

# The Poverty of 'Anti-Politics'

Robert Shenton

David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990).

NEAR THE END of this book David Ost remarks that, "All those who talk about the 'death of communism' miss the essential point: as reform proceeds apace, the slogans of Marxism will come into vogue once again." (213) Such has not come to pass — at least no yet. The "reforms" have certainly proceeded apace. Since coming to power the Solidarity government, in alliance with the International Monetary Fund, has implemented monetarism, fought to outlaw abortion, and made religious education all but compulsory in Poland's schools to mention just a few of its more notable policies. The 'slogans of Marxism', however, have not come into 'vogue'. Rather, the Polish people have disposed of one of the central figures of Solidarity, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and have elevated a Canadian non-entity, Stanislaw Tyminski, whose previous political experience included the fringe right Canadian Libertarian Party, to the status of Lech Walesa's main political rival. Given this remarkable turn of events, the question that must be asked of Ost's writings, (or, indeed, any number of works written on the subject of Solidarity and the transformation of Poland over the past decade) is how well they allow us to understand the events which have taken place in that country since March of 1989. In order to fairly answer this question a rather lengthy exposition of Ost's thesis is in order.

Belying its title, the central concern of David Ost's book is not the history of Solidarity *per se* but rather the evolution of the movement's intellectual mentors, especially the members of the Workers Defense Committee, KOR. David Ost's central argument is that in the late 1960s and early 1970s Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuron and their KOR colleagues created a new kind of politics, a "postmodern left." In Ost's words,

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What made *this* left so original was that it had given up all the utopias radicals so often cling to. It might best be called a *post-modern* left. This a left past the age of innocence, past the utopias and simple solutions. It knows that left traditions have been hopelessly compromised, but seeks to salvage something anyway. It represents a continuation of tradition, but also its transcendence. Postmodernism is an attempt to recapture concepts and traditions that have lost their freshness and power, that have already been compromised, but nonetheless still have something to say. This post-modern left thus rediscovered the concept of civil society long after the left had discarded it. It embraces civil society and pluralism, and freely appropriates from different spheres: the right, the left, the Catholic Church. It doesn't worry that the lines are being blurred, because it knows the lines have already been blurred. The post modern left rejects finality and accepts inconsistency. It revels in a 'love of difference and flux and the exuberantly unfinished', and wants these values to be welcomed in a new political pluralism. There is no modernist, constructivist faith in the future here. No technology, either mechanical or social, can guarantee a life worth living. Only people actually living a worthy life can guarantee its reproduction. (16)

Central to this 'post-modernism', according to Ost, was a belief in the political strategy of "anti-politics" born out of the frustration of the perceived impossibility of changing the nature of the Polish state, a perception which was itself the creation of the state repression of the decade 1965-75. Crucial to the creation of this sense of frustration with politics as such was the demise of the last hopes of the period of post-Stalinist revisionism associated with the regime of Wladislaw Gomulka and the rise to prominence in 1967 of the "Partisan" faction of the Polish United Workers' (or communist) Party which instituted an anti-Semitic, anti-intellectual purge of the Party and Polish society in 1969. Such a purge went especially hard on young University of Warsaw based Warsaw radicals such as Kuron and Michnik.

...liberal intellectuals were expelled from the universities, government ministries, publishing houses, or wherever else they worked. The viciousness of the campaign, the persecution of thousands of law-abiding citizens, the attempt to stir up nationalist hatreds — all of this dramatically changes the political situation in Poland. It also changes the nature of the Party. Thousands of socialists for whom such policies were the antithesis of socialism either left the Party or were expelled. The hopes that many had held for so long, that somehow something good could still come out of this Party — all of that was dashed. (51)

This purge was followed in 1970 by the bloody repression of strike activity generated by price increases among workers in the now famous shipyards of the Baltic coast.

When workers went on strike ... the regime responded with unprecedented force. The first day of the strikes brought pitched battles in Gdansk and Szczecin, where police fired on workers who had left their factories and marched downtown, and workers responded by burning down Party headquarters. But this was nothing compared with December 17. The mayor of Gdynia, Stanislaw Kociolek, had broadcast an appeal for workers to return to the

shipyards that day, saying that the strikes were over. And workers did come to work. But when they arrived for the 6 a.m. shift, they found the gates locked. Immediately afterward, in one of the most gruesome massacres in post-war Europe, still unexplained to this day, police opened fire on the unarmed crowd, killing dozens of workers trying to report to their jobs. (51)

Ost argues that the crisis generated by the strikes and the treatment of those participating in them led to the ouster of Gomulka and his replacement by Edward Geirek who made various temporary economic and political concessions to the strikers. However, despite the opportunity presented by this crisis, reformist intellectuals remained silent. Ost maintains they were "too shell-shocked to respond" seeing little purpose in protest.

Attempting to find an escape from labour's wrathful response to a deteriorating standard of living, Geirek attempted to "revitalise Poland's economy on the cheap" by borrowing petro-dollars in order to import Western technology. This technological fix was to be combined with domestic reforms in such a fashion as to create a booming economy which would in turn produce a quiescent working class. However, as pressure from below mounted the program of reforms was for the most part abandoned while consumer goods increasingly eclipsed capital equipment on import manifests. With the advent of the global economic crisis in late 1973 triggered by dramatically increased oil prices, the Polish economy, now lumbered with a huge external debt, went into a deep recession. It was this recession, itself the outcome of Geirek's failed response to working-class militancy, which, from 1976 on, in turned spawned the wave of strikes which begat Solidarity.

The "post modernist" politics of Michnik and Kuron evolved during the same period. Central to this evolution was the notion of "anti-politics" which embodied a voluntaristic rejection of what were seen as traditional forms of politics as well as a rejection of the state as the primary arena of political struggle. Conditioned by the repression visited on strike activity generated by the failures of Gomulka's reformism and Geirek's "great leap" into the economic abyss, the "ideology" of "anti-politics" was based, according to Ost, on an

... "ingenious error": the belief that society could be democratized without affecting the state. It was "ingenious" in that it successfully mobilized civil society, before the creation of Solidarity and even more so afterward, when millions of people suddenly began acting as citizens of a newly revitalised public sphere. But it was also an error, because the monopolistic state could not be ignored. For if the socialist state necessarily tries to monopolise public life, which is what the social democrats asserted, then the reappropriation of the public sphere that would occur with the legalisation of independent societal organisations (like Solidarity) would be an encroachment upon that state. At that point it would no longer be possible to ignore the state. (57)

Ost argues that this policy of "bypassing the state" became irrelevant in August of 1980 at the moment in which Solidarity was legalised in defacto fashion

following a new wave of strikes in the Baltic coast ports. "A new historical period had begun," but one for which KOR's "post modern" "anti-politics" provided little preparation. "State politics was now back on the agenda" in the form of an invitation to corporatist compromise from the Party's negotiators who asked whether Solidarity was prepared "to co-operate" or to continue to follow what they termed "the road to nowhere."

Solidarity, Ost tells us, responded to his challenge in various ways ranging from a proposal to take part in food distribution and to "check" food supplies to a flirtation with syndicalism in the form of an "active strike" involving overtime labour which would be directed by Solidarity which would also control the distribution of the goods produced. Kuron argued that the long-term solution would be found in a "Government of National Salvation" but that in the interim

the union should ask all workers to work harder and produce more today. This additional effort, however should be entirely organised by the self-management bodies and by new union control commissions which would also administer the additional output. (131)

According to Ost, none of these proposals came to much. The former met with Party opposition on the grounds that "whoever controlled food production essentially controlled political power," while Solidarity itself rapidly abandoned the syndicalist option arguing that "the nation's *primary* need" was not "self-managing reform, but the creation of institutions that will guarantee working people influence in the socioeconomic policy of the state." Any immediate hopes of creating such institutions were cut short by the imposition of Martial Law on 11 December 1981, the military coup of General Jaruzelski and the ensuing arrest or escape into hiding of a large proportion of the KOR/Solidarity leadership. As Ost argues, in the years that followed, that leadership and Walesa in particular came to be much criticised for having been "too trusting of the government, too willing to come to an accord."

... by 1983, underground publications such as *Niepodleglosc* (Independence) and *Polityka Polska* (Polish Politics) took up the charge that Solidarity had been too "socialist," too tied to leftist faith in the power of the masses. By 1984, however, when the reluctance to engage in critical self-examination had faded, the right wing became increasingly prominent and increasingly diverse, and its main themes were taken up in a wide number of publications. (165)

More and more, the official Solidarity leadership bodies themselves adopted a pro-market position, culminating in an April 1987 document signed by Walesa ... calling for extensive privatisation of the Polish economy. So market oriented was the program that Ryszard Bugaj, the chief economist of the left social democratic tendency of Solidarity, wrote that one might never know this was a trade union program if not for the union masthead at the top! (168)

Thus began Solidarity's move to the right. By 1987 both the Party and Solidarity were split over the question of market reform.

The workers, Solidarity's putative rank and file, were already beginning to oppose reform, in deed if not in word. They wanted a "reform" that meant an immediate increase in the standard of living, while the reform they saw entailed a cut in living standards. The government argued that this was just the bitter pill on the road to recovery, but the workers, naturally, did not believe it. The Solidarity leadership, however, *did* believe it. (171)

The attempt by the pro-market wing of the Party-government to impose its program on Polish society once again met with stiff resistance in the form of strikes in the Spring of 1988. In Ost's view, however, these strikes were only superficially similar to those of a decade before.

The strikes of April-May 1988 resembled the ones of 1980 only in the way they appeared on the television screen... But whereas those were strikes of hope, these were strikes of despair. And whereas those strikes protested against the lack of reform, these strikes were in part directed against the effects of the economic reform already under way. The strikers were different too. It was the young workers who led these strikes... They were protesting against disappearing dreams and non-existent perspectives. Like workers in a Third World country, they saw reform as entailing higher prices and austerity alone, harming those who had the least to begin with. (182)

From this period on, Ost argues, the Solidarity/KOR leadership had increasing difficulty in controlling strike activity and was rapidly losing membership. While, for example, in the Warsaw area in 1981 Solidarity had boasted some 300,000 members in 4000 worksites by March of 1989 membership had declined to 60,000 in 100 shops. In Gdansk, Solidarity's birthplace, membership had dropped by a factor of seven. Yet, although weakened in the workplace, Solidarity faced a prostrate opponent in the Jaruzelski regime and by August 1989 the Round Table talks had resulted in the first Solidarity government with long-time Solidarity advisor Tadeusz Mazowiecki at its head and with Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuron playing important roles — the latter as Minister of Labour.

The generalised euphoria occasioned by the end of communist rule and the accession of a democratically elected government initially masked the growing rift in Solidarity between the "free-marketeers" and those who held fast to the ideal of Solidarity as a movement to defend working class interests. The latter were not silent even if their voices were not widely reported in the Western press. Walesa himself was denounced by young workers in Gdansk on 29 January 1989 as one of "them," "a traitor" to Solidarity's defense of labour. Noted Solidarity film-maker Andrzej Gwaizda warned of the "spectre of marketization." In the Spring of 1989 rival Solidarity organizations were set up in a number of industrial and port towns.

As Ost informs us, all of this preceded the announcement in December 1989 of the austere Sachs/Balcerowicz plan of economic recovery. The adoption of this plan was itself evidence of the now dominant influence of the "free-marketeer's in the higher circles of Solidarity which now capitulated to IMF demands for the "structural adjustment" of the Polish economy as the price for liberal rescheduling

of Poland's 40 billion dollar debt and the provision of emergency stand-by credits. The acceptance and implementation of the Sachs/Balcerowicz plan represented a huge gamble for the fledgling rule of Solidarity. It called for the rapid removal of all price controls, full convertibility of the Zloty, the end of subsidies on fuel, food and housing, and a strict limitation on all wage increases. It was predicted by the planners themselves that unemployment would reach over 400,000 in the first year and that energy prices would increase between four and seven times.

Sachs promised economic chaos for 6 months, improvement within a year, and full integration into Europe in 10 years. The Sachs gamble is dependent on a number of both external and internal variables. Externally, it requires the maintenance of at least as reasonably buoyant world economy, a positive response to the allure of the revamped Polish economy to would-be foreign investors, and the availability of strategic amounts of aid of sufficient quantity and quality to tide Poland's consumers over the period of adjustment.

Internally, the chances of success depend upon simultaneous increases in labour productivity in both industry and agriculture. In practice in the industrial sector this means raising output while, at the same time, closing down large, inefficient and under-capitalized state factories. This feat is to be achieved through a combination of the blossoming of small private production and foreign investment which will take advantage of the low wages created by dramatically increased unemployment.

In agriculture the planned remedies are no less draconian. Although in the aftermath of World War II there was an initial attempt to collectivise agriculture in Poland the policy was rapidly abandoned by Poland's post-war Communists as politically untenable. Thus, some 70 per cent of agricultural land remained in private hands with 60 per cent of Poland's 2.8 million private farms smaller than 5 hectares. Until recently, laws governing the sale of farms prevented land concentration with farm sizes being limited to 50 or 100 hectares depending upon the location and soil quality. Under the Sachs plan land is to become a freely traded commodity in order to encourage higher productivity on large farms. Aside from augmenting the already growing number of unemployed there is no guarantee that increased farm size would automatically produce a more efficient agricultural sector.

By December 1989 the chaos promised by Sachs had become reality. Living standards had dropped by some 40 per cent over the preceding twelve months and some 60 per cent of family budgets was being spent on food alone. Unemployment by year's end was estimated at between one and two million or 6 and 11 per cent of the waged population. The *Economist* pointedly remarked that "Economic reform has so far meant that Poles can gaze in wonderment at now well-stocked meat stalls that have no money to buy from." Jacek Kuron, the hero of KOR, was reduced to the role of opening "soup kitchens" and "Down with Kuron's Soup" covered the walls of Warsaw.

By the time of the national elections of November 1990, economic conditions had deteriorated even further with unemployment growing rapidly and inflation re-emerging as a major problem. In the first round of elections Solidarity Prime Minister Tradeusz Mazowiecki, supported by Michnik and Kuron, was the choice of little more than 20 per cent of Polish voters and ran behind not only Walesa but the Libertarian Tyminski as well. Bitter words were exchanged between the Walesa and Mazowiecki camps with long-time KOR activist Zbigniew Bujak turning in his Solidary party card.

The results of the Polish elections challenge Ost's analysis in the most fundamental fashion. For if, as Ost argues, the secret of Solidarity's success in removing the communists from power was its "ingenious discovery" of an "anti-politics" the practice of which was deeply rooted in an understanding of "civil society," why then has the support of the authors of this ingenious error been so rapidly and thoroughly undone?

The answer to this question may well be a simple one. Ost has fallen prey to mistaking a reading back of the *post-hoc* rationalizations of their actions by Michnik, Kuron, *et al.* for a historical explanation of those actions — or rather re-actions. For the most part, KOR intellectuals were reacting — to worker upheavals, to government reform policies, and ultimately to the collapse of the communist regime. Again and again, by Ost's rendition, KOR was surprised: by the successful formation of the Solidarity union, by the success of the Gdansk strikes, by the collapse of the communist regime, and ultimately and most importantly, by its own accession to power. Thus, when in power and faced with the necessity to govern, to make and to implement policy, it collapsed. Its supposed "post-modernism" was openly shown for the irrelevance that it had always been.

Notwithstanding these criticism, this is in many ways a fine book. It is well-written and well-argued. Moreover, this reviewer has had the advantage of writing from a viewpoint conditioned by the passage of events which have occurred long since Ost put his book to press. Yet, Ost's book could have been better still. All that would have been required was a recognition by him that it was not the "post-modernism" or "anti-politics" of the KOR intellectuals which have made the history of Poland over the past twenty years but the movement of the Polish working class. As the elections of 1990 have so far shown, they make it still.

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