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Agency and Political Action. The Main Theoretical Trends in Polish Political Sciences

Abstract: In this article I discuss the views of contemporary Polish political scientists concerning the subject of political agency. I stress the diversity of research perspectives adopted in the Polish literature on the subject and no less diverse conceptions of agency. I also emphasise differences in the understanding of the qualities of agency, especially the capacity for political action and participation in political processes. The analysis demonstrates the pluralism of the accepted concepts of political ontology. I also argue that it is important for Polish political scientists to preserve the autonomy and specificity of the political science research on agency, in particular the independence of this discipline from philosophical perspectives. At the same time, I refer to several philosophical paradigms in the understanding of agency, indicating how they inspire Polish political scientists' inquiries into this issue.

Keywords: political actor, political agency, political participation

Introduction

A review of the research of Polish political theorists on the issue of agency and its impact on politics suggests that the Polish political science literature devoted to reflects considerable diversity in approaches adopted toward the problem, its theories, and methodologies. The aim of this article is to capture, from a metatheoretical perspective, the peculiarities of political science work concerning the concept of political agency and political action. The natural diversity of the subject makes this task challenging. Therefore, and unavoidably, in this

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article I adopt a method of textual and hermeneutic analysis, in which I employ ideas drawn from the field of political philosophy. The following discussion of the issue of political agency and political action in the analysed texts should be preceded by several introductory remarks.

The number of publications devoted to this issue is a testimony to the fact that it is not only topical, but also perceived as increasingly relevant. The growing importance of these issues can be attributed to a variety of reasons. Generally speaking, one could claim that the most important of these is the decline in civic political activity which until recently manifested itself, among other things, in the relatively low involvement of Poles in electoral processes. Another factor stimulating theoretical interest in the problems of political agency is the development of new forms of political activism made possible by the development of information technologies. Another factor informing the inquiries into the political agency is the growth of both social and theoretical awareness of the barriers standing in the way of various actors in pursuit of their objectives.

Notwithstanding the above, the diversity and dynamism of theoretical perspectives on political agency is rooted in the adoption of different theoretical options by individual researchers. This diversity makes any exhaustive account of the literature on agency extremely difficult.

Bearing the above in mind and emphasising the auxiliary and heuristic character of the following classification, one can divide the publications of Polish political scientists on agency into the following four thematic areas.

The first and most general of them concerns the place assigned to the category of agency in political science research. This problem is addressed in a variety of contexts in which it is sometimes assigned a peripheral role.

The second area covers the three main subtopics in which agency is considered. These are (1) research conducted from an empirical point of view, oriented towards presenting the results of empirical research on the manifestations of political actors' agency in specific settings (Sotwin, 2003). (2) There are also publications on much broader, complex, and diverse topics in which political agency as a concept is analysed in its various aspects (Karwat, 1980, 1989; Bodnar, 1985). (3) Another part of this area comprises works of an analytical nature, devoted to the category of agency itself, as well as its forms of activity and its efficacy (Pierzchalski, 2009; Kołodziejczak, 2002). Such approaches are among the least numerous; it is worth noting among them works whose authors strive for lexical clarity, as well as theoretical and analytical rigour. They primarily aim at a thorough conceptual analysis revealing a number of significant distinctions in political theory and in the nuanced language of Polish political sciences (Karwat, 1980, 1989, 2018; Czajowski, 2013).

The third research area in which, the issues related to the agency are in the main focus includes publications illustrating differences of emphasis in approaches to the problem. Some of the papers focus on broadly understood

political activity, some focus strictly on agency manifested in the form of political participation, while others place the political actors themselves at the centre of attention.

The fourth area includes publications discussing methodological perspectives adopted for dealing with the issue of agency. The perspective most frequently adopted is that of methodological holism. Authors leaning towards this view assume that the agency of individuals is not an intrinsic or primary feature of an individual, but a derivative property in relation to the agency of supra-individual social forces. Other methodological approaches are mentioned marginally or are presented as critical discussions of the works by other researchers (Wieczorek-Orlikowska, 2021; Kołodziejczak, 2002).

The below discussion should also be preceded by the following three comments. The first one is of a terminological nature. In the English-language literature on political theory, the relevant spectrum of the meaning of “acting subject” is implicitly contained in the concept of “political agency”. “Podmiotowość polityczna” as the Polish lexical equivalent of “political agency” is less capacious, while its usage differs due to the research specificities developed within the Polish academic discourse.

The second comment concerns the historical variability of the categories of agency and political agency. This means that the content and scope of these notions are subject to transformations over time. Nowadays, the agency has become “one of the integral elements explaining empirical social changes” (Pierzchalski, 2009, p. 53). This is due to the growing importance of the subjective factors in contemporary science and the associated anthropocentric tendencies which influence historically shaped judgements and perceptions concerning the nature and status of human beings which cannot be ignored (Nowak, 2011).

The third comment belongs to the plane of political ontology and aims to clarify the understanding of the actor bearing political agency and its qualities. Political agency is analysed as a phenomenon situated at the levels of (1) the agency of the human individual; (2) the agency of a community; and (3) the agency of non-formalised institutions and organisations (Karwat, 1980, 2018; Chmaj, 1999; Muszyński, 2007).

From the political actor to political agency

“Man is born as a political actor and dies as such” (Muszyński, 2007, p. 61). The political is the natural state of man regardless of whether he participates actively in politics or is merely its observer. According to this premise, inspired by the ideas of Helmuth Plessner, human beings cannot step outside the state of the political, which is natural for them because they “belong” to the main political

actor, that is the state, which they can neither enter nor leave – each of them “is simply in it as an individual of the whole community” (Muszyński, 2007, p. 61). Political agency is thus conditioned by the nature of man as a member of the community. The category of agency is used to describe both the collective and individual agency. In this argument, the main collective political actor is the nation organised into a state (Muszyński, 2007, pp. 61–62). The close relationship between the agency of the nation and that of the state emerged with the establishment of a state-like structure by the first social communities. The domestication of politics in primeval societies confirms the thesis of the human being as a political being by nature.

Following Stephen D. Tansey, Jerzy Muszyński claims that political agency is also possible independently of the state’s, as well as that the agency of the state can be independent from the community living in it. The size of the community is neither a determinant of the growth of internal integration nor a source of the ability to exercise its political agency. The political agency of society derives from the principles of social contract theory, according to which supreme power belongs to the community whose members enter into a hypothetical contract with each other in order to delegate their powers and establish a form of order for the exercise of power. The political agency of society also acquires the dimension of legal regulations; consequently, the political agency of a nation is “embodied in the category of citizenship of a state” (Muszyński, 2007, p. 65).

The essence of agency is to act in order to satisfy and shape one’s own needs and abilities. The prerequisites for agency are self-awareness, the ability to act consciously, and the conscious action itself. In a non-individualist approach, political agency is defined as “the enduring ability of a group or organisation to consciously take sovereign and rational action” (Sokół, Żmigrodzki, 1999, pp. 225–226; Chmaj et al., 2005, pp. 269–270). Being an actor is not a transitory, temporary, or changeable state. One either is an actor or not; its gradation, however, reveals itself on the level of the actor’s activity. Marek Chmaj considers it legitimate and more reasonable to link the essence of political agency directly to political organisations that are already involved in the state’s politics or with attempts to influence it. Andrzej Antoszewski and Ryszard Herbut, on the other hand, argue that political agency is “the property of social groups and individuals, consisting in the ability to take independent (sovereign), rational and purposeful actions that satisfy their needs and interests by participating in and/or influencing the processes of exercising political power” (Antoszewski, Herbut, 2004, pp. 317–319).

The agenda of the Polish political science debate on political agency is determined to a significant extent by the works of Mirosław Karwat, the author of the most extensive and comprehensive publications concerning the political agency, which deserves a separate study. Karwat’s theory of political agency develops in a dialogue with other researchers. Political decision-making arrangements

plays a vital role in this dialogue (Czajowski, 2013, 2015). According to Andrzej Czajowski, “a political subject is every human being and social group that has been given the ability to take political action by law, or that takes such action regardless of whether it is legally entitled to do so” (2013, p. 143). In Karwat’s view, this position implies an excessively broad definition of the political actor. Among the numerous fundamental distinctions and types of political and non-political agency introduced by Karwat, one has to emphasise his idea that agency should be distinguished from participation, effectiveness, and the influence of political action. For, as he argues, not every subject must – and can – possess agency (Karwat, 2018, p. 161). He thus points out that political agency cannot be reduced to the capacity to act, for it must also include its efficacy. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly in Karwat’s proposal, the agency is not only and not so much a capacity to act, as a “meta-capacity”, i.e., the capacity to sustain and actualise or to use this capacity. For this reason, he recognises that conscious or deliberate causality as a manifestation of agency is made possible by its other components, namely self-awareness, self-determination, the capacity to anticipate, to make decisions and to exercise self-control in thinking and acting. This applies equally to individuals and communities (Karwat, 2018, p. 172).

The agency of the political actor

The ability to act, as the essence of agency, presupposes the fulfilment of a number of conditions that enable an effective action. One of its key conditions is the knowledge possessed by the actor. The dynamics of historical approaches to agency indicates that the relationship between cognition and agency is not unambiguous. Indeed, it can be claimed that the history of the modern concept of the knowing subject begins with the overemphasis of the agency in the conceptions of Descartes and the philosophers of the Enlightenment who formulated the idea of a subject endowed with almost unlimited agency, capable of transforming themselves, society, and nature. However, this epistemological optimism came to an end with the declaration of the “death” of the subject by Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault (Nowak, 2011, pp. 15–36). It should be emphasised that both these approaches to agency, the former characterised by essentialism and the latter by nihilism, actually block the cognitively productive inquiries into human agency. However, the very emergence of the opposition between the two had a beneficial effect as it opened the issue of agency to intensely developing research concerning various determinants affecting the construction of the subject of cognition and action. Thanks to this, it became possible to understand agency not as a primary and inherent feature of human beings, but as “an existentially derivative effect of its properties in the process of ontic solidifying of the whole construction of the subject and the attainment of an

independent and relatively autonomous position by it” (Lipiec, 1997, pp. 60–69; Pierzchalski, 2009, pp. 59–60).

The agency expresses itself in the capacity for action, i.e., freedom preceded by reflectiveness on the basis of available knowledge of social processes. Bodnar characterises the actor of political action by first distinguishing between primary or potential, and direct or secondary actors. A primary actor is an individual, a subject of all human action who becomes a direct actor by assuming a social role. “The transformation of a primary potential actor into a direct actor and, thus, functional in relation to actions ‘for oneself’ is a complex and sometimes protracted process when it concerns, firstly, larger social wholes and, secondly, generically higher spheres of social practice that are identified as political spheres proper” (Bodnar, 1985, p. 174).

The essence of agency is understood as the ability to take, by one’s own will, one’s own choices and decisions, or to refrain from action. This is the approach adopted by Karwat. In developing his views, he rejects the erroneous belief that the origins and tradition of the notion of agency are more ideological than scientific. He demands that the entangled notion of agency should be freed from humanistic interpretations, ideals and models of self-determination, emancipation, and equal rights. He believes that it is precisely such an axiological approach that won the sympathy of the majority of thinkers and that only a few of them adopt the correct approach, i.e., one that adequately describes and explains agency (Karwat, 2018, p. 157). For these reasons he demands that the term “agency” be given an objectivized, intersubjectively and empirically verifiable meaning in science.

Intentional-axiological contexts need not necessarily weigh on its scientific application in diagnosing whether one is capable of acting in one’s own self-interest and influencing others, whether one is effective in such actions, or in explaining what factors condition such ability or its absence. The same criteria can be used in addressing the problem by scholars with a variety of different or non-crystallised ideological orientations (Karwat, 2018, p. 156).

Following the example of objectivized legal constructs, Karwat aims to develop an equally objective dimension of the notion of agency in the theoretical and legal sense, adopting the apparatus of praxeology. An actor, therefore, is someone who determines their own goals and actions, gives them meaning and significance, is self-aware, understands and is able to express their own needs and interests, is guided in action by their own will, strives for self-realisation and makes decisions about their own independent action or subordinate action. “This universal notion of the actor is applicable to the fields of education, artistic and scientific creativity, moral attitudes, as well as economic, legal and political relations” (Karwat, Ziółkowski, 2013, p. 230).

Agency is a social status of an individual or group that consists in a lasting capacity for “reasonable and sovereign actions that satisfy one’s own needs, but at the same time have a significant and lasting impact on the situation of the environment; in particular, the ability to cause changes in social relations which become subsequently objectivized” (Karwat, Ziółkowski, 2013, p. 230). This “lasting capacity” should be understood as the ability to reproduce (sustain and increase) one’s own influence. A strict understanding of agency does not refer to one-off feats or achievements, but to a more permanent state of affairs, when a given actor retains their identity, aspirations, rights, abilities and readiness to defend them, and at the same time displays the capacity to influence their environment and the course of social transformations.

Thus, in a general summary of this approach, it can be said that an important tendency in the literature under discussion is to examine political agency and its context from the point of view characterised by the pursuit of objectivity. By this I mean the fact that, although the axiological layer of agency, including political agency, remains one of the important issues in political science as a fundamental element in the decision-making and the activity of the actors themselves, the political sciences strive to avoid ontological and axiological commitments. In this, they are opposed to philosophical doctrines that openly advocate concrete solutions on the grounds of specific political ontology and, accordingly, engage axiologically on behalf of adopted value systems. Thus, it can be said that the characteristic tendency of political science is that agency should be analysed exclusively by means of the conceptual apparatus typical of political sciences (Wielecki, 2003, p. 7). To reiterate: This kind of reductionist procedure of excluding the ethical context is not so much about refusal to recognise the ethical status of the actor as rather about separating the sphere of ethics from the field of political sciences.

However, the most frequently mentioned conditions for the formation of political agency do not exhaust the repertoire of qualities and abilities that explain its nature. Attempts to transform the political sphere, aimed at either the preservation of the status quo or its arbitrary reconfiguration, do not take place in an axiological void. The point is not to moralise about the consequences of actions, or about actions themselves, but to pinpoint particular cognitive competences involved in such processes. Among such competences is the ability to acknowledge the norms and values that determine (temporary) *status quo* and to be able to identify the roots of conflicts and tensions. Their specific nature that they continuously manifest themselves. They cannot be annihilated, are immanent in social and political reality, and become frameworks for political and social actions and decisions. The languages of discourse become carriers of moral goods whose special status consists in, firstly, the fact that they antagonize people and, secondly, that such conflict cannot be resolved. The agonistic dimension of practices reveals another sphere of conflict whose origin is elsewhere, i.e., at

the level of the dispute over values. Political activity, as one such practice, needs a discourse that appeals to cultural resources, the realm of symbols, as well as social morality. Political activity is one of the forms of an indirect manifestation of the ethical dimension of social life (Laska, 2020).

In other words, at the individual level, agency arises in the space of qualities whose meaning becomes intelligible only by reference to other people, to contexts and meanings entangled in histories, traditions, in culture. “The sense of agency increases in proportion to the degree to which an individual’s actions lead to outcomes in line with their expectations concerning causality or authorship, and the degree to which they are the individual’s personal values” (Korzeniowski, 1983, pp. 55–56). Political agency is situated at the epicentre of the impact of such intangible meanings (Taylor, 2001, p. 62; Drałus, 2002). Only in such a perspective do certain goals and goods become independent of particular desires, inclinations and choices. Political agency is not limited to mechanical causality; agentive activity is also expressed in the ability to realise certain standards of conduct, to act with a sense of qualitative distinctions (Taylor, 2001, p. 68). When it aims, for example to implement the principle of universal equal rights (e.g., prohibiting every form of slavery), its purpose not to express specific way of life, but it recognises and perpetuates a moral value whose uncontroversial status cannot be resolved on the basis of commonly recognised principles, as it is possible in the case of empirical questions.

Moral demands are expressions of respect, not utilitarian benefit, even if a benefit may be among their consequences. The expression of agency of a political actor also includes promoting ways of thinking, initiating social processes, and strengthening social sensitivity. Both the praxeological criteria of political agency, along with the recognition of its ethical criteria, enable its fuller understanding.

Political participation

Difficulties in defining and understanding concepts arise from abstracting them from the reality in which they came into being and with which they were originally associated. Their examples include sovereignty, rights, nation, and democracy. The concept of actor’s participation in politics belongs to this catalogue. The proper recognition of participation depends on the recognition of its concrete entanglement. A discussion of political participation, therefore, cannot refer exclusively to ideal-typical models, as they constitute a copy without an original, describing a world that does not exist in reality.

The phenomenon of participation has undergone significant changes over the decades. In the 1940s and early 1950s, scholars investigating political

participation adopted a its narrow understanding of the issue. In this narrow view, political participation was equated with participation in elections and citizens' actions related to elections. Protest-related activities were considered an element of the spectrum of participatory activities in the 1970s; consumer participation was added in the 1990s. According to some authors, the tendency towards widening the perception of participation is related to the expansion of politicisation to successive areas of social life (Sotwin, 2003, p. 55).

In the post-war period, the classical vision of citizenship, formulated by Thomas H. Marshall, prevailed. It emphasised primarily entitlements – personal, political, and social – which did not imply an obligation to participate in public life. If the citizen had any relationship with the state, it was occasional, in the role of a voter or as a customer of public services (Frieske, Poławski, 1997). Citizenship defined as the right to have rights was described by critics as “passive” or “private”. Over time, it became clear that non-participation was tantamount to the illegitimacy of the democratic system. “The guaranteed constitutional institutions of freedom are only worth as much as the citizens themselves can extract from them” (Habermas, 1993, p. 16). Approval of the government should flow from citizens's genuine conviction that it is they who control the government, and not vice versa.

The conditions of the political functioning of individuals, social groups and larger communities are manifold and multifarious. The political participation of individuals is therefore gradable. At the lowest levels. The techniques of manipulation and therapy enable the rulers to “educate or treat participants”. The next level encompasses such activities information and deliberation. The excluded may be heard, but their voice is not taken into account. Such political participation is “toothless”, as it offers no chance to change the *status quo*. The next level, appeasement, is an activity of a still higher order, and it consists of allowing the excluded to act in the role of advisers, but leaving the decision-making to the privileged. The partnership allows for negotiation with people in power. Delegation, and citizen control, provide opportunities for citizens to make decisions almost independently (Arnstein, 2012, p. 12).

Authors studying political activity and inactivity employ a variety of terms to refer to the same or different phenomena. They often use the categories of engagement, involvement, participation, and activity. The broadest of these is the notion of political involvement, which can be cognitive-emotional in nature and may be expressed in terms of a particular attitude towards various political phenomena. Involvement can be understood as any form of interest in politics, characterised by any degree of intensity (Skarżyńska, 2002, p. 27).

Political participation is generally defined as “active support for political continuity or change”, as any form of individual involvement in influencing “the allocations of socially respected values made by those in power”. Many researchers adopt definitions that emphasise the instrumental nature of political activity,

thereby linking participation to exerting influence on specific policies, decisions, or decision-makers. This way of understanding participation does not complete the set of possible approaches to it (Skarżyńska, 2002, p. 28).

In her analysis of participation, Krystyna Skarżyńska indicated three dimensions that are adopted as uncontroversial. The first is the dividing line between the ritual or symbolic, and real influence. The second separates conventionality from unconventionality, while the third refers to the intensity of participation. Accordingly, some instances of political participation are ritualistic or symbolic. Their goal is not to influence politics. They may arise from the need to manifest one's presence, from the need to feel a sense of community, to be able to meet others and experience things together; from the desire to express emotions, feelings, and moral judgements (Skarżyńska, 2002, p. 28). What distinguishes participation aimed at exerting political influence from purely symbolic one is the intentions of participants and an assessment of the real impact on politics. The dividing line between these forms of participation is not obvious and unambiguous, but fluid and contentious. No less contentious is the question of identifying and assessing intentions, all the more so when unintended consequences clearly contradict them (Skarżyńska, 2002, p. 28).

The second dimension of the analysis of political activity concerns the conventionality and unconventionality of the methods of political participation. The term "conventional participation" refers to activity that is in line with the constitutional order within democratic institutions, the electoral behaviour being a case in point. Unconventional participation, i.e., direct participation in politics, comprises activities aimed at influencing the decisions of those in power undertaken without the mediation of institutions, e.g., through manifestations of civil disobedience (Skarżyńska, 2002, p. 28). Unconventional political participation is also sometimes analysed through the prism of the legality of adopted political behaviours. In addition to illegal activity, another form of participation is distinguished, i.e., political violence, for example destruction of property or physical violence against people.

Intensity, i.e., the third dimension of the analysis, indicates the degree of an individual's involvement; for example, it can be temporary or permanent. The intensity of political participation depends on the influence of the political system on the individual's behaviours. Skarżyńska emphasises the importance of the individual's attitude toward the political system, which depends on "the extent and type of influence of the political system on the individual's behaviour" (2002, p. 30). Three types of influence are distinguished: submission, identification, and internalisation. Researchers tend to see all three forms of attitude toward the system reflected in political behaviour. They consider it undeniable that the political system in which individuals live is always to some extent present in their political activity.

The approaches adopted in the research on participation distinguish its three forms: political action, institutional action and issue-based action. The first approach is concerned with actions aimed at influencing politics; the second one examines the political activity of the individual in institutions (e.g., volunteer organisations); the third one focuses on the factors that guide the individual towards choosing activities that influence politics (Mider, 2008, p. 9).

Daniel Mider lists seven criteria for political participation. These are: (1) motivation for action which encompasses: instrumental and autotelic participation; (2) the autonomy of action: i. e. autonomous and mobilised participation; (3) the level of activity: active and passive participation; (4) the purpose of action: participation aimed at achieving particular social goals; (5) the addressee of action: state and non- governmental participation; (6) the professionalisation of action: amateur and professional participation; (7) the normative criterion: participation in line with normative systems, or in conflict with normative systems (Mider, 2008, pp. 11–15). In addition to illegal activity, political violence is also distinguished as a form of participation. Daniel Mider emphasises the importance of the criterion of violence in the political sphere, since any unauthorised use of violence in political action implies a breach of the state's monopoly on violence, which by definition belongs exclusively to the state (2008, p. 15).

The ability of individuals and groups to influence their environment – the condition of agency – is unfulfilled for numerous individual and collective actors. The condition enabling the agency of a given actor is conceptualized as the fact that he or she has the real possibility of influencing events by initiating, modifying, interrupting, or abandoning their activity. The essence of agency as viewed by the social sciences is “a certain relatively permanent, gradable property attributed to different types of actors. This property, which is called agentive power, is nothing more than a statement of the fact that actors are the agents directly affecting the socio-political processes” (Pierzchalski, 2009, pp. 59–60).

Despite being fully aware of the specificity and autonomy of political science in relation to the philosophical perspective, it is impossible to deny that issues of agency are inevitably linked to philosophical concepts and that various political science approaches often draw inspiration from philosophical ideas. Below, I indicate some examples of such inspirational influences on Polish political sciences.

Among the essential ways of acquiring and demonstrating one's political agency is participation in political discourse. According to Jürgen Habermas, power “means any possibility to exert one's own will within the framework of social relations, also against resistance” (2019, p. 176). These involve persuasion, sanctions or various forms of manipulation. However, a consensus-oriented communication model can also be developed. The basic mechanism of such power is not the instrumentalisation of another person's will for one's own ends, but the formation of a common will in communication. By political power,

Talcott Parsons understands the general ability of a social system to make one do things that are in the collective interest. Max Weber understands political power in a similar way. In opposition to such instrumentalist positions at the level of both political action and systemic theory, Habermas seeks to formulate a model of politics based on consensus achieved through communication oriented towards consensus. Such communication is an end in itself and cannot be instrumentalised for other purposes. “The persistence of consensus achieved in coercion-free communication is not measured by one success or another, but by a claim to rational validity, which is an immanent quality of speech” (Habermas, 2019, p. 178). The power of shared beliefs produced communicatively is expressed in the fact that interested parties pursue consensus, not their own interests, by means of language employed “illocutionarily in order” to establish intersubjective relations without violence, rather than “perlocutionarily” to force others to behave in an expected way (Krzynówek, 2010; Sawczyński, 2016; Habermas, 2019; Drałus, 2020).

An important addition to this theme is that the development and dissemination of communication technologies have led to an expansion of the public sphere which serves the purposes of deliberation and political activity. As a result, political agency, political action, and political efficacy are increasingly moving into cyberspace, offering previously unknown opportunities for citizens’ participation in political life. For this reason, theoretical attempts to understand political agency, which, in the contemporary world, is linked to the positioning of the human being in the new communicative space created by online networking systems, are becoming increasingly important. The concept of agency in cyberspace is understood as the effect of relations in the “network” (Mider, 2008; Jakubowski, 2018).

The level of political participation of individuals and social groups is significantly influenced by the obstacles of blocking possible ways of manifesting one’s views, demands and claims. Such obstacles are hidden in language. It appears that language can be not only an instrument of building consensus and agreement, but also a special tool of power and, therefore, an instrument of redistribution of power. On the one hand, it allows for the inclusion of people currently excluded, but also, on the other hand, for their exclusion. Participation without redistribution of power is not only an insignificant and frustrating activity for the excluded but a factor that intensifies, including its particular kind, i.e., epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice assumes two forms. One of them is testimonial injustice, which is a kind of injustice expressed in varying levels of credibility. Testimonial injustice applies to various forms of speech and occurs whenever the listener’s biases cause them to attribute a reduced level of credibility to the speaker’s words. This kind of injustice, therefore, concerns the credibility of a statement, and it is possible to identify an agent responsible for it (Fricker, 2009, 2013).

The second type of epistemic injustice is hermeneutic injustice. It refers to the actor's ability to interpret the social world and, in particular, to interpret their own social experiences. Hermeneutic injustice cannot be attributed to any specific agent responsible for it, as it is a structural phenomenon. It occurs when a group is hermeneutically marginalised, i.e., its members cannot fully participate in the social processes of creating meanings that are essential in the formation of shared concepts and modes of interpretation of the social world. In the case of testimonial injustice, a specific individual or collective agent is responsible for it. The character of hermeneutic injustice is structural; there is no actor responsible for injustice. Epistemic forms of injustice affect the actor's participation in political life: they reduce the ability of the actor of the subject to contribute to the social process of political inquiries. As a result, individuals involved in political processes cannot fully express their agency. Epistemic injustice arises when people are disregarded as potential participants in a debate. Before individuals can achieve the capacity for participation, they must first have access to basic resources and venues of intellectual exchange. Once access has been achieved, individuals need a minimum level of recognition to participate in social exchanges that constitute inquiry (Fricker, 2009, p. 176). The epistemic injustice may be eradicated by facilitating civic participation, which means opposing exclusion and marginalisation.

The theme of epistemic justice is directly linked to the theory of recognition, which constitutes a particularly important contemporary paradigm in understanding political agency. According to the conceptual apparatus of this theory, agency cannot be understood outside the sphere of intersubjective relations that play a constitutive role in it. The theory of recognition formulated in Georg W.F. Hegel's early writings was aimed to demonstrate that Hobbes's political theory was wrong. According to Thomas Hobbes, political order, as manifested in the unity of the political community, arises as a result of atomistically perceived individuals realizing' that the only way to avoid a war of all against all is to renounce violence in mutual relations and submit to a common authority. According to Hegel, Hobbes's error consisted in assuming the existence of ready-made and rational individuals. These issues are directly related to the opposition between individualism and holism in political theory, as indicated in the introduction. According to Hegel, political agency is not something ready-made, but is the product of intersubjective relations between individuals. Inspired by the ideas of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Hegel's theory of recognition is important because it attempts to answer the question about the sources of human agency (Pelczynski, 1971; Hegel, 1977; Ifergan, 2014).

Hegel claims that agency is the product of dialectical, conflict-ridden processes taking place at three levels. The first one, comprises the relations constituting the private sphere, i.e., the family in which the individual attains recognition (*Anerkennung*) as a concrete being with natural needs. On the second, legal

level the individual receives formal recognition as an abstract subject of law. As a subject of law, the human being is understood in a universalist, abstract and egalitarian way. This means that the individual has the same rights as any other, while their idiosyncratic qualities are necessarily overlooked by the law: no individual, regardless of their social status, can be treated differently from others by the law. However, both levels mentioned above do not yet guarantee the formation of a political community or its cohesion because individuals thus constituted follow their own interests and for this reason, remain individuals as characterized by Hobbes's theory; they are not "members of a whole", for no whole has yet been constituted. At most, they form a collective, but not a political community. The prerequisite for the formation of a coherent and authentic political community is the transformation of a "person" into a "full" or "complete" person. An individual becomes such a person when, through participation in intersubjective social relations that transcend the private and legal spheres, they receive recognition of their uniqueness or "particularity". This highest level of recognition occurs within a political community that Hegel refers to as the state. Thus, fully autonomous human agency is the result of winning recognition at the three indicated levels, while autonomy consists in the individual's growing understanding of the intersubjective relationships to which they owe their autonomy (Bobako, 2010).

Hegel's ideas, together with George H. Mead's conception of human agency, from an underpinning of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition (Honneth, 1995). He distinguishes three spheres or levels of recognition. In the sphere of primary relationships, the individual can receive recognition in the form of emotional support of love or friendship. This gives rise to the individual's positive attitude towards themselves, expressed in a basic belief in one's own abilities. Denial of recognition (*Mißachtung*, disrespect) in this sphere leads to pathological manifestations of disrespect, which include physical violence. In the sphere of legal relations, recognition expresses itself in respect which allows the individual to acquire the status of a subject of law. This status is a prerequisite for self-respect, while the main manifestation of the refusal of recognition in this sphere is exclusion and/or denial of rights. In the sphere of relations forming a community of values, the primary form of recognition is esteem which gives the individual a sense of self-worth. For the individual, the main forms of disrespect in this sphere are disregard, humiliation, and insult (Modrzyk, 2013; Byczyński, 2021).

Conclusion

The directions and methods adopted in the research concerning political agency outlined above, as well as the theoretical approaches presented, demonstrate the importance of this issue for Polish political scientists. Undoubtedly the issue is

perceived as important for both practical and purely theoretical reasons. The above account, which is only a general outline of theoretical approaches to the problem of agency, unambiguously indicates the diversity of the developed approaches. This variety should be seen as a testimony to theoretical innovativeness and sensitivity to the transformations of traditional forms of political agency, and its spontaneously emerging new forms. This variety undeniably makes it difficult to find a common denominator for the presented views. At the same time, however, it testifies to the unquestionable explanatory potential of the category of agency employed to understand a wide range of political phenomena.

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