

## *A Note on Solidarnosc*

MANY YEARS AGO, in an arithmetic class in elementary school, I learned how to reduce a fraction to its lowest terms. Whether I can still effectively remember all the steps required to perform that mental skill is uncertain. But the concept which I absorbed during an earlier educational phase of my life most definitely had its uses since it enabled me to comprehend the fact that, in order to understand the fundamental nature of anything, it is absolutely essential to strip it of all superficial and irrelevant baggage—in short, to reduce it to its lowest terms. That operation I now proceed, with some apprehension, to perform on the subject of Marxism and the Solidarnosc movement in Poland.\*

I ought first of all to explain that I regularly find myself discussing Marxism with those who adamantly endorse that zealous secular faith. And not infrequently I observe an implicit assumption on their part that I, as a well informed person with some knowledge of history, should in all honesty support the Marxist cause. In such

an exchange of views, I have consistently maintained that an intelligent individual may certainly regard the Marxist philosophy as an illuminating interpretation of man's past without necessarily subscribing to it as the only viable doctrine by which human civilization is destined to survive and prosper. And even if one firmly believes that the Marxist doctrine has many interesting things to say to men and women who are seriously concerned with the perilous state of the modern world—one might still with excellent reasons refuse to support the Marxist cause, as well as question its overall validity.

The turbulent events in Poland during the last two years, which have now receded from the front-page headlines, provide a good case in point. The Solidarnosc movement was one of those fascinating historical moments when, as it were, a flash of lightning suddenly threw into sharp relief the contours of an otherwise relatively obscure political and social landscape. It revealed, once and for all, the depth of the workers' mistrust of a ruling Marxist establishment that had exercised power ostensibly on their behalf for decades. In

August 1980 this seething suspicion rapidly came to a head in the striking workers' insistent demand for independent, genuinely representative trade unions. But beyond that, it showed with unmistakable clarity just how morally bankrupt the whole state of the Marxist body politic has been in Poland, as also in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union, under a system whose political fantasies and mythologies have had so few relevant answers to offer to the needs of a mature, rapidly changing late twentieth-century society. Anger and the credibility gap it engenders are certainly not confined to the workers alone, and it is not surprising that the call for a profound re-thinking of the "social contract" between the ruling communist "workers' party" and Polish society has so quickly widened.

As these lines are written, Poland faces an uncertain future. The strikes of the workers along the Baltic coast and elsewhere that led ultimately to the birth of *Solidarnosc* marked not so much the end of an era as the beginning of a new one, leading into previously uncharted territory. The concept of independent trade unions that the Polish Government has so ruthlessly banned in the name of maintaining "socialism" has been an entirely unfamiliar one for Eastern Europe and it is a precedent that Poland's allies must find extremely unsettling. It very much remains to be seen how a model that implies the free interplay of legitimate social interests can be integrated into a system traditionally rooted in the notion of party supremacy in all essential spheres of life. The workers will not simply allow the authorities either to ignore or to forget their hard-won concessions; yet they can expect the party to try to limit further the damage to its position. Moreover, the Soviet Union and the other Warsaw Pact states will inevitably form part of the broader political context in which the Warsaw leadership of General Wojciech Jaruzelski will have to work, just as much as its predecessors. Undoubtedly, it would be foolhardy to attempt any prediction of the road that lies ahead for Poland. The story is by no means finished.

What is evident, however, is that Marxism in Poland is nothing more than a rotting corpse that urgently needs burial at the earliest possible moment.

Beyond these introductory observations, it is necessary to outline the meaning and significance of the momentous events that have unfolded in Poland between *Solidarity's* birth in August 1980 and the tragic imposition of martial law sixteen months later. Analyzing contemporary events is, at the very best, a fragile intellectual challenge punctuated with a host of methodological and philosophical uncertainties. As such, it will undoubtedly require decades of diligent and urbane interdisciplinary study by a veritable army of social scientists before a mature understanding of that human drama is pronounced with any degree of measured accuracy. But while a formal photograph of *Solidarity* is not yet available, one may nevertheless attempt to paint a few broad strokes that will serve to provide the essentials for a preliminary composite sketch.

The chronological history of *Solidarity* has been well documented and need not be set down here. A more useful exercise involves asking what *Solidarity* came to signify to more than 9 million rank-and-file members who belonged to it, including their now universally famous spokesman, Lech Walesa. In other words, what is *Solidarity*? The question is not so obvious as it might appear at a first glance. The immediately underlying causes that lead to the embryonic development of highly influential events in the annals of human affairs rarely, if ever, lend themselves to easy explanation. Recent crises in Poland are no exception to this rule. The factors contributing to *Solidarity's* meteoric ascendancy are best seen as an inseparable amalgam of past experience and present reality. From this vantage point, then, *Solidarity* is not a watershed in the structure of post-World War II Polish history. Working-class discontent with the Soviet-styled government has long been a festering sore on the national domain and, not infrequently, this pent-up resentment has manifested itself in different forms of

popular protest. Despite their peaceful intentions, workers fell victim to a callous and indifferent system whose only answers to legitimate demands for democratic expression came in the form of tear gas, water cannons, rubber truncheons, and live ammunition. But the Polish masses, having never accepted their fate under the communist political constellation, licked their wounds, re-organized, and patiently awaited the opportunity to begin once again the construction of a just and more equitable society.

The seeds that germinated into the flowering Solidarity movement were not of the hybrid variety. They sprouted in an altogether familiar landscape where working-class reaction to rapidly escalating food prices (without corresponding increases in salaries) touched off an avalanche of unanimous and unequivocal condemnation. In this sense, Solidarity's origin was not unlike previous vocal expressions of bewilderment and non-confidence. But what began as an affair of the shopping basket quickly metamorphosed, or, more accurately, crystallized, into a spirited national rally that must have even surprised members of the working class who participated in it. No longer satisfied with hollow promises and empty slogans announcing the benefits of communism, the Polish workers (now with the strong support of the nation's intelligentsia) took a giant step in a heretofore unknown direction and proceeded to move toward safeguarding and promoting their interests. The transformation of Solidarity from an organization demanding economic reform to a syndicalist movement calling upon the nation's free will was a supremely important historical development that served as a human catalyst to erode further the crumbling edifice of communist party rule. With almost 10 million loyal adherents, Solidarity could now rightly describe itself as the foremost representative of a nation besieged by thirty-five years of mismanagement, exploitation, and corruption. Jacek Kuron, a prominent Polish intellectual, co-founder of KOR (the Workers' Defence

Committee), and the ever present *éminence grise* to Solidarity's charismatically flamboyant leader, perhaps best summarized the significance of the turmoil raging in his native homeland with these words: "The essential thing is to understand that the regime has received a fatal blow: either it must die, or it must destroy Solidarity. There is no other solution."

Solidarity is infinitely more than a workers' union, as many observers on the scene initially believed. It is also an engine for social reconstruction. Above all else, Solidarity constitutes a drastic change in class consciousness. Philosophically the movement holds ideas that are both renaissance and revolutionary in character, an ironic and unlikely combination that will have to be reckoned with in depth at some future point in time. At this particular point there is no better tentative conclusion with which to end this Note on Solidarnosc than to recall the prophetic words of Frederick Engels. During a speech at an international meeting held in London on March 24, 1875, commemorating the twelfth anniversary of the Polish uprisings of January 22, 1863, Marx's friend and collaborator asserted, "No one can enslave a nation with impunity." It remains to be seen whether General Jaruzelski and Soviet Party Chief Konstantin U. Chernenko will profit from this dictum.

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\*For recent books on this subject see Neal Ascherson, *The Polish August: What Has Happened in Poland* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981); Michael Dobbs, K.S. Karol, and Dessa Trevisan, *Poland: Solidarity: Walesa* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981); Stan Persky, *At the Lenin Shipyard: Poland and the Rise of the Solidarity Trade Union* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1981); Peter Raina, *Independent Social Movements in Poland* (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1981); Kevin Ruane, *The Polish Challenge* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1982); Daniel Singer, *The Road to Gdansk: Poland and the USSR* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981); Stewart Steven, *The Poles* (New York: Macmillan, 1982); Lawrence Weschler, *Solidarity: Poland in the Season of Its Passion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).