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Disorderly Liberty. The Political Culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century

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It seems that politicians and politics have never been regarded with greater contempt across the western world. The expenses scandal in the United Kingdom, the lacerating negative rhetoric of American election campaigns, and, in an age of economic crisis, the growing disjuncture between the promises made by politicians to win elections and their actions while in government, have helped create a corrosive cynicism among voters about the motives and actions of those they elect to lead them. In the United States, the growth of the Tea Party movement has demonstrated a curious mixture of devoted admiration for the founding fathers and the constitution they gave the nation in 1789, and a withering contempt for those who attempt to operate it in very different circumstances two centuries later.

It is a good time to publish a study of the last 100 years of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Europe?s second-largest state in 1750, which was partitioned out of existence between 1772 and 1795. For the Commonwealth possessed by 1700 one of the most radically consensual political systems ever devised and, as Jerzy Lukowski amply demonstrates in this book, in its decay its political culture displayed very similar symptoms to the modern West: blistering contempt for politicians, deep cynicism about the motives and aims of those in government, ludicrously overblown rhetoric about political opponents, and a debilitating attachment to a venerated political constitution established in a supposedly more virtuous past. For all the

weakness of the executive, presided over by an elected monarch stripped of most of the prerogatives enjoyed by his European counterparts, the Commonwealth?s noble citizens were as suspicious of Warsaw and the machinations of government ministers as any devotee of Sarah Palin is of Washington?s porkbarrel politicians. Yet even if these noble citizens were aware of the Commonwealth?s problems, they regarded their political system as the most perfect known to mankind, since, from the 16th century, it had enshrined at its core the liberty of the citizen, while establishing an increasingly elaborate system of control over the king.

Despite the disasters which befell the Commonwealth after 1648, when a debilitating cycle of wars fought almost entirely on its own territory ruined its economy, depleted its treasury, and left it after 1717 effectively as a Russian protectorate, its citizens praised their system as the best conceivable, and trusted that it would survive because it was indispensible to the international system. Their world was, as Lukowski shows with characteristic relish, marked by bizarre efflorescences of utopian fantasy, and wishful thinking on an Olympian scale, not least in the dogged attachment to the principle of the *liberum veto*, by which the objection of one citizen at his local sejmik (dietine), or one envoy from a sejmik to the central Sejm (parliament) was sufficient not merely to block legislation, but to break up the assembly without achieving anything: in the reign of Augustus III (1733?63), only one Sejm passed any laws at all; since taxation depended on Sejm approval, it was a recipe for domestic anarchy and international oblivion. By the 18th century the old joke that ?*Polska nierz?dem stoi*? [Poland stands by anarchy; literally ?by lack of government? or ?lack of order?] was cheerfully believed by many to be an established principle of political science, while the veto was seen as embodying the citizen?s individual liberty.

Lukowski?s book is the fruit of a lifetime?s research into 18th-century Polish political culture. It covers the period from the disastrous Great Northern War (1700?21) to the momentous Four Year Sejm (1788?92), which broke the political deadlock and introduced major reforms that might have restored the Commonwealth as a functional member of the European states system had its neighbours not stepped in to demonstrate that if Poland stood by lack of government, it fell through government?s reintroduction. The book not only provides the best available guide in English to 18th-century Polish political culture, it also makes a genuine and substantial contribution to scholarship in any language on the Commonwealth. For, as Lukowski points out, Polish coverage of the 18th century is patchy at best; most scholars concentrate on one or other end of the century, dealing either with the Saxon period (1697?1763), or with the reign of Stanis?aw August Poniatowski (1764?95), but not with both. Large areas of both periods remain uninvestigated, and the connections and disjunctures between them are often simply ignored. There is no work in Polish that covers 18th-century political culture in such detail, and Lukowski adds much to the work of such scholars as Anna Grze?kowiak-Krwawicz, Zofia Zieli?ska, Emanuel Rostworowski, and Jerzy Michalski.

Lukowski draws extensively on the secondary literature, but the foundation of this study is his close reading of political treatises, pamphlet literature, and the instructions prepared by sejmiks for their envoys to the Sejm, drawn from an impressive range of archives across Poland, and from the substantial collection of Lithuanian material in Vilnius. He concentrates not just on the highlights, such as Stanis?aw Konarski?s *On the Means to Successful Counsels* (1761?63), or *A Free Voice Freedom Securing* (1743?), traditionally attributed to Stanis?aw Leszczy?ski, but has ploughed his way through the mind-numbing effervescences of such minor authors as the Franciscan Florian Jaroszewicz, whose *Poland, Mother of Saints* (1767) Lukowski ruefully describes as ?interminable?.

Thus he is not interested, as some Polish scholars have been, in selecting highlights of Polish political thought that might stand up in a general European context: he presents Polish political culture in all its richness and ? for he is a highly critical reader ? its poverty. It begins with a survey of Polish political culture before 1700, before moving through 18th-century developments roughly chronologically, with important excursions into the role of Catholic religious and political thought, and a careful, judicious chapter on the unique problems posed for 18th-century Polish-Lithuanian political culture by the fact that the Commonwealth was home to over half the world?s Jews: nowhere was the general Enlightement question of the relationship of Jews to the wider political community so complex. Of particular value are his chapters on Enlightenment influence on Polish political thought, and on the impact of foreign views of the Commonwealth, where his careful reading of Montesquieu, Mably, and, in particular, Rousseau, will be of

great interest to scholars of the Enlightenment: he uses to excellent effect his expert knowledge of the Polish-Lithuanian political system to give a properly critical account of these works, and he provides a genuinely original assessment of their impact within the Commonwealth.

Lukowski provides a detailed and absorbing account of Poniatowski?s reign, demonstrating how, in contrast to the reign of Augustus III, the veto effectively went into abeyance, Sejms reached their term, and a growing body of legislation was passed. This may have been due, as Lukowski argues, to Catherine II?s realisation that this was the best way to secure Russian objectives in Poland-Lithuania ? the First Partition of 1772 was famously approved by the Sejm in the face of abortive attempts to lodge a veto ? but it ?habituated [a generation] to parliaments doing things, no matter how much it disapproved of them? (p. 96). The climax of the book is an account of the reforms of the Four Year Sejm, embodied in the Constitution of 3 May 1791, and a raft of legislation passed while Russia was distracted by wars against the Ottoman Empire and Sweden. When the opportunity arose, therefore, the Sejm was capable of acting decisively. Despite considerable resistance among the *szlachta* (nobility) to the idea that burghers should be admitted to citizenship and representation in the Sejm, a new law on towns was passed that, while not conferring upon burghers the political rights enjoyed by the *szlachta*, did declare royal towns and their citizens to be free, and extended to them certain rights?such as *neminem captivabimus*, the Polish equivalent of *habeas corpus*. It also abolished the private noble and ecclesiastical enclaves within towns that had caused considerable problems for town governments. Yet as Lukowski shows, the Law on Towns brought considerable benefits to the nobility by officialy opening up to them full participation in many urban trades and professions that had previously been debarred to them by the threat of derogation, even if, as with most laws in the Commonwealth, such bans were widely ignored. The formal recognition of this merging of urban and noble activities was indicative of a coming together in practice of the urban and noble elites, and to an extent the reformers circumvented the general prejudice against extending full citizenship rights to burghers through effectively redefining citizenship. By introducing a property qualification for the enjoyment of full political rights, the Sejm deprived some 300,000 impoverished nobles of their citizenship. Meanwhile, a growing number of wealthy burghers were simply admitted to citizenship through large-scale ennoblements that represented a radical departure from the policy of previous Sejms, which had closely controlled entry to the nobility.

For all that many of these reforms were, in the context of what had gone before, truly radical, Lukowski pours cold water over the wilder claims about their significance. He argues that, far from being an expression of a new democratic spirit, the Constitution of 3 May ? an English translation of which is included as an appendix ? was not so much a new beginning as a recasting of the old order: the Constitution and the mass of supplementary legislation that followed it to define how it would work in pratice: ?aimed not so much to create a modernised effective state ? although that was undoubtedly one of the aims of those who framed these laws ? as to provide an alternative, modernised vision of the noble Utopia? (p. 249). It was for this reason, he suggests, that the sejmiks, which had reacted overwhelmingly negatively to the proposals for reform presented to them in 1790, now overwhelmingly endorsed the Constitution and the supplementary legislation, ?which sought to preserve much that was traditional and deemed of value, while balancing it against the new? (p. 248).

Lukowski?s final verdict is therefore a sober one, and his conclusions represent a significant reassessment of the Commonwealth in its last days. Ultimately, he argues, the ?enormous amount of intellectual energy? devoted to shaking the *szlachta* out of its ?mental cul-de-sac? had failed, and the *szlachta* itself had failed ?spectacularly? to create a viable political system. The fact that they were only prepared ?to refurbish their old Commonwealth, not construct a dynamic new one? doomed their state to extinction. With the veto replaced by an impeccably enlightened ? but in practice highly complex ? system of checks and balances, and Rousseau?s concept of the general will enthusiastically coopted to provide a theoretical justification for continuing close control of the executive by citizen assemblies, the reformed Commonwealth was in no position to resist the partitioning powers.

There is much in Lukowski?s assessment that convinces, and his sober realism is a bracing antidote to more optimistic portrayals of these developments: he is clearly sceptical of the revisionist scholarship that in

recent years has attempted to rehabilitate the Saxon monarchs, and he politely points out that much of the data presented by the late Józef Gierowski, the distinguished historian of the Saxon period, in his English-language *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century. From Anarchy to the Well-Ordered State* contradicts the book?s subtitle. Yet for all the cogency of Lukowski?s arguments and the impressive depth of evidence he adduces in support of them, his account is perhaps a little too negative and ungenerous, not so much to the political writers who advocated reform and the politicians who finally achieved it ? to whom he pays due tribute ? as to the *szlachta* citizenry in general. Given the strength of their attachment to the political principles underlying their system, of liberty, of equality ? at least for citizens ? and a suspicion of central government, it is hardly surprising that the *szlachta* sought to retain the essence of that system. Yet even if the reforms of the Four Year Sejm did preserve much of the old system, it did create a wholly new political framework that, had it been allowed to operate by the Commonwealth?s neighbours, would undoubtedly have functioned differently. As Robert Peel pointed out in the debates over the 1832 Reform Act, the Whig advocates of reform were fooling themselves if they thought that the bill they were presenting would preserve the old system that they ? and Peel ? admired so much. It was Peel who, once the Act had been passed, adapted his party most rapidly to the new system that he recognised now existed. Similarly, the intention of the majority of the *szlachta* may well have been, as Lukowski argues, to preserve as much of the old system as possible, but that might not have been the result of the reforms they endorsed so enthusiastically in 1792: as Lukowski admits, the tide of change, once it was unleashed, swept all before it, and much was improvised in response to what was a radically altered political landscape, in which so many of the pillars of the old system had been swept away: not just the veto, but also the elective monarchy that, since 1572, had been regarded as the fundamental basis of Polish liberty.

Yet was the *szlachta* really of one mind? The problem about utilising *sejmik* instructions as a window into *szlachta* attitudes is precisely that they represented the consensus that was possible at meetings of the *sejmiki* , and they disguise the deep divisions that often existed: debates were notoriously tempestuous. Alas, accounts of *sejmik* debates are rare; only in Royal Prussia were detailed protocols taken. Lukowski cites one diary of the 1790 Minsk *sejmik*, but otherwise is dependent on the instructions. Moreover, as he points out, there are very few monographs on 18th-century Sejms, in contrast to the plethora of accounts of 17th-century parliamentary assemblies. Thus, while he devotes close attention to the Four Year Sejm ? which is well served by the secondary literature ? he has not used Sejm diaries, the most extensive of which are in the local state archive in Gda?sk, to any great extent.

This is a pity, for it is often in the detailed debates of the Sejm that much is revealed about szlachta political culture. For just as the vapourings of right-wing shock jocks on American radio are not necessarily a direct window into the soul of ordinary American voters, so the often rancid pamphlet literature in a system without effective censorship do not necessarily indicate what members of the crucial middling nobility ? since the 15th century the bedrock of the political system ? were thinking. And if there were undoubtedly many, indeed probably a majority, whose political views and attachments in general to the old pieties were just as Lukowski portrays them, when it came to practical politics, there are hints in his own material that there was a significant minority of the *szlachta* who thought differently and were willing to contemplate change. Thus in 1790, over the key issue of the introduction of the hereditary monarchy, Lukowski writes that ?only? nine out of 55 *sejmiks* were ready to accept it. Yet for just over 16 per cent of the *sejmiks* to endorse hereditary monarchy is, in the context of the conviction embedded in *szlachta* consciousness since at least the 1660s that elective monarchy was the bedrock of liberty, actually rather remarkable: only 14 sejmiks (25 per cent) ruled out hereditary monarchy entirely. Moreover, it is here that the reliance on instructions may disguise the extent of support for change: in the one surviving *sejmik* vote on the issue, from Sandomierz, the vote in favour of retaining elective monarchy was won by the relatively narrow margin of 206 to 192.

Thus there may well have been a substantial minority who were less enamoured of the status quo than Lukowski suggests, and this may help explain how, when events began to move rapidly, and the reformers finally came together to agree a concrete package of measures in 1791, the tipping-point was reached, and the *sejmiks* rushed to endorse change in 1792. For all the cogency of Lukowski?s account, ultimately, it is

hard to see how the benighted, conservative, reactionary political culture of the Saxon period that he so entertainingly depicts, and of which he is so critical, could ever have endorsed reforms that were ? in the Polish context at least ? so substantial. Moreover, as in Britain in 1832, as Peel was so acutely aware, it was more the fact that reform had been achieved that was important than the details of that reform. Perhaps, as in the contemporary West, the ordinary citizen in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was rather more level-headed than the vapourings of the pamphlet literature might suggest.

Whatever the reality, this book is a major achievement, and should stimulate more research on the issues it raises. It captures well the raucous, combative tone of Polish-Lithuanian politics, and poses a series of interesting and important questions. There is very little to criticise. While due attention is given to Lithuania, it is largely a Polish view of the Commonwealth and Lukowski has not used the considerable collections of archival materials for the *sejmiks* in the Ruthenian areas of the Grand Duchy held in Minsk, or for Royal Prussia, held in Toru? and Gda?sk. More attention might have been given to the Ukrainian palatinates in which Polish political culture had met its greatest challenge after 1648. Micha? Pac, who was just as corrupt and venal as Lukowski suggests, was Grand Hetman of Lithuania from 1667 to 1682, not during the Great Northern War. These, however, are minor quibbles. This is an excellent book, and should provoke thought about the dangers of the gap between the idealised justifications that sustain consensual political systems and the grubby deal-making necessary for their survival.

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