

GUEST EDITORIAL

Solidarity and Occupy Wall Street: A Tale of Two Movements

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Paraphrasing Galatians 6:2, the Catholic philosopher Józef Tischner explained that solidarity “means to carry the burden of another person.” He preached these words during the Solidarity movement’s First National Convention in Kraków, Poland on October 19, 1980.² Tischner subsequently described the events unfolding before his eyes in his book *Etyka solidarności*. A 10 million strong movement of people from diverse walks of life fought for the rights of citizens and workers, leading eventually to Communism’s demise. *Solidarność* accomplished this without shedding blood.

Although one can find other influences on the movement, *Solidarność* explicitly acknowledged an intellectual and moral debt to Catholic social teaching (CST). Over the last one hundred and fifty years, CST developed perhaps the most robust theoretical understanding of solidarity and called for a world imbued by it.³ Even though it withered after 1989, *Solidarność* has been among the most successful social movements to embody the Catholic ethic of solidarity to date. To the participants it was an unparalleled time of moral and spiritual unity. The victory of these downtrodden workers

1. Gerald J. Beyer teaches at Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This essay draws on his book *Recovering Solidarity: Lessons from Poland’s Unfinished Revolution* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

2. Józef Tischner, *The Spirit of Solidarity*, trans. Marek B. Zaleski and Benjamin Fiore, SJ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 2–3. The Polish is *Etyka solidarności* (Kraków: Znak, 1981).

3. Steinar Stjernø, *Solidarity in Europe: The History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 82.

ranks among the most inspiring “David conquers Goliath” moments in history.

Thirty years later, we are perhaps at another historic crossroads. Accounts of Occupy Wall Street disclose that something new—or at least absent for decades in the US—is afoot. Having lived in Poland, I have been perplexed by the docility of the American public despite blatant and persistent injustices, though some analysts have cogently explained the mechanisms that have suppressed dissent.⁴ Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has changed this landscape. The movement is still in its fledgling stages, or has begun to dissipate, depending on one’s interpretation of current affairs. Nonetheless, it is interesting, and perhaps instructive, to contemplate OWS in the light of *Solidarność* and CST on solidarity. I am not on the movement’s front lines, though I am a sympathetic observer and public advocate of economic justice. Below are my preliminary musings.

The Contexts

Some readers will carp that this comparison is foolish demagoguery. Life in Poland in the early 1980s was abysmal, while Americans live today in a free society where all people can have a good and prosperous life. There’s a grain of truth to this claim, or at least the first half of it.

The average hourly compensation has remained stagnant since 1977, even though worker productivity has steadily risen since 1947. The median wage for males—about \$45,000 in 2007—is *less* than thirty years ago, adjusting for inflation. The minimum wage plummeted in real value. American families worked 500 more hours than they did in 1979, but they barely earn more than then. The average CEO now makes almost 300 times the average worker.⁵ Even President Obama has admitted that the American dream is unattainable for most, noting in a recent speech the massive increase of the top 1% of incomes and the 6% decline of most Americans’ income over the last decade.⁶

More than 46 million Americans live in poverty. Among working age adults, three quarters of the poor work but do not earn enough to stay above the federal poverty line.⁷ More than 50 million people do not have

4. See Michael B. Katz, “Why Aren’t U.S. Cities Burning?” *Dissent* (Summer 2007). Available at <http://dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=859>

5. See Robert Reich, *Aftershock: The Next Economy and America’s Future* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

6. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/06/remarks-president-economy-osawatomie-kansas>

7. Charles M. Blow, “For Jobs, It’s War,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2011. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/17/opinion/blow-for-jobs-its-war.html?_r=2. This represents a dramatic increase from 2007, when 37.3 million people lived in poverty.

health insurance. Hunger abounds, with 6.7 million households having to skimp on meals in order to make ends meet.⁸ Americans may not live under martial law but multitudes encounter violations of their economic, social and cultural rights on a daily basis.⁹ In short, the gravity of the situation today warrants both a comparison to *Solidarność* and a movement akin to its spirit and proportions.

Unity among Differences

Solidarity members overcame political, economic, philosophical and religious differences in order to promote their common goals. Disagreements and sometimes hostility existed within the ranks. Yet, people overwhelmingly described “an unusually intense experience of community” and “the widespread awareness of the deep bond with others.”¹⁰ This community included Communists, democratic socialists, and free-marketeters. Professors and poets conversed with manual laborers. Priests and lay people bridged the clerical divide. Christians, Jews, atheists, and agnostics embarked together on what Adam Michnik called “a collective return to issues of transcendence.”¹¹

Solidarity in CST calls for this kind of unity among differences. It entails the recognition of the *de facto* interdependence of all human beings.¹² Because we share a common fate, we have obligations to one another. Marx, Weber, and other theorists believed solidarity could only exist among those with the same interests, but CST holds solidarity can and should transcend boundaries of class, creed, gender, race, ethnicity and nationality.¹³ Oppressors and the oppressed should work together to create communities of solidarity. “Solidarity...does not need an enemy. It turns towards all and not against anyone.”¹⁴

Some detractors have tried to portray the Occupy movement as a band of lazy and indigent leeches of society’s resources. This cynical description

8. See http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/us_hunger_facts.htm

9. I refute the objections to economic rights in “Economic Rights: Past, Present and Future,” in *Routledge Handbook of Human Rights*, ed. Thomas Cushman (New York: Routledge, 2011), 291–310.

10. Zbigniew Stawrowski, “Doświadczenie ‘Solidarności’ jako wspólnoty etycznej,” in *Lekcja sierpnia: Dziedzictwo ‘Solidarności’ po dwudziestu latach*, ed. Dariusz Gawin (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2002), 104.

11. Adam Michnik, “The Moral and Spiritual Origins of Solidarity,” in *Without Force or Lies: Voices from the Revolution of Central Europe in 1989–90: Essays, Speeches, and Eyewitness Accounts*, ed. William M. Brinton and Alan Rinzler (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1990), 246.

12. See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, nos. 38–9.

13. Sjørnø, *Solidarity in Europe*, 74, 85–88.

14. Tischner, *The Spirit of Solidarity*, 3.

defies reality. Unemployed, poor, and homeless people belong to OWS, but they are joined by techies, entrepreneurs, labor activists, lawyers, academics, and clergy. Maintaining unity among the movement's diverse population has not always been easy. For example, in my hometown of Philadelphia fights sometimes occurred within the recently dismantled encampment. But these have been isolated incidents. The majority of protesters have apparently treated each other with respect.

Rather than the dregs of society, these activists are the hope for democracy in a country that systematically marginalizes many of the 99% and where politicians too often favor the interests of powerful corporations. "Their ambition reflects a core mystery of American democracy—the fact that humble people can acquire power when they convince themselves they can," as William Greider put it.¹⁵ In this way OWS resembles *Solidarność*, which was led by Lech Wałęsa, an unknown electrician, and Anna Walentynowicz, an aging welder. While OWS's message has resonated with many Americans, its ability to mobilize even more people to struggle actively against economic injustice will determine if it succeeds. In an effective movement like *Solidarność*, "someone plants a tree—one, a second, a third, many trees. From these trees grow as a forest."¹⁶

Solidarność erected a cross outside the Gdańsk Shipyard and often celebrated mass by its gates. Likewise, OWS has brought together members of diverse religions and spiritual seekers in makeshift sacred spaces. Surely they have theological differences, but their shared task of striving for a society of justice, where no one languishes on the margins, bonds them together just like the Poles in the 1980s. At times, however, OWS has been accused by insiders and outsiders of anti-Semitism and racism. People of color may justifiably fear that white activists are not always aware of their advantages, regardless of their class or employment status. Although OWS has protested against injustices such as racial profiling by police, it is important that white members learn from minorities and stand with them against the interlocking social evils of racism, white privilege, and economic injustice. They also need to be sensitive to the way the movement's tactics resonate with the diverse experiences of minorities, as anti-racism writer Tim Wise has discussed.¹⁷ Whether or not OWS can sustain a movement of solidarity will depend on whites' recognition of these dynamics and minorities' willingness to work through their difficulties with the movement in order to find

15. William Greider, "The Democratic Promise of Occupy Wall Street," *The Nation*, November 22, 2011. Available at <http://www.thenation.com/article/164767/democratic-promise-occupy-wall-street>

16. Tischner, *The Spirit of Solidarity*, 80.

17. See the interview with Tim Wise at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP8OCNWMp9g&feature=player_embedded

common cause.¹⁸ Adam Michnik, an agnostic Jew in *Solidarność*, lamented the deep anti-Semitism he encountered among some of its members. Yet, he remained a key leader in the movement and challenged it to aspire to “moral elevation.”¹⁹ Perhaps Cornell West is emerging as one of the movement’s intellectual voices. OWS needs people like him, just as *Solidarność* needed historian-activists like Michnik.

Hope and Nonviolent Change

In order for dialogue and compromise to take place among people with meaningful differences, a certain level of trust must be shared. Hope lies at the font of mutual trust. At the core of the Solidarity movement was an ethic of hope — hope in the human person and her ability to choose good over evil. The Poles were not naïve about the human capacity for evil. Auschwitz, Kolyma and the entire blood-stained history of Poland have left an indelible mark on the Polish soul. Yet, *Solidarność* restored faith in the human ability to “conquer evil with goodness.”²⁰

This hopeful anthropology undergirded the Solidarity movement’s commitment to nonviolence. Hope allows us to believe that even those who have perpetrated great evil can change. Hope awaits, provokes, and sometimes demands conversion. It rejects violence because it trusts that although it is often difficult, people can change, if only they see themselves as they truly are. Solidarity aims to “hold up a mirror for the oppressor,” as Tischner maintained. This may involve conversation, shaming, or when these methods fail, strikes.²¹ Extending solidarity toward oppressors always entails the possibility for forgiveness, but never without the insistence on truth.²²

The Catholic ethic of solidarity has sometimes been accused of being too irenic, too willing to appease rather than accept conflict in the struggle for justice. However, Karol Wojtyła (later Pope John Paul II) argued in *The Acting Person* that political opposition can be an expression of solidarity when it is “a form of participation in the common good.” In other words, it must be “aimed at attaining that which is true and just.”²³ His friend Tischner and *Solidarność* embodied this approach. Roman Catholicism

18. An insightful essay on this topic can be found at <http://www.peopleofcolororganize.com/featured/general/seven-occupy-wall-street-racial-justice-roadblocks/>

19. Michnik, “The Moral and Spiritual Origins of Solidarity,” 243.

20. This paraphrase of Romans 12:20-21 was often repeated by *Solidarność* leaders such as the martyr Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko and by John Paul II.

21. Tischner, *The Spirit of Solidarity*, 80–81.

22. Michnik, “The Moral and Spiritual Origins of Solidarity,” 246.

23. Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, 3rd edn (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2000), 325. The English version is Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Boston: D. Reidel, 1979).

shares the Solidarity movement's hopeful view of the human person and her ability to achieve goodness. However, it is also realistic. It permits the use of force against life-threatening physical attacks. Moreover, it allows for the use of nonviolent resistance such as strikes and civil protest amidst a much broader array of rights violations. In his encyclical on worker solidarity, John Paul II wrote: "One method used by unions in pursuing the just rights of their members is *the strike* or work stoppage, as a kind of ultimatum to the competent bodies, especially the employers...workers should be assured the *right to strike*..."²⁴

At first glance, OWS may not appear to espouse a hopeful anthropology. The movement denounces the widespread greed and selfishness of "the 1%," the financial elites and the politicians who collude with them. Does OWS call for their conversion or their demise? Would the protesters seek compromise at Roundtable Talks with bankers and traders as *Solidarność* did with the Communists in 1989? Whether the public shaming of powerful elites, marches, street theater and the civil disobedience that Occupy has utilized is borne of solidarity depends on the intention of the protesters. If they wish, as Marx and Engels did, to eviscerate the capitalist class, then we cannot speak of solidarity, at least not the Catholic understanding of it. If, however, OWS's activities aim to raise consciousness of economic injustice in order to promote the common good, it is a movement of solidarity. *Solidarność* didn't force the oppressor to face a firing squad, but it did not shy away from speaking truth to power. The goal was to get the Communists to envision a better Poland together with them.

The majority in OWS appears to prefer the path of solidarity. Cornell West has spoken trenchantly to this issue: "the Occupy Movement is a love movement. It's a love of poor people. It's a love of working people... if it's tied to hate, it's a hatred of injustice, a hatred of that which hurts and dehumanizes people. It doesn't hate people at all." Wall Street employees are not evil, but they are ensnared by the "odious vice" of corporate greed.²⁵ One can criticize the decadence of the 1% and still love them. Pope John Paul II seems to have done so.²⁶

The media has reported sporadic skirmishes with police, but OWS has largely remained committed to nonviolence, as evidenced by principles of the New York General Assembly of OWS and the nonviolent commu-

24. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, no. 19. Available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html

25. See Sally Quinn, "Cornell West Keeps the Faith for Occupy Wall Street," *The Washington Post*, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/post/cornel-west-keeps-the-faith-for-occupy-wall-street/2011/11/10/gIQAZxhk8M_blog.html.

26. The Pope blamed the plight of the poor on an "abuse of freedom" by those who are never satisfied with what they have. See *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 16.

nication trainings held.²⁷ The images of peaceful protestors such as those at UC Davis being pepper-sprayed by police recall the crackdown against *Solidarność* in 1981. It is easy to imagine Wałęsa telling those who harmed them that they have lost and the protestors have won, just as he told the police who beat and arrested him. In fact, the Polish hero has expressed his support for OWS.²⁸

Bread, Freedom, and Participation in the Common Good

Solidarność fought for the rights to just wages, to unionize, to better living conditions and the rights to political participation and freedom of expression. The 21 Demands of the Gdańsk shipyard workers and the official Solidarity Program spelled out their desire for “bread and freedom.” *Solidarność* also adopted a participatory approach. Anyone could speak on the floor of the national convention at any time.²⁹ The Solidarity movement demanded the right to participation in the creation and enjoyment of the common good, a right the Communist regime had usurped. Thus, *Solidarność* exemplified the “personalist communitarianism” of CST, which sees solidarity as empowering the marginalized to protect their individual dignity and so that they can in turn “carry others’ burdens.” According to the 1971 World Synod of Catholic Bishops, all persons have the right and duty to become “principal architects of their own economic and social development.”³⁰ This requires moving beyond temporary assistance to embodying solidarity in policies, institutions, and social structures that eliminate the causes of the suffering of the oppressed.³¹

OWS clearly attempts to practice this kind of approach and calls for broad participation in the economic, political, and cultural spheres of American society. Among the New York General Assembly’s “Principles of Solidarity” are: (1) “Engaging in direct and transparent participatory democracy”; (2) “Exercising personal and collective responsibility” and (3) “Empowering one another against all forms of oppression.”³² Like the

27. See <http://www.nycga.net/resources/declaration/>

28. See “AP Interview: Walesa Backs Wall Street Protesters,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2011. Available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/APb6ba79d7a2c741ddb02b45462a3ad68e.html>

29. Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, 3rd edn (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2002), 229–30, 370.

30. World Synod of Catholic Bishops, *Justitia in Mundo*, no. 71. Available at http://catholicsocialservices.org.au/Catholic_Social_Teaching/Justitia_in_Mundo

31. Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity*, 21–24; 86–88. See also John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38.

32. See <http://www.nycga.net/resources/principles-of-solidarity/>

Solidarność conventions, which were sometimes inefficient, the highly democratic meetings and assemblies of Occupy need to carefully balance inclusivity with structure and leadership. However, emphasizing participation is a risk worth taking in order to create a community of solidarity that welcomes all people into this crucial conversation. OWS has effectively sensitized more Americans to the status quo and its causes. It has cast light on crushing student debt, widespread foreclosures, unfair banking practices, and more. However, Tischner aptly stated, “In struggling for just bread, I propose. I propose how to sew, so more will grow; how to divide, so all will share equally; who should divide, that the bread does not stick to the hands. The ethics of solidarity are the ethics of *proposition*.”³³ OWS might take cues from Poland’s “self-limiting revolution,” which codified demands but also acknowledged the need for concessions.³⁴ The “Principles of Solidarity” move in the right direction, but more focus, specificity, and national consensus are needed in order to translate general principles into policies.³⁵ Does OWS want revolution or reform? Does it attack US or global economic inequality, or both? Hopefully, we stand only at the beginning of a long process of dialogue and renewal that OWS jumpstarted. The 99% from around the world must now unite to implement sustainable solutions for a better future on our imperiled planet.

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33. Tischner, *The Spirit of Solidarity*, 59.

34. Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution*, 93, 295–96, 305.

35. See <http://www.nycga.net/resources/principles-of-solidarity/>. Unofficial lists also exist, for example <http://occupywallst.org/forum/specific-demand-and-action-list-for-washington-dc/>.

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