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ABSTRACT

In the last 6 years, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been undergoing fundamental political reinvention. Scholars of language, literacy, and rhetoric can learn much from the study of rhetorical histories. Accordingly, a brief rhetorical history of these upheavals, particularly those in Poland, reveals the extent to which they are very much about the language of politics and public debate. According to literary professor Michal Glowinski, the major characteristic of Communist rhetoric in Poland was the dominance of simple, direct evaluation over sense. Such evaluations were always based on clear oppositions and polarizations: us vs. them, friend vs. foe, good vs. bad. It was thus a language that was already overinterpreted; each work, each expression, had one meaning and one meaning only. Because of this semantic reduction it did not tolerate synonyms or alternative ways of expression. Another major characteristic of this language was its strong "magical" quality: its orientation not towards describing reality but towards bringing it about. Desirable states were talked about as though they already existed. In the 1980s, public frustration and demands for real dialogue and meaningful reforms, coupled with a deteriorating economy, led to an acute rhetorical crisis. Ironically, Solidarity entered the elections with a program whose articulation painfully resembled, in spite of the differences in substance, the traditional rhetoric of propaganda. One problem continuing to face Poland is the persistence of the polarizing, valuative rhetoric, which originated in totalitarian discourse. (TB)

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WRITING RHETORICAL HISTORIES OF MODERN REVOLUTIONS: RHETORIC AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN POLAND, 1952-1992.

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"He who controls the past also controls the future."

George Orwell

In the last six years, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been undergoing fundamental political reinvention. Such reinvention, as I suggested in my 1994 CCCC presentation, is "to a large extent a rhetorical process, aimed at supplying a new set of collectively validated symbols, at (re)defining the basic terms of national debate, and at inventing a new language for describing--and thus also conceiving and implementing--new political institutions and processes" (citation to my IJC paper).

In the present paper, I want to offer a brief rhetorical history of these momentous changes, focussing on the evolution of the language of politics and public debate in Poland. I want to show that the "revolution" of the late 1980s and early 1990s was largely a struggle over language and that this struggle was conducted in the rhetorical arena, by which I mean not only that rhetoric constituted a weapon of struggle but that the site and

locus of contention was the rhetorical system itself: an ensamble of ways of talking; a set of linguistic strategies and moves; assumptions about speakers, writers, and audiences; implicit interpretations of reality; and implicit assumptions about the nature of language and its relationship to reality. This struggle is far from over and it continues to significantly influence the shape and tenor of young Polish democracy.

The Rhetoric of Totalitarian Socialism

According to Polish literary scholar Professor Michal Glowinski, a pioneer in the analysis of political discourse under what is not commonly referred to as "real socialism," the major characteristic of this discourse was the dominance of simple, direct evaluation over sense. Such evaluations were always based on clear oppositions and polarizations: us vs. them, friend vs. foe, good vs. bad, correct vs. incorrect. It was thus a language that was already overinterpreted; each word, each expression, had one meaning and one meaning only. Because of this semantic reduction, it did not tolerate synonyms. Synonyms would introduce uncertainty, the potential for multiple interpretations. Thus, for example, when the communist propaganda described the Gdansk food riots in 1970 as "events" or "incidents," it was unthinkable that they could be referred to also as "riots," or "protests." To call them that would class one automatically as being in political opposition to the entire system of official interpretations of reality, and thus to the

entire political system. In this way, one of the major functions of this language was identification, both self-identifaction with the system (or against it), as well as ideological identification of the subject of discourse. Totalitarian identification marked everything, including the speaker, in terms that brooked no compromise; in that sense, it did not really serve persuasive purposes. (We may note that this sense of "identification" is obviously the obverse--and perverse--of that which was central to Kenneth Burke's conception of rhetoric.)

Another major characteristic of this language was its strong "magical" tendency: its orientation not towards describing reality but towards bringing it about. Desirable states of affairs were spoken about as if they already existed, for instance, in slogans such as "All citizens stand united behind the Party." Such rhetorical magic stood behind much public "information" and news reporting, for instance, when a newspaper would "report" that "the whole nation enthusiastically celebrates the anniversary of the October revolution."

The limitation of semantic and syntactic choices reduced public language to a set of canonical formulas. In its deployment, totalitarian rhetoric consisted of a synthesis of ritual and pragmatic elements. Ritual, because in certain situations it was possible to say only one thing, to speak only thus and not otherwise. Pragmatic, because rhetorical possibilities were pre-fabricated to corresponded to the range of typical situations encountered in public life. It was thus a

language and a rhetoric that was fundamentally monologic; it could function only under conditions of monopoly on power and public voice. It was neither suited for nor useful in discussion or debate. It could not accommodate other points of view, respond to challenges, or address audiences who were not always already reduced to mute political objects. Neither could it deal with novel situations, except through violence: through the imposition of preinterpreted possibilities or disabling the language of the "other" by derailing, obscuring, obfuscating, and muting any other meaning (for which the systematic jamming of Western radio and television frequencies between the 1950s to the 1970s provided the perfect metaphor).

Such rhetoric, according to Professor Glowinski, effectively "devastated" everyday language. It did so by taking over elements of everyday language and endowing them with a different sense--a sense that was often hidden. In this way, it created the impression that words meant what they normally meant, while in fact they meant something else. As the prominent Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, himself forced to emigrate in the wake of the "events" of 1970, wrote in 1973,

> "Sovietism creates the kind of situation in which everyone knows that there is nothing to, and nothing can truly exist in, public speech, that all words have lost their original sense and one should not be surprised if someone calls a cockroach a lark or a parsley a symphony; one who calls a cockroach a

cockroach and a parsley parsley arouses horror and amazement. Sovietisation reaps its harvest precisely where using words in their ordinary sense amounts to an intellectual or moral feat or to insane extravagance, where it is self-evident that public language has absolutely nothing to do with 'real life.'" (quoted in Glowinski, 135).

This devastation was especially acute in those realms of language which concern society, history, ideology, and politics. In those domains, everything had been reduced to cliches, to formulas in which simple evaluation and ritual completely dominated meaning. As a result, by the mid-1970s, it became almost impossible in Poland to talk meaningfully about major areas of human, and especially social, experience.

It is against this rhetorical background that we may better understand the meaning of the revolutionary events of the 1980s and early 1990s and appreciate the difficulties and problems (other than those having to do with the economic or international situation) of the transition to "democracy," that is to the establishment of the foundations for open public debate and pluralistic political life.

The Rise of "Solidarity" and the Battle for Language: 1980-1981

Unlike the protests of 1956, 1968, and 1970, which were motivated largely by political and economic factors, the events of the 1980s shaped up as in essence a "struggle for language,"

as Lech Walesa recalled in his memoir Droga Nadziei [Path Toward Hope]. Forty years of dominance of totalitarian marxist-leninist rhetoric had led to the atrophy of tools for meaningful social and political critique and for constructive critique of government and power in general. There was no language for describing and conceiving other visions and possibilities, other realities. Jacek Kuron, one of the founders of the Worker's Defence Committee (KOR), the first organized opposition movement in former Eastern Europe, remembers:

> "[W]e [KOR] did not even know really what to teach people, we did not have the necessary language. The language that was used for talking about politics for the last 30-40 years was the language of the institutional representation of reality. In rejecting that representation, we had to create a new conceptual network, common to us all, unofficial." (Gwiezdny Czas 156)

Mounting public frustration and demands for real dialogue and meaningful reforms, coupled with the deteriorating economy, led to an acute rhetorical crisis. This crisis had two aspects. On the one hand, there was no language in which legitimate demands could be presented without threatening the entire socio-political and geo-political edifice of totalitarian socialism. On the other hand, even had the government wanted to reform (and a strong faction within the ruling elite did support fundamental reforms) there was no language, no rhetoric, available for

genuine discussion, negotiation, and compromise. The essentially monologic official discourse became dysfunctional when society refused to be a cheerleading section or the mute addressee of manipulation and demanded to become a partner in discussion of its own future. As is often the case, when rhetoric fails, tanks roll in--as they did on December 13, 1981.

The Transition to Democracy: The "Round Table Accords" and the Parliamentary Elections of 1989

The period beginning with the ground-breaking "August" accords of 1980, punctuated with the imposition of martial law, and ending with the historic "Round Table" accords of 1989, showed the bankruptcy of totalitarian rhetoric and its inability to deal with rising public discontent. Faced with massive public demand for change and with the undiminished power of "Solidarity" as the vehicle for public voice, official discourse--in spite of the fact that it was backed by guns--entered a period of acute crisis. Especially towards the end of the 1980s, when it became apparent that one cannot continue for ever to run a modern state at the point of a bayonet, the crisis of official rhetoric became the dominant factor on the political scene: how to speak, and how to govern, in a situation when the traditional language of power no longer holds power, when society that was reduced to a mute addressee of monologic speech must begin to be addressed like a partner in a debate, when the "magical" rhetoric of wish-fulfillment has to become an instrument of persuasion? The

revolutionary "Round Table" accords constituted in effect not so much a dialogue on the future of the country as the negotiation of conditions of surrender. Poland was free.

The first exercise in political pluralism, the parliamentary elections of June 4, 1989 (the first semi-free elections in Eastern Europe), as well subsequent events, showed the extent to which what we call "democracy" depends not only on a system of institutions and processes but also, and perhaps primarily, on the availability of a language and a rhetoric in which public debate can be conducted relevant to the real conditions in which a society finds itself.

"Solidarity" entered the elections with a program that whose articulation painfully resembled, in spite of differences of substance, the traditional rhetoric of propaganda. Its chief features were direct demands, wish-fulfilling calls to action, and the articulation of specific social and political aspirations in terms of universal human rights. As an example, consider the following point of the program:

> "Every Pole has the right to work in a healthy environment. We demand a radical improvement in the situation of ecologically threatened areas.... Social control in this respect as well as ecological movements should be supported and respected by the state."
>
> (Gazeta Wyborcza, May 9, 1989, 3, my translation)

At times, the program exhibits extraordinary impracticality and naivete, for instance in demanding that "dignified vacations

should again be universally available to everyone."

In essence, the program was a continuation of a type of discourse that official totalitarian propaganda used to refer to as "legitimate demands of the working people." Consider the following postulates:

--"We demand that self-government give workers a voice in the strategic decisions of the company and make them co-responsible for the company's performance."

--"Everybody has the right to a decent [or dignified, Pol. "godziwa"] pay for labor. We will struggle to assure that the income from 42 hours of work a week be sufficient to support a family. Nobody should be forced to work longer." (Gazeta Wyborcza May 9, 1989, 3, my translation)

The rhetoric of the program was heavily weighed towards ethos (with vague, general sentiments such as "dignity," "respect," "decency"--sentiments with which it is difficult to disagree) but short on logos, on logical argument, providing few directives for concrete actions united by a programmatically and ideologically consistent set of principles. The implicit ethical focus of the campaign was "truth": whose version of what life is really like is more true to people's experience, who is a more true representative of the "real" interests of the people, what do people "really" want, who is telling the people the "truth." The result was a campaign of allegations and counter-allegations, in which the issue, again, was not who or what is "right" (in terms of offering a viable economic/political program for overcoming of

the crisis in the country) but who or what is more "true" (or genuine). Perhaps the oddest slogan of the campaign was the communist government's call "Do not interrupt the birth of democracy" [by voting for "Solidarity"].

Even though the elections resulted in the victory of the opposition and the election of the first parliamentary government in Eastern Europe, fundamental rhetorical problems persist and continue to shape the character of emerging Polish democracy.

On Friday, August 30, 1991, less than two months before the second parliamentary elections of October 27, 1991, Jan Krzysztof Bielecki, then Premier of Poland, resigned. In his resignation speech, he declared that the major problem faced by the country was a "paralysis of decisionmaking." Poland found itself, according to Bielecki, in

> "a specific and dramatic moment. There are many strikes and protests aimed against the state and its reforms.... We can see observe in these protests how declarations of allegiance to democracy, law, and the market economy are at odds with behavioral practice. Could it be that Poles are theoretically for [democracy and reform] but practically against?" (Gazeta Wyborcza, August 31, 1991, 1)

The problem, I think, lies in the disjunction between, on the one hand, the practical and political demands of the historical moment and, on the other hand, the rhetoric available to articulate, and therefore conceive and cope with, these demands.

One problem is the persistence of the polarizing, valuative rhetoric, originating in totalitarian discourse and perpetuated, ironically, by the "Solidarity" rhetoric of "truth," which both polarized and moralized political discourse. Such polarization and moralization makes it difficult to compromise. Public discourse in Poland continues to be highly charged with emotional and ideological judgements that often cloud practical considerations. Televised debates are lessons in rhetorical ineptitude, with discussants screaming and interrupting each other, apparently unable to listen or compromise.

Still another factor is the "petitionist" tenor of much political discourse. The rhetoric of "claim," "demand," and "struggle" continues in much current political discourse, under the implicit assumption (an assumption that itself is clearly an inheritance from the totalitarian past) that power is clearly localizable, that it is something somebody "has" (as opposed to the product of something one does) and that the only way to get something or do something is to make more or less insistent claims on this power.

While the meaning of many specific concepts and words may have changed in recent years, articulation of social and political issues remains confined to old rhetorical forms. In addition, many words critical to any discussion of power and policy are still burdened with old meanings: among others opposition, authority, leadership (Pol. "kierownictwo"), party. Large areas of political and social lexicon remain to be "de-

totalized" (Professor Glowinski's term).

It is perhaps most interesting and instructive what has happened to the former communists in the new parliamentary configuration. Their discourse has quickly adapted itself to the new conditions by becoming openly parasitic though borrowing, adaptation, pastiche, and cannibalization of other languages and forms. This makes sense, since its function was never really to "mean" anything, to aim at semantic precision or description of the actual world. It was always a discourse that was highly stylized, that represented a triumph of form over substance. It is worth noticing, that as such it bears strong resemblances to the language of commercialism, of advertising, and so it found itself quickly under the new conditions of "market" competition for voter attention and media time. It is also somehow uniquely compatible with the cultural conditions of postmodernism, which is also characterized by parasitism and poaching. We may venture that this is perhaps why members of the former communist nomenklatura can sound so convincing as capitalist entrepreneurs; it may also explain, at least in part, the recent ascendancy to power of post-communist parties and politicians in most of Central and Eastern Europe.

On the eve of the watershed 1989 election, Professor Glowinski has suggested that "one of the general and most serious problems before which stand practically all new political forces in Poland is the lack appropriate rhetorical models. The old socialist rhetoric, grown out of a totalitarian vision of the

world . . . has turned out to be useless, while a new rhetoric of democracy, in its contemporary shape, not one imported from a distant past, has not yet formed" (145). While it is not clear what such a "rhetoric of democracy" would consist of, the question is obviously of great theoretical, practical, and pedagogical interest, not only in Poland, where has spurred calls for fundamental educational reform based on renewed attention to language and the humanities, but also for us in the U.S., where the sharpened polarization of the political scene, intensified contention over fundamental assumptions of the culture, and the continuing ascendancy of technology seem to be leading in the opposite direction. As scholars of language, literacy, and rhetoric, we may have much to learn from the study of rhetorical histories.

In one of the first popular books on democracy published in Poland, political scientist Stanislaw Filipowicz argued that "It is the political parties, and the language they create, that sets in motion the entire mechanism of democracy. On the other hand, they inevitably promulgate certain stereotypes, thus also limiting and reducing democracy" (82, my translation). "In fact," Filipowicz continues, "it is power gained through language that decides the specific character of democracy" (76).

In a unique interview with Adam Michnik on the eve of the June 4, 1989 election, Premier of Poland Mieczyslaw Rakowski, the last communist Premier of the country, said: "A real breakthrough demands, both from you [the opposition] and from us, a break with

the past.... [However] we [the government side] are frequently, still, the prisoners of language. You too." (Gazeta Wyborcza, June 2, 1989, 3)

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