When Reality Fails:
Science fiction and the fall of Communism in Poland

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When the walls fell

When the Martial Law was enforced on December 13th, 1981 in Poland, after the Solidarity rebellion that lasted for almost one and a half year, it felt like all hope was being buried forever. The system, once again, proved that it was invincible. The massive popular movement, which had reached 10 millions of members at its peak, was shattered during the following years; the leaders were, once again, imprisoned, censorship tightened anew, and the people subjected to a new wave of unbearably self-righteous propaganda. Its main rhetorical style was named *panswinism* by Michal Głowiński (1992): „we are all swine," no one is honest, Party people are swine, but so are the heroes of the Solidarity rebellion. There is no hope. Communism was here to stay and most people tended to believe that is was permanent; some voiced the belief that it might perhaps end in 100 years.

And then, in 1989, the state TV started to show glimpses of a remarkable event: the so-called „round-table talks". Representatives of the opposition and Party officials

met and discussed possible scenarios for the future. Suddenly, people all over Poland could see famous dissidents: Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń and other, up to then, totally „forbidden" faces. On June 4th, 1989, the first free elections after the World War II were held. The Solidarity candidates celebrated a remarkable victory, gaining more mandates than the limited quotas of the elections deal assigned them. Soon thereafter, a Polish actress and member of the opposition, Joanna Szczepkowska, declared on the state TV: „On the 4th of June, 1989, communism fell in Poland." A lot of other extraordinary events followed: the Berlin Wall fell, more and more countries of the former communist block declared the return of democracy. We were facing the impossible — the immortal institutions imprisoning individual initiative and belief died before our eyes. But before we come back to that momentous occasion, let us consider the images of the reality before and after its metamorphosis.

The reality: press accounts

Under the communist regime, organization in all the dimensions of social life was hypocritical. The social reality as perceived by the actors was one thing, and the Power, as it was called in Poland, i.e. the largely anonymous voice of the ruling forces, through its various media, said something entirely different. We would like to quote a few examples of how the press and other popular written texts defined various aspects of the organization of social reality before 1989 in Poland. Such a review will help us to show what kind of meta-narratives was constraining the small stories of the individual people. The meta-narratives were responded with anger, protest, faked faith, genuine belief, consent, and on many occasions with indifference. A popular joke circulating among the Polish society in the 60-ties reflects that general

atmosphere of deception: „Are there more bright or good people in the Party? —

There are more good people — that's easier to fake."

The society was depicted as being based on the highest of humanist ideals:

> [...] at the foundations of socialism and the struggle for socialism there lies the
> concern for man, a great trust in man, based, however, on a realist approach to
> him, depending on his real transformations — and not on a mythical-falsified
> one. And so that man of the new type will have the full possibility of
> development, he has to make himself free from the ropes of false individual
> liberty, [traditional Polish] sovereignty and seeking in another man and nation
> the elements motivating his distrust (Roman, 1990: 44, after Borejsza, 1949)[1].

Culture was finally liberated from the „decadent aesthetics of capitalist societies:"

> Socialist culture, being objectively the necessary, and in our times, the highest
> phase in the development of world culture, erasing the contradictions
> characteristic of the spiritual creation in the class society, eradicates the one
> sidedness and constrictions imposed on culture by the relationships of private
> ownership, creates the conditions favoring the rapid progress of culture and
> versatile development of human personality (Roman, 1990: 113; after Baller,
> 1975).

The logic of the new economy was based on statements such as this one, intended to

popularize communist economics among the common reader:

> The existence of too many retail shows increases the costs, because every new
> merchant decreases the turnover — of the already established; every one of
> them serves in effect a smaller number of clients, and has to increase the
> prices of the sold articles, because the general costs comprise a smaller
> quantity of turnover (Roman, 1990: 13, after *Kalendarz Warszawski,* 1947).

The new economic order would solve all such problems. Communism was heaven on
Earth:

> The abundance of goods and the way of their distribution will create
> conditions, under which it will be possible to take on the managerial and

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[1] Andrzej Roman (1990) collected press clippings and other texts from the communist

era, mainly Polish, and published them with short ironic comments to expose their

utter absurdity and malignancy in his book *Paranoja: Zapis choroby — Paranoia:*

The inscription of the disease.

subordinate functions successively by everyone - in theory, and in practice — by the majority of the employees of the enterprise (Roman, 1990: 23; after Sawicki, 1962).

The communist enterprise was officially introduced as the most democratic of social realities. Lenin thought that accounting and control were to be handled by the manager only in the first phase of communism. Later, the working class itself would take over these duties (Kiezun, 1991). Early Russian management theorists such as Gastyev and Jermanski repeated many of the Taylorist principles (such as discipline, order, self-control, functional control, etc.), but under new labels, as a "truly scientific system of work organization" based on Marx's concept of the disalienation of the working class under communism (Jermanski, 1972; Kiezun, 1991 after Gastyev, 1924). However, empirical research (Kostera and Wicha, 1996; Oblój, 1986) shows that the communist organization was rigid, hierarchic, highly bureaucratic and oppressive for the participants.

The communist manager was to be of working class origin (Gomulka, 1945), a defender of the people. The new society was to be reminiscent of a united, uniform, unanimous organization, or "a single office and a single factory with equality of work and equality of pay" (Lenin, 1981:96) and with absolute equality in living and working conditions. In such a society the manager's role was to embody the ultimate interests of the working class, to be its "avant-garde", knowing what is "really" good for the masses.

> A good director is a real treasure for the Party organization. Such a director does nor prompt the Party to intervene directly; he guarantees the proper execution of Party and government directives; he takes an active part in Party work and is able to make use of advice from below (of criticism of the working masses); and he can correct his mistakes of 'self criticism'. One can say without hesitation that a good enterprise director and good divisional director solve half the problems of the Party in the factory. (Najduchowska, 1976, after Szyr, 1951).

The Polish president of the 50-ties, Boleslaw Bierut declared that:

> The supervisor should consider the worker, his working conditions, his pay conditions, his security; the supervisor should be friendly to the worker, just as in our people's army the officer is friendly to the soldier.
>
> Secondly, the supervisor should be demanding, should strictly espouse all the regulations... (Bierut, 1953: 1).

Bierut briefly mentioned that the "supervisor," a term that contextually turned out to refer to the manager, should be skilled (the context implied it was technical skill that Bierut meant), and continued:

> The supervisor has to guard his/her authority, his/her dignity as a commander, because those who do not see that all their commands are strictly and well followed, are not worthy of the name of commander (Bierut: 1).

Bierut reminded the managers, that

> ... Lenin and Stalin pointed out many times that the task of management is not only to foster, to organize the masses, but to learn from them, to take their voice into account (Bierut: 1).

Field research (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1986; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988; Kostera and Wicha, 1996) points out that managers under communism had more responsibility than freedom to act and make decisions, they felt restricted, limited and constantly harassed by the secret police and party aparatchiks.

The dissidents, such as Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń were not only harassed by the police and imprisoned, but both they and their relatives had trouble at work, their children were pestered at school (and thrown out for some more or less vague excuse). They were also depicted as demoralized demons, hateful radicals, and ungrateful paranoiacs. The accusations were, of course, absurd and sick. For example, Jacek Kuroń, the current symbol of personal warmth is depicted as a person „from whom a great cold emanates" (Roman, 1990: 165; after Roszewski, 1981). The dissidents were

often listed in plural: „the Kurons and Michniks," a rhetorical trick meant to further degrade, depersonalize and dishonor them.

The general atmosphere we remember of these times was that of futility. Especially the 80-ties felt like an endless display of hopelessness. „Real socialism" indeed seemed like the only realistic option, with its newspeak, boring lies, and sudden hideous displays of power to „teach a lesson" to those who were still unable to grasp that there is nothing else to hope or wish for.

The new order

This situation changed drastically after communism fell, and was replaced with a totally different vision, of reality, of organizing, and of a manager. One of us (Kostera, 1996) has studied the change in the identity of enterprises and managers taking place in Poland in the early 90-ties. Kostera (1996) has analyzed three magazines read by business people, looking for images of management. Her findings suggest that Western enterprises and managers were depicted as heroes, one-sided images of perfection, that some Polish enterprises have come close to imitating . Enterprises other than western and Polish-"westernlike" were typically referred to as a negative "background" in order to achieve an effect of contrast between what symbolizes the "era that had passed" and what is "modern". Both western and westernized Polish managers were presented primarily in the category of "success" — achieved only through hard work in the economic dimension, and not political games. The Polish version of the American dream appeared to be in use very often. The image of the manager was strongly gendered, and the stereotypization of genders was strong. The stories about western firms and managers were as one-sided as the Polish contrasting examples: they were simple and with a plain moral. The Western

examples were successful because they were what they were (Western and thus successful). Polish negative "background" examples were, similarly, a failure because they were as they were. The Polish positive examples were different, because they were not the image of perfection, and very often they are problematized: they narrated stories of problems and how they were overcome. The described identity was in fact much more naive than the actual managerial responses to change, which were based on varying rationalities, often either continuing to work from the "old" communist times or composing a suitable mixture of "old," political, and "new," economical (Kostera, 1995a). Instead, the identity-image's one-sidedness reminds one more of the symbols reinforced by the communist Polish press: black-and-white, and always having a simple moral (see e.g. Glowinski 1992). Choosing the "wrong" identity is unthinkable: there is no acceptable image for "dissidents", at least not in the press. Even more one-sided and rigid is the image of the woman manager. She is not presented with an identity of her own, but with a re-mix of two others: that of the male manager and that of the traditional female social role. In 1994 and 1995 I have asked MBA students and practicing managers, students of evening courses in management to react to the images of managers and of enterprises disseminated by the press in anonymous reviews. Typically, they reacted with open irony and distancing themselves from the images of the organizations, with very subtle, between-the-lines, irony to the images of managers,[2] except from the role of the woman manager which was not commented at all.

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[2] It is worth noticing that „between-the-line" comments were a typical strategy of resistance and semi-resistance during communism. Ambiguous allusions were either „too intelligent" for the censor to grasp, or the risk of ridicule was to high for the

Elsewhere, Kostera (1995b) depicts the learning process as a crusade, the one sided transfer of "truths" from the West to the East. The Western consultants act as missionaries of the old times, attempting to convert the Eastern "heathens" to the new faith of market economy. To this the Polish managers typically respond with private irony and public passivity. They thus act as they have learned under communism: let "them" do their talking, then try to do one's job (Kostera and Wicha, 1996).

Together with co-authors, Kostera has also attempted to learn about the Polish managers' perception of the change (Kostera et al., 1995). The managers studied presented their current tasks as new and similar to those of the Western managers. The managers' self-image focused on competence and professionalism, and a code of ethics. The authors concluded that the managerial job in Poland was undergoing "professionalization" understood as a raising need for specialist education, and also the refocusing on different tasks. The new role might be inspired to a certain degree by western management. However, rather than learning about "how it really is like to be a western manager", Polish managers adopt an idealized picture of western management. They become "what they believe that the westerners are" (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993), adopt the "new language" fast, but superficially. This reminds one of the adoption of "fashionable" slogans, during the Communist Party's attempts at the management of meaning in Poland. People often repeated them, but did not believe and ridiculed them in their private conversations (Kostera and Wicha, 1996).

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opponent to dare attacking such a statement frontally. Also, if the author happened to be confronted by those in power s/he could always point to another, not politically dangerous interpretation of what s/he has said or written and thus avoid being held responsible.

Changing times

These two pictures clearly present us with two distinct, incommensurable realities.

What did, then, happen in 1989 to cause such a drastic change? Here is the first story

of the shift.

In 1989 a news daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza* started to be published, in which all the

heretofore „forbidden" voices spoke. Articles signed by Jacek Kuroń, Adam Michnik,

Zbigniew Bujak, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and others, were published and the paper

could be bought in a newspaper stand. The issue of 1998, June 4th, published a short

statement signed by Lech Wałęsa, containing among others, the following phrase:

> [...]this is not yet freedom and democracy, but it is an important step towards a
> free, democratic, economically sane Poland (Wałęsa, 1989: 1)

The date was a significant one: that of the first semi-free elections[3] since the World

War II. The front page also contains an instruction about how to technically vote, so

that the voting ticket will be considered valid, and an article by Józef Tischner, a

Catholic oppositionist priest and philosopher, declaring that he intends to vote,

praising democratic values, courage, and the public good. *Gazeta Wyborcza* of June

5th, 1989, was beginning to reflect the realization of the triumph of the opposition:

> [...] Solidarność, by organizing and carrying through a successful campaign,
> has proved that it is a great social power. This is the common work of those
> who had organized this campaign, those who had supported it in different
> ways, those who manifested an interest in it, and those, or perhaps, in the first

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[3] Negotiations between the communist government and the opposition resulted in an

agreement stating that the opposition may take seats in the parliament if they gain a

sufficient share of the votes but the seats allowed them were ex ante limited and could

not constitute a majority.

place, those who voted for Solidarność. They will be rewarded through the results of the elections (*Gazeta Wyborcza,* 1989a: 1).

Another article from the front page explains that the votes are still being counted, but the preliminary unofficial results „put [us] in a very optimistic mood" (*Gazeta Wyborcza* 1989b: 1). On June 6th it was already more or less certain and almost official: Solidarność has won the elections, within the limits set in the preceding negotiations. Leading activists of the opposition speak of a victory — and of responsibility in *Gazeta Wyborcza,* of that date. Adam Michnik, in an article about the elections entitled „Joy... and a moment of reflection" (Michnik, 1989: 1), says:

> Thank you, dear friends. Thanks to all who helped Solidarność with the campaign. It is thanks to you, tens of thousands of anonymous friends from every part of Poland that we won the campaign and the elections.

He recognizes the importance of the moment:

> the day of June 4th will be remembered as a **Polish day of celebration.** The Polish people voted for hope (p. 1).

But it is only a beginning. Further, he speaks of the important to build an institutional order under difficult circumstances „the geopolitical position of Poland has not [...] changed, and the ones managing the apparatus of coercion have not changed" (p. 1). June 4th is the day beginning the „endeavor of all supporters of the idea of an evolutionary transformation from the Stalinist communist system to parliamentary democracy" (p. 1).

While none of these newspaper explicitly talk about changing reality, their very existence, as well as, hitherto, blacklisted names signing the articles, bear witness to a dramatic metamorphosis taking place at that time in Poland. Official availability of such newspapers was not only unthought of, but downright impossible even a few

months earlier. Now, though, the impossible has happened, leaving people to make sense of and deal with the change.

Other encounters with the unreal

A similar theme of the confrontation with the impossible, of reacting to extraordinariness and the fall of the seemingly most reliable institutions is one of the main themes reappearing throughout the science fiction literature, thus making it a natural place to look for insights into the situation of sudden reality withdrawal. The reasons behind such a shock can be most varied, ranging from life-changing technological advances, like in George Alec Effinger's *When Gravity Fails* (1986) which inspired us to the title of this chapter, talking about the life in orbital stations, to the drug-induced hallucinations of Philip K. Dick's (1964/1990) *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* to stepping into an alternate universe in Andre Norton's (1963) *Witch World*. What interests us in the context of the fall of communism in Poland is, however, how people react to the unknown and the unexpected.

Of course we won't find one easy answer shining like a beacon from all the different science fiction stories — quite the opposite, what we encounter is a multitude of responses to the intrusion of impossibility. We would like to take a look at a few of the reactions we find the most significant and promising in our attempt to understand the change of 1989. The stories we reference here form by no means a complete list of those pertinent to the issue, they are included rather as examples of the ways of approaching the problem of facing the impossible in the science fiction genre. We have chosen the ones we find the most enlightening in the context of making sense of the fall of communism, though of course this choice involved a considerable amount

of arbitrariness. In the present text we are, thus, telling our own story (and choosing a plot) as well as recounting the stories already told.

The first one coming to our mind is the one of wonder at all the possibilities opening up due to the arrival of the impossible, possibly accompanied by the relief at seeing all the old worries turning obsolete and unimportant. Such is the case in Samuel Delany's (1966/92) *Empire Star,* where Jo, a teenage boy from a backward planet starts a journey through the whole known universe on an unexpected errand, discovering in the process that reality is much more complex (or, as the author would have it — "multiplex,") than he has ever anticipated. A strong aspect of this revelation is the realisation of the manifold points of view contributing to the perceived world (that is more or less the meaning of the word "multiplexity" as used in this novel), as well as a diffusion of any absolute judgements he held about the universe in general.

Another way of looking at the sudden change in available possibilities is to notice all the business opportunities opening up because of the paradigm shift. This line of thinking is represented by a film producer L.M. Greenspan in Harry Harrison's (1967/94) *Technicolor Time Machine.* The author cannot help but be ironic in describing the commercial use of a time machine in film-making (producing a cheap but epic Hollywood historical kitsch), although the producer's attitude in itself is far from inconceivable. A more drastic version of the story is presented in Iain M. Banks' (1996) *Excession*, where a discovery of an artifact of highly advanced technology has numerous civilisations vying for the power it might offer.

The very way in which the end of the established reality threatens to displace the old way of living is a cause for the polarity in the attitude towards changes. On the one

hand, we have eagerness in embracing the impossible as typified on the one hand by Daniel Chain from Roger Zelazny's (1980/89) *Wizard World,* who steps into a fantasy world and finds it much more to his liking than the twentieth century he has just left, even though his life up till then was not too miserable. On the other, there is Thomas Covenant (Donaldson, 1977/80), who, in a similar situation, retains considerable reluctance, viewing his new predicament as an obstacle in coping with the problems he had in the „real" world, although his situation there used to be pretty miserable.

The issue of judging which reality should be perceived as more valid, or more „real," presents a serious problem to the science fiction characters facing the impossible. Disbelief in one form or another is common enough, either complete as in Thomas Covenant's case, or partial, like that of Arthur Dent (Adams, 1979/93), who, seeing the destruction of Earth, can easily accept the end of New York but not of McDonald's. Cyril M. Kornbluth (1985) adds yet another twist to the idea of disbelieving what contradicts the accepted reality — in his short story *The Silly Season* a long series of apparently absurd events reported by various newspapers causes humans to ignore the news of a Martian invasion until it is far too late.

But, of course, the fall of reality does not always bring about any dramatic changes – sometimes it just passes largely unnoticed, as in Harry Harrison's (1991) *The view from the top of the tower*, where the only recipient of an alien race's desperate attempt at contacting earth is a drunk neither willing nor able to do anything about these revelations. At other times, the observers manage to remain calm despite the impossible events taking place all around, like the Russian townsfolk in K. Bulytchev's (1982) short story, easily accepting an alien spacecraft crash in their backyard as an event of little or no consequence

This examination of the attitudes and responses to the unimaginable presented throughout the genre might provide us with a context for how people coped with the changes that took place in Poland. In order to bring together the science fiction stories and the Polish systemic shift, we need some more personal stories discussing the latter.

Tales of the shift

1989 was, for many people, the end of the world as it was known. A miracle to some. The fall of the house in which they had lived for many years — a foul house, but a home nonetheless (to use Jacek Kuroń's, 1990, metaphor), for many others. For a moment, reality was swaying at the edge of chaos. However, soon life got back to normal. When looking back on 1989, one can claim than nothing much really happened then, nothing extraordinary. The miracle became institutionalized into narratives. In this chapter, we tell some of these narratives; we present stories that practicing managers, students of MBA courses at a management school in Warsaw, and active organizational reality constructors in 1989, wrote about the shift. We then share our own personal recollections of the change.

Stories of the actors

Barbara Czarniawska and Marta Calás (forthcoming) use a narrative method to explore cultural differences in gender construction. Their study was designed around a collection of short stories with a female heroine. These stories were purposefully imprecise and vague. They were distributed to participants of 6 different cultures to be filled in with details and interpreted. We have used a similar method to see what kind of stories people tell about the shift of 1989. We did not sketch any narratives

ourselves, but asked our informants, students of an MBA level course at a private school of management in Warsaw, to author them themselves.

Our respondents are of varied age (mid-20-ties to late 40-ties), slightly more men than women, all working as managers, albeit of differing levels (middle to top management, a few CEOs of their own business). A friend, teaching one of the courses in the MBA program, asked the students to write a short story about what, according to them, happened in 1989. They had 30 minutes to accomplish the task. He promised them that the answers would be anonymous, which would encourage them to write more freely about possibly emotionally laden matters. Only one person signed his text. We received 24 texts in total.

None of the students wrote what we would call fiction or a consciously metaphoric text. They tended to answer briefly, often as a personal narrative of a biographic kind. We have analyzed the material and found that almost all narratives fit into one of three major plots, which we will now describe. We have found only one non-typical text, which we will present later.

The first plot we called *the cliché*. It is typically a set of slogans, put together more or less swiftly into a narrative or semi-narrative with an obvious sense moral. *The year of 1989 is a gate for me and for Poland and a chance for normalcy.* The phrase „normalcy" was used very often in the years 1989-1990 in the mass media to convey the message that Poland was now on the road to something normal, standard, not very revolutionary or remarkable, from having been „abnormal," „sick," „wrong." *The victory of ideas that I believed in; optimism and hope* — says another, repeating words and sentences we both have heard in the mass media innumerable times. *It was for me*

the year of regaining of independence and the year of new hopes for better conditions of living is another sentence we recognize too well from the mass media, although in a slightly distorted version. *This year turned out to be the year of the retrieving of freedom for millions of beings from Central Europe, and especially from Poland.* The abundance of platitudes used by the respondents is remarkable, phrases once used extensively by media as metaphors communicating the change and its significance were embedded in sentences concerning the change itself. Only the personal narratives of the private occurrences, not having to do with the shift, and of the business developments, lack such platitudes.

The second plot is the *nothing much happened* story. It contains often personal recollections, sometimes of important occurrences (*I decided to get married* —said one respondent. *In 1989 I was finishing ground school and had to chose the type of my further education […] the year of one of the greatest shift for me — I went to the gymnasium* — said another.) and sometimes trivialities (*That wasn't a year very different from any other. The family finances allowed us to keep a fair level of life […] Generally quiet.*). Some people state the insignificance of the year openly: *To be honest, I do not associate anything special to me personally with this year.* One respondent explains him- or herself, why s/he doesn't believe that the year 1989 was anything significant — s/he was only 19, and too young to be interested in politics. The explanation is referring to a logic internal in the text: we know many people who were and are actively interested in politics at the age of 19, and younger.

The third plot we called *the business opportunity narrative.* It is a story of how significant the year 1989 was to the person's economy or how the person made use of the opportunity it presented. One person says:

> That was a time of great change for the individuals who wished to lead their own businesses. My father together with my uncle established a firm, that started as a service enterprise and developed to a trade enterprise.

Another student talks about the *changes in the ways of communication within the company — talking aloud about privatization.* One person tells his story of working abroad in 1989 and how he was disconcerted at first by the change — it made the value of his laboriously earned dollars much less significant than under communism, but how he then realized that it was, after all, a favorable change: *Looking from the perspective of the time [that passed], the changes that arrived with the year of 1989 turned out, in my case, beneficial.* He explains that he now *leads [his] own company, and the incomes from the company are higher than the incomes that [he] would have got from physical labor abroad.* One respondent tells her own, brief but powerful story:

> In 1989 I stopped working in a large firm with a decidedly communist approach to work, people, sales etc. and I started my own construction firm employing 6 people + a part-time employed book keeper. I bought 2 concrete mixers, a few shovels, trowels, and I lead reconstruction works. It was scary , I had no experience, but had great enthusiasm.

Generally, the stories tell that the year 1989 was either nothing much, or that the significance of the date was obvious, an institution already dressed in platitudes. The business opportunity plot seems to be the most engaging, and contains the most suspense. It is not okay to be reluctant towards the change, some respondents present a story of how they were ambivalent in the beginning, but then realized how good it was: *The explosion of the new made me anxious at first.* It all happened so unexpectedly, it could mean that *people from the former system would be held responsible,* it could prove to be unstable, once again reversible, the respondent explains. Another person says:

Unfortunately, the hopes for better living conditions were not real for everyone. It turned out that again political cynicism, theft, and corruption entered the stage. But this period should be treated as a time of transition that will end in some time and the situation will be stabilized, as for example in the European Union to which we aspire.

Among the different texts there was especially one, containing just one plain sentence:

The year of 1989 was to me

„The Great Unknown"???

Another answer contained a phrase that does not fit into either of our plots very well, but was extremely short and ambiguous: *For the first time I realized that the problems that concern me are important to many people in Poland.* It may be one of the „nothing much" stories but it may also be something more than that, a statement about the recognition of the link between the person and society, a link severed under communism (see Stefan Nowak, 1979, on the gap between the public and private spheres in communist Poland). Another respondent tells the story of her/his engagement — how s/he participated in the strike of April 1989, and how s/he was engaged in various political activities connected to the campaign and the elections. In a story full of platitudes and private recollections of trivialities, one respondent included the following capitalized sentence: *PEOPLE SMILED MORE OFTEN AND WERE HAPPIER.* The main plot of the brief narrative then returns into the mixture of trivialities and platitudes, the above statement being something of an emphasized footnote, a sidetrack in the main line of answer.

Our stories

To me, 1989 felt like a personal gift from God, a powerful sign that "realist" things are not necessarily as inevitable as they seem as long as they last. I was interested in politics, but to a limited degree, not very active (but not passive either), since the rise

of Solidarność of 1980. The political significance of the shift was indeed important to me, but I perceived the symbolic dimension as perhaps much more dazzling than the political ones. The "owners of truth" were questioned, the "only realistic scenario" shattered, my favorite interpreters of social and political reality, such as Adam Michnik, marginalized before, were now allowed their authority and dignity. The lies and the counterfeits of the past suddenly lost their legitimacy they had acquired through being the "only real presence" among public voices; an empty space for the construction of a new social reality was offered us. I had some pictures of a new democratic order, based on market economy, but I was thrilled by the possibility to experiment, to try out new things — the old, solid, invincible "one best way" was overthrown — and thus there was no reason to adopt another "one best way" in its place. Everything was possible, for one beautiful moment. On New Year's Eve of 1989 I went out on the street, shouting "Free Europe."

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For me, the changes of 1989 felt like an utterly inspired revelation – not so much because of the freedom of expression, of travel, or the introduction of free market economy, although all these were in no way insignificant, but mostly because of the sheer impossibility of what was happening before my very eyes. I guess that it is much easier now to see causes leading inevitably to the downfall of Communism, but in 1989 such a shift seemed utterly impossible and unbelievable, at least to me. Actually, the dreamlike haze of unreality still overshadows about my impressions of the event, a strong testimony to the malleability of the basic fabric of reality. Gone was the aura of futility, not because I did anything much, but because I could see that there were some results, after all, of other people's actions. All the colours starting to

appear on the streets felt deeply symbolic, as the dreary sameness of the Communist propaganda made place for the multiplicity of voices – some wise and joyful, others stupid or hateful, but none of them as inescapable as the weighty voice of the system in the Communist years.

Making sense of the stories

We do not wish to ascribe any particular Polish system change stories to any of the science fiction plots — neither to those we have already presented nor to any other ones we have kept up our sleeves until now, even though all these stories share many common aspects. Yet, our sense of wonder parallels the similar feelings experienced by all the children drawn to the magical world of Narnia in C.S. Lewis' classic novel series, and our situations were not dissimilar from that of the characters of these novels. Instead, we wish to argue that all these narratives belong to the same genre, and the protagonists' standpoints are equally valid and instructive for organization studies in both the stories by MBA students and by JRR Tolkien. In a broader sense, the point has of course already been made (Czarniawska and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Philips (1995)), but we wish to point out the particular appropriateness of science fiction as the genre in dealing with the issue of social change, of mediation between the incommensurable alternatives, or of transition from one such alternative to another.

But this is yet another story, the telling of which requires us to make sense of many different narratives we have touched upon so far.

The change of 1989 turned out to be nothing much, people tell the same old stories incorporating some new language, new clichés etc. The magic of the moment is no

longer there, the new reality is as solid as the old one, the shift itself has been a one time event, and besides — the old reality was destined to fall, it was *ab*normal and there was no way it could hold together any longer. Furthermore, the new reality has surprisingly many points in common with the old one.

The story about the field as read by us earlier in this text, is one about deflected change. The actors interpret reality after 1989 in a way as similar as possible to their mind frames from before that date. *Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose* — they read symbols and signals in a way that enables them to continue acting according to the same basic schemes. At the same time, they are subjected to a streamlined and uni-directional transfer of identity and images of what is "good" and "right" in management, usually more or less unrealistic images of what the West is like. The managers sometimes stress their distance from the new images, in the way they are used to from the communist times — in ambiguous, subtly ironic statements, or with silence. The Polish managers' freedom to act is, however, currently much more significant than before. Therefore their responses to change are, in practice, mixed, and the results of their actions are definitely more varied than before. (Kostera, 1995a; Koźmiński, 1993). The majority of the MBA students' stories that we have presented trivialize the change by accounting for it as if „nothing much happened," or defining it with the use of platitudes and clichés.

This process of domesticating radical changes and institutionalizing the new reality using tools drawn from the previous context brings to mind yet another concept already appealingly presented in science fiction form, in Robert Sheckley's (1966/95) *Mindswap.* The hero of this novel, traveling through rapidly changing and increasingly bizarre realities, attempts to order and understand all the

incomprehensible events taking place all around him through the use of genre templates already available to him. Thus he starts seeing in the surreal worlds around him scenes from kitschy western, romance, detective, or adventure stories. Although at times he manages to regain his senses and to see the fallacy of all these ascriptions, the final change of reality catches him by surprise, and at the end of the novel we find him in a dramatically altered copy of modern-day planet Earth, oblivious to all the drastic changes that have taken place all around him. Much like the authors of the *nothing much* stories, we might say, but to do so would be to slip into the trap of ascribing our own ready-made templates to the reality. We prefer to curb ourselves to pointing out the similarities between the 1989 situation in Poland and the plight of Sheckley's protagonist, suggesting that responses from science fiction stories augment and parallel those presented in the narratives we have collected, forming together a richer background for understanding social change than any of them would on their own.

Another type of plot is represented in the MBA students' „business opportunity" stories. They are also depicted in field material: Andrzej K. Koźmiński (1993) tells of a multitude of new firms that emerged after 1989, as well as of new forms that the old ones begun to take. Also I, through the reading of my field material (presented in e.g. Kostera, 1995a) tell the story of a business opportunity. By placing these narratives alongside those from science fiction, some of which, as we have already mentioned, deal with the very issue of entrepreneurs striving to exploit a drastic reality change, we enrich our ability to make sense of and interpret these stories. This does not mean that stories exactly like those of the MBA students have already been told before by science fiction writers, but only that the issue is not one completely unheard of, and all

these new stories can be treated as new voices in an ongoing discussion. In other words, science fiction literature seems to have many stories to tell about change — some similar, and some completely different than those of the actors participating in the shift of 1989 in Poland. There is no reason why the insights they offer should be left out of the discourse of the social studies.

Science fiction as a genre seems to be a way to explore different dimensions in social change, which may be helpful in enacting the reality and filling in the „empty space" — the emergence of which is, as Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges put it (1993), what reforms are all about. These blanks can be inscribed by modes of interpretation and writing from the past (as if life continued as usual), by new experiments, by re-configurations of past experience etc. Discussing radical change with the aid of science fiction literature may help undertake mental and emotional experiments in how to make sense and use of the change.

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