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# **Report on the Polish round table**

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The second national round table in the Ford Foundation funded project 'Voices for the *Res Publica*: The Common Good in Europe' was held in Poland on 16-18 June 2007, under the auspices of the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) and the Warsaw-based Collegium Civitas. The purpose of the round table, as defined in the project's manifesto, was to bring together a carefully chosen group of opinion-formers and academics to foster a frank and in-depth 'off the record' exchange of views on the conflicts, underlying fears and deep defensive reflexes that exist within each minority or majority group, in other words, those factors which had led to a weakened common public space.

It is, of course, very difficult for the person who conceived the entire project, and planned the round table programme to write an 'objective' report on the round table's outcome. I trust that my non-Polish astigmatism will compensate for my deep involvement in the very shape of the project. I can only hope this will contribute to a more detached reading of the proceedings. I hope the Polish participants will feel challenged by this summary, much as I was throughout the entire two days of debates. Nevertheless, when reading what follows, please bear in mind this personal *caveat*.

Summarizing a two-day round table with such a diverse group of participants inevitably implies confronting several risks. The first is that of generalizing on the basis of what a given number of individuals present said, when other participants in their place might have raised different issues or addressed the same issues in a different manner. The second risk is that of 'essentializing', i.e., attributing a given person's comments to his or her ethnic background, religious affiliation, age or gender. Each individual is, of course, a sum of different experiences and identities, which at times clash or reinforce each other in defining that person's outlook. Essentializing is a particularly dangerous proposition, especially for a project which seeks to build a new *res publica* on a wide set of intertwined

multiple identities.

Yet it is impossible not to generalize at some level if one is to use the round tables as a starting point for further *res publica* debates. In the pages that follow, I have referred to given group identities (such as Catholic, lay, Jewish and Muslim, conservative or progressive) only when what was being said stood out for having been said by a member of a given group who clearly invoked his or her given identity while grappling with the issue at stake. Similarly, I felt it was worth reporting when only members of a given group took stands on a given issue while others who belonged to other groups did not jump into the debate. Lastly, I refer to 'generations' when there was a clearly defined cluster of statements cutting across identities by persons of the same age group.

### Preliminary remarks on the round table

This round table took place at a particularly tense moment in Poland's political life, when a common Polish public space was weakened over the politics of lustration, Poland's relationship to Europe, the role of the Church in public life, the ever present weight of a series of badly 'digested' pasts, and a general climate of political, social and cultural tension between the progressive camp and an increasingly conservative government. In brief, a round table discussing how best to create or recreate the Polish *res publica* could not have been more timely, nor more complex.

The round table included fourteen Polish participants (two more were unable to come at the very last minute), two British representatives of JPR, an American representative of the Ford Foundation and myself, with a more continental and French perspective. The Polish participants constituted a diverse group in terms of their professional activities (academics, journalists, inter-cultural dialogue specialists, and NGO activists involved in work with immigrants). They were also diverse in terms of backgrounds. There were Catholic activists, including a Jesuit, a Jewish intellectual/activist, as well as a Tartar Muslim, and a variety of lay voices, both moderately conservative and somewhat more radical. The participants ranged in age from their

early 30s to one in her early 70s, with the majority in their late forties and in their fifties. Among the latter there were one or two former *Solidarnosc* activists. Missing from the round table discussion were voices coming from the right-wing political camp in power, as well as from the conservative Catholic camp. Contrary to what one would assume however, their absence did not unbalance the round table discussions. It actually facilitated them. It allowed the group (which the right-wing camp would have defined as composed of left-wing opponents, and even 'traitors') to engage in very open discussions and even dissent because both were based on an implicit trust. The result was that what initially appeared to be a 'too' coherent progressive bloc, quickly revealed profound intellectual, cultural and political differences at the very heart of the Polish malaise.

For one should call a spade a spade. The two-day round table opened up bleak vistas of a deeply troubled, divided and pessimistic country, best defined by the strident tone of its political debates, and by the belief that the 'other' side did not constitute a valid interlocutor because it was politically illegitimate. Some of the stridency of the national debates filtered, albeit in a very civilized manner, into the round table, rendering it far more 'representative' of the Polish situation than its actual composition might have indicated. And yet, this bleakness was in itself paradoxical. It contrasted markedly with the 'booming' aspects of Warsaw's modernity and with the very clear economic improvement of the country as a whole. An external observer was thus left wondering whether the political and intellectual tensions merely reflected the last (passing) chapter of a long and complex Polish political and historical saga before one 'moved on' toward a far more pragmatic, even if mediocre, European-compatible political life. Or whether these strident debates pointed to a badly digested past which would continue to poison the national future, despite a better economic life... or perhaps because of it, since the best minds were deserting the political arena for the marketplace.

The round table offered no clear indications on this count. Especially since the youngest voices present, even those who were fully committed to working for a more open, tolerant and progressive Poland,

stressed just what an uphill battle theirs was. They stressed time and time again that the important Western migration of Polish youth to the UK and Ireland was only partly due to the far higher wages these countries offered and far more the product of their wish to escape a stifling national setting, which offered them no optimistic future vistas. And yet, despite these highly pessimistic statements, no one would have contested just how far the country had come since 1989.

The current climate of political conservatism, however, had made them forget the progress accomplished, and thrown the group into either a nostalgic or a furious mood, whose contents varied in function of the person's background, but which led to the same conclusion: that 'others' had 'stolen' the Polish *res publica*, hijacking it for their own divisive ends, thus depriving the country of its own ideals. The prevalent mood was thus one of nostalgia. Some participants were nostalgic for a certain internationalist ideal, as opposed to the present-day national stridency. Others regretted the spirit and passion of the first years of *Solidarnosc* with its liberating struggle against a clear enemy, Communism, and the attendant fight for freedom. Others regretted a far more recent past, the years which immediately preceded the coming of the Kaczynski twins to power, when politics did not aim to exclude. Still others were nostalgic for a more open and civically engaged Church which rallied people to it rather than excluding them, while others regretted a more lay setting where the Church did not exert pressures on one's private life. Some were nostalgic for a more ethnically variegated Poland; others for a more culturally homogeneous one sharing similar values. Still others were nostalgic for a European Poland predicated on the Enlightenment, while others hearkened back to prewar Poland or to the Polish national memory before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In brief all were nostalgic for their own vision of an ideal *res publica* which others did not necessarily share. Even the younger voices seemed to be nostalgic: for a childhood past of parental ideals, and above all for a Poland that cherished the dream of fully belonging in a throbbing outside world.

Keeping this complex collective nostalgia in mind, one can turn to the ten topics which dominated the

two-day round table. These were: 1) The nature of Polish political discourse, and the role of the intelligentsia; 2) The legacy of *Solidarnosc*; 3) The role of the Church; 4) The role of the state; 5) Nationalism and patriotism; 6) Polish myths and values; 7) Identity and otherness; 8) The weight of the past; 9) the role of Europe.

### The nature of Polish political discourse and the role of the intelligentsia

Everyone in the round table agreed that Poland was a country fraught with massive political divisions and identity tensions. They also agreed that public discourse had reached a low point since the election of the new President and the arrival of his twin as prime minister. There was a consensus that political discourse was predicated on outlawing the other camp by considering it as an 'enemy of Poland'. In brief, national life was based on a 'we' against 'them' mentality.

Participants disagreed however, on the origins of this problem. For the more liberal and lay participants, those in power today and their allies (the party of Law and Justice, as well as the Church) were the principal culprits in this degradation of public discourse. One participant cited that the political language pitting the *Solidarnosc* camp against the former Communists of Kwasniewski in the presidential elections of 1996, considered very strident at the time, had never reached today's levels, with the government side refusing the other the right to exist in the national debate.

For the more conservative and Church-affiliated participants, instead, all sides were to be blamed, since, in their view, the liberal camp was just as aggressive and exclusionary in its tone and demands. For these voices, Poland's political tragedy was linked to the fact that all sides were convinced they incarnated the only correct approach, refusing any notion that stable and 'normal' political life was the result of compromise and acceptance of the other. They were quick to stress that having a strong identity should not be equated with being aggressive, rather the opposite. One could be most open to others when one is sure of one's own beliefs and values. Those present were willing to compromise

to a certain degree, but they were also highly defensive of their own camp if they thought it was being attacked. Few accepted one participant's call to try to put oneself in the shoes of others, particularly of the absent camp.

What existed in Poland, instead, was, in the words of a human rights activist, the intellectual concept of '*sur-réalité*', a constructed setting of absolutist values, traditions, and world-views which were imposed from above and to which everybody had to bow in order to enter the national discourse, and which as a result, imprisoned thinking in unyielding corsets. One independent sociology professor, who refused to be associated with either side, commented that such political wars were well nigh inevitable in a country where the measured social science level of interpersonal trust between 'Mr X' and 'Mr Y' was the lowest in Europe after Greece. If there was no trust within civil society, there could not be any trust in the state either.

In a way that seemed a throwback to the Communist past, the debate then focused on the responsibility of the intelligentsia in these political wars. One participant, partially nostalgic for the internationalism of yore, claimed that the strident political climate of the day was linked to the disappearance of the intelligentsia as a class that was able to unify, steer, and elevate political discourse, while thinking of the greater good. The same 'neutral' sociology professional countered him by saying that, defined as a class of persons with higher educational degrees, the intelligentsia, was, on the contrary, thriving because it was present in many different sectors, and no longer considered politics as its only purview. The lay progressive voices regretted, instead, the passing of those intellectuals who incarnated 'the common good' and universal values, (and who contributed to the success of the *Solidarnosc* movement) and dared hope that the current political climate would stir them into a renewed civic commitment because their values were once again under attack. But they also claimed that in a democracy, intellectuals could no longer have the power they had in combating anti-democratic regimes.

The debate then shifted focus to address a related issue: namely, whether one was not witnessing the

return of conservative and even right-wing intellectuals, who took ever more extreme public views, and who bore no relation to the intellectuals the old left had traditionally adored. Such intellectuals, according to one lay participant, were most willing to celebrate power over democracy, instrumentalizing the social divisions of the country for their own political ends. The allusion here to the lustration debate was quite clear. At stake was how to understand the government's desire to extirpate former communists from the body politic who might have collaborated with the secret police, but after such a long time period.

In this reading, one could then find *bona fide* right-wing intellectuals, and could not simply define the Poland of today as a populist mass media conservative (a sort of Berlusconi) camp against the old Poland of progressive ideals. The implication was quite strong: namely, that today's Poland increasingly resembled pre-war Poland with its extremist political factions and hatreds, and the facile use of the term 'traitor' that characterized the national radical right-wing intelligentsia of the time. Not all participants agreed with this historical reading, if only because of the dramatically different international situation, and the presence of Europe.

Some disagreed with it in purely historical terms, stressing that many conservative intellectuals of the 1930s believed in a common civic culture, were not antisemitic and had not excluded anyone from the nation. Others countered that such intellectuals had been responsible for some horrible laws, and that the dividing line between national democrats and national radicals was not always easy to draw. From an external perspective, the still living power of a nearly 80 year-old past in a present-day Polish round table was interesting to observe, especially since, when referring to the 1930s, little mention was made of the fact that Jews, through anti-semitic legislation, had indeed been marginalized and then excluded from the nation.

The debate was highly interesting because it revealed the degree to which the 'intellectual' continued to incarnate a lofty figure in Polish society (in ways that were no longer the case in France), perhaps because of the long Communist period. Only one participant claimed matter-of-factly that the

power of the intellectuals was now limited to their voting numbers. For all the others, the question of the intelligentsia's role in Poland's divisive political culture remained central.

Beyond the discussion over the intelligentsia one could find a deeper reference to the lack of moderate elites who could address issues in a responsible manner across political divides. In the words of one NGO activist, there simply were no courageous advocates of the common good to be found in such a badly fractured country.

### The legacy of *Solidarnosc*

This topic flowed directly from the previous discussion, and in many ways lay at the heart of the entire round table. Some of the older participants had been important *Solidarnosc* activists from the onset and discussed its legacy with conviction, passion and nostalgia. Others had been less involved in the movement and examined it with a more critical eye. Still others had been too young during its heroic days, and could only adhere to its ideals in a secondary mode. It was interesting to observe that the youngest participants to the round table did not feel drawn to the discussion, perhaps because the movement had dominated their childhoods, and they wanted to move beyond debates that seemed to them to remain relentlessly generation-bound as the old ones replayed their differences once again.

The discussion did distinguish between Solidarity's three phases: the original trade union movement; its fusion into an all-encompassing force for change combining all classes in society, led by a trade union-intellectual spearhead, and the final phase of Solidarity in power with its inevitable bureaucratization and politicization.

For some of its critics, the liberating force of the past could no longer be the same liberating force needed for the future. The time had come for the heirs of *Solidarnosc* to make their own *autocritique* and to realize that by abandoning their original working-class base and trade union identity, once in power, they had indirectly created the bases for the conservative and populist Law and Justice Party in power. For there were aristocratic penchants in

the group, which felt it knew best what was good for the workers. The result was that they too were responsible for the current polarization of Polish society, for once the Communists were removed from power, *Solidarnosc* no longer incarnated the common good.

Supporters of the movement replied that Solidarity had managed to unite the nation around a set of common ideals of freedom and justice in what were extraordinary difficult conditions. They could not understand why it was no longer possible to replicate this movement in today's Poland (perhaps forgetting that it is far easier to unite people 'against' than 'for'). They felt that the conditions for such a struggle were present once again, citing the lustration debate as an example.

In the opinion of one former activist, *Solidarnosc* had based its power on the fact that all were equally guilty, each in their different level, for the misdeeds of Communism. Above all it did not respond to violence with violence. In the current climate, instead, no one was willing to share the guilt for the sad state of affairs, preferring to demonize the other side. To which another critic rebutted that Polish factions suffered from the 'syndrome of a clear conscience', for which *Solidarnosc* was also to blame.

Two younger voices involved in NGOs on behalf of the poor and immigrants stated that on the lustration debate, what mattered most was not the past, but whether those who were accused were working on behalf of the common good at present, in which case they should not be dragged into any judicial accounting. They also stressed that *Solidarnosc*, (of which they only knew the phase in power) had sinned just like every other political group in not taking into account the needs of those who were left out of society, be they the unemployed, the marginal, the immigrants, or other outcasts. This pragmatic attitude was not to the liking of everyone in the round table, particularly those who had been close to *Solidarnosc*, but it did incarnate a desire to 'move on' beyond an older generation's debate.

The importance of this debate lay in the fact that *Solidarnosc* had now also entered the overfull closet of Poland's contradictory and controversial

pasts, whereas in its heyday it had sought to transcend them all by uniting Catholics and atheists (and Jews), socialists and libertarians, patriots and pro-Europeans, workers and elites, in one major national movement. Addressing the issue of this complex, and now also divisive, but increasingly historicized legacy constituted, in my opinion, an important step in the fashioning of a future Polish *res publica*.

## The role of the Church

As might be expected, the role of the Catholic Church in Poland was hotly debated during the round table. The liberal lay participants contested the Church's centrality in Polish political life and lamented the passing of the *Solidarnosc* years, when an ideologically besieged church fought back by being particularly open to the world. Today instead, they lamented, since the Church was no longer under attack, it was free to return to its obscurantist and authoritarian penchants. The result was that it played a major role in fomenting the country's political divisions and in spreading the language of intolerance against its 'enemies'. One participant went as far as saying that the Church was the equivalent of a 'black cloud' casting its shadow over the entire country, an obvious reference to the polluting and highly toxic Chernobyl cloud. Others stressed that the Church refused all dialogue with other sectors of society, in essence incarnating or even guiding the present government's negative politics. Most lamented the fact that the Church no longer incarnated love, tolerance and peace, but was now perceived as standing for three major 'anti's': anti-homosexuals, anti-abortion and anti-immigrants.

Those in the group who were close to the Catholic Church either because they were priests, students of theology or committed Catholics reacted violently to these lay accusations, by making the classic distinction between the holy Church and the often imperfect men and women who composed it. They stressed that the lay presentation of the Church was a cheap caricature and that they could not recognize their own institution, which was full of dialoguing and tolerant activists whose actions were never taken into account by the secular camp.

In other words, things were changing inside the Catholic world, but no lay people were willing to admit it. Such a refusal to see the virtues on the other side thus led many Catholics to consider the *res publica* as a shallow and valueless playing ground, against which one had first of all to defend the Church as an institution, before engaging in any critique which could be used by the other camp.

To which the lay people present curtly replied that unfortunately these 'nice' Catholics did not have the policymaking power within the Church, and were often marginalized within their own institution, which was deliberately cutting all bridges between the conservative and the progressive camps. One professor of a generally conservative bent, who considered himself a practising Catholic, made a powerful plea for another type of Church, one which united rather than divided its flock, one which accepted internal discussion and stopped associating dissenters with sinners. An intercultural activist stressed the degree to which the Church was closed and backwards in the Polish countryside and how it thrived on the general public indifference to contemporary social issues.

Foremost among these was the question of homosexuality in the body politic. The lay participants present stressed that, irrespective of religious debates, one could not deny the existence of Polish homosexuals, who, as citizens, had the right to be listened to and protected, because they were a part of society and could not be extirpated from the body politic. The Jewish participant to the discussion evoked the highly sophisticated response of Jerusalem's mayor, an orthodox Jew, when he had to decide whether to permit the Gay Pride Parade. The mayor opened his speech by condemning homosexuality in religious terms but then explained that he would allow the Parade to take place because he was the mayor of all the city's citizens and therefore had to respect all identities. This plea for multiple identities that were reconciled in the name of the *res publica* elicited no response from the Catholics present, who preferred to remain silent on the question of homosexuality. They limited themselves to saying that, indeed, the Church needed to learn to use more 'subtle' language but that one had to give it the benefit of the doubt, because it was 'huge and old', and not at all like a black cloud.

This debate was most instructive because it showed to what an extent the round table participants suffered from the very flaws in Polish political discourse which they had condemned in the first session. The Church reformers stuck to their 'holy' Church, while the lay reformers of society stuck to their social camp with no attempt being made to join forces in the name of a shared *res publica* to transform the hard liners in each camp *together*, via the building of intellectual bridges and the underscoring of the common stances that united them. One participant spoke of the need to clean up 'one's own backyard', but no one suggested crossing yards or pooling gardening tools to help the neighbour in this task.

Each group, instead, positioned itself in the defensive mode with respect to their camps, stating, in the case of the Catholics, that it was difficult to carry out reforms while 'under attack'. This led the lay camp to protest that it was they who were under direct attack by the conservatives and the Church, and that the two attacks could not be compared since one camp held power and refused to dialogue with the other, while the other one was fighting to preserve its rights. Such was the power of the Church, they affirmed, that even a leading liberal lay voice such as *Gazeta Wyborcza* was afraid of taking on the Church establishment in its columns. On this count, both sides seemed to suffer from the fear of losing their lay or religious identity by falling into the trap of relativism. In this 'chicken or egg' debate over who was most attacked, there were no clear winners but only one loser: Poland's democracy and its common good.

### The role of the state

Each country has its historical lacunae and institutional weak spots. In the Polish case, the state constituted the missing link in any possible *res publica* chain. It simply did not exist as an independent overarching presence, as a neutral self-standing locus whose civil servants survived the changes of different governments as stable institutional pillars.

The round table discussions pointed to a state that was perceived by different political camps as a passive entity (not unlike a ball) that was either forfeited, confiscated, regained, deserved and finally

possessed, depending on who did the describing, and this in the wake of nearly two centuries of foreign domination. The Polish state, reborn after World War I, had thus 'belonged' to one camp or the other since its inception: first to the conservatives, then to the right, before being taken over by the Communists after World War II, and returned to Polish society (via *Solidarnosc*) with the demise of Communism, only to be 'retaken' by the right in recent years. In addition, any Polish state was in direct competition with the Church, which still claimed to incarnate the nation in moral terms, and could not think of itself as belonging to only a part of the Polish population. For such a reading could only lead to an attendant shrinking of its official and political power.

In brief, hearing the participants refer to the state during the round table, it was clear that it had never really belonged to all Poles, each state incarnation excluding a different sector of them, and, in the opinion of the Tartar Muslim, almost always the country's minorities. The result was that rather than transcending partisan politics, the state had simply come to incarnate them.

For many moderates, the question of lustration thus amounted to one state faction seeking revenge over another, so as to better (re)appropriate the state for itself. The insignia of the country moved from one camp to the other without retaining any symbolic stature, since they were lowered to fit partisan politics behind the cover of a national ideal.

The result in the words of one of the younger participants was that she felt a 'stranger in her own country' because she was a prisoner of historical and political divisions that were unimportant and even irrelevant to the political and social concerns of the day. This tug of war over who 'owed' or 'deserved' the state distorted all the other levels of Polish society as well, since the state failed in being the 'facilitator' or the neutral locus between different camps. The result was that the state became one of the divisive factors responsible for the weak Polish *res publica*.

## Nationalism and patriotism

These two terms were evoked in virtually every session of the round table. Since there were no adamant 'nationalists' in the group, a consensus emerged that patriotism was a positive value linked to the love of one's own country for its virtues. Nationalism, instead, was perceived as a negative stance based on antipathy towards other nations, with a related wish to defeat them or exclude them from close contact.

How to avoid confusion between the two terms was deemed crucial, particularly at a time when the Polish government seemed to be moving in an ever more nationalist direction. Here again opinions diverged. The more conservative members of the group felt that nationalism had made a strong comeback precisely because *Solidarnosc*, once in power, had minimized the importance of patriotism among its working-class constituency. It had also minimized (and this one Solidarity activist admitted was true,) the Polish need to rejoice in national independence after the fall of Communism, and to bask in this newfound patriotic liberty. The result was that *Solidarnosc* abandoned patriotism to the opposition, which was more than ready to turn it into nationalism. In a vicious circle of consequences, Polish politicians then became ever more nationalist in following the 'opinions' of the masses, who, in turn, followed their politicians into ever greater nationalist stances.

The result was that no positive idea of 'Polishness' emerged. Nationalism was a frustrated negative reaction to what 'outsiders' had done to Poland, be they the historical occupying powers, followed by the so-called internationalism of the Soviet Union, and now the supranational 'diktats' of Europe. In the words of one participant, weak identities were the ones that reacted violently; hence the renewed nationalist wave. Poland's problem, according to one of the younger participants, was further compounded by the fact that nationalism transcended generational divides and found echoes even among the young who had never known a foreign-dominated Poland.

The result was tragic, according to most participants. No one celebrated Poland's positive heroes,

those who adhered to universal values, those who preached tolerance and humanism, or who had saved Jews during the war. For the lay camp, the Church had played a major role in defining a narrow and defensive Polish nationalism that saw 'enemies' everywhere. And either through passivity or obedience, the rest of society, including the media, simply followed in this path, which was the one of least resistance, and the most rewarding one in terms of national popularity.

### Polish myths and values

The participants coming from the more liberal and lay camp felt that Poland defined itself in terms of strong values that were largely mythical. The first was that of Polish 'uniqueness', which rendered any comparisons with other countries impossible and even undesirable. The idea of a Polish 'destiny' based on suffering and martyrdom, before national liberation ensued at last, remained very strong. It was accompanied by another myth: that of Polish 'tolerance' towards historical others in its midst, be they Jews, or members of neighbouring countries. Reality, for the lay camp, was not so sanguine. Part of the national problem lay in the fact that no one wanted to explore these contradictions or to really try to define Polish 'values'. Referring to them was, in itself, a political act linking the upholder of these abstract 'values' to a conservative and Church-dominated camp.

One more radical participant linked to the feminist cause went so far as to claim that even Poland's quasi sacred 'family values', when examined analytically, were bad for the future of Polish democracy. For the cult of the family, which went hand in hand with inequality between sexes, went against that of civic virtue and facilitated selfish family behaviour. The result: underhand deals, opaque transactions, all in the interest of family life and which only reinforced the national penchant for not trusting others.

More important, once a given trait became a 'value' it was elevated to a level of loftiness which precluded any possible compromise. Hence patriotism, in this context, could not brook any compromises with other nations or groups. Some felt that this inability to compromise originated in Poland's old codes of

nobility based on 'honour', even in its most populist incarnations. As a result, values based on reason, on the Enlightenment and on universal rights, as well as values based on the *res publica*, were perceived as alien to the Polish tradition, which remained conditioned by what one participant referred to as a 'Baroque religious mindset'.

The response of the more Catholic participants to this onslaught on Polish values was to stress the value of 'diversity', in what one Jesuit voice considered the Bible's exaltation of 'difference' in God's creation. But this call for 'difference' could be interpreted both ways: as a way of protecting all, or as a way of protecting the Catholic Church's 'difference' with respect to material, lay values. It remained unclear whether all sides in Poland meant the same thing when they were celebrating 'difference', for one needed other commonalities to celebrate it.

The term 'tolerance' led to even greater debate. Most participants mourned its passing in an era of ever greater political aggressions. Some even claimed that the word had disappeared from the Polish language, thus precluding any consolidation of the *res publica*, since the extremists on all sides carried the day. Without 'tolerance' words became bombs in the war between camps.

Not everyone agreed with this reading. One of the young participants involved in NGO work expressed her intense dislike of the term 'tolerance', which she found to be condescending toward the person or group supposed to be 'tolerated'. She felt that where there was equality and justice, there was no need for 'tolerance.' The consensus of the rest of the group was that Poland was so far from such ideal conditions, that priority had to be given to rescuing the term and its positive meanings, when confronted with national intolerance and uncompromising stances.

### Identity and otherness

Not surprisingly given all the above, the participants at the round table agreed that Poland was particularly unreceptive to the 'others' in its midst. The 'others' in question during this session were not those Poles the conservative-populists chose

to extirpate from the nation, but those who were genuine outsiders: immigrants, refugees and visible minorities. The priest in charge of the Catholic Vietnamese community, as well as the younger NGO activists present who also dealt with the rising number of Byelorussians, Ukrainians and even Russians who were immigrating to Poland, were unanimous in condemning the Polish inability to 'see' these 'others' in the nation's midst, much less to develop policies on their behalf. There were many references to the 'Stadium' on Warsaw's outskirts where these foreigners gathered to trade and to network among each other, in what appeared to be a total insularity from the rest of Polish society. Obviously Poland, long a land of emigration (continuing among its younger generations as well) had difficulty imagining itself as a land of immigration (not unlike Italy two decades ago), so that it still possessed no tools with which to come to terms with what had become a key issue in Western Europe's attempts to define a new *res publica*.

The Polish problem, however, ran deeper, according to the Tartar Muslim, whose family, like that of other Tartar Muslims, was settled in Poland for over five centuries. For the majority of Poles, the definition of a Pole in both ethnic and Catholic terms was so ingrained that they could not imagine being able to integrate citizens with other identities inside the Polish nation, unless such people took on Catholic names and Polonized themselves with respect to the country's 'values'. Other participants concurred with this reading by stressing that it was impossible to be a Jewish Pole, a Protestant Pole, a lay Pole, and even a 'feminist' Pole.

As for the old multicultural Polish identity of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the country had 30 per cent of others in its midst, one Jewish participant shut that past out as a possible model for the future, by saying that it had been oversold and that anyway, history had done away with it by destroying the minorities. Nevertheless, with the return of such populations on Polish soil, including the small Jewish community and the wider world Jewish and Israeli presence, one could make a case that such a past could at least be evoked as a counter-scenario or even memento to the closed nationalist Poland so many participants had condemned in all of the round table sessions.

Interestingly enough, with respect to 'otherness', the metaphor with which most of the group felt at ease was that of the 'hedgehog'. In this view, all identities, whether those of the majority or of minorities, were deemed to be sharp and prickly. One participant, deeply involved in human rights struggles, initiated the comparison by stressing that dealing with 'others' was the equivalent of two hedgehogs courting each other, with the mutual request of 'do not get too close, dear'. The same person made an eloquent plea for separate spaces, and for the right to one's environment to which one could retreat without having to be in too close a contact with 'others' all the time. Behind this stance, lay the philosophy of 'live and let live', provided there was a 'safety zone' to which one could retreat, but also provided one addressed the 'other' in the terms with which he or she wished to be called. This message was neither multi-cultural nor identity-blind; it seemed to come from a very different, almost pre-modern world.

The Catholic inspired participants celebrated diversity because 'God loves diversity', and encouraged the full respect of 'otherness', but at the same time they emphasized the fact that Poland had no facilitators for such an open stance, neither within the state nor within civil society. The lay opponents within the group replied that the Church only praised diversity when it suited its own needs, and not as a universal precept. As with nearly all topics, the issue of identity and otherness simply brought the group back to the old cleavages they were trying to condemn.

### **The weight of the past**

One NGO activist summed up the whole burning issue of Poland's many competing pasts by claiming that confronting the past 'did not heal', that the past could not be 'solved', and that it would never come to an 'end'. One had to learn to live with it. All in the group lamented the fact that history was just as divisive and politically motivated as politics. For some Poland had always been historically divided between two visions of itself: a closed one linked with the old Piast dynasty, and an open one linked with the far more 'cosmopolitan' Jagellonian dynasty, and these divisions continued to shape world

views to this day.

Beyond this historical incursion into the distant past, the session was dominated by two key historical references which, in many ways, underpinned in an incompatible manner the crusades of the two Polish camps: Jedwabne and the politics of lustration. The group agreed that those who fought for the truth to come out, namely that it had been their Polish neighbours who had killed the Jews of Jedwabne in the context of the Nazi-Soviet redistribution of power in 1941, were often the same who refused the present-day government's politics of lustration of all those who had had too close ties to the police organs of the Communist regime. While those who wanted the truth about Communist collaboration to come out so that the 'traitors' could be identified, were to be found among those who steadfastly refused to acknowledge Polish responsibility over Jedwabne. This camp was quick to condemn the bringing out of the truth as merely anti-Polish defamations at the hands of 'international pressure groups', against what they continued to define as an innocent and martyred Polish nation.

On this count, the group agreed that there seemed to be no third conciliatory reading of this bitterly contested past, no possible compromise, and no desire to build an inclusive and honest parallel history. In both cases, suspicion, even hatred, and falsified memories seemed to preclude any dialogue within Polish society. More significantly, the group agreed that no one was asking the deeply troubling questions about Polish society as a whole and its historical self-presentation, nor, in the words of a younger participant, analyzing competing pasts from the perspective of human rights.

In brief, history in Poland continued to be an absolute zero-sum game. The Jedwabne controversy, which had so inflamed passions in 2001-2003, and according to many at the time, transformed Polish society by making it confront previous taboos, had petered out, leaving behind more bad feelings than the previous silence, for the simple reason, according to one participant, that it had ended in an incomplete and even botched catharsis, with each camp entrenched in its certitudes. On this count, the lay camp insisted that the Church bore a major

responsibility for the degradation and stiffening of the historical context, while the Catholics present sought to spread the blame to include all camps. One participant mentioned that initially, the citizens of Jedwabne were amenable to a review of the town's past, until church officials intervened and turned the Jedwabne affair into a war of identities.

There could be no historical consensus as long as many Poles considered Jedwabne as a 'Jewish affair' and therefore normal that 'the Jews' would defend their own particular past in such a way that the Church then felt the need to defend its own contrasting interpretation of the same events, with the result that no shared civic reading was possible. Those who wanted the truth to come out on Jedwabne agreed that any plaque specifically accusing the then citizens of Jedwabne of the murder of their Jewish neighbours would be taken down immediately by the current citizens of the town. They also commented on the fact that the woman who had saved some Jews from being murdered lived in poverty and exclusion, ostracized by the rest of society. This was, according to them, a perfect proof of ongoing antisemitism. For the lay non-Jews, it was a proof of the total lack of civil courage of a society still held hostage by its past. For the Catholics present, Jedwabne was perceived as an exception, compared to what they considered to be the far more prevalent Polish saving and helping of Jews. Those who had turned it into a symbol of Polish politics were equally guilty of historical distortion for their own political struggles.

As for the politics of lustration, there was no clear consensus on whether or how it should be done. The group did not go into any details about it, as though exhausted from the battle fatigue of the previous months, since this had been the central topic of Polish political life. Furthermore, no one present agreed with the official government position. But it also seemed quite evident that if the discussion had focused on the issue at greater length, critical divisions would have emerged even within the round table, for there were different positions on the question based on different criteria of investigation.

The misunderstandings of the past therefore just seemed to gain weight with each passing year,

as new divisive layers were added. It is no small wonder then that the young voices present kept on reiterating that their generation was fleeing Poland for its stifling political and intellectual climate. They did not wish to be saddled with the weight of an undigestible past.

## Europe

The round table took place days before the Brussels EU summit over the mini-treaty which was to re-launch Europe after the French and Dutch 'no's' to the Constitution, a mini-treaty which was particularly endangered by the Polish government's demands to maintain Poland's weight in any new voting system.

Interestingly, for an outsider, the round table, which had been quite critical of the current Polish government on most counts, did not excoriate it with respect to the European front. No one in the round table criticized Poland's belonging in the EU, since everyone agreed that the EU had been good to Poland. But with the exception of the former Solidarnosc activist, who feared that Poland would henceforth stand at the margins of the EU, given its stubbornness, no one took Europe's side against Polish policy in this matter. Most of the participants felt that Poland had the right to stress its national interests and present a strong Polish 'voice' in the European setting, for the simple reason that every other country did the same. Britain and France, to cite one participant, were not paragons of European selflessness. They too gave priority to their national interests.

Having said this, most participants agreed that the Polish government's hostile EU stance was perhaps a bit exaggerated and was the logical outcome of a national stance based on the old 'we' against 'them' scenario, which preferred a negative presence to any positive international accomplishments.

Equally surprising to an outsider was the fact that Europe scored few positive points even among those, particularly in the lay progressive camp, who had set many hopes on it. One participant claimed that 'Europe' was a hybrid artificial way station which was not very useful in a globalized world. A

second, engaged in many European cultural projects and who had been an enthusiast of the EU, now voiced clear disillusion with a European project that had lost any deep 'meaning'. 'Europe', in his view, had not created culture, nor had it sought to spread each country's deepest cultural patrimony in the lands of others. It had become a show case for each country's 'separate room'. In cultural terms, Europe had also become the purveyor of ever more costly 'bread and circus' events—shows that cost massively and lasted only a few days without leaving any significant cultural or intellectual legacy behind. This position found a clear echo among the younger members of the round table, who also felt that 'Europe' preferred to offer 'tolerance shows' where young people danced, without ever discussing the issues that might divide them. There was no true will to tackle head on the prejudices which continued to thrive throughout the continent.

The debate over Europe took on a Muslim-Christian dimension when the Tartar Muslim present stressed that Europe was simply a 'Christian club' and had failed in Bosnia, because it 'naturally' supported the Christian Serbs against the Bosnian Muslims in a clash of civilizations. He predicted that the EU would become a bloc against the Muslim world. His views were particularly rebutted by the Jewish participant who felt that the conflict had pitted authoritarian nationalists against the advocates of democracy, but that Islam had not lain at the heart of the Yugoslav wars. The Catholic voices present did not enter into the fray in this debate.

Overall, one could feel a large dose of Euro-fatigue in the room, probably because, as one participant put it, 'Europe' had not managed to improve the Polish style of politics nor curb its corruption, but might actually have reinforced them, by giving them national legitimacy in a twelve-starred setting. But at least 'Europe' was not blamed for Poland's deeply acrimonious political setting.

## Beyond the round table

As was manifest throughout, the round table offered a perfect mirror for Poland's current *res publica* void. But it also offered a positive setting for any easing of the conflicts. Tensions within the

group were high at the onset, and significantly less so at the end of the meeting. Difficult issues were broached and even addressed directly. Perhaps the most important outcome of the meeting was the universal call on all sides for the need to stop demonizing the 'other'...clearly something that did not come naturally. Since many participants stressed that it was impossible to 'clean up one's backyard' until the attacks from the other side were curtailed, it is important to pursue this metaphor in encouraging them to clean up together in the name of the *res publica*.

Given the tensions within Polish society, two possible continuations emerged from the round table. The first is the continuation of further round tables, which would progressively bring together members of different camps in an exercise of 'confidence building', in order to break the current zero-sum game approach to political and social issues. The second is the providing of a *res publica* forum for NGO and other activists, particularly for the younger generations, who often have more contacts outside Poland, than within Polish society as a whole. One must take seriously the comment of one young Catholic activist who stressed that much was happening within the Church but that no one knew about it. There should be a place where different *res publica* initiatives can come together.

The Collegium Civitas would be the ideal venue for the first initiative by structuring a series of ongoing round tables, which could meet regularly (not unlike a seminar) so that dialogue could be encouraged and maintained. The round table showed to what an extent divisions ran high even in an academic context, so it would seem logical to start round tables in such a context, by having different professors from the different camps (lay, Catholic liberal, Catholic conservative, progressives, conservatives, etc) act both as liaisons to their own group and as 'guarantors' that there is no 'hidden agenda' behind the round tables.

The second initiative should be more 'hands on' and might be best housed in an inter-cultural institution such as The Borderlands Foundation, where political and cultural activists could come together to exchange their practices, problems and experiences.

## One final comment

The often bleak conclusions of the round table must not be taken as definitive judgements. They were as much *cris de coeur* of a group of participants who had been given the chance to speak out candidly, as irrevocably black judgements. One cannot forget the dynamic Poland one sees in the streets as one plans future round tables. In forging a *res publica* debate, younger voices will prove crucial in ensuring that one does not simply fight the battles of the past, but truly engage in the challenges ahead. I considered this round table as a very positive step in this direction.

As I finish this text, there is talk that Poland may be heading toward election in the autumn. Whatever the outcome of such elections, there will still be a major need for further round tables and a slow 'patching up' of all sides in the name of the *res publica*.

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[http://www.jpr.org.uk/common-good-in-europe/downloads/round\\_table\\_poland\\_programme.pdf](http://www.jpr.org.uk/common-good-in-europe/downloads/round_table_poland_programme.pdf)