

The Polish Round Table of 1989: The Cultural Dimension(s) of the Negotiated Regime Change

Jan Kubik

1. Introduction. Modeling the Round Table (RT) process as a political-cultural phenomenon.

In this essay, I will look at the Polish Round Table (RT) from a “political culture” perspective. There is no room here to present a complete and exhaustive picture of this perspective and its place in the most recent theorizing on culture. I summarize the main assumptions of my approach in Appendix 1; it is strongly influenced by Sewell’s recent synthesizing article.¹ As for political culture, I adopt a useful definition offered by Gamson: “A nonredundant concept of political culture refers to the meaning systems that are culturally available for talking, writing, and thinking about political objects: the myths and metaphors, the language and idea elements, the frames, ideologies, values, and condensing symbols.”² I focus, therefore, on the “meaning systems” (or “webs of significance”) that were developed and used by various participants of the Round Table negotiations to visualize, conceptualize, analyze, criticize, evaluate and propagate strategies of (political) action they and their adversaries were employing.

Specifically, the theoretical frame of this essay is based on:

1. An approach to the study of the relationship between culture and politics, informed by (a) the Geertzian definition of culture as a “web of significance” and (b) Swidler’s idea to construe “culture’s causal significance not in defining ends

¹ William H. Sewell, Jr., “The Concept(s) of Culture,” in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond The Cultural Turn: New Direction in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

² William A. Gamson, “Political Discourse and Collective Action,” in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *International Social Movement Research, Vol. 1, From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research Across Cultures* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), 220.

of action, but in providing *cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action.*"³

2. Conceptualizations of social processes that explicitly problematize the dialectics between social action and textualization of social reality (narrativization, emplotment). Here I borrow heavily from cultural anthropology (particularly Geertz and Victor Turner) and sociology of culture.⁴

3. Cross-cultural studies on conflict resolution.⁵

Victor Turner's concept of social drama will serve as the main organizing device for this paper:

At its simplest, the drama consists of a four-stage model, proceeding from breach of some relationship regarded as crucial in the relevant social group, which provides not only its setting but many of its goals, through a phase of rapidly mounting crisis in the direction of the group's major dichotomous cleavage, to the application of legal or ritual means of redress or reconciliation between the conflicting parties which compose the action set. The final stage is either the public and symbolic expression of reconciliation or else of irremediable schism.⁶

To this sequence of four phases, Breach, Crisis, Redress, Reconciliation/Schism, I will add one more: Pre-redress. This is a period in the development of social drama when the earliest modifications in the actors' cultural schemas occur and when the preliminary contacts between adversaries are established. But, the whole process at this point is easily reversible, there is no firm commitment to the redress action, and an institutional

³ Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies" *American Sociological Review* 51 (April 1986): 272.

⁴ Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, "Introduction," in Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, eds., *Culture/Power/History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3-45; Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond The Cultural Turn. New Direction in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Michael D. Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Postcommunism: Emancipation, Transition, Nation and War* (book manuscript, 1999); Mabel Berezin, *Making The Fascist Self. The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁵ Kevin Avruch, Peter W. Black and Joseph A. Scimecca, eds., *Conflict Resolution. Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Westport: Praeger, 1991).

⁶ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 79.

setup for redress is not yet created. For the sake of simplification, I merge Breach and Crisis and thus isolate in the RT process, conceptualized as a social drama, *four* phases:

- (1) The pre-RT period (1980-1986). It begins with the *Breach* in the socialist status quo, that is the creation of Solidarity in 1980. Next, a long phase of *Crisis* follows (with the Martial Law period being its essential part).
- (2) The Amnesty of September 11, 1986 (all Solidarity activists are released from prison) opens the *Pre-Redress* phase. In this section I emphasize the specificity of the Polish resistance to communism.
- (3) The RT process per se (February 6, 1989 - August 24, 1989 [formation of the Mazowiecki cabinet]), constituting the *Redress* phase. Here I focus on two pairs of contradictions/tensions: confrontation versus compromise and exclusion versus inclusion.
- (4) The post-RT period: *Schism or Reconciliation?* Analytical emphasis is placed on the conflict between various interpretations of the RT and their political relevance.

The empirical base of the project includes:

1. Documentation produced within the Michigan project, including: (a) the transcript of the conference and (b) transcripts of the interviews with several key participants of the RT negotiations⁷;
2. My own memories of and notes on informal conversations and debates I had with several participants in Ann Arbor (April 1999) and elsewhere;
3. Several existing historical and sociological accounts and analyses of the Round Table (RT);⁸

⁷ Interviews were conducted with several participants in the April 1999 conference while they were in Ann Arbor. Interview audiotapes were subsequently transcribed under the auspices of a contract from the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER), under authority of a Title VIII grant from the US Department of State, for the project, "Negotiating Revolution in Poland: Conversion and Opportunity in 1989." (This contract, awarded to Michael D. Kennedy and Brian Porter, has also supported additional interviews in Poland with both participants in, and opponents of, the RT negotiations.) Neither NCEEER nor the US Government is responsible for the views expressed within this text.

⁸ Andrzej Paczkowski, *Od sfalszowanego zwycięstwa do prawdziwej klęski* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999); Marjorie Castle, *Changing Arenas, Changing Players: Regime and Opposition in Poland's Transition from Communist Rule* (book manuscript, no date); John Elster, ed.,

4. Documentation produced by Polish participants.⁹

In order to trace the dynamic of the RT process, for each phase I will try to determine the following set of features:

1. The dominant symbolic vision(s) of the polity
2. The dominant relationship between the elite and followers in Solidarity
3. The dominant relationship between the elite and followers in the party-state
4. The dominant mode of interaction between the main adversaries.

Additionally, in order to suggest possible generalizations and lessons to be learned from the Polish experience, I will also:

5. Identify the main feature of each phase
6. Offer a few simple theoretical points learned from or relevant for each phase

2. The Pre-RT Period: Breach and Crisis.

When Polish communists granted their full legal recognition to Solidarity in the fall of 1980, they suspended the rules of the political game the Soviets had imposed on Eastern Europe after WWII. A massive organization, fully autonomous and free from their control, was formed. But, at that time, the breach proved to be too radical, and with the imposition of Martial Law and delegalization of Solidarity on December 13, 1981, state socialism attempted to re-assert itself. The process, known as “normalization,” did not work, however. The Solidarity movement was too massive and too deeply entrenched in the society to be crashed. The country entered a five-year period of simmering crisis. During this crisis a cultural-political polarization of the polity intensified.

The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁹ Bronisław Geremek (with Jacek Żakowski), *Geremek Opowiada, Żakowski Pyta. Rok 1989* (Warsaw: Plejada, 1990); Krzysztof Dubiński, *Okrągły Stół* (Warsaw: KAP, 1990); Krzysztof Dubiński, *Magdalenka: Transakcja Epoki* (Warsaw: Sylvia, 1990).

2.1. *Dominant Vision of the Polity: Bi-Polar Cleavage: Solidarity Versus the Communists.*

As I demonstrated elsewhere,¹⁰ the Polish anticommunist “revolution” was a cultural-political phenomenon of massive proportions, by comparison with other East European countries. During the 1970’s and early 1980’s, a substantial number of people engaged in the formulation, development and defense of a counter-hegemonic vision, which served to de-legitimize the state-socialist system and, simultaneously, allowed these people to constitute themselves as an “oppositional” cultural-class of Solidarity. Put another way, Solidarity was never simply a trade union or a movement, but a cultural class *in statu nascendi*, never fully “consolidated,” subjected to the tremendous internal centrifugal tensions which operated together with the centripetal forces of symbolic unification. By 1991, the centrifugal political (both programmatic and personal) tensions destroyed Solidarity (as a specific “cultural” class), but throughout the 1980’s a substantial portion of the Polish populace “belonged” to it, either actively, by engaging in various clandestine activities; or passively, by giving it their “moral support.” The cultural frame which held this class together was built as a polar vision of “we/the people/Solidarity” versus “them/authorities/communists.”

Several students of the 1981-1989 period in Poland concluded that the cultural vitality and political significance of this polar frame during these years not only did not decline, but seems to have increased. Anna Uhlig, author of an excellent study of political symbolism during the 1980’s, wrote: “after December 13, 1981 the opposition’s drive to make a distinction between ‘our Poland’ (the Solidarity Republic) from ‘their Poland’ (Polish People’s Republic) intensifies.”¹¹ The events that helped the “opposition” to construct this hegemonic polar cleavage included two papal visits, the murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko and the immediate emergence of his cult, and countless street demonstrations and clashes with the police as well as large industrial strikes in 1988. Not everybody, of course, participated in this ongoing, political and symbolic confrontation with the regime, and not everybody accepted the polar vision of the conflict. In fact, the actual numbers of those who supported Solidarity kept declining throughout the 1980’s and rebounded only after Solidarity’s spectacular electoral victory in 1989.¹² Yet the perception of the hegemonic conflict between “us” and “them” continued to be the most characteristic feature of Polish popular political culture. Jasiewicz and Adamski summarized a longitudinal study of Polish attitudes in the following fashion: “Spontaneous answers show that in 1988 somewhat fewer respondents than in 1984 perceive the presence of conflict in Polish society, which is,

¹⁰ Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power. The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Anna Uhlig, *W kręgu symbolu. O polskiej kulturze politycznej lat osiemdziesiątych* (Warsaw: Uniwersytet Warszawski, Instytut Nauk Politycznych, 1989), 61.

¹² Krzysztof Jasiewicz, “Polish Politics on the Eve of the 1993 Elections: Towards Fragmentation or Pluralism?” *Communist and Postcommunist Studies* 26 (4) (1993): 110-12.

however, perceived by almost half the respondents. The great majority of those who perceive conflict define it as between the authorities and society."¹³

It is therefore clear that during the waning years of state socialism in Poland (1976-1989), an extreme, *bi-polar* conceptualization of the public space ("we" versus "them") was formed and became a crucial weapon in the "society's" struggle against the unwanted regime. This bi-polar conceptualization ((di)vision) was not shared by everybody, yet it served as a mobilizing frame for the most active individuals and groups.

2.2. *Solidarity: Dominant Relationship Between the Elite and Followers.*

During that phase, Solidarity was highly unified and most followers felt that they were "well represented" by the underground structures; a sense of *inclusion* was clearly dominant in the movement. It is important to remember, however, that the numbers of followers were dwindling and the Solidarity activists had to resort to various symbolic strategies exaggerating the actual strength and the degree of unity of the movement.¹⁴

2.3. *Party-State: Dominant Relationship Between the Elite and Followers.*

During this phase, the party-state seems to have been strongly united behind its leader, General Wojciech Jaruzelski. The sense of *inclusion* among the party apparatus (*nomenklatura*) at various levels must have been high.¹⁵

2.4. *Dominant Mode of Interaction Between the Main Adversaries.*

The party-state and Solidarity were engaged in an intense, multi-level confrontation. As Solidarity developed massive underground structures and from time to time engaged the security forces in frequently violent *confrontations*, the state relied on repressive

¹³ Krzysztof Jasiewicz and Władysław Adamski, "Evolution of the oppositional consciousness," in Władysław W. Adamski, ed., *Societal Conflict and Systemic Change. The Case of Poland 1980-1992* (Warsaw: IFiS Publishers, 1993), 55.

¹⁴ Grażyna Staniszevska, conversations in Ann Arbor, April 1999 and in *Communism's Negotiated Collapse: The Polish Round Table, Ten Years Later. A Conference at the University of Michigan. April 7-10, 1999. English Transcript of the Conference Proceedings*, trans. by Kasia Kietlinska, ed. by Donna Parmelee (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Russian and East European Studies, 1999). References to the Round Table transcript correspond to the original printed version of the transcript. They may not correspond to the transcript currently available on the web or to subsequent printed versions.

¹⁵ The tentativeness of this assessment is justified by the scarcity of empirical data.

techniques. Due to the authoritarian political structure and the lack of contacts between both sides, the repertoire of political contestation was limited to street protests and infrequent strikes.

2.5. *The Dominant Feature of This Phase Was the Symbolic Bi-Polarization of the Polity and Society.*

2.6. *Theoretical Points.*

A. Under the conditions of strong symbolic polarization and a stable and “hostile” external political context, conflict becomes intractable. Yet:

B. Researchers should focus on the way the symbolic politics is being played (the contest of cultural hegemony versus counter-hegemony) and try to identify possible openings for a dialogue. In this case, the “*exhaustion*” of the existing system’s potential for economic growth was becoming increasingly clear to certain “reformers” within the ruling elite.¹⁶ At the same time, some Solidarity activists were realizing that eventual dialogue and compromise was inevitable; other strategies (such as violent confrontation and overthrow) were increasingly untenable.¹⁷

C. Kriesberg’s brief article on the transition from intractable to tractable conflicts is very useful. His description of the tractable conflict fits perfectly the Pre-redress and Redress phases of the Polish conflict: “The minimal benchmarks of tractable conflicts include the following three features. First, the adversary parties recognize considerable mutual interests and shared identity, and not only incompatible interests of distinct, exclusive identities. Second, significant members of each adversary side acknowledge minimal rights of the other and the propriety of the other’s claims. Third, the adversaries agree to rely on nonviolent means of pursuing their conflict and procedures to settle specific issues in contention between them.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Rakowski, *Interview Transcript*; Gdula, *Interview Transcript*.

¹⁷ Kaczyński, *Interview Transcript*; Bujak, *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*, 37.

¹⁸ Louis Kreisberg, “Intractable Conflicts,” in Weiner, Eugene, ed., *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 337.

3. Pre-Redress Phase (September 11, 1986 - February 6, 1989).

This phase began with the full amnesty ordered on September 11, 1986. According to several interviewees, this was a truly significant breakthrough point. It signaled the regimes' readiness to switch from confrontation to dialogue with the opposition.¹⁹ What factors caused this change? A minimal list should include the following:

1. External political factors: A change in the political opportunity structure (POS) and its framing, caused by Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union.²⁰
2. Internal political and economic factors: an increasingly acute political stalemate between Solidarity and the party-state. The May and August 1988 strikes demonstrated Solidarity's staying power (however weakened). Equally importantly, during the second half of the decade some key members of the ruling elite came to the conclusion that state socialism reached a state of systemic "exhaustion," particularly in the domain of economy.²¹

3.1. *The dominant symbolic vision(s) of the polity.*

During this phase the cultural/symbolic maneuvers are particularly important, for many actors are beginning to reconsider their own and their enemies' identities. A gradual process of dismantling prior stereotypes begins. In Poland, this phase was still dominated by symbolic bi-polarization (Solidarity versus the communists), and the symbolic unity of Solidarity was perceived by its key activists as a necessary pre-condition of eventual success. Michnik noted: "I thought that the only method to dismantle communism is a strong social identity, and this was provided by Solidarity and Wałęsa."²² Yet, a slow reconceptualization of the socio-political map was beginning. In that process some "enemies" were re-defined as "adversaries one can talk to" and a search for a common platform was initiated. Kaczyński noted the paradoxical nature of this phase: "there existed certain confusion between treating communists as enemies and the necessity of eventual negotiations with them."²³ Geremek succinctly

¹⁹ Kaczyński, *Interview Transcript*; Rakowski, *Interview Transcript*; Michnik, conversation (April 1999).

²⁰ Paczkowski, 165. For example, on January 4, 1989 Rakowski informed the Episcopate: "we are now completely free to re-furnish our house."

²¹ Paczkowski, 171; Rakowski, *Interview Transcript*; Reykowski, *Interview Transcript*.

²² *Interview Transcript*.

²³ Kaczyński, *Interview Transcript*, 5.

summarized the whole problem as a difficulty of moving from “an ethos of the struggle and hostility to an ethos of civilized political game.”²⁴

Undoubtedly, this gradual rapprochement was triggered by the real and perceived changes in the political opportunity structure, noted above. But, while some members of both elites began drifting toward a dialogue, others cultivated their unwavering hostility toward the other side. Which factors help to explain this increasing divergence in political behavior, predicated, it seems, on an ability to learn new cultural scenarios?

People’s ability to engage in such “strategic learning” varies.²⁵ Most, if not all, participants of the RT process demonstrated some flexibility and readiness for such learning. A minimal motivation to enter negotiations came from a conviction that there were no other viable alternatives.²⁶ But there existed other mechanisms as well. While reading through the interview transcripts and various statements, I identified three such mechanisms:

A. *“Dialogic” personalities.* Michnik described in detail how his personal background (“a communist family”) predisposed him to see in communists human beings. Additionally, he was able to see a difference between the communist doctrine (that he was always ready to fight) and communist functionaries, fellow human beings capable of errors and change, and potential partners for a dialogue.

B. *Philosophical affinities.* Some RT participants emphasized philosophical affinity with some members of the “other side.” This affinity was based on subscribing to loosely understood tenets of left-leaning liberalism.²⁷ Adherents of this philosophical creed could be found among the younger members of the “communist camp.”²⁸ This observation underscores the significance of the generational change.

²⁴ Geremek, 146

²⁵ During strategic learning people “revise their perceptions of what is feasible, possible and indeed desirable in the light of their assessment of their own ability to realize prior goals (and that of others), as they assimilate new ‘information’ [Colin Hay and Daniel Wincott, “Interrogating Institutionalism, Interrogating Institutions: Beyond ‘Calculus’ and ‘Cultural’ Approaches” (paper downloaded from CLIO, 1999, 12-13)].

²⁶ Kaczyński, *Interview Transcript*.

²⁷ Reykowski, *Interview Transcript*.

²⁸ Gdula, *Interview Transcript*; Rakowski, *Interview Transcript*.

C. *Cultural commonalities*. I was able to detect three:

- “Polishness” (Rakowski, Reykowski). According to Reykowski, during one of the critical political debates someone observed: “What’s wrong with Solidarity taking over power? They are also Poles.”²⁹ Gebert writes: “...In Poland (by contrast to Yugoslavia - JK) we could throw out to the communist side the idea that we were all Poles together. Whatever the political differences, we are all good Poles, good patriots, we all love our country”;³⁰
- Activists of both sides sometimes stressed the “common sense” and “pragmatism” of their interlocutors (e.g., Reykowski on Michnik, Staniszevska on Kwaśniewski);³¹
- A decisive predilection for “bloodless” cultural scenarios, shared by both sides. This predilection comes from a specific interpretation of (common) Polish history, which suggests a singularly important lesson: no more blood.³²

3.2. *Solidarity: Dominant relationship between the elite and followers.*

A gradual shift from confrontation to dialogue engendered a process of polarization (or diversification) within the Solidarity elites.³³ A group of influential activists emerged, who interpreted rapprochement with communists as “treason.” According to them, communists were preparing “another trick.”³⁴ Nonetheless, Wałęsa and his closest advisers at that time were increasingly convinced that there was only one way out of the deepening crisis: negotiations.³⁵

²⁹ Reykowski, *Interview Transcript*, 7.

³⁰ Konstanty Gebert, “Ten Years After: Reflections on the Round Table,” *Bulletin. East and Central Europe Program, The Graduate Faculty, New School University*, vol. 9/3 (October 1999): 4.

³¹ See, for example, Reykowski, *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*, 140.

³² Gebert; also, personal communication with Gebert. Laura Edles demonstrates that a similar cultural maneuver (necessitating a specific interpretation of history) was successfully implemented by the Spanish elites. See Laura Edles, *Symbol and Ritual in the New Spain. The Transition to Democracy after Franco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³³ Chrzanowski, *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*; Hall, *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*; Michnik, *Interview Transcript*.

³⁴ Michnik, *Interview Transcript*.

³⁵ Geremek; Kaczyński, *Interview Transcript*; Lech Kaczyński and Jan Lityński, “Kompromisu blaski i cienie,” *Rzeczpospolita*, September 11, 1999.

3.3. Party-state: Dominant relationship between the elite and followers.

A parallel process of fragmentation (or polarization) began among the ruling elite.³⁶ A secret poll conducted in November 1988 among over one hundred regional party secretaries revealed that eighty-five percent of them were against “transcending the fundamental features of the system.”³⁷ That meant a decisive rejection of any rapprochement with Solidarity. Stelmachowski reports that after the announcement of the Wałęsa - Kiszczak meeting on August 31, 1988, thirty-two regional (voivodship) party secretaries sent to the Central Committee memoranda expressing their protest against such a meeting. According to Stelmachowski, one of them argued: “For seven years the government argued that Wałęsa is stupid, and now it decides to talk to him. Hence our question: did he become wiser or the government stupider?”³⁸ The most famous phrase, summarizing the attitude of many party members toward the new approach to Solidarity, was coined by Stanisław Ciosek. As he put it: “The Party howled.”

In brief, the decision to establish initial contacts with Solidarity triggered the increasing polarization within the party-state elite. The “pro-Solidarity” part of this elite began drifting away from those members of the *nomenklatura* who felt threatened by the emerging possibility of the regime modification or, even, change.³⁹ In an attempt to alleviate this budding polarization, the party “reformers” had to devise a series of propaganda moves that would produce a modicum of reassurance for the disgruntled apparatchiks. The political significance of communication between the elite and its “base” increased dramatically. In fact, both elites had to play a double communicative game. They had to interact with their opponents, the “other” elite, according to the unclear rules of a complex game of signals, overtures and tactical withdrawals. At the same time they had to talk to their own “base.” Signals sent through these channels often had to be quite different. An excellent example is provided by Dubiński.⁴⁰ On August 31, Polish Press Agency (PAP) announced that General Kiszczak met with Lech Wałęsa. It was an event of enormous significance. This official reference to Wałęsa, previously referred to by the regime’s spokesman as a private person of no consequence, represented yet another manifestation of Solidarity’s re-entry into the public domain. In an effort to dilute the significance of this event, PAP issued on the same day two other communiqués, informing the public of Kiszczak’s other meetings. The signal to the

³⁶ Rakowski *Interview Transcript*, 9.

³⁷ Paczkowski, 160-61.

³⁸ Andrzej Stelmachowski, “Telefon do Sekretarza,” *Rzeczpospolita*, February 6, 1999.

³⁹ Orszulik (*Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*, 58) on the first Magdalenka meeting (September 16, 1988): “I was sitting next to two such prominent members [of the hard-line faction - JK] and they were saying: ‘What the heck do they want? What are they demanding? This is impossible!’”

⁴⁰ Dubiński, *Okrągły Stół*, 52.

“base” seems to have been clear: no big deal with this Wałęsa, Kiszczak is just meeting a lot of people from various organizations.

3.4. *The dominant mode of interaction between the main adversaries.*

The tenor of the interaction began to change from confrontation to dialogue. The change was occurring simultaneously in several dimensions.

First, both sides, but particularly Solidarity, had to re-establish their “credentials”: to signal their presence as a “serious” force and demonstrate their unity. Prior to January 1989, no polls were allowed to measure Solidarity’s support, but in the assessment of many Polish sociologists this support was systematically dwindling since 1980.⁴¹ The re-invigoration of Solidarity’s public standing was, therefore, no small matter. An occasion to do so presented itself when Miodowicz, the head of the pre-regime labor union federation (OPZZ), challenged Wałęsa to debate him in “a TV duel.” Despite tremendous fears and reservations (in itself indicating an acute understanding of the “public relations” aspect of political struggle), Wałęsa, prepared by Andrzej Wajda and other media experts, accepted the challenge and, subsequently, “creamed” Miodowicz (as Michnik put it in an interview).⁴² This was a *symbolic breakthrough*: Wałęsa not only proved that Solidarity was still alive but he also demonstrated that he and the movement were a serious, credible and relatively powerful force on the public scene. As Paczkowski reports, support for Solidarity’s legalization went up from forty-two percent in August 1988 to sixty-two percent a day after the debate.⁴³ In general, as several participants confirmed, the game of mutual perceptions, through which both sides were attempting to test their relative weaknesses and strengths, was very important at this stage.⁴⁴

Second, as both sides were staking out symbolically their positions vis-à-vis each other, they also had to begin building preliminary bridges of communication. At this stage, the choice of a proper idiom was very important. The language and cultural imagery that framed the situation and the identities of both sides had to be carefully chosen. As Stelmachowski observed: “You may think this is amusing, but I had to use

⁴¹ Krzysztof Jasiewicz, personal communication; Castle, Chapter 4, 1-3.

⁴² Michnik, *Interview Transcript*; Geremek, 24-28.

⁴³ Paczkowski, 158.

⁴⁴ See, in particular, Jaruzelski’s presentation to the Secretariat of the Central Committee from December 5, 1988 [Stanisław Perzkowski, ed., *Ostatni rok władzy 1988-1989. Tajne Dokumenty Biura Politycznego i Sekretariatu KC* (London: Aneks, 1994), 196-99]. See also, Staniszevska’s contribution to the Conference and the following debate, in *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*, 143-48.

their language, because otherwise nothing would have happened as far these negotiations are concerned.”⁴⁵

Third, if communication was to happen at all, appropriate spaces for preliminary contacts had to be established. To describe those spaces Kaczyński used the metaphor of “locks.” They were initially provided by (a) private apartments, (b) Church spaces and (c) state-sponsored seminars or consultative bodies. Later, the (in)famous villa Magdalena became the main “lock” between both sides.⁴⁶

Fourth, the process from the beginning was facilitated by the constant presence of the mediator: the Roman Catholic Church, enjoying at that time enormous and unchallenged authority in the society.

3.5. The main features of this phase:

1. Mutual adjustment of identities and strategies;

2. Gradualism (incrementalism): the move from confrontation to dialogue is gradual and “dialogic” from the beginning;

3. The cultural/symbolic side of this process is of primary significance. Symbols, images and rhetorical figures, are used concurrently to (a) sharpen the relative position of both adversaries and (b) build discursive bridges between them.⁴⁷

3.6. Main theoretical points learned from this phase:

A. After a change within the “objective” context opens a possibility of moving the conflict from its intractable phase to tractability, the actors themselves must take initiative and introduce preliminary steps on the road to compromise. Cultural/symbolic scenarios, that shape identities, strategies, and mutual perceptions, are of critical importance at this stage. In brief, this stage is dominated by cultural politics.

⁴⁵ Stelmachowski. Geremek describes how he had to choose a language acceptable to the authorities in his influential article from February 1988, in which he proposed forming an “anti-crisis pact”, 9-10.

⁴⁶ Geremek, 20.

⁴⁷ A captivating confirmation of this proposition comes from Jaruzelski himself. In his presentation to the Party leadership one finds the following fragment: “Accord–struggle. Obviously we have always claimed that accord and struggle are inseparable. The weight of these two words changes, depending on the situation...” (*Ostatni rok władzy*, 1999).

B. The signs of possible rapprochement must come from the centers of power (the Jaruzelski and Wałęsa circles) to be credible.

4. The Redress Phase: the Round Table negotiations and their immediate aftermath.
(February 6, 1989 - August 24, 1989 [formation of the Mazowiecki cabinet]).

This phase reveals crucial structural contradictions underpinning a social change via elite negotiations: on the one hand, the negotiating game, by necessity, calls for exclusion of the majority of a given camp. To be effective, negotiating teams must be relatively small. On the other hand, the “size” of each elite’s constituency (“base”) or the “depth” of its support is a very powerful bargaining chip. Each elite, therefore, tends to cultivate such support or, at least, invest a lot of resources in creating and upholding an image of its “massive base.” As Kuroń, one of the Solidarity leaders, told Castle: “We threatened each other with our bases.”⁴⁸ Thus, the logistical demand for *exclusion*, must be constantly counterbalanced by some form (purely symbolic, at least) of *inclusion* (of the base). Moreover, if the whole process is to gain a wider legitimacy, at the end of the negotiations, the logic of inclusion must take precedence over the logic of exclusion; a mechanism must be found to re-incorporate the “society” into the process of change. This can be achieved through a skillful ritualization. In brief, the resolution of this tension between exclusion and inclusion determines the final outcome of a social drama and the way its legacy is going to shape further developments.

It seems that this basic dynamic interplay of exclusion and inclusion determines other features of the redress phase in a social drama played according to a scenario of negotiations.

4.1. The dominant symbolic vision(s) of the polity.

The dominant vision of the polity in this phase was still bi-polar, but a picture of the “untouchable” enemy was being slowly replaced by a vision of an adversary-as-a-negotiating partner. Negotiations are impossible without a symbolic platform of commonality. To create such a platform, several principal actors engaged in discursive actions aimed at discharging potentially explosive historical memories. Reykowski said:

Another [condition of successful negotiations – JK] was the principle of not discussing symbolic problems. We were to solve the future, and avoid arguing about the past. We believed, and I think most of us agreed here, that if we started getting into discussions about the past wrongs, we wouldn’t accomplish

⁴⁸ Castle, Chapter 4, 18.

anything. We had to accept the fact that we looked at different things from the past in different ways, and that we had different visions of various symbolic problems. There were situations when someone couldn't help raising such a problem, and the emotions flared, but I think we were in solidarity trying to weaken these emotions during the negotiations.⁴⁹

Such visions of commonality must be, however, counterbalanced by images of separateness. Otherwise, a perception of "selling out" or even "becoming polluted" emerges among the "base," and some critics of a dialogue begin to develop a narrative of treason.⁵⁰ As a result, a crisp, bi-polar vision of the socio-political field is replaced by an ambiguous, hazy picture of the elite, whose previously totally separate segments are now somewhat overlapping.

Since each elite had to position itself vis-à-vis two different audiences, the adversarial elite and its own followers, one would expect that they attempted to master the art of putting forth various identities, depending on the situation. Even a cursory reading of various party documents and statements confirms this hypothesis. On the party-state side I detected three different discourses (languages) of identity:

A. *The party elite as an open-minded, **compromise-prone partner**.*

In this role they use a negotiations-facilitating language.⁵¹

B. *The party elite as a "real politic," pragmatic strategist.*

This idiom was used in the internal disputes (in the Politburo or Central Committee meetings).⁵²

⁴⁹ *Communism's Negotiated Collapse*, 141.

⁵⁰ See Geremek's vivid and dramatic depiction of this process, 146. Hall observed in his conversation with Castle (Chapter 4, 16): "The most important thing was that society, and particularly that part of society which identified with Solidarity and with the opposition, did not get the impression that the border between the camp of the authorities and the camp of the opposition had been erased. That it didn't get the impression that the system was being transformed only as a result of co-opting part of the former opposition elite into the ruling elite. That would have meant a defeat, a fundamental defeat for all of us, since we were convinced that our strength resulted above all from social support. For society it must be clear that it isn't a matter of creating a new Front of National Unity, but that instead there are two forces here, each internally differentiated but each clearly distinct from the other: the camp of the authorities and the camp of the opposition."

⁵¹ This idiom/discourse was used, for example, during the Magdalenka talks (examples in Dubiński, *Magdalenka*).

⁵² Many examples in *Ostatni Rok Władzy*.

C. The party elite as a trustworthy member of the communist bloc.

This identity was couched in an ideological idiom and used mostly for external consumption.⁵³ It is striking that in 1989, as best as I can judge, the ideological fervor of this discourse was much reduced, compared both with earlier years in Poland and with the “official” discourses of the Czechoslovak or East German parties. This pragmatization of the official ideological discourse produced by the leadership of the PUWP confirms the thesis that they were the closest allies of Gorbachev in Eastern Europe.

4.2. The dominant relationship between the elite and followers in Solidarity.

Since during this phase the number of actors directly involved in the political process is limited, the politics of exclusion (who gets in, who is left out, who makes such decisions) takes on a tremendous significance. The main reason for this may be what is bound to happen next: during the post-redress period, the exclusionary politics of the redress phase becomes the subject of an intense symbolic war of interpretations.

Some Solidarity politicians seem to have realized this significance early on and invested a lot of energy in communicating with their base. “The Round Table talks were not only talks between the representatives of the opposition and the representatives of the authorities. They were also our talks with society,” observed Piotr Nowina-Konopka, a Solidarity spokesman.⁵⁴ After the inaugural meeting of the RT, Wałęsa toured several major industrial centers and met with potential supporters at rallies.⁵⁵ As most observers indicate, these propagandistic efforts of Solidarity leaders were extremely important, for the size of the base was very unclear and seems to have been weak. There exists, however, evidence indicating that as the negotiations were progressing the support for Solidarity increased.

4.3. The party-state: the dominant relationship between the elite and followers.

The split within the party cadres widened.⁵⁶ But generals Jaruzelski and Kiszczak were firmly in control of the basic apparatuses of power, such as the army and the police.⁵⁷ Their authority and support for their policies within the communist party was less clear, though. Castle reports that “fifty to seventy percent of its members supported the

⁵³ See a report on Jaruzelski’s visit to GDR in May 1989 (*Ostatni Rok Władzy*, 363-66).

⁵⁴ Castle’s interview with Konopka, Chapter 4, 12.

⁵⁵ Castle, Chapter 4, 9. It should be noted, however, that Geremek assessed Solidarity’s communicative attempts negatively, 145.

⁵⁶ Rakowski, *Interview Transcript*, 10.

⁵⁷ See Kiszczak’s letter to the Michigan conference, April 1999.

liberalization policies,"⁵⁸ but within the *nomenklatura* this support was weaker. As Castle reports: "In January 1989, Politburo member Stanisław Ciosek estimated that a majority of the apparatchiks opposed liberalization."⁵⁹ What held the party together was the tremendous authority of Jaruzelski and a sense of non-alternativity. Significantly, of course, Jaruzelski had Gorbachev's backing.

4.4. The dominant mode of interaction between the main adversaries.

At this stage, interactions between the members of both elites generate intense strategic learning. Collective stereotypes give way to individualized pictures of actual persons; previously demonized personages reveal their human dimension.⁶⁰ Jaruzelski, for example, began perceiving Michnik as a "tactical dove but strategic hawk." It is intriguing, however, that this process was more often mentioned by the representatives of the party-state than by the representatives of Solidarity.⁶¹ This may indicate that the gap between the propagandistic picture and "reality" was much more pronounced within the communist camp than among the Solidarity activists.

4.5. The main feature of this phase.

A tension between the logic of exclusion (underpinning negotiations) and the logic of inclusion lying at the heart of each elite's successful relationship with their respective bases.

4.6. Main theoretical points learned from this phase.

A. The logic of the negotiating process calls for direct interactions between a small number of participants. As a result, many members of the elite are excluded from the process. At the same time, a danger of symbolic exclusion of the followers increases. Success of the negotiations within the closed circle must be "sold" to wider audiences; a mechanism of (symbolic) inclusion must be implemented.

⁵⁸ Castle, Chapter 4, 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Reykowski, *Communism's Negotiated Collapse*, 140; Gebert, *Communism's Negotiated Collapse*, 133 and personal communication.

⁶¹ See, in particular, Staniszevska, *Communism's Negotiated Collapse*, 147.

B. Strategy of incremental gains seems to be superior to any maximalist position.

5. The Round Table's Double Political Afterlife: Schism and Reconciliation.

Solidarity never ceremonialized its victory. Consequently, Poland entered a path of momentous transformations without a ceremonial closure of the redress phase and without a ritualized inclusion of the "society" into the political process. The absence of a ceremonial *rite de passage* from "communism" to "post-communism" has serious consequences for the post-1989 public life in Poland.⁶²

Basic cleavages in Polish politics are more "cultural" than in other post-communist Central European states. I see two such cleavages: one that opened within the Solidarity camp between "reformists" and "revolutionaries."⁶³ Another one separates the Solidarity camp and ex-communists. Both have remained salient throughout the last decade and help to explain the basic maneuvers on the Polish political scene.

Significantly, both cleavages have their origin in the *unrealized ritual inclusion* that was supposed to provide a modicum of unity in the divided society. This society has been engaged in an attempt to shed a double legacy of the authoritarian politics of late communism and the extraordinary, liminal, politics of the Round Table. Hence, the first legacy of the Round Table process: a polity dissected by two non-trivial cultural cleavages.

Second, the post-1989 public life in Poland has been characterized by a very low level of trust in political parties and a relatively high level of protest politics.⁶⁴ Again, the roots of this dissatisfaction with institutionalized politics may lie in the lack of a proper (ceremonialized?) closure of the RT process and the absence of a symbol or ritual signifying the birth of the post-communist Poland. The existing studies leave no doubt that for those who negatively or critically evaluate the current situation of the country, the RT symbolizes the beginning of the wrong path Poland has taken since the end of communism. Ireneusz Krzeminski, a very perceptive sociologist, writes:

The moral acceptance of former adversaries (by a section of the Solidarity camp – JK), including the symbolic persona of general Jaruzelski...delineated the basic lines of political divisions, but first of all it generated unusually strong and emotionally laden *moral divisions* (original emphasis - JK). A moral anathema

⁶² The lingering consequences of this lack of ceremonialization of Solidarity's victory is carefully analyzed by one of the main actors of the drama, Bronisław Geremek, 147-51.

⁶³ For its description see Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society. Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989-1999* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

has been imposed by both sides on each other. The symbolic representation of the society was destroyed and as a result a symbolic picture of the end of the old order and the beginning of the new order has not emerged. Such a symbol, that would dwell in the everyday consciousness and that would constitute a focal point for public rituals, practically does not exist; and yet it is sorely needed.⁶⁵

For those who tend to construe the postcommunist reality in a manner described by Krzeminski, the RT compromise is not seen as an achievement, but rather as yet another example of the murky, if not outright malicious, wheeling-dealing behind the scenes that benefited only the elites of the “Reds” and the “Pinks.”⁶⁶ In particular, they tend to reinterpret the maneuvers of Solidarity’s negotiating elite as having detrimental long-term consequences (for a summary, see Table 1).

Table 1

Political maneuver/skill (Short-term “virtue”?)	Possible re-interpretation as a long-term “vice”
Talent for and openness to strategic learning	The lack of “backbone”
Realism: incrementalism of steps and gradualism of goals	Short-sightedness, cowardice, giving in
Exclusion of the majority from the negotiation arena (technical imperative?)	Sectarian deal-making

The third legacy of the Round Table is less symbolic and intangible and more institutional-procedural. As Michael Kennedy argues at length in his newest manuscript,⁶⁷ the Round Table, properly “closed” or not, has provided Poland with a model or scenario, that constitutes a cornerstone of the country’s robust, parliamentary democracy and remarkably non-violent political practice.⁶⁸ Hence, the ultimate paradox of the Round Table: the potentially explosive, deep cultural divisions (*schism*) engendered by the Round Table are routinely channeled through non-disruptive

⁶⁵ Ireneusz Krzeminski, “Moralne Skutki Transformacji Ustrojowej” (manuscript, 1999).

⁶⁶ With some exceptions, the “Pinks” are those members of the Solidarity elite who negotiated with the “Reds.”

⁶⁷ See Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Postcommunism*.

⁶⁸ Zbigniew Janas emphasized this feature of the RT in his interview (*Interview Transcript*, 13).

political mechanisms (*reconciliation*) that also have their origins in the Round Table process.⁶⁹

6. Summary of conclusions (see also Table 2).

1. An analysis of the cultural dimension of the negotiated social change should focus, at minimum, on four political actors (incumbent elite, incumbent followers, challenging elite, challenging followers) and three relationships: between both elites and between each elite and its base. The negotiating game is played concurrently along the lines of all three relationships.

2. The negotiating game, by necessity, calls for *exclusion* (to be effective, negotiating teams must be relatively small). The politics of exclusion (who gets in, who is left out, who makes such decisions) is crucial, but what is particularly important is whether the negotiations end with a (symbolic, ritualized) *inclusion* of a wider public (followers) to the political process or not. The politics of the post-negotiation period are to a large degree determined by the manner in which this issue is resolved.

3. The negotiated social (regime) change is underpinned by an incessant dialectic between *polarization/confrontation* and *compromise/dialogue*. Cultural strategies of polarization/confrontation are used by the negotiating elites to (1) maintain their separate identities and (2) to forge ties with their followers. Cultural strategies of compromise/dialogue are necessary to keep the negotiations with the adversarial elite going.

4. The negotiated social change is ridden, therefore, by two tensions: (1) between *exclusion* and *inclusion* and (2) between *polarization/confrontation* and *compromise/dialogue*.

⁶⁹ Reykowski confirms this observation: according to him the pre-1989 political polarization continues but it is played out in a completely changed institutional system (*Interview Transcript*, 1).

5. Gradualism (or incrementalism) seems to be a mechanism that allows actors to move forward and navigate between both the polar opposites of both logics without abandoning either of them.

6. In order to facilitate negotiations, rhetoric and symbolism, containing the cultural scenarios employed by both elites, should evolve gradually (strategic learning). A dramatic change is bound to produce accusations of “treason.”

7. Wagner-Pacifiçi noted that “Turner, progressively, thought of dramas in four (not necessarily exclusive) ways: (1) social dramas as revelatory of the ongoing but normally indistinct social structures and relations, (2) social dramas as functional (attempted) remedies for societies in crisis, (3) social dramas as self-reflective moments for societies in crisis, and (4) social dramas as potentially liminal moments of social transformation.”⁷⁰ This fourfold conceptualization of the social drama helps to summarize the significance of the Polish Round Table.

First, the RT process revealed the depth of the schism between Solidarity and the party-state and the nature of the relationship between both elites and their respective bases. Second, RT negotiations did remedy the crisis, ushered in a peaceful regime change, and set Poland on a very successful political trajectory.⁷¹ Third, it is clear that the successful completion of the RT negotiations was made possible by the fact that both elites engaged in the re-conceptualization of their own identities and developed new strategies of interaction (strategic learning). This indicates serious self-reflection. Fourth, it is easy to notice that the RT process was indeed liminal: the rules of the game according to which it was played had little to do with either the rules of the outgoing authoritarian regime or with the rules of the incoming modern democracy.

⁷⁰ Robin Erica Wagner-Pacifiçi, *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 9.

⁷¹ On this point and its comparative significance, see Kennedy.

Table 2

	Breach and Crisis	Pre-redress	Redress	Schism or reconciliation
Dominant vision of the polity	Bi-polar cleavage: Solidarity versus the communist state (we versus them)	Bi-polar cleavage still dominant Change in POS Gradual introduction of dialogue New cultural scenarios tested/some applied	Dialectic of symbols/discourses of commonality (elite - elite) and "separateness" (elite - followers"	Polarization: Solidarity versus ex-communists
Solidarity: Relationship between elite and followers	Inclusion	Growing strain and polarization (a dynamic of exclusion triggered)	Polarization (Full blown politics of inclusion/exclusion)	Polarization (within Solidarity) as the dominant cultural legacy of the "RT exclusion"
Party-state: Relationship between elite and followers	Inclusion	Growing strain and polarization (a dynamic of exclusion triggered)	Polarization (Full blown politics of inclusion/exclusion)	Inclusion
Mode of interaction between two adversarial elites	Confrontation within an authoritarian context	Signs of rapprochement Symbolic breakthrough Gradual change of idioms	Dialogue, personal contact, de-demonization Both need to "play" their respective bases	Contest within democratic structures: political legacy of the RT schism and reconciliation
Basic observations/theoretical points	Intractable conflict: look for signs of tractability	Cultural politics of mutual perceptions Two basic dynamics begin to work: inclusion/exclusion confrontation/dialogue	Two basic dynamics revealed: inclusion/exclusion confrontation/dialogue Ritualized closure: Is it necessary for reconciliation?	Cultural cleavages, that result from the lack of ritualized closure of the negotiated systemic change, dominate the post-change politics.

Appendix 1

Summary of Old and New Approaches to Cultural Analysis

Old approaches	New approaches	Research focus in new approaches
Culture as a molding press (of attitudes and values)	Culture as a tool kit ^a (containing cultural scenarios, schemas)	Texts, discourses, symbols
Symbolic domain per se Semiosis	Symbols in action Context Praxis	Dialectics: models of strategies of action versus actual strategies
Focus on the past Being Traditions “handed down”	Focus on the present Becoming Traditions (re)invented, (re)constructed	Mechanisms of transmission (cultural, social, and political)
Constancy Continuity of traditions: unproblematized	Elasticity, choice (within constraints) Continuity problematized	Limits of malleability and credibility of cultural forms
“Thick” coherence (of a cultural system) ^b	“Thin” coherence Conflict/tension (between various elements of the system)	Culture versus counter-culture; Action versus reaction; Emergence and maintenance of hegemony
Clear boundaries	Hazy, weak boundaries, often contested	Strategies of boundary maintenance
Goals of action	Goals and methods (strategies) of action	(In)compatibility of strategies
Actor(s)’ action: conformity to norms “Logic of appropriateness associated with obligatory action” ^c	Actor(s) action: limited choice Logic of choices among “scenarios” drawn from a limited, but constantly evolving, “cultural kit”	Cultural scenarios, schemas, cultural strategies Cultural entrepreneurship

^a Swidler.

^b Sewell.

^c James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 23.