

What Ever Became of Solidarity?

BY GERALD J. BEYER



LAST AUGUST MARKED the 25th anniversary of the birth of the Polish nonviolent revolution known as Solidarity. On the morning of Aug. 14, 1980, a strike in the Gdansk shipyard began what eventually caused the demise of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The whole world watched as ordinary people like Lech Walesa and Anna Walentynowicz led what the historian Timothy Garton Ash later deemed “the most infectiously hopeful movement in the history of contemporary Europe.” Solidarity’s successful use of nonviolent resistance to topple Communism has left an indelible mark in the history books.

But what ever became of the fight for “bread and freedom” and the equality and dignity of all in Poland’s new era? Many intellectuals and religious leaders had hoped that Solidarity would initiate a return of values and principles to capitalism and democracy. Unfortunately, their hopes were

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dashed. Solidarity’s project was largely abandoned after 1989, and the unity in spite of differences that characterized it disappeared.

A host of celebrations, conferences and gatherings were planned in Poland to commemorate the events of August 1980. Yet Poles today exhibit a great deal of ambivalence toward the legacy of Solidarity. Most Poles recognize that Solidarity was indispensable in the battle against Communism. They are grateful to it for helping to gain freedom of speech and worship and the right to vote. But the vast majority of Poles believe that Solidarity no longer serves the good of the country. In a recent survey only 24 percent maintained that their lives changed for the better as a result of Solidarity’s historic victory, while 31 percent said that their lives became worse, and 45 percent saw no change whatsoever.

In fact, most of the economic, social and cultural rights that the movement stressed have not been realized. Poverty levels have grown from 1990 (to 11.7 percent of the total population in 2003, according to Poland’s “subsistence minimum,” and 57 percent, according to the more generous “social minimum”). While some have prospered, wages have fallen in many sectors, contributing to the rise in

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poverty. Unemployment plagues 18 percent of working-age Poles, most of whom cannot claim unemployment benefits or pursue state-sponsored job-training. Worker ownership, one of the centerpieces of Solidarity's original program, has been discouraged by economists and politicians. Although many new colleges and universities have been created, fewer and fewer young people from agricultural and working-class backgrounds can afford them. In short, the benefits and burdens of the transformation have not been distributed evenly. The majority of Poles view themselves as "losers" in the new Poland. Aleksander Smolar, a former member of Solidarity, put it this way: "The Poland of Solidarity's program was a completely different one than the one we have created."

As a result, Polish journals and the press have been filled in recent years with articles with such titles as "On Solidarity Abandoned" and "Is Solidarity Outdated?" Pope John Paul II, who repeatedly urged Poles to embody the ethics of solidarity in their democratic and market-based institutions, chastised the union's leadership in 2003. He stated that by entering directly into the sphere of politics and governance after 1989, the Solidarity union could not effectively defend the rights of workers, which, he maintained, are often neglected by those in power. "If Solidarity really wants to serve the nation," he said, "it should return to its roots, to the ideals that inspired them...." The demise of the Solidarity movement and its ethos is a complicated story, one that cannot be told in full detail here. Several reasons why Solidarity faltered in Poland after 1989, however, are clear.

War at the Top

It is hard to point to a single moment when the Solidarity movement's demise began. Some scholars identify a gradual decrease in the ethos of Solidarity beginning with the introduction of martial law and heightened repression in Poland on Dec. 13, 1981. Martial law terminated the fruitful debate of the early years of Solidarity and sowed the seeds of mistrust between those inside the movement who supported the regime and those who opposed it. But when most Poles think of the end of the Solidarity era, they recall an event that occurred after Solidarity's first free elections in 1989, namely the *wójna na górze*, or "war at the top."

In the spring of 1990, the fiery electrician Lech Walesa declared a "war at the top" at the Second National Congress of Solidarity, turning against his former intellectual advisors Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuron, Bronislaw Geremek and Tadeusz Mazowiecki. They were shaping the new order in Poland after 1989 from the capital, Warsaw, while Walesa was in Gdansk. Mazowiecki became prime minister of Poland on Aug. 24, 1989, and Walesa, the leader of the early Solidarity movement, felt marginalized. Therefore he

announced his candidacy for the presidency in this fashion, and took up opposition against Mazowiecki, his former friend from Solidarity. During the presidential campaign, the chasm widened between the “intellectuals” and the workers of the Solidarity movement. The “war” culminated at a Solidarity meeting in June 1990. According to an account by the historian Timothy Garton Ash, Walesa rudely called Jerzy Turowicz, the well-respected editor of the Catholic weekly popular among the intelligentsia, to the podium and sardonically cried, “Poland is waiting for your criticisms.” For many, this event signified the end of Solidarity as a unified social movement. Michnik, the well-known dissident and author, lamented that with the war at the top, the ethos of Solidarity died, and that Lech Walesa was responsible for its death.

It is unfair to blame Lech Walesa alone for the fall of Solidarity. He deserves much credit for his role in Solidarity in the 1980’s. Clearly, however, most Poles perceived these rancorous power struggles to be the end of the Solidarity era. The hostility between the two camps within Solidarity—one that supported Mazowiecki for president, the other Walesa—polarized Polish society.

While the personal political ambitions of Walesa and Mazowiecki largely caused the “war at the top,” much more was at stake. As the historian Antoni Dudek writes, two different visions of the transformation of the political and eco-

nomic systems lurked beneath the surface of the more visible personal battle. The main differences lay along two lines: the speed and the nature of the economic and political reforms to be undertaken and the role of members of the former Communist party in post-1989 democratic Poland.

While both the Walesa and Mazowiecki camps generally supported neoliberal economic reforms after 1989 (sometimes called economic shock therapy), they disagreed on the appropriate pace of these reforms. Walesa advocated giving the government “fast track” powers to legislate economic reforms, because as the economic situation got worse, social trust for the reforms dissipated. He therefore wanted to force as many of these reforms through as quickly as possible. Many in Mazowiecki’s government, however, became wary of hastily introducing economic reforms that might have harmful social consequences, such as large-scale layoffs and significant decreases in social spending.

They also eschewed political reforms that would in one stroke lead to the “de-Communization” of the government, one of the Walesa camp’s key goals. Instead of barring former Communists from public life, Mazowiecki adopted the so-called “broad line” policy, which allowed former Communists to participate in shaping the new Poland. The political issue of “de-Communization” split the Solidarity movement, which eventually broke into several new political parties. On the economic front, both Walesa and

Mazowiecki ultimately opted for neoliberal economic reform, despite the initial misgivings of Mazowiecki. This triumph of neoliberalism in Poland, in addition to the personal enmity between old Solidarity allies, contributed to the disappearance of the ethos of solidarity.

The Ascendancy of Polish Neoliberalism

While it had some adherents in Poland prior to 1989, neoliberalism rapidly gained popularity in Poland after the fall of Communism. The Polish sociologist Jerzy Szacki provides a useful description of neoliberals. First, neoliberals uphold the unconditional supremacy of the economic system. Second, they support unfettered capitalism, without the possibility of a “mixed” economy, in which government can intervene to correct social problems associated with market failures. Finally, they permit all possible points of view concerning issues “beyond economics,” such as civil liberties, reproductive freedom, capital punishment, as long as they do not interfere with economic freedom. These ideals became real political alternatives after the collapse of the Communist regime and the centralized economy in 1989.

As Dariusz Gawin argues, the fall of Communism was also the triumph of Thatcher’s and Reagan’s free-market ideology in Poland. Many Poles, particularly new key decision-makers, welcomed it with open arms. While some politicians spoke of building a social market economy akin to that of the Rhineland countries, the idea was never really considered seriously. Politicians thought it resembled too closely the failed socialist system. With its forms of social protection that were weaker than those of the social market economy, capitalism in its neoliberal, Anglo-Saxon form prevailed.

Neoliberalism, in short, spread a philosophical understanding of human freedom that directly conflicts with the ethic of the Solidarity movement. The Solidarity movement believed freedom is realized by participating in the construction of a just society that promotes the participation of all. To act in this way is to act in solidarity with others, because solidarity promotes the freedom and participation of others. For neoliberalism, freedom amounts to freedom from constraints, particularly in the economic sphere. In the practical realm, this rejection of freedom, understood as freedom realized in solidarity with others, led to a “sink or swim” attitude in socioeconomic policy.

This notion of “freedom from” contributed to the widespread indifference to the poor after 1989. Particularly vulnerable groups, such as farmers and children of large families, suffered greatly as little was done to aid them during the transformation to a market economy. Social dialogue also broke down, because most people were concerned with personal gain. Interestingly, the new Polish Constitution of 1997 insists that Poland’s economy is based on the social market economy model, which “values freedom and solidarity equal-

ly.” Nonetheless, under the influence of neoliberalism, politicians have often created laws that fall short of embodying the general principles found in the Constitution.

Neoliberalism Meets *Homo Sovieticus*

Undoubtedly, neoliberalism has created rifts among Poles and contributed to the eclipse of Solidarity. But it would be an oversimplification to attribute Poland’s current social, political and economic problems to neoliberalism alone. While Solidarity provided the glue that held Polish society together during the 1980’s, another pervasive force divided it. Forty years of Communism had wreaked havoc on Polish society by attempting to atomize it and by eradicating civil society. The moral and social vestiges of Communism linger on in a new sort of person, often referred to as *homo sovieticus*. The Russian philosopher Alexander Zinoviev used this term to describe the anthropological traits of those who lived under Communism. *Homo sovieticus* exhibited eagerness to blame others, a fatalistic attitude toward life, extreme suspicion of others and their motives, a sense of entitlement, helplessness and irresponsibility.

The moral values of *homo sovieticus* starkly contrast with the values exhibited by the Solidarity movement, like heroism, trust and self-sacrifice. A recent study of Polish mentalities, conducted between 1988 and 2000, concluded that the characteristics ascribed to *homo sovieticus* continue to weaken civil society today. Social mistrust can be seen in various aspects of everyday life and has grown slightly in the last decade. Suspicion of others, which is rooted in a negative view of the human person, precludes solidarity. The rise of neoliberalism has exacerbated this problem. Wild capitalism, as it is commonly called in Poland today, is understood as a zero-sum game. Members of society see one another more and more as competitors for jobs, money and prestige. Fellow citizens represent a threat, not partners in solidarity.

The future of Solidarity in Poland remains unknown. Although numerous organizations foster solidarity, the scale does not begin to compare to the need today and the breadth of the movement of the 1980’s. The Solidarity labor union, which still functions, has resorted to violence in some of its recent protests in Warsaw, thus revealing its sense of desperation in the new Poland. Scholars, bishops and a few politicians have called for a return to the ethic of Solidarity that united Poles amid the trials of the 1980’s. The question is, will their calls continue to go unanswered, while corruption, poverty and myriad social ills continue to afflict Poland? To be sure, much has been accomplished: Poland is a democratic country and a new member of the European Union. Thousands of businesses have sprung up. But the vision of “the most infectiously hopeful movement” called Solidarity has yet to be achieved. **A**

