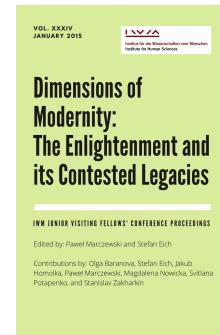


Janus-faced Enlightenment and the Quest for General Equality in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

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Abstract: The paper focuses on common ground between the concept of general equality, espoused by proponents of radical Enlightenment in Western Europe, and the idea of liberty cultivated by Polish noble republicanism. Convergence of these seemingly irreconcilable perspectives in political treatises of half-forgotten political writers of the eighteenth century, like Michał Wielhorski, Adam Wawrzyniec Rzewuski and Wojciech Turski, resulted in the vision of an alternative modernity that differed in some important respects from programmes of contemporary Polish mainstream reformers. It rested on the assumption that civic capacities do not depend on wealth and therefore civic and political rights should be extended beyond nobility. It also included a stark defence of the decentralised state and a decisive condemnation of Western colonial practices of the period. By discussing such an alternative modernity the paper aims to challenge the persistent image – forged in the epoch of the Enlightenment by Western philosophers, along with travel writers, and recurring to this day in many historical accounts of the region – of a static eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, where servitude remained unquestioned and unreflected upon by ruling elites.

The emancipatory ambitions of the Enlightenment, its emphasis on human self-understanding, or in Kant's words on "man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage", are seemingly difficult to reconcile with any kind of hierarchy. And yet the Age of Lights undermined an old order sanctioned by faith and tradition, but at the same time introduced a new gradation of people and nations according to their level of progress. Jonathan Israel illustrates this conceptual revolution in his *Enlightenment Contested* by discussing the ideas of a leading physiocrat economist, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot:

“Exploration, experiment, trial and error, discarding of dogma, ceaseless innovation, and accumulation of knowledge are conceived by Turgot as the essence of human history. But these impulses, he explained in 1750, are inseparable from the creation of hierarchies of types, classes, and peoples. As with Voltaire, the primitive savage is at the bottom of Turgot’s pyramid while some or most more developed societies are always more inert and slower to develop than others. As progress is achieved, more and more inequality becomes essential, especially in societies at the forefront of progress, like England and France. Peasants, he thought, contribute little other than at a very basic level. Similarly, progress in the common crafts seemed to him comparatively easy because artisans and mechanics were very numerous. More difficult is moral, scientific, intellectual, political, and artistic progress, and here specialized kinds of education, breeding and refinement, and good taste are indispensable.” (Israel 2006, 549)

In other words, endorsement of the idea that all men are capable of making use of their reason did not necessarily imply that all people will be equally capable of reasoning, or that they will gain this capacity at the same pace. Hierarchies of human types catalogued people according to their occupation, from easy to learn professions demanding very little use of reason to the most sophisticated professions, requiring the most refined education and the best taste. Internal social hierarchies were accompanied by a ranking of nations from the most primitive societies to those at the forefront of progress, like England and France.

It is particularly telling how the idea of progress intertwined intellectual potential with aesthetic sensibilities. In order to achieve a higher civilizational level, one had to enlighten oneself, which meant not only accumulation of knowledge, but also refinement of manners. Good taste and the ability to reason were perceived as interchangeable; they became two sides of the same civilizational coin, which established itself as a commonly accepted currency both on domestic and international markets, determining the worth of a social class or a particular country in human history. As observed by Larry Wolff in his *Inventing Eastern Europe*, the category of manners served in the eighteenth century as a distinction between elite and common people, but it was also used to distinguish between the refined, civilized West and the barbaric East of Europe (Wolff 1994, 23). New hierarchies of types, classes, and peoples were projected onto a political map of eighteenth-century Europe. In fact, divisions created by “philosophic geography” were in some cases more pervasive than social distinctions formulated by enthusiasts of the enlightened absolute rule of a narrow elite or a monarch. Even a staunch advocate of universal intellectual suffrage like Kant, who insisted in his *What Is Enlightenment?* that “it is more nearly possible for the public to enlighten itself”, excluded the Slavic nations of Eastern Europe from his history of reason (*Ibidem*, 314-315).

Cultural refinement and accumulation of knowledge served as a basis for new hierarchies, and therefore societies and countries remaining in the thrall of tradition were inevitably treated as backward. The distinction between elites and common people, resting on education and manners, was a sign of inevitable progress, but difference between masters and slaves, sanctioned by tradition and rooted in history, was perceived as proof of backwardness. In his overview of Western European travel writing about Eastern Europe,

Larry Wolff points out that slavery was “a word that was frequently used by travellers to describe the harsh character of serfdom and peasant life in Russia, in Poland and in Ottoman Empire” (*Ibidem*, 52). The persistence of slavery served as evidence for the despotic character of local governments, regardless of whether they proclaimed themselves republican or absolutist. James Marshall, who most probably never visited the lands he described, wrote in his *Travels Through Germany, Russia and Poland in the Years 1769&1770*: “The personal service, in which the lower ranks of Poland are kept, is a mere slavery, such a despotism as the planters in the West-Indies use over their African slaves” (*Ibidem*, 81). It is worth noting that to Marshall slavery was not despicable in itself. He did not formulate any criticism of “planters in the West-Indies”. What appalled him was the fact that a country bordering Western Europe could resort to the same practices that were typically used in lands without pretences to European levels of civilizational advancement.

The march of progress being brought to a standstill by the continuous enslavement of “lower ranks” remains a recurrent idea in much that is being written today about the history of Eastern Europe. Of course, the persistence of the *corvée* in the region as late as the eighteenth century (and for a greater part of the nineteenth) is a fact, but it is striking that even though a much more sophisticated economic apparatus is used to explain this phenomenon, the cultural and political imaginary of Eastern European backwardness in the period of the Enlightenment remains very similar to the one captured in books of James Marshall and others. The centrepiece of such an imaginary is a vision of society living in a frozen time, locating itself outside of the main current of history by preserving unequal institutions.

In their ambitious book *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* (a lengthy volume advertised as an audacious reexamination of the region’s history, offering, among other insights, “original, striking and revisionist coverage of the rise and decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth”), Robert Biedeleux and Ian Jeffries wrote:

“Some ethnically Polish historians of Poland like to compare the status of the ‘political nation’ in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to that of Roman citizens in the Roman Empire. However, while one can find instructive positive parallels, there were also some darker ones. In both cases many of the human beings living under the same rule were either serfs or slaves with no rights of representation, redress or self-determination, and yet the privileged strata unquestioningly accepted such gross inequalities as part of the ‘natural’ and/or ‘divinely ordained’ social order. Moreover, one does not have to be Irish, black or Indonesian to perceive elements of myopia, self-deception or hypocrisy in British and Dutch ‘liberal’ outrage at the fate of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the hands of the partitioning powers.” (Biedeleux and Jeffries 1999, 156)

For all their “revisionist coverage”, Biedeleux and Jeffries do not question the analogy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with the Roman Empire[1]. Instead, they point out “darker parallels” implied by this comparison – the existence of large portions of the population reduced to the status of slaves, denied civil rights and political representation, and subjected to cruel economic exploitation. From this perspective, the Polish ruling elite literally recreates the past and decides to live in it. The vision of a country that

adheres to an ancient political model and “unquestioningly accepts” the gross inequalities that it creates is a not so distant echo of the indignation expressed by Western European thinkers and travel writers of the Enlightenment at the sight of Eastern European slavery.

What Biedeleux and Jeffries fail to recognize is the fact that many Polish political writers of the period who belonged to the ruling elite were anything but “unquestioningly accepting” of the social and political order, in which great numbers of their countrymen remained deprived of a voice, not to mention economic independence. British and Dutch “liberal outrage” at the fate of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth could at times be myopic, given that their own governments did not hesitate to enslave people in the colonies. It would be equally short-sighted to assume that partitioning powers divided the country in order to introduce universal suffrage and general equality. After the First Partition of Poland in 1772 and the diet that sanctioned it, some thinkers from the camp of the nobility became painfully aware that reforms were necessary. They remained staunch, deeply anti-monarchical advocates of republican liberty. In their eyes, losing part of their country to neighbouring absolutist monarchies was a clear indication that their beliefs were true – monarchic rule gives way to conquest. But if the subjugation of one country (or part of it) to another could not be justified, then the domination of elites over the remaining population, or of one man over another, was equally inexcusable. They praised Dutch republicans for preserving true liberty despite being surrounded by monarchies, but they also sympathised with black slaves or compared their position to that of oppressed Native Americans. Their political ideals may have been deeply rooted in the past, but this does not necessarily make them myopic or hypocritical.

Even though the Enlightenment introduced new hierarchies as it attempted to erase old ones, there were those who refused to accept them. In his *Enlightenment Contested*, already quoted above, Israel introduces an important distinction between mainstream and radical reformers in the Age of Lights. According to the former, liberty was grounded in property and depended on the existence of good social and political order, while the latter defended the unconditional, fundamental equality of all men. Israel finds proponents of the former among proponents of “Anglo-American classical republicanism”, with its “mindset of opposition-minded gentry – agrarian, anti-commercial, asserting special status of free property-holders and the duty of citizens to participate in government”, while he equates the latter with Dutch democratic republicans, who attempted to “classify all those not dependent on others (...) as a single category of citizens.” (Israel 2006, 241-242) A major feature of radical as opposed to mainstream Enlightenment is therefore an idea of general equality – a fundamental assumption that all people are equal, regardless of their economic status, race, creed or “refinement”, and should be treated as citizens. Above all, the concept of general equality rests on a decisive refutation of all forms of slavery: “General equality denies the legitimacy of slavery in whatever shape or form. But it also asserted the dignity and equal worth of non-European peoples, the Amerindians, Africans, and Asians, including primitive peoples in whatever remote, isolated parts of the world.” (Ibidem, 598)

The aim of this paper is to describe the seemingly paradoxical intellectual kinship between Western European, mainly Dutch, proponents of radical Enlightenment defending general equality, with certain Polish political writers of the period, who despite their allegiance to the camp of the conservative nobility, defended the very same ideas against a local mainstream reformers and the entrenched interests of their own social class. By discussing their programmes, I also intend to at least partially question the persistent image of a static eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, where servitude remained unchallenged and unreflected upon by ruling elites.

Citizens instead of property owners

Among the fundamental values upon which the political culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth rested was the idea that all members of the nobility enjoyed equal political rights. Stanisław Jabłonowski summed this up in 1730 with the following passage: “Our equality is such that every nobleman born is equal to a prince, a margrave and a count. Office alone gives pre-eminence, hence our saying ‘the gentleman on his little acre is the equal of the palatine.’ Our forebears understood they would make the republic more orderly by securing equality within it.”^[2] In the second half of the eighteenth century, it became clear both to mainstream and radical reformers that equal political rights combined with stark economic inequalities resulted in rampant political corruption. Wealthy magnates could buy the votes of numerous poor rank and file nobles to influence legislative procedures and secure sufficient support to get themselves elected to major public offices. Even though a republican understanding of liberty as non-domination was praised in treatises of reformers and defenders of traditional privileges alike,^[3] political practice in the Commonwealth was becoming dominated by “monied interests”, to use the term coined by English republicans of the modern period.

Mainstream and radical reformers differed first and foremost with regard to their views toward the possibility of ordering the country by introducing a hereditary monarchy. The latter devoted large sections of their treatises to arguing that it would be an infringement of traditional republican liberty, a form of domination over a free nation, in the long term leading to conquest, which is a major driving force behind all monarchies. But they also strongly differed over solutions to the problem of political corruption. Hugo Kołłątaj, one of the most influential mainstream reformers, proposed that the Commonwealth should become a “nation of property owners”. Kołłątaj believed that with political rights restricted to property owners, liberty would no longer be merely an obligatory reference, but would become a part of political practice. He was convinced that a certain amount of property secured citizens from influence exercised by their more wealthy compatriots and allowed for informed and independent decisions.^[4] His ideas are very much in accordance with the proposals of Edmund Burke or the later programme of James Mill, who advocated restricting political representation to a select group of citizens with a certain amount of income guaranteeing independence and genuine concern for the common good instead of particular, financial well-being.

Radical reformers strongly opposed these arguments. To them, limiting political votes to property owners was a violation of already imperfect equality. Adam Wawrzyniec Rzewuski, a descendant of a wealthy and powerful family, many members of which were ardent defenders of oligarchic privilege, strongly opposed excluding poor noblemen from participation in diets. In his major political treaty, *O formie rządu republikańskie myśli* from 1790, he wrote:

“Znamy już źródło zarazy i nieładu sejmików, starajmy się go oczyścić, ale nie wypierajmy się współiomków naszych dlatego, że mnie od nas mają majątku, więcej prostoty, mniej światła. (...) Trwa jeszcze dotychczas w ojczyźnie hańbiąca i dzieląca ludzi różnica; chłopa, mieszkańina, szlachcica, trzeba nową określić granicę szlachcica od szlachcica, trzeba jednemu inną, niż drugiemu dawać naturę?

[We already know the source of the diets' malady and chaos, we should try to cleanse them, but let us not disavow our compatriots, because they have less wealth, more simplicity, less enlightenment. (...) Despicable distinctions persist in the country until this day between people, between peasants, burghers, and noblemen, should we create another one between one nobleman and the other, should we ascribe different natures to them?"] (Rzewuski 2000 [1790], 131)

This fragment is an illustration of an idea prevalent in the whole treatise, namely that wealth, refined manners, and accumulation of knowledge do not guarantee greater political insight. Rzewuski therefore goes against ideas of the mainstream Enlightenment. By discarding poverty, simplicity, and lack of education as features that disqualify one from participation in government, he implicitly refutes the idea that progress can be a justification for new hierarchies between people and countries.

One could of course argue that Wielhorski's refutation is not as well-intentioned as it seems. Given the political realities of the time, it could have been an indirect defence of oligarchic influence exerted over the less affluent nobility. But Wielhorski does not stop here; he compares proposed reforms restricting participation in diets to property owners with the "despicable distinction" that persists in the country between nobility and the social strata without any political rights. Moreover, he insists that both powerful oligarchs and rank and file noblemen have the same *nature*. It is an entirely different kind of justification of political equality than the one offered by Stanisław Jabłonowski six decades earlier. No longer a work of wise forebearers, who wanted to ensure the stability of the republic, but an expression of the equal nature of all men, political equality is defended by Rzewuski both as a tradition he wants to protect and a prominent feature of modernity he is willing to embrace.

A nation of eight million

Advocating for levelling economic discrepancies was surely a reformist task, as it meant going against the interests of powerful and rich oligarchs; but arguing for general equality, the inclusion of burghers and peasants in the political nation, was much more challenging. It demanded questioning a very longstanding self-understanding cultivated by the Polish nobility. A political writer demanding equal rights for less affluent noblemen

could claim a rightful place within this tradition. But a reformer toying with the idea of the same nature of all men had to tread lightly if he wanted to have his voice heard. The same poor nobility, who would praise him for defending their rights when he refuted the idea of restricting political rights to property owners, would fiercely criticise him for taking away their last title to equal footing with oligarchs, if he threatened to question their primordial claim to supremacy over the lower social ranks.

That is why enlightened Sarmatians were very cautious when invoking general equality in discussions about practical issues, for example with regard to the question of participation in local diets. Michał Wielhorski, despite his above-mentioned “mythistorical” attempts to disprove that inequality was an inherent feature of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, clearly stated that in order to participate in diets, one had to fulfil strict requirements:

“Trzeba być szlachcicem z urodzenia, mieć obyczaje, mieszkać w swoich dobrach, tam żyć, stosując się do Praw i zwyczajów krajowych, być swobodnym i wiarę Rzymską katolicką wyznawać, ażeby zupełnych szlachectwa dostojeństw używać i być członkiem udzielności Rzeczypospolitej.

[One has to be born a nobleman, cultivate customs, reside and live on one’s land, adhere to all domestic laws and customs, be free and practice the Catholic religion, in order to enjoy all the privileges of nobility and be a member of the Commonwealth’s governance.]” (Wielhorski 1775, 166)

Wielhorski’s requirements were aimed not only at excluding people who were not of noble blood, but also at excluding non-residents of a particular region, all those remaining in servitude (as discussed in the previous section), and non-Catholics. All these provisions seem to be in accordance with the xenophobic discourse of the Bar Confederation, of which Wielhorski was a prominent member.[5] His perspective seems to rest on an assumption that unequal status was justified as long as people were granted, at some distant point in Polish history, a free choice to defend the homeland or dedicate themselves to cultivating land and craftsmanship, and also were guaranteed property rights. But it is telling that Wielhorski was not consistent in arguing for these requirements. For example, just a few pages after the above-quoted passage, he argues for granting rights of participation in local diets to religious dissidents, people who “diverged from Catholic faith” (Wielhorski 1775, 174).

Even bolder programmes of granting burghers access to the national diet were expressed with similar caution and many reservations. Adam Wawrzyniec Rzewuski wrote:

“Jak naród jest tylko jeden, tak izba narodowa jedna być powinna, do której jeżeli by się to Rzeczypospolitej zdawało, można by przydać reprezentantów miejskich, szczególnie tylko dla informacji w materiałach handlowych, bez najmniejszego uczestnictwa do rządu, co aby z tym większym dla wolności bezpieczeństwem stać się mogło, i aby czasem król nie miał zręczności stanem stan uciemiążać, stan przeciw stanowi uzbrajać.

[Just as a nation is one, we should have one chamber of parliament and given that it would be beneficial to the Commonwealth, representatives of cities could be included, but they would have a say only on issues of trade, not government, in order to secure freedom and not give the king the possibility to oppress one state with assistance from the other, to arm one state against the other.]” (Rzewuski 2000 [1790], 166)

Polish political writers of the eighteenth century were afraid the country might follow the Swedish example, with the king using burghers in order to secure absolute power for himself; hence remarks about the king arming “one state against the other”. But Rzewuski was even more careful to assure the nobility that their interests and political rights would be secured: he proposed to limit burghers’ voice only to issues of commerce. This provision was supposed to minimize fears – widespread among rank and file nobility – of burghers aligning themselves politically with oligarchs.

One could perhaps categorize these ideas as a typical defence of the interests of Wielhroski’s or Rzewuski’s own social stratum, and they were indeed interpreted as such in a rather dismissive account by Władysław Konopczyński.[6] But writers like Rzewuski and Turski did not limit themselves to catering to their fellow noblemen with their proposals of practical reforms. Even though they were extremely cautious when writing about voting rights and participation in diets, at the same time they invoked a very progressive vision of Poland as a “nation of eight million”.

The elements of this vision are scattered throughout Turski’s pamphlet *Myśli o królach, o sukcesyi, o przeszłym i przyszłym rządzie*. He advocates for the natural equality of all men and criticizes all instances of domination by people of noble blood: “Czuje dusza moja, iż los człowieka ręką natury na łono wolności oddanego, chybiliby przeznaczenia swego i do ostatniego przyszedł poniżenia, gdyby drugi człowiek panował nad człowiekiem prawem urodzenia [My soul feels that human fate is bound up with liberty by nature and a man will not fulfil his destiny and will be utterly denigrated, if one man rules over another by virtue of his breed.]” (Turski 1790, 17). He also calls for “more compassion toward burghers and the peasantry” (Ibidem, 23). The conclusion contains a solemn assurance that the author does not belong to any political party and that for him the Commonwealth is “a home of eight million people, a haven of friends” (Ibidem, 43).

Rzewuski used the same notion of a “nation of eight million”, but put it in much more concrete words, giving it a sharper political edge:

“Nauczycielu! Słyszysz te nieszczęścia i wzgardy człowieka wyrazy, umiej z przykładu korzystać. Czas jest, abyś dał serce twym uczniom, abyś im usunął zasłony i pokazał święty i szanowny ojczyzny obraz, abyś im los jej przepowiedział i szczęście jej w ich cnotie i rozsądku ukazał. Gdy użytek cnoty i rozumu poznają, połowa dzieła twoego skończona. Wy tłumacz im prawo własności, obelgę i sromotę niewolnika, zaszczyt wolnego. Powiedz, że człowiek równe wziął od natury do szczęścia prawo, że kto bliźniemu swemu to prawro odbierać usiłuje, jest godzien ohydy i wzgardy publicznej gwałtownik, że moc tyranów jest tylko w ślepocie i głupstwie niewolników, ale przyjdzie czas światła, który się w wieczną noc obróci dla niebacznych tyranów, że naród, w którym jest siedem milionów niewolników, a milion wolnych, koniecznie pomimo nawet najlepszych praw swoich upaść

powinien, że człowiek, skoro jest mu prawo własności odebrane, przestaje być człowiekiem, aby został bydlęciem, że zniszczyć to prawo jest tym samym, co zniszczyć społeczność, a na to miejsce albo wojnę ustawiczną łotrów z łotrami, albo nieustanne zgnębienie i męczarnie słabszych postanowić.

[Teacher! Hear those expressions of despair and contempt, learn how to use them. It is time for you to offer your heart to your pupils, to remove the scales from their eyes and show them a holy, venerable vision of the homeland, to foretell its fate and to show its happiness in virtue and common sense. When they learn the use of virtue and common sense, half of your job is done. Explain to them property rights, the disgrace and shame of a slave, the privilege of a free man. Tell them that every man has an equal natural right to happiness and that whoever tries to take it away from his fellow men, is a shameful violator who should be held in public contempt, that the power of tyrants rests only on the blindness and stupidity of slaves, but that the time of light will come, that it will bring darkness to tyrants, and that a nation where seven million are enslaved and only one is free will inevitably fall, regardless of how good its laws are, that a man without property right is merely an animal, that to destroy that right is to destroy community and replace it with war between villains or declare ceaseless misery and pain for those who are weak.]”
(Rzewuski 2000 [1790], 43-44)

In this emotional passage, Rzewuski offered his understanding of the Enlightenment as levelling artificial hierarchies among men, resting only on “the blindness and stupidity of slaves”. He made an explicit reference to Poland – “a country were seven million are enslaved and only one is free” – as an example of such abominable hierarchy and did not shy away from defending the equal (and natural) right of everyone to happiness. A cornerstone of this right for him was property. Of course property as a guarantee of true liberty is a classic republican trope, but Rzewuski made a fairly radical use of it, given that the *corvée* was still persistent in the eighteenth-century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

All in all, enlightened Sarmatians envisioned “a nation of eight million” as a country of compassion, natural equality, secured property rights for all social strata, and freedom to pursue happiness for everyone. It was a vision not very distant from the one the American Federalists had in mind, a major difference being that the latter were more ready to permit slavery.

Fear of great numbers

The idea of mainstream reformers, discussed above, to limit political rights to property holders, to turn the commonwealth into the “nation of property owners”, was defended as an attempt to limit the influence of “monied interests” on decision making. In the socio-economic conditions of late eighteenth-century Poland such a justification was of course quite convincing, but it left some important questions unanswered. If only those with a certain amount of wealth were to be the sole representatives of the whole nation, who would guarantee the civic rights of less affluent members of the nation? Kołłątaj and his circle postulated equality in social and economic life, but by taking away the political vote from impoverished individuals from all social estates, they risked undermining this very

principle. Moreover, the wealth of property owners granted political rights would still remain unequal, and mainstream reformers did not offer any radical proposals for creating greater equality among citizens. The risk of political corruption would surely be smaller, with property owners enjoying greater amount of economic independence, but it would be far from eliminated.

The persistence of such questions suggests not only that the vision of a “nation of property owners” was defended as a countermeasure against the domination of the oligarchy, but that there was another, more latent motive behind it – the belief that masses, multitudes, are unable of making unbiased, calculated political decisions. Of course, this attitude is as old as political thought itself – we can find its classic incarnation in works of Plato – but at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century it found a new expression in so-called “aristocratic liberalism”[7]. This differs from previous scepticisms toward the political abilities of “great numbers”, because it treats the idea of the people’s rule not as a diversion from some eternal wisdom cultivated by the elite, but rather as a threat to the independence of the individual, a rational subject capable of reasoning and self-understanding. The idea of the individual unencumbered by biases and outdated traditions, by all forms of unreflexively accepted forms of group thinking, is precisely the place where mainstream Enlightenment meets aristocratic liberalism.

But radical Enlightenment thinkers proposed a different approach to the rule of great numbers, originating from the works of Spinoza.[8] This approach rested on an assumption that all human beings are fundamentally and unconditionally equal – and equally fallible. If one accepts this assumption, it is no longer possible to associate better judgement with wealth, a certain colour of skin, a particular national character, or refined manners. In chapter VII, section 27 of his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza argued:

“And what we have written will, perhaps, be received with derision by those who limit to the populace only the vices which are inherent in all mortals; and use such phrases as, ‘the mob, if it is not frightened, inspires no little fear,’ and ‘the populace is either a humble slave, or a haughty master,’ and ‘it has no truth or judgment,’ etc. But all have one common nature. Only we are deceived by power and refinement.” (Spinoza 1891, 340)

From Spinoza’s perspective, ascribing irrationality and violent behaviour only to the populace at large is not a sign of healthy scepticism, but an exercise in wishful thinking. All human beings are fallible; no elite or wealthy group is exempt from this rule. In fact, we are misguided by superficial layers of “power and refinement”, political influence and manners masking the fallible nature of mankind.

Spinoza goes further in his criticism of mistaking social inequalities for unequal nature. According to him, passionate actions are a result of violating natural equality, rather than a justification for it:

“As for the populace being devoid of truth and judgment, that is nothing wonderful, since the chief business of the dominion is transacted behind its back, and it can but make conjectures from the little, which cannot be hidden. For it is uncommon virtue to suspend

one's judgment. So it is supreme folly to wish to transact everything behind the back of the citizens, and to expect they will not judge ill of the same, and will not give everything an unfavorable interpretation." (*Ibidem*, 341).

Denying people influence on political processes, "transacting the chief business of the dominion behind its back", results in distrust and drawing unfavourable conclusions on the basis of the very limited information that is available to the public. In short, fallacies of "great numbers" are not a result of their numerical force. There is nothing inherently irrational or vicious in multiplicity. The masses become distrustful, suspicious, passionate, or even vengeful, when they feel that a say in crucial decisions has been denied to them.

Spinoza understood such denial in terms of imposing the natural partiality of individual perspective on others. He stated in chapter XVII of *Theologico-Political Treatise* that "everyone thinks himself omniscient and wants to fashion all things to his liking, judging a thing to be just or unjust, lawful or unlawful, according as he thinks it will bring him profit or loss." (Spinoza 1891, 216). If that was the case, restricting political rights to an individual or a select group of citizens did not mean, as Hobbes argued, abandoning the uncertainties of the natural state for the security of the political one. It meant instead that the imperfect, fallible nature of all men has been translated into oppression of the state.

Spinozian ideas became a major source of inspiration for Dutch democratic republicans, and they in their turn inspired Gabriel Mably, who collaborated closely with a "founding father" of the enlightened Sarmatians, Michał Wielhorski. It is therefore no surprise that Polish radical republican reformers followed in the footsteps of Spinoza and argued decisively that "fear of great numbers" was misplaced.

Their defence of the multitude was formulated under the pretext of providing an answer to a practical question of proposed number of representatives. Adam Wawrzyniec Rzewuski opposed attempts to limit the number of legislators by arguing that it was only the executive that risks becoming inefficient if its members were too numerous:

"Tłum zniknie, gdy porządek nastąpi, gorliwość się powiększy, gdy więcej osób o dobru ojczyzny radzić będzie. (...) Gdyby nawet tysiąc osób ośmiu milionów ludzi woli tłumaczyło, czyżby ta reprezentacja tak ogromna zdawała się, aby ją podobną w skutku uczynić nie można było? Władza wykonywająca w nadto wielkiej liczbie osób pomieszczona, może ją uczynić niedołęczną, ale władza prawodawcza jest narodem, narodu lękać się nie trzeba, bo naród wtedy tylko być niesprawiedliwym może, gdy jego reprezentację jeden despota lub kilku aristokratów sobie przywłaszczy."

[The mob will give way to order, the zeal will become greater, if more people will have a say about the good of the fatherland. (...) Even if a thousand people express the will of eight million, would this representation appear so great as to render it incomprehensible? Too numerous an executive may become inefficient, but legislative power belongs to the nation, we should not fear the nation, because it can be unjust only if its representation is captured by a despot or a few aristocrats.] (Rzewuski 2000 [1790], 167)

Rzewuski's defence of a large legislative – we can assume that ideally it should amount to eight million, as he equates it with the whole nation – rests on a Spinozian argument. The nation can only be unjust, if “a despot or a few aristocrats” deny it a voice. In other words, imposing a particular perspective of absolute ruler or wealthy elite on “large number” can turn the latter into a mob.

Rzewuski did not limit his Spinozian criticism of conducting the “chief business of dominion” behind people’s backs to the question of the legislative branch. His major treatise *O formie rządów republikańskiego myśli* is in fact an elaborate defence of the common sense, semi-intuitive ability to act politically for the good of one’s community. He devotes lengthy passages to condemning different forms of paternalism, not only on the part of oligarchs or despots, but also that of lawyers. Rzewuski describes the mind of a legal scholar as a “broken mirror, which multiplies one thing into thousand of others” (*Ibidem*, 185). He was convinced that the juridical profession would become “a stronghold of despotism”. It was not only a matter of lawyers selling their services to tyrants and wealthy despots, but more importantly a problem of a trained mind undermining common thinking, understood quite literally as the disposition to think together.

This aspect of enlightened Sarmatianism echoes not only sentimental tropes that can be found in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and which herald the coming of romanticism. It is also an idea that turns Rzewuski and others into not-so-distant cousins of Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, with their focus on virtue, compassion, and common sense rather than on pure rationalism (Himmelfarb 2004). However, enlightened Sarmatians were more radical than their Scottish counterparts. At the core of their programme for social and political reforms for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a Spinozian idea of unconditional, general equality.

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Notes:

[1] An analogy with the Roman Republic would probably be more appropriate, given the fact that political writers defending Polish noble republicanism continuously use the introduction of imperial rule in Rome as evidence of liberty's decline, praising Brutus as the “noble assassin of Ceasar”. It is in fact the same theme that was used during the Renaissance period by Florentine republican thinkers, see Pocock 1975.

[2] For a discussion of Jabłonowski’s writings and the idea of equality among noblemen, see Łukowski 2010.

[3] For an insightful study of the uses and abuses of the idea of republican liberty in Polish political thought of the eighteenth century, see Grześkowiak-Krwawicz 2006.

[4] For a concise, yet informative discussion of Kołłątaj’s main reformist ideas, see Walicki 1989.

[5] For a detailed discussion of the Bar Confederation’s political discourse, see Maciejewski 1971.

[6] See Konopczyński 2012. Konopczyński had his own reasons to dislike Rzewuski and other “enlightened Sarmatians”. An ardent student of the Krakow historical school, advocating a realistic approach to international and domestic politics, and a right-wing politician, he clearly found their vision anachronistic.

[7] The term was coined by Alan S. Kahan (1992) to describe a combination of endorsement of certain aspects of modern democracy with sceptical and elitist attitudes toward the idea of the rule of the people. A different understanding of aristocratic liberalism can be found in de Dijn 2008, where the author defines the term as a perspective that stresses the importance of intermediary bodies in new, equal societies. To Annelien de Dijn, unlike Kahan, aristocratic liberalism is a political programme rather than a cultural and spiritual attitude. However, these two understandings are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

[8] I am using the term “great numbers” to point out some important connotations of the phrase “fear of small numbers”, used by Arjun Appadurai in the title of his seminal essay (Appadurai 2006). Appadurai focuses on minorities, which very often fall prey to so-called “predatory identities”, concerned with ethnic or racial purity contaminated by the existence of various small religious, cultural, or ethnic groups in larger states. But he also makes an important point about liberalism leaving small groups out of the picture by focusing solely on the problem of defending the individual in relation to great numbers – masses, nations, tribes etc. One could indeed argue that liberalism is motivated by a kind of “fear of great numbers”.

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