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Utopianism and Enlightenment

Utopianism and Enlightenment: the Political Culture of eighteenth-century Poland-Lithuania

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This project is essentially the fruit of the two year British Academy Readership which I was awarded from September 2003 to September 2005. I am currently working on a monograph, provisionally entitled: *Disorderly Liberty: the political culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century.*

This will be the first treatment in English of the subject, but I am consciously intending it to complement the work of Polish historians writing in the field. Without wishing to claim any especially privileged objectivity in treating this subject, I believe I can legitimately argue that it has been extraordinarily difficult for historians, be they in Poland or beyond it, to provide a balanced picture of early modern Polish history. As Norman Davies rightly pointed out in the introduction to his *God's Playground*, it was extraordinarily difficult for nineteenth-century Polish historians to know what to make of their history, if only because they had no idea of what their present meant: was Poland gone and finished, never to return? would it be resuscitated? what would happen to the Poles themselves? was their historical fate to be germanisation, russification or something else and if so, what? It is not a question widely raised in western European historiography, because western European historians have some kind of sense of 'where' their countries are going - but put yourselves in the Poles' shoes, and the issue becomes much more complicated: at the very least, it exposes the fragility of assumptions so readily taken as givens.

When, in November 1918, a Polish state was restored, it was inevitably wracked by neuroses and ideological cross-currents which made balanced judgement difficult. Then came World War II with all its attendant horrors and then, in their own way almost as bad, came the deformations imposed by Soviet dominance. Although it was probably easier to write about early modern than late modern history under the communist regime, it was impossible to escape the determinist hand of Marxist ideology. A further, practical and material problem was not so much the immense destruction wreaked on Polish archival sources (though given what so easily might have happened, they have survived remarkably well) as the relatively small number of working historians. The upshot has tended to be that once an established authority had covered a particular field , it tended to be regarded as 'done' and research moved on elsewhere. The kind of constant questioning and revisioning that is such a feature of western European and American scholarship happened to only a very limited degree. Thus, the historiography of the political ideas of the eighteenth century still remains dominated by the work of Władysław Konopczyński (1880-1952). For all its genuine value, it cannot remain as a kind of Ten Commandments. One of the purposes of my work, building on the contributions of historians writing especially from the 1960s onwards, is to paint a hopefully more nuanced picture of political ideas in the eighteenth-century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The second half of the sixteenth century especially witnessed the growth of a strong sense of 'ownership' of the Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita*, *Respublica*) by its nobility or *szlachta*. Surrounded by authoritarian states, they were very conscious of their possession of liberty - a quality which, perhaps inevitably, they blew up to mythological proportions. One of its key features was the notion that they, the nobility, as a body, were responsible for the well-being and maintenance of that state, just as they were also its primary beneficiaries. In social terms, this translated into the preservation of the status quo and the exclusivity of full political rights for the nobility. In political terms, it meant government by consent, that is, the consent of the nobility; its corollary, however, was constant, even inevitable tension with the elected monarchs of the Commonwealth. In an ideal world, the *szlachta* would have liked their kings as guardians of their libertarian constitution: in practice, they took the view that kings were always trying to subvert that construct. The upshot was either an uneasy partnership between king and nobles or, sometimes, open conflict and civil war.

For as long as neighbouring powers did not themselves develop powerful standing armies and permanent bureaucracies which permitted the emergence of 'efficient' state organisms, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth could cope with the challenges thrown at it. By the start of the eighteenth century, however, this was clearly not the case. Poland's neighbours had developed massive standing armies and officialdoms which Poland lacked. Poland's consensual government had ossified into an impossible system of unanimous consent, which under normal circumstances, militated against change and adaptation. The nobility looked to past glories and ancestral virtues, and their cumbersome, governing consultative machinery was utterly unsuited to the task of undertaking major structural reform. Insofar as structural reforms did take place, it was almost entirely at periods of crisis and often imposed by foreign, principally Russian, intervention.

What I am looking at is a kind of prolonged conversation going on over the eighteenth century as a whole, between those who wanted change and those who rejected it. Everyone accpted the need to preserve 'liberty' - there were no advocates of authoritarian or absolute government. If change was to come, it could only do so if the nobility themselves, or, at least, a critical mass within the nobility, were sufficiently convinced of the need for it. That things were not going well was widely accepted: the problem, however, was how should they be altered. How much of the past should be preserved, how much discarded? Should majority voting be introduced? Should serfs be emancipated? Should townsmen be given wider political rights? What degree of religious toleration (and for whom) should be settled on? Should elective be replaced by hereditary monarchy? These were the questions that were being increasingly loudly discussed in Poland and, from the 1770s onwards, also topics of a wider, European interest, with luminaries such as Gabriel Bonnot de Mably and Jean-Jacques Rousseau throwing in their substantial ha'pennyworths.

There is enough in all this, I feel, to make Polish political ideas of interest to a wider audience than has so far been the case.

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