
Solidarity in Crisis. A Lesson from Poland

Professor Krzysztof Czyzewski

MIREES Open lecture

Professor Krzysztof Czyzewski is one of the creators of the *Borderland* foundation in the Polish city of Sejny. He teaches at the MIREES program in Forlì the second module of the integrated course “The Visegrad Group in Post-Socialist Regional Geopolitics” titled “Identity-Dialog-Trust: the culture of coexistence in East-Central Europe”. His work is based on the concept of coexistence as a new fundament in solving conflicts, without eliminating them but attempting to live with them as an inevitable part of human condition. In the *Borderland* foundation he works on borders and bridges promoting the coexistence as a way of seeing life and politics. The city of Sejny has been chosen as the headquarters of the organisation for its multicultural past: it is at the Polish border with Lithuania and Belarus, and its history has been influenced by the multiculturalism shared by Ukrainian minorities, Old Believers, Lithuanians and Poles. Professor Czyzewski introduced us to a different point of view on current Polish situation, trying to explain it without prejudices. The starting point of his speech is, in fact, of a person who knows well Polish society and people, not just because Poland is his native land, but because he has apprehended those topics thoroughly, being also an active participant in cultural organisations, theatre companies and other civil society’s activities.

Poland today is experiencing a deep internal crisis (we can call it a broken bridge crisis). According to him, the country never experienced such a serious situation, which can be seen as the outcome of the last 20 years. It could seem that the current crisis has been provoked by external reasons, like contemporary migration crisis, but this is not true: Polish society is homogeneous with a really small number of minorities. The divisions, Czyzewski claims, are within Polish citizens themselves.

The slogan launched by Pope John Paul the II: “There is no freedom without solidarity” represented the importance of values in the pursuit of freedom for Polish people. Social unrest in Poland has been seething particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, and freedom was considered as a

fundamental value by many Poles. Democratic elections in 1989 signalled the advent of democracy in Poland, and at that moment, the goal of freedom and political independence seemed to have been achieved. This could have been the best background to create a strong community based on solidarity in Poland. At that moment, it seemed that the government would be ready to accept and legitimize such a movement. But this legitimisation did not happen.

The starting point to read the Polish situation in a different way could be found in anthropology. Czyzewski used the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas that analysed human nature as following three general patterns of rituals:

- Hierarchical model used in relatively stable societies;
- Sect based model when the societal relations are constructed on social ties of religion;
- Market based model, fundamentally based on the individual will of people;

Czyzewski sees the Polish society as having been structured around the sect pattern. The presence of this model could depend on the Polish feeling of having been historically dominated, occupied and surrounded by enemies. So in the past they saw the problems as something extraneous which does not belong to their borders. In the sect society, the borders are outside; the fear of external dangers eliminates, in fact, the internal borders and differences. If the Polish society could be viewed (considering the 19th century) through the sect paradigm, after 1989 with the arrival of the free market the alternative social model also appeared. Balcerowicz reforms opened the social space for individualism to Poland and contributed to the breakdown of the solidarity chain. Since the process of modernisation has not been built around solidarity but on the individualist model, and given that the sect model did not disappear, an invisible division between people who succeeded in adapting to the transformation and people who did not grow. For the latter, democracy remained an artificial and unreachable goal.

To better explain the division created by modernisation, Czyzewski discussed the Smolensk plane crash of 2010, when during the flight to Russia, Lech Kaczyński as well as other members of the PiS (Law and Justice) party lost their lives. The market oriented model reads such events through a rational approach: a technical error brought the plane down and caused many deaths. In the sect model, the one which remained present in Polish society, this vision cannot work: the accident touched emotions of the Polish people, and for them the technical reasons which provoked the accident were not the most important aspect in connection to this event. This division between two models of building a community has been expressed in the direct policy of the PiS: they built their

political careers around this tragedy. In the new government, in fact, a new commission to restart the inquiry of the Smolensk tragedy has been established.

Professor Czyzewski has managed to clarify for us the current situation in Poland. According to him, it is not possible to know about the future. However, several new political movements, Partia Razem (Together Party) for instance, are developing, bringing hopefulness along. He thinks that people generally sympathize with the members of the Razem because they do not depend on classical political parties' politics which promoted individualism and pragmatism, but are bringing again into Polish society the spirit and feelings which were associated with the Solidarnosc some 30 years ago, focusing on the social, civil and cultural issues which do not fully depend on the neoliberal system.

Those new manifestations of solidarity (like the above mentioned Razem) can be seen as a re-birth of the feelings of solidarity which used to characterise Polish society, but have been suffocated by the transition to market society. Even if the road to a new solidarity is long and not simple to face, maybe a light can be seen at the end, able to recompose the Polish society and spirit.

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