DISPLACING ELECTIONS IN THE 'JUMP TO THE MARKET': DISPERSED TRACES OF NEOLIBERALISM IN POLAND'S TRANSITION FROM SOCIALISM

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Abstract: Poland is often viewed to as a special case of transition from state socialism: it was early in developing counter-hegemonic forces and in forcing the regime into negotiations, but late with the conduct of foundational elections. This paper addresses the question of why and how democratic elections played this rather marginal role in early post-socialist Poland, in particular with a view to the role of political conceptions with a neoliberal genealogy that factored into those elections and their interpretation by politicians, theorists, and political commentators. Thereby, the article will discuss three such conceptions: the legacy of Milton Friedman's thoughts on elections and the competitive market, a legacy whose influence can be traced in the ways in which elections in Poland became imbricated with the 'shock doctrine'; the significance of a counter-hegemonic discourse on 'civil society' in Poland and East Central Europe that radically juxtaposed state and society, leaving virtually no role for elections as a legitimate and reasonable hinge between society and the political system; and the structural presence of neo-liberal frame conceptions that guided important critiques of the non-foundational and no-choice elections between 1989 and 1991. In conclusion, the paper suggests that the traces of neoliberalism in the processes that ended state socialism in Poland be understood in a twofold way: first, as doctrinal artifacts that could be connected to quite heterogeneous political motivations and serve both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic aims; second, as ideas that by far surpass the realm of economic policies or the economy as such, amalgamated as they are with fundamental axioms regarding human decision-making and social coordination.

Keywords: Poland; transition from state socialism; voting; democracy; elections; neoliberalism; uncertainty

1. Neoliberal imaginaries: The conjecture of voting and transformation in Poland

Poland is often seen as an exemplary case for the transition from state socialism for two reasons: first, because it relied on the institution of general competitive elections for a peaceful transformation as a vanguard (Nohlen/Kasapovic, 1996: 117); and second, because it was the country which most early and radically attempted to overcome state socialism through neoliberal 'shock therapy' (Przeworski, 1993; Klein, 2007).[1] The present paper addresses one particular dimension of this conjecture: namely, the significance voting was given in this process, by politicians and commentators, within a horizon of neoliberal transition envisioned not only as an economic but as a societal project. The paper thus builds on research critiquing the neoliberalism's avoidance of democratic participation (for instance, Klein 2007), adding to it that neoliberalism was not only *restrictive* concerning democratic processes, but also *productive* in regard to politically conceiving of (and functionalizing) those processes in quite particular ways. Poland's transition from state socialism stands out as a particularly apt example for the effects of the imaginative force that neoliberal arguments projected not only upon the political economy, but also upon society and political institutions – crucially including, elections and voting. I will argue that voting was introduced, conducted, and problematized within the horizon of a neoliberal imaginary, whose sources are important to understanding its power and its role in the Polish transition.

Democratic elections, referenda and plebiscites have faced regular criticism in Western political theory. This holds true in particular for the republican tradition, which tended to regard elections as deficient forms of political will-formation (Tocqueville, 1835; Arendt, 2006). Contrary to this theoretical tradition, which operates against the background of a normative notion of political participation, it is crucial to regard elections and practices of voting as basic forms of political inclusion, namely, as a fundamental modality of sense-making in modern societies. It is precisely in this sense that voting and elections are not the sole prerogative of democratic political orders. As political anthropology has shown, they can be historically traced in all sorts of regimes since Greek antiquity, and possibly even earlier and elsewhere (Flaig, 2013). In modernity, it was notably authoritarian regimes which emphasized elections, referenda, and plebiscites.

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Following Jessen and Richter (2011), one can argue that general elections belong to the core of conceptions of modernity, signaling an inclusion of society into politics together with the fundamental equality of individuals. Thus, analogous to the way Charles Taylor (1985, 2002) conceptualized elections as a forum for electoral practice which was informed, and at the same time fed back into, common understandings of voting as a practice 'common' for liberal democracies, elections in state-socialism carried their own imaginary, equipping individuals with a general sense of the political and societal conditions beyond their immediate everyday experience (Langenohl 2019). Along the lines of this theoretical and methodological angle, the present paper poses the question how neoliberal thought and conceptual elements were articulated in the ways that politicians, political theorists and political commentators – in Poland, but also internationally – understood and imagined the role of elections, voting, and democratic participation in Poland's transition from state socialism.

With respect to the institution of general and competitive elections, Poland in fact represents both a vanguard and a laggard case: vanguard as the first country (in February 1989) to initiate negotiated political change through 'roundtable' discussions whose results, including new election regulations, were put to the parliament for legislative vindication; laggard as it was among the last countries in East Central Europe to hold foundational elections (in October 1991, Nohlen/Kasapovic, 1996: 117–118). While this asynchronism might be explained with considerations of both parties to the roundtable that, given the overall situation of large scale change, any election regulations should only be temporary (Ibid.), it led to a kind of legal limbo during which elections (the Sejm elections of 4 and 18 June 1989, local elections of May 1990, presidential elections in November and December 1990) were likened by political observers not to a foundational moment but rather to a "plebiscite" for a radical democratization of the country and its parliamentary system (Ibid.: 118–119). In the meantime, the new government, including finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz, had launched a large-scale pro-market reform plan, the 'Balcerowicz Plan', which was implemented on 1 January 1990 and is characterized by Adam Przeworski (1993: 145) as "the most radical program of pro-market transformations attempted anywhere." Yet, economic policies did not play a significant role in the run-up to the parliamentary elections 1989, and the following elections of 1990s and 1991 demonstrated to the population that the reform plan was not up for negotiation: "Most observers read the results of the presidential elections [of November-December 1990] as a defeat of the Balcerowicz Plan, and survey studies show that people opposed to the plan were more likely to vote for Wałęsa and against Mazowiecki. Yet Balcerowicz kept his position in the new government, and his reform program was pursued without major modification." (Ibid.: 180)

This constellation can thus be formulated as a paradox: The electorate was given access to participate in state institutions, but not in state politics, as least as far as economic policies were concerned; and as the elections of 1989 and 1990 were not founding elections, they were conducted under the proviso of preliminariness. Poland thus emerges as a case of the transition from state socialism that is significant in a twofold way: It held elections that were doubly handicapped, while 'jumping to the market' without any real democratic legitimacy.

In essence, this paper argues that the conjecture between the non-legitimated pro-market reforms and the twofold retrenchment of general elections in late state-socialist Poland can be traced back to the emergence of a neoliberal imaginary couching voting in its own terms since the 1970s. Thereby, the notion of 'neoliberal imaginary' should not be misinterpreted as heralding any sense of ideological homogeneity and consistency. Rather, I will argue that conceptual components of neoliberal thought were, in a dispersed way, mobilized in the transition of Poland from state socialism to liberal capitalism, and that the elections in the period between 1989 and 1991 functioned as points of crystallization and condensation of these dispersed ideological tendencies and dispositives. Most importantly, they rendered neoliberal conceptual elements operable not only in terms of economic policies (known as 'shock therapy'), but as conceptual frames for conceiving of political decision making and social coordination during the transition period.

I will first reconstruct Milton Friedman's view, who for major oppositionists and later reform politicians in Poland was a towering intellectual figure, on participatory democracy as an order that has not elections, but the competitive market at its center. This section puts the emphasis on the fact that neoliberal thinking does not satisfy itself with recommending competitive markets as blueprint for the totality of society, but conceives of itself as a theory of *political* participation (section 2). Then, the presence of neoliberal ideas and impulses in oppositional circles, yet also within the camp of the communists, in the course of the 1980s will be discussed and connected to the emerging emphases on the role of 'civil society' in the transition from authoritarian rule since the 1970s. The major point made in this section is that the juxtaposition of state and society as presented in oppositional discourse, and sometimes also in political conceptions associated with the state, offered a certain proximity to neoliberal conceptual elements that contributed to displacing elections as a normatively relevant link between state and society (section 3). Last, an analysis of political commentary on the Polish transition from state socialism will reveal a presence of the sources of neoliberal thought even in those strands of the debate that, based on their analysis of elections and voting in 1989 and 1990, were critical of the 'jump to the market' (section 4). In conclusion, it will be argued that the neoliberal imaginary in the Polish transition was overdetermined: while having multiple and

thus contingent sources, at the same time the neoliberal imaginary installed 'uncertainty' as a major normative vehicle for conceiving of, and driving forward, the societal transition and the role of democratic voting in it.

2. The 'market as participation': The intellectual legacy of neoliberal transformation

The 'jump to the market' reform agenda was no invention of Jeffrey Sachs, whose support of the Polish reformers gave birth to the notion of "shock therapy" (Klein, 2007: 177). It can be traced back to Milton Friedman, a foundational figure in the discourse of neoliberalism and, according to Leszek Balcerowicz, one of the "main intellectual architects of my country's liberty" (quoted ibid.: 171), whose opinion on democracy arguably informed salient characteristics of that agenda. Friedman advocated installing competitive markets in virtually all sectors of society, allegedly as a superior modality of social coordination. This aligned him with his mentor Friedrich von Hayek (1948), who claimed that social coordination is most effective with respect to the allocation of goods, services, and general wellbeing when it resembles a competitive market. As social reality is too complex to be knowable by any single actor or institution because it emerges from countless decisions taken by countless individuals, only a competitive market is capable of accounting for all the dispersed pieces of information left by individuals' actions. It transforms them, through the mechanism of demand and supply, into a fully convertible idiom, which is price, that can be deciphered by any individual and institution and thus orientate and inform any action. Friedman's influence on the intellectual and institutional formation of neoliberalism as a distinct political and economic agenda cannot be overestimated (Burgin, 2012: 152-213), and it also informed the development of public choice theory which became important in the transitions from state-socialism, notably in Poland (see section 4). Moving beyond Hayek, Friedman applied the claim of the competitive market as a superior way to coordinate action and allocate resources to concrete policy fields, notably education, arguing that the market mechanism enables individuals to participate in society much more effectively than any formal political institution could do – crucially including democratic elections.

In this respect, Friedman argued that market participation is a much more effective and less forced modality of participation in society, and thus preferable to political elections. The competitive market appears as the most uncompromisingly representative institution:

> "The characteristic feature of action through political channels is that it tends to require or enforce substantial conformity. The great advantage of the market, on the other hand, is that it permits

> wide diversity. It is, in political terms, a system of proportional representation. Each man can vote, as it were, for the color of tie he wants and get it; he does not have to see what color the majority wants and then, if he is in the minority, submit." (Friedman, 1962: 15; cf. also ibid., p. 13)

Markets offer a virtually unlimited choice of options and alternatives to choose from, as opposed to "explicitly political channels", where, like in elections, the "typical issue must be decided 'yes' or 'no'; at most, provision can be made for a fairly limited number of alternatives." (Friedman, 1962: 23) From this concept it follows that the realm of genuinely political action – understood as action requiring political institutions of coercion, to which Friedman counts majority elections – should be as limited as possible, because genuine political action inescapably leads to imposition and conflict. In the ideal case, political action should be restricted to "indivisible matters – protection of the individual and the nation from coercion are clearly the most basic –" where "we can discuss, and argue, and vote." (Ibid.) In other words, voting, as it belongs to the realm of "explicitly political channels", is justified only in exceptional cases where the spontaneous order of the competitive market does not function. Yet even so, those "channels" are viewed by Friedman not as basic institutions but merely as "inevitable" (echoing Tocqueville's [1835: 60] notion of majority elections as "necessary evil"), tending to "strain the social cohesion essential for a stable society" due to their proneness to create division and conflict (Friedman, 1962: 23).

Friedman thus separated the notion of democratic participation from that of voting: "The free market is the only mechanism that has ever been discovered for achieving participatory democracy." (Friedman, 1994: 2) In other words, as Friedman subordinated 'participatory' agency under competition, he juxtaposed it as well with the logic of political institutions. Yet, through precisely that juxtaposition Friedman interrelated markets and elections as both being institutions that are politically and democratically significant. The important point to make here is that Friedman might have become such a great inspiration for Balcerowicz and other transitional politicians in Poland (cf. Klein, 2007: 179) by dint of his vision of competitive markets as a superior modality of political freedom and participation, and not only as the advocate of an economic vision that took the most radical oppositional stance toward state socialism. More specifically, Friedman related the market to the core democratic practice of elections, thus not only equipping the market with democratic dignification, but also, and crucially, rearticulating the functional location of voting in a liberal democracy.

3. Crafting the experience of a 'self-limiting revolution' in East Central Europe: society and state in political activism and political theory

Friedman also preordained the juxtaposition of state and (civil) society that became so influential in the formulation of transition agendas in the 1970s and 1980s, even as not every single one of these agendas shared Friedman's view of the competitive market as the superior modality of social coordination (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 33–34). In the 1980s, political theory in the West began to pay attention to an activist discourse and practice in East Central Europe, most notably in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, in which societal actors forced institutions of the authoritarian states to retreat from some of their power claims without trying to 'take over' the state. The theory of civil society was thus reanimated through what seemed to be, in Jacek Kuroń's formulation (Ibid.: 32), a 'self-limiting revolution'. This section will look at how this discourse built up some proximity to neoliberal thought, while also paying attention to the role of the state and the Communist Party in effectively, if involuntarily, strengthening it; and also, how it was reflected, and partly vindicated, in generalizations about 'civil society' and the 'self-limiting revolution' in political theory.

The discourse on 'civil society' as a sphere of social activity that can attain autonomy even under the conditions of a repressive state and party apparatus gained traction in the late 1970s among oppositional groups. It was an intellectual response to a situation in which, as a response to hardening political oppression and worsening economic conditions, hopes that the party and state could be changed from within toward more democracy and freedom were laid to rest. At the same time, as most notably epitomized in the formation of the "Committee for Workers' Defense" (KOR) in 1976, intellectuals, student activists and representatives of the Catholic Church extended gestures of solidarity with workers' protest activism (Ekiert/Kubik, 2001: 38). Thereby, the intellectual exchange spun transnational networks across Central Eastern Europe, most intensely between Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia (see the contributions in Deppe at al., 1991 as well as Szulecki, 2019: 87–117). An important early manifestation was a joint 1979 Czechoslovak-Polish publication "On Freedom and Power". As Steven Lukes summarizes the spirit of that collaboration, "The Poles, in a sense, saw the Czechoslovaks as helping to develop the theory for their emerging practice – and the debate was continued by Adam Michnik and others in Poland." (Lukes, 2009 [1985]: 2) One of the most important references was Václav Havel's (2009 [1985]) "The Power of the Powerless", in which he juxtaposed the ideological power of the party/state apparatus with a social form of power that resides in everyday consciousness, interactions and solidarities that escape the radar of the state's reconnaissance machinery: "The effective range of this special power cannot be measured in terms of disciples,

voters, or soldiers, because it lies spread out in the fifth column of social consciousness, in the hidden aims of life, in human beings' repressed longing for dignity and fundamental rights, for the realization of their real social and political interests." (Ibid.: 22–23) For Havel, this power constituted the "independent life of society", at once crystallizing as a moral force (a "relatively high degree of inner emancipation") and as a principle of social organization: "It includes everything from self-education and thinking about the world, through free creative activity and its communication to others to the most varied free, civic attitudes, including instances of independent social self-organization." (Ibid.: 39) These manifestation of society's independent life were morally marked by Havel as "living within the truth" (Ibid. *et passim*), for which he found the much-quoted allegory of the greengrocer who, realizing his ideological complicity with the regime, "stops voting in elections he knows are a farce." (Ibid.: 21)

Havel's manifesto thus aligns elections, like all other institutions designed by the state to include the population into its power structure, with the project of, in his terms, 'post-totalitarian' authoritarianism. This argument was not only replayed in many contributions to the oppositional debate across East Central Europe, but also, according to Jan Kubik's (1994) analysis, helped consolidate the oppositional discourse in Poland that eventually crystallized as the Solidarity movement. For instance, analyzing the ways that the Pope's visit to Poland in 1979 was discursively framed by the authorities and how it was taken up by the population in a way that openly contrasted with the official version, Kubik highlights the popular experience "that civil organization of the society *outside* the state was possible" and that "the realization that national community can be defined *outside* the Communist state reached all sectors of society" (Ibid.: 145, emphases in the original). Thereby, the discourse on civil society, with its focus on societal self-organization and the difference between society and state, oscillated between two emphases, also reflected in the sociological and conceptual literature: first, an emphasis, also as a tendency shared by Kubik, on the formation of an oppositional societal *identity* vis-à-vis the state (Tatur, 1991); and second, an emphasis on the inner *plurality* of civil society, with the political rationality to prevent any single social force from taking total control over society (Dubiel, 1994). Both emphases, however, underwrote a skepticism regarding the potential role of elections as an interface between society and political system.

While the discourse on civil society and the confrontation between state and society engaged in by oppositional activists in East Central Europe has been broadly covered in the research literature (see, for instance, Cohen/Arato, 1992, Dubiel, 1994, Ekiert/Kubik, 2011), more recent research literature specifically looks at the presence of neoliberal ideological elements in that discourse. Neoliberal groups, who gained in number and influence within the oppositional movement in Poland in the course of the 1980s, had their specific vision of a society

emancipated from the state, namely, through a self-regulating market, which effectively relegated 'democracy' to something which must be hedged to start with. Bohle and Neunhoeffer (2006: 97) quote historian of liberalism Andrzej Walicki that a neoliberal critique of the Solidarność movement organization pertained to its ignorance of "the desirability of *limiting the scope* of all political power, including democracy". Thus, the discourse on civil society, in its neoliberal variety, instead of advocating a limitation of state power in any unitary way, instead could materialize in rather different forms, which however had as a common denominator an insistence on a free market economy as a political good. For instance, expressing an outright antagonism between demands for more democracy and demands for a competitive market, philosopher Mirosław Dzinski recommended the party in 1980 to introduce a free market economy in order to be able to avoid political democratization (Peters, 2020: 113). Roughly ten years later, Donald Tusk insinuated that "free elections" needed to be limited in their effects by "civil rights, where the priority of persons over institutions will be recognized [...] and where liberty stems from private property." (quoted in Bohle and Neunhoeffer, 2006: 100)

The figure of a necessary distinction between state and society, or 'civil society', could indeed be appropriated in rather diverse ways – also in ways that actually *strengthened* the position of the state. For instance, during the 1980s sociologist Jerzy J. Wiatr was working on a conception of civil society for the party that would offer the opposition some freedoms regarding foundations and voluntary associations while reserving political power for the state alone – an idea that, according to Florian Peters, was "quite in agreement with contemporary neoliberal conceptions" (Peters, 2020: 117, my translation). During the introduction of shock therapy to Poland, then finance minister Balcerowicz claimed the period to be one of "extraordinary politics" (quoted in Klein, 2007: 181) which of necessity had to be "antithetical to the Solidarity vision [of a socialist market economy] in both content and form" – as Klein characterizes it, "a democracy-free pocket within a democracy." (Ibid.)

Thus, the rise of neoliberal thought and political rationalities in the course of the 1980s was embedded in a general oppositional stance of antagonism between an authoritarian state and (civil) society. Yet, along with reducing the idea of a 'free society' to that of a free market, those ideas and rationalities also introduced the crucial tendency to devalue elections because they were seen (in total agreement with Friedman's arguments) as a political institution that per se needed to be hedged and limited. This reasoning left elections without any particular worth that deserved to be protected; and as Balcerowicz's political diagnoses of "extraordinary politics" confirmed, the priority was seen to consist of the substantial processes of pro-market reforms, which could ironically only be guaranteed by state (i.e., legislative) action, not through the democratic legitimation of such reforms.

While the remarks so far have covered the field of political *agency*, it is striking to see how discussions in political *theory* about the notion of 'civil society', which crucially referred to the East Central European experience of the late 1970s and 1980s, display a certain tendency to efface the political significance of elections as an interface between society and polity, too. Even where it was critical of pro-market reforms, the civil society discourse advocated an irreducible own-logic of society as a political entity that actually could well be fitted into the project of neoliberal transformation with its deliberate bypassing of the state as a crucial seat of the own-logics of the political. In order to demonstrate this, I refer to Cohen and Arato's work (1992), which can be regarded a major attempt to rethink political theory from the perspective of societal actors, thereby encompassing discursive and political constellations in western democracies, newly democratizing societies in East Central Europe, and political orders emerging from authoritarian rule in South America. They start out with an affirmation of the argument that transformative impulses are unlikely to come from authoritarian states, but presuppose the agency of social movements and 'civil society' organizations. This observation is then discussed within a differentiation-theoretic framework known from sociological theory of modern societies, which accords different procedural and substantive imperatives to different societal spheres, such as the political system, the economy, and society. The question of democracy, according to Cohen and Arato, thus has to be placed within an argument that modern societies cannot achieve a structural totality, but are heterogeneous entities. Accordingly, their rendition of the discussion on the 'self-limiting revolution' in Poland since the 1980s capitalizes on the juxtaposition between state and civil society that Polish oppositional intellectuals saw as their basis of political mobilization and regime change: Instead of attempting to capture the state through a popular revolution – an attempt which was paradigmatically aborted by military force in Hungary of 1956 – their strategy consisted in wresting away leeway from the state, thus locking it into a circumscribed and predictable position of political power over society. Although Cohen and Arato diagnose problems in this discourse – for instance, the unresolved question in the Polish case of how civil society might relate to different economic regimes and forces (Ibid.: 31–35) – they arrive at a panorama in which the East Central European experience of transition from state-socialism sees civil society assigned a role where it works to limit both market forces and political institutions, including that of democratic decision-making (Ibid.: 488). Their vision for a further refinement of liberal democracy is thus a limit on market forces and on democratic decision-making that is guarded by civil society, conjoining an insistence on rights, public communication and associational life (Ibid.: 470–480).

While it is the undeniable merit of Cohen and Arato's work to synthesize political experiences with democratization in a virtually global way, they tend to problematize East Central Europe, and especially the Polish transition, in a way that heavily borrows from the experience of and intellectual reflection upon already established democracies. Hence, they warn that the experience of East Central Europe cautions against the dual threat of totalitarianism and populism, thus rendering the state as both a potential origin of domination over society as well as a potential victim of societal forces threatening to take it over. Against the background of this insistence of necessary *boundaries* between state and society, institutional *interfaces* between them, like elections, can hardly conceptually or normatively materialize. Instead, Cohen and Arato (ibid.: 503, original emphasis) side with Charles Tilly's view that "[e]lectorate politics thus offers an incentive to social actors to select the demonstration, public meeting, and strike as modes of collective action," and conclude that "*civil society* has become the indispensable terrain on which social actors assemble, organize, and mobilize, even if their targets are the economy and the state." Even as they critique Tilly's focus on the "political public sphere" as one-sided because it chiefly focuses on the ways that civil society actors watch and problematize power dynamics within the political system (Ibid.), by not coming back to the question of the role of elections and voting, they effectively reduce elections to an epiphenomenon of the projection of state power over society. The juxtaposition of civil society and state thus tends to obliterate the significance of elections and voting as a crucial device in society's political *constitution* and *imagination* – and, as must be added, in particular for societies in a transition to democracy for which voting and elections are paramount devices of collectively constituting the political and of imagining the future.

Concluding this section, I wish to stress, first, that the juxtaposition between state and society had great currency not only among oppositional groups in East Central Europe since the 1970s, but even captured the imagination of the holders of power who tried to use it, if somewhat bizarrely, as a justification for limiting democracy. Second, that juxtaposition lent itself as a fertile intellectual ground on which ideas of the superiority of competitive markets in collective decision-making could be cultivated alongside the conviction that general elections cannot be of much significance for the constitution of a 'post-totalitarian' polity. For both oppositional activists and political theorists, 'civil society' had the significance of a realm of *autonomy* from political tutelage that could easily be aligned – without that being a necessary corollary – with ideas of unhampered market circulation; while the notion of elections, as epitomized by Havel's figure of the greengrocer, smacked too much of ideological ritual in order to be associable with the ambitions of autonomy.

4. Critiquing the 'jump to the market': Elections, uncertainty, and public choice theory

Cohen and Arato's work was, arguably, not the only critical appraisal of transitions from state socialism. However, with respect to the way it displaced elections as a core driver of transition while accepting the necessity of a fundamental separation between state and society, it can be compared to other forms of skepticism towards elections and voting as a fundamental form of interrelating society and politics. Most profoundly, if ambivalently, this skepticism was articulated by political commentary that operated within an idiom of public choice theory. Public choice theory, which had been applied to working out dilemmas of democratic political processes within a rational choice framework in the political and economic reforms in Latin America and Eastern Europe, informed influential assessments of those reforms. Turning to a prominent protagonist of public choice analysis, this section reconstructs Adam Przeworki's critical writing about pro-market reforms and elections in Poland of the transition period as an articulation of neoliberal conceptual elements as present even in fierce critiques of 'shock therapy' such as his.

Public choice theory was developed in the U.S. during the 1960s. It was designed as a libertarian alternative to Kenneth Arrow's social choice theory, which was interested in developing a notion of collectively rational action, and became applied to the question of the governance of a democratically constituted society (cf. Amadae, 2003). Unlike Arrow, Buchanan and Tullock (1962), in a groundbreaking publication titled "The Calculus of Consent", argued that any notion of rational action can only be applied to the level of the individual, and hence must proceed from the basic axiom of a rationally deciding, utilitarian individual acting only according to his or her genuine preferences. For the question of decision making in a democratic society, this implied a skeptical view in particular for the institution of majority voting. According to the authors, major political decisions – like, for instance, the introduction of redistributive policies – cannot be based on a simple majority decision because, as Amadae (2003: 142) puts it in her reconstruction of public choice theory, it "incurs too much cost for a rational agent who seeks to avoid the negative repercussions of unfavorable policies. Instead, Buchanan and Tullock advocate near unanimity in collective decisionmaking at the level of constitutional design to best serve individuals' interests." Moreover, they proceed from a theoretical model which axiomatically implies that rational actors act largely in uncertainty, or ignorance, about other individuals' preferences (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962: 126) – a point which, according to Amadae (2003: 143), "obliterates the concept of 'the public' as a meaningful category for analysis". This was echoed, and even enforced, by an early version of John Rawls's "A Theory of Justice" which constructed a primordial scene in which rational individuals, deciding

about a constitution for the polity, act from within a 'veil of ignorance' (Ibid.: 150).

Public choice theory thus formulated a rational choice idiom of the constitution of a democratic polity. It was skeptical of majority voting as most election outcomes would leave too many individuals with suboptimal utility – a reason to not participate in elections or to subvert their results. Consequently, public choice theory also replaced an understanding of political constitution as the formation of a polity in which individuals could publicly participate with a vision of a polity consisting merely of legal restraints on individual utility.

These theorizations informed political scientist Adam Przeworski's (1991) fear that what had been defeated in Eastern Europe was not "Communism" but "the very idea of rationally administering things to satisfy human needs – the feasibility of implementing public ownership of productive resources through centralized command; the very project of basing a society on disinterested cooperation – the possibility of dissociating social contributions from individual rewards." To this fear he joined another one, namely, that that idea, born as is had been out of ideological conviction, was being replaced by another "blueprint developed within the walls of American academia and shaped by international financial institutions. [...] Replace 'nationalization of the means of production' with 'private property' and 'plan' with 'market,' and you can leave the structure of the ideology intact." (Przeworski, 1991: 7) While obviously referring to the Balcerowicz plan and the influence of the 'Chicago boys', it is impossible to ignore the allusions to Milton Friedman's views on the conduciveness of libertarian liberalism in Przeworski, who declared his social democratic inclinations explicitly (Ibid.). Przeworski thus emerged as a major critic of what he termed the "neoliberal fallacy" (Przeworski 1992) that tried to usher in competitive markets and privatization with "excessive ideological zeal" (Ibid.: 47). And yet, a few pages later in his monograph, Przeworski comes up with a theory of democracy that is foundationally based on the notion that democracies differ from other political orders through the mechanism of "competition", echoing some of Friedman's (and Hayek's) hypotheses concerning the competitive market mechanism:

> "[I]n a democracy all forces must struggle repeatedly for the realization of their interests. None are protected by virtue of their political positions. No one can wait to modify outcomes ex post; everyone must subject interests to competition and uncertainty. [...] Democratization is an act of subjecting all interests to competition, of institutionalizing uncertainty. The decisive step toward democracy is the devolution of power from a group of people to a set of rules." (Ibid.: 14)

The point about this set of rules is that it guarantees uncertainty, not in an ontological sense, but in a perspectival sense: following Aumann, Przeworski argues that

> "[t]he appearance of uncertainty is necessarily generated by the system of decentralized political decision making in which there is no way to be sure what others think about me. An omniscient observer could determine the unique outcome of each situation, but no participant can be an observer, because the observer's theory need not be universally shared by other participants." (Ibid.: 45)

In other words, the perspective of an observer is purely hypothetical and irrelevant for the political process: "Democracy is thus a system that generates the appearance of uncertainty because it is a system of decentralized strategic action in which knowledge is inescapably local." (Ibid.: 49)

The neoclassical underpinnings of this argumentation clearly aligns it with Hayek's notion that only the competitive market, through the price mechanism, is able to effectively coordinate social action as all market participants are restricted in the information available to them to their local contexts. Moreover, the legacy of public choice theory becomes evident when taking into account the game-theoretic way that Przeworski models democratic competition along the lines of non-cooperative prisoner dilemma models (Ibid.: 29, 43; cf. Amadae, 2015). Considering the roots of Przeworski's argumentation in public choice theory and game theory and their neoclassical intellectual ramifications, it is not surprising that, for Przeworski, democracy, if consolidated, provides the epistemologically most reliable framework for coordinating action, because "Institutions replace actual coercion with a predictable threat." (Przeworski, 1991: 27) This he terms an "equilibrium", which makes disappear "the distinction between the rulers and the ruled" (Ibid.: 26, quoting Montesquieu). Democracy, in his famous phrase, is consolidated when it "becomes the only game in town" (Ibid.). Accordingly, in his 1991 monograph, Przeworski is mainly interested in the likelihood and the potential setbacks of such consolidation of democracy under the conditions of a market transformation. In other words, what bothers him is the potentially negative impact of radical market reforms on the consolidation of democracy as modeled after a competitive market.

This is obviously paradoxical. Przeworski, using public choice theory and game-theoretic methodology that places the mechanism of competition at center stage, is skeptical of the rapid introduction of competitive markets in Eastern Europe. In a later publication focusing on Poland, Przeworski (1993) is able to observe the initial years of the 'jump to the market', discussing the role of elections and the way they mediated the relationship between political actors and the electorate. On the one hand, he concludes that economic state policies between 1989 and 1991 featured a pro-market activism that first did not account for potential welfare problems ensuing from the radical introduction of market mechanisms, and then held on to those reforms even as the reform policies were widely disputed in the Polish public. Instead of

introducing welfare packages into the reform agenda, privatization was introduced as "the final wonder", igniting entrepreneurship, battling bureaucratic excesses, "creat[ing] a middle class" and shielding the state from companies' interests (Przeworski, 1993: 168). The 'jump to the market', in his analysis, is thus revealed as an ideologically driven project of creating competitive economic markets that shunned any state-initiated social reliefs, and when critiqued, was only intensified. On the other hand, due to the irresponsiveness of the market reforms to public political challenges, implying that the market course was not corrected even as administrations and presidencies changed, "citizens were taught that they could vote but not chose, the legislature was trained to think that it had no role to play in the elaboration of policy, and the nascent political parties and trade unions were taught that their voices did not count." (Ibid.: 180) He concludes that "The policy style with which reforms were introduced and continued had the effect of weakening democratic institutions" (Ibid.).

In the absence of a competitive market order as in the late People's Republic, the introduction of such an order would probably have to be counted among Friedman's (1962: 23) "indivisible matters" that coercively change the frame conditions under which people have to act, and about which "we can discuss, and argue, and vote." Przeworski's diagnosis is that discussion, argumentation and voting over the market reforms did take place in Poland, but that voting was effectively disconnected from discussion and argumentation because the electorate "could vote but not chose" (see above), as the different political actors did not come up with real alternative options to the market reforms. They shied away from that political uncertainty which, according to Przeworski, is the basis for a stable democratic order, while at the same time exposing the electorate to existential uncertainties due to their ignorance of welfare considerations (Przeworski, 1993: 180–182).

Przeworski's comments boil down to the argument that elections serve the function of constituting and increasing political uncertainty, not as a means of popular participation in the political process. Instead, voting interconnects society and polity through society becoming an, in the final instance, incalculable risk for political actors. We can depict here yet another variation of the theme of the confrontation between state and society that so shaped discussions in and on the Polish transition. The normativity of this argumentation, which envisages uncertainty as a societal check on political actors and institutions, becomes evident from Przeworski's critique, referred to above, of the ways that political actors in Poland chose to deal with uncertainty: namely, instead of embracing political uncertainty by taking opposing sides in elections, to pursue a 'reform' policy despite all its inner contradictions and the social distress it causes, and thus to transform political uncertainty into social, existential uncertainty. This process is likened by Klein (2007: 181) to "Friedman's crisis theory: the disorientation of radical political change combined with the collective fear generated

by an economic meltdown to make the promise of a quick and magical cure – however illusionary – too seductive to turn down." This also modifies the juxtaposition between political system and 'civil society' that both the civil society discourse and the neoliberal celebration of the market as the true seat of participation underwrite: Instead of having (civil) society gain back leeway from the political system, the political system emancipates itself from society by presenting it with no-alternative market reforms – Balcerowicz's "extraordinary politics" (id.). Elections play the role of enforcing this self-immunization of the political system, as they clearly show that they make no difference.

Analyzing the structure of legitimation of capitalist political-economic systems, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have argued that capitalism has proved its capability to reproduce itself through incorporating critiques directed against it. In their prominent example, neoliberal capitalism rolled out in the course of the 1970s had incorporated the 'artistic' critiques of absent self-actualization and individual autonomy that social movements of the 1960s had directed against postwar capitalism. Przeworski's critique of the 'jump to the market' is an example for a comparable dynamic, as he criticizes the introduction of neoliberal economic policies through 'shock therapy' from the point of view of a political decision theory that itself bears the marks of neoliberal thought (through joining the centrality of competition with the argument of actor's limited knowledge). Neoliberal economic policies can thus be critiqued in the name of a neoliberal theory of political constitution. The price that Przeworski pays for this, however, is a view on elections as a mere environment for strategic political actors that precludes the possibility to view them as instances of political constitution.

5. Conclusion: Elections and the politics of uncertainty

In conclusion, I argue that neoliberal conceptions, arguments and rationalities were instrumental in displacing any understanding, be it that of political actors, political theorists, or political commentators, of the role of democratic voting in the Polish transition from state socialism as an act of political *foundation*. This tendency was overdetermined, in the sense of having multiple sources that, although interlocking, were yet in each case contingently situated. For instance, it has been pointed out that 'shock therapy' was not a mono-causal result of a neoliberal dogma that had gained transnational hegemony, but that it emerged from the consolidation of epistemic communities in Poland as well as from struggles about the possible future of market socialism in the country (Bohle and Neunhoeffer, 2006; Peters, 2020). Mirowski and Plehwe (2015) remind us that neoliberalism should neither be perceived too narrowly as a unified theoretical and ideological

edifice, nor too widely as an all-encompassing concept whose overuse threatens the loss of its distinctive force. In the light of this reminder I contend that the role of the elections that accompanied Poland from state socialism to liberal capitalism was that of a point of crystallization where conceptual and ideological components of neoliberal thought were mobilized for political ends, where they found fertile ground in the narrative of society-against-the-state, and where they lent themselves in order to critique concrete economic policies from a perspective that itself put neoliberal thought to work.

Taken together, however, these heterogeneous tendencies powerfully translated democratic voting and elections as an *uncertainty* that institutionally and imaginarily informed, or ought to inform, the political process. In epistemological terms, Friedman's understanding of 'participatory democracy' as a competitive market was based on Hayek's conviction that no social or political institution, apart from the competitive market, can effectively perform social coordination because all individual actors rely on strictly localized knowledge, thus operating under conditions of perspectival uncertainty. Inasmuch as this reasoning informed parts of the Polish opposition, who were able to further develop it in antagonistic cooperation with the party apparatus to effectively rule out the alternative project of market socialism favored by the constituency of Solidarność (Bohle and Neunhoeffer, 2006) and embed it into a wider discourse on 'civil society against the state', democratic elections were seen as belonging to the realm of the political, and hence as in need of being hedged and limited. During the phase when legislation introduced 'shock therapy', elections – instead of re-founding the Polish polity – were used to push through pro-market policies. Their role was not to set a new political scene or to make collectively binding decisions between clear alternatives (as these alternatives were absent), but rather to add to the general sense of crisis, disarray, and lack of political orientation in the population. This passing on of the uncertainty that elections confront political actors with to the population was, ironically, at odds even with public choice informed analyses which also capitalized on the epistemological significance of the uncertainties of democracy for the political process, as echoed in Przeworski's (1993) bitter commentaries – which are thus highly informative reflections on the limits of portraying voting in terms of uncertainty even from within rational choice theory.

Thus, the displacement of voting hinged on the stipulation of uncertainty as a frame condition for processes of political coordination. If understood as the major connecting link between society and polity, as is the case in neoliberal libertarianism, in public choice theory, and in the politics of governing neoliberal transition, uncertainty rearticulates voting as a socially and politically significant practice. This is how I regard the articulation of voting in neoliberal terms. It is not merely an almost allergic avoidance and restriction of democratic procedures, as Klein (2007) notes, but a, with Michel Foucault, 'productive' rendition

of power *through* such procedures, as clearly seen by Przeworski. The invocation and increase of uncertainty in democratic elections is thus a peculiar way of passing the uncertainty of political actors in a democratic order on to society – a revenge, as it were, for the fundamental democratic discontinuity between society and political system that Claude Lefort and Marcel Gauchet (1990) spoke of. As the example of the late People's Republic of Poland shows, such situations can be used to implement transformative agendas of absurd radicalism, through preventing democratic elections from making any real difference.

In the final analysis, this paper suggests that the traces of neoliberalism in the processes that ended state socialism in Poland be understood in a twofold way: first, as doctrinal artifacts concerning the societal and political centrality of a free market that could be connected to quite heterogeneous political motivations and serve both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic aims (as visible in the mobilization of the juxtaposition between state and civil society); and second, as ideas that by far surpass the realm of economic policies or the economy as such, amalgamated as they are with fundamental axioms regarding human decision-making and social coordination.

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