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## Reading Tocqueville in Poland

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This essay sheds light on the history of reading Alexis de Tocqueville's writings among the Polish emigrants in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris and in the circle of Warsaw philosophers and sociologists of late 20<sup>th</sup> century. From this later milieu many translations and commentaries on his writings have emerged. The author presents the main threads of their conversation with the author of *Old Regime and the Revolution*. Tocqueville's thought was evoked by informal political groups of Polish emigrants and served as a memento for subjugated nations. The Frenchmen has been compared to Polish Romantics such as Zygmunt Krasiński and Adam Mickiewicz. In this context, cultural continuity and change have been the subject of reflection. *On Democracy in America* was also read and commented on before and after the fall of communism in 1989. Since then, the nature and condition of Polish democracy have been discussed in the context of this book. In the final paragraphs, the author reflects on the relevance of Tocqueville's thought today.

Keywords: *Tocqueville – Polish romanticism – liberalism – Polish Solidarity movement – Democracy*

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Both in the nineteenth century and today, Poles consider Alexis de Tocqueville to be a “modern classic”. He has been perceived as someone with whom it is worth entering into a conversation to understand oneself, one's own situation and the outside world. Tocqueville's books were being already read by Polish emigrants in nineteenth-century Paris. The author of *Democracy in America* and *Old Regime* accompanied Poles both at the threshold of the twentieth century, when hopes for their own state began to take shape, and after 1989, when communism collapsed in Central Europe and the Polish state regained its sovereignty. Reading Tocqueville's writings was always somehow entangled with local

problems, specifically Polish challenges of the time. Throughout the 19th century, the most important of these challenges was Polish independence and the shape of the state once it was happily reborn. This is not to say that Poles did not see the great social, economic and political processes and related tensions across Europe, but the recurring question was, what does this mean for us, Poles? Nineteenth-century Poles did not assume the role that Tocqueville often assumed: that of a distanced observer theorizing about their own position. On the contrary, Poles of the time observed in order to act, even if only by the power of the printed word. From the observations with the help of Tocqueville of the great historical processes came exhortations and political programs.

The reading of Tocqueville in the twentieth century was already different. The Frenchman's writings, with one exception, were almost absent from wider intellectual circulation until the 1970s. Twentieth-century reception is definitely more concerned with reflecting on great, social and political, changes, such as the process of democratization and the nature of democracy as a system, but still the reading is somehow local. The idea was to understand one's own position, to evaluate the young democracy, to be aware of the baggage of the past. Below I give examples of interest in Tocqueville, realizing that this is by no means an exhaustive presentation, but rather starting points for further exploration by intellectual historians. This short text does not pretend to be a detailed account of Tocqueville's reading in Poland, but still, it can say something important about this reading.

In the following paragraphs, I will describe briefly the examples of the early reception of *Democracy in America*. My intention is to only make a record of how the Poles read them from the perspective of their specific circumstances. Then, I will describe how the writing of this French traveler and politician reached a wide Polish audience. Next, I will present some of the topics of imaginary conversations with Tocqueville in a specific group of Warsaw historians of ideas: sociologizing philosophers and philosophizing sociologists who lived in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was from this Warsaw milieu that most of the translations and comments of the Frenchman's thoughts came out. While writing this text, I would also like to commemorate my teachers who introduced me to the arcana of the history of ideas and who were in some way marked by Tocqueville's theories of democratic society and style of reasoning. I will conclude by outlining the topics of conversation that are still worth having with the author of *Democracy in America*.

## 1. The Great Emigration on Alexis de Tocqueville

Knowledge of the French language was in eighteenth and nineteenth century Poland an element of the so-called good upbringing. To say that Poles were fascinated by French culture and politics is an understatement, taking into account the participation of Poles in the Napoleonic campaign. In the nineteenth century, Paris became the destination of emigration of Polish elites. This phenomenon, called The Great Emigration, gained momentum after the collapse of the November Uprising in 1831, an attempt to reclaim independence after the partition of the country in the last years of the eighteenth century. In Paris there were former soldiers, political and cultural elites who formed competing political groups. Two of them seem to have played a role in the Polish reception of Tocqueville's thought, although there are no testimonies of close acquaintances between them and the author of the book.

The left leaning the Polish Democratic Society explained the collapse of the uprising by the lack of involvement of the lowest social strata, including the peasants, and therefore advocated a radical social program: abolition of state privileges, enfranchisement of all citizens, restoration of independence through general revolution and establishment of the Polish democratic republic. Wojciech Darasz, one of the editors of «Pismo towarzystwa demokratycznego polskiego», [Magazine of the Polish Democratic Society] the Society's official magazine published a long review of two volumes of *On Democracy in America* in 1840<sup>1</sup>. The following year, a translation of passages on family and equality of the sexes from *Democracy in America* was published in the magazine «Demokrata polski» [The Polish Democrat]<sup>2</sup>. Darasz focused mostly on positive aspects of democracy and its institutional design. Both Henryk Żaliński<sup>3</sup> and Mikołaj Rakusa-Suszczewski<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. Darasz, *A Section of On Democracy in America by Alexe Tocqueville. Volumes I and II* in «Pismo towarzystwa demokratycznego polskiego», vol. 2, Poitiers 1840, p. 207. The meaning of this article as well as other Tocquevillian threats in the thought of 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish emigrants is reconstructed in Mikołaj Rakusa Suszczewski's short article *Początki polskiej recepcji myśli Alexis de Tocqueville'a*, in «Rocznik Lubuski», vol. 34, n. 2 (2008), pp. 75-85. I base this chapter on his findings.

<sup>2</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Wpływ demokracji na rodzinę, Jak Amerykanie rozumieją równość mężczyzn i kobiety*, in «Demokrata Polski. Pismo polemiczne» vol. 3, Poitiers, 1841, pp. 101-104 and 110-112 (*On Democracy*, vol. 2, part 3, ch. 8 and 12).

<sup>3</sup> H. Żaliński, *Kształt polityczny Polski w ideologii Towarzystwa Demokratycznego Polskiego (1832-1846)*, Kraków, Ossolineum, 1976, pp. 43-44, cited in Rakusa Suszczewski, *Początki polskiej recepcji myśli Alexis de Tocqueville'a* cit., p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 76-78.

recognized that Tocqueville's writings were an important point of reference for the Society.

What was less interesting to the Polish Democratic Society turned out to be very interesting to the conservative-liberal group of Adam Czartoryski, the group later called Hôtel Lambert<sup>5</sup>. The group brought together aristocrats, often former leaders of the 1830 uprising, including who believed that the way to independence of Polish was diplomacy and the use of future conflicts between European powers. The milieu published a magazine «Le Polonais», in which they also took an interest in *On Democracy in America*. As Rakusa Suszczewski reports, unlike the Polish Democratic Society, the aristocratic circle was interested in the nuanced view on democracy and interplay between progress and tradition.<sup>6</sup> However, in their polemical zeal, they belittled the positive sides of democracies in demonstrating their attachment to the politically and socially unique role of the aristocracy<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. Poles, the Indians of Europe?

Tocqueville's first book was a pretext for a very different consideration for Ludwik Powidaj (1830-1882), a writer, historian and publicist with ties to Galicia. In December 1864, that is, just a few years after the Frenchman's death, he published an article, entitled *Poles and Indians*, which sparked a wide, decades lasting discussion<sup>8</sup>. In it, Powidaj refers to Frederick II's famous anti-Polish statement comparing Poles to Iroquois. Poles, like the Iroquois, should be tamed to European civilization, Frederick II wrote in a letter to d'Alembert, and this view was widely shared by Germans, Powidaj argued. Citing and translating long passages of *On Democracy in America*, he warned compatriots against losing their national identity, just as the American Indians, described by Tocqueville, had done. The fate of the Indians, Powidaj argued after Tocqueville, was sad and inevitable, because those were the laws of civilizations' development that more contributed to it than the ill-will of the colonizers. The same laws, Powidaj

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<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p.79.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* Rakusa-Suszczewski cites article *De la démocratie en Amérique* par A. de Tocqueville by F. de Eckstein published in «Le Polonais», 1836, vol. 6.

<sup>8</sup> L. Powidaj *Polacy i Indianie*, in «Dziennik Literacki», n. 53 and 56; also in «Gazeta Narodowa», n. 285 and 293. I would like to thank Łukasz Mikołajewski for pointing this article to me.

argued, applied to Poles living in the German partition. The way out was to accumulate property, develop system of education, build national identity and through them a political significance. Powidaj's article has a positivist tone, emphasizing the importance of daily, persistent work, but also passes over the "laws of history", according to which stronger nations subjugate weaker ones. Not surprisingly, it is sometimes read as a source for the study of Darwinist<sup>9</sup> or postcolonial discourses.

### 3. Translations: Tocqueville widely known

The first Polish complete translation of Tocqueville's work appeared in 1907 [*Old Regime and the Revolution*], when the Polish state had been partitioned between Prussia, Austria and Russia for more than 110 years. Eleven years and a world war had still to pass for it to regain independence. Its author was the now forgotten Władysław Mieczysław Kozłowski. Kozłowski was a botanist, a graduate of the University of Dorpat, and earlier a student in Kiev, a freemason and a revolutionary exiled to Siberia. This restless spirit, who abandoned the natural sciences in favor of philosophy and sociology, was associated with the French scientific community, traveled around the United States, and after 1918 co-founded the University of Poznań. Before that he had taken part in the Flying University and the Society for Scientific Courses, which were underground, unofficial educational initiatives addressed to those who were prevented by the partitioning authorities from obtaining formal education, including women. In the introduction to the translation of *Old Regime and the Revolution*, Kozłowski wrote:

Toqueville's Study on the causes closest to the French Revolution is not only a historical work. It contains a series of generalizations concerning collective life in general, which we would not hesitate to call sociological laws [...], it is particularly timely for the present and for the historical conditions with which we must take into account most closely. The critical moment that Russia is currently in makes us turn to the most analogous symptoms of the past to explain the present. The analogies which the reader will easily see between France under the former monarchy and Russia present, without excluding remarkable differences, give rise to a series of momentous arguments and warnings to anyone who knows how to think. On the

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<sup>9</sup> R. Koziołek, *Kompleks Darwina*, in «Teksty Drugie», n. 3 (2011), pp. 11-32.

other hand, it will be no less instructive for the Polish reader to compare pre-revolutionary France with Poland before the constitution of May 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>10</sup>

I note this introduction not only for the sake of remembering, but also to emphasize the circumstances in which Tocqueville appears in the wide Polish intellectual circulation: earlier experiences of social protests [the revolution of 1905 in Russia and thus also in the Polish lands belonging to Russia] and, therefore, the conviction of the fragility of the existing political structures. Reading Tocqueville was supposed to be an attempt to understand the present by rethinking the past [the French Revolution and the adoption of the first Polish constitution on May 3 in 1791]. It might have served also as a warning that a new Russian regime that was said to be approaching may not be necessary much different from the former. Devoting more attention to the historical circumstances in which the first full Polish translation of *Old Regime* was published in Warsaw seems a promising task in many respects, especially since the translator himself refers to the situation in Russia. On the other hand, the book appears as the 14th volume of a series of books under the general title "Fundamentals of Modern Education", alongside items by Kozłowski himself on the history of philosophy and the history of the French Revolution, and before a book on the history of Western Europe in the 19th century. It is therefore difficult to assess whether its appearance was due as a commentary on events in Russia or simply due to the publishing plan. The solution to the riddle must be left to inquisitive historians. What is sure, is that Tocqueville has been read in Poland – as in many other countries – by those who try to combine sociology and political philosophy.

The Polish interest in Tocqueville seems to have faded over the following decades. Without a detailed, painstaking query, it is difficult to say to what extent the Frenchman's thought was a point of reference for subsequent generations of Polish intellectuals until the 1970s. He probably appeared only on the margins of Polish culture, because it is difficult to find serious references to him in intellectual memory of those decades. Two wars, the restoration and the loss of independence, dark night of Stalinism, decades of communism and the Iron Curtain effectively diverted attention from the author, who was seen mainly as a historian and better known only to students of French literature. Interestingly,

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<sup>10</sup> W.M. Kozłowski, *Wstęp*, in A. de Tocqueville, *Dawne rządy i rewolucja*, Warszawa, Zakłady wydawnicze M. Arct, 1907, pp. 5-6. Translation by ECM. Constitution of May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1791 – the first Polish constitution.

Tocqueville was also virtually absent from the milieu of «Kultura», an émigré monthly magazine headed by Jerzy Giedroyc and published by his Literary Institute. This was due to the specificity of the magazine, which was primarily a place for Poles to talk freely about Polish culture and politics and, above all, for Poles. Despite the place where the monthly was published, French culture was a secondary topic that appeared when it was a contribution to reflection on Polish affairs and Polish culture, often only commented on by Polish authors (e.g.: Czesław Miłosz' commenting on Sartre and Camus). During the more than half a century of the Institute's activity, the name Tocqueville was mentioned only few times in the books and monthly, and only on the margins.

Tocqueville reappeared in the Polish intellectual life in the 1970s, when the Polish people's state under the leadership of Edward Gierek decided to open up a bit to the West. The works of the French aristocrat have started to gain an interest due to their new or simply first translations [fragments of *Democracy in America*]. The communist authorities did not block the publication of the Frenchman's writings, but neither did they treat their publication as a special event. In 1970 a new translation of *Old Regime* by Hanna Szumańska-Grossowa [Anna Wolska] was published, with an introduction by sociologist Jerzy Szacki. Paweł Śpiewak, also a sociologist, later recalled that he bought the book without really knowing what he was buying, read it and could not sleep at night. Almost three decades later, already in the 2000s Śpiewak conducted a long-term seminar on Tocqueville's thought for his graduate students<sup>11</sup>.

The publication of the *Old Regime* and *Democracy in America* – without overstating their influence – either preceded or coincided with formation the Polish anti-communism movement. Subsequent editions accompanied the first years of a new Polish Republic after the fall of communism. Tocqueville was one of the authors whose writings in the 1990s and 2000s were either reprinted or published for the first time to talk about the American and European world to which the Polish democracy was returning and becoming a part.

In 1976, an abridged translation of *Democracy in America* by Marcin Król<sup>12</sup> was published, with an introduction by Jan Baszkiewicz. *Memoirs* were published in

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<sup>11</sup> The author's conversation with Paweł Śpiewak on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Paweł Śpiewak (1951-2023) was a sociologist, historian of ideas, translator at the University of Warsaw. He was a co-founder of an underground «Res Publica Magazine» in 1979, member of the Polish “Solidarity” movement, member of the Polish Parliament (2005-2007), and director of the Jewish Historical Institute (2011-2020).

<sup>12</sup> Marcin Król (1944-2020) Philosopher of politics, historian of ideas, co-founder and editor-in-chief of the underground quarterly «Res Publica» (the first issue was published in 1979).

1987, translated by Aleksander Wit Labuda and also with an introduction by Jan Baszkiewicz<sup>13</sup>. The 1990s and 2000s brought a full translation of *Democracy in America*<sup>14</sup>, a translation of *Letters*<sup>15</sup>, subsequent editions of *Old Regime* [2003, 2005, 2019] and smaller forms of Tocqueville: *Quinze jours dans le désert américain*<sup>16</sup>, *Report on Pauperism*<sup>17</sup>, and excerpts from notes and speeches published in the Gdańsk liberal intellectual magazine «Przegląd Polityczny»<sup>18</sup>. By publishing translations of Warsaw historians of ideas and their commentaries, «Przegląd Polityczny» contributed significantly to introducing the Frenchman's thought to the Polish ground. The journal also published commentaries by foreign authors such as André Jardin, Jacob-Peter Mayer, Golo Mann, Dana Villa, Pierre Manent, François Furet, Hayden White, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Raymond Aron and others.

What reactions did Tocqueville provoke? In the following part I present an account of the meeting with Tocqueville in the milieu of historians of ideas at the University of Warsaw. Basically, there will be no question of reading Tocqueville in other intellectual circles, such as Kraków, Poznań, Łódź or Gdańsk. The specificity of the Warsaw milieu was that it was and is one of the most important Polish *intelligentsia* circles. Even though the role of *intelligentsia* has radically changed since its formation in 19<sup>th</sup> century, the members of this status class traditionally provided moral, intellectual and, when circumstances allowed, also political leadership. Most of the people from this group were involved in anti-communist activities. Their accession to the opposition stemmed from very different circumstances. These were various political beliefs, which today can be described as social democratic, liberal or conservative. These were also family

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Marcin Król was a democratic opposition activist, participant in the student protests of March 1968, advisor to the “Solidarity” movement, and a participant in the Round Table talks between the communist party and the “Solidarity” movement in 1989. After 1989, he was an advisor to Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first non-communist prime minister, and an active commentator on political life.

<sup>13</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Wspomnienia*, Wrocław, Zakład im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *O demokracji w Ameryce*, B. Janicka, M. Król, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 1996.

<sup>15</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Listy*, trans. B. Janicka, introduction and selection I. Grudzińska-Gross, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Znak, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Piętnaście dni w pustkowiu*, Roman Chymkowski trans., introduction I. Grudzińska-Gross, Warszawa, Res Publica Nowa, «Polityka» Spółdzielnia Pracy, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Raport o pauperyzmie*, J. Strzelecka trans., introductions P. Śpiewak, G. Himmelfarb, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> «Przegląd Polityczny», vol 71 (2005); vol. 72 (2005); vol. 75 (2006); vol 82 (2007); vol. 139-140 (2016).



traditions or religious beliefs. Some of these people [for example, Marcin Król, Wojciech Karpiński and Paweł Śpiewak] co-created underground intellectual magazines since the 1970s and engaged in various educational initiatives. These initiatives were modeled at the Flying University and the Society for Scientific Courses of the early twentieth century and bore their names. Most of these people after 1989 intellectually supported the development of liberalism in Poland. Their conversations with Tocqueville followed three paths: cultural, political and societal.

#### 4. Culture: Context, Continuity and Change

Reading and discussing books among friends has a special value, also for those who come later and in the next generation benefit from the work of the first readers. Such is the case with the essays of Wojciech Karpiński<sup>19</sup> and Marcin Król, who confronted Tocqueville's thought not only with that of their contemporary authors, but also of the Polish Romantics. In his book *Cień Metternicha* [The Shadow of Metternich], submitted to the publishing house prior to his forced emigration and published in 1982, Karpiński wrote about Tocqueville as an author who could be a guide to the meanderings of democracy and freedom<sup>20</sup>. He recommended reading Tocqueville "from the end," that is, from *Old Regime*, and advocated publishing the Frenchman's *Letters* in Polish. Probably due to political censorship, Karpiński did not refer to the current political situation (the rise and activities of the Solidarity social movement). Another reason may have been the desire to get to the essence of the issue of political freedom, which, despite its changing historical forms, still poses similar questions. And although the heroes of Karpiński's book are many (including Cicero, Lord Acton, Nicola Chiaromonte, Zygmund Krasiński, to name a few),

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<sup>19</sup> Wojciech Karpiński (1943-2020) studied French literature and for years was involved in its popularization in Poland. He was associated with Polish émigré periodicals in France, «Kultura» and «Zeszyty Literackie». He initiated the Polish translation of some of de Tocqueville's and Astolphe de Custine's writings. As a result of the imposition of martial law in Poland in December 1981, he remained in exile for the rest of his life. He popularized the works of Polish émigré authors abroad. He taught at Yale University, the University of Texas and New York University, and from 1982 to 2008 was also a researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique in Paris and the École des hautes études en sciences sociales. He was a translator and author of travel essays.

<sup>20</sup> W. Karpiński, *Cień Metternicha. Szkice*. Warszawa, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1982.

Tocqueville finds a special place in them.<sup>21</sup> In the final sentences of the essay *Tocqueville – wolność i demokracja* [Tocqueville – freedom and democracy], he wrote:

Tocqueville reminds us that freedom is earned by long effort, that free social institutions are easy to destroy, easy to be seduced by the temptation of simplicity and uniformity. It is much more difficult to rebuild a democratic community, to restore people's creative passion for freedom.<sup>22</sup>

Although Karpiński was not writing about the Solidarity movement or the struggle against communism, it is difficult not to read these words in this context.

Marcin Król, who translated *Democracy in America* together with Barbara Janicka in 1976, in his *Romantic Journey*<sup>23</sup> [*Podróż romantyczna*] of 1986, juxtaposed Alexis de Tocqueville with Zygmunt Krasiński, a Polish aristocrat and, above all, a romantic poet [1812-1859]. Krasiński spent his life in a voluntary exile. He returned to Poland reluctantly and only forced by a duty. For fear of political reprisals, he published only abroad, and not under his own name. Krasiński constantly fought internal, bitter battles with himself for Poland and Europe. He corresponded and befriended with the Englishman Henry Reeve, who was Tocqueville's translator. It was in a 1937's letter to Reeve that Krasiński compared the Frenchman to Tacitus and Montesquieu, and declared that he found in *Democracy in America* «a proof of strength and genius»<sup>24</sup>.

It is difficult to say whether Krasiński and other Polish emigrants knew Tocqueville in person. According to Król, Krasiński and the author of *Old Regime* shared not only the same romantic, post-revolutionary times, aristocratic birth, place on earth (Krasiński spent a significant part of his life in France), friendships and the year of death. There were other, more important similarities. There were also significant differences.

While Tocqueville traveled through the American wasteland, Krasiński was writing his most important drama, *The Undivine Comedy*. *The Undivine Comedy*,

<sup>21</sup> Adam Michnik read Karpiński's book while he was in prison in 1983-1984, and called it «a tutorial of freedom» (A. Michnik, *Niezlomny z Londynu i inne eseje*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo "NOW-a", 1984, p. 49). The essay dedicated to Karpiński's book Michnik called *In Tocqueville's Shadow*.

<sup>22</sup> Karpiński, *Cień Metternicha* cit., p. 146.

<sup>23</sup> M. Król, *Podróż romantyczna*, Paryż, Libella 1986.

<sup>24</sup> Letter dated September 25th, 1837. Z. Krasiński, *Listy do Henryka Reeve*, ed. Paweł Hertz, Warszawa, PIW 1980, vol. VIII, p. 285; quoted in I. Grudzińska Gross, *Wstęp* in A. de Tocqueville, *Listy*, Kraków, Znak 1999, p. 13.

which appeared in 1835 under a pseudonym, dealt with the subject of a revolution overthrowing the rule of the aristocracy. In Krasieński's drama revolutionaries introduce a new order. This is an apparent change, however. Old sins are dressed in new clothes, and nothing indicates that the new constitution is the final one. Revolution does not bring with itself new things. In the drama's final scenes, the triumph of the revolutionaries is interrupted by the revelation of Christ. The leader of the revolutionaries dies. History is ultimately in the hands of God, not people, Krasieński may be saying. Reading both authors together, Król pointed out that both men of the pen were well aware that their ordered world, the world created by their ancestors, is a world that is passing into the past, that it is inexorably retreating under the pressure of new politics and new rules. What's more, despite the personal problems associated with it, they accepted that change somewhat coldly, without thinking about the old world either with love or nostalgia. They also knew that they would not find a place for themselves in the new world, that it will not be their home<sup>25</sup>. In a sense, they were both "above and beyond", but the situation forced them – even only in front of themselves – to take a stand, to answer the question: what next?

Tocqueville did not have much understanding for the national question, especially the national liberation question, which inevitably dominated Krasieński's thinking<sup>26</sup>. Krasieński fervently believed in God and recognized spiritual forces as more important than political ones. Tocqueville, recognizing the positive functions of religion in a democratic society, could not muster faith in a personal God. Tocqueville, according to Król, represented a liberal mentality, whereas Krasieński – the sacred. Although both wanted to bring what they thought was best in European culture, the rupture between the two mentalities became a division that broke European culture, Król argued<sup>27</sup>. The liberal mentality means basing hope on institutions and the customs that support them. These institutions are the law, local self-government, associations, freedom of the press, independence of the judiciary<sup>28</sup>. The sacred mentality is the perception of the world primarily in spiritual and religious categories. Krasieński could not agree on consumer mentality entering and conquering territories inherently alien to it, territories of spirit and culture<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Król, *Podróż romantyczna* cit., pp. 152-153.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Grudzińska Gross, *Wstęp*, in: Tocqueville, *Listy* cit., pp. 30-34.

<sup>27</sup> Król, *Podróż romantyczna*, cit. p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, p. 152.

Król's *Romantic Journey* is above all a book about the nineteenth-century understanding of Polishness, Polishness, which is both loved and disliked, believed in and doubted at the same time. Król followed these struggles with Polishness in many authors, recognizing in their dilemmas the struggles of Europeans. Although it is a book about the past, a book about Polishness that must be strengthened and defended as a besieged fortress, it is at least as much a book about the future, it is based on a premonition of a coming change, about principles that could (should?) govern not only Polishness, but simply Europeanness.

*Romantic Journey* was published in 1986. Less than six years earlier, Solidarity had been founded, a social movement of over nine million people that had shaken the position of the communists in Central Europe. In the years 1979 and 1983 Poland was visited by Pope John Paul II, what had a great social and political significance. In 1983 the martial law ended (it had been introduced by the communists in reaction to "Solidarity"). In 1989, only a few years after the publication of *Romantic Journey*, the Round Table Talks and the final fall of communism began. The sense of impending change, even if competing with fear, apathy, was common at that time. Interestingly, that great politics was basically absent from Król's book, as it was absent from Karpiński's book. Król adopted, like the protagonists of his reflections, the attitude of "above and beyond". However, just like in Tocqueville's case, and given Król other activities that did not mean indifference. Thinking about the coming world, he tried to bring to it what he thought was best, he tried to reunite European culture. He reached for the romantic tradition, which needed to be worked through and rethought. To the question: Krasieński or Tocqueville? "The answer is simple: both", Król replied<sup>30</sup>.

To conclude this part, I would like to refer briefly to Irena Grudzińska-Gross book *The Scar of Revolution: Custine, Tocqueville and the Romantic Imagination* because it sheds light on the romantic, but I think also Tocqueville's legacy in the lives of Polish intellectuals. Irena Grudzińska-Gross a researcher born in Warsaw associated with Slavic Languages and Literature Department at Princeton University, a friend to Karpiński and Król, read Tocqueville in the romantic

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<sup>30</sup> Król, *Podróż romantyczna* cit., 168. In later years, Król changed his position to some extent. He spoke and wrote less often about religion. Instead, he emphasized the need to preserve a high spiritual and intellectual culture.

key<sup>31</sup>. In such a short text it is impossible to quote the richness of cultural and literary observations of Grudzińska-Gross. One thing that may seem marginal in her book is however worth highlighting here. In the last sentences of the second part of the book, Grudzińska-Gross writes that on the example of Cusitne and Tocqueville (as well as René, a character from Chateaubriand's books) the process of formation of modern intellectuals could be observed, their "being outside"<sup>32</sup>. Certainly, "watching carefully, but with a distance" one's times was what both Karpiński and Król were doing when writing<sup>33</sup>.

## 5. The political path: the turn of 1989 and the following years

Poetry and romantic dramas accompanied the creation and operation of the "Solidarity" social movement from August 1980 to December 1981, as well as the years of martial law following those events. *Democracy in America* proved to be an important point of reference when the process initiated by "Solidarity" began to culminate in the transformations of 1989. It was then when new questions arose. They were concerning a direction in which the new Polish democracy should go and what should be its "philosophy" – its ideological principles.

In a short essay, *Alexis de Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt on Solidarity*, published in 1987 and republished in 1991, Paweł Śpiewak wrote about possible interpretations of the «political philosophy» of the social movement. One was a republican reading, following the thought of Tocqueville and Arendt, the other was a liberal reading. The first of them was to focus on the spontaneously created political order, identifying politics with the art of debate and persuasion, political freedom and participation. The second had a potential for reform, attaching importance to the efficiency of the administrative and economic system, protecting the rights and interests of communities and individuals. The first was to be guided by the passion of distinction and civil courage, the second was to be

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<sup>31</sup> I. Grudzińska Gross, *Piętno rewolucji*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1995. The Polish edition of her book has been enriched with a chapter on Adam Mickiewicz, the most important Polish romantic poet, an emigrant in Paris. It is not known whether Mickiewicz and Tocqueville knew each other. Certainly, their circles of acquaintances intertwined.

<sup>32</sup> Grudzińska Gross, *Piętno rewolucji* cit., p. 207.

<sup>33</sup> Marcin Król titled his autobiography "A bit from the side". M. Król, *Nieco z boku: autobiografia niepolityczna*, Warszawa, Prószyński i S-ka, 2008. Cf. Michnik, *Nieźtomny z Londynu* cit., p. 50.

guided by the logic of the trade union, private freedom and material needs<sup>34</sup>. Śpiewak considered both interpretations to be legitimate (he was talking about interpretations, because the social movement “Solidarity” did not express its philosophy in a clear and coherent way). Nevertheless, he was inclined to a republican reading of “Solidarity”. In that social movement, open politics drew everyone into its vortex and became an existential experience<sup>35</sup>. “Going beyond old habits and environments, setting new requirements, taking on the role of citizens and politicians, people suddenly acquired an identity” – wrote Śpiewak<sup>36</sup>. Eighteen years later, sixteen years after the fall of communism, Paweł Śpiewak returned to these issues, asking whether Alexis de Tocqueville could be a guide to Polish contemporaneity<sup>37</sup>. At that time, the point of reference was not only *Democracy in America*, but above all *Old Regime*, because, in Śpiewak’s view, the shape of Polish democracy and the Polish understanding of freedom was determined more by the experience of the authoritarian state before 1989 than by the sixteen months of “Solidarity’s” activity. In this aspect Tocqueville’s writing was seen as both a measure of what could and could not have been done, and an opportunity to reflect on cultural continuity. Tocqueville helped in the reflection on the “old system”, on the influence of the mentality formed during communism and the legacy of the Polish People’s Republic. Śpiewak reminded that democratic freedom as described by Tocqueville had two dimensions: private and political. The first referred to the sphere of personal autonomy, and the second, which did not contradict it, referred to the capacity for participation, to the civic shaping of common policies.<sup>38</sup> According to Śpiewak, after more than four decades of authoritarian communist system, we inherited an apolitical, antisocial individualistic understanding of freedom. The social system was not based on experiences of self-government, participation and cooperation. On the contrary, it promoted centralism. Śpiewak wrote:

“An examination of the history of the anti-communist revolution would probably require Tocqueville not so much to unmask the evils of the communist system. His reflections would have been necessary above all to reveal what remained of this

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<sup>34</sup> P. Śpiewak, *Alexis de Tocqueville i Hannah Arendt o „Solidarności”*, in P. Śpiewak, *Ideologie i obywatele*, Warszawa, Biblioteka Więzi, 1991, pp. 219-223; cf. E. Ciżewska, *Filozofia publiczna Solidarności*, Warszawa, NCK, 2010, pp. 59-60, pp. 331-333.

<sup>35</sup> Śpiewak, *Alexis de Tocqueville i Hannah Arendt* cit., p. 224.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> P. Śpiewak, *Lekcja de Tocqueville’a. O demokracji w Polsce*, in «Przegląd Polityczny», vol. 71 (2005), p. 50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

experience in us, what habits turned out to be more durable than political changes” and explained: “From the perspective of reading de Tocqueville, our problem is not the state itself. (...). The problem is the inherited and consolidated to a large extent in the era of real socialism ideas about the nature of power, which we transfer to new times, and at the same time the natural passion for money”.<sup>39</sup>

Almost eighteen years have passed since then. New generations have already entered public life. Their entire conscious life falls in modern times. Is the burden of the legacy of an authoritarian regime still so significant? And could more than forty years of communism overshadow earlier decades?

## 6. Society: institutions and customs

When describing the social path in the reflection on Tocqueville, it is worth considering the academic reception of Tocqueville. The university is a meeting place for students and lecturers. So how was Tocqueville read in seminars? At the undergraduate level, there were considered the features of a democratic society. The tensions between freedom and equality were pondered about, American individualism and the development of associations were commented on, and finally, last but not least, the role of customs and the famous Tocquevillian thesis on religion as the first political institution of Americans were discussed. The primary point of reference here has always been *Democracy in America*. The topic of the role and place of religion in democracy appeared at Marcin Król’s seminar in the context of political transformation after 1989. The debates of the 2000s were not only about the model of church-state relations (here the thought of Ernest W. Böckenförde was a certain point of reference), but also about what Tocqueville described as «habits of the heart», as social institutions that would be a remedy for democratic excesses (individualism, greed, etc.). Such a perspective was, however, quite rare in the milieu of Polish liberals. Polish liberals, fearing domination on the part of religion, focused on reducing its presence in the public sphere rather than on the creative use of its social or ethical potential.

One of the most important graduate seminars of the mid-2000s was the already mentioned seminar of Prof. Paweł Śpiewak. The point of reference here were all of Tocqueville’s texts which appeared in Polish. The thought of the Frenchman was confronted with, for example, the thought of John Stuart Mill, de

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<sup>39</sup> *Ivi*, p. 53.

Custine, de Maistre, Burke and Marx. Tocqueville was commented on in his historical context, but also outside of it. Tocqueville's writing about envy was compared with what Max Scheler wrote about resentment. Tocqueville's thoughts about democratic society were accompanied by the observations of Ortega y Gasset. Tocqueville's republicanism was related to Machiavelli's republicanism. The seminar participants were interested in various contentious issues in the Frenchman's thought and those on which he himself seemed internally conflicted: to what extent he raised class issues and how he wrote about aristocracy, to what extent his concept of freedom had emancipatory potential, and whether Tocqueville's republican liberalism had imperial features. Some of the fruits of this seminar took the form of doctorates and debates in «Przegląd Polityczny» edited by Wojciech Duda and «Res Publica Nowa»<sup>40</sup>.

## 7. Reading Tocqueville in Warsaw

From this short sketch emerges the figure of Tocqueville as a guide to a changing, democratizing world. The questions of change, continuity, and democracy remain valid till today. The interests of Warsaw historians of ideas stemmed from the shared heritage of romantic culture and the need to take a stand in the face of a great political and social change, a change that brought Poles more hope than fear. Catalogues of convergences and discrepancies were formulated in this context. They reflected on the character of the Polish anticommunism “Solidarity” movement and considered Tocqueville as a partner in a discussion on the relationship between religion and democracy. Readers in Warsaw also wanted to talk to Tocqueville about desirable and undesirable legacies. The undesirable legacy was in the first place the mentality inherited from communism. Poles – unlike Americans – did not start from the beginning in 1989. In the Polish political culture today, romantic, republican, socialist, liberal and conservative themes are mixed. Christian traditions still play a significant role. All of them create “underground rivers” that reveal themselves on the surface of contemporary Polish politics and do not cease to surprise.

Michael Zuckert, recalling Cheryl Welch, describes several contemporary waves of postwar interest in Tocqueville in the United States. For example, after World War II, Tocqueville was cited as one of the first theorists of the mass

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Paweł Marczewski, PhD, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



society, and as someone who could help us understand the potentially dark side of democracy<sup>41</sup>. The phenomenon of massification was also discussed by Polish scholars in 1990s and 2000s with the help of Tocqueville's thought.

Interestingly, Poles have not paid much attention to Tocqueville's final predictions concerning the tension between Anglo-Americans and Russians and their ambition to conquer the world<sup>42</sup>. For Warsaw readers, Tocqueville has never been an "anti-Marx", he has never been a "cold war writer" who offered a perspective on living in a free world to those shut behind the Iron Curtain. The reason of this was twofold. First, those who were reading him in Warsaw did not need a counterweight to Marxism, because most of them would develop their own political and social understanding on the nature of totalitarian regimes and look for inspiration in the local philosophical and political traditions such as for example phenomenology, Christianity or early twentieth century socialist movements. Second, Tocqueville, as he was read and translated in 1990s and 2000s came just as one more author who commented on the philosophy and practice of democracy<sup>43</sup>. Tocqueville was surrounded by diverse "old" and "young" authors such as The Federalists, Edmund Burke, Max Weber but also Robert A. Dahl, Charles Taylor, Judith Shklar, Will Kymlicka, Norberto Bobbio, Francois Furet and Stephen Holmes. It is also worth mentioning that even though the group I am describing here was populated to a great extent by sociologists, neither Raymond Aron's nor Robert Nisbet's commentary on Tocqueville shaped the Warsaw reading. The voices of Aron and Nisbet were known of course, but not decisive.

## 8. Today: what shall we talk with Tocqueville about?

Tocqueville was an unobtrusive companion in the political and social transformations of the 1990s and 2000s. His thought did not give them shape, it was not an inspiration for decision-makers, nor was it a warning. Polish liberals discovered it relatively late, after almost 150 years. The tone of Polish liberalism after 1989 was set by economic matters and progressive individualism.

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<sup>41</sup> M. Zuckert, *Introduction: The Tocqueville Thesis*, in M. Zuckert (ed.), *The Spirit of Religion and the Spirit of Liberty*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2017, p. 2 and 3.

<sup>42</sup> A. Tocqueville *Democracy in America*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund. 2010, p. 655.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g.; the book series of "Znak" Publishing House and Batory Foundation entitled *Demokracja. Filozofia i praktyka* [Democracy. Philosophy and Practice] published between 1994-2001.

Tocqueville was given the role of one who helps to understand what was happening, but also the mistakes and neglect of the times of transformation. Paradoxically, sometimes this understanding was born from the observation that the perspectives of the people participating in the conversation are untranslatable and there can be no mutual understanding.

What is worth talking to Tocqueville about today? The answer will be absolutely unoriginal, because I think it is worth returning to the conversation about institutions and customs. The crisis of contemporary Polish democracy and the deep social division also result from insufficient thinking about the mutual relations between customs, traditions of the place, between «habits of the heart» and political institutions. Contemporary Polish democracy was based primarily on institutions, and the question of supporting and supplementing them with customs has not resounded loudly enough neither in the 1990s nor today. It resulted in mistrust and lack of respect of institutions, which were legitimized with rupture rather than continuity and an attempt to use and build on available resources. It seems that it will be recurring problem not only of the Polish politics but also the European one.

Another issue is social self-organization, civil society, civic activity, networks of formal and informal civic associations. What would Tocqueville say about contemporary social movements today? How would he evaluate contemporary identity politics? Would he consider contemporary social movements as a remedy against atomization and closing in privacy or the opposite? I wish Tocqueville could tell us more about democracy and war. Unfortunately, his reflections in this field are so immersed in emphasizing the differences between aristocracy and democracy that they often sound foreign to current happenings.

Tocqueville is an unobtrusive author who prefers to point readers to potential paths of thought rather than destinations. He is an atypical liberal and an atypical republican. Maybe we need such authors in turbulent times?