

Reviews. Reports

Recenzje. Sprawozdania

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Review of: Jo Harper (ed.), *Nieliberalna rewolucja w Polsce* [*Poland's Memory Wars: Essays on Illiberalism*], transl. Paweł Tomanek, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2020, pp. 263

Jo Harper, the editor and one of the book's authors, is an independent journalist and a reporter, who works in Poland and Germany. He writes for the BBC, Politico, and Deutsche Welle. His doctoral dissertation, defended in 1999 at the London School of Economics, concerned the Round Table Talks in Poland (1989). He has been interested in Polish issues for over 20 years and comments on them, both in the press articles¹ and in the book publications [Harper 2021].

The authors of other essays collected in the book are: Neal Ascherson, Tomasz Basiuk, Urszula Chowaniec, Dariusz Czaja, Jan Darasz, Artur Lipiński, David Ost, Neal Pease, Brian Porter-Szűcs, Gavin Rae, Nicholas Richardson, Andrzej Rychard, Ewa Stańczyk, Agnieszka Stępińska, and Joanna Średnicka. There are Polish, British and American scientists, journalists and lawyers among them.

The reviewed publication is an assemblage of essays and interviews on the political and social situation in Poland in recent years. The texts analyze the causes of this situation, which go back to the distant history of the country and the nation. The essays' authors, as political and social observers, investigate and comment on the current Polish turn towards conservatism. This turn seems to have a close association

¹ Cf. J. Harper, Politico Archives, <https://www.politico.eu/author/jo-harper/> (access: 12.11.2020) or J. Harper, Forbes Archives, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joharper/?sh=5e76e7a6762c> (access: 12.11.2020).

with the majority government of the Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) conservative party.

The first edition of the book was published in 2018 by the Central European University Press in Budapest, with an original title: *Poland's Memory Wars: Essays on Illiberalism*. The texts contained in it were written in the years 2016–2017 after PiS took over the reign in Poland. The Polish edition contains some changes compared to the previous one and introduces a more current view of the Polish situation. Some essays take into account subsequent PiS's victory in 2019.

The Polish title of the book, referring to the illiberal revolution, reflects the paradox of Poland. The breakthroughs, changes, and revolutions do not take place in a progressive direction, determined by the western part of the world, but lead to traditional, conservative values and norms. The keynote of the book is an analysis of PiS's rise to power and an assessment of the party's use of power. The authors' intention was to show foreign readers the specifics of politics in Poland, and enable Polish readers to learn about the opinion expressed by foreign media. The external point of view is based mainly on the British reports on the situation in Poland. The structure of the book consists of three parts, each of which is the authors' voice on the Polish socio-political situation. Each essay is a separate text, dealing with a different issue, written using an original approach and method. The adjacent texts raise similar subjects.

The first part of the book [Harper 2020: 33–122] focuses on the governance of the PiS party after the elections in 2015. This chapter contains an attempt to explain why the party was able to come to power. It describes the characteristic of PiS's voters and the style of party's governance. The authors also speak about other groups on the Polish political scene and the relations that are formed between all factions. Therefore, the question arises, where the current balance of power in the government will lead the entire society. According to the authors' opinion, the present Polish political system ranks between democratic and authoritarian. This phenomenon is highlighted by introducing the concept of *hybrid democracy* [p. 50].

The second part of the book [pp. 123–188] reaches for a historical perspective, which was the basis for shaping the political arena in Poland. The authors of the essays in this part pay attention to historical events and myths that influence the Polish mentality, especially the mentality of the political elite. The chapter emphasizes to what extent the contemporary existence of Polish society and the political arena is rooted in the past, mainly in the era of Romanticism. The texts also evaluate the way the ruling party views history and monopolizes, or even modifies, historical truth.

The third part of the book [pp. 189–256] covers the main themes, on which PiS focuses in its vision of the state and politics. These themes are gathered under the concept of “normality”, that implies a return to the tradition and a desire to maintain the conservative position. Family and the Catholic religion are the main values guarded by PiS. In this chapter, the authors describe and comment on the actions of the ruling party aimed at upholding the above-mentioned values. The questions of

manipulating concepts and phenomena such as gender, LGBTQ+ community, sex education, feminism, and IVF were discussed. Also, the main enemies that the ruling party is currently fighting: sexual minorities, the Left, Jews, and other national or ethnic minorities, were described.

The substantive value of the book is very high. The political and social situation in Poland after 2015 was accurately described and assessed by the authors. In this context, I appreciate the introduction of the concept of *PiS monopoly* [p. 173]. The reasons for the PiS seizure of power and its renewed election success were equally accurately indicated. The content of the book does not ignore any of the essential aspects of the ruling party's governance. The essays include the analysis of the relationship between PiS and the Catholic Church, the reinterpretation of historical facts in favor of Poles, the manipulation on the subject of the Smolensk tragedy in 2010, the anti-Russian and anti-EU attitude, the politicization of banks, the aversion to foreign capital in the Polish economy, the rigorous attitude towards abortion and IVF, the reform of the judiciary and education, the co-financing of biased state media, and the public discourse related to the messianic role of the Poles. Other parties and social moods, evoked by politicians' decisions, were also objectively described by the authors [e.g. pp. 19–20]. The title term, “illiberal revolution”, is exceptionally accurate for defining a climate of changes, that take place in Poland. In the last weeks, this term is getting more and more adequate.

The wealth of sources, based on which the book was written, also deserves appreciation. The diversity of authors and the eclecticism of their backgrounds are of great value. Both the conclusions of the authors' observations and their scientific references are valuable. Many essays are based on empirical research [e.g. pp. 33–52, 53–66, 95–110]. Texts contain reach anthropological [e.g. pp. 21–25, 131–132] and sociological references [e.g. p. 22, 38]. There is no shortage of the historians' [e.g. pp. 123–174], the media experts' [e.g. pp. 95–110], and the lawyers' [e.g. pp. 111–122] point of view. The whole book is a comprehensive and interdisciplinary study.

The structure of the book is logical. The ordering allows the reader to be introduced to the current socio-political climate of Poland, then to learn about its causes and interpretations, and finally to be aware of the challenges of further political and social country development. The accessible language is the advantage of the book. The journalistic and popular science writing style makes the essays pleasant to read. The narrative is as much objective as possible. Despite the right criticism of certain political solutions, the authors also managed to mention the strengths of the current Polish government and the weaknesses of other political factions [e.g. pp. 29–30]. The admission that foreign authors may not accurately assess the Polish situation was a valuable observation. Their barriers seem to be not only linguistic, but they also stem from insufficient rootedness in the local context [pp. 47–49].

Also, the specific dualism of the narration contained in the book deserves appreciation. On the one hand, the narration is a source of information about the political situation in Poland for readers staying abroad. On the other hand, it presents

an assessment of local political events from a foreign perspective. The publication should be then appreciated both by people from abroad and the Poles. The essays written by British and American authors reveal that politics in Poland is difficult to investigate, describe, and understand [pp. 9–15].

The high level of imagery and giving examples of the described phenomena is another great value of the book. In particular, detailed historical examples [e.g. pp. 245–247] and samples of media discourse [e.g. p. 254] are mentioned. Such a procedure gives credence to the authors' narratives and enriches the reading. The high level of accuracy, mentioned before, applies not only to the comments expressed in the book but also to predictions of the future. Neal Ascherson admitted in an interview: "I believe that PiS may, step by step, try to introduce a much more presidential system, which will drastically limit the power and role of the opposition, perhaps begin to interfere with the operation of the National Electoral Commission, and so on" [p. 213]. Knowing the fate of Polish politics after the publication of this book, the above words can be considered as an exceptional prophecy.

As a young sociologist and a researcher of society, I am impressed with this book. The essays are a confirmation of my observations. However, some texts drew my attention to questions that I had not noticed before. I realized that there is still Romanticism in Poland, with all its tendencies, especially traditional and national ones [pp. 123–134]. I also noticed that Polish culture focuses too much on the worship of graves and death, and so its focus on the present is neglected [pp. 175–188].

One should also pay attention to the weaknesses of this book. In my opinion, the influence that the current government has on the rule of law, freedom of citizens, and compliance with the constitution in Poland, is not accurately assessed. It is pointed out that the ruling party has not crossed any borders [p. 41] or that the Polish financial situation is not bad, despite the distribution policy [p. 75]. I consider this a slight underestimation of the problem. My position seems to be confirmed by public opinion.²

As the media is an important aspect of the book, I think that PiS's attitude to the media in Poland is not highlighted enough in the essays. There is only a mention of attempts to nationalize some media [p. 70], without information about politicizing the public television and using it by PiS for election purposes.

What is more, there is a discrepancy between the essays regarding the assessment of the PiS president and the Deputy Prime Minister, Jarosław Kaczyński. Some texts mythize him, and attribute to him exceptional leadership abilities or charisma [pp. 33–52, 67–78]. In others, Kaczyński is perceived as a character who succeeds not due to the personal factors, but due to the systemic ones [pp. 53–66]. Perhaps, the

² Public opinion in Poland is openly talking about the end of the rule of law in Poland and the violation of freedom guaranteed by human rights, cf. *Kryzys praworządności w Polsce. Trwa debata w Parlamencie Europejskim*, *Gazeta Prawna* <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/galerie/1490854,duze-zdjecie,1,praworzadno-sc-w-polsce-debata-w-pe.html> (access: 12.11.2020) and *Amnesty International: koronakryzys to pretekst do lamania praw czlowieka*, DW, <https://www.dw.com/pl/amnesty-international-koronakryzys-to-pretekst-do-%C5%82amania-praw-cz%C5%82owieka/a-53141411> (access: 12.11.2020).

difference in assessment results from the level of the authors' involvement in the Polish political context [pp. 9–15].

However, the weaknesses of the book are marginal concerning its overall value. In my opinion, the book has achieved its goal of bringing the climate and history of the political scene in Poland to foreign readers. It describes, in a nutshell, the current socio-political situation in the country and its historical and systemic causes. The publication should also be of value to the Polish readers. It is an accurate description and commentary. It also contains a lot of information that can be revealing. The illiberal revolution has become a relevant term for many changes that took place in Poland after the PiS party took over the reign. Importantly, many of the described processes have grown stronger since the publication of the Polish version of the book.

The book introduces a new voice to contemporary literature on Polish politics. Not one, but many voices from many fields and also from other countries. The publication becomes accessible to everyone due to the interdisciplinary approach, scientific perspective, and, at the same time, journalistic language. I recommend it to everyone.

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