Lustration after totalitarianism: Poland's attempt to reconcile with its Communist past[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe have attempted to reconcile their Communist past in different ways. It is in Poland, however, where the issue of dealing with its Communist past through attempts at lustration has been especially fraught. It will be argued here that Poland's lustration problems are caused primarily by a failure to understand the specific nature of totalitarian dictatorship that existed in Poland under Communist rule.

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Introduction

The democratic transitions that many of the former Central and East European Communist states have gone through have occurred on a scale and at a pace without precedent. But the euphoria felt by many following the fall of these Soviet-type regimes has been replaced by a sombre realisation that the road from one-party rule to democracy is not without its obstacles. Perhaps the most controversial and emotional aspect of the transition has involved the question of how the new democratic regimes should deal with those who played an integral role in the maintenance of the *ancien regime*? More specifically, what should be done with those who either worked for or collaborated with the security apparatus?

The former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe have attempted to reconcile their Communist past in different ways. It is in Poland, however, where the issue of dealing with its Communist past through attempts at lustration has been especially fraught. It will be argued here that Poland's lustration problems are caused primarily by a failure to understand the specific nature of the dictatorship that existed in Poland under Communist rule. Thus, the main aim of this article is to highlight how a failure to acknowledge or even appreciate the particular nature of Poland's Communist past has lead to misunderstandings about how to deal with its post-communist future.

The article is presented in five parts. The first is devoted to a discussion of how best to understand Poland's Communist dictatorship and more specifically the merits of describing Poland's Soviet-type system as 'totalitarian'. Part two provides an historical overview of lustration in Poland. The third and fourth sections present, respectively, the main arguments of lustration advocates and opponents. The fifth and final section is broken up into four 'lustration problems'. It is argued here that Poland's 'lustration angst' is reflective of and relates directly to a failure to acknowledge or appreciate the specific nature of Poland's Communist past.

Polish totalitarianism

Understanding Communist Poland as totalitarian, albeit decreasingly totalitarian, is useful. It sheds light on the current lustration debate in that it offers illuminating insights into the problems that Poland has encountered in its lustration efforts.

Describing Communist Poland as a totalitarian regime is contentious.[1] For example, Linz and Stepan (1996, pp.255 and 256) argue that Poland was never totalitarian, noting instead that 'Poland always had a significant *de facto* degree of societal pluralism' that 'increased the ability of parts of civil society to resist the regime's ideology and somewhat checked the will of the aspirant totalitarian regime to impose intense mobilisation, especially in the ideological area'. This conclusion is that Poland 'was always closer to an authoritarian than to totalitarian regime'.

They present three points to support this argument. First, they point out that through the continued maintenance by the Polish Catholic Church of a 'sphere of relative autonomy', it was able to generate 'a complex pattern of reciprocal power recognition and even negotiation between the Catholic Church and the state not found in any Communist regime we would call totalitarian' (Linz and Stepan, 1996, pp.256–258). Second, Linz and Stepan (1996, pp.257 and 258) point to the failure and eventual abandonment of agricultural collectivisation, suggesting that 'privately owned farms remained in the overwhelming majority, never dipping below 70 percent of Poland's agricultural holdings', a mark, according to Linz and Stepan, 'of incomplete state penetration and a sign of social power and autonomy outside the grip of the totalitarian state'. Third, regarding the role of ideology, Linz and Stepan argue that the dramatic policy shifts that occurred from leader to leader are more representative of an authoritarian rather than a totalitarian regime.[2]

Although the above points are not completely without merit, arguments that suggest Poland was totalitarian, albeit only between 1948 and 1956, reflect a more nuanced understanding of 'actually existing socialism' in Communist Poland. Chief amongst these is the importance of coercive societal instruments, in addition to formal institutional mechanisms. As Walicki (1996, p.514) suggests:

> the unmistakably totalitarian feature of the Stalinist regime in Poland was its ability to create…a system of organised ideological pressure, ruthlessly exercised by people situated *within* society and having at their disposal not merely the state apparatus of coercion but also *social* mechanisms of control; a system of intimidation and quasi-moral collective pressure which…proved capable of maintaining and reproducing itself on a local level (emphasis in original).

Thus, during the period 1948–56, Poland could certainly be regarded as totalitarian. After 1956, however, rather than transforming into a more benign authoritarian state, Poland became gradually *less* totalitarian. Although Walicki (1996, p.516), argues that by 1956 Poland had already 'completed the transition from Communist totalitarianism to Communist authoritarianism', it was not until 1989 that it was able to rid itself *completely* of all its totalitarian traits.

Whereas Walicki (1996) argues that the changes that took place in Poland post-1956 were substantial enough to describe the system as having become detotalitarianised, Polish intellectual Smolar (1996, p.27), while appreciating that the system had undergone some changes, argues that it still maintained its essential, totalitarian characteristics:

> socialism of the 1970s and 1980s was obviously different from that of the 1940s and 1950s…the institutions created during the revolutionary period retained their form…totalitarianism as a millenarian movement had long since died, but the set of institutions that it had created was left behind like the fossilized carcass of some extinct beast…

Granted, overt Stalinist terror declined over time.[3] However, the Party maintained its 'leading role' status until 1989. In this respect, the ideology retained much of its importance. It was through the ideology that the regime was able to continue claiming possession of the truth, an idea supported by influential Polish philosopher Kolakowski (1983, p.127), when he points out that the central role of the Party-state ensured the supremacy of ideology as the 'institutional lie': 'This is the great cognitive triumph of totalitarianism. By managing to abrogate the very idea of truth, it can no longer be accused of lying'. Of course, such control had an adverse effect on the day-to-day existence of the populace living in this system, as Václav Havel (in Blair, 1987, p.81) explains; 'a general and all embracing lie begins to predominate; people begin adapting to it, and everyone in some part of their lives compromises with the lie or coexists with it'.

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[1] A great deal of literature is devoted to discussions of the usefulness of totalitarianism as an analytical tool, much of it promoting the argument that totalitarianism lost most of its value when it was appropriated as an anti-communist weapon during the Cold War. According to Mueller (1998, p.62), '"totalitarianism" functioned as a normative premise to start every exploration into totalitarian systems with an option of Western values of freedom'. In this manner, totalitarianism's equation between fascism and communism served as nothing more than a convenient rationale for US foreign policy (Barber and Spiro, 1970).

[2] Regarding ideology, authoritarian regimes are characterised by 'a political system without elaborate and guiding ideology but with distinctive mentalities'. Totalitarian regimes are characterised by an 'elaborate and guiding ideology that articulates a reachable utopia. Leaders, individuals and groups derive most of their sense of mission, legitimacy, and often specific policies from their commitment to some holistic conception of humanity and society' (Linz and Stepan, 1996, p.44).

[3] Although acknowledging that the threat of terror diminished after 1956, Paczkowski (1999, p.224) suggests that the fear of totalitarian terror remained; 'terror was no longer necessary, but the possibility or threat of terror was real and the security network remained huge. It is important to remember that submission without terror is totalitarian, too'.