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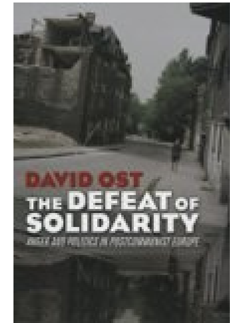
**Gerald J. Beyer**. *Recovering Solidarity: Lessons from Poland's Unfinished Revolution.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. x + 324 pp. $40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-268-02216-7.

**David Ost**. *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. ix + 238 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7343-2.

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## The Revolution That "Meant all things to all people": A Comparative Review

Similar to the year 2009, which saw a real flood of 1989 anniversary literature, 2010 was expected to bring a wave of new publications and conferences on the Polish "Solidarity." It did. Gerald J. Beyer's book, however, and in spite of the title–*Recovering Solidarity*–is *not* one of them. Readers, who are attracted by the title and front cover's direct allusions to the legendary trade union, will be disappointed. "Solidarity" is present only in the background. This, however, does not mean that Beyer's is an uninteresting book. On the contrary, it is a remarkable contribution to the studies of Polish (and more generally East European) economic transformation and its disturbing by-products: mass unemployment, growing social inequalities, and deepening poverty. It is also a brilliant introduction to applied Catholic social thought. Hence it is interesting to compare it with an earlier, and widely acclaimed, work by David Ost–*The Defeat of Solidarity*. Both books signal similar problems, yet tackle them from two very different perspectives, using very different methodologies and suggesting completely different remedies. All in all, Ost seems to have the upper hand in this comparison, in part because his goals are not as ambitious as Beyer's. Both works also seem to confirm the observation that the best analyses of Polish contemporary history and politics come from foreigners (i.e., Timothy Garton Ash or Padraic Kenney) due to a combination of close observation and distance.[1]

As Ost rightly points out, "Solidarity" was "a nonviolent revolution that meant all things to all people" (p. 37). This becomes obvious when we look at the way the authors portray the movement of 1980, which for both is a point of departure. For Beyer, "Solidarity" was a "moral revolution," led by the lay Christian and left intellectuals, and a realization of the principles of Catholic social thought (p. 5). For Ost, it was first and foremost a labor movement, a trade union, and a practical exercise in self-governance. From these two framings stem the distinctively different approaches to the shortcomings of Polish economic transition. On the one hand, Beyer provides a normative account in which the concepts of "solidarity," "freedom," and "participation" play key roles. All this is rooted in the teachings of some prominent figures of the Catholic Church. Ost, on the other hand, comes up with a very strong political-sociological analysis, through which he explains both the policy choices in the Polish economy, the internal breakup of the "Solidarity" movement, and the weakness of Polish labor. In the remainder of this review, I briefly introduce the contents of the two books and discuss their strengths and weaknesses both individually and in comparison.

Beyer's *Recovering Solidarity* has one grand goal, but also several smaller ones. This is reflected in the multidisciplinary character of the work, as well as the visible dif-

ferences between chapters. The first two chapters show the historical process of the gradual demise of solidarity within "Solidarity" between 1980 and 1989, and, as the author declares, "point to causal factors" (p. 6). Chapter 3 discusses empirical data from various sources to depict the breadth and depth of poverty in Poland. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the normative understandings of solidarity, freedom, and participation "in order to demonstrate how a contemporary revisionist ethic of solidarity can and should be embodied in social policies" (p. 7). Chapter 6 then discusses how the Catholic Church ought to promote solidarity. Finally, in the conclusion, Beyer suggests how the lessons from Poland can prove useful in Eastern Europe and beyond–in the "neoliberal capitalist world" (p. 205).

The main goal of *Recovering Solidarity* is to present an argument in normative ethics, defining "solidarity" (small "s") as a normative category, for which the "Solidarity" (capital "S") movement/moment serves as a benchmark. Apart from that, Beyer seeks to introduce the reader to the social teachings of Father Jozef Tischner, one of the key figures of the Polish liberal Catholic tradition, and John Paul II–who as Father Karol Wojtyla shared much of Tischner's experiences and ideals, and as pope became the most influential Catholic social theoretician. Beyer is a close and acute reader of both, and his reconstruction of their intellectual heritage, an attempt to merge them with Amartya Sen's concept of "capabilities," as well as their applications are an invaluable contribution. But there are other goals. Beyer also tries to compile empirical data on Polish poverty, as well as to provide a brief history of the "Solidarity" movement, in which the demise of "solidarity" as a guiding principle is the main thread. All this leads to some practical solutions that, according to the author, can help to "recover solidarity" and effectively combat poverty in Poland. The latter parts are not as convincing as the first two, and create internal "cracks" in the book.

The first "crack" we encounter in the historical chapters. Beyer argues that the "moral revolution" of 1980 was an instance of manifest solidarity, which since then has only been demising. It is, however, very difficult to understand why solidarity was so omnipresent in 1980, not before and not after. Beyer treats this "carnivalesque" period as a benchmark–although readers familiar with Polish history and social relations would rather see it as an aberration from norm. It is an "anthropology of hope," claims Beyer, derived from secular dissident and progressive Catholic thought, that lay at the heart of the movement and that brought about this increase in solidarity (pp. 26-27). The author additionally quotes Catholic intellectuals who claim that "Solidarity and its view of the person was ... born on the pages of the Gospel" and that "Christian anthropology, even if as a forgotten and unrecognized heritage was the real basis of solidarity and Solidarity" (Tischner and Jaroslaw Gowin, quoted on p. 15). Now, while such opinions are justifiable, Beyer tries to build something resembling a causal relationship on them. For that he needs a deeper rooting in cultural and historical structures, i.e., the thesis that "Solidarity's" values were "gleaned from Poland's Roman Catholic and socialist heritage" (p. 17). This statement and other similar ones are very important for the logic of Beyer's argument. However, the source of most of this "cultural and historical 'evidence' " is Ash's *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (1983). Thus the main weakness of the book's historical part is that it constructs an important argument based on opinions coming from a fairly narrow set of scholars and writers. Beyer produces a narrative that is very close to the dominant "post-KOR" (meaning the Workers' Defense Committee, the key circle of intellectual opposition) interpretation of events, linking 1976 and 1989. The parts that are innovative, and very important for the whole book, that is, those relating to the presence of an "ethics of solidarity" and its gradual demise, might not be very convincing for a less sympathetic reader. An overidealization of the original "Solidarity" might also be a key problem; yet Beyer does not go half as far as Ost in his praise of 1980.

The conclusion of both historical chapters of *Recovering Solidarity* is that Lech Walesa's declared "war at the top" was the beginning of the eclipse of "Solidarity" (and solidarity). However, one might rather think that it was an *end* of a decade-long process. From that point, argues Beyer, neoliberalism, personified by Leszek Balcerowicz, enters the scene and becomes the main reason for the nearly complete lack of the ethics of solidarity in Polish society.

In the following chapter, Beyer provides a multitude of very diverse and interesting statistical and sociological data on poverty in Poland. This is a fascinating (and terrifying) read, especially since much of this data not only is made available in English for the first time, but is also fairly unknown to scholars outside the disciplines of social policy and sociology in Poland. For Beyer's book, however, the chapter is on the whole largely irrelevant, and stands out as an unexpected appendix. For the general normative argument, it suffices to state that poverty in Poland is a grave problem and that it has been deepening systematically since 1989. Entering into the de-

bate on the methodologies of measuring poverty, Beyer, again, finds himself in a field that is not his own, and where he has to rely on other people's accounts. By relativizing poverty levels he also invites potential critics to dismiss the gravity of the problem. Readers more fond of Poland's economic transformation (and there are many, especially in economics) will also notice that the author dismisses neoliberal policies a priori (which is understandable given his explicitly stated ethical perspective), without really getting into the economic realities of Poland in the period from 1988 to 1991.[2] For example, hyperinflation, which was the key impulse of Balcerowicz's policy and which was inherited after the last Communist government, is mentioned as late as page 122 for the first time, long after Balcerowicz has been almost demonized (cf. p. 44). Such anti-neoliberal edge, expressed in fairly strong language, combined with the reluctance to take on potential counterarguments already in his book, can make it rather difficult for Beyer to convince economic policymakers of his message.

Having discussed some arguable weaknesses, it is high time to acknowledge the strong sides of *Recovering Solidarity*, which by all means outnumber the former. The normative side of the book is consistent and provides a strong basis for an ethically informed critique of Polish society and economy, as well as the general global neoliberal condition. This generalization is an attempt signaled both in the introduction and the conclusion. A three "moment" model of solidarity is at the heart of his normative theory (p. 90). In the first "moment"–the "recognition of *factual solidarity*"–people aware of their role and obligation to humanity as a whole notice "the cry of the wounded"–the Other in need. The second "moment" is then the response to "solidarity's ethical imperative," which can either take the form of direct action, or, as a more long-term strategy, understanding "the cry of the wounded"–looking not to cure the symptoms but to find the cause of the social illness. The third "moment"–"embodying solidarity in policies and institutions"–is the practical application of the results of this contemplation.

Why would people behave this way? Because solidarity is the only way to fulfill one's *freedom*–understood in a much deeper sense than the negative freedom of liberalism. If freedom is the goal and solidarity the guiding principle, *participation* (the third element of Beyer's trinity) is the modus operandi. Beyer argues for both political and economic participation, and in his argument he refers to such diverse thinkers as Tischner, Jacek Kuron, and Sen. Because the "ethics of solidarity" has been lost, due both to the "neoliberal turn" and the post-Communist state of mind dominating the Polish society (*homo sovieticus*), some "agent" needs to actively promote it–or "recover it," as the title proposes. Beyer suggests that the Catholic Church, as well as the Catholic laity, should play this role in "promoting the ethics of solidarity as evangelization" (p. 183). Although I personally question whether the Polish Catholic Church may ever in fact perform such a role, it is possible to imagine that it could, and definitely *should* do that. In the light of the recent (2010) deepening controversy over the role of the church in Polish politics and society, this seems highly unlikely though. Beyer is overly optimistic, taking only the "liberal" strands of the Polish church as the representative "norm," while almost completely ignoring its reactionary, nationalist, and repressive wing (if not *core*).[3] "The Roman Catholic Church has historically advocated the freedom of the individual"–an eyebrow-raising claim Beyer makes (p. 159), probably having in mind those circles of the clergy and laity who, like Tischner, the *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Znak*, the Catholic Intelligentsia Club (KIK), or Wojtyla, once so impressed even the previously hostile "leftists" like Kuron or Adam Michnik. He idealizes the church to a great extent–in a similar way that Ost idealizes "labor."

Ost's *The Defeat of Solidarity* is a story about a "betrayed" working class and a labor movement that for reasons both internal and external lost its way in the rapidly changing realities of post-89 Eastern Europe. Though the emergence of "Solidarity" in 1980 is explained in mostly material and structural (one could even say "neo-Marxist") terms, the movement's "defeat" is due to *ideas* (p. 193). Ost first shows the enchantment if not fascination of the liberal dissident intellectuals with "the workers," which suddenly (in mid-80s, after the Martial Law period) turned into suspicion, hostility, and after 1989 an open "war," in which labor was turned into the archenemy of the emergent democracy and the nascent capitalist market. "Turned" discursively, because, as Ost convincingly argues (chapter 1), conflicts structured around class cleavages–that is, struggles over economic interests expressed in economic terms–are not a threat to democratic polities. On the contrary, the strength of mature democracies lies in their ability to contain mechanisms in which economic "anger" (Ost's crucial concept) is channeled into collective bargaining between labor and capital.

Polish workers, partners in opposition, became the object of fear and disgust–the hoi polloi dismissed as irrational and dangerous. Betrayed by their former intellectual leaders, suffering the worst consequences of the

capitalist "shock therapy" (Balcerowicz again) and having their grievances pushed outside the sphere of the "rational" (which was monopolized after 1989 by the post-Solidarity intellectual elites), the workers could only turn to those who were willing to articulate their anger in irrational terms. And that is why Polish labor is (still) predominantly affiliated with the far Right. Toward the end of the book, however, Ost strikes a slightly more optimistic note, showing examples of trade union initiatives that finally represent the workers as workers and begin to organize real economic bargaining in the new capitalist context. In his splendid analysis, Ost moves gradually down from macro to micro scale, from the general condition of labor in post-Communist Eastern Europe down to the situation of individual trade union locals. As a mainstream work in political sociology, *The Defeat of Solidarity* with its neat qualitative methodology (Ost proposes ethnographic research as a remedy for the fallacies of "transitology") and clear argumentation is very coherent and reads remarkably well.

In spite of this consistency, high readability, and great explanatory power of Ost's theory, there are still some questions to be raised. The author uses a reifying concept of "labor" that has an unclear designate.[4] Ost attempts to revive class as an important analytical category. However, throughout the book it is unclear who exactly constitutes "labor." Unqualified physical workers–that's for sure. But although he defines "labor" as a class and thus in relation to "capital," he tends to exclude or include different groups depending on the need. And so intellectuals or "intelligentsia" are contrasted with labor (and have their own "class interests" [p. 42]), although in terms of their relation to capital they often stand in the very same position (wage laborers). At one point we also learn that doctors are labor–at least as long as they are not the beneficiaries of the transition. This leads to two conclusions. One is that Ost's labor is perhaps not a class but rather an interest group, which fails to find the right political representation. Second is that labor, idealized throughout the book, does not seem to be responsible for anything, at least for no mistakes. Betrayed by the intellectual elite, "Solidarity" is left with its central political leadership. This leadership in turn is made up mostly of career-pursuing conservatives, who drive the union farther to the Right. Then we learn that the local leadership is also to be blamed, since it despises the rank and file, and does not see any unionist mission. Then we are down to the mostly unqualified laborers, who cannot be blamed for their economic situation (and indeed they cannot). But Ost does not dare criticize their own apathy, and Beyer's discussion of *homo sovieticus* would probably displease him. Beyer, who uses an ethical benchmark, makes numerous attacks on different professional groups within "labor"–especially the miners, whom he sees as egoist (p. 78).

Additionally, again following his idealized vision of labor, Ost does not accept the possibility that these "irrational" and "illiberal" ideas that have taken over the labor movement are (and were) in fact widely accepted by the workers. He attacks Michnik for his 1985 "anti-labor turn," but the quotes he uses seem to be taken out of context, and explained as a conspiracy of the elite, and not (rightly or not) as a reaction to the radicalization and "illiberalization" of many union activists. Anti-Semitism and nationalism are for Ost only fallacious narratives that have been imposed on the workers by political entrepreneurs. If that is so, then why were these present in Solidarity already since 1980? Ost simply detours such questions, focusing on the class cleavage as normatively superior to struggles over identity.

At first glance Ost's book seems more consistent than Beyer's. But what some might take for Beyer's inadequate consistency others may interpret as methodological pluralism, and therefore an asset. The books propose two very different approaches, but are in some sense complimentary, and definitely suggest a multitude of important remedies for the difficult socioeconomic situation of a large part of Polish society. They are also undeniably important and innovative analytical and theoretical works, showing how far we got from the 1990's "transitology."[5]

Notes

[1]. Beyer is definitely aware of this specific perspective. See G. J. Beyer, interview by J. Makowski, "Przydałby się nam Tischner dzisiaj," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 28, 2010.

[2]. A good example is Francis Fukuyama, who on the occasion of "Solidarity's" thirtieth anniversary remarked that "the Polish transformation is one of the biggest miracles of the $20^{th}$ century." See "Fukuyama: Transformacja w Polsce–jeden z największych cudów XX w." *PAP*, September 30, 2010.

[3]. Scholars with a strong Catholic background naturally overemphasize the positive role and impact of the church, both in the 1980 and the 1989 "revolutions." See, for example, Paulina Codogni, *Okrągły Stół, czyli polski Rubikon* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Proszynski i S-ka,

2009).

[4]. Similar problems are related to Beyer's usage of "the poor" as a category. While it is clear what he means by "the poor" under contemporary capitalism, he unnecessarily insists on using that category also for the 1980 "Solidarity," arguing that it was "opting for the poor," even if this was never mentioned directly (p. 22). It is however highly unlikely that a division between the "poor" and the "rest" ever occurred to "Solidarity" intellectuals and members, and Beyer seems to commit the error that Tischner explicitly mentioned–absolutizing the poor in this context.

[5]. On the move from transitology to broader approaches see, Vassilis Petsinis, "Twenty Years after 1989: Moving on from Transitology," *Contemporary Politics* 16, no. 3 (2010): 301-319.

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