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**POLAND'S CONTENTIOUS ELITES ENTER THE AGE OF REVOLUTION:  
ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF WHY SOCIAL MOVEMENT SCHOLARSHIP  
SHOULD BECOME EVEN BROADER<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

Scholars of social movements commonly call for the field to be broadened in various ways because movements are often intertwined with other forms of conflict and because the causes or consequences of movements may operate differently in different contexts. Important change processes that were unfolding in Poland at the time of the French Revolution provide an instructive case. Although the contemporaneous French Revolution, with its enormous quantity and variety of collective mobilizations has been a touchstone for social movement scholars, the work of Poland's reform parliament and the adoption of Poland's 1791 constitution have gotten much less attention. Poland's reform politics not only provides both instructive parallels to and differences from French revolutionary developments, but were also deeply intertwined with them and embedded with those French events in a larger, European field of contention. Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the Polish reform movement is that it was largely driven by elites; something noted in Karl Marx's bemused praise. Although social movements

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played very much less of a role in Poland than in France, we try to show here that familiar tools of social movement analysis permit an account of those Polish events as well.

With all its shortcomings, this constitution, seen in the context of Russian-Prussian-Austrian barbarism, presents itself as the only work of freedom produced at any time by Eastern Europe on its own. It was created exclusively by the privileged class, the nobility. The history of the world knows no other example of nobility so noble -- Karl Marx (1971:153)

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper calls attention to the extended examination we will be making of a particular time and place as well as to the theoretical and conceptual purposes for which we marshal the empirical materials. Social movement scholarship is enjoying an academic boom, a happy disciplinary circumstance readily demonstrable by studying the number of members of the Collective Behavior and Social Movement Section of the American Sociological Association, the proliferation of exciting publications, or the receptivity of major nonspecialist journals to work in the area. Yet major voices among social movement scholars tell us that the field needs to broaden in all sorts of directions. Doug McAdam (2001:xii), for example, writes of concerns shared with Sidney Tarrow over “the increasing narrowness of the field and its disconnect with other ‘proximate’ fields of study”. McAdam, Tarrow and Charles Tilly (2001), have proposed locating social movements in a broader field of “contentious politics”, in which social movements as generally studied are but one form of contentious interaction, often

occurring in complex dynamic relationships with other ways of engaging in human conflict.

Those who see social movements as a collective action problem (e.g., Lichbach 1995), have generally drawn on broader and more abstract formulations of such notions as selective incentives and free riders rather than restricting their vision to social movements as such. What deserves to be called the foundational text of this approach, Mancur Olson's *Logic of Collective Action* (1965), was highly general and only incidentally addressed social movements at all. Finally, students of the political life of democracies repeatedly demonstrate the enmeshment of conflicts fought out in many arenas – electoral competition, lawsuits, legislative coalition-building, bureaucratic infighting, lobbying, and social movement activism. It would not be a wise division of knowledge, for example, to insulate the study of socialist movements and socialist parties from each other (Goldstone 2004; Tilly and Wood 2009; Author 2011).

In summary of such arguments, we suggest that scholars often may wish to cross the boundaries that distinguish social movements from quite a range of other phenomena because:

- Organizations that participate in social movements may predate those movements and therefore be embedded in other kinds of social processes.
- Social movement organizations may mutate into highly institutionalized forms. like political parties, NGOs, armed partisans, or (in the case of successful revolutions) governments.
- Social movements are often deeply intertwined with other forms of political conflict, whether highly institutionalized or profoundly transgressive, ranging

from electoral contests to insurrections, as alternatives, catalysts, sources of energy, or outcomes.

- The causes and consequences of social movement activism in one setting may be quite different in some other one.
- The study of both the causes and the consequences of social movements often needs to consider institutions, circumstances, practices, or events that are not themselves social movements.

As a result, the conceptual tools that most commonly figure in accounts of social movement action plainly apply to a broader class of social action as well. Social movement scholars commonly explore the ways organizations gather resources, recruit members, and succeed or fail in directing those members for organizational purposes; arrive at tactics for specific actions and strategies for extended campaigns; draw on identities of potential recruits and generate new identities in conflict; frame their goals, tactics, and strategies for participants, the general public, governments, police, allies and enemies; respond to favorable and unfavorable features of the contexts in which they find themselves; reshape those contexts through their own actions, sometimes through deliberate, strategically crafted action and sometimes inadvertently or even without awareness of having done so; alter the lives of participants; have impacts on specific policies; draw on established patterns of contentious action and alter those patterns. It is evident that many other ways of engaging in conflict are amenable to analysis through the same battery of conceptual tools since they, too, involve the engagement of participants, dealings with allies, enemies, and audiences, draw on and alter identities, respond to favorable and unfavorable circumstances, and so forth. At just a slight level of

abstraction, therefore, the tools of social movement analysis are tools for the analysis of other modes of conflict as well. Appropriately, those who urge us to study recurrent “mechanisms” and “processes” for new insights into how movements work, also urge us to see the movements within a larger field of “contentious politics” (McAdam et al 2001; McAdam and Tarrow 2011).

What triggers these introductory remarks as well as our ungainly title is the quote from an unfinished essay by Marx that we took as epigraph. We are likely to associate Marx with admiring analyses of the collective action of those disadvantaged by existing social arrangements, including especially the ultimately triumphant bourgeoisie against the chains of feudalism in European history, and the growing organized action of the modern proletarians, visible in the Europe of his day and expected in greater strength in the future. Yet in the observations unpublished in his lifetime from which we quote he takes note of a major achievement, the adoption of a progressive constitution by Poland<sup>2</sup> on May 3, 1791, an achievement not brought about through organized collective action from below but by reformers among the Polish elite itself. This is all the more noteworthy, Marx suggests, because neither the European nobility nor the Eastern European location were usual founts of recent contributions to human progress.

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2 The place we are writing about, like many eighteenth-century European states, was forged out of many separate pieces whose history is reflected in such labels as “Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth”, “The Kingdom of Poland and Grand Duchy of Lithuania”, or “The Commonwealth of Both Nations”. We will simply refer to this entity as “Poland” as was common in Western Europe at the time and will ignore institutional differences in the Polish and Lithuanian components of the composite state (Kamiński 1983).

We may take note of the date to suggest some striking contrasts. It was still early in the age of revolution. French revolutionaries had pulled down their old regime and were working on their own constitution, eventually enacted four months after the Poles had done so. Across the ocean, the Americans had recently ratified their own constitutional text. In the not very distant future Haiti's slaves would revolt and Latin America would field armies to drive the Spanish forces from the American mainland. These dramas were part of the revolutionary foundations of modern democracy and all involved movements of various kinds, including popular mobilizations in town and country. The revolutionary French constitution was written by members of the new revolutionary legislature, but very little that that legislature did can be understood without paying a lot of attention to the enormous pressures posed by popular actions all around them from insurrectionary peasants challenging the feudal regime to insurrectionary urban artisans challenging the authority of the new government. It would seem a rather natural extension of social movement scholarship to tackle the forms of popular mobilization in France and their interplay with revolutionary legislation (see Author 1996) even if the precise forms of mobilization differed from the contentious repertoire that emerged under democratizing conditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that have been taken to define the modern social movement (Tilly 1995, 2008).

Deploying the tools of social movement analysis for the Polish elite's constitutional reform might seem a much bigger stretch. Unlike the French circumstances, there is little by way of popular mobilization from below placing pressures on elites or seized by elite reformers as opportunities. The Polish story does have an important component of collective popular mobilization and even insurrection,



but these mostly happened a bit later as consequences rather than causes of constitutional reform, or rather as consequences of the interaction of the reformers and their opponents.

Nonetheless we think the Polish story should be of considerable interest to students of social movements and contentious politics for three reasons. First of all, it is a story full of contentious politics, with actors engaged in remaking their identities, deploying their resources in contexts rich in both threat and opportunity, seeking allies and engaging opponents, with a great deal of strategic framing going on (much of it by allies and opponents). So common tools of social movement analysis turn out to have useful applications, even though movements are peripheral parts of the story.

Second, Polish events are also interesting as a contrasting, negative case. They teach us that at least under certain circumstances elites might enact significant reform without those particular pressures from below. (It also may suggest some important questions about the consequences of reform without such pressures, but that is not the main subject of this investigation.)

Third, the Polish processes, seen in their transnational context, turn out to be extremely important for the contingent unfolding of the revolutionary birth of modern democracy. Because the rulers of Austria, Prussia, and Russia saw the Polish events as a far more immediate challenge, the Prussian and Austrian armies arrayed against France when the twenty years of European warfare began in 1792 were far smaller and less cooperative than if they had no Polish problem taking priority and about which they were mutually suspicious competitors; and Russia didn't even enter the war against France until 1795 (Blanning 1996: 128-137). A very large part of why monarchical and

aristocratic Europe failed to crush the French armies before they could organize on a vast scale is Poland.

We need to begin with a sketch of Poland's rather unusual political institutions and the involvement of Poland's neighbors in conflicts over the future shape of the Polish state<sup>3</sup>. Poland was a very large country with a very limited and distinctly organized state. Although its territory was significantly reduced from what it had been a century earlier (when it was the largest and one of the most populous states in Europe), in the mid-eighteenth century it extended in the northeast almost as far as Riga, in the east it included all of today's Belarus and today's Ukraine almost as far as Kharkiv and south to the Dniester. The *sejmiks* – the several dozen local assemblies in which all male nobles throughout the country could participate – had extremely broad powers.

Since the Polish nobility (the *szlachta*) was an extremely numerous group compared to the very approximate analogues elsewhere in Europe, a larger number of people participated in government than anywhere else in Europe<sup>4</sup>. These local assemblies elected deputies to a national parliament – the *Sejm* – whose powers relative to the head of state were far larger than in other eighteenth century countries. Indeed, the monarch was elected and the powers given to particular kings was negotiated prior to the new king's taking office. Some of the terms made up a standard package and others were specific to particular kings. This is to say, the notion of a social contract by which

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3 The following account is drawn from Davies (1982), Jędruch (1982); Bardach et al (2005); Roháč (2008); and Łojek (1986).

4 According to Lukowski (1999:2), the *szlachta* made up 6-7% of the population in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, considerably larger than the proportion of nobles in Spain and enormously greater than the proportion in France.

subjects agreed to place themselves under a ruler's authority, which was a convenient fantasy for political theorists in western Europe, was the actual experience of Poland's political class. Despite using the Polish term for "king", Polish writers frequently referred to their country as a "republic" and might even use a polonized version of that word as if it were the name of their country. To assure the incapacity of a royal lineage to augment its authority over the generations, the royal successor was almost never the son of his predecessor but with some frequency a foreign prince or aristocrat from somewhere with which the currently dominant group of Polish aristocrats sought to establish a linkage.

The Polish parliament itself had some very unusual rules for decision-making during the six weeks for which it typically was convened. No more inclined to place themselves involuntarily under the authority of a central parliament than a king, decisions were increasingly made by unanimity, and from about mid-17<sup>th</sup> century a single parliamentary delegate could veto any legislation (a practice known as the "liberum veto"); indeed, a single objector could insist that a parliamentary session be brought to an end and all legislation previously enacted at that session be annulled. All a deputy needed to do was to get up and say "I do not allow it", and this once happened at the very beginning of a session, so everyone went home. A very large number of parliamentary sessions were thus brought to a premature end, particularly during the latter two decades of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries, paralyzing the Polish system. In addition, it was regarded as legitimate for networks of aristocrats to form independent, armed "confederacies" that had legal status, something not terribly far removed from an aristocratic right to rebellion, and it is not an easy matter to understand how Polish legal theorists attempted to distinguish legitimate confederacy from

illegitimate insurrection<sup>5</sup>. Taken together, these institutions of local and national government together were so distinctive that analogies to social hierarchies elsewhere in Europe suggested by words like “noble” and “king” are essentially misleading, but we will avoid burdening the reader with much unfamiliar Polish terminology.

Many Polish aristocrats embraced their distinctiveness within Europe. They claimed their ancestors hailed from Sarmatia (in the South Russian steppe) and that they were therefore ethnically distinct from Poland’s subordinate strata. Some showed their Sarmatian identity by adopting Ottoman-inspired dress which sharply differentiated them from western nobles (Bockenheimer 2002). Over time, others, however, began to favor dress that would have fit right in when they visited western capitals, where the magnate elite liked to send their sons for education<sup>6</sup>. Conventionally, the szlachta were supposed

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5 But see Bardach et al 2005:225-226. Acquiescence in the right of confederacy was part of the standard package that all who would be king were asked to accept.

6 During the period of reform leading up to the May 3 constitution, there seems no clear relationship between dress and political allegiance. In one recent account, some reformers opted for western dress, identifying with the French Revolution and others with Sarmatian dress, filled with pride in renewed Polish patriotism (Możdżyńska-Nawotka 2002: 126-134). The famous depiction of the adoption of the constitution by the 19<sup>th</sup> century painter of flamboyantly patriotic work, Jan Matejko, puts Sarmatian garb on a foe of the reforms, but that seems more a certain 19<sup>th</sup> century reflection equating Sarmatism with backwardness than a valid generalization about the 1790s. But Matejko’s general depiction of participants resembles Marx’s: of thirty eight figures tentatively identified by us, twenty five are szlachta, four are townspeople, and four aren’t Polish. There is also a generic peasant, an Orthodox priest, a French

to be equal in honor, if quite obviously vastly unequal in wealth, and did not develop the fine gradations of inherited titles common in countries to their west<sup>7</sup>. Polish “magnates”, some called “little kings” (a measure of their power on their own estates) and rich almost beyond imagination, and “barefoot szlachta”, poor as churchmice, were, at least in theory, of equal worth (as exemplified in the Polish proverb: “A noble on his farm is the governor’s equal”). So there was an ideology of a sort of noble “democracy” in which an at least formally equal nobility exercised local power, chose their king and granted him specific authority, and whose deputies did not have to accept any national law proposed by a mere majority.<sup>8</sup>

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royalist and two Jews who don’t seem to be specific individuals. There are also three women who can be identified, one from the szlachta class; one townspeople; and one who might be either a szlachta or a townspeople.

7 The use of aristocratic titles like prince was in fact illegal, with a few exceptions that usually had to be recognized by specific Sejm legislation. But Polish nobles could instead proudly use nonhereditary titles they acquired as occupants of office or performers of functions, like Marshall of the Sejm or Chancellor. Since the szlachta were quite aware of the cultural practices of European nobles generally a terminology developed to designate the wife, son or daughter of an officeholder or even the grandson and granddaughter. This informal practice undermined the official principles of equality among szlachta to the extent that a student of szlachta culture, Janusz Tazbir,(2011), writes of the szlachta's title-mania, noting that there were over 40,000 titles distributed by the king, a figure that does not include the much harder-to-estimate number conferred by the various magnates upon their allies.

By the early eighteenth century, however, the ideological basis for Polish political organization had been seriously reshaped by a different reality, the pressures of powerful neighbors. In actual practice, deputies to the Sejm were frequently on the Russian (or sometimes Prussian, Austrian or even French) payroll. Elections of kings or even regular meetings of the Sejm were accompanied by the deployment of Russian troops, and the last of Poland's kings was plainly named by his former lover, the Empress of Russia. Those powerful neighbors might claim they were the defenders of Polish distinctiveness but it wasn't difficult to see that efforts to strengthen the Polish military, develop a more effective state, raise tax collection capacities, or engage in economic development

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8 Adopting the language of a struggle of "democracy" and "aristocracy" that had spread far and wide from its origins in the Low Countries in the 1780s (Palmer 1959:15-20), in the debates around major redesign of the Polish polity that led up to the May 3 constitution, the King commented that a plan for increasing the power of the sejmiks amounted to "szlachta democracy" that would be "aristocracy with respect to townspeople and peasants" (Rostworowski 1963: 365). The expression "szlachta democracy" was more characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century discussions of the Polish past rather than of the period when what that expression denoted was alive, although its earliest use appears to have been in 1774. As elsewhere, "democracy" was a negative term before the revolutionary era, although Dubisz (2003) notes a shift in the 1780s and especially after 1791 (see also Lukowski 2010: 6, 276). There were occasional instances of trying out a similar term built on Polish rather than Greek roots for "people" and "power", the now utterly-forgotten *gminowładztwo* and *ludowładztwo*, and we may perhaps take their failure to take root as another indication of the degree to which Polish discussion of political innovation was part of the broader transnational discussions of the revolutionary era.

projects would run afoul of Prussian and Russian plans. Reform currents that hoped for a higher-capacity Polish state, whether through western-inspired or idiosyncratic changes, therefore, ran the risk of extremely unwelcome attention from dangerous neighbors claiming themselves the guardians of Polish tradition against malicious upstarts. The possible consequences of that attention were demonstrated in 1772 when Russia, Prussia, and Austria together seized about 30% of Polish territory, an episode known to later generations as the First Partition.

Nonetheless, in 1788 a reform-mongering Sejm assembled and kept on meeting well beyond the usual brief duration of two to six weeks. The Four-Year Sejm (or the Great Sejm), as it came to be remembered, adopted the constitution that drew Marx's praise. Before turning to how that came about, we should indicate the main features of the May 3 constitution<sup>9</sup>. First, and perhaps foremost, is not what is in it but that it exists at all. The term "constitution" in the European past had been commonly used for an abstract understanding of how a society was constituted: its body of law, practice, tradition, and commonsense understandings of correct practice. As thus understood, a constitution was not a single document enacted at a commemoration-worthy date. So constitutional reformers commonly were people who were trying to find the old constitution that was being effaced by more recent and improper practice. Legal scholars would often conduct research into precedent, hunting for the constitution. The new, eighteenth-century propensity to think of a constitution in a different way, as a document needing to be

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9 Since the May 3 document's third article on "towns and citizens" states that a previously enacted reform about the rights of towns and townspeople is to be regarded as part of the constitution, the following discussion doesn't distinguish between the two documents. Both texts can be found in Kowecki (1991).

thought through by the present generation and written down in order to shape the future, was fundamental for modern democracy because it enshrines an act in which human beings deliberately decide how they choose to be governed. Poland's is arguably the first of the many European constitutions of the revolutionary age<sup>10</sup>.

Like the recent US precedent, the May 3 constitution has a tripartite division of government function and a bicameral legislature (an idea strongly supported by the king)<sup>11</sup>. By making property the prime qualification for suffrage, it enfranchises many townspeople and disfranchises many szlachta since significant numbers of the former would be thus qualified and significant numbers of the latter would not. Townspeople acquired as well many privileges previously reserved for the szlachta (like access to military officership or public office) and the barriers to entering the szlachta were weakened. Gone, too, was any legitimate right for szlachta to form armed confederacies; instead provisions were to be instituted for expanding the state's armed forces.

Nothing much with immediate consequences, however, was done for Poland's peasants, although the language of not very well specified "freedom" and the invocation of a future in which they would freely enter into contracts were provocative to repressive, powerful neighbors and potentially a source of future trouble with peasants who might hope to claim those freedoms. Emancipatory changes, as often, suggested further ones

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10 If one stretches the chronology back a tad before British units were fired upon in rural Massachusetts, one could instead call Sweden's document of 1772 "the first written and consciously modern constitution in an era that was to produce many such" (Palmer 1959:102).

11 For some comparative observations on the era's constitutions see Ludwikowski 1997; Kasperek-Obst 1980.



and in the ongoing climate of crisis in part provoked by the constitution, talk of rural emancipatory measures emerged in 1794 (Kowecki 1997: 510-511). As Marx (1971:153) had it, the constitution “did not free the peasants, but it provided them with legal protection and paved the way for their emancipation through voluntary contracts between peasants and land owners”. Marx is referring to a passage declaring the peasantry placed "under the protection of the national law and government", thus introducing an unspecified promise of state supervision into what was previously a mostly unregulated and rather one sided relation between peasants and noble land owners. For an extended instance of how explosive it could be to combine the language of freedom and the detailed insistence that peasants actually owed pretty much the same people pretty much the same things as always, one could hardly do better than cite contemporary French developments (Author 1996).

Procedurally, the constitutional changes were even more radical. Depending on the issue, legislation required either a simple majority or sometimes a supermajority. The Senate had a suspensive veto that could be overturned in the following session. And the liberum veto was gone.<sup>12</sup> Ministers were accountable to the Sejm. And in another major

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<sup>12</sup> Since it was unimaginable that the ending of the liberum veto could pass through a Sejm in which the liberum veto still governed, the entire Great Sejm was a confederated one (immune from the liberum veto). Even so, to ensure the passing of reforms, the May 3 document was passed through coercion: announced on May 2 to a group of deputies known as reformers and debated the next day in front of an enthusiastic audience in a building surrounded by army units. In response to objectors, the Marshal of the Sejm responded that this was a moment of “revolution”, not “formalities” (quoted in Michalski 1997: 266).

shift in the modalities of rule, the monarchy was made hereditary, eliminating the nominally democratic but deeply corrupted procedure under which foreign states wielded enormous influence in Polish affairs (Michalski 1997). In the eighteenth century this role was mostly played by Russia. That this was, all in all, a transformative program was suggested by both the keen interest and often enthusiasm of people in other countries but also the immediate hostility of Russia and Prussia. The text was almost instantly published in English translation and read in French to the National Assembly, deeply engaged in drafting its own constitution (New Constitution 1791; *Forme Constitutionnelle* 1791).<sup>13</sup> For the year of its existence, the new constitution was a framework for continuing legislated reform. Even among the *szlachta*, bearing out Marx's claim, support was widespread. In March 1792, the local *sejmiks* were asked for their approval and 45 responses of 47 were in favor<sup>14</sup>. But far more consequential than the praise the document earned in the west was the hostility of its dangerous neighbors. The prospect of a more effective Polish state with a stronger army was viewed with dismay in Russia, the prospects of economic advance was viewed with equal dismay in Prussia, and the prospects that Russia and Prussia would divide Poland among themselves was viewed with dismay in Austria. To the extent that Poland seemed part of the same revolutionary and democratic camp as France, things seemed even worse.

The Prussian government, which had entered an alliance with Poland as recently as 1790, in 1793 declared that alliance invalidated by the constitution (Łojek 1986:325-

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13 Reflecting on the genesis and undoing of the constitution, major participants in the reform movement put out a German translation in 1793 (Kołłontai et al, 1793). For more on the reception outside Poland see Fiszman (1997); Palmer 1959 (1:429-435).

14 Wrede and Wrede 1999:143.

326) and sent its army into Poland to combat the “the spirit of French democratism” and “to subdue the malevolent who are stirring up troubles and insurrection, to restore and maintain order and public confidence, and to insure that the well-intentioned inhabitants are effectively protected” (Lutostański 1918: 139-140). The threat of democracy exacerbated its neighbors’ extremely negative view of Poland’s constitutional reforms. Polish-French contacts proved to its neighbors that they were dealing with a revolutionary conspiracy clearly aimed at their absolute monarchies and led them to see Polish reformers as Jacobins, something not helped when some Poles used that label for themselves (Leśnodorski 1965; Kocój n.d.)

Even without the French, let alone Jacobin, angle, the character of the reforms of the Four-Year Sejm, reaffirmed by the new constitution, was a big problem. Russia had become increasingly used to seeing Poland as something akin to what in the twentieth century has been meant by a “puppet government”, while Prussia wanted to consolidate its control of the Polish territories in Pomerania, and thus gain control of the lucrative Baltic grain trade, passing along the Vistula to Gdańsk<sup>15</sup>. The Austrians were less preoccupied with these issues directly but were very preoccupied by the prospect that these rival imperial states might grab the rest of Poland for themselves. None of the powers who had helped themselves to huge chunks of Poland in the partition of 1772 was happy to contemplate the prospect that a resurgent Poland, whose until now puny army

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15 In fact, a major Prussian reason for a short-lived alliance with Poland during the Great Sejm was that it expected to be rewarded by the cession of Gdańsk and other Pomeranian territories. When the Sejm made cession of any territory illegal, Prussian support for the Polish reforms quickly diminished.

the constitution threatened to increase six-fold (from about 16,000 to 100,000), might wish one day to take them back.

In addition, even the limited protection granted to Polish peasants under the constitution made Poland look less oppressive than Russia or Prussia. Russian serfs had been already crossing the western frontier for decades since the weak Polish central authority had an utterly dismal record in catching runaway peasants within its borders. With the Polish reforms, both Prussia and Russia seriously contemplated a threat of an even larger migration; and if a strengthened state might do a better job catching runaways that same strengthened state would be more able to ignore its neighbors' demands<sup>16</sup>. Frederick William II of Prussia saw the Polish reforms as much more dangerous to

Prussia than the French ones, a Prussian statesman referred to the constitution as a “coup

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16 Indeed, one could read the new constitution as a generous invitation for peasants to immigrate to Poland in the section headed “Peasants and Villagers” where it says that “willing to encourage most effectually the population of our country, *we publish and proclaim a perfect and entire liberty to all people*, either who may be newly coming to settle, or those who, having emigrated, would return to their native country; and we declare most solemnly, that an person coming into Poland, from whatever part of the world, or returning from abroad, as soon as he sets his foot on the territory of the Republic, becomes free and at liberty to exercise his industry, wherever and in whatever manner he pleases, to settle either in towns or villages, to farm and rent lands and houses, on tenures and contracts, for as a long a term as may be agreed on...” (New Constitution 1791:11; the emphasis in this contemporary English translation perhaps reflects the translator’s enthusiasm since there is no equivalent in the Polish text).

de grâce” for the Prussian monarchy, (Bauer 1991: 116-117) and Catherine the Great of Russia saw it as “plainly Jacobinical” (Doyle 2008:220) and worried that “half of the peasants of Belarus would move to Poland” (See also [Czajewski 2004](#); Kocój 2002: 12; Kucharski 2000:114; [Leśnodorski 1965](#); Łojek 1988: 101-102). Polish szlachta opposed to the new constitution, some on the Russian payroll, formed a Confederation in 1792, something that the constitution had just outlawed.

Things moved fast. A second partition followed Russian invasion in 1792. But the growing Polish ferment was not settled by the arrival of foreign occupiers. Huge urban insurrectionary mobilizations, especially in Warsaw and Wilno, including formation of town militias, and the raising of the first Commonwealth army to have a significant peasant presence (the *kosynierzy* regiments) in 1794, challenged the Russians and Prussians. These were ultimately suppressed by a third partition and the elimination of Poland from the map of Europe until the end of the First World War<sup>17</sup>. So insurrectionary mobilizations do come into our story, a bit, but as effects not causes of the constitutional reform (Davis 1982 1:535-546; Lord 1915).

## EXPLAINING REFORMS

While the May 3 constitution encapsulates the reform movement and was the best-remembered (by Poles) single act of the Great Sejm that had been in session since

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<sup>17</sup> Some might object that this glosses over a number of short-lived semiautonomous creations: the small Napoleonic satellite Duchy of Warsaw, the smaller Congress Kingdom of Poland created by the Congress of Vienna whose limited autonomy from Russia ended after a decade and a half (following the November Uprising) though its name lived on, and the microscopic Republic of Cracow, which lasted until Austria seized it in 1846. On these statelets, see Davies 1982: II, 6-7.

1788, explaining its enactment requires an understanding of the entire project of elite-driven reform.

So how did such a significant reform movement, launched and carried out from above, primarily by Polish aristocrats, as Marx wonderingly notes, come about. We will suggest that there are six arenas that provide essential components of an explanation.

1. *Threat.* Poland's elites took seriously the threat of destruction of a Polish state surrounded by powerful neighbors capable of acting in concert against a Poland lacking in useful allies, a threat both symbolized by and exacerbated by the First Partition of 1772. In 1773, Russia, Prussia, and Austria joined in formalizing their recent separate seizures of what amounted to just under 30% of Polish territory. These actions were variously justified. They were characterized as suppression of Polish rebellions, defense of Polish tradition against centralizing statebuilders, protection of the Orthodox by Russia or the Lutherans by Prussia, stabilizing a chaotic region, giving troublesome Poles a proper structure they were unable to give themselves, or enlarging the authority of modern states over savages just as other Europeans were doing in North America. Austria was the least concerned with how Poles governed themselves, the least threatened by anything it expected a stronger Poland might mean or do, and, with its own rulers Catholic, totally lacking a religious minority on Polish soil it could claim to be defending, but it was very concerned about being left out by its dangerous, often antagonistic, neighbors in the scramble for Poland (Davies 1982 1:520-522).<sup>18</sup>

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18 There are many striking resemblances in the circumstances surrounding Sweden's constitution of 1772. A powerful nobility defended its "age of liberty", as it was called (Roberts 1986:59), by keeping the king weak. Members of the parliament were in the pay of foreign powers. Prussia and Russia agreed to support Swedish liberties in a

Poles felt threatened. The previously little-known Stanisław Staszic struck a responsive chord when he anonymously published a work in 1787 contending that Poland was doomed without serious reform and concluding it with a chapter on “Methods of Saving Poland from Partition” (Staszic 1787:164).

2. *Opportunity.* The opportunity presented by the temporary immobilization of a major source of danger, which did little to mitigate the sense of threat since it was widely perceived as temporary, created a sense that now is the moment to act. This specific opportunity was the preoccupation of Poland's neighbors with wars elsewhere. Russia and Austria were engaged in hostilities with the Ottoman Empire from 1787; the Russians also found themselves fighting Sweden beginning in 1788. In addition, Russian-Prussian cooperation against Poland had been fraying. The two countries had fought each other in the Seven Years War but with that conflict concluded, they agreed by treaty in 1764 to defend each other's territory, easing the path for cooperation on the shape of the Polish state, laying the groundwork for the First Partition of 1772. Among other Polish matters, the Russian-Prussian treaty confirmed their commitment to Polish liberties, in other words, a weak state, the liberum veto, and a political process in which they had great influence (Zielińska 1997:100). A decade later, however, the Russian enemy of the

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treaty in 1764 that joined that country together with Poland as appropriate for partition. But Sweden's non-nobles had collective, institutionalized representation in Sweden's four-estate Riksdag, and geography made it a more difficult target for Prussia and Russia (Roberts 1986:57). So conflict between nobles and non-nobles was a less important and interstate conflict a more important part of the story in Poland; non-nobles had significantly more political clout in Sweden; and the Swedish constitution did not bring on external invasion (Palmer 1959:100).

moment was the Ottoman Empire, leading to alliance with Austria and loss of interest in its Prussian partnership, which formally ended in 1788. Thus, when Prussia proposed an alliance to Poland that same year, the reformers found themselves in a unique situation that seemed to provide at least the possibility of some security against unwelcome foreign intervention (Zielińska 1997:106).<sup>19</sup> The Sejm was convened in 1788, and kept sitting, making the Four-Year Sejm the culmination of a broad diversity of reform proposals whose common theme was strengthening the state.

The preamble to the constitution itself tells us of the improved international circumstances when it explains that its authors are “convinced by a long train of experience of many defects in our government, and willing to profit by the present circumstances of Europe, and by the favorable moment which has restored us to ourselves; free from the disgraceful shackles of foreign influence” (New Constitution 1791:4). Even if one sees this as an extremely optimistic reading of the circumstances<sup>20</sup>, one could at least argue that they were the least unfavorable in a very long time. Scholars of social movements and contentious politics have called attention to the interplay of

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<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that the reformers were unwilling to deal with Russia. In fact, an alliance with Russia was an early preferred choice, and was only sunk because the Russian court had very little interest in changing the status quo and allowing Poland to reform itself. Thus the pro-Prussian shift among the Polish reformists happened only after it became apparent that the continuation of the pro-Russian stance was mostly meaningless (Łojek 1986:31-32).

<sup>20</sup> Here is Norman Davies’ (1982:533) summary of the international situation: “To anyone with a sense of reality, it was clear that the work of the Four Years Sejm initiated in October 1788, ran a serious risk of Russian intervention”.



threat and opportunity as contexts (Goldstone and Tilly 2001). Tilly and Tarrow (2007:58) argue that when threat and opportunity change rapidly, defenders of how things are get more rigid, challengers get more inventive, and defenders are prone to respond to inventiveness with repression. The Polish situation seems a case in point with the unprecedented Four-Year Sejm, operating under unusual rules, pushing a flurry of reforms, generating an early instance of a “demonstration” (to be described below), and becoming the first Europeans to follow the Americans in constitution-writing. Also exemplifying the Tarrow-Tilly analysis, the conservative neighbors responded with the destruction of the offending Polish state.

3. *Institutional Resources.* The institutions by which Poland was governed made reform difficult, but also made it possible to circumvent the usual difficulties. The determined reformers were able to make perhaps surprising use of Poland’s institutions when the favorable moment beckoned. According to Davies (v. 1, p. 533), The Sejm convened in 1788 would have been as usual paralyzed by the liberum veto, but it prolonged itself as a “confederation”, which meant that it wasn’t bound by the liberum veto making the passage of significant reform measures possible. If we take a step backwards and ask why the Russians did not try to stop a Sejm organized in this fashion before it got started, the answer seems to be that at that moment they were considering whether they would need Polish support in their current war with the Ottomans and doubted that a Sejm operating under the threat of even a single dissenter could generate a declaration of war (Michalski 2011:623). So the Ottoman war got Russia to tolerate Polish sidestepping of the inefficient procedures they usually strongly demanded.

4. *The limited role of movements from below.* To say that only nobility was active on the political scene of the late 18th-century Poland would be a simplification. True, the Polish peasantry was not very mobilized, but it was never simply a passive mass. Polish peasants were probably as adept as any in deploying the weapons of the weak, to use James Scott's (1985) evocative phrase: doing tasks poorly, taking advantage of szlachta claims of benevolence, falsifying measures, feigning stupidity, running away. Major insurrections were rare, and more characteristic of the 17<sup>th</sup> century than the 18<sup>th</sup><sup>21</sup>, more characteristic of the eastern reaches of the Polish state of that era (in what's now Ukraine or southeastern Poland), more characteristic of independent and militant Cossacks than serfs, more likely on a small, local scale than on a large one (Kochanowicz 1989). However, from the occasional local rebellion (a small one occurred in 1788 near Pohrebysk) to an encounter of a traveller with a group of surprisingly well informed serfs, in a country with over six millions peasants, and the memory of the bloody Cossack uprisings (from the Khmelnytsky Uprising of the previous century to the more recent killings in 1768-1769), the potential for trouble was never completely absent (Jeziarski:77; Kocój 2001:53; Łojek 1988:101; Kochanowicz 1989; Bogatyński 1955: 73).

Kalinka (1991:304-343) does note that accounts of peasant unrest along the Commonwealth's eastern border were causing much concern at the Sejm sessions in late 1788 and early 1789. In the end these proved to be simply rumors. They did cause the deputies to discuss the peasant situation, but even at the height of these rumors this topic was of minor interest to the deputies and the politically engaged public. With the notable exceptions of Kołłątaj and the less well known Jan Pawliowski and Tadeusz Morski, no

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21 The same was true of France up until 1789.

other influential publisher, politician, or faction were significantly thinking about any need to change the situation of the peasantry (Grześkowiak-Krwawicz 2000:60-61, 180-181, 184-185).<sup>22</sup> Cases of genuine peasant unrest can indeed be seen as an exceptional and limited in scope. In the period discussed by Kalinka, in fact, the most serious event was the murder of a single noble family).

Yet another indication is the absence of any sign of a country people closely following elite debates. A French diplomat, the comte de Ségur, passing through Warsaw around the time of the Great Sejm, noted that the peasants did not share in the enthusiasm aroused by the reforms<sup>23</sup> (Kocój 2001:14). Interestingly, the unrest among the peasantry

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22 Major areas of interest to the deputies and to politically active public opinion of that time included the size of the military, the closely connected question of taxation, and most of all the royal succession. Should election (a key mechanism of szlachta domination) be retained or should hereditary succession be (re)introduced?. In addition there was much discussion of municipal reform, which meant both what the rights of towns were to be and whether commoners were to obtain privileges previously monopolized by the nobility). The peasant question was a relatively minor topic of interest to few and never become a principal topic of debate. (Grześkowiak-Krwawicz 2000)

23 Ségur writes of “the excitement that at that time was stirring up the thoughts of all the inhabitants of that unhappy country.” He goes on “Only the peasants retained that gloomy appearance, that face without expression, that changeless constant apathy, that sad and constant character of servitude, that silent stagnation that the partisans of absolute power or of oligarchy like to call *order* and *calm*”[emphasis in original]” .By contrast, “In the middle of the towns and on the public squares people were

increased *after* the constitution was passed, as incorrect rumors spread among them that the constitution abolished serfdom. Such unrest, however, does not even begin to approach what was happening in contemporaneous France and still amounted to relatively rare events whose peasant leaders were beaten or humiliated rather than executed (Korzon 1897). Students of peasant resistance will wonder whether such provocative rumors were products of genuine ignorance, or whether the feigning of ignorance was, as often, among the important resources of a profoundly subordinate social stratum.<sup>24</sup> In summary, those who wrote, voted on, or debated the new constitution were certainly not doing so in mortal terror of the mobilized rural majority, a radical contrast with the context of the almost precisely simultaneous writing of the first revolutionary constitution in France.

In contrast to the relative quiet on the peasant front, Polish townspeople, numbering half a million, were becoming increasingly active and organized, at least in the capital; well off townspeople were probably better educated and may have been more nationally conscious than many szlachta. With numerous pamphlets, brochures and agitators at the bottom, at the top their political leaders such as Jan Dekert, mayor of Warsaw, or Stanisław Staszic, priest and advisor of the magnate Zamoyski family, were assembling and were speaking passionately. Everything indicated the greatest excitement ...” (Ségur 1825: III, 537-538).

24 At the same time, French peasants deployed claims about what the revolutionary legislature had enacted and had not enacted that were far more generous to themselves than the plain meaning of the actual legislation, but did so in ways that led revolutionary elites to see them as ignorant and misled, rather than seditious (Author 1996).

closely involved with the noble reformers. As (Grześkowiak-Krwawicz 2000:46, 164) noted, with their own authors and publications this was the first time that the townsfolk joined the political debate in the Commonwealth as equals. The culminating event of their activity took the shape of the demonstration in 1789, known as the Black Procession, in which hundreds of burgher representatives of the royal towns, clad in black, marched through the city ending with a royal audience that had been planned with the king in advance. Although black was traditional ceremonial garb for urban officials, the gesture was also understood as mourning for town privileges lost in the preceding centuries. This event has been credited with cementing the image of the cities as a real force – perhaps nine-tenths of the royal cities were represented – leading the Great Sejm to seriously consider and eventually pass legislation strengthening the position of urbanites in Poland (Łojek 1986: 154, 189, 307, 421; 1988: 78-79, 87, 131; Zienkowska 1982).

Although there is no indication that similar events followed (or preceded) the Black Procession, from the point of view of the history of contentious politics it may be noted that it is quite early in relation to the excellent reconstruction by Tilly (1995; 2008) of the history of the development of the demonstration in England. Tilly has argued that the demonstration as a form of collective action was created in England out of earlier performances between the 1750s and the 1830s, then diffused widely (Tilly 2008: 71-79). But the Polish evidence suggests the possibility that the demonstration, as a form of collective contentious action was multiply invented, rather than diffused from a single point of origination. We don't know nearly enough about this.

Had the Polish elite been under pressure from below, and especially from its overwhelmingly peasant majority and from organized urban plebeian insurrectionaries, it is impossible to doubt that the constitution would have been so little concerned with their issues. Perhaps the elites would have come around earlier to the rural emancipatory measures associated with Kościuszko's leadership in the losing struggle against Russia and Prussia that followed, perhaps they would have sought Prussian and Russian support against Polish peasants earlier than some of them did, perhaps they would have divided against each other. The very striking thing about the Polish situation, in deepest contrast to the French, was how little rural social conditions were major elite concerns. By contrast, the movements of well-off townspeople epitomized in the Black Procession got those urban concerns much attention in the new constitutional texts

5. *Elite collective identity.* The political culture of the Polish elite, including cultural conflict over the definition of and symbolic representations of their collective identity, made the new constitution, indeed the whole body of reforms of the Four-Year Sejm highly attractive. We have observed above a bifurcated choice of dress among the szlachta, with some opting for styles that would have been perfectly in place in western cities and among western aristocrats and others opting for something they held to demonstrate their Sarmatian heritage. Since no one had a clue as to how the presumed ancestral Sarmatians actually dressed, Polish Sarmatism distinguished itself from European neighbors by adapting Ottoman and Tatar styles, with the result, for example, that when a Polish army showed up to break the siege of Vienna in 1683, their soldiers

tied on bundles of straw so their Austrian allies could distinguish them from their Turkish foes<sup>25</sup>.

Style meant more than clothes since the shape of one's sword<sup>26</sup> and the trim of one's haircut provided other opportunities to demonstrate one's resemblance to the aristocracies of western Europe or one's Polish uniqueness. As we suggested, all the evidence points to no simple congruence of political orientation and style. In the revolutionary era, some who supported the constitution displayed, with their French styles, their association with that country's revolution while others displayed, with their Polish styles, renewed pride in Polish advance. But what is striking nonetheless is that even in the mundane act of putting on one's clothes, or, for the wealthy, telling one's servants to do so, implied a choice among identities. Polish paintings don't display many figures who opt for a stylistic mix.

As we have seen, quite a number of politically active, prominent Poles were significantly connected to the world beyond Poland, through education abroad, through travel, through correspondence, through participation in the transnational "republic of

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25 Some Polish cavalry -- their strikingly outfitted hussars -- wore a feathered contraption resembling angels' wings that made a piercing sound at a gallop. These particular units looked like no other soldiers on the planet. Some very impractical Polish armor was modeled on Roman imperial depictions of Sarmatian foes. Excellent images can be found in Ostrowski et al. (1999).

26 One of the traditional symbols of the Polish noble was a specific type of a saber ("szabla"). It is said that the poorest nobles could not be distinguished from peasants but for this weapon, which, unable to afford a leather scabbard, they wore tied on a rope (Nadolski 1974:124, Burszta 1985:21).

letters”. They could hardly fail to be aware of the prestige gradient that operated among the intellectual and administrative elites of late eighteenth century Europe, in which lands further to the east than the country in which one resided tended to be regarded by the enlightened with disdain and their political institutions seen as folly.

Larry Wolff’s *Inventing Eastern Europe* is chockfull of disparaging observations on Polish backwardness by prominent western writers. As Wolff (1994: 279) narrates it, small wonder that even the Polish King, the principal mover of the constitution, expressing his appreciation of some French praise in 1790, recalled “the words of Alexander the Great: ‘Oh Athenians, what would one not do to be praised by you?’” and went on to add “that he meant not to compare himself immodestly to Alexander, only to identify Paris with ancient Athens”. Poland could remind western Europeans of their outgrown past. For Adam Smith in 1776 Poland is “as it was before the discovery of America”; for Voltaire it was five hundred years behind the French in textiles and porcelain; for many Poland recalled feudalism or even the barbarians who had assailed the later Roman Empire (on which complaints Larry Wolff [1994] is an invaluable guide; specific passages referred to are on pp. 261, 272.)

The reforms that followed the First Partition, and particularly those of the Four-Year Sejm, and most particularly of all, the May 3 constitution, were efforts to associate Poland instead with the European future. This cannot be summarized as simply acting in imitation of admired western models. The Four-Year Sejm began its reform work the year before the Estates-General convened in Versailles, and Poland’s constitution preceded France’s. There is nothing aberrant about this since democratizing advances, in this instance the adoption of explicit constitutions as foundational national documents, have



generally not been pioneered by the greatest powers of the day (as argued in Author 1999).

The szlachta's strong overarching collective identity did not preclude Polish aristocrats identifying themselves with distinctive causes. Wherever some sort of parliamentary body has existed we find alliances formed around mutual support in electoral competition and in attaining the passage of legislation. With dramatic reforms under unprecedented discussion<sup>27</sup>, supporters and opponents of reform, including a constitution, formed new, identifiable groupings. Among the supporters was the Patriotic Party, whose label, a tribute to the Dutch Patriots whose rebellion in the 1780s was one of the places where "democrat" was coined, showed a deep connection to the transnational revolutionary currents of the age (Kądziela 1991:32). After the constitution was promulgated the Patriotic Party became known as a political club dedicated to advancing the cause of the Constitution. Exemplifying further the formation of new identities in contentious episodes, followers of reform leader Hugo Kołłątaj, became known collectively as Kołłątaj's Forge. Despite this specifically Polish label, this latter loose grouping would in turn come to be associated with the celebrated and reviled transnationally identifiable identity of Jacobins (Kadziela 1991:32; Fedorowicz et al 1982: 252-253).

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<sup>27</sup> Grześkowiak-Krwawicz (2000:41-43) writes about a hundred-fold or so increase in the publishing of political texts, estimating the number of such publications in the era of the Great Sejm as 600 to 700 (that number is conservative, ignoring reprints of speeches or proposals for new legislation), the most popular ones with a circulation of thousands.

Opponents of all of these reform currents, and especially of the constitution, had their own identity labels, too. Some labels suggested the social identity of adherents, some their allies, and some their ideological leanings. Such was the Hetman Party, several of whose prominent members bore that military title (approximately “general”). The label denoted a social, not ideological, trait of its adherents, since it was actually the reformers who advocated a major increase in the military budget to build a larger army. Other labels included the Magnate Party and the Muscovites, both simplifying labels since there were magnates among the reformers, as well as reformers who, like the king himself, had at points sought Moscow’s support. Finally there was the label of the Conservative or Old-Nobility Party, staking a claim to an ideological definition of identity. Although there was a profusion of such labels, there was enormous overlap among those thus characterized. Shortly before the Sejm ended its deliberations, magnates distressed by the specter of change lent their signatures to a Russian general’s document in the town of Targowica, making the Targowica Confederacy the identity under which szlachta opponents of the constitution rallied, with decisive support from the Russian army. Note the appeal to pre-constitution institutions in claiming to embody precisely the szlachta collective action (“confederacy”) illegalized by the offending constitution.<sup>28</sup> A lot of what Tilly and Tarrow (2007:34) call “identity shift” was going on.

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28 More than two centuries later, this label retained resonance. In 2010, the catastrophic crash in Russia of a Polish jet carrying the prime minister of Poland and other high officials triggered an acrimonious debate over who was responsible. Part of the Polish political spectrum over the next two years accused others of a sinister conspiracy to suppress the truth about Russian involvement and “Targowica” was invoked as a label for Poles serving foreign masters. But from those thus denounced, “Targowica” was

6. *Hope*. The multiple and mutually reinforcing sources of hope of the revolutionary era defy summary, but they include the striking models of redesigned political institutions especially in America and France and a likely reconfiguration of European state relations centered on French developments. The people who played the largest role in actually drafting the constitution had intellectual horizons well beyond Poland. Kalinka (1991:299-311) begins his overview of the important Polish literature of the era with a case for some significant influence in Poland of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. King Poniatowski corresponded with American radical Joel Barlow and had an American secretary, Louis Littlepage (Pastusiak 1977:194-198,200-203). Before being elected to the throne, he traveled to Berlin, the Netherlands, Dresden, Saint-Petersburg, Paris, Vienna, and England. As king he organized the Polish diplomatic service and was in frequent correspondence with Poland's emissaries abroad. (Michalski 2011:617). Ignacy Potocki, deeply involved in educational reform, was educated in Italy, had traveled to France and Russia, corresponded in several languages, exchanged correspondence with Prussian officials (Jędruch 1998:179), and was a freemason. Scipione Piattoli was not even Polish but an Italian priest who worked in various capacities for several magnate families, including the Potockis, with extensive European network connections, and was a member of France's abolitionist *Société des Amis des Noirs*. A key organizer of the Black Procession, Hugo Kołłątaj, a noble and priest, had traveled to Vienna, Naples and Rome, and promoted educational reform, including replacing Latin with Polish as the language of instruction.

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invoked as a label for Poles who undermine the legitimate government. For two examples among, very, very many see Kowalski (2012); *Gazetakrakowska.pl* (2012) [May 3]..

Europeans noted with thrilled or horrified fascination as the new French order announced that it would be based on “the rights of Man” in the summer of 1789, and would follow that up, like the Americans, with a constitution that would redefine the structures of the state and the rights and responsibilities of its citizens. For Polish elites hoping to use the temporary distraction of Russia as an opportunity to reorganize the state on a sounder foundation, and long used to hoping for French support as a counterweight to dangerous neighbors, the promotion of their own reforms with their own redefinition of state and citizenship, beyond their value in themselves, may have suggested the possibilities of a strengthened French connection, but now with the France of the Revolution<sup>29</sup>. But apart from such an instrumental view of how the reform movement, and the constitution in particular, might serve to tighten French-Polish connections, participation in this Polish movement associated one with the enlightened future which many Europeans hoped to usher in. A Poland moving into this future would no longer have to remind contemptuous westerners of their own feudal pasts. It was a moment in which a part of the Polish elite might hope to dissociate themselves from what decades later Marx was calling “Russian-Prussian-Austrian barbarism”.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Unlike their contemporaries in revolutionary France, the Polish government was not compelled by many-sided rebellion to undertake reform. Unlike the French National Assembly, into which that country’s Estates-General evolved, the Four-Year Sejm did not carry out its work against the background of thousands of insurrectionary events in town and country. Unlike Paris, the neighborhoods of Warsaw had not been seized by plebeian

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<sup>29</sup> For much useful material on the variety of Polish thoughts on the French Revolution and French thoughts on the Polish reforms, see Kocój 2001.

militants who used their organizational strength to bring great pressure on the actions of the national government. Although in the notable Black Procession, we were able to identify a collective action by townspeople, this was a tiny thing compared to the apparently infinite variety assumed by collective action from below in France (and the participants in the Black Procession were urban notables, not plebeians). Nonetheless, Poland's governing elite, made up exclusively of aristocrats (Marx had that right), and even including Poland's king, undertook a significant reform program, convened a special Sejm for that purpose even before the French king conceded an Estates-General and managed to generate a new, written constitution even before the harried Parisian legislators managed to agree on theirs. Notwithstanding the comparatively inconsequential character of movement-organized collective action from below, a portion of Poland's aristocratic leadership set out to radically reshape that country's governing institutions.

Beyond being an interesting story, we have tried to show that despite how little movements contributed to the story (at least if one stops on May 3, 1791, when the constitution was proclaimed), the conventional tools developed by social movement analysis illuminate the Polish processes. We have seen actors responding innovatively to a shifting mix of threat and opportunity, although those actors are not movement organizations, nor are they threatened by movement organizations. The critical threat/opportunity mix is in the international environment surrounding the territory of the Polish state. We have also seen the role played by identity issues, of Polish distinctiveness in relation to participation in a transnational culture talking about reform and then revolution. At just a very slightly more abstract level, social movement analyses

help us understand human conflict and change far more broadly than just those conflictual processes in which social movements as generally understood have been pivotal components. Perhaps that is why the “contentious politics” program so readily could build on the work of social movement scholars and indeed is largely engaged in by the same scholars. A lot of helpful theory is already out there.

So from the perspective of social movement theory, it is probably not a terribly good idea to wall off the study of movements from the study of conflict more generally. And, empirically, we noted early in this paper that movements are often intertwined with other modes of human interaction. In the case at hand, if we look a bit downstream from May 3, 1791, we begin to find the movements after all. Plebeian activists seized control of major towns (especially Warsaw and Wilno) to drive out occupying Russian forces; Polish aristocrats with the same goal mobilized peasants with promises of emancipation. And further downstream still, one finds the rich variety of nineteenth century movements in partitioned Poland and among its émigrés, national movements, class-based movements, émigré movements, local parts of transnationally organized movements, culturally-oriented movements, for all of which an essential context is the combination of Russian, Prussian, and Austrian rule that came from those states’ suppression of constitutionalized Poland.

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