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Social conflict and economic development in communist country. The Polish case

During the communist regime in Poland, socio-political conflicts were linked to economic cycles – at the end of a slowdown phase of each cycle a political crisis appeared. The aim of this paper is to discuss an array of political and economic measures applied by the ruling communist party to ease these conflicts. Both economic reasons of political crises as well as economic effects of the political decisions undertaken to face them (i.e. liberalization and democratization of an authoritarian regime) will be identified and analyzed. The relationship between an economic growth (prior to the crisis and thereafter) and the dynamic of the subsequent social/political conflict will be also discussed in detail. The decision matrix of the conflict each time were determined by political power of three crucial stakeholders the Communist Party, a working class and the Opposition.

During the history of PRL at least 4 waves of strong, mass protests occurred (1956; 1970; 1980 and 1988). Each time, the strategy employed by the communist regime to solve them must have been different: from political and economic easing (1956) through “welfarisation” of an economy (1970), the martial law (1980) to the transition (1988). These different strategies responded to various economic circumstances and limited stability of the political regime (both, internal and external). The political violence had taken place during each of those conflict, with the culmination in 1981 when the martial law was enforced.

Important part of the whole story was growing importance the working class, which was not only a crucial part of labor force in industrializing economy, but – to some extent – a material representation of the ideological construct. The growing number of workers as well as the growing political importance of working class as an entity (what was rather unavoidable in a communist system) stirred their socio-economic claims leading to subsequent socio-political conflicts.

The so called ‘Democratic Opposition’ consisted of intellectuals, both of leftish and rightist views. The process of forming influential groups of oppositionists started in 1950., and cumulated in 1970. Between 1956. and 1970. conflicts between working class (June 1956 in Poznan, December 1970 in Tricity) and the Party were effectively separated from conflicts between the emerging Opposition (mainly leftist) and the Party (October 1956, March 1968). A cooperation between the Opposition and the independent working class’ movement that commenced in 1970s, resulted in growing political impact of next conflicts (1980/81 and 1988/89) on the stability of the system.

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Current research projects:

In pursuit of modernity. Successes and failures of the politics of modernization in Poland since 1800 (founded by Polish National Science Centre).

“Solidarność” (1980-1981) – roots, mobilization and demobilization of social movement (founded by Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education)