

## Minimal Unity in Diversity

“L’union fait le force” (Unity makes us strong) – say the French. “Zgoda buduje” (Consensus constructs) – say the Poles.<sup>1</sup> We should then strive for unity and concord. Perfect unity and full agreement should be our ideal. Also in matters political. How could we achieve this ideal? We should bring together the dispersed individuals and groups and make them into a “true community.” A “true community” presupposes that its members accept the same fundamental values. Which values? The answers to this question may be diverse: “national,” “religious,” “republican,” “democratic,” “racial...”

The attitude with respect to the ideal of unity may be used as a criterion that allows us to categorize political positions in a manner that differs from the usual. Both representatives of the political left and right have opted for unity, the champions and beneficiaries of “real socialism” and the “dissidents,” thinkers and politicians who are close to religion and those who maintain their distance in relation to it.

One of the institutions composing the facade of “real socialism” in Poland was called – and this surely was not pure chance – “Front of the National Unity.” Under the guidance of the “leading force” of the Communist Party, the nation was supposed to “unite” in that

<sup>1</sup> Polish version: Czesław Porębski, *O Europie i o Europejczykach* (Kraków: Znak, 2000).

organization in order to “increase Poland’s strength and the welfare of the people.”

Quite a number of the 10 million members of the “first” *Solidarity* of 1980/81 still remember it as the locus of an authentic unity, profoundly different from that imposed and stage-directed by the communist party authorities.

The disruption of the uniform camp of *Solidarity*, internal divisions and factions, “wars at the top” of the *Solidarity* movement many have found all this regrettable not only because of lost political opportunities. It was in the first place a sorrow for lost unity, due to the end of a great community that was ready to fight against “them” jointly and in large numbers. “Unity” has been advocated on the grounds of “national values”: we should stay one big family of “true Poles.”

It is no particular feature of the Polish political scene that the adherents of “unity” appear on different sides of the line which demarcates the usual political camps, nor is it exclusively a feature of our time. The political history of France supplies us with many examples of similar phenomena.

Unity was one of the ideals of the French revolutionaries. Inspired by Rousseau and his projects of civic religion they spent much time and rhetorical energy on searching for the right formula for the revolutionary celebrations. In spite of some minor controversies they concurred on the main goal: the revolutionary cult of the state should result in removing all the heterogenic elements from the republic. The authors of the new form of political sacrum were looking for the persuasive means that would enable the “saint institutions” of the republic to penetrate into the hearts and souls of the citizens and push out of their minds all kinds of individualism, non-conformism and intellectual independence. Long would be the list of those who continued this revolutionary tradition:

Comte, Saint-Simon, Fourier would appear on that list. But also Joseph de Maistre. This great conservative thinker, in one of his visions of the desirable future, depicts humankind as united around one and the same table and enjoying a common feast.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of all the longing, expectations and efforts of the advocates of unity, diversity remains a persistent fact. One has then to learn how to live with diversity. In political life the variety of opinions, programs, styles, models of elegance will be our everyday problem. *Savoir vivre* in such a context by necessity has to rely on certain fundamental principles. John Rawls, the author of *Political Liberalism*, underlines the role of three of them.<sup>3</sup>

The first one may be called the principle of acceptance of diversity. Even if we assume that our fellow-citizens are rational human beings, equipped with the sense of justice – which is a rather strong assumption – we have to take into account that our judgments will differ, especially as regards fundamental matters.

Whatever we might desire, this is what we should expect in our world: we shall encounter people whose world views, philosophical positions and religious creeds will be different from ours. To some extent all these differences originate in self-interest and natural human partiality. But this is not the only source of differences as regards fundamental questions. Such differences appear, at least in part, for fundamental reasons. Even experts differ, for example, in their interpretations of empirical data. One of the reasons why our worldviews diverge is that they sum up our own experiences that are only given to us.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986), pp. 139-173.

<sup>3</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), passim.

Another principle may be called the principle of partial agreement. It follows from a simple observation: constitutional order may be established and maintained without reaching full consensus. Partial consensus is enough: the differences between philosophical and religious “comprehensive doctrines” are usually not as profound as to exclude finding the common ground on which to found political cooperation. This common ground on which we meet is of great value as the alternative would be civil war. But the value of partial consensus cannot be reduced to just that. Partial consensus, in spite of being partial, is an authentic consensus: we reach this common ground starting from the respective comprehensive doctrines of our own that define our attitude towards the surrounding reality. Partial consensus is not only of pragmatic value or, at least, it should not be only of this value. It should not be feigned. It should not be temporary – until the moment comes to show others how profoundly we disagree with them, how much we dislike the partial consensus.

The third principle may be called the principle of civic politeness or the principle of civility. One of its manifestations should be that we take recourse to only such linguistic means and arguments that are admissible on the common ground of the “partial consensus.” Another sign of civility is that we are ready to take part in an authentic public debate. This means that we are ready to listen to what others have to say, that we wish to fully understand what their position is and, finally, that we are ready to change our own position if other people’s arguments are cogent. An important component of civility is that we respect the constitutional and legal order as a great common value.

It is difficult not to notice that political life in this country, and elsewhere, is marked by the recurrence of cyclic phenomena that result from a disregard of the above principles. At first, the mat-

adors of “complete unity” enter the centre of the political stage. It is easy to recognize them: they tend to solemnly preach their views as exclusively and entirely correct. What they in fact achieve is that the modest common ground that we owe to partial consensus is not only reduced but also becomes more uncertain. Other benefits of the partial consensus are also getting out of hand. In this situation – when more and more chances and opportunities, that political collaboration within the framework of partial consensus would bring, are lost – even elementary principles of civility and good manners of political life go into oblivion. And the more poignant becomes the longing to reconvene in one’s own, closed, unified group. Of course, this makes political collaboration and co-existence still more difficult.

To avoid these consequences one should accept some version of the rules that Rawls deduces from his “political liberalism.” This would be easier, as they are themselves a variety of praxiological rules of a fruitful discussion.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Roman Ingarden, “O owocnej dyskusji słów kilka,” idem, *Książeczka o człowieku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1972), pp. 187-190. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 189: “trzymanie się z uporem własnego języka, własnego sposobu rozumienia, własnego wartościowania – to właśnie ów brak swobody wewnętrznej, który iluzoryczną czyni wszelką próbę dyskusji między ludźmi.”