Acta Univ. Sapientiae, European and Regional Studies, **15** (2019) 15–30

DOI: 10.2478/auseur-2019-0002

The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth as a Border Experience of the City

Iwona BARWICKA-TYLEK
Dr. hab., Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland
Faculty of Law and Administration
E-mail: i.barwicka-tylek@uj.edu.pl

Abstract. Referring to Fustel de Coulanges' distinction of *urbs* and *civitas*, the article discusses political theory and practice in 16th-17th-century Poland. While in western Europe an important shift in the notion of politics took place, and the *civitas* aspect of cities deteriorated as they were conquered by new centralized nation-states, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was an attempt to recreate the ancient and mediaeval concept of *civitas* – a community of free citizens, actively participating in the government – at the state level. As its proponents, such as Stanisław Sarnicki, argued, Poland was to become a city rather than a state, and so the theoretical justification, political practice, and eventual failure of this project is an interesting, though extreme, historical example of difficulties embedded in a more universal 'quest for the political form that would permit the gathering of the energies of the city while escaping the fate of the city' (Manent 2013: 5).

Keywords: *urbs* and *civitas*, Polish republicanism, urban history, history of Central Europe, cities

Introduction

Political philosophers may feel reassured reading words of Lewis Mumford, who stated boldly that figures like Aristotle, Plato, and the utopian thinkers from Sir Thomas Moore to Robert Owen contributed more to answering the question 'what is a city?' than his fellow sociologists (Mumford 2011: 93). Even more reassuring is the review of extensive sociological literature on the subject. The city is 'an *oeuvre*, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product' (Lefebvre 2000: 101). It is 'something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences' (Park 2005: 1) because 'social life is a structure of interaction, not a structure of stone, steel, cement, asphalt, etc.' (Martindale 1958: 29). 'It is in the city, the city as theater, that man's more purposive activities are focused, and

work out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations' (Mumford 2011: 94).

There is one repeatable element in all these definitions, as phrases like: 'more than', 'rather than', or 'not only' prove. All authors find it necessary to underline the fact that the city is a human creation, and thus any reliable explanation of the city experience must include intentional human action even if it is difficult to pin down this action by strictly scientific analysis. The city itself is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human 'nature', summarizes Park (2005: 1). And since any discussion on human nature includes philosophical assumptions, it looks like political philosophers are indeed called to complement studies on cities with their more general and synthetizing narrative on the very essence of a city.

In effect, scholars interested in urban reality struggle not only with cities but also with 'the city'; the latter having not only descriptive but also normative content. Cities have their particular names, they belong to particular times and spaces, they tell their particular stories. At the same time, there is a continuous interest in 'the city' meant as a concept which would become a theoretical benchmark according to which successes and failures of urbanization, being judged and predicted, could be measured. And so the worldwide historical city experience is still a valid political lesson.

This dual nature of a city is reflected, for instance, in Fustel de Coulanges' distinction. The author of *La Cité antique* described ancient cities as being syntheses of *urbs* and *civitas*; the former being 'the place of assembly, the dwelling-place, and […] the sanctuary', while the latter: 'the religious and political association of families and tribes' (Fustel de Coulanges 1877: 177). Both terms are convenient labels, and their possible application goes beyond the specific context of the ancient city-states. Regardless of time and space, particular cities can be viewed as places providing their inhabitants with opportunities to create their own *civitas* – 'the city'. The *urbs* side of cities is to a large extent historical and therefore easier to explore with scientific scrutiny, but the *civitas* element cannot be grasped in a purely scientific manner. This is exactly the something-more-element of a city that can be universalized due to its direct references to presumed human nature. And this is the element which has always fascinated both urban scholars and political philosophers the most because by grasping its nature they could formulate not only historical or sociological descriptions but also political prescriptions for their societies. Thinkers like Fustel, Weber, Mumford, and Lefebvre did not avoid overtly political engagement. They were dissatisfied with the outcomes of rapid industrialization and urbanization in the West, and it was one of the main incentives that triggered their interest in urban history. Appreciating cities from the past for being successful syntheses of *urbs* and *civitas*, they tried also to present a more universal and coherent image of

a 'good' city in its full. The historical examples they had previously examined (whether it was the ancient city-state or the mediaeval city-guild) became political arguments that this ideal is feasible and perhaps should be revived to avoid further degradation of their societies. This way, their political beliefs and goals became lenses through which one could look at the historical record to identify general trends and directions of city development and to present particular cities as better or worse manifestations of the assumed city ideal. It is, however, necessary to remember that the use of wider philosophical and political assumptions as methodological lenses has some inconveniences. They are condemned to be biased as they are themselves bound to the particular historical experiences of those who have constructed them. As summarized in Weber (1950: 318): 'It is true that outside the western world there were cities in the sense of a fortified point and the seat of political and hierarchical administration, but outside the occident there have not been cities in the sense of unitary community'.

In spite of voices demanding caution (Isin 2003), scholars still find it convenient to treat the development of cities west of the Elbe as the most significant spatial and temporal urban phenomenon. Consequently, they tend to examine urbanization and further industrialization in other regions of the world through the prism of lack – lack of a Roman past, lack of routes facilitating large-scale international trade, lack of Protestantism and its ethic promoting capitalism, even the lack of demographic perturbations caused by the Black Death in the 14th century. Paradoxically, there are also clandestine consequences of this attitude among scholars who are dissatisfied with it. They focus upon proving that on the most specific level of empirical studies the dividing line gets rather tenuous. Still, that means following the same pattern of reasoning, trying at best to show that we can find ideal-type cities outside Western Europe, so that at least the quantitative 'amount of the lack' in other parts of Europe was not that great. The fact that more cities were built in Western Europe (see the map in Clark 2009: 38) and that Western-style urbanization and industrialization had a decisive impact on world history is beyond question. Nevertheless, the privileged position of ancient and mediaeval Western cities as 'the most "beautiful" *oeuvres* of urban life' (Lefebvre 2000: 65) is more a political conclusion than a historical one.

The above remarks are not to question such an approach. Quite the contrary, appreciating the political potential of historical studies, I am convinced that we should follow in the footsteps of thinkers such as Weber and not avoid looking at urban history as a source of wisdom that can contribute to the justification or criticism of our own political choices. This is what I intend to do in this article, presenting what I would call a border experience of the city – the case of the 16th-17th-century Poland. The relation between *urbs* and *civitas* is still an open question, and, since many new factors complicated its nature in the course of the last century, we are entitled not only to refer to the opinions of the classics

but also to revise them and to draw our own conclusions. The Polish 'state-city', peculiar as it may seem, may be worth mentioning for at least two reasons. First, it was an attempt to create a city in which the superiority of the *civitas* would not be limited to some commonly shared political ideology or occasionally performed rituals but would actually shape its constitutional design, setting conditions for everyday political practice. This way, it sets an interesting perspective that permits the assessment of the arguments of those who 'still imagine a city made up not of townspeople, but of free citizens [...], freely associated for the management of this community' (Lefebvre 2000: 97). Second, its proponents held rather strict views about cities they had observed in the West, which makes their observations relevant, as far as we are concerned, to formulate more balanced opinions concerning the assumed beauty of the European city.

Can Big Be Beautiful?

Small Is Beautiful, proclaimed Ernst F. Schumacher (1973) in the 70s of the last century. Proximity is often viewed as an important factor that strengthens interpersonal bonds and facilitates the establishment of strong and proud communities which their members can identify themselves with and thus support mutual cooperation, both political and economic. And so Pierre Manent in his *Metamorphoses of the City* writes: 'The Greek city was the first form of human life to produce political energy. It was a deployment of human energy of unprecedented intensity and quality […]. Later history appears, in sum, as the ever-renewed quest for the political form that would permit the gathering of the energies of the city while escaping the fate of the city [...]' (Manent 2013: 5). Although for Fustel de Coulanges only ancient cities were to be perceived as being both *urbs* and *civitas*, his opinion in this respect does not seem to prevail among city historians. Many of them do their best to at least extend the validity of this peculiar combination, looking for some continuity between Greek *poleis*, Rome, and mediaeval or even contemporary cities. This is possible, so it seems, because contemporary interest in cities is to a large extent motivated by the assumption that the concept of *civitas* born in ancient *urbs* has been constantly affecting the direction of the cultural and political development of Europe. Its values and ideals, such as freedom, justice, cooperation, etc., are claimed to form the core of European identity.

It is true that the concept of the city as *civitas* was born in the reality of small Greek city-states, or even more precisely in Athens, the cradle of political philosophy. And it was reborn at the end of the Middle Ages, this time in the urban republics of Northern Italy mainly. Nevertheless, unlike the Greeks, who consequently viewed those not having *polis* as barbarians, Italian thinkers did not

identify *civitas* or *respublica* with urban political reality only. They were 'thinking primarily of the city-state they knew', but 'they enlarged their definitions so as to include larger political units like the medieval kingdom or the empire' (Dawson 1961: 180). And so, especially in the political literature of the Renaissance, the city (*civitas*) was emancipated from cities as such, and as a political project it supported the emancipation of nation-states aspiring to independence from the ideological and political domination of the Church. Often taking after Italian predecessors, writers all over Europe used the same political language borrowed from Aristotle and Cicero. Institutions, laws and the virtue of citizens, the political significance of individual behaviour and thus the role of education and wisdom, and the need for establishing balance between particular interests and the common good are the main themes whether one reads Andrzej Frycz-Modrzewski's prescriptions for the Polish government (*De republica emendanda* 1551) or learns about the sources of strength of the Commonwealth of England from Thomas Smith (*De republica Anglorum* 1583) or Venice Serenissima from Gasparo Contarini (*De magistratibus et republica venetorum* 1543). Proportions differ, stress is put elsewhere, but the conviction that the state should be a collectively operating community in which every individual understands, and perceives as just, his social and political role is common to all of them. Perhaps Weber was right that the 'ideal type' of the European city was the mediaeval guild city, but the political spirit of *civitas* lasted in Europe much longer. Unfortunately, although it was able to keep its allure as a desirable political ideal in works of many political thinkers, the dominant historical practice proceeded along an alternative path for a long time. The eventual victory of nation-states resulted not only in conquering cities as such, but – as Maurizio Viroli (1992) points out – it changed the meaning of politics. From then on, the traditional language of politics, being so far the language of the city, functioned only on the margin of political philosophy. At the level of states, it was replaced by the language of reason of state according to which political activity is no more than a struggle for power. Cities survived, but merely as new economic resources and not proud communities any more. Thanks to subsequent industrialization, the *urbs* side of cities expanded far beyond traditional political imagination, but at the same time they ceased to be political forms 'in which men govern themselves and know that they govern themselves' (Manent 2013: 18). With one decisive political shift, *civitas* was ousted from its natural residuum, a city, and new dynamic states refused to give it a shelter – except for Poland (from 1569, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth), where a unique political experiment was carried out at about this time. The experiment could be seen as a continuation and radicalization of the earlier European political practice that was just expiring in the West.

As Jerzy Topolski points out rightly, the tendency to oppose Western Europe and countries east of the Elbe River is perhaps attractive as it permits the production of many neat explanatory schemes, but being often contradictory they

only multiply confusion and on the whole do not make any progress in explaining true historical sources of the split (Topolski 1994: 342). Perhaps a better option would be searching for some common backgrounds all across Europe, and only then looking for special causes and developments characteristic of the different regions. One of such commonalities are economic and social changes taking place in the last centuries of the Middle Ages, which were accompanying the developing market economy. Though generally the social living standards in the late mediaeval period, and especially of the wealthy townspeople, rose, the same was not true about the status of the nobility. The disparity between the growing needs of the nobles and their falling income was noticeable in almost all countries and demanded a countermeasure. This was all the more so since it was the nobility who claimed a leading political and cultural role in society, which was on its part redefined by the growing popularity of the model of the Renaissance man. Given the prevailing conditions of European economic growth, the only effective method for the nobility to regain its position was for it to develop the individual's own direct economic activity, which is again a reaction that can be observed throughout Europe except for the Netherlands (Topolski 1994: 346). At the same time, this common reaction of the nobility is for Topolski the crucial factor that triggered processes responsible for the further differentiation of Europe, the rising of a 'new' serfdom and manorial-serf economy in Central and Eastern Europe being one of their outcomes. Specific conditions of Poland – its agrarian character, good terms for the grain trade, and large quantity of nobility (the *szlachta*) – were in favour of this group. No wonder that the rise in economic and social status encouraged the *szlachta* to increase their political significance. It was facilitated, again, by particular historical circumstances which were to modify the impact of pan-European trends and events. All over Europe, the main opponent of the centralization of power and the establishment of a strong monarchy was the nobility. Nevertheless, while western monarchs relied upon towns as a means of reducing their dependence upon the landed aristocracy, Polish kings in their attempts to counterweight the power of the wealthiest nobles (the 'European' *magnaci*) had to rely on the provincial nobility, the 'gentry' (Wyczański 1982: 97). They were doing that with the help of various privileges, which are often incorrectly viewed as gradually weakening the monarchical power, while in the first place they improved the social and political position of the lesser nobility in respect to their much wealthier 'brothers'.

From its beginnings at the end of the 14th century, the realm of the Jagiellons was in fact an agglomeration of territories differing in political traditions, customs, laws, and populations, with the ruling dynasty as the only tangible embodiment of the political will which gave birth to the spectacular undertaking of the union between the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania. Only when this unifying element risked perishing because of Zygmunt August's inability to beget an heir was

the new Act of Union signed in Lublin (1569), according to which two separate political organisms became one. The process of unification was long and never fully accomplished. Still, as the crucial political actors from both sides were interested in its lasting, it was important to construct and support some coherent political narration which would facilitate the building of a common political identity and a common political language. In general, this identity was in accordance with the concept of the ancient *civitas*, being perceived as a community of free and equal citizens who elect and control those who are to decide on the common good, including the king himself. Already in the 14th century, no king could come to office without the approval of the representatives of the nobility, and from 1573 the concept of free election (*electio viritim*) was introduced, which meant the participation of the entirety of the nobility. Eventually, as the Sejm developed its own leadership and political movement (the so-called 'executionist movement'), the middle gentry replaced the aristocracy as the key political decision maker. The growth of political awareness among the *szlachta* was accompanied by constitutional development, which in the course of time centred all power in the legislative assembly – the Sejm Walny ('general gathering'), comprised of the 'three estates' (*trzy stany sejmujące* – the king, senators, and deputies from the Sejm proper). Besides privileges granting the nobility almost absolute power over the rest of the society, several documents laid the legal foundations for this domination. According to the *Nihil novi* act (1505), all new laws required the approval of the Sejm. Even more significant were the *Henrician Articles*, meant as a social contract between the newly elected king, Henri de Valois, and the nobility (that is: all citizens). Though the king abandoned the Polish throne to become the ruler of France as Henry III, the *Articles* survived. In essence, they formed a *Bill of Rights* as they included important obligations which were meant to bind every king thereafter. The last article granted the nobility the right to absolve itself from obedience to any king who had violated the agreement, which was in fact an invitation to legalized rebellion (Jedrych 1982: 88). In a nutshell, the subsequent privileges and laws set the nobility in an extremely favourable economic, social, and political position unknown in other countries, supporting constitutional changes that eventually transformed Poland into a democracy of nobles. A detailed analysis of peculiarities embedded in the political system of the First Polish Republic would be superfluous here. All the more so, the recent 'republican turn', as some call it, raised the interest in the Polish version of republicanism, and so the literature on the subject is vast and constantly growing (Fedorowicz 1982, Jedruch 1982, Lukowski 1991). Instead, I would like to make use of my philosophical licence and underline one particular aspect of the nobles' ideology, which is often overlooked. And that is because it is visible only when it is presented against the background of general European trends in the development of political thinking – such are the trends mentioned by Manent

and Viroli. Here is where the Polish *rzeczpospolita* (Latin *respublica*) can be presented as an experimental attempt to find a form suitable for 'the gathering of the energies of the city while escaping the fate of the city' on the largest scale then possible – the whole state.

A City without Cities

From the Middle Ages, the urban sector in Poland was relatively small, but at that time among countries with agrarian economy one can also count France, Germany, Austria, and Hungary (Allen 2000: 4). The number of Polish cities is estimated at about 1,100 in the 14th and 1,750 in the middle of the 17th century (Herbst 1954: 7). Only eight cities had more than ten thousand inhabitants, with Gdańsk (German *Danzig*) having in its prime over seventy thousand inhabitants (Cieślak, Biernat 1988: 92). On the scale of the whole country, the percentage of urban population did not exceed 20–25%, with some regional variations. Some sources seriously lower these data (Allen 2000) as final numbers depend on the calculation method. Traditionally, the most urbanized region of Poland was Great Poland (*Wielkopolska*, in the west), and the most notable were three cities of Royal Prussia (Gdańsk, Toruń, and Elbląg), for enjoying the greatest autonomy. Though the pace of urbanization was rather slow up to the mid-17th century, the cities in Poland had not markedly lagged in size or wealth behind the cities in the West. Quite similar were their internal development, the economic, social, and political conflicts between different social strata, or the religious revival during the Reformation (Bogucka–Samsonowicz 1986). The situation changed dramatically in the second half of the 17th century. Reasons for that were plenty, and there is still disagreement between historians as to which ones of them are to be viewed as the most pivotal. Definitely, one of such important causes were consequences of the Swedish invasion (the *Swedish deluge* of the years 1655–1660), during which more than one hundred cities were destroyed, and the whole country suffered serious political and economic problems. Nevertheless, it is also true that the fate of urbanization in Poland was at least partly sealed by political changes brought about by the rise of Polish parliamentarism at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries and by the further democratization of the political system. For various reasons, cities did not fit into the general project of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, but the most interesting from a philosophical perspective are the arguments justifying reluctance to the urban reality.

Polish republicans deplored cities. The main object of their criticism was not, however, accidental. What they really resented was first of all one particular aspect of cities, namely their dependence on their economic status and thus the promotion of materialism among their citizens. For Polish political thinkers,

such focus on triggering the development of the *urbs* side of urban communities worked against their attempts to become *civitate*. And so cities were criticized for both aesthetic and ethical reasons (Bogucka 2009). The primacy of egoistic motivations was accused of causing damages in the public sphere. That is why, it was claimed that big cities all over Europe were dirty and smelly, they were overcrowded, and in their search for utility they became inimical to beauty. No *laudatio urbis* can one find in early modern Polish literature. And the only known essay on a Polish city – the *Description of Warsaw* by Adam Jarzębski (the middle of the 17th century) – praises not the urban reality of the city but the great houses and palaces of the nobles, which bring some greater culture to it and thus deter total disintegration.

Ethics, according to Polish writers, does not live in a city, either. Since self-interest is a centrifugal force, it does not foster republicanism. In fact, egoism percolates through the public sphere, and, instead of strengthening a good republican government, the political system drives towards oligarchy. Even Venice, perceived as the best European model of government up to the middle of the 17th century, was treated with some dose of suspicion in this respect (Grzybowski 1994). And yet, in spite of all the criticism against urbanization, in one of the works of Polish historian and 16th-century nobleman Stanisław Sarnicki, one can read: 'not many cities they have built in Poland, but with one city so notable, so fortified, so ordered – they [the ancestors] granted us [...]. The one in which the king is a mayor, and the whole nobility is a city council, so they are all, together with the Crown, urbanites' (Zarębska 1986: 271).

It would be wrong to see in the above words just a slick analogy. They expressed a belief common among Polish political thinkers that the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth had much more in common with European cities than with big European nation-states. And it has to be remembered that we are talking about the biggest country of Europe (except Russia), covering at its peak in the early 17th century almost a million square kilometres; and the biggest body of citizens, as the Polish nobility was the most numerous in Europe. To think about such a large area as similar to cities required a great dose of imagination. Trying to turn it into a city required courage and favourable historical conditions, that is to say: a lot of luck. And so the political turn Poland took in the Renaissance, with its further successes and failures, was the outcome of all that.

Although points such as political imagination and courage in making political choices are much more interesting for a political philosopher, a few remarks should be made on more objective factors that contributed to the undertaking. One of such factors was the Reformation, all the more so it coincided in time with the coming of age of the parliamentary system.

In Poland, and even more in Lithuania with its large Eastern Orthodox population, Christianity was already multi-denominational long before the start

of the Reformation (Tazbir 1994: 168). More than a movement for the radical reform of the Church, the latter was perceived rather as an interesting foreign ideology which could serve as a means of exerting pressure on the Catholic clergy (id.: 178). Luther's ideas reached Poland very quickly, and they found fertile soil especially in the cities of Pomorze (Pomerania) and Wielkopolska. However, it was not Luther's Church which was to prevail. Burghers in Poland were for the greater part of German origin; so, for them, Lutheranism was more natural – all the more so as German immigration rose during the 30 Years' War. Still, the nobility had their reasons to choose Calvinism instead. Lutheranism was perceived as a supporting absolutism, while Calvin's ideas could be applied, if correctly interpreted, as a weapon to fight both the king's prerogatives and the rights of the Roman Church. And in this role they were used, causing Calvin himself to criticize Poles for not paying enough attention to theological issues (Małłek 2012). The superiority of political over religious goals had paradoxical effects. It encouraged quick proliferation of new ideas (quite soon Protestant deputies dominated in the parliament), but strictly religious debates were fragmented and shallow in spite of all the efforts of figures like Jan Łaski, who was one of not so many converts interested and trained in theology. In effect, Polish Protestantism started with serious religious claims – like the proposal to cut the bonds with Rome and to create a national Protestant church of Poland – but gave them up rather quickly. The climax of the Polish Reformation was reached in 1570 with the Sandomierz Agreement in which a number of Protestant groups (without the most radical movement of the Polish Brethren) agreed on mutual tolerance. The idea was supported even by many non-Protestants, including Jakub Uchański, the Archbishop of Gniezno and the Primate of Poland. And so the document was later incorporated into the *Henrician Articles*, thus becoming a kind of constitutional provision. This peak of famous Polish toleration was, however, the forecast of its decline. After achieving a legal confirmation of the superiority of the noble nation against the king and the Church, Polish nobles were more than happy to re-convert to Catholicism. Although for the next hundred years Poland was to be called 'a place of shelter for heretics' or 'a state without stakes' (Tazbir 2000), the number of Protestants dropped significantly on the political scene already in the 70s of the 16th century (Małłek 2012).

One of the less obvious but significant effects of the Reformation was an important change in the educational *curriculum* of the Polish nobility. Despite its medieval renown, the University of Cracow no longer satisfied the taste of the youth as it was too much devoted to the Pope and at the same time hostile to republican ideas. Therefore, the need for intellectual freshness drove young noblemen abroad. Protestants initially chose Wittenberg, Leipzig, or Basel, but the University of Padua soon became the most attractive place for Catholics, not without regard for the proximity of the increasingly appreciated Venice.

Exaggerating a bit, Stanisław Windakiewicz claims that this popularity of Padua put a stop to the former Florentine influences, paving their ways into Poland via the royal court at the turn of the 16th century (Grzybowski 1994: 19). Falling under the spell of the *Serenissima*, the new noble élites started to dream about turning Poland into the new Rome and so exceeding Venice in fulfilling republican ideals. In spite of its inspiring political theory, Venice seemed not to have been radical enough in unifying all individual efforts around the common good. And the reason for that was exactly its urban character with all its vices. The Polish republic was to correct this imperfection, referring directly to the Ciceronian ideal of the virtuous citizen.

Reconstructing the concept of *civitas* on the state level did not mean at all staying true to the more and more outdated language of politics. Polish thinkers were more than happy to adopt the language of *raggione di stato*. Nevertheless, answering the question as to who had an ear so sensitive and an arm so strong as to hear and then to execute demands of the reason of state, they pointed at the nobility – or, even more precisely: at every member of the group, regardless of his property, his social status, his education, and so on. All such individual differences were perceived as secondary and deprived of any serious political significance. That was to be the main difference between ordinary cities, including city-states, and the big Polish state-city. The latter was to become a pure *civitas* whose functioning would remain unblemished by any private interests. Even the very word 'private' served as a serious insult in Polish political discourse. It was believed that freedom and equality are values necessary to improve the quality of one's life, which led to the conclusion that every individual should naturally seek ways to enjoy them. In effect, every individual was expected to develop civic virtues as a natural competence that simply ameliorates one's life. And so the idea to create an institutional system which would offer freedom and equality as the most attractive social and political rewards for acting on behalf of the common good might indeed look convincing as strengthening both freedom and cooperation. In fact, this idea has been percolating through the whole body of republican literature from antiquity up to our times as it serves well the purposes of the theory, vouching for its coherence. Rarely, however, was it brought to such an extreme, literally becoming the source of constitutional practice, with inventions so unique as the *liberum veto* custom ('I do not allow' shouted by a noble present at the parliamentary session nullified any legislation).

Binding the difference between *urbs* and *civitas* to the forms of human activity, it is possible to see here the difference between 'using' and 'creating' the city. The *urbs* is the object of the activity motivated first of all by personal interests. And so it is a city which is viewed by its citizens as an opportunity, a tool which is to be used to achieve their own particular goals, such as wealth or social prestige, taking advantage of one's social, economic, or political position. The need for *civitas* is

born out of recognizing the benefits of joining one's actions to those of others. And though perhaps, at first, individual motives for doing so are equally egoistic, requirements of cooperation – institutions and laws but also public accountability for one's actions – are factors which facilitate the rise of some common political awareness and sense of community. Even if we assume the egoistic, unsocial nature of each individual to be a fact, under favourable circumstances, this nature does not have to be hostile to undertakings which are able to unite efforts of the citizens, as not only philosophers but also historical practice observed in many cities proved. What seemed to be the key to their success was balance between *urbs* and *civitas*, with its many aspects described already by Aristotle: the balance between material and spiritual needs, richness and freedom, differences and unity, private and common, or economy and politics.

Polish republicans (with few important exceptions such as Andrzej Wolan or Andrzej Frycz-Modrzewski) paid little attention to specify conditions under which such balance could be achieved. Believing in the superiority of the *civitas* aspect of their state-city, they seemed to have assumed that the strength of the *urbs*-Poland should emerge automatically. This initial oversight of the fact that it is much easier to create a *civitas* in a wealthier *urbs* was perhaps due to the fact that in the 14th century Poland entered an economic and demographic upswing which persisted into the 16th century (Bideleux–Jeffries 1998: 129). It was expected that this prosperity would survive much longer. Nevertheless, the economic situation was worsening in the course of the 17th century, and by the end of the First Republic nearly half of the gentry did not own land and had to earn their living through public service (in the army, the judiciary, or in administrative positions) as, according to the above mentioned *Nihil Novi* act, the *szlachta* was barred from engaging in city commerce. Being enfranchised and feeling equal to the rich magnates, later on, that so-called *szlachta-gołota* contributed heavily to the corruption of the political system as they became puppets in the hands of their more powerful colleagues and foreign courts. Nevertheless, even when the economic backwardness of the country was noticed and voices demanding social, economic, and political reforms were raised, they were usually supported by a very specific narrative. According to this narrative, it was much more important to remind the nobility about their political and ethical duties than to introduce concrete legal and institutional solutions which would be able to force particular behaviours. Of course, the political significance of this ideological bias cannot be overestimated, but it does deserve attention from a wider philosophical perspective. It shows that Polish republicanism put great trust in the individual, expecting that, being granted citizenship, he would feel motivated to take part in the *civitas* of his own will and thus would develop virtues necessary to establish the balance between *urbs* and *civitas* – in his life and in the life of the whole community. Consequently, the constitutional framework of the Commonwealth

was viewed as a tool to activate this individual potential of freedom rather than a system of fences to direct it as, for instance, Thomas Hobbes would have wanted it. It was believed that once individuals become virtuous citizens, their virtue would guarantee that their actions would take into account not only their own particular interests but also the good of their *civitas*. Such a radical choice of the republican political practice to bind the condition of the whole community with qualities of its citizens heavily influenced the development of Polish political culture. In the 18th century, when anarchy in the Commonwealth was so obvious that there was no point in denying the need for deep constitutional reform, even radical proposals in this respect were usually mitigated by the argument that 'every form of government is good [...] when people are good', as an anonymous author of the only known Polish booklet (moderately) advancing French absolutism concluded. And so the Polish experiment to create a city which would be more beautiful than other cities thanks to suppressing the *urbs* side of the community and expanding its political *civitas* side was caught in a vicious circle. To suit theoretical assumptions, this project was deprived of the political energy coming from competing interests although, as Fedorowicz concludes summarizing the noble hegemony: 'In any healthy society, competing loci of power and influence tend to balance each other in a creative tension which offers that society the opportunity of flexible response to any crisis' (Fedorowicz 1982: 148). At the same time, the Polish state-city was deprived of the energy coming from the *civitas* itself as the emphasis put on the individual virtue made it impossible to enforce obedience to the common good via institutions and laws. In short, the produced noble *civitas*, which in theory was to embody the ideal of a good city, became merely a screen for private interests of the nobility. It was no accident that, as observed by Zamoyski, the less the nobility participated in the government, the more indispensable they believed themselves to be (Bideleux–Jeffries 1998: 146).

Conclusions

There is an extremely interesting 16th-century essay which refers to exactly the same issues as the ones mentioned in the first, more philosophical section of this article, and then I discussed these issues with references to the history of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. It confirms my deep conviction that indeed, as Cicero claimed, *historia magistra vitae est* – not because it is repeating itself but because we are condemned to repeat the same political lessons all over again. The essay I have in mind was born out of a careful observation of Renaissance city life in Italy and an active participation in Polish political life. The work, titled *The Conversation of a Pole with an Italian*, was written by Łukasz Górnicki, a minor burgher from the town of Oświęcim, then appointed at the court. In the

dialogue, which compares the levels of freedom being enjoyed by Polish citizens and Italian ones, Górnicki includes many references to cities. Both the Italian, probably some Venetian merchant, and the Pole, a member of the nobility, notice very quickly that there is one huge difference in their view of possible sources of corruption of the *civitas*. For the Italian, the greatest dangers are brought about by those who are idle and poor but audacious, while for the Pole much worse are citizens who are rich and mind their business quietly. And so they both soon realize that one of the main objects of disagreement is the perception and the function of *urbēs*. For the Italian, there is no *civitas* without the strong *urbs*. For the Pole, urbanites always seem to threaten the political community. And yet there is a characteristic passage in which both the Italian and the Pole become a bit confused. It starts with the suggestion by the former that if the nobility lived in cities then it would be easier to check up on their civic virtue as cities are small enough to take account of every individual. The Pole seems to follow the reasoning, adding that indeed it is easier to care for virtue and good *mores* in small communities, but he suddenly draws back noticing that freedom suffers in such communities. It suffers, he claims, as the attention of the individual is focused upon his personal benefits, while it should rather encourage serving the whole political community. The Italian rejects Polish reservations and reiterates his argument referring to Gdańsk and its conflict with the Polish king, Stephen Báthory. Still, he cannot avoid the binding political decisions that have been made in the name of protecting the freedoms of the Gdańsk *civitas* against the king (the city gave its backing to Maximilian Habsburg during the 'dual' election of 1576) with the particular interests of the Gdańskers. Again, *urbs* and *civitas* seem to be two important aspects of the city but not so easy to be reconciled in practice. If we keep in mind that the dialogue was written by one person, it is not hard to come to the conclusion that Górnicki's contemporaries were quite acute in observing these difficulties and the possible consequences of diminishing either element of the city.

The experiment to recapture the energy of the city on the state level did not end up well, but it deserves attention as an extreme political answer to historical processes which are claimed to be responsible for having eventually destroyed the essence of the European city and producing in many historians and philosophers the 'feeling of shortcoming or loss' (Manent 2013: 18). In Polish republicanism, one can find a bold defence of the public sphere and a rather unique combination of individualism and collectivism. On the other hand, the eventual failure of the state-city project may be seen as a warning against all-too-quick extrapolation of ideas that we might want to adapt to our times. That is why, it may still be instructive since its fate suggests caution in treating economic development rooted in egoistic motivations as a threat to the sense of community as well as in seeing that development as an automatic gateway to producing it. In both cases,

the accompanying political appreciation of either *civitas* or *urbs* risks becoming merely an ideology and not a politically valid philosophy of the city.

References

ALLEN, Robert C. 2000. Economic Structure and Agricultural Productivity in Europe, 1300–1800. *European Review of Economic History* 3: 1–25.

BIDELEUX, Robert–JEFFRIES, Ian. 1998. *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change*. London–New York: Psychology Press.

BOGUCKA, Maria. 2009. Miasto i mieszczanin w społeczeństwie Polski nowożytnej (XVI–XVIII wiek). *Czasy Nowożytne* 22: 9–49.

BOGUCKA, Maria–SAMSONOWICZ, Henryk. 1986. *Dzieje miast i mieszczaństwa w Polsce przedrozbiorowej*. Wroclaw: Ossolineum.

CIEŚLAK, Edmund–BIERNAT, Czesław. 1988. *History of Gdańsk*. Transl. B. Blaim–G. M. Hyde. Gdańsk.

CLARK, Peter. 2009. *European Cities and Towns 400–2000*. Oxford: University Press.

DAWSON, Christopher. 1961. *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*. New York: Image Books, Doubleday.

FEDOROWICZ, Jan Krzysztof. 1982. *A Republic of Nobles: Studies in Polish History to 1864*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

FUSTEL de COULANGES, Numa Denis. 1877. *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*. Transl. by W. Small. Boston–New York: Lee and Shepard; Charles T. Dillingham.

GRZYBOWSKI, Stanisław. 1994. *Jan Zamoyski*. Warsaw: PIW.

HERBST, Stanisław. 1954. *Miasta i mieszczaństwo renesansu polskiego*. Warsaw: PIW.

ISIN, Engin F. 2003. Historical Sociology of the City. In: Delanty, Gerard–Isin, Engin (eds), *Handbook of Historical Sociology*. SAGE Publications Ltd. 312–325.

JEDRUCH, Jacek. 1982. *Constitutions, Elections and Legislatures of Poland, 1493–1977*. Washington D.C.: University Press of America.

LEFEBVRE, Henri. 1996. *Writings on Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

LUKOWSKI, Jerzy. 1991. *Liberty's Folly: The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century*. London–New York: Routledge.

MAŁŁEK, Janusz. 2012. *Reformacja i protestantyzm w Polsce I Prusach (XVI–XX wiek)*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK.

MANENT, Pierre. 2013. *Metamorphoses of the City: On Western Dynamic*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press.

MARTINDALE, Don. 1958. Prefatory Remarks: The Theory of the City. In: Weber, Max. *The City*, transl. D. Martindale, G. Neuwirth. Glencoe, Illi: The Free Press, 9-62.

MUMFORD, Lewis. 2003/1937. What Is a City? In: LeGates, R.T.–Stout, F. (eds), *The City Reader,* London–New York: Routledge. 92–96.

SCHUMACHER, Ernst Friedrich. 1973. *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered*. London: Blond & Briggs.

TAZBIR, Janusz. 2000. *Państwo bez stosów i inne szkice*. Krakow: Universitas.

TOPOLSKI, Jerzy. 1994. *The Manorial Economy in Early-Modern East-Central Europe: Origins, Development and Consequences*. Hampshire (GB)–Brookfield (USA): Variorum–Ashgate Publishing.

VIROLI, Maurizio. 1992. *From Politics to Reason of State. The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics (1250–1600).* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

WEBER, Max. 1950[1927]. *General Economic History*, transl. F. H. Knight. Glencoe, Illi: The Free Press.

WYCZAŃSKI, Andrzej. 1982. The Problem of Authority in Sixteenth-Century Poland: An Essay of Reinterpretation. In: Fedorowicz, Jan Krzysztof (ed.), *A Republic of Nobles: Studies in Polish History to 1864*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 91–108.

ZARĘBSKA, Teresa. 1986. *Początki polskiego piśmiennictwa urbanistycznego*. Warsaw: Państ. Wydaw. Noukowe.