Reflections on 1989: When Poland's future opened up, Solidarity's sense of agency disappeared

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Perhaps the most surprising part of my recollection of 1989 is to recall the large part of it that was not surprising at all. Because nothing had gotten back to “normal” in Poland in the 1980s, the political events of that decade always happened with Solidarity as the “other.” Because the political situation never seemed resolved, it was always in flux. What happened in 1989 was thus treated initially as part of that flux, by me and by Polish political actors themselves. Martial law left leading intellectuals still teaching at the universities and writing for the liberal Catholic and the widespread, largely unpersecuted, underground press. Then, after the amnesty of 1986, regime and opposition traded one political proposal after another: the regime trying to win social support for market reform, the opposition signaling that anything was possible once the government accepted genuine political reform.

Wildcat strikes in 1988 inaugurated what would be the final process: official recognition that an opposition existed, Round Table negotiations, elections, and then a new government. But even before then, it was clear that big things were changing. Most of Western academia, still shaped by cold war paradigms and Soviet bloc émigrés, could not accept that, which is what led to the common belief that no one anticipated 1989. I still remember being about to publish one of my first academic articles, “Towards a Corporatist Solution in Eastern Europe,” in 1988, when the editor of *East European Politics and*

Societies insisted I take out the phrase about the party being already in a process of giving up (some) power. “We know that cannot happen,” he told me, and, not wishing to squander my chance at publication, I consented.

In Poland, then, 1989 began as another year in the ongoing transformation of the system. It was still unclear that it would lead to “1989” as the complete collapse of communism. It was part of an ongoing, tenuous, uncertain reform process.

I was in Poland in March 1989 during the Round Table talks. The Solidarity offices and officials writing up and distributing the ongoing communiqués looked remarkably like the offices and officials from 1981, except that workers were now much less present. Each day brought new information on what was being negotiated at the formal talks, and rumors on the more important proposals being bandied about at the informal talks happening at Magdalenka. The Round Table ended with an agreement on an imminent election and the legalization of Solidarity and a Solidarity newspaper (*Gazeta Wyborcza*). This meant an immediate change in the way politics looked—opposition figures were suddenly on television and holding campaign rallies—but it was still not certain that any durable change had been instituted. Solidarity leaders were wary of being co-opted right up to the point when a Solidarity government came into being, and conservative opponents of official Solidarity complained they had been co-opted even afterward.

Even experts on Eastern European societies speak of 1989 in shorthand as the fall of the Berlin Wall. We can say that the Berlin Wall fell not only in Germany but also in Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria—meaning that in all these countries the toppling of the regime happened almost instantaneously when external support for the systems collapsed. But the Berlin Wall did not fall in Poland, or Hungary, and so most of 1989 was a continuation of ongoing reform processes. There was no clear moment at which things changed, which is one of the reasons why these countries have not had one particular date they can celebrate.

But even though there was no Berlin Wall in Poland, the actual fall of that Wall changed everything. For this meant that all options were now on the table. The fall of the Wall meant that all the worries about the tenuousness of the transformation, worries that were constant from 1980 to 1989, suddenly disappeared. Suddenly there was no longer a communist other that had to be dealt with. The Berlin Wall thus signified what we know now as 1989, and for that very reason it triggered a crisis in Poland.

It was precisely at this moment when everything became possible that a certain timidity came over Polish opposition leaders. Suddenly they lost their self-confidence. The popular stories of 1989 still stress agency (despite Valerie Bunce's efforts [1999] to disabuse us of this notion). And the pact-making of the 1989 Round Table talks, in Poland and Hungary particularly, demonstrate that agency did play an important role. But at the moment that the party ceased being a powerful force, the opposition's (not government's) sense of agency rapidly declined. In 1989, the Polish opposition was consistently saying that it did not want to take full responsibility for the system. Though this was partly a political ploy, their attitude after the fall of the Berlin Wall (and the end of any fear of a party/Soviet backlash) suggests that they really did not want to take responsibility. The new political leaders almost uniformly acted like they did not have any new ideas, and could not come up with any on their own. This led to the huge popularity of Western ideas of shock therapy. It is

true, as Hilary Appel [2004] has stressed, that domestic reformers, such as Leszek Balcerowicz, had these ideas too, and sought to use big Western names, such as Jeffrey Sachs, for their own purposes, every bit as much as the latter used them. But Balcerowicz and the other radical reformers had gotten these ideas in the 1980s precisely from Western thinkers, from what would come to be known as the Washington Consensus. What went strikingly AWOL starting in late 1989 was the sense that the old Polish opposition could produce any interesting ideas themselves.

This was new, and in sharp contrast to everything that the Solidarity movement had been at the outset. In 1980/81, opposition activists in Poland were not particularly interested in talking to Westerners, such as myself. They did not believe we had lessons that would be relevant for them. But starting in late 1989, opposition (now government) activists seemed to be focused on getting information from Westerners.

Many, interestingly, did not care to talk to me when they learned how much I knew about Poland! "We need someone who doesn't know anything about us," one of them told me. "We need to know how to make things 'normal' now." It was only if they knew me only as someone from the West, and not as an expert on Poland, that they were interested in talking. (Interestingly, it was the young Western economic grad students, brought by Sachs to work in Poland's Finance Ministry, who were interested in talking to me: they didn't believe the hype about themselves that they were hearing from the Poles!) But if I tried to get Poles to talk about the experiences, lessons, and potential prospects of the great civil society, anti-politics approach that had led them to this moment, they balked. They now saw that past as obsolete. My first book, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, had just come out, discussing Solidarity's approach to democracy, presenting its political program as viable though problematic. But in 1989 most Poles saw that program as outmoded, and wanted chiefly to talk about "normal" capitalism, market economies, and Western democratic institutions.

The irony, of course, was that they soon got plenty of Westerners wanting to tell them all about these things—Westerners who didn't know anything about Eastern Europe—and the Poles, like others in the region, quickly got disgusted. In a pattern that would continue until Poland's entry into NATO and the European Union, Poles and other Eastern Europeans would act humble and grateful to the Westerners who told them what to do, and then complain vociferously once they were out of sight. But they opened themselves up to this problem by deciding to believe, at the moment when everything was possible, that they had little to contribute. Their own sense of agency, in other words, was proving difficult to rebuild.

Structural explanations now seem to me much more convincing than agency-based ones. In particular, it helps a great deal to see the class interests that were emerging in 1989. Jan Kubik once described the Solidarity movement as “a cultural-political class in statu nascendi ... made up not of workers or intellectuals but of all those who subscribed to a system of principles and values” (Ekiert and Kubik 2000). But agreement on a “system of principles and values” collapsed quickly after 1989, and new interests burst to the fore. Professionals, young people with higher education, semi-professionals closely tied to the Solidarity opposition, and technical personnel in the party, could now pursue their interests in the marketplace, not only through political connections. The elite became more open to more groups of people, which is what led to such a strong elite consensus (even emerging right-wingers who sought to take political power from liberals accepted the new market consensus). This expansion of the elite also made the transformation “democratic,” even as it excluded workers (both in terms of rights in the workplace and general systemic ideology). In this sense, then, the Wallersteinian theory that 1989 was a replay of 1968 has a great deal of merit.

That theory continues, unfortunately, to be one of the least-known explanations of what happened in 1989. That is probably due to the relative obscurity of its publication, the imprec-

cision of the argument (none of the authors are or claim to be experts on the region), and its Marxism (Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein 2001). Yet it offers a very fruitful way to rethink what happened in 1989. The merit of the approach is that it allows us to hold on to the view of 1989 as a democratic revolution, while still seeing it as a moment for the emergence of new class interests. In the authors' view, 1968 and 1989 were moments when the interests of the recently college-educated and the “semi-skilled stratum of the new working class” were brought to bear on a stagnant socio-political system. That system made sense for a postwar Fordist industrial society based on a deal between skilled workers, unskilled workers, capitalists, and managers (with the party and intellectuals substituting for the last two in the state socialist system). By the 1980s, however, social structures became more complex in both the East and the West. The post-World War II period led to the well-known boom in higher education that led to the emergence of a huge group of people whose values transcended those promoted by traditional class cleavages (thus, the cultural revolution of the 1960s) and whose interests could not be met by the old industrial structures.

In the Wallersteinian account, 1968 succeeded in the West and was stifled in the East. But the Soviet repression of 1968, the crushing of the Prague Spring, did not solve anything. It only forced the opposition, representing those social groups, to seek other, more imaginative ways to get their interests met. Because those social groups were continually increasing in numbers, as more and more educated and skilled workers were continually being produced, this opposition was able to win so many people over with the “civil society” program that eventually became embodied in Solidarity. The moment when they could freely pursue both their values and their interests came in 1989, just as 1968 made it possible in the West.

Georgi Derluguian develops these ideas in his account of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the Caucasus (Derluguian 2005; see also Lewin 1990). There, the educated professionals whose advancement is stifled in 1968 reemerge as Is-

lamic radicals after the Soviet breakup; bourgeois civil society was not an option due to the limited industrialization in the area and the high numbers of what Derluguian calls “sub-proletarians.” I end my “memo” of 1989 by calling attention to this approach because it seems to me now to help explain much of what actually happened at the time: the long opposition process of the 1980s, the enthusiasm of so many social groups for the toppling of communism, the strong support within the party for radical reform, the uncertainty of the exact economic program that would allow for the advancement of these groups, the eventual embrace of the market economy, and the class-based dissatisfactions that would emerge soon after.

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