

AN HOUR WITH ADAM PRZEWORSKI

Professor Adam Przeworski often asks the questions most of us are a little embarrassed to ask. We see democracy as the natural state of affairs. We believe that non-democratic states are abnormal cases that in due course will grow democratic through modernization. We do not ponder the fact that, historically, electoral defeat by incumbents is rare. The American public is brought up to see its roots as democratic and disregards the disdain for party politics often expressed by the Founding Fathers.

To Adam Przeworski, who came from New York to Uppsala in late September 2010 to receive this year's Johan Skytte Prize in political science, no such truths are taken for granted. He finds violent conflict more natural than consensus or compromise, and marvels that we still manage to live civilized lives. He asks himself why the socialist movement chose a reformist path and settled with the right to vote rather than pursuing revolutionary goals. He tests and invalidates the once common notion that social and economic modernization leads to democracy.

You were born, brought up, and educated in communist Poland. Does this explain why you approach social question outside of the framework of conventional wisdom? Or do you have a unique capability to ask the most simple, and at the same time complicated, questions?

"I think that my lifelong puzzlement about democracy is due to having grown up under communism," he responds.

"As youths in Poland, we were taught that a society can function and develop only if it is united and guided by a single authority. Hence, the spectacle of regular contests for power was bewildering. It was also thrilling: as I report in the auto-biographical preface to my recent book, it was like football: parties compete and no one can be sure who will win. But two more experiences marked my quest for understanding how and under what conditions democracy works. One was my disappointment with the workings of the US democracy when I first studied there between 1961 and 1963, and secondly, the debacle of the Chilean democracy between 1970 and 1973. The latter experience, in particular, raised questions about conditions under which democracy could survive distributional conflicts."

Adam Przeworski left Poland for the first time in 1961 when by chance he got an offer to do graduate study in political science in the US. At that time, political science was an unknown entity to him. But political science was not the point:

"I was 20 years old," he has noted, "and I would have gone anywhere to do anything."

But there was no drama to his departure from Poland. His attitude to his life as a young man in communist Poland appears to be quite laid-back. He returned to finish his doctoral studies and seems to have been able to live a decent life there (at least until the events of the late 1960s).

His remarks about contemporary Poland are often skeptical, in particular when it comes to religious life and nationalism. Nonetheless, the Polish embassy in Sweden proudly posted the announcement of his Skytte Prize on its Web site and the

Adam Przeworski is professor at the Department of Politics, New York University. Born in 1940 in Warsaw, Poland, he graduated from Warsaw University in 1961 and then moved to the United States, where he received his PhD at Northwestern University in 1966. For a long time Adam Przeworski taught at the University of Chicago, before moving to New York City. Among his major works are *Capitalism and Social Democracy*; *States and Markets: A Primer in Political Economy and Democracy* and *The Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*.

On September 25, 2010, at Uppsala University, Adam Przeworski received the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science for "raising the scientific standards regarding the analysis of the relations between democracy, capitalism, and economic development".

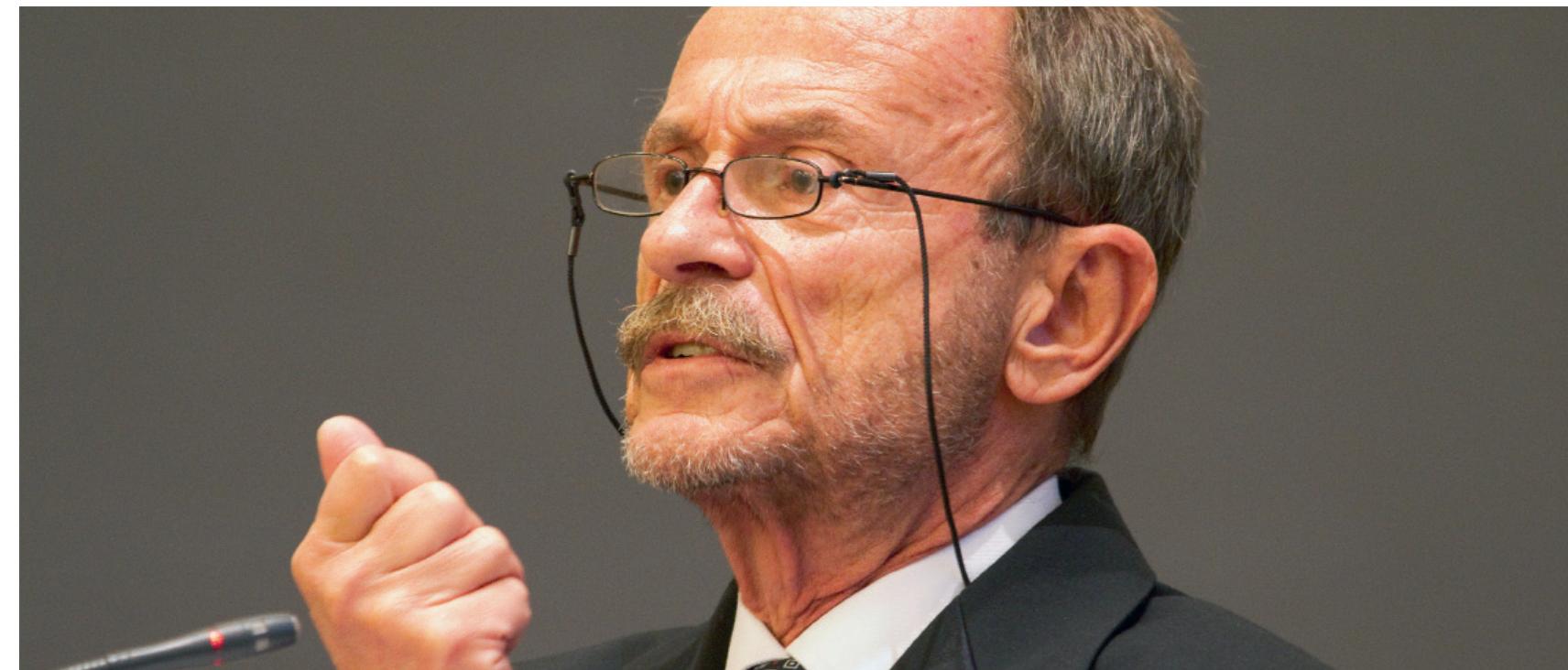


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Polish ambassador was an honored guest at the award ceremony.

What is, on balance, your view of Poland and Polish developments?

"I always felt marginal in Poland," he confesses: "I shared neither the ardent Catholicism nor the nationalism of my compatriots. While I was always critical of the communist regime, my initial reaction against it was that it did not practice what it preached. It was a left-wing critique. After 1989, people who shared this position either moved to the right or were politically marginalized. Hence, while I obviously have some sentimental attachments to the land of my youth, I do not find a place for myself in Poland. And this is a reciprocal feeling: it seems that Polish intellectuals find me too left-wing for their tastes. Paradoxically, until the Skytte Prize, I was pretty much ignored in Poland."

Still, even as a left-wing critic of communist Poland, it was the observation during a visit to his native country in the late 1980s that Poland would introduce market reforms which convinced him that the communist system would eventually fall. Other analysts stress the crucial importance of the growth of civil society with the KOR and Solidarity movements and the activist role played by the Catholic Church.

How relevant is civil society for your analysis of viable democracy — in the Polish case and more generally?

"This is a complicated topic," he replies. "In my view the transition in Poland was a result of an interplay among three interrelated factors: the decline of the Soviet power, the divisions within the communist elite, and the rise of the civil society. I do not think that it is possible to say that one of them was the cause."

One of Adam Przeworski's most quoted research findings and analyses is that democratic regimes need prosperity above a certain level to sustain themselves. With average individual incomes above 4,000 US dollars a year, states stay democratic. He sees this as a rock-solid correlation.

How does this play out with dictatorships? Can states remain dictatorships when they get richer and exist at a high level of market economic activity? China, but also the Gulf states, are the relevant cases in point, of course. Is the jury still out on China's future and possible need to reform?

"I think that dictatorships die for different reasons but not as any mechanical result of economic development. I suppose that if they become sufficiently wealthy, they can last. The problem facing China is how to regulate political conflicts. There are between four and five thousand mass eruptions every year: peasants protesting that land is being taken from them by developers, workers that they cannot breathe the air, parents that schools crumble during earthquakes, etc. And there is no mechanism to handle these eruptions according to some rules: each conflict is treated ad hoc, by a combination of repression and accommodation. But this is a minefield: if such conflicts erupt one day in several places at once, the crisis will be profound. Hence, my prediction is that the Chinese leadership will try to institute

some mechanism of regular conflict resolution. But whether it will entail some degree of political competition, I have no idea."

Some analysts tend to emphasize the necessity of the rule of law rather than of democracy for social and economic development. Hong Kong, e.g., has been portrayed as a bastion of liberty. Was there any truth to the discussion about "Asian values" in the 1990s?

"Asian values" are just an excuse for authoritarianism."

There is a no-nonsense matter-of-factness with Adam Przeworski and his remarks. He kept his cool and seemed mildly amused but not impressed by the pomp during the Skytte festivities in Uppsala. He is a short, low-key man who does not impose himself on others and is almost squeezed out of the way during cocktails before dinner in Uppsala. When we fail to find an hour for an interview during his weekend in Sweden, he generously offers to answer questions by mail and takes his time to elaborate on them but leaves no time for small talk or social niceties. There is only one crowd-pleasing line in his Skytte address in the Uppsala university lecture hall:

"Swedish social democrats and Arsenal are two of my long-time favorites."

This was said a week after the social democratic disaster in the 2010 Swedish general election. Since you have written so convincingly about the strategic success of social democrats when they choose "paper stones" in order to gain power via elections, would you be able to offer an analysis of the "withering away" of social democratic parties today?

"As I noted a long time ago, the essence of 'reformism' was that reforms would cumulate and would never be reversed: a social democratic party would come to office, adopt some reforms, and these reforms would survive until social democrats won again and adopted new reforms. And then came neoliberals and did exactly that: reversed. They did not reverse everything: even Thatcher and Reagan did not reduce social spending; it took Clinton to do this. But they reduced the role of governments in other realms, deregulated, opened capital accounts, and privatized. Hence, reformism collapsed as a long-term strategy and in many countries social democrats turned into social liberals."

On most topics, Adam Przeworski prefers to rely on hard facts for his comments and assessments. He is an outright empiricist and bases his arguments on statistical analyses of huge sets of data. He is most cautious where there are no data. Thus, he finds it hard to discuss and analyze economic and social inequality.

According to your findings, are there levels of inequality that could account for deficiencies in both democratic and economic efficiency? How relevant for democratic viability is the distribution of resources in

a society, compared with absolute economic levels?

"The problem with saying anything about the effects of income inequality is that cross-national data are not comparable and national data are unreliable. Moreover, the effect of inequality on economic growth is extremely hard to identify. There are different theories about it, but given the quality of the data, it seems impossible to tell which is better. My own work shows that democracy is less likely to survive in societies that are more unequal. To put it differently, if two countries have the same average income, democracy is less stable in the more unequal of the two."

In his Uppsala prize address, Adam Przeworski chose to ask a basic question about the role of the military in public affairs: Why do men in uniform obey?

He returns to his experience of having lived in Chile during the Allende years and having seen the brutal overthrow by the military of the Allende government, and its impact on his life and thinking. In Latin America, the military has intervened in politics when they have defined internal security as part of national security. It thus became legitimate for the military to usurp power in domestic affairs.

Could it be that men in uniform only obey where they have always been left out of internal policy decisions?

"But why would national security be considered part of internal security? This was just a particularly pernicious language of Latin American authoritarians: 'Eradicate the foreign virus of subversion from the body of the nation,' that is, kill communists. I hesitate to say much about the military because I know that I do not quite understand why they intervene. All I can say is that purely intra-military conflicts (promotions, conflicts between different corps) play an important role, not only their relation with civilian governments."

"Fear of conflict" is a perspective to which you often refer. It was also prominent in your Skytte lecture. If you had to find only one independent variable to explain human social and political behavior, would this be it?

"Perhaps," he replies. "The idea that conflicts can be structured, regulated, and contained is just not natural. People are repeatedly seduced by slogans of 'harmony and consensus' as well as another political mantra, 'unity'. But we live in societies in which interests, values, and norms are inevitably in conflict. And it turns out that we can learn how to process conflicts in peace without excessively curtailing the freedom of conflicting groups to advance their interests and their visions of a common future. This for me is the miracle of democracy."

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Visiting professor of political science, CBEES. Former director of the Swedish Institute of Foreign Affairs (UI) and editor-in-chief of the leading Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*.