

SPEAK, CITIZEN!

Who discussed Polish politics centuries ago, and how?
 What was the language of that discourse? What values did it invoke? What kind of state did it describe?



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Political discourse – understood as a certain way or ways of speaking publicly on issues related to the broadly understood problems of a specific political community – has been studied by historians for quite a long time. This should come as no surprise, given that it is impossible to understand the concrete realities of a given epoch without understanding the language of its political discourse. When we look closer, what we can see here is a distinctive interrelationship: the reality of a given historical period undoubtedly molds the discourse of that period, but the use of specific words and phrases to describe certain political institutions, solutions, and ideals also affects the way the latter are perceived and evaluated.

Although Europe's political discourse (or discourses) in the early modern period flourished largely as a result of the contributions made by such theoreticians of the state as Machiavelli, Bodin, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, the characteristics of that discourse were also determined by less known or even completely obscure participants of political debates. This holds true in particular for the countries where such debates were possible – where not only the ruler but also certain members of society wielded influence over politics, or at least believed they had such influence, and therefore engaged in discussions on political issues. One of these countries, back then referred to as free states or free republics, was the state commonly known in English as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in Polish as the *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów* – the Republic of the Two Nations (the word “Rzeczpospolita,” meaning Commonwealth or Republic, being a calque from the Latin *res publica*, “public thing” or “common thing”). Its political discourse is a very interesting phenomenon, one that deserves an in-depth analysis yet still remains insufficiently well studied.

Discussions of great magnitude

The political culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a culture of dispute and discussion. Such discussions were not limited to statements delivered in the Sejm (the national assembly, also known in English as the “Diet”) and in the regional *sejmik* assemblies (or “dietines”). Whenever the Commonwealth witnessed a flurry of political activity, discussions engaged the whole of the community of nobles, as demonstrated by the copious number of letters that were written over 200 years of elections, confederations, and Sejm assemblies. Not by means of oratory but rather in writing, the authors of these letters expressed various opinions, attacked opponents, and wooed supporters. Despite being unfamiliar with the word “propaganda,” the authors of these texts or those who commissioned them were fully aware of the propaganda role of such statements and used them to showcase their arguments and reach the widest audience possible.

It was in the heat of those disputes that the political discourse was forged by and for the noble citizens of the Republic. As a phenomenon, it was extremely interesting, rich, and deeply rooted in the European traditions yet simultaneously distinctive and molded by the political reality of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Its richness is best demonstrated by profuse source materials left as a legacy of that era. Scholars of the times are indeed inundated by statements that vary in topic, level, and form, ranging from addresses delivered before the Sejm, the *sejmik* assemblies, and courts (recorded in writing for the glory of the authors and to live in the memory of the future generations) to theoretical treatises, from extensive deliberations about the state to pamphlets of an “interventional” nature, from political poetry to prose.

What all those statements on political issues had in common, regardless of their form and characteristics, was the way of describing the affairs of the state, a certain set of shared concepts, an approach to politics, and political values that were respected yet not necessarily held onto in practice. All these characteristics taken together comprised the language of the political discourse in the Polish-Lithuanian Common-

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wealth, a frame of reference for all those who spoke out about issues of importance for the state. What we are talking about here is a single political language, despite the fact that from the perspective of linguistics there were at least two languages, even if we factor out Ruthenian, important in Lithuania and in the east of the Commonwealth, and German, which was used in Royal Prussia: this is because, for a long time, Latin and Polish were used in the political discourse on equal terms. Until the 18th century, Latin was the language of serious treatises (Modrzewski, Wolan, Goślicki, Fredro, Lubomirski, and Karwicki), political pamphlets (proportionately fewer), and elaborate speeches. In some periods (especially in the 17th and early 18th century), Latin was incorporated into Polish texts, or strictly speaking Polish-Latin texts, as a language in its own right. That notwithstanding, there was only one political discourse. It took form

in the 16th century, in the period of the emergence of the noble Republic, under the strong influence of the traditions of antiquity, in particular ancient Rome, revived in Europe by the Italian humanists. However, the Greek heritage, especially that of Aristotle, was also well-known and accepted.

The Republic as a community of citizens

It was the tradition of classical antiquity that served as a source of not only political terminology but also the whole of the concept of the state, which was understood not as an institution external to the individuals who formed it but rather as a community of citizens – a *Rzeczpospolita*, or Republic. In the eyes of those who participated in political discussions until the 18th century, that word, which was part of the name of

"*Apologia pro libertate Reipublicae*" (1625),
a drawing of *Respublica Polona*.



CENTRAL ARCHIVES OF HISTORICAL RECORDS (AGAD), PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF THE POTOCKI FAMILY, MANUSCRIPT 38

their country, referred both to a certain polity and to a certain territorial domain, as well as to a certain community who formed that polity and inhabited that domain. Such an understanding had far-reaching consequences. On the one hand, the Republic bound together all citizens who represented different religious denominations and languages, which was extremely important at the beginning its existence.

On the other hand, it excluded those who were not citizens. Importantly, both peasants and burghers not only enjoyed no rights but practically disappeared from the political discourse at the end of the 16th century to re-emerge two centuries later, when not only the Polish realities but also the discourse had undergone serious changes. The Republic we are speaking of here was a community of nobles. It acted as the only guarantor of freedom, understood as the ability of citizens to decide about themselves (and their community), regardless of what others wanted. Again, that concept was rooted in antiquity and distant from we know today as negative liberty, or the freedom to enjoy what we own within the limits imposed by the law. It was not freedom understood as something that every human being was naturally entitled to (such a concept did not exist in the 16th century), but freedom created and protected by the laws of a country that was free, both from foreign violence and from domestic tyranny. It was freedom (not efficiency or effectiveness) and the question of potential threats to freedom that served as the main criterion for evaluating any institutions and solutions that pertained to the system of government.

Above personal interests

Another very interesting characteristic of the political discourse of that period was the absolutely inseparable link between ethics and politics. The concept of virtue, today largely anachronistic and most certainly no longer associated with politics, was an integral part of the way people spoke and thought about the state. It was by no means a Sarmatian oddity but an idea that was popular in Europe in the 16th and partly in the 17th century and sometimes referred as republican. It held that the existence of a free republic could only be guaranteed by specific attitudes on the part of those who formed it, above all by the dominance of the common good over personal interests. It was Machiavelli who started to separate morality from politics, whereas Hobbes dealt a final blow to that vision, which nonetheless remained in the Polish discourse until the 18th century. At the end of that period, however, some authors who remained under the influence of Western theories kept moral issues out of political considerations. Moreover, the form in which the concept of virtue was retained was relatively ossified, in a sense even dangerous: instead of the descriptions of the model behaviors of citizens and the

ways to achieve them, the period of the crisis of the state witnessed futile laments on the demise of virtue that treated the crisis as an alibi, an explanation of why the state institutions did not work or worked badly.

The language of the times of crisis

The political discourse that emerged during the great political dispute of the 16th and early 17th century, an otherwise diverse and interesting phenomenon whose experience and concepts enriched the European traditions, ossified over time. It failed to incorporate new concept or ideas that were developed and discussed in the west of Europe in the 17th century. Still worse, the language that was once alive and consisted of words that carried political connotations became a set of empty platitudes that were reiterated because the recipients expected them, but they were devoid of any profound meaning. It could be said at that the noble language of politics in the early 18th century could not describe and therefore also could not notice the threats that were looming over the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Likewise, it was not prepared to describe and propose changes that were already taking place or had to be effected in the social structure and the system of government. Attempts to breathe new life into the political language were made by the participants of the discussions in the times of King Stanisław August Poniatowski. Unlike their predecessors in the Renaissance, they did not look for words to describe new institutions of the system of government and the law; instead, they attempted to find a language that would allow them to address the crisis in the state. Without the rejection of the old discourse, new concepts such as social contract, the separation of powers, and natural freedom started to be used in the discourse, first by the most prominent individuals and then by more and more participants of political life. Old terms, such as "nation" and "citizen," were imbued with more profound, sometimes even new meanings. As a result of this, it proved possible to name phenomena and problems that had not been noticed in the former discourse (such as freedom as the inalienable right of every person, not as a privilege enjoyed by noble citizens), formulate concepts with greater precision, and explain the misunderstandings that resulted from the combination or confusion of certain concepts (civil liberty for everyone, political liberty for citizens). An increasingly modern language of political debate slowly started to take form.

Unfortunately, its future would be determined not by the influence of new concepts but by the political realities. The ultimate demise of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth also meant the end of the political discourse created by its citizens.

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Further reading:

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