

Media, the New Authoritarianism, and Its Alternatives Update



Teaching in Wroclaw, as liberal democracy is collapsing in Poland and beyond

Jeffrey Goldfarb — August 1, 2017

I am exhausted. Conducting the seminar “Media, Publics and the New Authoritarianism” at this time, and in Poland, was intense, exciting, illuminating, and depressing. Coping with a combination of illumination and despair, I did not have the time or the constitution to properly digest what we were exploring together, and was not able to realize my plan to write about the seminar as it went along. Intensity is generally a problem of the Democracy and Diversity Institute: the classes proceed so quickly, and the learning for both the students and the faculty is so challenging, that there is a danger of intellectual indigestion.

And this year, although I had promised myself to report on our proceedings daily, I was especially unlikely to succeed.

It was a very special institute, not only in a good way. We were studying the new authoritarianism and its alternatives, at the very moment when democracy in Poland appeared to be in collapse. The new evolutionary democratic march of Poland, as Adam Michnik imagined in 1976, and subsequently helped realize, bumped up against the most ominous of anti-democratic barriers, a committed anti-liberal and nationalist regime.

PiS, the Law and Justice Party, was on the threshold of completing its absolute takeover of state power. Since coming to power in November, 2015, the civil service has been re-politicized. Public broadcasting has become state broadcasting, the nationalist propaganda apparatus of the ruling party. Public life has been turned upside down. Heroes of the recent past, of the Solidarnosc movement, among them, Lech Walesa, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and first freely elected Polish President, are officially vilified. Wild conspiracies of assassination are spun by the actual leader of the nation, Jaroslaw Kaczynski. Mirroring the realities of Communist times, he is the leader of the ruling party, a simple member of the parliament, with the first and final say, as was the case of the First Secretary of the Communist Party.

As a long time observer of Poland’s long march to democracy, I am shocked by the rapid transition from liberal democracy to authoritarianism. (For a telling account of these events, see this piece by David Ost.) The latest development that has threatened to complete the transition to authoritarianism includes a series of bills passed in the Polish Parliament that would destroy the independent judiciary, opening the path to rigged elections, the complete compromise of civil liberties and minority rights. These were all passed during the course of our seminar.

Think about it: a series of authoritarian bills were passed during our deliberations about the new authoritarianism. *The impending loss of the primary institutions of justice as they support democracy was the background to our inquiry.*

My idea for the course was based on an intuition, or perhaps I should say a working hypothesis. Everywhere I look democracy is being attacked from within, starting with my own country. In Europe, east, west and central, Asia, Africa and the Americas, North and South, there is a new group of leaders who use a manipulative populist, even fascist, rhetoric, to take power. Enthusiastically supported by one faction of the population, they are vehemently opposed by another. Nationalism is ascendant, and anti-globalization has racist, xenophobic and military faces: Trump, Kaczynski, Putin, Duterte, Maduro, Orban, Erdoğan, and Sisi, et al. I postulate that the continuing structural transformation of the mediated public sphere has helped bring these characters into power, along with a new kind of authoritarian rule.

I planned a deliberate inquiry for the seminar, that took four distinct steps:

1. An examination of the continuing mediated transformations of the public sphere.
2. This would be enriched with an understanding of the sociology of media and not just criticisms of the problems with *the media*.
3. Then this would be applied to a series of problematically perceived global cultural, political and economic problems of our times: the clash of civilizations, and the end of history and the threat of neoliberalism, each grounds for the new authoritarianism and shaping its alternatives.
4. We would have a high focus on how the new authoritarianism and its alternatives are related to the relationships between truth and politics, and ideology and terror.

I wanted to consider both the relationships between changes in the mediated public life and the rise of a new form of authoritarianism, as well as the openings for resistance and alternatives.

My candid self-critical course evaluation? I think we did adequately take on each of the four steps, but the connections between the steps were not drawn as clearly as I would have liked. In addition, the connection between our deliberations and what was happening, only steps from our seminar room, were not demonstrated with enough urgency in my seminar.

In the institute's activities, though, I am happy to say that this did occur. This included talks by Ewa Majewska, a feminist activist leader of a new party of the left, Razem (Together), Rafal Pankowski, the head of an anti racist watchdog association, Never Again, Jan Gross, the author of *Neighbors*, Irena Grudzinska Gross, the brilliant comparative literature professor whose work most recently grapples with the problems of remembering Poland's difficult past, and Ewa Letowska, the distinguished jurist and political activist, this year's winner of the 3rd Annual Courage in Public Scholarship Award by TCDS and the N SSR Europe Collective.

To conclude this update: I invite seminar participants and others in this year's Institute on Democracy and Diversity, and for that matter Public Seminar readers, to pose questions and add comments about the progress of the seminar and the institute as a whole. I will follow this post with a series of specific reports on our findings and progress, starting with a post on the structural transformation of the mediated public sphere.

Postscript: Polish democracy received an unexpected reprieve as our session ended. The day we departed, President Andrzej Duda refused to sign two bills that would have destroyed the independence of the courts, though he did sign one bill which moved in that direction on the local level. He promises to present his own version of the "reforms" in the coming weeks. In the near future we will know if the reforms he proposes halt the rapid destruction of democracy in Poland, or put to an end to the Poland's long evolutionary democratic march.

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