

## The Power of Aristotelian Memes – the Polish Example

**ABSTRACT:** *The article uses the concept of meme (from Greek word mimesis), coined by Richard Dawkins, as a tool to look at the history of political Aristotelianism. It argues that recurrent interest in Aristotle's ideas can be viewed as a manifestation of deeper cultural traits that have been running throughout the veins of European societies for centuries, framing our minds and influencing our practice. Such Aristotelian memes can be observed particularly in Polish political tradition. Thus, this tradition serves here as an example of the historical implementation of some Aristotle's memes, among which the definition of man as zoon politikon, the concept of politeia and the role of virtue are of special interest.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Aristotelianism, history of ideas, memetics, Polish republicanism, political theory.*

I SHALL START WITH A QUOTE:

The statue, it is sometimes said, was always there inside the block of marble. All the sculptor did was to chip away the surplus marble to reveal the statue within. There is a helpful image here for the historian. [...] He must begin with some fairly clear perception of what he wants to end up with, just as the sculptor must have some vision in his mind of the statue he wants to create. For it is a process of creation, and the writing of good history calls for creative imagination. To deny or to minimize this truth was the basic fault of the positivist or 'scientific' historians. Believing that the statue had always, in a material sense, been 'objectively' there, they failed to see that it was only when the sculptor [...] had envisaged it there that it became at all possible for it to be revealed. (Thomson 1969. 99)

The above words didn't grow stale. Quite the contrary, the simple truth they contain has been spreading within all branches of history. The history of political thought is no exception here. Examining particular political traditions we face a large amount

of different data: names, biographies, books, documents, concepts, ideas; institutions founded upon these ideas or ideas questioning the institutions being established. Some of such data are at hand because they have already been mentioned hundreds of times – but is this a sufficient reason to repeat them again or rather to “chip them away” as trivial? Others are hardly known because they have usually been omitted by many – but is it a sign of their lesser importance or simply more difficult access, and then, maybe it would have some value to expose them in our final work? To sum up, we do not deal with a block of marble, but with a big quarry. And since it is impossible to turn the whole quarry into a sculpture gallery, we are condemned to restrict our passion for creation and confine ourselves to selective pieces we find particularly attractive, leaving the rest for others. Imagination helps a lot in making choices of the historical material that we are to present as our final “statue.”

Though the word “imagination” was not popular in the humanities during the rule of the positivist paradigm, lately this attitude has changed. Consequently, we can observe more diversification in methodological approaches in the field of history of political thought. It is worth underlining that, first of all, imagination is required to see past political experiences (both intellectual and practical) from an interesting, accurate, and trustworthy perspective – which is nothing more than a methodology that provides us with tools, useful to investigate the past. And reversely, once the methodology is constituted, it directs imagination away from weakening the connection between our interpretations and historical facts. In a way, the proportion between imagination and methodological rigour assumed or required by particular disciplines allows to discriminate between science (where methodology rules almost indivisibly) and art (where imagination takes over). The humanities have always been balancing between these two extremes. The challenge of positivism had brought it close to science, but the failure of positivistic promises made it look more and more firmly in the other direction. And so the intellectual pendulum can swing again, reviving debates on the right way of talking about the past.

The history of political thought embraces this change of attitude willingly, in its “sculpturing” looking for inspirations coming from the outside. Among these inspirations there are achievements of social sciences, such as sociology, psychology, economy, and others; but also philosophical standpoints or general, cultural trends. All that can be used by imagination to refresh methodology and to find good methods of presenting old concepts and ideas in the way they could teach us something new and useful. The past is left behind, but history, as such, must be up-to-date. And it is. Historians drew lessons from Wittgensteinian “linguistic turn,” and then from “narrative turn;” like other scholars they thought over problems of objectivity and subjectivity; finally they tried to reconsider and specify once again their objects of interests. To make this new opening more visible, some new subdisciplines have been created, like “history of ideas” (initiated by Arthur O. Lovejoy), “history of concepts” (*Begriffsgeschichte*, initiated by Reinhart Koselleck), or “intellectual history.” Some insist to discriminate between them, while others prefer to expose simi-

larities, arguing that the career of all these “histories” reflects a more general change in our methodological consciousness.

I do not intend to discuss the variety of possible ways of examining political thought. This lengthy introduction is just to show that the door has been opened by others, and inviting some dose of inspiration coming from fields strange to historical research itself can do it no harm, if applied consciously. Only accepting such a possibility, one can postpone, for a while, quite natural reservations towards an article that refers to Aristotle, Polish political tradition and – the most mysterious of them – memetics.

If I was to traditionally discuss Polish contemporary Aristotelianism, then I would have to concentrate upon philosophers who openly admitted that the works of Aristotle had been the source of inspiration to them. It could be an interesting task because we have such philosophers that have been working on Aristotle’s ideas independently of mainstream Western philosophy; and yet in many respects they chose similar directions in interpreting and imbuing Aristotelian concepts into the more modern context. I am talking especially about the so-called Lublin School of Philosophy, that is, a group of scholars centred around the Catholic University of Lublin, and their attempts to combine Aristotelianism with neo-Thomism, existentialism, phenomenology, and Marxism. Their names include: Józef M. Bocheński, Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, Stefan Świeżawski, and definitely the most renowned, Karol Wojtyła. That would summarise the influence of Aristotle upon Polish political thinking. However, for Aristotle, the politics was mainly practical science with a strong normative bias – it should concentrate upon good actions that would lead the given political community towards happiness. So it is dubious whether the Philosopher himself was satisfied with presenting Aristotelianism as a particular way of thinking and political reasoning only. Thus, with due respect to Aristotle, I want to propose a bit more controversial undertaking, trying to reconsider whether in our European or, more precisely Polish history, we have not only been thinking as Aristotelians but also acting like them.

Usually a historian of political thought refers to historic events, institutions or people’s actions to understand concepts and ideas he or she discusses more profoundly, and to examine them in a wider context. That means we invite the “materialised” history to support our intellectual discussions. I intend to do something opposite, that is, to suggest that our history incorporates general ideas and concepts and then translates them into its particular cultural reality. In the case of Aristotelianism it means that to find its traces in Poland for instance, one does not have to be confined to reading several books which deal with it directly, but it is also helpful to inquire into Polish culture and its historical development. Only bidding these two aspects together can we acquire the whole view. To join them, a coherent methodology is required; however, specifying it here would change the character of this essay, leaving little space for Polish Aristotelianism as such. That is why I decided to turn to the concept of “memes.” It is a concept external to the field of history, so I am fully aware of the fact that it is not warmly welcomed by historians. Still, I be-

lieve it suggests ideas (if deprived of a strictly evolutionary background) which can gather some of the quite common epistemological and methodological convictions on interdependencies between our political theories and the world we live in under one label. So let us say that this article just meets memes at the threshold of our discipline, treating the concept as potentially worth adapting to historical studies, but only after serious reconsideration and modification that would make it fit there. Until such reconsideration is done, every attempt to apply memetics (not to be confused with mimetics) will assume a little bit of imagination. Which means that the term “Aristotelian memes” should be treated first of all as a convenient trope here – even if I am convinced it can serve far more analytical purposes without putting a historian’s methodological conscience at stake.

To begin with some facts: as a term, “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). The general idea of Dawkins revealed the concept of self-replicating units that spread in the universe with no respect to goals other than reproduction itself. To avoid any simplistic interpretation that would identify “replicators” with genes only, and thus would reduce our human development to biological evolution, at the end of his book Dawkins introduced the second type of similarly “selfish” entities. As he explains:

We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene.’ I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*. (Dawkins 1976/1989. 192)

He adds:

Examples of memes are: tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process, which in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears or reads about a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (Dawkins 1976/1989. 192)

A short digression: if we look at contemporary trends in the history of political thought (or whatever we decide to name the discipline), it is surprisingly easy to argue that “ideas” or “concepts” discussed by followers of Lovejoy or Koselleck are not so far away from Dawkins’s memes. In order not to air groundless opinions, it is enough to mention that in his monumental *The Great Chain of Being* Lovejoy uses several times the word “unit,” sometimes as a unit-idea. In an interesting passage he writes, for example:

Another characteristic of the study of the history of ideas, as I should wish to define it, is that it is especially concerned with the manifestations of specific unit-ideas in the collective thought of large groups of persons, not merely in the doctrines or opinions of a small number of profound thinkers or eminent writers. (Lovejoy 1936/1964. 19)

It seems that the same methodological presumptions and expectations stand behind the attempts like that. Namely, the need to express the development of our intellectual heritage more independently from both the individuals and the natural world. It is not to deny the obvious fact that memes or ideas are produced by humans and their content is to a large extent determined by the material reality, but only to grant them with some kind of autonomy. Thanks to this autonomy, both their history and the relations between them can be grasped from a different angle – the angle that enables the exposure of affinities having been treated as secondary<sup>1</sup> so far. Dawkins has chosen a very provocative way to express it, but it is worth discriminating between the style and the merit.

Originally Dawkins's memes were presented in a rather nonchalant way without any profound examination; however, this primary nonchalance furnishes the given concept with a rough simplicity, sufficient to emphasize its most interesting elements and thus its theoretical potential. To the contrary, during the later history of the term it became a basis for the science of "memetics," and so its meaning has been frozen and it raises reasonable doubts.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing a veil of ignorance upon memetics, I would like to use the picture of spreading memes as a source of analogies with the history of Aristotelianism in Poland, and its impact upon the ideological foundations of Polish political theory and practice. Several associations seem to be useful here. When expressed in evolutionary terms, these features would be: "variation, selection and retention (or heredity)" (Blackmore 2000. 14).

<sup>1</sup> Because they were usually intermediated. For instance, by putting stress upon individuals – historians adore to give answers to the question who was the first to invent a particular concept, from whom to whom it was being passed. It is an interesting thing to do but it strengthens the role played in the history by "great thinkers" at the expense of ideas as such.

<sup>2</sup> The biggest objection towards memetics is connected with the "universal Darwinism" of Dawkins, and his assumption of the "selfishness," which is characteristic for every kind of replicators. That means that in their strive for spreading, memes (like genes) do not take into account interests or opinions of their "hosts." To say it simply, we embrace concrete ideas (like ideas drawn from the work of Aristotle) not because they seem to solve some of our existential problems or to improve our human reality. Memes do not serve us but rather we serve them, becoming some springboards with which they can jump from brain to brain. Drawing this conclusion to the extreme would require to deny any thoughtful intellectual activity on our part, and to admit that – like parrots – we just repeat beliefs and behaviours we happen to hear or see too often. However, nothing in the concept itself calls for such a reductionist generalisation, especially if we invite memetics just to support, not to substitute our historical research on political thought.

Variation means that we should not look at memes as some complete “boxes” with a fixed content to be passed from one mind to another, for example, as a thought transmitted from Aristotle to his pupils and then to their followers up to our times. Of course, some Aristotelian ideas (like the concept of *politeia* or the distinction between commutative and distributive justice) have been constantly reverting to Aristotelianism, but it is worth underlining two faces of this transmission. To differentiate between them, the theory of memes discriminates between “copying the product” and “copying the instructions” (Blackmore 2000. 14), and it points out that we should rather pay attention to the latter. That means that while examining Aristotle’s work (and its later career, that is Aristotelianism) it is not enough to concentrate upon deepening our understanding of particular terms, concepts and ideas. It may be equally important to see Aristotle’s philosophy as an “instruction” of dealing with the world around us and its particular elements. There is, so to speak, the Aristotelian “way of thinking” which consists of rules and some general assumptions (axioms) that our mind should adhere to if it wants to operate in an Aristotelian manner. Aristotelianism would mean putting this general instruction into action, and we could observe its outcomes not only in the philosophical literature, but within the culture of a given society subjected to the influence of such Aristotelian memes. Taking into account this cultural background, we could become more sensitive about possible different “products” of Aristotelian ideas functioning under different historical circumstances, that is, separate “mutations” of the original concept. Besides everything else, they denote the retention and durability of Aristotelian memes.

Memes can also be inherited, and so, it does not suggest that Aristotle was an intellectual or spiritual ancestor of Cicero, Thomas Aquinas, or contemporary philosophers. Instead, it is much more interesting to notice how Aristotelian memes have been genetically running throughout history. Sometimes they have been marginalised and hardly visible, yet sometimes they have seemed obvious. My opinion is that their influence has been particularly evident and strong within the Polish tradition of political thinking and political practice. I would even dare to say that Aristotelian memes – quite coincidentally – have embedded in extremely fertile ground in Poland.

To sum up what has been said so far: By the reference to the concept of memes, I would like to say a few words about the Polish mutation of Aristotelianism. I discriminate between elements (concepts, ideas) that can be viewed as universal Aristotelian instructions (prescribing generally the world of political relations), and the resultant historical conclusions drawn from these instructions.

Let us for a moment look at Aristotle’s work as a source of memes to highlight a few of them, which, in my opinion, have been replicating continuously within the Polish political culture. I will choose to discuss the well-known concepts only (to avoid too specific considerations of Aristotle’s ideas as such) and put the stress upon connections between these concepts and some features observed in contemporary Polish political thinking. My main goal is not to present a detailed lecture on the

understanding of Aristotle in the Polish intellectual history; instead, I want to argue that quite general assumptions coming from the acceptance of some of his concepts are stamped indelibly upon Polish culture, and European culture in general. They became a kind of general “schemata” or “scripts” – to borrow terms from cognitive psychology – to be used to interpret the world of political relations, to act within it and also to look for ways of improving it. It may be interesting to trace such memes and to see how they diversified spatially and temporally. Comparing differences and similarities in incorporating Aristotelian thinking by different cultures allows to see the growing interest in Aristotelian studies in a wider cultural perspective. And that can help to understand better what makes Aristotle so attractive to strengthen his memes nowadays, since such a tendency is noticeable, at least in modern political philosophy.

Beginning with Polish history, Aristotle was known in Poland in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century already, but the explosion of interest in his works took place only several decades later, especially among professors of the Kraków Academy (now the Jagiellonian University). By the 16<sup>th</sup> century Polish scholars, just as their European colleagues, discussed and commented on all areas of Aristotelian studies. At the same time, foundations of the renewed Polish Kingdom were laid, the kingdom that (partly by coincidence) had to give up the most obvious legitimation of the king’s power – the hereditary right – for another source of legitimisation. The Polish throne was elective<sup>3</sup>; this was not without significance for choosing a theoretical support for political theory. Aristotle turned out to be a good choice, and the best Polish thinkers of that time referred to him – Andrzej Frycz-Modrzewski, Stanisław Orzechowski, Wawrzyniec Goślicki, and others. In their writings, we can find the core of Polish Aristotelianism and, at the same time, the Polish version of republicanism which was derived from the former.

It is often underlined that the political system which evolved at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century in Poland makes up a separate phenomenon in European civilization. At first glance, Polish republicanism of that age seems to follow the example of the Roman Republic with the concept of a mixed government that consists of three elements: monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. However, for many reasons, the democratic element has been slowly gaining an advantage over the other two. Thus, politically the system was changing into a democracy and the main political problem was to preserve it from going to the extreme status – that of anarchy. Aristotle

<sup>3</sup> There is a small disagreement among historians about the exact date/event that should be considered as the beginning of Polish elective monarchy but most of them agree that the first elected king was Władysław II Jagiełło. Up to 1572 this fact did not have any serious political significance as the crown remained in the hands of the representatives of the Jagiellonian dynasty. After the death of the last Jagiellonian – Zygmunt August –, political consequences of this (compared to other European countries) quite peculiar Polish elective monarchy became visible because it turned into the institution called „free election” (more properly: *electio viritum*).

tried to solve this problem with his concept of *politea*, which was meant to give the right measure to freedom<sup>4</sup> according to the Golden Mean Principle, which combines politics with ethics.

It is worth noticing that the erstwhile Polish republicanism needed to deal with problems generally quite similar to our modern problems with democracy. Just like contemporary philosophers and scholars do now, Polish thinkers had to look for ways to put democracy on the right path, that is, to make sure that equality and individual liberty do not threaten the minimal level of social cohesion and co-operation the commonwealth needs to function as a community which works for the benefit of all (the common good, as opposite to the benefit of some group). The interesting fact is that many of their prescriptions resemble our contemporary ideas of this issue. These prescriptions were used as guidelines for possible reforms of the political system, but also as the basis for the education of our citizens. As such, they became the memes to be passed on and form the culture of Polish society. Given the fact that they had begun to work this way in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – that is, some three centuries before a concept of political democracy came to fruition in the West – by examining them we might get a better insight into the benefits and limits of Aristotelian “instructions” of where to look, and what concepts to choose upon to improve democracy.

There are at least three important memes of Aristotelian provenience worth reconsidering. These are: definition of man as *zōon politikon* reinforced with the particular concept of liberty, the concept of virtue, and the idea of the common good as a main criterion of discriminating between good and bad political orders.

If to be a human being means to be a part of a political community, then the natural desire of every person – to act and to influence the world around – must be directed towards creating interpersonal relations, which builds a commonwealth worth supporting. Poles took the idea of fulfilling the definition of *zōon politikon* very seriously and, in a very Aristotelian manner, identified humanity with the disposition of citizens’ rights. Thus, as for ancient Greek philosophers, the crucial thing for them was to decide whom to grant full citizenship. The Polish answer was the nobility and nobility only. Of course, we may accuse this choice of being non-democratic but it would be an ahistorical accusation, especially when we realise that the number of Polish nobility (*szlachta*) was impressive – up to 10% of the population –, and they were all enfranchised and took an active part in the legislative process. Thanks to privileges, not only political, but social and economic as well, *szlachta* exercised a great part of the political power over the rest of the inhabitants of the country (Ihnatowicz et al 1999). Because of that, in Polish history there has never been conditions favourable enough to discriminate between the private and the public sphere. Quite the contrary, Polish citizens (*szlachta*) found themselves being representatives of the

<sup>4</sup> In the ancient notion of the term, Benjamin Constant was so kind to specify. For Aristotle, as for other Greeks, freedom being realized by political participation, was the essence of democracy.

whole commonwealth and their importance was closely connected with their political participation and engagement. So their private interests were in a way expressed, and being taken care of, with the help of a particular political language. It is not an expression only; such convictions were put in action and backed up by a combination of individual liberty and equality – both placed within the political sphere.<sup>5</sup>

The superior concept of Polish *Aurea Libertas* (Golden Liberty) consisted of rights such as election of the king, the right to form an organisation to force through a common political aim (*konfederacja*), religious freedom, and the right of *szlachta* to form a legal rebellion (*rokosz*) against a king who violated guaranteed freedoms. Though generally all these rights can be viewed as creating a “liberal” order, Polish liberty had much more to do with so-called “liberty as non-domination,” as it would be named by modern civic republicans. It was designed as an active freedom that wanted to make a stand within the public sphere, where it could prove (and not only assume) to be free from any “arbitrary power.”<sup>6</sup> The most visible (and at the same time the most infamous) example of such liberty is known as *liberum veto* – the right of each member of the *Sejm* to oppose a decision made by the majority in a parliamentary session. The voicing of such a veto, “I don’t allow,” could negate all the legislation that had been passed at that session<sup>7</sup>.

*Liberum veto* was acclaimed to be the most important warrant of equality – the other crucial value incarnated in the Polish political system. It was understood in the Greek way, as a starting point of the right political order. Unlike in Rome, where equality was somehow an effect of balancing the quality of each of the citizens (his material status, prestige) with the political influence the person was granted with, in democratic Athens every citizen enjoyed equality only because the person was a citizen. The same way, every Polish noble was treated as equal to all others. There were many ways to express this basic democratic equality. For instance, the growing superiority of the democratic element (the chamber of envoys) was strengthened by the 1505 act *Nihil novi*. From then on, no king could pass laws without the approval of the lower chamber. Beside the legal order, equality was protected in a more subtle manner as well. In Poland, there were no special aristocratic titles, and the whole

<sup>5</sup> There is a quite significant, though a bit amusing, detail proving this. Many authors – from Maciej Sarbiewski in the 16th century to Wincenty Lutosławski three hundred years later – regarded this Polish inclination to treat every issue as a political matter as being responsible for one of the most visible features of Poles, namely: verbosity.

<sup>6</sup> Frankly speaking I do not think that the concept of freedom as “non-domination” can be separated from the liberal concept of the negative liberty in the way their advocates (Ph. Pettit mainly) want to see it. I would rather say that the differences between the two appear because of the much more general background that is taken into account whenever these concepts are discussed; so they do not rest upon definitions. The same concept can work quite differently, if there are other variables to modify its final influence, and this may be the case.

<sup>7</sup> The first deputy to disrupt the parliamentary session with “veto” was Władysław Siciński (1652). It set up a precedent (though it had no serious consequences then) that turned out to be dangerous, and many historians accuse it of being the main cause of the decline of The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

*szlachta* regarded their class as “brothers.” Of course, there were serious differences between the rich part and the poor part of it (the latter growing), but those differences were not taken into account as far as political rights were concerned (which caused major political problems in the 18<sup>th</sup> century).

Liberty combined with equality can be a dangerous admixture. The political history of the Polish (from 1569 Polish–Lithuanian) Commonwealth is the best example that it does matter how general values as these are conceptualised in the given society. Its failure followed by partitions of Poland should be, however, viewed in a wider context. Polish „noble democracy” was not meant to be a democracy. It was designed as an Aristotelian republic/*politeia* in which excesses of liberty and equality were to be blocked by the socio-political structure favouring those who were able to give priority to common good over their individual interests. The problem was that the Polish republicans were not able to direct accepted Aristotelian memes, exposing the value of a free citizen, for the common good of the society in a way that was superior to democracy. They tried, but to put it succinctly (even if exaggerating a bit), they made a small mistake in turning to Aristotle in their search for a useful tool.

There is a significant difference when we compare works of Polish republicans with works of their colleagues from other Renaissance republics. For example, it is enough to look through the books of Thomas Smith, Gasparo Contarini and Wawrzyniec Goślicki, as a means of perceiving a puzzling split. All three of them, referring to Aristotle, name three things crucial for a good commonwealth to survive: law, institutions, and virtue of the citizens. Yet Smith and Contarini put the onus upon the institutions and legal order, while the work of Goślicki is almost solely devoted to virtue.

The attachment to virtue was to preserve the commonwealth by the reduction of the potentially unlimited and infinite individual liberty. When invited into the political sphere, individual liberty could not be based on the model of self-interest and competition.<sup>8</sup> It simply had to be supported by a model promoting cooperation, if the state was to remain a commonwealth. The concept of the virtuous citizen, rooted in the normative concept of a state being the *Res publica* and thus defining some common values one should adhere his actions to, seemed to be a good option. The problem with virtue is, nevertheless, that it resides in individuals. Thus, to avoid the risk that citizens would become overburdened with their political responsibilities, it required establishing at least some external guidelines and rules to provide individuals with proper criteria to make it easier for them to judge right from wrong (and so they could attain virtue through habit). For that, the legal and institutional order serves best as it frames all relations and actions that are to be called political in a commonly understandable way. Both Smith and Contarini seem to agree on this,

<sup>8</sup> Quite natural if we think about freedom as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke taught us.

admiring the individual virtue, but allowing it work only within borders delimited by the established order. However, for Goślicki things looked different.

The Polish political tradition accepted the simple truth that there would be no state without law and institutions. But such impersonal aspects of a commonwealth were perceived as secondary. Most of the Polish political thinkers tended to believe that we first needed to take care of virtue itself and good institutions, or the good law would appear as a natural outcome of virtuous citizens exercising their freedom. It was an expectation far too optimistic; I would call it “immoderation in virtue,” to suggest that the Aristotelian meme was used in a contrarian way to Aristotelian principles in this case. To condemn it, however, would be a premature conclusion.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it turned out that it was not so difficult to erase Poland from the map of Europe. Nevertheless, it became totally impossible to eradicate its culture. The culture in which memes that had been rightly blamed for the growing corruption of the political order had already sufficiently started to work for Poland’s preservation. And, this is not a paradox; rather, it is an argument for assessing different concepts and theories in their relation to the given empirical political reality.<sup>9</sup>

The Polish mutation of Aristotelian memes, specifically the assumption that every individual should act as *zōon politikon* – that individual actions matter politically (so liberty cannot be simply “negative” in liberal terms) – has led to the belief that virtue is indeed a cornerstone of a good commonwealth. This modification gave Polish citizens the responsibility for sustaining the notion of Poland as a political community,<sup>10</sup> even if it had only existed temporarily in their heads and hearts.

External powers could conquer and take over Polish territory, institutions, and create their own legal order; however, they could not annihilate the Polish political community, primarily because it had been cleverly divided into smaller pieces. In a sense, every citizen could simply put one of these political pieces in their pocket and save it for the future. This might seem an idealistic standpoint, and it was often perceived that way. However, a political idealism that grounds and provokes concrete actions does not differ significantly from so-called political realism.

It is not a coincidence that the long struggle for independence, a drive for “materialising” the community by regaining the political sphere, was for better or worse

<sup>9</sup> A side remark. I think it may be important here to underline that Polish political thinking was at odds with liberalism. The West generally was coming to democracy after having discussed and implemented liberal thinking and values such as individualism, for instance. So now to discuss propositions that could modify our concepts of politics a bit, as a point of reference, one simply must take liberalism into account as such (even if it is to be criticised then). But we in Poland never did elaborate neither a lesson on absolutism (that would encourage liberal demands), nor a lesson on liberalism – so our ideas, and their historical consequences could contribute to contemporary debates with some alternative perspective.

<sup>10</sup> That is worth underlining – even the Polish ‘nation’ was usually described in political, not ethnical terms. That changed to some extent when modern nationalism was born, but even then, to be a Pole meant mainly a devotion and engagement in realising Polish political interests.

the superior goal of every political movement that arose in this part of Europe before WWI. It tainted both liberalism (never so strong and radical in praising self-interest and egoism as in the West) and socialism (rejecting usually the idea of the abolition of the state, as being harmful for the ethical core of the society). It was responsible for two big Polish national uprisings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – at least one of them (November insurrection of 1830) having managed to organise its own political structures, exercising real power over Polish society.

Quite similarly, we may look at the Polish Underground State during WWII. It could not have functioned on such a large and massive scale if it was not favoured by cultural traits that evolved in Polish society. I think it is also the key to profoundly comprehend the situation in Poland under the Communist rule, namely, some features of the opposition movement, including “Solidarity” (the independent trade union formed in the 1980’s).

It is usually regarded that “Solidarity” cannot be classified according to typical discrimination between the political Left and the political Right. It has expressed a clear attachment to religious and national values on the one hand, and the strong socialist view of economy on the other hand. To reconcile these two puzzles, we could see them as adapting cultural memes to existing possibilities and conditions of action. “Solidarity” – as other oppositionists before it (like the Workers’ Defence Committee – KOR, or the Polish Independence Movement – NN) concentrated upon representing Polish society and its political interests, including social and economic goals, against the Communist state. The power and the institutions of the latter were perceived as imposed by Moscow so they had to be overtaken or overthrown, if Poland was to be Poland in the sense of a *bona fide* political community. It did not mean overthrowing important democratic values that in our tradition were not planted upon the soil of liberalism with its individualism, but rather incorporating republicanism with its more collectivistic view of the individual. That led to many interesting particularities, I think.

Firstly, until the 1970’s almost all opposition hoped for the possibility to reform socialism to make it a Polish socialism. They criticised the communist government as an institution being a parasite in the Polish body but not necessarily the communist political elite. Rather, they tried to convince the latter (at least a part of it) to “convert” to virtue and then stand at the side of Polish society.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, identifying “social” with “political,” it was easier to promote an idea of civil society in which our part of Europe gained much attention and thus discouraged the opposition in Poland from a revolution on behalf of strengthening the social bonds of every kind. The goal was, as it was often summarised, to create a “parallel Poland,” and

<sup>11</sup> The assumption that every person in Poland is a Polish citizen first of all (so every Pole can understand and agree on the national interest), and only then one can have other “loyalties” (like being a member of the Church or of the Polish United Workers’ Party, for instance) made it easier to choose the path of negotiations between the Communists and “Solidarity” (the Round Table Talks in 1989).

thus to make the communist system die naturally as being deprived of any individual activity. Thirdly, as all institutions were to be assessed according to their power to support political aspirations of the Polish nation, it is easier to understand the special role of the Catholic Church which was not restricted to religious matters. As Józef Tischner, Catholic priest and philosopher, argued:

The greatest achievement of Polish Christianity cannot be found in theological works, but rather in a religious thinking (referring to values) that are deeply rooted in the entire Polish ethos. (Tischner 1981. 13–14)

It is in a way remarkable that at the end of the 1970's even atheists appreciated the political activity of the Church – some of them denying their earlier views on the subject (for example, Leszek Kołakowski, or Adam Michnik). And conversely, ethical and political issues were incorporated and elaborated by strictly Catholic thinkers as well. I already mentioned the works of the Lublin School of Philosophy in which there is a strong connection between human dignity, spiritual values, and their cultural (also political) background. As John Paul II put it during his first visit to Poland:

Polish culture is a good on which the spiritual life of the Poles rests. It distinguishes us as a nation. It has been decisive for us throughout the course of history, more decisive even than martial power. Indeed, it is more decisive than boundaries. (John Paul II 1979. 73)

To present both sides, Polish communists knew very well the special tenor of Polish political tradition. And, they referred to the same memes to support their power. Indeed, the Polish version of the communist ideology quite soon stopped exploiting the orthodox Marxism-Leninism theory of conflict but – with its rhetoric – tried to fulfil our needs for solidarity, unity, and so on. It was a difficult task and never fully accomplished for there were strong alternative bases for social identity, like the Catholic Church, having referred to quite similar memes. So our Polish version of communism has been usually compared to a radish – red from outside but completely white inside.

The last remark: there is a feature of contemporary Polish society that has gained a lot of attention from cultural anthropologists lately. After the fall of communism many social anthropologists examined post-communist societies with different versions of individualism-collectivism scales.<sup>12</sup> There is an agreement among researchers that individualism and collectivism “together form one of the dimensions of national cultures” (Hofstede 1994. 261). As Geert Hofstede puts it:

<sup>12</sup> The concept was introduced to social anthropology by Harry Triandis.

Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family only” while collectivism „stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong cohesive ingroups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.<sup>13</sup>

The concept turns out to be very useful; however, researchers having referred to it while examining Polish society came to quite different conclusions. Some of them argued that Poles were typical collectivists, while others<sup>14</sup> pointed out our strong individualistic bent. Only now are these contradictory data being reconciled by new observations. Paweł Boski argues, for instance, that this strange combination is exactly the outcome of cultural habits which developed in Polish culture under the influence of ideas from 16<sup>th</sup> century republicanism (Boski 2010. 378). He tries to examine and name them but it is not easy without the knowledge about European intellectual history as such. Boski, for instance, summarises some of the ideas I mentioned as Aristotelian memes under the term “humanism,” which is not the best choice. In my opinion, it is worth meeting such attempts half way with a reflection coming “from the other side.” Paying attention to cultural differences in putting Aristotle’s ideas in action (as adapted political and ethical “instructions”) can also have some significance for us historians from different countries, being attracted by Aristotle’s heritage. In this way, we get another source of inspiration – besides examining Aristotle’s works and works on Aristotle, we can exchange the “practical Aristotelian wisdom” our cultures have already gathered. And what can give more satisfaction to historians than a visible proof that the past we deal with is perhaps dead, but will never be done with – so it is not a waste of time to talk it over again and again.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 260–261.

<sup>14</sup> Among scholars who deal with the subject, one name is particularly worth mentioning because of its renown also in the fields of history and political science: Emmanuel Todd, and his impressive studies, like *L’origine des systèmes familiaux* (2011).

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