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Solidarność, Euromaidan, and Realpolitik

I

In his book *Moscou aller-retour*, Jacques Derrida expresses the thesis that *perestroika* was a condition for the non-violent revolutions in Central Europe.ⁱ If it had not been for the slogans of *perestroika* sounding in Soviet generals' ears, *non-violence* would neither have had any chance of practical success, nor could it even have appeared – as it was too far an idea from the reality of real socialism. (Obviously, the author does not miss the opportunity to notice etymological and other, deeper – presumably unfathomable – relations between *perestroika* as a “reconstruction” and “deconstruction”).ⁱⁱ

Derrida's thesis is doubly false. It is untrue owing to basic chronology. The *Solidarność*, or “Solidarity” movement, initiated by workers' protests in August 1980, emerged a few years before *perestroika*. Furthermore, Derrida's thesis seems to reveal a deep misunderstanding of the Solidarity phenomenon. It contains a suggestion that Solidarity, motivated by tactical reasons mainly, chose the means which were absolutely necessary to achieve its goals, and that the situation of the time was not in favour of violent actions.

But the essence of Solidarity we know from the experience gathered between August 1980 and 13th December 1981 was different. As a large social movement almost from the beginning, *Solidarność* was also, on top of that, a moral movement, as the workers of Lublin, Gdańsk and Szczecin facing the actions of communist power stood up for their dignity. They were soon followed by millions of Poles.

To live like hitherto was impossible not because people were short of everything: food, accommodation, medicines; it was following the communist dictates that caused offence to human dignity. The people demanded the return to work of the illegally dismissed Anna Walentynowicz, the release of political prisoners, free trade unions and free press, but a common feature of all these demands was an appeal to treat human beings in a human way and not as if they were an addition to the economic, technical superstructure guided by the Communist Party.





Non-violence was only a consequence of this fundamental claim: if we demand respect for our dignity, we cannot treat the other side as if they were solely an obstacle to achieving our aims. We should discuss with them, negotiate, fight using means accepted by democratic societies, but we should not try to destroy or annihilate them. It is in this attitude, and not in tactical speculations about Soviet generals' and secretaries' state of minds, that we can find the reason for the principal abandonment of using violent means. General Jaruzelski was lying when, upon imposing martial law on 13th December 1981, he claimed that he wanted to prevent civil war. No one on the Solidarity side was preparing for a civil war. No weapons arsenals were discovered in Solidarity's stores.

The 16 months of the "first" Solidarity were a time of a restored sense of dignity. As a result, this was also a time of responsible freedom. As Józef Tischner said, people left their shelters, entered the public arena and freely accepted duties and burdens that they had avoided not long previously. Another person, their needs, all social surroundings suddenly started to count – often even more than the narrow circle of personal matters in which people used to seek protection, shelter and support.

The first Solidarity period was, therefore, a time of care for others, concern about local community matters and the whole nation. It was this sense of responsible freedom that made the participants of the first Solidarity's assembly launch an appeal to the other countries of real socialism.

Underlining the moral aspect of the first Solidarity, we should pay attention to another feature of that time: to the fact that Poles regained the ability to show confidence in other people. No, this was not some collective naivety. It was known that the secret police was still working, and that certain Solidarity members were there only in order to complete tasks designed by the Communist Party.

But this did not really matter, as we weren't afraid and no longer perceived others as enemies: we went on with our things and we felt ourselves. Part of this "feeling ourselves" was readiness to put more trust in others.

Mutual trust was the reverse side of discovering that fear of the other, namely distrust, takes away freedom of thought and action, it constrains and humiliates, so, in the final analysis, it underpins the totalitarian construction.

II

This basic trait of the "first" *Solidarność* – the very fact that it was a moral movement arising from



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a very elementary moral impulse which led to the rejection of the social and political status quo because of its fundamental incongruity with the demands of human dignity – can be rendered in a different way still. Here we have a special case of practical inference: if we refuse to tolerate the present state of public affairs on behalf of the value of dignity, then we are implicitly calling for general respect of dignity, including the dignity of our opponents. If we demand respect for our own dignity, we cannot trample on the dignity of other people. What follows from such an understanding of the sources of our own protest is the rejection of all forms of violence and aggression, including all kinds of psychic oppression.

Of course, *Solidarność*, as a very complex and massive movement, may be interpreted in different ways. As a result, questions have been asked concerning the nature of this movement continuously since its inception.

Similar traits can be discovered in that set of phenomena that the participants themselves and sympathetic observers call *Euromaidan*. Many of those who try to interpret these phenomena tend to call them the Ukrainian “Revolution of Dignity”.

At the outset Euromaidan too was an elementary, simple, spontaneous moral impulse: we cannot accept a situation in which the president of our country, after many months of dodging, prevaricating, promising and suddenly changing his mind, finally makes a decision that is so blatantly contrary to the expectations, hopes and aspirations of the citizens whom this president is supposed to represent.

The Ukrainians articulated their European aspirations in modest terms as the desire that the world around them be normal. It is not normal, they said, that the highest representative of the nation so conspicuously disregards the public opinion of his people, that he so unashamedly gives in to external pressure in the form of a commercial deal: in exchange for not signing the association agreement a favourable loan of 15 billion USD is offered and the price of gas is reduced by a third. It is not normal that the head of state is someone who runs into major difficulties, to some extent because of his poor education, while trying to assess the situation in which he has to act, someone who has a criminal record, someone who takes advantage of his position to augment his own fortune and that of his family and camarilla around him.

All this is so offensive to the dignity of the citizens of a large European country that they have to declare their *non possumus*. In a comment from 27 November 2013, Yuri Andrukhovych wrote:



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“Our Europe homework is now quite clear, and, while being extremely complex, it is feasible. We have to remove this regime. It is the only (...) obstacle on our road.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The answer of the ruling group was very similar to that of the Polish communist party in August 1980, when the workers’ protests began in Lublin, Gdańsk and Szczecin: stop protesting and demonstrating and go back to work. The motivation of this appeal was quite obvious. Of course, when asked, the ruling elite would not speak about the amenities of their positions within the hierarchy of power. As Serhiy Zhadan writes, “They would rather talk about stability, about order, and first of all about your duties, so that you never forget that you are obliged to them. You are obliged to work, you are obliged to support, you are obliged to be loyal. You are not at all obliged to have your own thoughts, nor to articulate them, nor count on their listening to what you think. You should be grateful for your workplace (...), you should be grateful for the possibility of acquiring your education, even if this acquiring means rather buying it, you should be grateful for your salary of one hundred bucks, for that entire machine that works owing to your work: all these law protectors, judges, deputies and tax inspectors. You have to thank them for letting you still breathe, for their trying to at least imitate decency and being civilized, (...) for the fact that you are not behind bars.”^{iv}

This enumeration of obligations of the ruled with respect to the rulers highlights another unbearable aspect of the situation of the Ukrainians who rallied on the Kiev Maidan and on the other Euromaidans throughout Ukraine. The tergiversations of the president negotiating the terms of the association agreement with the European Union were just one too many instance of the ruling power’s insolence. It was preceded by an endless series of humiliating experiences. The Ukrainian protest opposed to all that its “it should be normal”. It should be like in Europe. Europe was not primarily a political or economic choice. It was an axiological basic decision.

III

Solidarność in 1980-81 and the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity are similar in many respects to other movements that were at first moral protests and later on became social and political





phenomena of such importance that they fundamentally changed the global realities of the 20th century. Witness, for example, Mahatma Gandhi's movement that led to India's independence and the British empire's decline; Martin Luther King's movement that brought the collapse of the system of racial segregation in the South of the US and as a consequence transformed the social structure of the major global power; or Nelson Mandela's movement that succeeded in overturning South African apartheid.^v

All these movements were perceived at their beginning as strikingly inadequate, disproportionate when compared with the forces they wanted to oppose. Questioning the colonial power of the British in India, trying to uproot well-established practices of racial segregation and apartheid, while at the same time refusing to take recourse to violent instruments of bringing about profound social and political transformations, was in the eyes of critical commentators conclusive proof of a poor understanding of the mechanics of the world and laughable naivety.

And yet it is these movements that have defined the 20th century, maybe even more importantly than the many wars and revolutions. They let us hope that in the historical perspective the overall balance of our time will not be terribly negative.

Both the opponents of such movements and their observers and commentators have considerable difficulty explaining and really grasping them. They tend to use arguments and explanatory schemes that are to be found in the arsenal of realpolitik and, recently, in various geopolitical conceptions. What these arguments and schemes have in common is the tendency to underestimate the practical efficiency of such movements. This potential of massive appeal to human dignity seems to be a *quantité négligeable* in sober calculations of realpolitik and geopolitical considerations.

Active opponents of these movements try to present them in a manner that might make it easier to absorb them in the business-as-usual type of political confrontation. To illustrate: it is common to maintain that the present conflict in Ukraine arises from ethnic and linguistic differences between the East and South on the one side and the remaining part of the country on the other. The East and South are allegedly inhabited by ethnic Russians, speaking Russian at home and preferring to





become citizens of the Russian Federation. The remaining part of Ukraine is presented as speaking mainly Ukrainian, populated by Ukrainians representing very nationalistic (if not Fascist) attitudes that may be dangerous for the Russian minority in the South and East. At this point the official doctrine of the Russian Federation enters: it reserves the right of the Federation to protect the Russian population wherever this population lives.

This picture is very far from the facts. It disregards the fact that most Ukrainians are bilingual, speaking both Ukrainian and Russian. It also ignores the fact that most of the ethnic Russians are loyal citizens of the Ukrainian state. And it pays scant attention to the fact that there is no clear-cut division of the country along linguistic and ethnic lines. Timothy Snyder makes the following essential point:

“In Russia, the major social media have been brought under state control, television has been almost completely subdued and several of the remaining free-thinking blogs and internet news sites have been shut down or pressured. This leaves Ukraine as an island of free speech for people who use the Russian language. There is a country where millions of Russian-speakers lack basic rights. That country is the Russian Federation. There is a neighbouring country where tens of millions of Russian-speakers enjoy basic rights — despite the disruptions of a revolution and Russian invasion. That country is Ukraine. As the joke goes, Ukraine is a country where people speak Russian, while Russia is a country where people stay quiet in Russian.”^{vi}

A considerable part of the recent Ukrainian chronicle is filled either with provocations that aim at transforming a peaceful civil movement into a growing political unrest that would finally degenerate into a civil war (the ideal pretext for external intervention) or with preparations for such provocative acts. All these attempts – including the biggest provocations, such as snipers shooting at the Maidan and the annexation of Crimea – have failed. It may still be hoped that realpolitik will have to give in to the forces of moral protest of people who have the courage to say *non possumus* and decidedly opt for a thorough change in their lives.





Notes

ⁱ Jacques Derrida, *Moscou aller-retour*, Éditions de l'aube, 1995, p. 36.

ⁱⁱ Ibidem, p. 70.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Еврюмайдан. Хроника відчуттів*, Discursus 2014, p. 59.

^{iv} Ibidem, p. 90.

^v Cf. A. Kourkov's note: "La Maison des syndicats abrite déjà les activités de 'l'Université ouverte de Maidan' où l'on donne des conférences sur l'administration publique, l'histoire des mouvements de contestation non-violents..." in: Andrei Kourkov, *Journal de Maidan*, Liana Levi, 2014, p. 65.

^{vi} Timothy Snyder, "Freedom in Russian Exists Only in Ukraine", *London Evening Standard*, 19 March 2014.

About the Author

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The paper was written to help with the development of the „Solidarity – Step by Step” manual during the Treasure of Solidarity project implemented by the Centre for the Thought of John Paul II in Warsaw, Poland (www.skarbsolidarnosci.pl).



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