

Plus electrification

A spark flashes and a gust of steam glides through a startled world dragging behind entire societies [...] it will crush and blind those left behind, because one must go along with steam and electricity, there is no other way. The old nobleman cannot mock this [...] he cannot hide away, lest progress will either drag him along or crush him.

Anonymous Reader from the Dzwina River, "Gazeta Rolnicza" 1864

Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country.

Włodzimierz Iljicz Lenin, 1921

Technological revolution is an inherent aspect of modernization. Ever since the Enlightenment, modernization has been a process in which innovation and affirmation of technology have played an essential role. They were seen as the main factor of progress driving social and economic change. This is also the case today. In this sense, the forces supporting the modernist project have learned nothing from Lenin's famous assertion: "Communism is Soviet power plus electrification." They fetishize different variants of the second part, while forgetting the first, key part of the sentence.

On forgetting the revolution

West-European Enlightenment and 19th-century revolutions of the liberal era (1789–1848) were filled with faith in the transformative power of energy based on the experience of English industrial revolution. The condition for the latter's success was the invention of technology that drove the first machines. Otherwise, constructing them would remain just a barren monument to the power of human reason. Fortunately, thanks to the use of coal as energy for the first industrial devices, that wasn't the case. In the mid-18th century, this allowed the English industrial revolution to overcome the *aporia* of its 12th-century Chinese predecessor and simultaneously inspired the following 150 years of progress. Influenced by these events, liberal Enlighteners invented what we sometimes call the technological question. In other words, they assigned technology as the decisive factor in this particular transformation, i.e. the turn towards modernity.

The condition for the success of this transition, however, was the erasure from memory of the social revolution that actually triggered it.

The years following the Congress of Vienna (1815) were conducive to the fulfilment of this condition, because the erasure of revolutionary legacy was the key motivation of the prevailing ideological aura. Thus, machines and energy (as well as speculative capital) captured the imagination of the post-Napoleonic restoration. The liberal vision of society understood as a community of rational, calculating individuals competing on the free market proved to be excellent anthropological grounds for the technological visions of that era. This vision had no time for class divisions and collective interests or contradictions and conflicts resulting from inequality. Thus, the modernization processes appear to be socially neutral and reduced to the dimension of technology. The undifferentiated collectivity of liberal subjects always asks “how” does progress arise rather than “why” it arises. Its rationality is perfectly instrumental. By focusing on the technical aspects of modernization, it fits in with the order of the revitalized *Ancien Régime*. The tech-focused liberals didn't need democracy, and this allowed them to score points with the ruling landed gentry. This approach to democracy is clearly visible in the early modernizers' approach towards the popular opposition to new technologies. They saw the destruction of machines by the Luddites as a shocking manifestation of the commoners' irrationality rather than a political matter. As a result of the lacking Enlightenment, they demanded — at best — more education, and prison for the ringleaders. For liberal modernizers, the plebeian fear of machines taking away labour and bread was an expression of irrational particularism that should be eradicated as part of the emerging, universal modern society.

Modernization of the peripheries minus communism

At this point, the enlightened idealism of the steam era and the fascination with the energy potential of electricity can be linked to the much later Stalinist vision and the 1930s policy of modernization.

The Stalinist USSR, not unlike Western Europe 120 years earlier, was a project aiming to eradicate the memory of the revolution that had brought it to life. Moreover, as a result of Stalinist terror, it also erased the people who carried this memory. The hyper-political practice of terror was to entomb all traces of revolutionary politics and ultimately allow for the reformulation of Lenin's slogan ("Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country") into a Stalinist slogan: Communism is electrification plus the construction of the White Sea Canal (*Belomorkanal*). Recognizing the central importance of technology and industrialization, the state born out of the Bolshevik Revolution eventually turned into a peripheral modernization project.

The difference between this project and its 19th-century Western European predecessor was, among others, a different attitude to resistance caused by its implementation. Unlike the liberals who were blind to class structure and class antagonisms, Stalin knew very well what stood behind the rebellion. It was not a lack of knowledge, but an irremovable contradiction between the interests of the government and peasants and some workers. It posed a threat to Stalinist modernization, because it threatened to replicate the offences of the politics eliminated by terror. It is difficult to disagree Stalin was right about class antagonisms. Nevertheless, the conclusions he drew were marked by the technological fetishism of a certain version of modernity. Politics was not intended to pave the way for technological transformation, but conversely — the latter's requirements called for the removal of the politics. In Stalin's understanding, this meant the removal of entire social groups by forcing them between the turning wheels of great Soviet industrialization and grinding them into fertilizer for history.

Instead of a qualitative change grounded in questioning the logic of a society based upon unlimited accumulation, Stalinist modernization focused on catching up with it and overtaking it. This process included the extermination of class enemies and the suppression of all politics. The latter resembles the approach characteristic of liberal visions of modernization that replace politics with technocratic management. In both cases, the subject of modernization is the society, and political classes and antagonisms that constitute them dissolve within a population of alienated individuals. The state and/or corporate bureaucracy triumphs.

Modernize, emancipate, and control

Taking into account historical experiences, there are enough arguments to understand top-down modernization, including electrification, as the work of the leviathan of capitalism (or Stalinism) that devours communities, populations, and areas that up until the 17th century remained beyond the control of the monarchy and, as such, were doing perfectly well. Modern inventions such as universal military service and education were simply tools for building the nation and exorcizing diversity and awareness of class antagonisms. The replacement of kerosene lamps with light bulbs connected to the national grid served a similar function. Electrification established the energy dependence of a given population on the state apparatus that controlled it. At the same time, it has strengthened or redrawn the divisions between the administrative and economic centre and its subordinate peripheries within the emerging nation states.

Understood in this way, the electrification that illuminated the night of the Polish countryside meant, above all, depriving peasants of the remnants of their autonomy and culture. (This was, indeed, the case).

The actions of the tsarist authorities during the 1905 revolution in the Kingdom of Poland are a classic example of the controlling function of electrification. Illuminating streets engulfed in revolt has become the governor-general's obsession and an innovative counter-insurrection strategy. Constructing the network of electric lanterns served to allow better control over the rebels, provide military patrols with a clear field of fire, and prevent groups of fighters from painting graffiti and attacking policemen and representatives of the regime. The struggle against authorities accelerated the construction of power plants and lighting in Warsaw's neighbouring towns, such as Otwock, where the anarchist movement was strong and the PPS Combat Organization carried out bold military actions (1908). In turn, in response to the wave of protests and armed attacks organized by anarchists in Białystok, the Grodno governor demanded immediate electrification of the streets, giving the city authorities 24 hours to carry out the order. Still, electric lanterns were installed in Białystok three years later (1909).

The third kind of modernity

The two contradictory tales of modernization — liberal-Stalinist, indiscriminately praising the emancipatory efforts of the state and/or state-supported capital, and conservative-romantic, exposing the subordination brought about by modernity — fail to take into account the third, grassroots model of modernization. It establishes the dialectic between the two, one-sided versions of history and simultaneously recovers its political character and disjointedness. Political character, because it depicts progress as the stake of peoples' aspirations, and disjointedness, because it illuminates the blind alleys of the modernization project on the peripheries of European capitalism.

At any rate, we can find this anywhere, where in parallel to the industrialization of the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th century, peasants freed from serfdom invented modern forms of autonomy. One example of this would be peasant cooperatives constituting the vehicle of technical change in the countryside. Initiatives enabling collective purchases and joint use of the newest, modern machinery were born in the Galician and Greater Poland villages in the second half of the 19th century. The peasant public sphere reconstructed by Kelly Stauter-Halsted is nothing other than an example of grassroots modernization — provincial press, libraries, fire brigades, community halls, associations, etc. These were not instruments for subordinating peasant subjectivity and autonomy to the logic of the official politics that maintained the class power of the gentry and bourgeoisie, but rather an expression of resistance to the monopoly of this kind of logic. Indeed, as Stauter-Halsted shows, this monopoly has been largely shattered, and citizenship — that is, inclusion within the civic community — and nationalization of peasantry took place on their own terms, entailing a redefinition of modernity's both key concepts.

Another electrification is possible

The experience of Polish post-1945 electrification is both anti-liberal and, to some extent, anti-Stalinist. Anti-liberal, because the failure of pre-war efforts based on the commercial plan to electrify the country with the participation of foreign investors provided its background. Anti-Stalinist, because the great project of top-down reforms implemented by the state encountered

great resistance from below and demands for change going against the communist authorities' plan.

The interwar attempts at electrification have failed before they even began in earnest. Based on private foreign capital, they mainly brought benefits to its shareholders. The involvement of the state after the great crisis of 1929–35 was too little and too late. As a result, towards the end of its existence, the Second Polish Republic was a model example of peripheral and uneven modernization — and the state of electrification proved it particularly vividly. Just 3% of Polish countryside, encompassing 70% of the country's population, was electrified. The post-war social transformation made possible the overcoming of peripheral capitalism's limitations. This occurred in the course of a revolution that not only overthrew the old order, but also imposed a dictatorship and subjectivized the majority of society. Simultaneously, this process triggered conflict. The top-down plan for modernization and its technocratic logic encountered grassroots politics. The latter forced modernity's spokesmen to introduce major modifications and changes. In this sense, paradoxically, Stalinist modernization created the right conditions and triggered a social revolution. The programme that assumed the eradication of class-based politics in the USSR launched these politics in the People's Republic of Poland. This history reveals the other, grassroots modernization, which demands a revision of the official history of modernity imposed by the state or capital.

From electrification committees...

This actually applies to the entire Polish "sleepwalked revolution" of the 1940s and 1950s. Contrary to the interpretation proposed by Andrzej Leder, it was not led by German fascists in partnership with Stalin. In fact, it was the clash between grassroots' aspirations and top-down planning and national and party strategies that saw modernization as an instrument for territorial integration and a necessary condition for the development of administration and building collective identification with communism. The latter turned out to be so strong that they largely determined both the reconstruction of Warsaw and the new ownership structure of the Polish capital, the radicalism of the land reform carried out in 1944 (which could not be retracted even

as part of Stalinist collectivization policy), and finally the reconstruction and reactivation of the industry in Łódź and other centres where workers largely imposed the control of factories. Despite the authorities' ambitious plans, top-down electrification of Polish villages was slow and challenged with numerous obstacles. In response to this situation, electrification committees spontaneously began to emerge throughout the country. A total of over 2,000 committees were created, and they became the driving force of the entire enterprise. Peasants collected money among themselves to finance connecting their villages to the grid and concluded contracts with energy companies. Party authorities and state administration did not interfere with this process of wide self-organization. It wasn't until the end of the 1950s that the authorities felt strong enough to replace the rule of the committees with activities of state organs.

The 1950–56 six-year plan was not fully implemented, but this still produced more megawatts than during the entire Second Polish Republic. Treating energy as a common good rather than a commodity meant that electrification could follow a trajectory determined by public needs, rather than market demands (i.e., the demand to meet market rates for energy and infrastructure).

Inadvertently, the electrification movement has debunked two conflicting myths. Firstly, the bucolic myth about a village living according to the rhythms of nature ruthlessly ravaged by the bulldozer of modernity (the film version of Edward Redliński's "Konopielka" by Witold Leszczyński remains an unattainable ideal of this myth) and secondly, the Stalinist myth about state-led, and often forced emancipation of peasants from the idiocy of rural life.

... to young women's councils

The history of electrification committees is just one episode in the history of grassroots transformation in the provinces of People's Republic of Poland. But electrification itself provided the material basis for another wave of profound change. As Małgorzata Fidelis explains, the 1960s were a special period considered the era of "small stabilization." In fact, for approx. 60% of the Polish People's Republic population living in the countryside, this was a period of ceaseless revolution under the slogan of modernization of various areas of life. The peasant revolution of

modernity had a gender. Its avant-garde were the so-called young women's councils based on the structures of the official Union of Rural Youth. The gender aspect of this history was not just an embellishment. Perhaps the most important achievement was the transformation of gender roles and questioning the models of life available to young rural women. Hence, apart from the establishment of clubs, the mechanization of work, and popularization of television and coffee — drunk for the first time in the Polish countryside — its manifestation was the campaign for women's health, concentrating on sexual education and reproductive health, as well as the growing fashion among girls for riding motorcycles. It was therefore a true cultural revolution that involved change of behaviour patterns, the ways of spending free time, relations between the sexes and different age groups. It undermined gender relations, changed the relationship between children and parents, weakened the position of men/fathers, broadened the possibilities of self-realization for young women, and limited the influence of rural parish priests.

The moral panic caused by young women entering the popular culture scene, which swept conservative societies in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, had its counterpart in the People's Republic of Poland. However, women in the latter exercised genuine control over the modernization processes, had their own organizations, and transformed the lives of their communities as entities redefining their gender status and social position rather than a new segment of the consumer market.

How to apply energy transformation

Today, it is worth thinking back to the forgotten lessons and democratic experiments from the times of People's Republic of Poland. They can help shift the discussion about the climate crisis and the need for energy transformation, dominated by fetishizing technology or moralizing. The former place their hope in the wonders of geo-engineering, the side effects of which may be more dangerous than what they are intended to prevent, while the latter blackmail individuals by demanding ethical consumption and even more belt-tightening. Meanwhile, the history of electrification committees reminds us that the problem lies neither with individual consumer choices nor with new technologies. Just like in Poland of the 1940s and 1950s, the social basis

of change is crucial today. As Matt Huber observes, without linking the project of green deal with the aspirations of the popular classes, we will at best be faced with actions reminiscent of the policy of French President Emmanuel Macron, which sparked the great yellow vest revolt.

Therefore, energy transformation should be approached both as a political and economic issue. The necessary conditions for its success are, firstly, the de-commercialization of energy, as it happened in Poland after 1945, and, secondly, the democratization of control over energy. The latter requirement means, among others, removing the monopoly on energy production from international corporations. The implementation of this postulate is simple enough because renewable energy sources [RES] — such as photovoltaic panels — do not require large power plants and transmission grids, and what is more, they are easily socialized within the framework of grassroots energy communities (housing estates, rural and communal housing). Such grassroots transformation — again, resembling the situation in post-war Poland — may be much more effective than state strategies of new energy mixes that attempt to reconcile the interests of capital and power at the expense of ordinary consumers and condemn the latter to energy poverty. The experience of the 1990s, when several communes in Podkarpacie region effectively organized to connect to the Internet long before it became popular nationwide, shows that such grassroots transformation is possible. These kind of actions do not require sophisticated explanations or ideological purity, because they are based on the pragmatics of satisfying the energy needs and specific material interests of the community. Therefore, demanding the freedom to collectively produce renewable energy in villages, municipalities, or neighbourhoods is a better way to organize support for transformation than countless reports, appeals, and conferences. The struggle for energy democracy is therefore more important than debates about the choice of technology. Such choice will simply result from democratic actions. And yet, these are not all benefits of the people's reign over energy sources. Building a network of autonomous electricity and heating communities will change the energetic geography of the country, removing disparities between the centres and peripheries. Finally, such development would also be a blow to the profitability of the corporate sector, which could translate into a weakening of its political influence.

To paraphrase Lenin's words: the change we need today comes down to council power plus energy transformation.

Przemysław Wielgosz