

REVIEWS

SOLIDARITY BEYOND THE LIBERAL NARRATIVE

Michał Siermiński, *Pęknięta Solidarność: Inteligencja opozycyjna a robotnicy 1964–1981* (Warsaw: Książka i Prasa, 2020), 476 p. ISBN 9788366615922

Michał Siermiński's *Pęknięta Solidarność (Ruptured Solidarity)* is a thought-provoking interpretation of dissident political philosophy in Poland, as well as an intervention into the existing historiography of the state socialist period, especially the Solidarity Revolution (1980–1981). The main claim of Siermiński's work is that the 1980 revolution in Poland was not the result of new political ideas developed by the opposition, which, according to the author, underwent an evolution distancing it from the working class. Rather, says the author, the revolution grew of the existing practices of the workers themselves. How this intellectual evolution happened and why it mattered are central to his arguments.

This book brings back the “whodunnit” debate that took place in the 1990s and concerns whether intellectuals or workers were the driving force in the Solidarity movement.¹ Siermiński is aware of this and refers frequently to sociologist Roman Laba, who had at that time argued that the workers had played an essential role in the development of the movement.² The book's main line of argument, moreover, resembles Jan Sowa's *Inna Rzeczpospolita jest możliwa (A different republic is possible)*, somehow absent in Siermiński's bibliography, where Sowa portrayed Solidarity as a *communist* movement, in which communism stood for *the commons*, a form of organization beyond private or state property.³

The book opens unexpectedly with a prologue, an extended essay on the Russian revolution. After a short introduction, the first chapter is devoted to March 1968 in Poland

¹ Jan Kubik, “Who Done It: Workers, Intellectuals, or Someone Else? Controversy over Solidarity's Origins and Social Composition,” *Theory and Society* 23(1994), no. 3, pp. 441–66.

² Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity: A Political Sociology of Poland's Working-Class Democratization* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

³ Jan Sowa, *Inna Rzeczpospolita jest możliwa!: widma przeszłości, wizje przyszłości* (Warsaw: Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal, 2015).

as a watershed event for the leftist dissenters (Kuroń, Modzelewski, and Komandosi). The second chapter shows the intellectual evolution of this group during the 1970s. The third chapter provides a new interpretation of the 1970–1971 workers' revolt in Poland. The fourth chapter analyses how the conflict between intellectuals and workers played out during the Solidarity Revolution.

The first protagonist of the book is the oppositional intelligentsia born out of revisionist Marxism. Throughout the book it is represented mostly by Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik, who, without a doubt because of their intellectual stature as well as their position domestically and internationally, were key actors on that side. Their intellectual evolution is followed very carefully, and the author's remarks are usually illustrated with long quoted passages. The content of the book weighs heavily towards this group. The second protagonist is the working class, sometimes referred to, in various forms, as "the proletariat." This protagonist, however, remains nebulous. Although it had "working class autonomy," it is at times seen as a collective subject through actions or attitudes (the author refers to contemporaneous opinion polls and sociological surveys) and sometimes has spokesmen, like the 1981 Solidarity activist and self-management advocate Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski, who is an author of the book's afterword.

My first criticism is that, for a book of such considerable size, only around three pages (57–59) serve as an actual introduction, where the author describes the work's structure, writes what he wants to achieve in its respective chapters, and introduces his methods and approach.

In the first chapter, Siermiński seeks to deconstruct the intelligentsia's myths about March 1968. During 1968, the Polish state-socialist authorities reacted to the student protests with repression and an anti-Semitic propaganda campaign under the cover of anti-Zionism, combined with purges in the state administration, Communist party and other institutions. However, he seems unable to go beyond them and offer an alternative reading of the events. He interestingly relates the discussion among intellectuals-participants as to whether and why ordinary people bought into the official anti-Semitic propaganda and did not support the students. But he then himself engages in this very same dispute, exactly in the terms proposed by the events' participants (92–108). In order to prove that the Polish working class did not turn into a "[...] spontaneous anti-Semitic subject [...]" (106) he cites cases in which the workers showed solidarity with the students. Siermiński looks for a clear resolution, but workers behaved variously during the events of March 1968. Is there really a need to establish a unity of interests between students and workers? The events Siermiński recalls, where the workers supported the students, did indeed occur. Other groups of workers, however, saw the students' protests as not being their fight, and the propaganda campaign promising, for example, more equitable rules for university admissions, was in fact viewed favorably. Others tried to advance their own agendas in the confused situation created by the demonstrations, aggressive anti-Jewish propaganda campaign, and purges in the elite.

The evolution traced in chapter two is in fact the “great turn” (wielki zwrot) from anti-bureaucratic socialism to liberalism, human rights, and national tradition analyzed in Dariusz Gawin’s 2013 book, which Siermiński refers to.⁴ While Gawin describes this turn as a process of intellectual maturing and of finding a more inclusive formula, Siermiński sees this process, caused by disappointment with the people due to the March 1968 experiences, as detachment from Marxism and from the interests of the working class. He summarizes this turn as follows:

[...] in the mid-1960s the conflict between the working class and party-state bureaucracy stood in the center of the left’s political imagination. Several years later in the same place the antagonism between the Polish nation and the ‘totalitarian’ system appeared” (178).

In the third chapter, the author attempts to question the role of the events of 1976, when organized dissident groups emerged, as the source of popular protest in Poland. Instead, he points to the year 1970, when the workers’ uprising in Northern Poland forced Władysław Gomułka to resign and the new First Secretary Edward Gierek to adjust his policies. During 1970, the conjunction of sit-down strikes (factory occupation), intra-company committees, and the demand to form an independent labor union, Siermiński shows, transformed the working class into an autonomous power. In this telling of the 1970 revolt, its more violent elements (street fights, dead victims) somehow disappear. Siermiński is very often a historian in this book, as when in chapter four he confronts Kuroń’s claims that the working class was not interested in economic self-management, using opinion polls from the time which showed otherwise (305–315). Yet in chapter three, he seems to be *too little* of a historian to say anything new about the working class in 1970. Instead, he gives ample evidence of the dissidents’ lack of understanding of what was happening in Gdańsk and other cities. Surprisingly, since he is usually identified with the sphere of high culture and intellectual critique of socialism, it was the editor of the Polish émigré magazine *Kultura*, Jerzy Giedroyc, who understood that the workers’ question was crucial to gaining concessions from the party-state (185–195).

During the course of the Solidarity Revolution, Siermiński demonstrates that events were being driven by intuitive practices of the working class, based on experiences from a decade earlier, with intellectuals attempting to block the more radical demands (235–269). Kuroń and Michnik, as the author shows, saw the workers’ protest through the lens of their concepts of civil society and cautious evolution, in which moderation and negotiation with the state were seen as a sign of maturity. In this chapter, I especially enjoyed Siermiński’s analysis of Jacek Kuroń’s interview from 1981, which

⁴ Dariusz Gawin, *Wielki zwrot: ewolucja lewicy i odrodzenie idei społeczeństwa obywatelskiego 1956–1976*, (Krakow: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 2013).

expertly highlights Siermiński's points (281–290). In the book's conclusion, the author comes back to setting the intelligentsia (national-civic) against a popular (workers') understanding of Solidarity. Again, both positions are expressed by Adam Michnik, and this perspective, despite the polemical intention of going beyond his interpretations of the events in which the intellectuals played the major role in Polish postwar history, looms large and hinders the formulation of a persuasive alternative.

In summary, when it comes to the polemics with Kuroń's and Michnik's intellectual evolution, the book is a strong contribution to the critique of dissident political philosophy. The project of a more inclusive history of protest under state socialism, however, remains less convincing.

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