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Classical Categories of Political Thought in Public Opinion: Qualitative Research on Polish Society

Abstract: This article establishes how ordinary people understand classical categories of political thought. By interpreting qualitative data, we show how contemporary Polish society conceives such fundamental concepts of political philosophy as 'the individual,' 'society,' and 'the state.' Finally, we point out the implications of our findings for political science and political sociology, especially in regard to popular political culture.

Keywords: classical categories of political and legal thought, qualitative research, individual, society, political power, state.

Why does nobody ever talk with us like you do?

(respondent from Ryjewo, II group)

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Similarly to Bellah et al. (2007), we assume that it is possible to compare the output of classical political philosophy with the results of contemporary sociological research, particularly qualitative investigations. Partly in opposition to the Cambridge School of Intellectual History (Skinner 1969, 2002: 3–53; Tully 1988), for the sake of our investigation we consider the whole body of classical political philosophy—both in its historical as well as conceptual dimension—as one complex entity. To explore this entity, we constructed a framework of five concepts: the individual, society, property, power, and the state. Given the limited scope of this paper, we will present our findings on only three of these concepts: the individual, society, and the state. Our aim was to see how ordinary people's understanding of these three concepts compares to their meanings in classical political-legal philosophy. To achieve this aim, the classical philosophical meanings have to be reproduced before the popular ones can be recreated. Of course, this is impossible without some simplifications of the former. Searching for the classical patterns of political philosophy in the everyday language of public opinion would be almost impossible without a wide selection

of representative statements. Because all the categories had to be extensively reflected in the statements, this was probably one of the most demanding and time-absorbing parts of our enquiry. [1]

We assumed that the first of these categories, the individual, should be analyzed from three perspectives: first, from the conceptual context in which the individual is placed; second, from the source of the individual's identity; and third, from the level of the individual's determinism or autonomy. The individual may be seen either as somehow conceptually or axiologically prior to a larger entity such as the family, a social class, the nation, or the state, or as secondary to it. The former position is taken by the representatives of methodological classical individualism and most contemporary libertarians who adopt social contract theories. The latter position is characteristic of all social holists; of those who write in the tradition of Plato or Aristotle, including some conservatives and communitarians; and of some socialists and communists (especially Marxists). The sources of the individual's identity may be identified as religious (Christian thinkers); historical or traditional (most conservatives, including Edmund Burke); ideological (humanists, atheists, feminists, ecologists); or based upon particular interests, such as individuals, classes, local communities, or professional groups (for example, Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, Karl Marx, or the Public Choice school) (Dumont 1991; Durkheim 1969; Lindsay 1930–1935; Lukes 1973; Machan 1998). The individual is understood as a rather autonomous being by almost all social individualists and as a more determined one by almost all social holists (Hayek 1948; Mandelbaum 1973; Rau 1995; Ruben 1982).

As far as society is concerned, we believe that the spectrum of meanings and concepts attached to it are best presented in regard to its type of social bonds, source of social obligations or social opportunities, and the character and essence of its structure. Social bonds seen as natural and independent of any human will primarily be emphasized by those who write in the Aristotelian tradition (for instance, many communitarians). Alternatively, such bonds are regarded as being conventional and volitional by all kinds of individualists, who write in the social contract tradition. For conservatives, communitarians, and classical republicans, society constitutes a source of social obligations, while for classical liberals and libertarians it offers a platform for most social opportunities. Conservatives, communitarians, and political romantics see it as an organic whole, while liberals and libertarians understand it as a sum of individuals. Similarly, conservatives consider it to be a given structure, either static (Joseph de Maistre) or evolutionary (Edmund Burke), while others conceptualize it as having a profoundly human design and construction—either created by the voluntary act of a social contract (as most liberals believe) or by the forceful, sometimes revolutionary, social engineering advocated by socialists or communists (Rau 1995: 11; Rau & Chmieliński 2010: 7).

We believe that the state is best understood when the following issues are discussed: the notion of political obligation, the origin of the state, the extent of its influence upon society, its tasks in the social sphere, and the nature of adherence to its structure (Bosanquet 1899; Hay, Lister & Marsh 2006; Knutilla & Kubik 2000; Oppenheimer 2007; Steinberger 2004). Usually, there are three basic sources for political obligation—citizens' consent (especially

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[1] It would not have been possible without the help of our working team at the Institute of Political and Legal Thought of the University of Lodz. Special thanks are due to Michał Rupniewski and Tobiasz Bocheński.

for liberal authors), tradition (as most conservatives seem to believe), and fear of force and violence (as many socialist or communist thinkers believe) (e.g., Gilbert 2006; Green 1986; Klosko 1992). The origin of the state is seen as being part of the social order created by the Maker (e.g., for Christian thinkers), as a natural phenomenon (e.g., for Aristotle), as the result of a social contract (e.g., many liberal authors), or as the result of force and violence (e.g., Karl Marx and Marxists) (see Das 2006: 64; Mann 1984: 185–213). In the thinking of classical liberals, and libertarians such as Nozick (1974: 110), the state is exclusively supposed to ensure security for its citizens. This is the opposite of the social welfare state as conceived by, for example, social liberals such as Rawls (1971: 47) or Dworkin (2002: 11). Adherence to the state has a voluntary nature (e.g., for most liberal thinkers), or a radically involuntary character (as is believed not only by absolutist or totalitarian authors but also by classical republican thinkers).

Our empirical approach takes into account one of the primary functions of qualitative research as employed by Merton and Lazarsfeld in the 1940s. They used focus group interviews—due to the explorative function of this method—as an initial stage for quantitative survey research:

…qualitative focussed group-interviews were taken as sources on new ideas and new hypotheses, not as demonstrated findings with regard to the extent and distribution of the provisionally identified qualitative patterns of response. Those ideas and hypotheses had to be checked out by further survey research… (Merton 1987: 557–558).[2]

Merton's point of view is often shared by public opinion research methodologists, who advocate the use of qualitative research (mainly focus group interviews) in writing survey questionnaires (Morgan & Fellows 2008: 340–347).

Contrary to Merton, we believe that qualitative research findings can also be used as autonomous, stand-alone sources of knowledge when the subject is new in sociological investigations, not well understood, or has not yet been explored in an empirical manner.[3]

We used qualitative research to reconstruct the common meanings of five categories previously reconstructed from classical philosophical ideas: the individual, society, property, power, and the state. We decided to use focus group interviews instead of individual in-depth interviews for one important reason. Although the concepts that interest us are frequently present in ordinary speech, they are commonly used as blanket terms without a clear idea of their meaning. Because the terms refer to abstract notions, and considering the limited language skills of the vast majority of people and their restricted ability for abstract thinking, we assumed that individual interviews would not be an effective way to reconstruct the common understanding of these notions. We decided to use focus group interviews instead because synergy and group dynamics can help to overcome the weaknesses of individual interviewing. A focus group interview facilitates a mode of thinking that individuals would be unlikely to attain in one-to-one interviews, especially when the interview is interpreted as a sort of test or examination. Focus group discussion stimulates

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[2] Our further research is a survey of a nationwide representative sample of adult Poles. The fieldwork was conducted in April 2014. Analyses of the data are in progress.

[3] This point of view is taken as a hidden methodological assumption in applied qualitative research such as used for marketing, policy-making, pedagogy, and also in deliberative research. Morgan and Fellows also see a stand-alone function for focus group interviews in public-opinion studies (Morgan & Fellows 2008: 343–346).

abstract thinking and allows meanings to be unearthed that are barely accessible in individual memories and consciousness.

Our research was unique because of the unusual cooperation between philosophers of law, political philosophers, and sociologists. Sociologists look at the dimensions and determinants of different attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. Philosophers of law or political philosophers operate in the field of jurisprudence in its wide sense and thus they would rather look for syntheses than analyze the differences in various socio-demographic dimensions. While philosophers take the holistic approach in their analyses, sociologists prefer to take into account the socio-demographic factors that might influence an understanding of the five notions under examination.

We conducted 24 focus group interviews in the period from June to September 2010 in four of Poland's largest regions: Wielkopolska, Pomorze, Mazowsze, and Podlasie. The extended interviews lasted up to four hours. The groups' socio-demographic composition was formed under the assumption that various factors might influence common thinking about the five notions under examination. We considered four factors: urban or rural place of residence; age, understood as an indicator of a life-cycle stage; and level of education.

Experience of living in a big city, small town, or village could affect perception of the notions under examination in a striking manner. People who live in big cities, though better educated, are somewhat alienated from local power elites and have little personal experience of the policies implemented there. On the other hand, people who live in rural areas are deeply involved in local community life and the decisions of the power elites affect them directly and noticeably. We therefore conducted group interviews in three locations in each sub-region: in the biggest city (regional capital), in a small or medium-size town, and in a village (two groups in each). [4]

Due to budgetary constraints we had to limit the number of groups to 24, thus a compromise was needed on two other factors initially considered to be important: educational level and age. Finally we decided to conduct two groups with respondents of various levels of education (and heterogenous with respect to gender and age) in large cities and in small or medium-size towns. In all four villages we conducted two groups of respondents of different ages (a younger group, aged 20–39, and older group, aged 40–65), who had vocational, uncompleted secondary, or completed secondary educations.

The Individual and Society

The respondents are inclined to believe that the individual is always a part of the social whole. Thus, the notion of human nature and the character of social ties that keep people together result from the general vision of this whole. Accordingly, the respondents consider the latter either as a normative category, which carries commonly accepted positive values, or as an empirical one, generally seen as a vehicle of negative values.

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[4] The focus group interviews were conducted in the Wielkopolska region (in Poznań, Leszno and Lechlin), Pomorze region (in Gdynia, Kościerzyna, and Ryjewo), Mazowsze region (in Warsaw, Kołbiel and Regut) and Podlasie region (Białystok, Czarna Białostocka, and Studzianki).

The social whole that enjoys positive values is the community, which is understood in a profoundly Aristotelian way. As for Aristotle, it has three dimensions (or three levels): the family, the local community, and the nation (rather than the state).

The first and most basic kind of Aristotelian community is the family. The respondents declare that family is the most valuable and cherished thing in their lives (*The family is the most important thing* (Gdynia, groups II). *Without a doubt, the well-being of my own family should never be sacrificed for the good of society. For me, the family is most important* (Kołbiel, group II)). This is because the family shapes the personality of each of us during the process of socialization. It is in our childhood that we acquire a moral code, basic virtues, and real guidance for the rest of life. As one respondent puts it: *The way in which our childhood begins determines the way we go on in our lives. If it begins well, if the family, especially the parents, guide us properly—and, indeed, everything begins with our parents—we will make it in the future* (Kołbiel, group II). Since our personality is originally and fundamentally anchored in the family, our belonging to it makes us truly social beings. The family ties are therefore the most natural, social ties. They produce truly altruistic attitudes based on love and sacrifice. A respondent explains this by referring to her own experience: *I have a daughter who lives with us along with her future husband and my two-year-old granddaughters. (…) We have two other children of nine and fifteen years of age. We support them. (…) I would never think of leaving them to their own devices. I could not imagine saying 'go away, sort out an apartment, and live on your own.' On the contrary (we are happy that they will stay). He is working. So is she. They will rebuild and enlarge our house. They have already obtained all the necessary construction documents from the office* (Kościerzyna, group I).

It is difficult to deny that these respondents conceive the family in the same way that Aristotle did himself. In the *Nikomachean Ethics*, he stated that:

Parents, then, love their children as themselves (for their issue are by virtue of their separate existence a sort of other selves), while children love their parents as being born of them, and brothers love each other as being born of the same parents; for their identity with them makes them identical with each other (which is the reason why people talk of 'the same blood,' 'the same stock,' and so on). They are, therefore, in a sense the same thing, though in separate individuals (Aristotle 1984: 1805).

The second kind of Aristotelian community has a more diverse character. In fact, it may be constituted by small neighborhoods, by circles of friends and associates, and, finally, by cities, towns, or villages. The respondents indicate that these entities give them a considerable sense of identity. A common point of reference is that of a community in a small apartment building. Unlike the owners of suburban houses, the inhabitants of such an apartment building constitute a sort of face-to-face community consisting of people who have lived together for a substantial time: *If you live with others at the same place you naturally get used to them (…). They are all your neighbors (…). You walk through and you always see the same faces, you know?* (Lechlin, group I). Another example of this kind of natural community is that of a circle of friends who regularly meet in a local pub: *I feel most strongly attached to the friends who are regulars in our pub. I feel comfortable with them. There are those among them who always understand me. Sometimes, when they think I am doing something wrong, they rebuke me. They are people who will listen to me, comfort me, with whom I can talk and laugh* (Białystok, group I). A larger community, like that of

a city or a town, gives an even deeper sense of belonging and a stronger sense of identity. It often combines social ties with personal history and aesthetic sensitivity. *If I had to live in a different city I would feel bad there. It is not just because I have many friends in Bi-ałystok. That is indeed very important. But, it is also about the city itself. I was born here. I grew up here. I feel comfortable here. There are corners of the city and places that I can call my own. When I am unhappy, I escape from my troubles and hide there* (Białystok, group I). In all these neighborhoods, social circles, or local communities, the social bonds that link people of similar identities are, as in a family, given rather than chosen. Yet they produce a sense of obligation that inclines some of their members to get involved in local civic initiatives: *It is surely much easier to work for the good of a local community than for the good of the country as a whole. In fact, it is better to act there than to wait for help from above (…) I believe it results from something I would call local patriotism* (Leszno, group II).

Aristotle made the same points when he wrote:

But when several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs, the first society to be formed is the village. And the most natural form of the village appears to be that of a colony from the Family, composed of the children and grandchildren, who are said to be suckled 'with the same milk' (Aristotle 1984: 1986).

The third kind of Aristotelian community is the country as a whole, which gives the respondents the most lofty and worthy sense of belonging: *When I say homeland I think about home (…) Indeed, 'homeland' sounds great. It means pride and unity* (Gdynia, group I). However, the high status of this identity has a relatively abstract character. In fact, it is rather absent in the everyday thoughts and practices of ordinary people. Such thoughts and deeds are reserved for freedom fighters and statesmen: *I believe that such ideas are not to be analyzed every day. No one is Marshal Piłsudski to ponder regularly over the country and the nation* (Gdynia, group I). In times of peace and stability there is no need to give much thought to things that are truly invisible: *When everything goes well (in the country) you do not think about it* (Gdynia, group I). Nevertheless, when more dramatic events occur and affect private or public life, the sense of national identity reemerges and is intensely lived. A good case in point is the experience of emigration, which produces both a strong feeling of longing for the country and the joy of coming home: *Whoever has lived abroad has missed Poland. I lived there and I missed it (…) I was in Belgium. Walking in the streets there I thought to myself, oh, if only I could go back home—even by bike if necessary (…) I do not know what it is. It's not that it drives you back to your family. It's more general. It drives you back to Poland. When you cross the border of Poland at the airport you instantly feel so happy* (Czarna Białostocka, group I). Other examples of situations that bring about intense feelings of national identity are public in nature. They include disasters, such as a plane crash, and victories, such as Polish sportsmen winning an international championship: *Definitely, critical events occur (…) For example, the Smolensk tragedy united the whole country. But only for a while. (On the other hand,) when you look at Kubica's success, when you see how he drives (you have to be proud of him). It's because he's Polish; he's a man of our nation. He represents our country, our nation* (Bialystok, group I).

The sense of belonging to and identifying with the national community may be weakened or strengthened by its members own conduct. In fact, they can reject national ties by

breaking down community bonds and permanently leaving the country: *There are people who leave the country and don't want to hear about Poland any more. And this is the end (of national belonging and identity)* (Bialystok, group I). They can also intensify and improve these ties by their own sustained efforts: *I can give the example of my acquaintance, a Polish woman from Canada. She regularly visits Poland and stays for two or three months to make it possible for her children to be fluent in Polish (…). She says that she is ready to devote her life to the Polish education of her kids because she considers herself Polish (and she will bring up her children in the spirit of Poland). She truly deserves to be called a fellow countrywoman* (Białystok, group I). Moreover, such efforts can even ensure membership in the national community for someone who does not naturally belong to it by birth: *I have heard of a native of Nigeria who is a member of the city council in Łódź. He has lived in Łódź for a long time. He says that he would like to be buried there too. Moreover, he speaks Polish pretty well. So, he can be considered our adopted fellow countryman. (…) A fellow countryman is a person who has certain roots in Poland regardless of how old those roots are (…). (The bottom line is that) he thinks like a Pole and he defends the values we would like our fellow countrymen to defend. Indeed, a fellow countryman is someone who thinks like I do, that is, he loves our country and works for the good of our country* (Warsaw, group I).

Understanding the country as a natural community involves the most fundamental elements of Aristotle's vision. First of all, it indicates the natural character of the national community. As Aristotle famously stated in his *Politics*, "it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal" (Aristotle 1984: 1988). Secondly, it assumes that there are people who reject the natural ties of the national community and try to create an identity on their own. Like our respondents, Aristotle described them as persons who display an obvious deficiency and therefore are unable to constitute part of the natural community. As he put it, "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state" (Aristotle 1984: 2099). Thirdly, it assumes that belonging naturally to a national community provides a strong motivation to pursue the national ethos. Aristotle himself considered it in terms of the moral virtues pursued by fellow countrymen. To quote his well-known passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethike*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ethos (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature (Aristotle 1984: 1754).

To summarize, the respondents indicate that the individual is a social being who naturally belongs to three communities: the family, the local community, and the nation. The social ties and social practices within these communities give the individual a sense of belonging and shape his identity. The more concrete these ties and practices are, the stronger is his sense of belonging and his identity. The family is the most concrete natural community. The local community—and especially the nation—are more abstract in nature. Thus it is in the family that the individual most naturally follows his instincts and accepts his social role by fulfilling his family obligations. In turn, the individual is ordinarily guided by

rational reflection in choosing conscious membership in the local community—and above all in the national community—and in accepting the duties attached to this membership. However, regardless of how instinctive or reflective his membership and obligations may be, they always require efforts driven by altruism and sacrifice. In other words, the natural status of membership, which is an empirical fact, requires an ethos, which has a normative dimension. This understanding of the relation between the natural status of community membership, which is given, and the obligation to improve this natural condition, which is chosen, is strikingly reminiscent of Aristotle's belief about the natural community: "while it comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life" (Aristotle 1984: 2013).

However, this Aristotelian vision of three natural communities does not constitute the whole social world. In fact, this profoundly normative conception is fundamentally challenged by empirical observations which lead to its radical alternative. The latter has a profoundly Hobbesian character. The reason for this spectacular twist can be traced back to the phenomenon of equal opportunities—the cornerstone of contemporary society. Indeed, the respondents indicate that it is equal opportunities that pull individuals out of their natural communities.

There is no doubt that the respondents consider equal opportunities themselves a positive phenomenon: *Opportunities are more equal now. We have better access to everything—a better access* (Regut, group I). In fact, the individuals are inspired, encouraged, and motivated to pursue their own life plans in the way they find most suitable for themselves: *As far as the very start of your career is concerned, the opportunities are more equal now. Take, for example, access to colleges or even universities, the access to education … It is really up to you now. It is also up to you if you want to run your own business* (Regut, group I). It is difficult not to affirm this state of affairs. More controversial are the consequences for individuals of equal opportunities. Taking advantage of equal opportunities requires a considerable, if not radical, change in the values, character, and patterns of behavior that the three natural Aristotelian communities create, promote, and expect: *When people can achieve more, they have to change* (Regut, group I). *In fact, people change their approach to life. Previously, the hated communist system endorsed more group behavior or social ties, even among strangers. It is true that everyone was laughing at the collective actions they launched to commemorate the communist takeover on July 22nd. However, it was at such events that people met one another, learned about each other, entered new relationships, made friends, integrated with each other. And what do we have today? There are corporations that integrate their employees but they do it in their own interests and on their own terms. It is not because of the policy of such a corporation that employees integrate, but rather out of their own interest. On the contrary, it is not well received* (Gdynia, group I). All in all, slowly but surely, equal opportunities isolate people from one another and cause them to concentrate on themselves. *In fact, these days, people are more withdrawn than before. Everyone isolates himself from others and prefers to stay in his apartment* (Regut, group I). The respondents draw a conclusion that is strikingly similar to one of Alexis de Tocqueville's most well-known statements:

One must recognize that equality, which introduces great goods into the world, nevertheless suggests to men very dangerous instincts … it tends to isolate them from one another and to bring each of them to be occupied with himself alone (Tocqueville 2010: 419).

This Tocquevillian twist turns the Aristotelian world of idealized, well-ordered, well-structured communities into a Hobbesian universe of egoistic, uprooted, atomized individuals. Indeed, when an individual isolates himself from a community the main feature of his nature is extreme selfishness. He is focused solely on himself, both in his thoughts and in his deeds. As the respondents observe, *today everything is to be aimed at myself. It is me that counts. Nothing else is important* (Poznań, group I). Accordingly, *everybody considers himself as being of the highest value. Everybody cares only about himself and worries only about himself* (Białystok, group II). Hobbes perceived human nature in a similar way:

For such is the nature of men, that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty, or more eloquent, or more learned, yet they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves" (Hobbes 1961: 76).

When the individual is concerned with himself alone he does not see any need to provide for anybody else. The more he is obsessed with himself, the more he focuses on the acquisition of material goods that will boost his ego, especially in front of his neighbors: *In fact, if my neighbor has a good car I've got to have a better one* (Gdynia, group II). All in all, people *desire better and better things* (Gdynia, group II). Thus, greed becomes the passion that motivates men more than anything else. However, when greed becomes a social phenomenon, social relations are unavoidably dominated by competition and rivalry. This creates an atmosphere charged with distrust. *People do not trust one another as they used to. Before, you could leave your apartment unlocked and your neighbor kept an eye on it for you. Nowadays, it can happen that when an apartment stays unlocked a neighbor goes in and empties the whole thing. Later he'll assure you that he knows nothing about it* (Warsaw, group I). In turn, distrust creates hostility and fear. As one of the respondents indicates, everybody is now aware of *robberies, thefts, burglaries*. Accordingly, he admits that *Twenty years ago, while driving across the country, I used to pick up hitchhikers because I did not want to travel alone. Now I don't do that* (Poznań, group I). These observations concerning greed, distrust, hostility, and fear can be confirmed by Hobbes himself:

If any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way of their end, (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only,) endeavor to destroy, or subdue one another (Hobbes 1651: 76).

In fact, this state of affairs comes close to the classical Hobbesian state of nature described in *Leviathan*, where "every man is Enemy to every man" (Hobbes 1651: 77).

The condition which has psychologically so much in common with the Hobbesian state of nature is bound to constitute a systematic guarantee of social atomization. An egoistic, greedy, distrustful, hostile and fearful individual is not in a position to create and sustain any lasting social ties. Therefore, he is naturally inclined to stay away from others or, as the respondents put it, he will prefer *to stay in his apartment rather than to involve himself in any endeavor with them* (Regut, group I). Hobbes himself put it in a similar way when he wrote that in the state of nature "Men have no pleasure, (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company (…)" (Hobbes 1651: 77).

To conclude, the respondents argue that equal opportunities have opened the door to a social situation that constitutes a profoundly Hobbesian setting. Being a greedy egoist, the individual is not a social being. He is neither anchored in any stable social group nor

bound by any strong social ties. With no sense of belonging he has nowhere to turn for security, guidance, or identity. Accordingly, with no obligations driven by altruism and sacrifice, he has no reason to make any effort to improve himself. He remains alone and naked in a social and moral desert.

The respondents indicate that they live their everyday life in two opposite worlds. The first world is Aristotelian. The second is Hobbesian. Both these worlds display radically opposite traits of human nature—the essentially social and the profoundly unsocial. These worlds are characterized by strikingly alternative social ties: strong, stable, and natural; or weak, ad hoc, and artificial. The Aristotelian world is commonly approved and sometimes idealized. The Hobbesian universe is mostly disapproved of and often rejected. The art of living in these two worlds is to separate them rigorously from each other. As one of the respondents proudly states, *I myself belong to a group of people whose relations are limited exclusively to professional relations. Thus, I am tied to certain stores and to those who do business there. It's my professional group. Do I have any private ties to them? No, rather not* (Gdynia, group II).

The above-mentioned approach profoundly corresponds with Ferdinand Toennies' view of two types of human association—*Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*—which he explains in the following way:

The group which is formed through this positive type of relationship is called an association (*Verbindung*) when conceived of as a thing or being which acts as a unit inwardly and outwardly. The relationship itself, and also the resulting association, is conceived of either as real and organic life—this is the essential characteristic of *Gemeinschaft* (community); or as an imaginary and mechanical structure—this is the concept of *Gesellschaft* (society) (Tönnies 1957: 31).

The Aristotelian world is then a kind of natural community and the Hobbesian world is a mechanical and artificial kind of society.

This twofold characteristic of our social world is closely connected with the problem of social justice. The commonly shared approach to social justice is without doubt deeply egalitarian. It is very often inspired by the communist past, idealized in opposition to the Hobbesian world. As one of the respondents says, *In the eighties, or seventies, it didn't matter if someone was a director or a worker; everyone was similar. You could go to visit the home of the director and he had the same furniture as you; he had old furniture made from chipboard and no difference was visible at all. Well, and now huge ones are visible* (Lechlin, I group). The idealization even leads some respondents to support a radical, material, and quite indefensible conception of equality: *What does 'fair' mean? It means the same for everyone* (Lechlin II group) says one of the respondents, in words that are close to Marx's famous formula of justice: "From everyone according to his faculties, to everyone according to his needs" (Marx 1922: 31). But this material conception of equality is not commonly shared by the respondents. The vast majority are convinced that wealth inequalities are fair in so far as they result from a person's own work and intelligence. *If he earned it fairly then he's welcome to it. One person earns more and he can't give what he earned to somebody else, right? Right, but... He can't, then ... But ... Somebody has to be poor and somebody rich...* (Poznań group I). Thus, even though this egalitarianism is inspired by a commonly shared Marxist resistance to economic exploitation, which is present in the Hobbesian world (Kołbiel, II group; Lechlin, II group), it seems to be far from the

commonly hated communist version. Namely, it can be seen as falling between the social democracy of Eduard Bernstein (Bernstein 1993: 98) and the left-wing liberalism of John Rawls, whose opinion, below, seems close to this popular conception:

> The unequal inheritance of wealth is no more inherently unjust than the unequal inheritance of intelligence. It is true that the former is presumably more easily subject to social control; but the essential thing is that as far as possible inequalities founded on either should satisfy the difference principle. Thus inheritance is permissible provided that the resulting inequalities are to the advantage of the least fortunate and compatible with liberty and fair equality of opportunity (Rawls 1971: 278).

The State

The notion of the state combines ancient, Christian, and liberal solutions. On the whole, however, the respondents do not refer in their considerations of the state to any individualist, contractualist, collectivist, or class-oriented assumptions.

The respondents view the state as an institutionalization of political power. Accordingly, they also see it as a natural phenomenon. *What would happen without a state? We would not be here* (Czarna Białostocka, group I). Indeed, the state constitutes a natural form of common existence for all people. *It seems to me it is quite natural that wherever there is a group of people a leader emerges. There are some things which can be done only by a team. And a team has to have a leader* (Gdynia, group II). This point is well argued in the Aristotelian tradition. Aquinas put it as follows:

> For where there are many men together and each one is looking after his own interest, the multitude would be broken up and scattered unless there were also an agency to take care of what appertains to the commonweal. (…) With this in mind, Solomon says (Eccl. 4: 9): 'Where there is no governor, the people shall fall' (…) Consequently, there must exist something which impels towards the common good of the many, over and above that which impels towards the particular good of each individual. Wherefore also in all things that are ordained towards one end, one thing is found to rule the rest. Thus in the corporeal universe, by the first body, i.e. the celestial body, the other bodies are regulated according to the order of Divine Providence; and all bodies are ruled by a rational creature. So, too in the individual man, the soul rules the body; and among the parts of the soul, the irascible and the concupiscible parts are ruled by reason. Likewise, among the members of a body, one, such as the heart or the head, is the principal and moves all the others. Therefore in every multitude there must be some governing power (Thomas Aquinas 1949 I: 2: 9).

As a natural phenomenon the state is based upon the natural instincts of those who live under its rule. These instincts seem to have a primarily biological character. As such, they later take on a wide social dimension. *Wherever there is a herd of wolves one of these wolves is a leader. Of course, a struggle for power is always taking place in such a herd. But there is always a hierarchy. So, it is quite natural for us that there is a government, a president, and so on. We are accustomed to it* (Poznań, group I). Thus, the very origin of the state is to be traced back to a sort of biological struggle for survival. The outcome of this struggle has been legitimized for ages by patterns of behavior, social practices, and customs. *The stronger won and became a representative of the whole community* (Warsaw, group I). This argument no longer belongs to the Aristotelian tradition. Rather, it is very close to the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment. David Hume argued similarly when he based the state on spontaneously created conventions which had been binding for generations:

Obedience or subjection becomes so familiar, that most men never make any inquiry about its origin or cause, more than about the principle of gravity, resistance, or the most universal laws of nature. Or if curiosity ever move them; as soon as they learn that they themselves and their ancestors have, for several ages, or from time immemorial, been subject to such a form of government or such a family, they immediately acquiesce, and acknowledge their obligation to allegiance (Hume 1758: 278).

The respondents stress that the state has to be based on social rules, which take the form of moral or legal principles. It is these principles that make it possible for the state and its institutions to work in and for the community. *There must be certain rules to make something work (as a social mechanism)* (Gdynia, group II). This is the point that Cicero made in *De Republica*.

Even so, from the just apportionment of the highest, middle, and lower classes, the state is maintained in concord and peace by the harmonic subordination of its discordant elements. And thus, that which is by musicians called harmony in song, answers and corresponds to what we call concord in the state:—Concord, the strongest and loveliest bond of security in every Commonwealth, being always accompanied by Justice and Equity (Cicero 1841: 245).

Following Cicero, Augustine claimed that the essence of the social rules on which the state is based is the notion of justice. "Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies?" (St. Augustine 2009: 88).

The respondents are radically divided on the issue of the state's agenda. Some have quite classic liberal attitudes, others take an Aristotelian communitarian approach, and the rest seem to be attached to the core notions of the Catholic Church's social teaching. There are at least a few supporters of statism in its social or even socialist form. Accordingly, one respondent believes that *the best thing the state can do is to stay away from its citizens* (Gdynia, group II). In this way, he repeats the argument made by Wilhelm von Humboldt that "(…) any State interference (…), where there is no immediate reference to violence done to individual rights, should be absolutely condemned" (Humboldt 1969: 16). However, another respondent claims that *the state should take care of its citizens*. What does this mean? *It should give them work. Not just work. It should meet their needs. Everything that is necessary in life* (Gdynia, group II). This is obviously an essentially Aristotelian conception of the good life that is only to be reached within the state itself.

Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good (Aristotle 1984: 1987).

In turn, others believe that a middle way is most appropriate and indicate that *the state should create conditions in which its citizens can work to satisfy their needs. It should develop the necessary economic infrastructure, like roads for example. If local communities are not in a position to do it on their own, the state should step in and do it in the interest of society as a whole* (Gdynia, group II). This common sense approach is, in fact, best conceptualized by the subsidiarity principle that is found in Catholic social teaching. According to Pope Pius XI:

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right

order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them (Pius XI 1931: 203).

The most radical state agendas go further—even to the socialist formula of statism: *Okay, people, what do you think will be better? If an economy—which is ironworks, mines, shipyards, and farms—is public or private? When it comes to farms, each farmer has to have his own farm. But ironworks, mines… Those can be public. People are out of work—I worked for a couple of years; I had a job and I was earning a good salary. Later [my workplace] was transformed into a company, and they started to fire people and [they are still doing so]. Half our company doesn't exist now. It would certainly be better if it was public* (Lechlin, I group).

This standpoint would directly reproduce the circumstances of communist Poland of old—in an idealized form, of course. It is worth emphasizing that such communist views were encountered in our enquiry, if only occasionally. One of the respondents expressed it in an even more radical way: *The leader should make everything public, everything…ours—as if it were all corporate. There should be no such distinction between rich-poor, private-public. There should be no such distinction; only a unity and this leader governs it* (Poznań, I group). This closely resembles Karl Marx's idea of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." As Marx wrote in his correspondence to Joseph Weydemayer, "the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; [and] […] this dictatorship, itself, constitutes no more than a transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society" (Marx, Engels 1983: 62).

Despite these different expectations concerning the state's activities, the respondents seem to treat the state in a truly instrumental way. The state is supposed to deliver. If it does not, then it is legitimate to terminate any formal ties with it. This position rules out any natural, organic—let alone communitarian—understanding of state institutions. It is contractarian in nature. Indeed, *if the state does not ensure sufficient economic growth so that a man can get a good education and earn enough money to live at a certain level, then it is no wonder he wants to leave. Everyone looks for better living conditions and has the right to emigrate* (Gdynia, group II). Locke argued in a similar manner in his classic statement that "The citizen is entitled to do "whatever he thinks fit for the preservation of himself … with the permission of the Law of Nature" (Locke 1960: 352). Thus "there are no examples so frequent in history … as this of men, withdrawing themselves and their obedience from the jurisdiction they were born under" (Locke 1960: 345).

Conclusions

Our interpretation of the qualitative data enabled us to reconstruct our respondents' understanding of classical categories of political thought and to compare their understanding to that of classical philosophers. The result is an outline of the popular political doctrine—eclectic and rather generalized but sophisticated—authored by contemporary society (in our case, by Polish society).

We believe that the main consequence of these findings is that sociology as an empirical science joins the humanities, especially political philosophy, in the task of improving or even perfecting our notion of democracy. Political philosophers have recently argued that democracy is ennobled when citizens pursue excellence, or is strengthened when they more intensely participate in public life, especially in the ranks of civil society. On the basis of our findings, we are convinced that sociology is entitled to claim that the people, who are sovereign in democracy, have the political will and political ideas that constitute the very foundations of a political community. This will, which is embedded in the public understanding of basic political concepts, cannot be reduced to particular voting preferences or particular issues in the changing political constellations. This will embraces a whole spectrum of categories, relations, and ideas that academics have tended to ascribe almost exclusively to classical political philosophers but which exist in popular political culture (though often in simplified form and in somewhat contradictory combinations). This does not imply that individuals or people as social groups should be seen as representative of one ideological or political side or perspective. They should be viewed as holders of fine, complex, well-argued, but sometimes contradictory sets of ideas.

Acknowledgements

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