

¹²⁰ August 1980 in Light of the Republican Tradition

Dariusz Gawin

The paper was first published in *Lekcja sierpnia* [The Lesson of August], ed. Dariusz Gawin, Warszawa 2002.

Translated by Artur Rosman.

Dariusz Gawin (b. 1964), PhD in philosophy, is associate professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, and director of the Department of Civil Society, both at the Polish Academy of Sciences. He is deputy director of the Warsaw Uprising Museum. His interests are political philosophy and the history of ideas. In 2006 he received the Andrzej Kijowski Award for the book *Polska wieczny romans* [Poland, an Eternal Affair]. His most recent book is entitled *Blask i gorzyc wolności* [The Glory and Bitterness of Freedom].

August '80, just like the whole “Solidarity” movement from the period between 1980 and 1981, escapes all clearcut interpretations. This is because this historical phenomenon can be observed both from the perspective of social movements, one can highlight the worker and left-wing features of the movement, thus also its revolutionary character (back when it started Jadwiga Staniszkis talked about a “self-limiting revolution”), but one is also totally justified in interpreting “Solidarity” in light of the spirit of the Polish tradition of insurrections.¹ I will propose one more possible perspective for interpretation: I propose looking at the August

¹ Compare *Lekcja Sierpnia* [The Lesson of August], ed. Dariusz Gawin, Warszawa 2002 and “*Solidarność w imieniu narodu i obywateli* [“Solidarity” in the Name of the Nation and Citizens], ed. Marek Latoś, Kraków 2005; an interesting overview of Polish texts concerned with “Solidarity” is Andrzej Waśkiewicz’s “*Ku pokrzepieniu serc*” [Toward the Raising up of Hearts] *Res Publica Nowa* nr. 8, 2000.

strikes in the Gdańsk Shipyards through the lens of the republican tradition. Thus, August will be analyzed through the eyes of one of the key traditions of political philosophy – reaching all the way back to the ancient tradition of reflecting upon politics.² The move is so significant, because this choice of a vantage point makes it into an interpretation that goes beyond the boundaries of sociological theory, or the typical historical narrative. Just as with any other interpretation, it is merely an attempt at getting at a phenomenon, which, because of its scale and historical meaning, exceeds all possible perspectives of interpretation. I bring this up here, because surely such an interpretation, which gives August ‘80 measures taken from the world of the *polis* of antiquity, will appear ahistorical to a historian, while for a sociologist it will be too radically removed from contemporary sociological theory (especially for theories of social movements, like, for example, those conducted by Alaine Touraine in the 80’s).³

I will spoil the conclusion of this paper for the reader a bit by saying that the perspective for interpretation offered by the republican tradition seems to be intellectually promising, because it explains certain elements from August, elements that usually escape description and cause researchers, plus those who participated in the events, much trouble when it comes to understanding the causes and the proper meaning of “Solidarity.” At the same time, the phenomenon of August exceeds, as is the case with other theoretical perspectives, the hermeneutical possibilities contained within the republican tradition. To put it another way, the republican tradition does a great job as a tool for understanding certain especially important aspects of August, but at the same time, the events of the summer of 1980 expose the weaknesses and limitations of the republican tradition.

Even now the news from the Coast hits us with an especially strong feeling of the gravity of the events, which are coupled with descriptions of the psycho-somatic sensations of the participants that are clear examples of limit situations. The strike is an existential border-experience for them. To illustrate these crucial facts let us use several quotes taken from the participants, “I was constantly moved. I cried throughout, but I felt strange about it, so I turned away from people, covered myself up, hid myself from others, but I could not get a grip on myself.” “I cried throughout the whole strike. Even now [in 1981] whenever I hear the word, ‘strike,’ tears well up in my eyes” “This was an incredible experience. Only once before, as a child during the Warsaw Uprising, did I experience anything like it. I remember how my mother was sewing armbands for the soldiers of the Uprising. It was also August, and also warm. They pulled down the fence between the yards, so there was a lot of space, and there young soldiers of the Uprising were walking around

² Years ago, Paweł Śpiewak was the first to conduct this sort of interpretation in the text “Hannah Arendt i Alexis de Tocqueville o Solidarności” [Arendt and Tocqueville on Solidarity], in *Ideologie i obywatele* [Ideologies and Citizens], Warszawa, 1991.

³ *Solidarność: analiza ruchu społecznego 1980–1981* [Solidarity: An Analysis of a Social Movement], ed. A. Touraine et al., trans. A. Krasieński, Warszawa 1989.

122 and singing: Poland has not yet perished. I remembered this experience and something similar happened right under this gate. It was an atmosphere of euphoria – of choking on freedom, one of our friends was literally in a state of shock. He had to return to Warsaw, because he was constantly throwing up.”⁴

If we agree with Hannah Arendt – whose writings on the republican spirit will be the interpretive key for our explorations – that a remarkable feeling of “public happiness” is born when free citizens constitute political freedom and at the same time establish a political community, then we can recognize in what took place in the Gdańsk Shipyard the pathos which has accompanied the republican spirit from the dawn of Western civilization.⁵ The spirit of civic action, the same spirit that once visited Athens, Rome, Philadelphia and Paris, demonstrated its power in Gdańsk in the summer of 1980. This really seems like a far-fetched perspective – someone could ask, what could the times of Pericles and the American Founding Fathers have to do with these shipyard masses dressed in gray work uniforms, their carts with accumulators, their halls that served to organize boring meetings, their factory fences and checkpoints? All these requisites appear to be in disharmony with the spirit that has encroached upon them. This disparity between the meaning and the background was rendered and overcome by the Cinema of Moral Unrest. When in Agnieszka Holland’s “Provincial Actors” its two protagonists settle their accounts with their fake inauthentic lives, one can hear the sound of a leaking toilet. To a contemporary viewer raised on mass culture (which is always conventional and ritualized) this whole setup would seem like a mocking of the protagonists and the topic of their conversation. Yet, the meaning of this scene was completely different right before August: every place and every occasion are appropriate for the unfolding of the human drama, its fate. By rejecting ritual conventions the creators of the Cinema of Moral Unrest pointed to the fact that the everyday reality of the Polish People’s Republic – its courses, conferences, project bureaus, editorial offices, factories, provincial schools – despite its vulgar character, its essential lack of high-mindedness, was actually a place in which real dramas took place, real conflicts of moral reasoning. That which was a postulate of the Cinema of Moral Unrest became reality in August. The politics encroaching upon the mundane reality of that time was capable of constituting the meaning of events totally irrespective of the context. This fact always seems to have the character of an epiphany. The power of politics sacralizes places that were totally submerged, without reserve, in the profane. Every scenery could serve as the backdrop for a historical drama whose theme is the struggle between freedom and tyranny.

⁴ These are fragments collected by reporters who participated in the strike, from: *Kto tu wpuścił dziennikarzy* [Who Let in the Reporters?], ed. M. Miller and J. Jankowska, Warszawa 2005, p. 69, 86, 245 ff.

⁵ This phrase was originally used by Hannah Arendt throughout the book *On Revolution*.

Let us start with the shipyard – the setting of the drama of August ‘80. Classical politics was tightly bound to cities understood as the physical emanation of the political community. *Polis, civitas* – in these concepts the physical space gave way to the laws of symbolism (and one should not forget about the religious significance of these words). The Greek *polis* contains, in its Indo-European roots, a tie to fortifications, that is, a fenced-in place which can become a shelter during times of attack. Fortuitously, the Polish word for stronghold, “gród,” in its archaic meaning, or at least in its archaizing translations, for example in translations of classical drama, is taken as an equivalent of *polis*, because it contains similar layers of meaning. Etymologically, it is directly connected to “grodzić,” the establishing of boundaries or fences. At the same time the Polish word for city, “miasto,” is the same as the Old-Slavonic for place. “Stronghold” and “city” point to the specific character of the physical emanation of politics, which appears where people want to be together, connected by a common political authority. The city-place, *polis*, should have clear boundaries, thereby tearing away the space of citizen’s action from the homogeneous space of nature, in which nothing can be called acting in Arendt’s sense, because everything is subject to the power of necessity flowing from biological processes (animals are condemned to an eternal circling in the cycles of returns; only man can start something new, establish something, begin something). The sphere of biological compulsion extends outside the boundaries of the city – the vegetative kingdom of life, the eternal rhythm of circling time, the time of creating and destroying forms; within the sphere outlined by the boundaries of the *polis*, torn away from the rule of necessity, action is possible for free citizens who are heading toward immortality and thereby going beyond the dimensions of biological necessity.

In August of 1980 the place-city, Gdańsk’s *polis* – but simultaneously the *polis* of all Poles, was the shipyard. More live accounts, “You could breathe there just like in free independent Poland. I felt so well over there. It was a wonderfully organized city, our little headland;” “Strumff told me that there came to be a country within the country in the shipyard . . . one that governs by its own laws, it has its own intelligence services, its own minister of propaganda, its supplies people, its own security forces. Thus, it fulfills all the functions of a normal country. . .”⁶ The fences of the shipyard were the physical barrier of the self-constituting political community. This was the wall of the *polis*. Spread out beyond it was the domain of necessity, the social controlled by the tyranny, that is, a totalitarian authority. To put it another way, one can say that beyond the wall of the shipyard there spread out an undifferentiated “society,” controlled by the authorities, which reduced politics (the state of the natural freedom of citizens) to a totalitarian managing of social processes (by doing this the authorities destroyed any possibility for democracy itself).

⁶ *Kto tu wpuszcil dziennikarzy*, op. cit., p. 240.

This particular tension is born of the interaction of two spheres, on the one hand, that which is social, submerged in pre-political tyrannical state control and therefore also in fear of outbursts of feeling, and on the other, the sphere of free political community – the clash between these two created the specific atmosphere at the gates of the shipyard. The participants of the strike underscored the well-nigh magical character of the place. The gates were “a wondrous passage into another world.” Once they were crossed, “everything became obvious, clear” and one “felt that a different world functioned beyond the gates.” This is how the participants described the unique function of the shipyard’s gates: “This passage to another world was simply miraculous, especially after the stifling atmosphere of Warsaw. All of a sudden I find myself in a place where everything seems obvious, everything is clear, peaceful.” “Things were different on the inside. The action occurred according to its own laws, which nobody tried to overstep. All in all, peace reigned. On the other hand, by the gates, there was a wild audience. Everything was possible. A feeling of apprehension seemed to be in the air. Confusion, apprehension, even hatred, borderline aggression coupled with words.” “This gate did not divide, instead it united people. On the one side were the shipyard workers, on the other was the city . . . We could feel that behind these gates a totally different world functioned, that totally different laws reigned there. This is indescribable. I just stood there and watched. I found myself on the border of a totally different world.” “What seemed to be dangerous in front of the gates, on the inside took on a controlled and calm character.”⁷

In the gates, literally and symbolically, a primordial politics concentrated within the shipyard came in contact with the social, with the whole of social life that remained outside the ring of freedom created by the strikers. The unique atmosphere of the plaza in front of the gate, filled with thousands of people waiting for communiques, fliers, manifesting their support, and, above all, concentrating and gathering in that point, was documented in countless photos and many documentary films. The gate, covered with flowers, guarded by shipyard workers wearing white and red bands, decorated with flags and pictures of the Pope, became one of the most important icons of August right along with pictures showing the interior of the BHP Hall.⁸

If the shipyard was a *polis*, then the equivalent of the Pnyx (the Athenian place where the *ecclesia*, the assembly of the people, held its councils) and the Roman *Curia*, was the Shipyard’s BHP Hall, where the National Strike Committee held its councils. A reporter present at the shipyard recalls, “I had the impression that it was, well, I don’t know, something like the conference hall of the United Nations.”⁹ This primordial form of politics had the power to morph places and events seemingly banal into

⁷ Ibid., p. 84, 86, 93, 98.

⁸ BHP – Work Safety and Hygiene [trans.].

⁹ Ibid., p. 98.

a historical drama, and here it showed its power. Thanks to it, the BHP ¹²⁵ Hall in the Gdańsk Lenin Shipyard became a historical icon not only on a local scale, or on the scale of Polish history, but also in universal history. The history of freedom picks the scene where its drama is going to put on its show. In this perspective accidental places, seemingly unfit for the occasion, become necessary elements of the historical narrative. This is why the symbolic career of the BHP Hall is reminiscent of the tennis courts in Versailles – as distant from the pathos of grand history in 1789 as the Gdańsk Hall before 1980. However, both entered the canon of history because they became the scenes of universal events.

On the margins of the comparison of the shipyard to the *polis* one notices one more factor that strengthens the metaphor – the Greek *polis*, also the democratic ones like Athens, were far from the modern understanding of democracy, because they forced women, slaves and foreigners who were permanent residents, out of political life. The shipyard was specifically a place of work and the majority of its employees were men. Indeed, many women took part in the strikes, some of them played very important roles, like Anna Waletynowicz, Alina Pienkowska (it was her determination that singlehandedly turned back shipyard workers who wanted to leave after the signing of the first agreement with the government; it is only at that moment that the strike became a solidarity strike) or Henryka Krzywonos from MKS, but the absolute majority of the strikers were men.¹⁰ Their families remained behind the lines separating what is the political, the political community (*koinoia politike*), from the social (the sphere of *oikos*), that is, the reality which remained outside the fences of the shipyard. Even here, in a surprising way, accidentally, August's reality intertwined with the classical tradition and the thought of Hannah Arendt. As one of the reporters recalled, describing the atmosphere by the gates:

One the one side were the husbands, on the other, the wives and children. The striking workers would come to the gates and greet their children, often they were little, in their strollers. The wives would ask, with everyone looking on, with worried voices, "When are you [singular] coming back?," and they would answer, "When will we back? Well, we have no idea when. We are waiting until they come to talk to us."¹¹

"Solidarity," That is, the *Res Publica*

Into this place-city that was the shipyard, fenced off from the outside world by a wall, something poured in like a torrent, it engulfed people and took them much further than they could have imagined at the beginning of their united action. It was elemental, primordial, politics, which transforms and changes people and reveals the proper meaning

¹⁰ MKS – Międzyzakładowy Komitet Strajkowy [Inter-Workplace Strike Committee] [trans.].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

126 of events. This is how a participant of the strike in Gdynia recalled the strike's atmosphere:

A strange knot of unity tied the Polish nation together, we became closer, dearer, everyone respected their brothers more than they respected themselves . . . This was not an ordinary strike, this was an enormous school of educating noble human feeling from which we took away not only theory, but an enormous experience of the immense unity of the nation.¹²

The knot of unity was nothing other than the directly felt nature of that which is in common, or also, to use an idiom grounded in the Western tradition, the nature of “the thing in common,” the republic. Our knee-jerk understanding of *res publica* causes us to see it as the concept which describes the form of a country. Here *res* means a thing. In its primordial sense *res publica* is not a thing, instead it is an event, thus it does not describe something that exists beside citizens (the country as a sum of institutions, laws, offices, etc.), instead it refers to relations that join citizens, thereby constituting the proper foundation for the state's institutions.

The “Solidarity” strike, as the formula of August's protest, contained this understanding of common action. Respective crews, respective work divisions, exceeded the horizons of their particularity and created a universal plane for political life. During the strike the event was not the particular interest of individuals nor of the factories, rather, as it was put by one of the strikers, the event was all about striving to “change the shape of our lives.”

The pathos of the August strikes was the result of a leading affect which engulfed the people directly involved in fanning the flames of the common will and feelings. The community of will and affect allowed for the constitution of an event common to everyone, a *res publica*, that is, “Solidarity,” because precisely this content is hidden in this remarkable word that was chosen as the official name for the movement born in the shipyard. There is no getting away from the impression that we have become too used to this word, that we associate it too much with a thing, with the “Independent Self-Governing Trade Union” and its history. This prevents us from hearing anew how remarkable it is, or more, its apparent clumsiness. We do not hear it, because we have gotten used to this word after all these years (today solidarity as a concept is specified by the speaker as, “solidarity with a small ‘s’”). The specificity of this name comes from the fact that it, and this is rare in modern politics, does not point to any political institution or ideology, but instead to a certain specific and universal human relation. In essence it is so primary, so primordial, that it is pre-political, because all politics – understood as institutions, procedures, ideas – to be truly living must depend upon a foundation of solidarity.

¹² Edward Bernatowicz, “Czarne chmury” [Black Clouds], in *Sierpień '80 we wspomnieniach* [Memories of August '80], ed. Marek Latoszka, Gdańsk 1991, p. 166.

Primordial political action, as its swift current poured into the *polis* of the shipyard workers, caused a rapid transformation of the drama's actors. Just the day before, seemingly without-remainder submerged in the social (for the great majority the impulse that pushed them to join the strikes was material, the increase of prices), but now, from day to day, they became citizens – free people who desired to constitute and regain their freedom at last. The rapidity of this change shocked observers. Many, up to this day, are inclined to instinctively explain the meaning of the August events by resorting to the category of “miracle.” This is because a miracle is an act that just happens, seemingly out of nowhere, and is not the result of the past – it is something that cuts through time and makes possible the establishment of a new order.

Within these categories the proper meaning of the miracle which occurred in the shipyard was the sudden (yet peaceful) and unexpected birth of a political community of citizens. The crowd deprived of its own will, a population treated as an object of administrative procedures by thoroughly alienated rulers, changed itself in the name of an opposition-in-solidarity of conscious and responsible citizens. The freedom that changed the anonymous crowd into citizens acts on two levels: it changed both individuals and the collectivity. In the first case, we are dealing with an ennobling of every individual, or rather, each person. On the other hand, in actualized socialism there was a dramatic divergence between the declared respect for the rights of the individual and reality, a reality over-saturated with contempt for anyone who found himself lower in the actual social hierarchy thus, the ethical postulate of guarding the dignity of the individual had deeply revolutionary political consequences. The power of this postulate was surprising and fascinating, because it ripped apart the cover of universally present lies and gave back social reality its proper proportions.

This precisely was the cause of the thing that made us cry and gave us lumps in our throats. Freedom is not a miracle because, obviously, one must fight for it and take care of it, but also because with its mysterious force it changes the essence of a person right down to his core. This is such a substantial and rapid change that affect precedes reflection, feelings are faster than thoughts. When freedom is encrusted with institutions, laws, procedures, when it is hard to perceive it under the accumulations of politics understood as the craft of gaining power and ruling, when freedom will become something ordinary and lose its primordial glow, it becomes increasingly difficult to realize how special it actually is. In August freedom showed its power without any veils, in its whole, primordial, wondrous character.

The rapidity of that metamorphosis of individuals and the whole collective fascinated observers. In September of 1980, Ryszard Kapuściński's report about the strike in Gdańsk appeared in the Warsaw-based “Kultura.”

128 Its tone does not stray from the tone of other texts written by intellectuals from the capital reporting live about the strange strike-phenomenon, which they personally witnessed. What is most interesting about it is the direct way in which he grasped the ethical dimension of the workers' protests:

On the Coast the workers have crushed what has widely circulated in gabinetes and elite salons, the stereotype of a "working schmuck." The working schmuck does not discuss – he carries out someone else's plan. If we want the working schmuck to bark, then only to promise and reassure. The working schmuck is only concerned with one thing – how much he'll make. When he leaves the factory he stuffs his pockets full of screws, line and tools. If not for their supervisors the working schmucks would walk off with the whole factory. Then they stand by kiosks with beer. Then they sleep. They play cards while taking the train to work in the morning. After reaching the factory they take their place in the line for the doctor and pick up a leave of absence. . . In the meantime, on the Coast, and then in the whole country, from behind this occupational self-satisfaction there emerged the young face of the new generation of workers – thinking, intelligent, conscious of their place in society – who were determined to draw out all the consequences stemming from the fact that according to the intellectual presuppositions of the political system their class was granted the leading role in society.

This is why someone who:

Tries to reduce the movement from the Coast to matters of pay and living . . . has not grasped anything. This is because the leading motive of these occurrences was the *dignity of man*, it was a striving to create new relations between people, in every place and in all ranks, there was the principle of mutual respect binding everyone without exception, a principle according to which one's subordinate was at the same time one's partner.¹³

Recognizing the dignity of every human person, recognizing his inborn right to be treated as a subject, not as an object, constituted the crucial condition this collectivity of individuals needed to raise itself up to a higher level – a collectivity composed of persons could no longer be just a crowd nor a mass of people living like swine in the fields and tied to "the stump of the moment." The collectivity had to transform itself into in a community of citizens. The ethical sense of August turned into its political sense – just as individuals were becoming persons, so also the crowd was becoming the People.

For this transformation to be complete another step was needed. A step that depended upon thinking through the logical consequences of the previously accepted conclusion about the inborn dignity of each and every human person. The conclusion had to be the presupposition that the collectivity of such individuals can be recognized as a valid subject of action only when it acknowledges the principle of equality as the main principle regulating their mutual relations. And again, just like with the surprise voiced at the unexpected eruption of general agreement to treat

¹³ Cited in: Grażyna Pomian, *Polska "Solidarność"* [Polish Solidarity], Paryż, 1982, p. 76.

each other and everyone with respect, also the experience of the sudden,¹²⁹ spontaneous, community of equals caused wonder mixed with deep feeling. This mood resounds in the picture painted by the words of a reporter written several months after his time in the Gdańsk Shipyard, “We sat on the ground, right by me there was some professor from the Fishing Institute. There were no barriers resulting from titles, positions, age, profession. Everyone was open.” Someone else added, “It was a republic of equals. No rituals.”¹⁴

The regained freedom brought out, from under the decks of social roles and social hierarchies, an inborn humanity. A female reporter who spent time in the shipyard recalls, “Faces were interesting . . . I immediately realized that I couldn’t tell the difference in professions from faces, and yet both workers, technicians, and engineers were there.” This similarity was not the same thing as standardization – a loss of individual identity. On the contrary, resemblance in dignity allowed for a recapturing of authentic subjectivity. It seems that the classic conception of *homonoiia*, that is resemblance, but also equality, is useful for understanding this aspect of the strike. The citizens of the political community, of the Aristotelian *koinonia politike*, as equals should at the same time resemble each other. This is due to the emphasis put on friendship between citizens by the Stagirate. That’s because it fulfilled a unifying role, transforming a collectivity merely living together into a community ready to act as a political subject in solidarity.

This lead is quite interesting, because to a certain degree *homonoiia* understood in this way overlaps considerably with solidarity understood as the tie of friendship (in its political meaning) joining equals in their inborn civic dignity. Friendship joining those resembling each other as the uniter of political community, or to put it otherwise, solidarity joining the free who recognize in themselves an inborn dignity, also expands and fills out the understanding of the shipyard as a *polis*. Plato and Aristotle underscored that a real *polis* as a political community is only possible in limited, small from our modern perspective, social frames. Several thousand citizens was the optimal number by their reckonings. The emphasis on this scale was the result of the conviction that a real community of citizens could only function where citizens know each other mutually and interact directly. Friends share the same interests, spend time together, and talk frequently. This is the way to recognize the presence of a friend, “this is made possible by people living together, but not in the way we use this word for cattle, because it grazes in the same place”.¹⁵ Since friendship is born of direct contact, thus, according to Aristotle, there arises the question about the possible number of friends:

¹⁴ On the margins, with a certain bitterness, one can notice that from our current perspective years later this disappearance of all social barriers and hierarchies and all their attendant social rituals, it all seems all the more miraculous and extraordinary than it did then. Our democracy today offers us equality reduced to a narrow circle of formal procedures. We no longer have any chance to experience being in a universal community of equals.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1170b.

Should one have as many as possible, or is there some measure in relation to the amount of friends, just as there is in relation to the maximum amount of residents in a city? The population of a city cannot be composed of ten people, however, if there will be a hundred-thousand of them, then it will no longer be a city either. But the proper amount is probably not expressed by some one number, but is always something that finds itself between two specific figures. Thus, the amount of friends is also limited to some highest number of people with which one can coexist . . . it is obvious that one cannot live with some inordinate amount of people and share with them. . . It is also hard to really participate in the happiness and sadness of many people.¹⁶

Babylon was the opposite of the *polis* thus understood: an immense city populated by hundreds of thousands of people who were necessarily anonymous. Babylon fulfills here the role of a symbol of an immense collectivity – collectivity not community – submerged without remainder in what is social and biological. A serious role was played by another consideration – in a giant collectivity democratic institutions (Greece did not know a democracy different from direct democracy) could not function.

The reality of the August strike, in a curious fashion, can also be explained according to this aspect of classical political thought. The average place of work in the Polish People's Republic (PRL) in its size was reminiscent of a Greek *polis* (naturally, we are talking about those who had the political rights of a citizen) – at most it contained tens of thousands individuals. Therefore, one can say that the largest industrial behemoths of those times did not exceed the size of Athens from Socrates' and Plato's epoch. On this scale people could still know each other, and if they did not know each other directly, then they could recognize each other by sight, or could have heard about people with whom they did not run into during day to day situations. In such conditions it was easier to talk of friendship, or also, to use a more modern idiom, of trust and solidarity. The great "Solidarity," a union of tens of millions, which developed from the August strike reminds one of a large confederation, or as the Greeks put it, a *symmachia*, composed of thousands of *poleis*. This large union also later fell apart into a thousand communities that each had its *agora*, its debates, its political conflicts, and its moments of political action. Precisely this circumstance was at the root of the unusual, even by modern standards, intensity of civic life which took place within the union. In a normal parliamentary democracy conscious, intentional, acting is needed to directly take part in political life – one has to sign up with a party, go to meetings, take part in discussions and pre-election meetings. To put it another way, one must find people and places that are "political." In the years 1980–1981 the vast majority of Poles participated in some workplace (the shipyard, a research institute, and a nursery all equally counted as workplaces) where they spent eight hours a day. Therefore, being political, as a way of collective acting and living, was really a universal and obvious dimension of their existence.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1171a.

The element of the political is language, speech, democratic debate. To all the authors writing about August the talkativeness of those times stood out. The unbridled element of universal debate, of a general and uninterrupted talking, spilled out from the Coast to the whole country. During countless meetings of work organizations of the union people could finally say what they thought and felt. The meaning of these monologues could not be reduced to its therapeutic function. Getting rid of anxieties or regaining psychological balance was not the thing at stake there. During them opinions about public affairs hitherto hidden under the masks of the gossip, political joke, judgments made within the safety of one's own four walls, transformed themselves into public discourse. In the sphere of the political, meaning that which is common, speech stopped being mere blather, constantly buzzing, filling up everything, but unable to change anything. This fall of language was earlier analyzed by Leszek Kolakowski who underscored that it is a symptom of Sovietism:

Sovietization takes its heaviest toll where the public use of words in their ordinary meaning is taken for an intellectual and moral deed or extravagance, where it is self-evident that public use of words has nothing to do with "real" life, and real life is: mud on the streets, kaszanka on the plate, requests for an apartment, a raise, price hike, price reduction, eggs are more expensive, not letting anyone trick you, don't be anybody's fool, break, pick, get hit, break away, fall under, patch up, hangover, medicine, funeral.

Then he added, "If real life exhausts itself in the daily bustle and daily agony, and when ritual phrases devoid of any semantic value break down and stop all thought, and if nobody is puzzled by this, Sovietization has been achieved."¹⁷

Under the new conditions speech was becoming a tool of change, a weapon, even more, an inherently political form of acting, "Very simple sentences were used, laconic, and each spoken word was treated seriously," furthermore:

The leadership of the strike had its meetings here (in the BHP Hall) . . . at the main table there was a microphone. Everyone stepped up to it and related what was going on in their workplace. There was a feeling of the great authenticity of these people. One could see that they were workers who did not have experience in having their voice heard. They fumbled, spoke ungrammatically.¹⁸

Speech was becoming a weapon, because it was public, because talking about politics in such a way demanded civil courage, thus the sort of courage required of citizens. What used to be whispered privately, now became the object of public debate. Public speech tore away the constrain-

¹⁷ Leszek Kołakowski, "Sprawa Polska" in *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań* [Can the Devil Be Saved and Other Writings], Londyn 1984, p. 302.

¹⁸ *Kto tu wpuszczał dziennikarzy*, op. cit., p. 99.

¹³² ing bonds of fear and a falsely understood “healthy reason.” It created a public space understood as a space of debate and as a sphere of coming to understand matters important to all “equal” citizens, meaning, equal participants who are concerned about the common good.

This helps us to understand why “Solidarity” sacrificed its efficiency on the altar of free speech. During the first convention of the union’s delegates, the same as with the lowest levels of the union’s structure, the super-democratic procedures allowed each delegate a chance to enter the discussion at any moment. Despite the fact that this usually resulted in a complete mess, this principle was carefully and seriously observed. Thanks to this “Solidarity’s” republican democracy had a clearly substantial character. It treated procedures as a necessary evil.

The weight given to observing the rules of equality in all public debates conducted by “Solidarity,” to a certain degree obsessional, came from one other circumstance: up until that time the language used for social communication, both the official and unofficial, was deeply undemocratic. Both the official propaganda and the language used in social interactions between Poles carried within itself deeply ingrained prejudices about the naturalness of social divisions. Behind slogans of triumphant equality in the Polish People’s Republic there hid a factual social hierarchy that divided people into “owners” of the People’s Poland, meaning the party leadership, members of the nomenclature, and then society, meaning a mass composed of ordinary people. What’s more, colloquial language, social relations in the non-official sphere, also treated inequality as a given. Even though this is a natural phenomenon and there is not one society whose members would be unaware of social differences, even given that, it seems that Polish society has, to a lesser degree than other Western societies, been subject to a democratization of everyday speech. In the relations of the intelligentsia, but also white-collar workers, to those of a lower status (whatever it is defined by: wealth, social status, education) one could sense the traces of the past going back a long time before 1945. The differentiation between the higher spheres and ordinary people, between the nobles and the people, was still present in Polish life despite considerable changes in the nation’s way of operating. The concept of the “people” in this instance is the opposite of the people of the republic and the revolution. Its essence does not come from the activity of equals but from hierarchy, from inequality, and marks out those who are an expendable mass, living somewhere at the bottom of the social ladder. Within this situation contempt and resentment interwove into an age-old knot of ill feelings.

The living element for public speech, whose power was built up during August, overcame all social divisions and rendered them useless. The language of “Solidarity” removed social divisions, all hierarchies and differences. It essentially was deprived of elements of symbolic violence: it did not divide, did not create hierarchies, did not exclude, instead it united. The abolition of natural hierarchies and inequalities was taken by the

participants as another sign of a miracle. This is where the amazement of the intellectuals as described by Kapuściński came from – that workers showed themselves to be people fighting for the dignity of all, even the intellectuals. This was also the cause of the stupefaction caused by this newborn “republic of equals,” where professors sat by shipyard workers and talked with them as equals.

The intensity with which the stream of republican political action poured into Polish reality through a small piece of land in the Gdańsk Shipyard was intensifying because of its historical context. The ten year anniversary of tight control over culture and the whole sphere of public communication, and also the lack of any authentic political life, caused all political traditions to fall into hibernation. This is why August and the beginning of “Solidarity” was enfolded, to use a concept chiseled out in a totally different context by John Rawls, by a “cover of ignorance.” People really did know that their past was covered over with official lies, but at the same time, they did not know it themselves. This is why one of the objectives of “Solidarity” was the reclaiming of the past. Paradoxically, this fact was a blessing for the newly formed “Solidarity” movement. Its building up took place in conditions strikingly reminiscent of the state of nature, the age-old dream of political philosophy. Right from the start the Poles, deprived of the ballast of the past and the variety of its concomitant, often contradictory political traditions, trustingly submerged themselves in the stream of republican revolution. Where there was no “politics” to speak of, one could easily reach for unadulterated politics. Where there was not yet a political left or a political right it was easier to build a political community on a foundation of unity. Where ideology had not yet appeared it was easier to utilize the language of primordial republicanism. Finally, where there were no parties which look out for the interests of a part, it was easier to begin to build a solidarity directed at the whole.

The Presence of Religion

The republican tradition also allows for an interpretation of religion’s presence during the August strikes. The unusual, mysterious, character of the process of establishing the public sphere demanded a transcendent sanction. A reporter present in the shipyard said:

How to understand this explosion, these explosions of religious feeling, this basically religious demonstration? All historical events demand a frame, ceremony. Right then the movement realized that its moral societal protest could not find any official form which was not compromised. The Church proved to be the only institution that did not betray the interests of the nation. There was nothing to lean on and in the shipyard there was a great need for lasting things, a need for hope, and as we all know, God is imagined as the One who does not represent any group interests, because He is impartial. Masses had a significant meaning for the mood and for building up the dignity of people. People in the shipyard, irregardless of whether they were believers or not, found in them a kind of soundness which they wanted to serve.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

¹³⁴ Thus, naturally, the boundaries surrounding this specific piece of physical space, which gained a totally new status thanks to civic action, had to be marked with religious symbols. On the fences of the shipyard, near national symbols, evoking political order, there spontaneously appeared crosses and pictures of the Pope. What's interesting, this presence of religion was deprived of (well known from later years) ideological variables. No one, besides the few left-wing reporters from the West, associated the crosses and pictures of the Pope with the stereotypical threat from the Catholic-nationalist right-wing. Just as the community had to first regain a primordial politics and an elementary public sphere – so that leaning on them it could practice politics and build political institutions – now the religiosity of its members first had to be rebuilt from a foundation of Christianity understood as the source of a sacred that sanctifies public space, so that in the next phase the members of the community could become conscious of the ideological traditions of Polish Catholicism (it seems that this is the only reason why those leaning toward the left could, without reservations, accept what was to their Western colleagues an off-putting element of August).

August and Republican *Aporia*

August, as was underscored earlier in this paper, escapes all clearcut interpretations. Thus, the republican tradition cannot appear in a privileged position. Just like all the others, even though it is handy and useful when it comes to shedding light on significant aspects of those events, it is not capable of providing a hermeneutical key to all questions. With this the experience of August shows the limitations of the republican tradition. One of the crucial matters is the matter of violence and its place in classical politics.

For Arendt, in her reconstruction of the Greek model of political life, the exclusion of violence beyond the sphere of the political had substantial consequences. This thread returns throughout her work, but it plays an especially important role in *The Human Condition*. The point of departure of Arendt's reasoning is the way in which Aristotle bases politics upon the human ability to use language. Speaking gained a political character, because the Greeks identified speech with acting. If a political community's proper mode of existence is the gathering of citizens together, thereby constituting political space where the political appears, then speech is the living element of politics. Citizens appear in public space in order to make themselves present, to present their point of view and to let others judge them accordingly. Public speaking thus becomes the core of political acting through convincing others of your own point of view, or also, as the Greeks put it, through giving good council to the *polis*. The identification of political action with speaking is based upon the assumption that political virtue is the way of finding the proper arguments and words at the right time, thereby influencing the assembly, this thus allows Arendt to exclude violence from the political.

Physical power, violence or compulsion are mute, as Arendt puts it, “the quintessentially political action is the one that stays outside the sphere of violence, it essentially occurs in words. . . Ordinary violence is totally mute, because of that it cannot achieve greatness.”²⁰ “To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that words and persuasion decided everything, and not power and violence.”²¹ A leadership which cannot tolerate opposition, or does not allow discussion, which uses violence, always mute, is one that uses ways of governing that are characteristic of pre-political or extra-political forms of living together. Arendt contends that, on the one hand, the Greeks reserved this sort of conduct for family life, on the other, that it characterized tyranny, a political order based upon an unlimited power bestowed upon a Greek individual, or even, that it characterized the barbarian political order, of which the main example known to the Greeks was the Persian monarchy. The citizen of Athens, within the confines of his household, was a tyrant, he had unlimited power over the members of his family and slaves; his will was an order, and discussion with him was impossible. However, by crossing the threshold of his family home and by entering the *agora*, or any other place where people assembled, he stopped being a despot who reigns over a miniature monarchy and became a citizen, equal in his rights to others. He could no longer command, all that remained was the persuasion of equals.

The removal of violence and coercion from the political sphere into the social sphere allowed Arendt to not only build a suggestive – the question remains how authentic – ideal model of the Greek city-state as a political community for whom the key element of being political is speech, but this also allowed her to criticize modernity, which according to her has confused these two spheres. By using society as the source of politics modernity made a mistake, because it let violence creep into politics. As she wrote in *The Human Condition* the characteristic feature of the household was the fact that, “in its zone people lived together, because they were directed by their needs. The driving force was life itself.” This is also the reason why the organization of the family and the home is ordered by physical work, “the work of men, connected to providing food, and that of childbearing women, were both subject to the same pressure exerted by life. Thus, the natural community in a household was born from necessity, and necessity ruled over all the activities done within it.”²² In opposition to the household – where necessity reigned, born from the nature of the life-process, which demanded to be upheld, continually consuming, without interruption, the work of human hands – the sphere of the *polis* was the domain of freedom.

This position, as mentioned earlier, is consequentially advanced by Arendt not only in *The Human Condition*, but also in her other works.²³

²⁰ H. Arendt, *Kondycja ludzka* [The Human Condition], trans. Anna Łagodzka, Warszawa 2000, p. 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²³ This matter is the topic, above all, of the work *On Revolution*, also in the exhaustive *On*

136 However, there appears a very considerable difficulty: by construing her ideal model of a Greek *polis* she not only passes over in silence the true character of Greek politics during the classical period, which was full of violence both within and without, she also passes over those elements of a Greek citizen's upbringing which were saturated by the continuous presence of violence in Greek communities. We should turn our attention to the references to violence in the models of a citizen's upbringing and civic virtues contained in the works of Aristotle and Thucydides. This is especially significant, because Arendt has her own specific way of choosing quotes from these authors. This is especially apparent, for example, in the funerary speech of Pericles so frequently cited by Arendt – it was given by the Athenian politician on the occasion of a state funeral for the soldiers who perished in the Peloponnesian War. The fragments from this speech used by Thucydides became the subject of interesting commentaries which Arendt placed in the classic essay, "On the Crisis of Culture."²⁴ Just the occasion of this speech, famous because it contains a direct praise of the political order of Athens and can be treated – in light of the repulsion to democracy felt by ancient philosophers – as a direct expression of a democratic community's self-knowledge, this is telling, because Pericles' speech commemorates dying for the fatherland. The praise of political order in this context highlights the relationship between violence and the political. Pericles says that before praising the fallen he will first explain, "what kind of order and what character traits have made our country great."²⁵ Pericles simply calls this political order democracy, and marks out freedom as its leading principle. He suggestively describes the greatness and fame of Athens, which flow directly from the spirit of its citizens. The glory of the country, above all, comes from military victories. From Pericles' perspective the main advantage flowing from these victories is not prosperity, but glory itself:

Our country evokes wonder, because with our courage we have forced all seas and lands to open themselves up to us and we have put up lasting monuments to the defeats we have inflicted and to our good deeds. In the defense of the city these men bravely perished, not wanting to lose it; all those that remain should also be ready to suffer for the defense of this city.²⁶

Within all of this reasoning death has a key significance as a proof of virtue – the one who does not fear to lay down his life for his native city does not only act on behalf of its material might, but also, at the same time, is a witness of the power of its *politei*, of the power of the ties binding the political community. Pericles unambiguously says:

Violence, trans. A. Łagocka & W. Madej, Warszawa, 1998.
²⁴ In H. Arendt, *Między czasem minionym a przyszłym* [Between Past and Future], trans. M. Godyń & W. Madej, Warszawa, 1994.
²⁵ Thucydides, *Wojna peloponeska* [The Peloponnesian War], trans. K. Komaniecki, Warszawa, 1988, pp.37–38.
²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Their death seems to me to be the best proof of their courage, in part it is its first appearance, in part, its final crowning. Because even when we are talking about those who were not the finest, the prowess they showed in defense of the fatherland should be put down in their favor, because by their good deeds they have erased the bad, more than that, they have brought more gains to the general good than they have caused harm to particular individuals.²⁷

Thus, the virtue of courage does not have a purely military character – it constitutes the highest realization of political virtue. Death on the field of glory in defense of a victorious fatherland constitutes the most perfect deed, the most perfect form of action for a citizen, and it deserves particular praise and memory. As Thucydides' Pericles says, the living should look upon the might of the country and fire themselves up with love for it, "and since they will become aware of its greatness, they should remember that it was created by daring people, responsible and enlivened by a sense of honor, who during times of hardship did not hold back their services and courage, instead they gave it the most valuable sacrifice as a gift." The key part of the speech occurs here, which corresponds, for the most part, with Arendt's views about the nature of the *polis*, understood as a structure of memory, but at the same time corresponding to that which the author of *The Human Condition* discretely passes over in silence:

By giving their lives for the common good, they gained a fame that does not pass and a most perfect monument – not the grave in which they rest, but in the human memory, thanks to which their fame lives, however many times words or deeds have an opportunity to pronounce it. The grave of famous men is the whole earth, their fame is not only voiced on gravestones in their native land, but their memory also lives on in foreign lands, not written on monuments, but in human souls.²⁸

Pericles concludes this part of his speech with the following words to the living, "Imitate these heroes! By understanding that happiness depends upon freedom, and freedom upon courage, do not avoid the dangers of war." Then he turns, with words of encouragement, to the grieving parents of the fallen, but at the same time tells them not to succumb to sadness, "in matters of the state, impartial and honest advice cannot be given by one who does not want to, equally like everyone else, put their children in harm's way".²⁹

Pericles echoes Aristotle by placing death on the field of glory in defense of the native political community as the deed which occupies the pride of place in the hierarchy of honors and the praise that accompanies them. It seems significant to our argument that Aristotle begins the catalog of virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* with courage. This virtue is related to danger, because the man who is valiant is the one who does not fear the greatest of all dangers. The deciding factor in the question about the

²⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

138 essence of courage is the answer to the question about the things toward which mans shows himself to be courageous:

What then are the fearful things in respect of which courage is displayed? I suppose those which are the greatest, since there is no one more brave in enduring danger than the courageous man. Now the most terrible thing of all is death; for it is the end, and when a man is dead, nothing, we think, either good or evil, can befall him any more.³⁰

But not every type of death is intended here:

But even death, we should hold, does not in all circumstances give an opportunity for courage, for instance, we do not call a man courageous for facing death by drowning or disease. What form of death then is a test of courage? Presumably that which is the noblest. Now the noblest form of death is death in battle, for it is encountered in the midst of the greatest and most noble of dangers. And this conclusion is borne out by the principle on which public honors are bestowed in republics and under monarchies. The courageous man, therefore, in the proper sense of the term, will be he who fearlessly confronts a noble death, or some sudden peril that threatens death; and the perils of war answer this description most fully.³¹

Speaking, debating, finding the right words and arguments at the right time all create, according to Arendt, the public sphere and build up a free authentically-participating community. This definition of political action, which identifies speaking and following procedures with action, seems debatable. Arendt, in her convincing reconstruction of the nature of politics and in her building up of a suggestive model of the ideal Greek community passes over in silence the aims of these actions, not in only in the way that they were construed by historical Greek political communities, but also how Greek political thought understood them. Distaste for the social, scorn for physical work, the building up of the political in opposition to the household, meant that in the hierarchy of citizen's virtues courage occupied a high position and its highest test was the field of battle. Politics, in the narrow meaning of the word presented by Arendt in her ideal model, is concerned with the process of making decisions and designating the aims of common action. But one would be hard pressed to find in Arendt's description what this whole process is concerned with if not matters pertaining to maintaining and expanding the might of the state (since this is obviously tied to violence), and if at the same time we will keep in mind that the social body should not occupy itself with the liability of administering of that which is social, that is, with "economy." This is how Arendt describes the nature of authority that appears in the model dimension of Greek political community, "Authority appears only where words and deeds have not dissolved, where words are not empty or deeds brutal, where words are not used to hide one's intentions, but

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a.

³¹ *Ibid.*

to unveil that which is substantial, and deeds do not serve rape and de-¹³⁹struction, but to establish ties and create new realities.”³² But when one remembers the words of Pericles quoted by Thucydides, one cannot help but hold back the impression that for real Greeks the establishment of ties and new realities was inextricably connected with rape and destruction, with the imposition of their will upon others. And not even for material gains, but for glory, which confirmed their civic excellence. The readiness to risk one’s own life was the best proof of having crossed the cramped confines of the biological nature of man, which he shares with the animals. The most beautiful deed is heroism in war, and the most beautiful form of “speech” is advising the city in matters pertaining to war and peace. The memory of the deeds of Pericles or Themistocles, but also of Aristotle’s personal pupil, Alexander the Great, was the memory of their grand victories. The superb individual aimed at eternity, and he proved it by risking death. Glory thus is tied to heroism.

If in the picture of the Greeks presented to us by Arendt we notice considerable oversights, then there is a glaring contradiction in her picture of the modern epoch and the place of violence in modern politics. In her accounts, from *On Revolution*, of councils during the Bolshevik Revolution, or also councils during the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, violence implicitly becomes a positive element.³³ Or to put it another way, it is hard to understand why criticism of the Jacobins and the negative appraisal of the violence used during the French Revolution can go in hand in hand with a fascination with Russian workers’ military councils. The pathos of constituting freedom, civic activity – if we even agree to such an assessment of the Russian revolution – was tightly connected with revolutionary violence. Arendt did not live to see 1980, but one cannot shake the impression that among all the 20th century political movements enlivened by civic cooperation, “Solidarity” was the closest to the ideal described in *The Human Condition*. This is because it was the only immense social movement totally devoid of violence. August, and later “Solidarity” between 1980 and 1981, was a political community whose main tool for achieving change was the element of speech, rather than physical battle. And yet it seems to me that it is not possible to explain the republican political pathos which appeared in the Gdańsk Shipyard without acknowledging an element of violence.

The words of a reporter who was present in the shipyard are key to understanding this matter, “If one lives a bit with people who throw caution to the wind and are willing to risk their lives, then this has an effect.” In an obvious sense violence was present in during August. It’s true that violence was not directly present on the stage of the historical drama, yet, it was lodged within the reality of that time as a possibility.

³² H. Arendt, *Kondycja ludzka*, op. cit., p. 219.

³³ The itself is full of references to Marx and Engels, brings up mixed feelings today, as does *On Violence*, written under the influence of the counter-cultural student revolts of the latter part of the 60’s, where one can find, for example, the author’s sympathy toward the Black Panthers.

¹⁴⁰ Just the potential for violence, happily not actualized in August, decided upon the character of the pathos felt by the participants. It was also one of the sources of the extraordinary psychosomatic reactions described earlier in this paper. The threat of intervention, internal and external, by the USSR, was both an obvious and deciding factor within the situation. August built up its self-consciousness as a fulfillment, as a late victory of those postulates, and at the same time, as an overturning and exceeding of the tragic suppression of the worker-strikers in December '70.

The nature of August's pathos seen in light of the republican tradition – a tradition which does not pass over in silence suggestive fragments in Aristotle or Thucydides – is based on the fact that a community of citizens, consciously and in solidarity, stood up against the threat of violence from a tyranny. This community itself did not resort to violence, but it did win a war of nerves; a war, because it consciously risked life and limb. If it was ready to risk its life in the defense of its freedom, then it fulfilled an elementary requirement of classical republicanism – it went beyond the boundaries of its own biological necessity. By defeating the tyranny it achieved the glory due to truly courageous people. This is the proper source of August's immortality, the reason why it has taken its proper place in the annals of freedom. The pressure of that situation was so great that the bodies and souls of the participants could behave in far from normal ways. Then again, there is nothing strange about these reactions. The power of politics is the biggest force that can come to life, according to the republican tradition, between people in this world.

In 1972, in Toronto, during a seminar devoted to the thought of Arendt, where the author of *The Human Condition* was present, there came the question about where in the democratic and liberal world did she notice places where the spirit of ancient civic life could come back to life. For the one asking the question it seemed especially problematic, because the only thing “left to do for the political man, is what the Greeks used to do, make war!” meaning, something which can no longer chosen as a respectable political option. To this Arendt replied that there are places where the spirit of civic debate is still present:

Let's take, for example, urban public meetings. Let's say that building a bridge is what's at stake. This can be decided from the top down, or through public debate. If it just so happens that the building of a bridge is truly an open matter, then it's better that it were decided upon by a discussion, rather than from the top down. I was once at such a meeting in New Hampshire and was impressed by the reasonableness of those citizens.³⁴

This whole example contains the core of the problem. Even though local self-rule often remains – especially in countries where civic culture is strong – a substantial element of civic activity, this form of engagement is essentially different from the classical model of political community.

³⁴ Cf. “Seminarium w Toronto” [The Seminar in Toronto] in *Przegląd Polityczny* [The Political Review], nr. 55/2002, p. 196 ff.

Civic life on this level, even though it is necessary and extremely useful, ¹⁴¹ only with difficulty provides the stimuli necessary to feel “public happiness” and also to feel the pathos which comes from enacting freedom. It would be hard to imagine people who are constantly crying or throwing up at a vote for the county budget or during a discussion about the renovation of a school.

Local self-governance, free from pathos, directed at comfort and friendly cohabitation is always in danger of falling into the sphere of the social. This is not a catastrophe or an act of God, but the normal situation which is totally understandable in modern liberal-democratic societies. On the other hand, the appearance of the republican pathos requires a context, even just a potential, of violence, or at least a sharp existential conflict (in Carl Schmidt’s understanding), which causes such situations to be treated by modern societies not as desirable, but rather as dangerous and threatening. The totality of social mobilization which appears during limit situations such as August is hard to maintain for the long run. This is also tied to the difficulty immanent in such situations, the difficulty of institutionalizing the republican spirit.

Thus, the republican tradition is not so much a realistic project as it is a normative utopia, the measure for social and political reality, which serves as a tool to criticize them. Paraphrasing Arendt, who spoke of the “lost treasure” of this tradition, it is a treasure continually regained in history and also continually lost until its next lightning bolt, until the next historical revelation of primordially pure politics. It is true that each such bolt will fall back into the sphere of the social, but memory of the miracle of freedom and real community will constitute – for a time, for a generation, maybe for several generations, for a century, or several centuries – a continually present ideal that shows the measure of perfection possible for people.

This is the reason why the experience of August seems especially important today, at the start of the XXI century. Behind Poland’s eastern border there is yet another staging of the age-old conflict between freedom and tyranny. One of the most discussed problems within the European Union is the so-called “democratic deficit,” caused by a divorce of European political structures from the life of citizens. We live in a world for whom the threat of radical fundamentalist terrorism is one of its main challenges. Since the start of the war in Iraq Western democracies have been divided not only about the strategies to use in this conflict, instead the differences lie much deeper, right down in their understanding of politics. In this context the divide between the United States and its critics is equally caused by different military and political proposals, as it is caused by something more fundamental – the place of heroism and violence in the defense of the idea of freedom within modern democratic and liberal societies. Should politics be a way of overseeing economic growth and social processes, or should it also be a life lived within communities concentrated around the idea of freedom? Does freedom spread in the

¹⁴² structures of the post-modern world all by itself as a vital function of social life, or does it require constant civic care, defense, or even heroism when it is endangered? Can a society function properly if its members know nothing of the public happiness which flows from common action? One cannot imagine an honest attempt to deal with these questions without first coming to terms with the phenomenon of August and “Solidarity.”