least, a considerable part of the society.⁶

'Self-organisation' and 'self-education' marked the beginning of a completely rank-and-file change which was not initially directed against the system, but towards its transformation. The totalitarian authorities, however, did not discuss the question the need for change. They did not need to, because, the power they apparently possessed gave them the illusory feeling of their own absolute advantage. Challenging the monopoly of awareness started with discussion, informal

debates in circles of acquaintances, debates about the system, politics, culture, and society. Some of these circles of communication became famous: the Club of the Crooked Circle [Klub Krzywego Koła] gathering intellectuals who, later on, created the core of oppositional organizations, the Club of Contradiction Seekers [Klub Poszukiwaczy Sprzeczności] engaging secondary school students who were intellectually involved in searching for the absurdities of the system. Intellectuals discussed the possibilities of change. Workmen introduced the postulates of change into real life, with a tragic effect. Poznań in 1956, the Baltic Sea coast in 1970, and Radom in 1976 are places and dates where the authorities used violence to show that they were not afraid of protests. This painful experience, however, convinced people that protest may be effective only when it is supported by the masses. In the words of the Workingmen's Defense Committee (KOR) activist Onyszkiewicz: ‘We realized we were living in a country where the last, though rarely speaking, resort were workmen. In 1976, everybody knew that this time it was necessary to join the rebellion.’7 This is how the idea of the Workingmen’s Defense Committee was born as an organization which defended workers who were fired for political activity. It insisted on releasing political prisoners as well as on clarity in acts that the authority used against its opponents.

In practice, KOR became a link between intellectuals and workmen. In the words of Boniecki (2006):

*Illustrus and texts of KOR propagated through Free Europe changed people. Determination and courage of KOR activists broke the wall of distrust, persistently built up by the authorities, which separated workmen from university circles and the intellectuals. But still another wall seemed to be breaking. KOR was secular; it operated far from the church structures.* 8

The KOR organization became a specific type of bridge between those who had so far been fighting with words and those who had not avoided a physical fight.

*KOR was a fantastic political idea, but all the time we were terribly careful about not entering a real politics – a politics based on choosing an ideological option. We supported any initiative, if it was relatively decent, and we defended anybody who organized themselves in any way.* 9

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KOR became the source of rebellion, or it at least showed clearly that the authorities cannot disregard opposition. People creating the organization were well recognizable. They had usually already possessed ‘public enemy’ status with Jacek Kuroń in the foreground. The Committee’s activity first involved material support for victims and providing care in different dimensions, for example legal support. Later on, KOR became the centre for exchanging information about repressions, a place where oppositional activity was co-ordinated, and an ‘information agency’ which distributed news about the situation in Poland abroad. It also provided some kind of support for the newly created trade union Solidarity. People constituting KOR – although they were coming from different environments and had a different philosophy of life and approach to politics – created a very strong organization which effectively resisted the increasingly aggressive activity by the authorities. Outside the KOR circle, there were many personalities and oppositional organisations whose contribution led to the transformation of the system. This short reference to KOR and the clubs involves a painful omission of many people and their magnificent work. But it has been done consciously because the topic under discussion here is the organization of an ‘independent education’. This selective approach was intended only to outline the context of activities performed by a widely understood ‘opposition’.

What did an ‘independent adult education’ look like? It had, above all, to appear as an informal activity concentrated, first of all, on the educative organizing of oppositional circles. Secondly, it provided them with educational materials, which in the conditions of the strict regimentation of nearly all goods was a massive achievement. All anti-system activity was illegal and punishable. How was this education thus undertaken? Its bases were formed by the Society of Scientific Courses organized by the opposition, and above all the so-called ‘Flying University.’ Lecturers at the courses taking place in private flats were oppositional activists, scientists, and publicists. Lectures were pacified by the activists of communist students’ organisations, but they were constantly attracting more than a full assembly. They were suspended after the Martial Law had been introduced. Despite this, however, different types of self-educative circles continued to exist. Independent education completely abandoned an institutional organisation which favoured hierarchical relations among the participants. The system of a teaching person and those listening was maintained, but there were no ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ roles anymore. After all, everybody could be the lecturer. This definitive break with the structure and precise roles built up a climate of real learning, free of the state’s ideology. Furthermore, the opposition, given the developing understanding between workmen and representatives of intellectual circles, frequently organized discussion meetings. Perceived in various ways, they became a field of stormy debates, as the presented views were often extremely diverse both in political and philosophical matters. Educative activities did not forget higher education. Students established their own oppositional organizations. The atmosphere of resistance against the communist system was
common. The 80s brought a carnival of freedom, and informal education was its essential component.

Beside courses and self-educative circles, an important role in independent education was played by the so-called second and third circulations of information, which, given the conditions of strict censorship, provided an opportunity to publish texts that were not legally available. Creating the second circulation was the only chance to propagate the literary works that were prohibited by the authorities such as books, brochures, and the clandestine press. Printing houses operating in complete illegality were being established. Publications got to people who, after having read them, dispatched them for further circulation; relatively low numbers of volumes of an edition forced such methods of distribution. At the same time, they created conditions for discussing the materials read, which took the form of a certain ‘fashion’ for reading anything that was prohibited.

The third circulation was an absolutely a question of the rank-and-file activity of individual people. Given the lack of possibilities to buy musical productions, especially alternative ones such as punk, rock, and a ban on distributing them was the reason why ‘...some bands recorded and distributed cassettes on their own. Listeners at concerts also recorded them on their own equipment.’

A highly effective distribution made totally niche performers well-known in the whole country. ‘Popular culture’ started to educate citizens on an unheard-of scale. The 1980s introduced a lot of bands which were strongly engaged in politics. In spite of censorial bans, concerts were large festivals of freedom. Performers carried away the crowds with courageous lyrics and powerful music. The surrealistic mood resulting from the combination of a totalitarian state with the carnival of civil freedom – unheard-of before or later on – caused many situations in which citizens went into the streets in not strictly political demonstrations, but as so-called ‘happeners’. The best example of such activity was the Wroclaw initiative of ‘The Orange Alternative’ with its charismatic leader Waldemar Fydrych as the self-appointed major. In the 80s, a few more than ten thousand people in the streets – dressed as gnomes – might have meant a revolution. But in Wroclaw it meant mainly a scoffing amusement in which people pointed out the absurdities of the system they were living in.

All the oppositional activity in the last phase of PRL developed an ever stronger conviction that transformation of the system was just a question of time. The educational contexts of the opposition became an element in building the awareness of people who had created it. A specific character of independent education in the conditions of a totalitarian state was grounded in people’s self-organisation and in developing the belief that they have a causative power. A society which was beguiled by the authorities remained in torpor, also in educational terms as well. Oppositional activities required engagement and letting

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people feel how needed they were by others, by the society. It is also necessary to observe that people taking part in different forms of oppositional education learned for themselves, as there were no certificates, nothing which would have provided any material proof of their competences. People from the *homo sovieticus* society began to live and not to just possess, and to know what ‘to be’ means.

**A view from the twenty-first century**

A twenty-first century perspective on what happened in Poland is full of ambivalence. Michnik (2003:250-252) formulates his point of view in the following way:

> If the essence of communism was to make a man the state’s property, we thought that our ‘velvet’ transformation will bring four forms of emancipation. We believed in the national emancipation, in a state without any ethnic discrimination which will not become a victim of a conquest, but will not be an oppressor to another nation either. Disintegration of communism has also caused explosion of ethnic chauvinism....We believed in religious emancipation. We thought that religion, which was discriminated and persecuted, would become a natural, invaluable component of democratic order...churches have been subjected to political manipulation and have often become the base for extremely intolerant attitudes...We believed in emancipation of the world of work. Functioning of the Solidarity trade union with many millions of members was supposed to be its germ. We felt disappointed. The Solidarity trade union soon became its own caricature and tried to play the role previously played by the communist party in working places and in the country...We believed in civil emancipation, in freedom which is not chaos...we experienced a powerful corruption threatening the quality of democratic order...This bitter balance is by no means a confession of a frustrated pessimist. It is just the opposite. I am convinced that an enormous change has been made and it is an absolutely positive change...On the other hand, I also emphasize the gloomy spheres of democratic transformation...”

A relevant, but sober, opinion from the perspective of a man who was a co-originator of the opposition is a strong confirmation that many issues are still to be corrected. People participating in the great, mass, social rebellion did not change their social awareness. In spite of the passing of the years, the idea of

Homo sovieticus has not been destroyed as yet. A civil society is still just a dream. The role of informal education is still to make people aware. Has anything really changed? Such a question may seem absurd, because for someone who saw Poland in PRL times and can now see it in the twenty-first century almost everything has changed — starting from the appearance of people, shops full of goods, to the way big, once grey, cities look. This is a ‘new world’ of tinsel, neon signs, world-famous brands, new generations of people. Yet there is still a system, although democratic today, which establishes norms, just like the previous one did, which still makes people used to welfare services, but which does not take anybody into account for the following four years until the next parliamentary election. Poland today is a country of big possibilities, but also of huge limitations. The idea of a ‘soviet man’ has been replaced with a few others: an eternal consumer, a fervent catholic, a technocrat, or a yuppie. All of these can incapacitate in exactly the same way, perhaps with less intensity. But this time the issue is not about compulsion, since totality has been replaced with pluriformity. Every day a new concept comes into being. It will gain supporters, because somebody will claim it is fashionable and at the same time ‘cool’. Political totalitarianism has been replaced with consumer totalitarianism. It is difficult to decide which one incapacitates more. There are, however, a few facts that need to be confronted in order to have a possibility of forming a relatively objective opinion.

There is the question of leadership. Oppositional activity was entirely based on political and intellectual leaders. Here, the duo of Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń remained unrivalled. Obviously, there were more recognizable political personalities, but no one had comparable information, or maybe even propaganda power. When people heard these names, they immediately knew that the authorities had a problem. Present leaders are the creation of the mass media, and they function in terms of the characters in soap operas or reality shows. The results of opinion polls have become the measure of their contacts with the society. Communication with society is reduced to the form of a television appearance and to a shallow intellectual mush directed towards thoughtless viewers. Substantial, ideological debate has been replaced with a trivial double-speak.

The totalitarian state has certainly passed away together with the previous system. A total state, however, still exists and it is in a good condition. Totality is expressed in the activities of the authorities that seemingly give power to their citizens. On the one hand, they encourage starting professional, social and educational activities. On the other hand, they restrict such activity in an extremely effective way. A bureaucratic system is being improved with a surgeon’s precision. What is the reason why it is increasingly more expensive and less open for the citizen?

Civil education is still functioning mainly as a form of resistance to the state. Social movements of different type communicate with the authorities through demonstrations or protesting by e-mails. Forms of resistance have benefited
from technological progress, but they have not changed the recipient. The state is still today perceived as the subject of social oppression.

What has actually changed then? Firstly, the understanding of education. Today more than ever before, people have become convinced that it is indispensable to change their own lives. Each form of education is perceived as the key to such change. Unfortunately, not all forms of education are seen as the key in reality. Civil activity is expressed most strongly among young people, frequently in form of radical slogans demanding a system change. Nevertheless, the fact that civil awareness is not as interesting for most people as sales promotions or another television series is a significant worry.

Civil education of adults in the conditions of a totalitarian state was a fight in the full meaning of the word, as it was inseparably connected with oppositional activity. It created a new quality in the sphere of co-operation among people and in their attitudes to politics, society and the state. It gave them a feeling of causative power in times when this was strictly regulated, because it posed a problem for the authorities. It also created the awareness of people meeting at secret lectures in order to listen, discuss and think. But this is now the past. One again, the present involves the fight for 'the rule over the souls'. There is a huge 'empty space' with regard to the question of civil education. Activities should be undertaken to make people more active, to convince them that they can only change their reality in every dimension through education, and these activities must be similar to those in the times of oppositional activity. What should they involve? First of all the understanding that freedom can be lost not only due to the restrictions of a politically totalitarian state, but also as a result of the total state in the sense of an addiction to consumption as was presented by Herbert Marcuse in and his notion of One-dimensional man. Therefore, a new opposition needs to be quasi-political, more interdisciplinary and critically concentrated with evoking reflection. It is not constituted by one movement - there is no common idea - it is not simple, and neither nice nor pleasant. It is the basic alternative for the mainstream thinking and the 'MacDonaldization' of the world. It is based on discourse and egalitarianism. 'Alter-global' opposition is perhaps the answer to the one-dimensional world. Time will show how whether change will succeed. Today, activity supporting 'independent education' is no longer expressed by Lennon's Imagine. Pink Floyd's song with the immortal appeal 'we don’t need no education, we don’t need no thought control' is perhaps more suitable for the present moment. It is now time to think with no limitations rather than dreaming. It is the message of the new 'civil education' for today. Not romantic enough? Hopefully, and perhaps with a greater effect.
Bibliography


E-bibliography: