

Civil Society in Postcommunist Poland

Jolanta Babiuch-Luxmoore

I see a difference between Anglo-Saxon and Polish understandings of 'civil society'. The former (derived from Locke and Hume) sees civil society as involving a contract on power-sharing between society and the state. The latter (derived more from Rousseau) sees society as essentially in conflict with the state.

In Poland discussion on civil society started in the 1970s and 1980s. The idea was to build civil society as an environment parallel to the state where citizens could 'live in truth', with respect for each other; the context was that nobody knew how long communism was going to last. It was to be a moral but apolitical civil society. Its apogee was the Solidarity movement. This was a very particular phenomenon: it was in fact a kind of 'negative solidarity' in that it brought together people who had in common only the fact that they were against the state. This negative nature was later to turn out to be a disadvantage: civil society as it evolved at this time in Poland was basically negative about the state.

Communism collapsed unexpectedly, and there was no Third Way because there was no time: suddenly the only agenda was neo-liberal. Postcommunist Poland has seen the rise of NGOs, which have been set up in order to take action in areas where the state has not been doing well. They have become neo-liberal, oriented towards money, getting grants from the West. They have lost the ethos of civil society, which in Poland was conceived as moral. They have largely become professionalised and cliquish closed shops, fulfilling the programmes of those who are giving them grants.

In communist times in Poland the Catholic Church played a very important role. After the end of communism, however, the Church gave the green light to neo-liberal policies, and the idea that it is good to be entrepreneurial was promoted from the pulpit. The Church did not do enough for the poor, and it even became a barrier to civil society. In identifying itself with the nation, it also became anti-pluralist and unfriendly to minorities. Taboos still prevail: anyone wanting to criticise John Paul II will not get an airing in the media, and topics such as child abuse occurring in Poland are not discussed. The Church claims that all Catholics constitute civil society, which could be a positive claim, were it not for the caveats just listed. Part of 'civil society' in Poland has tended to become right-wing. Radio Marija, for example, brings together thousands of believing enthusiasts.

Arguably true civil society in Poland today can be found in what I would call 'networking' amongst friends and family, as practised for 200 years when Poland did not exist as a political entity. However, this also has its negative side: it tends to produce closed communities which are prone to corruption. Concentration on the family creates less social capital than more open networking does. Indeed, I don't know if it is possible to create civil society in the western sense in Poland: as I say, the recent legacy is to see it as in opposition to the state.

I have been involved with setting up Transparency International (TI) in postcommunist Poland. TI originated in Africa, with the aim of opposing corruption

which syphoned off aid before it reached its intended recipients. Trying to set up TI in Poland was beset by anarchy: there was no framework or precedent for setting up such bodies, and when money started flowing in the leading participants started falling out among themselves.

TI produces a corruption index, rating countries from 1 (least corrupt). The ten least corrupt countries are always the same; and they are all countries with a Protestant Christian heritage. Perhaps Protestant individualism is a key factor in producing viable civil society.

When I first came to the UK I was impressed by the range of civil society organisations, and it struck me that they grow out of leisure. I would like to make a distinction between a 'community', which is a natural collectivist home, and an 'association', which you join voluntarily.

What of prospects for the future?

Now that Poland is a member of the European Union one might expect effects from increased exposure of Poles to the West, travelling to Western Europe to work and then going back to Poland. There may be the potential for the growth of single-issue groups of citizens who will start lobbying on more general European issues things like the mistreatment of young people by Catholic priests, abortion, child poverty, gay rights. These might take a different form from the the inward-looking communal groups I have been talking about.

There may also be increasing tension between secular human rights demands placed on the Polish government by the EU and the defensive position of the Church. The people and the government may before long take sides together against the Church on this issue.

Jolanta Babiuch-Luxmoore is Fundraising and Project Development Officer for the Oxfordshire Racial Equality Council and an Associate Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University. She was the elected Founder-Chairperson of Transparency International in Poland and served on the Berlin-based organisation's International Research Council.