



HOW SOCIETY SHIFTS

A social revolution can sometimes be a healthy reaction of the social fabric in need of regeneration, says **Dr. Anna Wylegała** of the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology.



What is a “turning point” from the social perspective?

ANNA WYLEGAŁA: A significant shift in the life and functioning of societies, a major change that comes rapidly. Every society changes, otherwise we would hit a dead end, and these changes can be either evolutionary (gradual) or revolutionary in nature. A social turning point involves the latter, it is a watershed moment that alters social norms or social structure. Obvious examples include the French Revolution, which abolished the feudal system and caused the aristocracy to lose its privileges. Another turning point came with the events of 1989 in Poland and Eastern Europe, which were nonetheless followed by evolutionary changes that further enhanced and ingrained the effects of that revolution. We are of course talking about certain ideal cases here, whereas in real life things of course fall more along a spectrum – many types of change are gradual in one sense, but rapid in another. In the past, most social changes were effected using force, aggression, and war, but today this is not always the case. Indeed, we had thought this form of conflict-resolution no longer applied in our region of

the world, but the war in Ukraine nevertheless shows that it has made a comeback. However, the abrupt nature of social changes or social turning points does not need to imply bloodshed.

So how do major societal shifts come about? Do they start with innovation?

A societal shift occurs in reaction to the exhaustion of some social mechanism – turning points are reached when something that used to work no longer does. We can gradually start convincing ourselves that a specific kind of change is needed, and attitudes shift gradually. But sometimes this social mechanism becomes exhausted more quickly, abruptly, drastically. In such situations, something urgently needs to change. In such a case, a social revolution can be a healthy reaction on the part of society – of course, leaving aside the potential losses.

Does change always have its source in social innovation? I wouldn't be so sure about that. A good example of a significant yet gradual change now occurring in Polish society is the adoption of an environmentally friendly lifestyle. It is now considered to

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be fashionable, in good style. This situation has not been influenced by any critical event that might have shaken up the public and forced people to change. Here, I'm thinking, for example, of a violent weather event, say a tornado that would prompt people to change their behavior once they saw, first-hand, the damage stemming from climate change.

Many factors have contributed to this change in Polish society, to more environmentally conscious attitudes and behaviors. On the one hand, they included a legislative shift: not sorting one's waste simply became more expensive, which prompted many households to pay attention to sorting. On the other hand, there are certain fashions: environmentally friendly objects are often esthetically more pleasing, which may have motivated some elites to modify their old habits. I think that major changes usually happen gradually and have many different causes.

Wars are said to represent critical junctures that result in significant economic, cultural, and social changes. Do they actually work that way?

Yes, quite often. War always causes some degradation of society – tangible damage, which boils down

to human casualties, damage to the infrastructure and tangible heritage, as well as the degradation of social structures and ties and a change of regime. When war ends, there is a need to rebuild everything, on both the tangible and the intangible level. Examples include the population boom after World War II. Before its outbreak, Poland was inhabited by 35 million people. After six years of occupation and extermination, however, the population count had dropped to 24 million. The years 1950–1958 witnessed the biggest surge in population figures, largely as a result of growth in the fertility rate. The post-war boom made up for the wartime losses, in a sense, which is why it is referred to as a compensatory boom. The war was also followed by radical changes in the social structure, the class structure – as a result of the extermination of certain social groups by the occupying forces and as a result of the violently imposed communist regime.

The post-war baby boom certainly had a positive impact on the condition of Polish society. But I would dispute that the same held true for the new political system and the new social structure. A turning point does not always turn out well for everyone.

Can we talk about any positive effects of the war in Ukraine? Some argue that Ukraine will rebuild itself as a modern country.

In my opinion, it is still much too early to discuss this. The war continues, and it remains unclear when it will end or whether there will even be an end. Ukraine has suffered horrible damage, so talking about reconstruction is more of symbolic importance – intended to impart a certain meaning to the sacrifices people are making now. I have a similar opinion about discussing Ukraine's accession to the EU. After all, this will not happen in a year or two, and definitely not shortly after the end of the war. Rather, declarations on the part of the EU are more of an indication of a certain change in how Ukraine is being perceived in the international arena, and there is no doubt this change is taking place.

Once rebuilt, Mariupol may indeed become a magnificent, modern city. But we should keep in mind that Warsaw was once rebuilt to be, as people said, an even better and more beautiful city – and yet most of its prewar residents would have given anything not to have had to rebuild it after the Warsaw Uprising.

For sure, the war has changed the Ukrainian people's sense of identity, constructed for example in opposition to the Russians. Previously, even after the conflict in 2014, there were many pro-Russian Ukrainians, especially in the East. But now I don't think anyone has any doubts about Russia's imperialist plans. This is evident in the research I am now conducting. In conversations with Ukrainian refugees living in Poland, we can hear a gigantic amount of hatred of the Russians. Previously, I didn't observe



ANNA ROMANIUK

Anna Wylegała, PhD

is a sociologist working in the Social Change and Tradition Research Group at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences. Her most recent book, *Był dwór, nie ma dworu* [The Traditional Manor Home Is No More], received the Strzembosz Award and Giedroyc Award and has also been nominated for the History Award of the *Polityka* weekly, the International Pilecki Award and the Moczarski Award.

awylegala@ifspan.edu.pl

it on such a scale. I interpret this phenomenon as a clear consolidation of the Ukrainian national identity and solidarity. The war made people realize, once and for all, that their country did not have any real future tied with Russia, that Ukrainian sovereignty was worth defending at all costs. I think these will be lasting changes.

Do social shifts lead us in any specific direction?

The view that societies are characterized by a gradual development towards a particular direction did prevail in early sociological thought. But we know today that things are not so simple. What would be the goal of this development, anyway? Where are the limits of progress? We can also imagine a change that takes us backwards, like in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where a revolution causes society to regress. That said, I don't think we should describe social changes in terms of their value. Going backwards in terms of development is not always a bad thing, and further progress should not always be seen as a desirable course of events. This is because modern-day development is making our world increasingly industrialized and complex. The question is, can we say that something is good or bad when we are describing social relations or diagnosing the social reality? "Good" and "bad" are concepts from a different imaginary, a more ethical one. We can ask if something is good for how society functions.

So something may be functionally good for society, but not necessarily for an individual?

Exactly. This brings us to the question of what it means for a society to function well. To give a commonsense answer, we could say it's when there are not too many conflicts, when individuals feel good in this society. Sometimes we encounter the argument that if we feel too good, too complacent, we will not develop. We've now reached a point where many people say that good times are a thing of the past, that for a brief moment our generation lived in the best possible times, but now things are going downhill. The past three decades, in political terms, or the last decade, in terms of economic stability, have indeed been the best time in Poland's history: we have had security, political freedom, and the freedom to travel. The COVID-19 pandemic was the first signal that the world as we know it is beginning to change. I hope things will not get even worse.

People have always feared social shifts, understood as a turn for the worse. Here, we can mention the crosses that were once put up in Polish villages to save the local community from the four plagues: air, famine, fire, and war. We can still hear the same words in a religious song that continues to be traditionally sung in the Corpus Christi processions. And these fears are now returning, often even including their religious undertones: we have witnessed pestilence, now there



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is a war, and inflation may soon cause some of us to face hunger. People may feel they are living in apocalyptic times. Certainly, today many of us feel that we have reached a critical inflection point. The world is extremely intense, chock full of stimuli and overloaded with information. My dream is for that to change. I would like my children to live in a world where there is more time to build relationships and bonds. But I fear that this will not happen, that my generation is one of the last to live in relative prosperity.

There is a fiction book entitled *The Last Wild Horses* by Maja Lunde (also author of the bestselling *The History of Bees*) that relates to how the world we live in is changing. *The Last Wild Horses* tells three intertwined stories. The one in the most distant future is set in the 2040s and 2050s and centers around water shortages and the flight of people from the south to the north of Europe. It depicts a world that has choked on its own development. We already know that what we have done to the planet is because of excessive consumption, which has been made possible by development. The question is, what is our goal: further economic growth or the security of our children? Of course, this is not an "either-or" choice because our children also need an efficient economy. But at what cost? What are the right proportions?

INTERVIEW BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PHD

Anna Wylegata during field research on agricultural reform, in the village of Wlonice in the Kielce region