

Social Dialogue Under the Supremacy of the Intelligentsia¹

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of the role, which intelligentsia, a specific social group to be encountered in Eastern Europe only, is to play within the field of social dialogue. The author argues that intelligentsia still has a capacity to make impact on the processes of social dialogue due to possessing adequate level of culture capital, which other influential social groups, including the entrepreneurs, lack. Intelligentsia should be, thus, regarded a principal actor in Polish society.

Keywords: social dialogue, intelligentsia, culture capital

The present paper will address one of the key aspects of the function of social dialogue mechanisms and institutions in Poland, namely the dominance of the intelligentsia and, in particular, its elite, as a principal social actor in Polish society. In this respect, Poland seems to differ fundamentally from both the most developed Western countries and from many countries in other parts of Europe, including Russia. An essential feature of Western countries, in particular those that form part of the

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so-called core of the world system, as defined by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), is the dominance of economic capital and its elites. I wish to clearly differentiate between economic capital, on the one hand, and cultural and social capital – as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1986) – on the other hand. In Bourdieu's approach, political capital is a particular type of social capital. On the basis of this system of three types of capital, we can – in accordance with the model put forward by Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi and Eleanor Townsley in their seminal work entitled 'Making Capitalism without Capitalists' (Eyal, Szelenyi, Townsley 1998) – generalize the specific features of social systems through a hierarchy of the types of capital that can be observed within them. For example, the model of the contemporary social system of the United States would be based on the clear dominance of economic capital over both political capital and social capital, and, in particular, over cultural capital. This is due to the dominant role of business elites (in particular financial elites). In many cases, the interests of the American political class are subordinated to the interests of the business elite. In this system, the state is – to a large extent – an institution supporting the expansion of big business, which pursues a policy that is advantageous to, and expected by, the latter. The cultural elite and the entire cultural sphere in this system remain subordinated. In most cases, this cultural elite adopts an ancillary position and agrees to deliver services in exchange for material resources, even if this means giving up a significant part of its traditional autonomy. In this type of society, the fraction of the cultural elite that contests the status quo is largely marginalized. The case of France is slightly different: thanks to a strong political capital, the position of the state is considerably stronger. The economic elite is closely linked to the political elite; the recruitment (and reproduction) of both takes place through the intermediary of elite public schools (the so-called *grandes écoles*). In comparison to other Western European countries, many large companies in France remain, to a great extent, under state control. At the same time, civil servants form a hermetic and hierarchical caste. In order to access this caste, one needs to follow a strictly defined career path that involves education in one of the elite schools. In the United States, many representatives of the business elite temporarily hold positions in public administration; those representing science and culture are considerably less numerous among public servants. In Germany, the situation is much more balanced: despite the dominance of economic elites, their position is not as superior as it is in the United States. It is partly offset by the role of political elites and other elites dispersed within a complex system of public, state and social organizations. These also include trade unions, which remain relatively strong. The above elements form a classic model of social dialogue based on partnership, albeit with a privileged position

for economic elites. It should, however, be stressed that the role of universities and of the intelligentsia in Germany is less prominent, particularly since the purges carried out by Nazi authorities wrecked German universities and their scientific elite, forcing many representatives of the latter to flee the country. German universities have never managed to regain their former status, as opposed to the largest corporations in Germany and families that own those corporations. The position of many of these corporations has not been undermined since the nineteenth century.

Russia is an example of a country where political capital clearly and radically controls all remaining types of capital. This supremacy was obviously much more striking during the Soviet period, particularly under the rule of Stalin. Nevertheless, it remains strong to this day, which becomes even more evident when we compare Russia to Western countries. The political elite, associated with the so-called 'ministries of force' ('силовые министерства' or 'силовики'), forms the core of the Russian 'field of power', as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1993). This field of power uses, in a rather assertive manner, the mechanisms of the centralized Russian state. Despite the development of a fairly liberal form of capitalism in Russia, and the country's noticeable economic autonomy from the core of the world system, the capitalist class in Russia is dominated by oligarchs and is highly dependent on the political elite. Despite a certain degree of autonomy, the cultural elite, or the intelligentsia, also remains subordinated to state institutions and their elites. Many critics of the Russian intelligentsia claim that this social group is largely a product of the Soviet system and its institutions, and therefore has been subordinated to it until today (Zarycki 2008). It is generally agreed that after the demise of the elites of pre-revolutionary Russia under Stalin's rule, they reincarnated in the 1960's. Despite a certain inclination for dissent among the Russian intelligentsia, this social group had neither the strength nor the tradition of independence from the state, which was similar to the Polish intelligentsia. The Russian intelligentsia's latest period of revival dates back to the period of perestroika and the first years that followed the disintegration of the USSR. Even then, however, intellectuals failed to achieve a dominant position, even if they began to appear in the corridors of power and gained a strong presence in many institutions. Their impact on political processes ended up quite definitely in the mid-1990s.

Against this background, the Polish case seems quite remarkable. It is marked by the dominance of the intellectual elite, which is considered to be a particular type of cultural elite. The crucial moment for the establishment of its dominance was 1918, during the birth of the Second Republic of Poland. It coincided with a spectacular failure of existing economic elites, in particular, landowners and capitalists, who

had lost a significant part of their economic resources and political influence. The intelligentsia held a dominant position in the new political system and throughout the economic crises of World War I and the Great Depression. This social group had worked for this privileged status throughout the nineteenth century, confronting both indigenous economic elites (i.e. the emerging bourgeoisie, and the aristocracy and the gentry) as well as the states controlling Polish territory. Regardless of their formal political outcome, economic elites were eventually weakened by nineteenth century uprisings – organised mainly by intelligentsia fractions of Polish elites. These factions paid the highest price in terms of their status and were most severely affected by expropriations and other restrictions aimed against Polish landowners and businesses. Since 1918, the configuration of the capital hierarchy in Poland has not fundamentally changed. World War II destroyed the former political elites, which were replaced after 1945. Even though the majority of the new elites originated from other political circles, the intelligentsia continued to form their core. Moreover, even though the field of power in communist Poland encompassed a large group of citizens with a working-class background (workers and peasants), their socialization was conducted on the basis of values represented by the intelligentsia. This was due to the fact that the Polish People's Republic adopted several essential elements of the civil model developed under the Second Republic, in particular, the idea of an 'ideal citizen' who was, in fact, a model intelligentsia member. At the same time, the category of 'working intelligentsia' was applied to refer to the middle-class of the communist era. Under the rule of Stalin, the autonomy of the intelligentsia was considerably curbed, and the new intelligentsia designed by the authorities was an elite group that was supposed to be loyal to the state and to communist ideology. A significant part of cultural activities and social networks of the traditional intelligentsia shifted towards the private or semi-public sphere. In Russia, this intermediate sphere of intellectual activity was symbolized in the communist period by the kitchen as a place of intellectual debate (Oswald, Voronkov 2004). In Poland, it was greatly influenced, in the institutional sense, by the infrastructure and the support of the Catholic Church. Over time, the nearly all-encompassing state control of the public sphere began to subside, and the broadly defined intelligentsia started gaining autonomy. Intellectuals remained dependent on public institutions and, more broadly, on state authorities, but this relationship was becoming increasingly complex and not as straightforward as it used to be, particularly in comparison to the situation in the Soviet Union. Autonomous associations, informal circles and niche public institutions enjoying a certain degree of independence, and the support of the Catholic Church allowed the Polish intelligentsia to maneuver within the public

space. Over time, after the breakthrough of 1968, which became a turning point for the intelligentsia's radical alienation from the field of power, independent institutions began to emerge, anti-politics ideologies were formulated (Ost 2014) and dissent with respect to communist rule intensified. The entire period between September 1st, 1939, and 1989 was a time of profound crisis for economic elites. Following the nationalization carried out in the 1940s, they lost all of their major resources. This can be regarded as yet another factor that contributed to the relative strengthening of the intellectual elite. As the Communist rule slowly began to weaken and decline, a new class of entrepreneurs was born, even though their position remained relatively weak until the demise of communist rule. In many cases, economic success was conditional upon having appropriate connections and contacts or the ability to adapt to the specific conditions created by communist authorities, which lifted state monopolies in certain cases. After the political transformation, the majority of entrepreneurs operating in the late communist period (private entrepreneurs, among whom a prominent place was occupied by truck farmers, black-market money changers and entrepreneurs from *firmy polonijne*, small foreign firms engaged in manufacturing) were unable to defend their position on the market. As suggested by the study carried out by a team led by Ivan Szelényi (Szelényi, Treiman, Wnuk-Lipinski 1995), few managed to consolidate their businesses. It was, however, easier for those with outstanding culture capital resources, i.e. mainly intelligentsia members. In the same manner, former top party officials, as a group, had long lost their advantage. Only some of them were able to convert their former political privileges into economic resources, or even political position within the new system. This is quite evident when we compare Poland with Russia or Belarus, where a much larger number of the former top party officials managed to maintain a privileged position and, towards the end of the 1990s, decidedly consolidate it through gaining dominance over business and cultural elites. At this time, the opposite trend was observed in Poland. Former communist party elites failed to secure themselves a privileged economic position (Staniszki 2001). They proved too weak: the united forces of the former anti-communist opposition along with the intelligentsia elites managed to hamper the process known as nomenclature enfranchisement, or political capitalism. As a counterweight, access to the privatization processes was granted to Western capital, which soon became the dominant actor in many sectors of the Polish economy (Jasiecki 2013). This process seems to be a key moment for the strengthening of the dominant position of Polish intelligentsia, as it prevented the consolidation of national economic elites and of post-communist political elites. Western capital and Western institutions proved to be an ideal partner for the Polish intelligentsia. The

latter group was granted total freedom in the cultural sphere, along with considerable autonomy in politics; at the same time, the intellectual elite was provided by Western companies with a steady source of income. Some intellectuals were employed on a full-time basis, others provided advisory services to commercial and foreign entities, public institutions, and engaged in a wide range of activities financed from the EU funds. Jan Drahokupil refers to part of this institutional field oriented towards providing services to multinational corporations as the ‘comprador service sector’ (Drahokupil 2008).

The ‘field of power’ outlined above, consolidated in its present form after Poland’s accession to the European Union, can be regarded as a factor that strengthened the structural position of the intelligentsia; with reference to Bourdieu’s sociology, it can be referred to as the ‘intelligentsia’s field’. In a situation characterized by a relative weakness of state structures and scarce resources of domestic economic capital, the intelligentsia’s field – legitimized and supported by the symbolic and economic capital of institutions of core countries – proved to have an advantage over the economic and political field, and partly also over the administrative field. This hierarchy is certainly not universal. In numerous spheres or situations, the intelligentsia elite must submit to economic and political players. At the structural level, and from a long-term perspective, this argument, however, seems to be much better justified. In particular, it seems that culture capital remains the most stable of all resources in Poland, allowing the transmission of social position from generation to generation. This cannot be guaranteed either by economic or political capital, the resources of which are lost by subsequent generations of Polish elites with surprising regularity in the successive waves of economic crises and political revolutions. This does not mean, however, that economic and political capital have lost their importance. Intelligentsia members, themselves, take on new roles as politicians and businessmen. It should, nevertheless, be emphasized that these are no more than roles that can be easily relinquished, e.g. upon the next economic downturn, without the risk of losing a privileged social position. From the very beginning of their existence, intelligentsia elites have been characterized by hybridity and the multitude of roles they perform (often simultaneously), the multiplicity of their spheres of activity and the plethora of functions and competencies they possess. This feature of Polish intelligentsia elites was referred to by an eminent American anthropologist Janine Wedel in her insightful study of life strategies of the intelligentsia in the early 1980’s entitled ‘The Private Poland’ (Wedel 2007). This plurality also provides intelligentsia elites with resistance to sudden economic or political crises. In other words, the discontinuity of institutions, typical of this part of the continent, cannot disrupt the relative stability

of the intelligentsia field, even if it has not been formalized. Its key resource remains the culture capital that it transforms into informal social capital based on affiliation (often multigenerational) with other intelligentsia families. This informal capital of recognition, education, symbolic achievements and ethos remains a key dimension within the hierarchy that classifies a person on the basis of their 'education', 'integrity' and 'wisdom.' We shall now briefly discuss the potential impact of the Polish field of power on social dialogue. In a broader comparative perspective, if one of the elites achieves a clear advantage within a given society, in particular, in the field of power, traditional social institutions take specific forms. They can even be perceived as 'dummy' institutions. Most importantly, they often turn out to be weak and ineffective in fulfilling their basic functions. When one of the elites is able to impose its will on others, institutions that theoretically form negotiation platforms turn into mere transmitters of solutions imposed by the dominant group – as their role is reduced to legitimizing that dominant group; the role of such institutions can be described as purely decorative. This applies mainly to fundamental democratic institutions. It was the case of the former communist countries and it can still be observed in countries where the financial elite has achieved a particular stature, e.g. the USA and a number of South American countries, such as Argentina and Chile. Special instances of this type of institutional deformation are sometimes observed in the area of so-called social dialogue. In a country dominated by economic elites, the democratic system can be perceived as corrupted due to the influence of economic capital and the financial resources it provides. The position of representatives of trade unions and public organisations is usually weak with respect to employers. In the case of domination of state, political or feudal elites, various forms and degrees of autocracy come to the forefront. At the same time, democratic and civil society institutions are transformed into largely sham institutions. As indicated by Jan Lutyński, this may also apply to individual activities that can be referred to as 'seeming' and 'make believe' (Lutyński 1977). This could apply, in particular, to social dialogue institutions that become more or less arbitrarily constructed entities, in which officials, politicians and persons designated by them play a role that corresponds to the adopted model of social dialogue. As a result, the most important aspect of their operations is the position of actors appointed to participate in a more or less simulated 'dialogue'. Their appointment and position attributed to them is usually a reflection of their position within the political field. In particular, this evidences their importance for political elites or their position in formal and informal systems of state authority.

A similar situation may occur in a system dominated by the culture capital. In this case, the dialogue and other mechanisms of civil society are controlled primarily by representatives of the intelligentsia and are usually evaluated against the background of its values and hierarchy. This thesis is substantiated by the diagnoses and opinions of the activities of such institutions, where particular importance is given to factors such as good manners, propriety, 'intellectual class' or 'open-mindedness and trust' of dialogue participants. Much less emphasis is placed on conflicts of interests between representatives of different social groups, which in theory should take place within social dialogue institutions. A conflict of interest is often difficult to identify given the identity of the participants of the many dialogue forums in the context of an autonomous intelligentsia. Many of these forums have a hybrid nature, which has recently also been observed among the global elite by Janine Wedel (2009). Under the domination of culture capital, complex identities and roles of actors in the field of power are always influenced by certain aspects of the roles and identities of the intelligentsia. In this situation, participants of social dialogue continually strive to outdo others by striving to prove their affiliation to the intelligentsia elite as a key resource in the social game. As a result, proving intellectual prowess and sophistication may become more important than the representation of appropriately defined interests of the group.

I believe this mechanism to be an aspect of a broader trend that I shall refer to as culturalism, which can be understood as focusing on broadly defined cultural issues while neglecting economic, political and institutional problems. Culturalism is, for example, clearly visible in discussions on socio-economic development. Cultural factors (sometimes considered in a historical context) are often pointed to as a source of weakness in this respect, but also as the main area where solutions can be found. An illustrative example is the debate on the so-called 'serf-and-lord syndrome' or 'serf-and-lord mentality' (*syndrom folwarczny, mentalność folwarczna*) and the possibility of overcoming such a syndrome (Hryniewicz 2007). The tendency to focus attention on culture and mentality, observed today in many areas of economics and politicals, can be interpreted on several levels. Firstly, at the structural level, this tendency can be perceived as a confirmation of the thesis of the weakness of the state and of economic structures and elites in Poland. The impact of the intelligentsia on these structures is very limited. In other words, in a situation of substantially reduced capacity to act and with sparse economic and institutional resources, a call for cultural measures (e.g. visions and programmes pertaining to the 're-education of society', 'preserving values' or 'mentality changes') may prove useful as a symbolic substitute for pragmatic action aimed at emphasizing the subjectivity and activity

of elites. Secondly, as already suggested, culturalist interpretations can be viewed as an element of individual strategies formulated with respect to demonstrating one's intellectual capacity, in particular, one's intellectual and stylistic refinement, respect for intellectual values, openness, knowledge of history, culture or social sciences etc. References to the cultural sphere serve to emphasize one's position in the social continuum that classifies Poles in two categories: those that are 'educated', and those who cannot be qualified as such and are often referred to in rather unrefined terms. The third level of possible interpretation of culturalist strategies may consist in perceiving such strategies as a means of legitimization in the eyes of elites and global institutions.

It seems that the current spread of culturalism is a major obstacle for social dialogue, as it shifts attention from the negotiation of interests in the material and political sphere to their evaluation in cultural terms, while granting those endowed with strong intellectual powers (and background) undisputed privileges. Idealistic visions of harmony, of open dialogue and conflict-free society led by the enlightened intelligentsia (frequently alluded to in culturalist discourses) prevent identifying interests (in their many dimensions) and legitimize the privileged position of actors who hold vast cultural resources. Particular historical interpretations, often referred to in these discourses, shift the attention from contemporary conflicts of interests to past issues. Undoubtedly, the legacy of the past is essential for understanding the present, as it predetermines, to a large extent, today's conditions for social dialogue. Nevertheless, this does not mean that historical interpretations should be used to reinforce the position of specific social groups, as is often the case in culturalist discourses. Importantly, historical interpretations themselves should not be focused solely on cultural or political aspects while marginalizing the economic dimension, both at the national level (the level of social class, social strata etc.) and at the spatial level (global, regional etc.).

It would be difficult to draw straightforward and practical conclusions from the above considerations. As argued above, the supremacy of the intelligentsia and the central role of culture capital have deep historical roots and, above all else, strong structural foundations. Any radical change in this respect would require quasi-revolutionary measures. At a slightly less fundamental level, it can, however, be advocated that we remain aware of the specific nature of social relations in Poland and of their impact on the processes and institutions of social dialogue. We must bear in mind that the key role of culture capital further undermines the social position of the majority of lower classes, particularly less educated workers, who risk being marginalized both economically and culturally. Paradoxically, culture capital

deficits may also significantly compromise the social position of entrepreneurs. Their financial resources, in the absence of intellectual capacities (and background), often turn out to be insufficient, thus preventing them from enjoying respect and recognition as members of the social elite. In such cases, the solution is to hire members of the intelligentsia elite as representatives or advisers. This strategy may prove effective, but carries the risk of disloyalty of intellectuals who may lobby and enter the game referred to above. At times, it seems that the dialogue in which they are intermediaries serves the specific interests of its participants rather than the communities theoretically represented. Perhaps this is the prism through which we should interpret the thesis of the 'betrayal of Solidarity by its intellectual leaders', methodically presented by David Ost (2007)? Even if Ost's criticism is not fully justified, we should bear in mind the risks associated with a systemic appreciation of the intellectual elite in Poland.

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