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## **The Promises and Limits of Anti-Politics: Solidarity's Democracy and Its Successors**

### **The Promise of Anti-Politics**

It is difficult to imagine now, but in the early 1980s, Poland found itself at the center of world attention. Poland is unusually sensitive to how the world views it. A powerful inferiority complex pervades, accompanied by rash proclamations of greatness and importance that are but the flip side of that same complex. From that standpoint, the 1980s were a very special time. People and news organizations around the world saw Poland as at the center of important global developments. The Solidarity movement, and the incredible self-organization of society accompanying it, galvanized world attention like nothing else at the time. Mainstream circles saw developments in Poland as a chink in the longstanding, seemingly endless Cold War, though they debated whether it too was destined to fail or might serve as a harbinger of the new. Left and progressive movements, disappointed by the decline of the 1960s, and particularly by events in Southeast Asia after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, saw Poland as one of the bright lights of the time: a workers' movement against a supposed workers' state – and aside from traditional communist parties, few of which remained, few in the western left saw Soviet bloc countries as genuine “workers' states.” Western governments and elites were of course also intensely interested in the ongoing events, but as they were going through a period of *détente* and *Ostpolitik*, an easing of relations with the communist party states in the east, they found themselves worried about how the Polish events might upset that new balance. In an editorial soon after the emergence of Solidarity in 1980, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote that of course the events in Poland were heroic and admirable, but western loans to the region had long been considered safe – safer than those in the turbulent Third World – and if strikes were to become a norm,

those loans could be in danger. Elites, in other words, were attached to the status quo, and so were more worried than others that the Polish events might upset that.

What exactly was everyone so focused on? It was not just a series of strikes, or a potential conflict between protestors and the state. Rather, it was the astonishing new status quo that emerged after the Gdansk Accord. Solidarity's legalization left the state in a kind of suspended legal animation. Citizens were active in all rungs of life, beginning to govern themselves while the authorities looked on. The Party still staffed all the institutions of the state. It controlled the economy, and put goods in the stores – or, increasingly, not. But public life was dominated by an open-ended conversation about how to proceed. In factories and institutes, workers were increasingly dominant, their voice often even trumping that of the party leader or director. Poland began to be run by constant meetings. Citizens gathered in workplaces and institutes, in houses of culture and factory halls, and talked about public events. Times were tense, but they were also full with possibility.

This is what the world was focused on. This is what made Poland the center of events. These weren't just protests against a repressive regime. Such things go on regularly in cities and countries around the world. This was the emergence of some alternative kind of order, separate from and apparently independent of the official state. Its hallmark and most distinguishing feature was the notion of openness. Just as the strikers in Gdansk insisted that negotiations with the authorities were broadcast over the loudspeakers to the shipworkers in the yards, so meetings and events in the tumultuous first months of the movement were open to all. In March 1981, my third visit to Poland but first during the Solidarity period, I attended the large meeting at Auditorium Maximum in Warsaw University commemorating the events of March 1968. Since I didn't know Polish well at the time, I brought a small tape recorder so I could listen to the proceedings more slowly later on. But expecting that people would be suspicious of tape recorders, seeing them as the potential ears of the secret police, I made sure to keep the device hidden as the student guards let me into the hall. I got about five meters in when one turned to me and said, "Do you have a camera?" Yes, I replied, resigned to giving it away. "Do you have a tape recorder?" Not wanting to deceive them, I replied yes again, and proceeded to take it out to hand over. "Then you go to the front row, please!" they urged me. "We want as many people as possible to know what's happening here."

This movement was not trying to take control of the state. It was trying to take control of itself. It was trying to come to some collective understanding of the situation the society was in, and to begin to offer suggestions and solutions on how to change it. Jadwiga Staniszkis's characterization of it as a "self-limiting revolution" was quite apt: it sought radical change, but did not know exactly what that entailed, and so was focused only on governing itself. In this way, the movement was profoundly "anti-political," in that it refrained from focusing on the affairs and institutions of state. Its aspirations for a new society were premised on

openness and conversation: it would be only through this kind of open discussion that the world would be changed. The first Solidarity period was that period of open and unfettered dialogue and debate, in all walks of life. It was not Poland itself that transfixed the world at the time. It was Poland's non-revolutionary revolution, its anti-political politics, its cult of openness and debate. Anti-politics was seen, rightfully, as some new kind of democratic practice, and many wondered about its applicability elsewhere, as a way of ensuring broad civic input into public affairs.

Obviously, things are not that way today. Poland, like the rest of east-central Europe, is seen today mostly as routinized elements of a basically stable European order, without many lessons of interest to others. But today it is still worthwhile to look back on those developments – not from the point of view of history, or nostalgia, but from the angle of looking back at that anti-politics, and seeing what is still relevant. Solidarity does not belong to Poles alone. It belongs also to the world that once had such hope in it. What is left of those hopes today?

Can one still talk about the promises of anti-politics? About the belief that self-organized groups of citizens, neither acting at the behest of the state nor dependent on the whims of the market, but seeking, through rational, informed, and respectful dialogue, to come to equitable decisions accepted by all? Can there be a sphere of politics, with extensive civic participation, free of coercion, yet able to make binding and enforceable decisions? To what extent did Solidarity present such a vision? To what extent is the Solidarity experience still relevant? And – relevant to what?

In my book titled *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, first published in 1990 and available in Polish translation only in 2014, I offered a portrait of Poland's original Solidarity movement as a great and still vital experiment, though ultimately unsuccessful, in the evolution of participatory forms of democratic practice.<sup>1</sup> As a political movement, Solidarity of course eventually won. Its triumph in 1989, through a peaceful compromise pushed through by a forceful and popular social movement, ushered in the building of a strong *representative* democracy in eastern Europe, and thus ended the Cold War. But Solidarity in 1980-1981 was something special. It aimed not at the building of formal representative democracy – such a goal was universally recognized as impossible at the time – and thus it had no choice but to be a different kind of democratic movement instead. But the theoretical arguments of Solidarity's ideologues, particularly Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik, demonstrate that it also *sought* to be a different kind of movement. Recognizing the limitations on the kind of political reform that was possible, they advocated a program based on the revitalization of civil society, and leaving the official state sphere alone. They argued that politics could be transformed not by engaging directly in the political sphere, but by building independent civic

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<sup>1</sup> Original version: Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990; also: *Solidarność a polityka antypolityki* (Gdansk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2014).

movements formally uninterested and uninvolved in politics, and presenting the state with a *fait accompli* of a mobilized populace, eventually forcing the state to transform.

This is exactly what the first Solidarity period was all about. To call Kuron and Michnik the ideologues of the movement is to make not a political claim but a historical one. We have the saying in English, “the proof is in the pudding,” meaning that we know what’s in something by looking at (or tasting) the final result. The movement that arose in Poland after August 1980 was based precisely on their call for the revitalization of society through massive participation and engagement – in this case by a trade union that consistently claimed to be separate from the political sphere, and refrained from challenging the Party’s prerogatives in the state. They did not “run” the movement, but their ideas about not just the necessity but the *ability* to build an independent civil society within a state socialist dictatorship are a good description of what indeed took place during the 16 months until the imposition of martial law in December 1981.

This essay is a reflection on the democratic premise and promise of that movement. It makes three key points. First, it shows the limitations of that model – what I call here, simply, “anti-politics” – due to its unwillingness and inability to engage in politics. Second, it argues that anti-politics nevertheless constitutes an important and still valuable lesson in the possibility of transforming dictatorships through civic engagement. Third, it explores some subsequent developments in democratic theory and practice – specifically, we look at deliberative democracy and participatory budgeting – that seek to build on Solidarity’s cultivation of widespread rational participation, while avoiding the pitfalls that Solidarity faced. In a sense, the overall argument is that Solidarity can be seen as some kind some sort of Hegelian “moment” in the unfolding of democracy. It does not point to a final Truth, but it does illustrate real potential, real new possibilities, while also demonstrating where those possibilities went awry, and what might be done to fix them.

## **The Limits of Anti-Politics**

Solidarity in 1980-81 constituted a textbook case of a participatory, “council” model of democracy, far from the idea of “representative” democracy. Its meetings were exemplars of popular participation, in which people were first encouraged, and then themselves insisted, on speaking about what they wanted for generally as long as they wanted, on issues related to the main topic of discussion or on some other point about which they felt they had too long been silent. Meetings in factories, enterprises, or institutes had a certain electricity about them – both because they almost always took place at some time of tension (almost ceaseless for the sixteen months of legality), and because people saw the very articulation of

their viewpoint as something of profound importance. For the first several months especially, meetings tended to be long, drawn-out affairs in which many regular workers, not seeking to be leaders, sought, and were given, time to present their views, put forth their ideas, talk about what was important for them. Delegates were elected, but they did not leave the workplace and make decisions elsewhere, away from the control of their electors. Rather, they had to regularly report back to their workplace after attending meetings “higher up,” in order to brief workers on what had happened and seek support or ask for advice on how to proceed next. Conflicts in the workplace elicited not grievance procedures but snap meetings and rallies, as the voice of the collective regularly trumped that of the temporary representative. Delegates unable to persuade the collective, or otherwise losing the confidence of their workplace electorate, soon lost their position as well. The movement was not institutionalized to a point where leadership changes occurred only during a scheduled election. Workplace matters, meanwhile, tended to be handled expeditiously: rank-and-file workers more boldly offered suggestions, and managers, aware where power now lay, and in any case naturally inclined to minimize internal conflict, usually did their best to accommodate them. In the workplace itself, and in discussions over the future, people got involved, and remained involved. Against those political theorists who have argued that regular people just don't want to be bothered with governing, Solidarity's activists provided strong evidence for the contrary claim: that when people believe their voice matters, and that they are being taken seriously, they are eager to be involved, and take their own role seriously.

Solidarity's anti-politics constituted a bold project of political reform. For as argued already in the title of my book, its was a *politics* of anti-politics. The movement was anti-political in its refusal to directly challenge state power, to question its political alliances, or to put forth overarching grand systemic alternatives. It was quite political, however, in that people were discussing collective affairs, seeking to formulate claims, projecting an idea of a different kind of society, and to a large extent already living *as if* they were already in that future society – a kind of *anticipatory* democracy was at work here.

The promise of anti-politics was clear: through their very engagement and participation, citizens were already changing the world. They didn't need state power in order to live differently. They didn't need state power in order to speak freely. And yet, these sixteen months were not a time of “peaceful coexistence” between state and society. They were instead incredibly tense months, with barely a moment when it seemed that things might really last. Solidarity's main goal during that period, the focus of all its demands, was always the same: that things *would* last – in particular, that Solidarity would last. They compromised on all kinds of economic issues during this time, and continually sought only that same guarantee: that an independent representation of society, not impacting the political sphere, would last.

But here was the first limit. It was impossible for things to last as they were *without* a political transformation. It was precisely *because* widespread independent participation lay at the heart of Solidarity's practice that it could not be incorporated into the existing system. That system was based on regular economic plans prepared by the state planning agency in coordination with the managers of state-owned firms. These plans spelled out not just each firm's production quotas, but wages, too. The planned economy thus required some kind of coordination with workers. This had been done by trade unions closely allied with the state, unions whose chief aim was the fulfillment of the plan. But independent unions functioned differently, and could not be told what to do. Genuine negotiations with independent unions, however, meant that the state could not be guaranteed an implementation of its plan. The existence of independent unions thus required a fundamental transformation in the nature of the state. A state system premised on the absence of independent representation of civil society cannot stay untouched when the latter governs itself.

The second limit of Solidarity's anti-politics has to do with the organizational aspects that made compromise difficult: the movement generated militant leaders, and its decentralized structure exacerbated conflicts. As for the first, the chief problem is that the council method of democracy, particularly in conditions of obstruction from the target of protest, yields leaders based too much on public presentation, loud talking, and personal charisma. The result tends to alienate rivals, drive out moderates, and get worse as time goes on.

One way to understand this is through a segue to one of the more important books about social movements in quite some time, Jane McAlevey's *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell)*.<sup>2</sup> McAlevey is perhaps the most successful trade union organizer in the United States of the last generation. Having started out working in environmental NGOs, she soon moved to becoming a union organizer. And having succeeded in Stamford, Connecticut, a very wealthy conservative city just outside of New York, she was moved to Las Vegas, where in a period of five years she managed to transform the city, and the national health-care industry, by organizing hospitals – nursing and clerical staff alike – at the top, for-profit hospitals where legions of unionists had previously failed. There are libraries full of books on successful or failed social movements. What makes this one so unusual is its focus on leadership, on the kinds of leaders that can bring in supporters and maintain their commitment in the face of attacks from above.

A key mistake of movement organizers, she argues, is that they tend to be too charmed by the loudest and most self-promoting of potential leaders, not the most reliable or trustful. Since movements can only succeed where the support base is widespread and solidaristic, movements need leaders who are trusted by others. Organizers, however, typically first encounter people who present themselves as

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<sup>2</sup> New York: Verso Press, 2014.

leaders, rather than those identified by others as trustful individuals. While the former might be brave, they also often tend to be excessively full of themselves, believing themselves to have leadership qualities without actually having won the sympathy of their co-workers. They often believe themselves to be better than others, to be stuck in positions beneath their capacities, underestimated and undervalued. But such a comportment is often treated as obnoxious self-importance by others. If I feel stuck in a position that I think is beneath me, believe I have great potentials that are not being utilized, and blame this sad fate entirely on someone else, I likely will not feel too solidaristic with others. I might want to be a leader to demonstrate my own talents and advance my own career, more than to uphold the interests of the collective.

The best leaders, in other words, are not those who promote themselves but those whom others promote. The task of an organizer is not to be overly enchanted by the first militant ready to voice discontent and eager to lead a campaign. "The way to find a leader," writes McAleve, "is to see who others trust first." A movement organizer needs to talk to people, find out whom they respect, whom they go to when they have troubles on the job, who they believe is a good and trusted comrade.

Solidarity, however, particularly in the smaller regions and workplaces without deep oppositional roots, was based largely on self-promoted leaders. Instead of the outside organizers looking for good local leadership, as McAleve writes about, most leaders had to emerge on their own. And many of them tended to be individuals who felt personally stifled by the existing system, with their own axes to grind, rather than those who enjoyed the confidence of the workforce.

This, of course, was famously *not* the case in Gdansk. Indeed, one of the key reasons for the success of the August strikes in Gdansk was precisely the superb organizing strategy behind it. The organizers in the Free Trade Union didn't pick just any issue around which to organize a strike. They waited for an opportunity where a trusted worker would be in jeopardy. The strike was started not in response to the price hikes of July 1980, but to the sacking of Anna Walentynowicz. And the strike organizers did not present themselves as leaders. Instead, they looked for someone whom the rank-and-file could trust, and in this way found Lech Walesa.

After August, however, the cost of militance dropped precipitously. Once Solidarity had been accepted, but before union cells existed at most of the factories and enterprises around the country, anyone with a grievance and a militant disposition could present themselves as the founder of the local Solidarity. But these were precisely often those who spoke the loudest, not those who enjoyed the most trust.

Indeed, this seems to explain some of the subsequent support for martial law. In my own research on the question of why martial law was able to be imposed so smoothly, with surprising and long-lasting public acceptance, I found skepticism with local leaders to be one of the most commonly cited factors. By late 1989, there turns out to have been a rather high level of rank-and-file mistrust in their

local Solidarity leaders. "I was sympathetic to the protests, to the demands, but I could never bring myself to join Solidarity," one woman in a small Wroclaw manufacturing plant told me. "Our leader was the loudest one, the one who always 'knew everything,' but not the one who knew *us* well at all." I heard varieties of this story quite often. By the end of the first legal period of Solidarity, the movement as a whole had massive support, but not the individual leaders, many of whom were seen as incapable of making the kind of compromises most people wished for to end the crisis.

The politics of anti-politics promoted this kind of activist. The one who initiated independent public activity was said to be the one living in truth, fighting mendacity, working for solidarity. The one who spoke out against power was the hero, deserving of honor and respect. This model works well during the initial breakthrough of independent action, but becomes a burden on retaining support for the movement during more regular times, when dialogue is essential.

So the limit of this type of leadership is that it monopolizes opposition public space. It generates leaders who think they know best, not those who believe in the rank-and-file. The problem got worse as time went on. Whereas the first months of Solidarity were marked by mass popular debate, factory halls and institute meeting rooms jammed with "regular" people eager to share their voices in public, participation declined dramatically in the final months. In part, of course, this was due to the increasingly repressive atmosphere, the increasingly aggressive words of the state railing against supposed "destabilization." As we know from the study of social movements, repression drives away supporters by increasing the costs of participation. Those afraid of losing their jobs, or their lives, or worried about the impact on family, drop out at such times, leaving the movement smaller, leaner, and usually more radical, too. This in turn led to declining support for leaders, many of whom tended to become even more shrill in the fading days of Solidarity, since they were now speaking mainly to a smaller group of committed radicals. More and more people had simply had enough, and were ready to accept martial law as the only viable possibility of at least some stability. Martial law enjoyed more support by women, and this too follows from the same problem. Leadership dominated by the loudest also tends to be leadership dominated by men, increasingly articulating demands that have less to do with the immediate problems women in a patriarchal society have to confront each day. Activism became more aggressive and more male in the declining days of 1981, contributing greatly to the successful introduction of martial law.

So while the problem of excessively brash leadership existed all along, it became more pertinent as time went on. Those whom people most trusted, because of their expertise and their judgment on how to negotiate between competing realms, found themselves pushed aside by a more aggressive type of leadership, leading to the downward spiral of support that opened the way to acceptance of martial law.

The other problem with Solidarity's organizational structure, mentioned above, is that its largely decentralized nature made the kind of coordination necessary for political deals probably difficult. As Sidney Tarrow has written, "while encouraging the autonomy of the base and exhilarating activists with a sense of participation, [decentralized movements] permit – and indeed encourage – a lack of coordination and continuity."<sup>3</sup> Solidarity had a loosely federal character. It had a weak national structure, and strong regional organizations, which became even stronger after the abortive general strike of March 1981. In the waning months of 1981, strike actions and protests were coordinated mostly by regions, not the center. Indeed, it often seemed that the chief activity of the center, by late fall 1981, was to try to put out the fires started by the regions. At this point, even if the government did want to come to a deal with Solidarity, it became more difficult for Solidarity to make one. Decentralization made coordination less and less possible.

The final limitation of anti-politics, paradoxically, can be seen from the actions of those who did want to address political issues, and did not wish to be lone screamers leading only a small number of committed followers. This is the problem of being able to make a binding deal. On December 5, 1981, a week before the imposition of martial law, Zbigniew Bujak spoke to dozens of delegates packed in the lobby of the Warsaw Polytechnic, at the meeting for delegates of Mazowsze's Solidarity branch (*Walne Zebranie Delegatów NSZZ Solidarność Regionu Mazowsze*). This was a very tense moment. Only days before, the regime press had published excerpts from a secretly wiretapped transcript of the meeting of Solidarity's National Commission, where some of the delegates spoke openly of a "confrontation" that could not be avoided. Karol Modzelewski, usually one of the more moderate voices in the union leadership, evoked the words of the anthem of the Communist International and declared that if it came to a confrontation, "it will be their final battle." And so Bujak came to the Mazowsze delegates speaking of an imminent confrontation with the authorities. But then he said something curious, though flowing naturally from the stance of anti-politics. If it comes to a confrontation, he said, he would not take decisions alone. Solidarity was a democratic movement, and delegates were co-decision-makers. And so even though he was the elected chairman, he said he would return to the delegates and work out, together with them, how to respond to such a confrontation.

The problem, of course, was that any confrontation with the authorities would prevent another calm meeting in which the 200-plus group could come to some kind of agreement on how to respond. Any decision would have to be made quickly, by a leadership not beholden to details of participatory procedure. As it happened, martial law was imposed a week later, accompanied by the internment of the majority of National Commission delegates as they left their late-night meeting in Gdansk. Bujak had left early and escaped arrest, and continued to do so for the

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<sup>3</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 131.

next four and a half years, as he went on to become an underground leader. He learned to make decisions, either on his own or together with other underground leaders. But the idea that even during a crisis of the highest proportions, such a large group would have to gather to come up with a response, was one of the factors that would have made any political solution difficult to achieve, even if there had been good will on the part of the authorities. Bujak's solution followed completely from the logic of anti-politics, and it was one more manifestation of the limits of anti-politics.

If anti-politics was an effort to promote democratic politics by involving citizens not accustomed to having their voices heard, it enjoyed enormous success in its early years. By late 1981, tens if not hundreds of thousands of Poles were speaking out about public issues and taking part in independent civic initiatives of broad political concern. But Solidarity in the end knew how to mobilize people, not how to provide them a continued say in public affairs. Of course, that depended chiefly on a change in state policy, if not in the state. But when the state did change policy, starting around 1987, Solidarity was no longer interested in promoting the broad civic politics of the past. The underground leadership had moved to support elite pact-making, as it no longer believed popular participation either effective or a legitimate emanation of the collective will. As a political accord became increasingly possible, movement leaders sought to curtail independent activity, and put forth themselves as the best guarantor of political change. The Round Table negotiations of 1989 were an elite-run affair. They were then followed by popular elections that soon led to the creation of a Solidarity government. Now the preferred model of democracy proposed by Solidarity leaders became clear: there should be a typical Schumpeterian representative democracy, with citizens asked to participate in election campaigns, but to largely stay out of politics in the interim.<sup>4</sup>

With this new approach, Solidarity gave up its role as an innovator in the development of democratic politics. Unsurprisingly, it no longer sparked much international interest, by democratic theorists or activists, a sharp contrast to the huge international following it had achieved in the early 1980s. Solidarity had been an important step in the development of a new kind of democratic politics, showing how dictatorships could be stripped of their authority, weakened to the point of dismantlement, by non-violent societal rejection, by the demonstrative non-violent assertion of civic rights. But it failed in its ability to engage in politics, and instead of looking for new creative solutions, the movement abandoned its

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<sup>4</sup> I discuss Solidarity's original model of democracy, with its sharp departure from Schumpeterian models, in *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, chapter two; while I discuss Solidarity's abandonment of this model, and its embrace of an elitist, representative model of democracy, in *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005 [*Kłęska Solidarności*, Warszawa: Muza, 2007]), chapter two.

participatory ethos and retreated to a top-down model of formal, representative democracy, with weak political participation.

## Toward a Deeper Democracy

Does this mean that anti-politics is a fraud, an illusion? No, it only means that it's not sufficient. Solidarity and anti-politics could not fill the radical hopes placed in it – or at least the radical *democratic* hopes – either in Poland or among its supporters in the west. That is, while formal representative democracy was a plenty radical idea in Poland in the early 1980s, it wasn't that but the more sweeping aim of a modern society run by a self-governing citizenry, without a dominant state or market, that captured the imagination of millions, and continues to make the Solidarity experience a touchpoint in the history of democratic theory. That vision constitutes one of the most significant utopias of recent times, and one of the last utopias imagined by the left, at a time when few dare to imagine utopias anymore.

For if Solidarity's anti-politics itself failed, its vision of democratic participatory politics most certainly has its successors. In the first place, there was the very idea of civil society, which began to be conceptualized anew thanks to the experience of Solidarity and other opposition movements in eastern Europe. In recent years, however, as the expansive view of civil society came to be whittled down, the concept often left meaning little more than the voluntary sector making up for the absence of the state, a more worthy successor has appeared, in the idea of "deliberative democracy," and in the practice of participatory budgeting. It is here where an idea of deep democracy, or what Benjamin Barber calls "strong democracy," has taken root.<sup>5</sup> The search moved out of Poland, out of eastern Europe, out of Europe altogether, for the new ideas were developed in Brazil, in Porto Alegre. What is at stake here? And why are they legitimate successors to Solidarity's anti-politics?

The idea of deliberative democracy begins with a familiar critique of representative democracy: that it does not promote serious consideration, rational debate, or public participation concerning concrete policies of government. Elections are the one opportunity to participate, but because candidates represent a plethora of policies, it is never exactly clear just what a vote for a particular party is a vote *for*. Moreover, in a world dominated by public relations, paid consultants, image makers, and "spin doctors," elections even on referenda do not allow citizens to make rationally informed decisions. Yet deliberative democrats do not support participatory, "council" style of democracy either, chiefly on the grounds, already noted, that it tends to limit participation to those who talk the loudest and can

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

afford to spend the time in meetings, aspects that often limit the participation of moderate voices and family caregivers. Deliberative democrats share both Oscar Wilde's quip that the problem with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings, and feminists' critique that rambunctious public meetings tend to exclude women. Their aim is to make sustained rational discussion about policies the centerpiece of democratic participation, like Solidarity in its heyday and at its best.

Participatory budgeting has emerged as one of the most important practical innovations of deliberative democrats. The idea is to promote informed decision-making on concrete issues and policies by a wide body of citizens within the general confines of a representative democracy. The practice was first developed by the Brazilian Workers Party, by origin a radical Marxist party that emerged in the fight against the military dictatorship, when it won elections in Porto Alegre, and wondered how it could best implement its call for popular democracy in such a small area. Better than most, they recognized the traps of power. But instead of just reflecting wryly on the irony of a party committed to popular democracy having to administer a capitalist system offering little chance for meaningful participation, they decided to innovate. Take a small but meaningful portion of the urban budget, and let ordinary citizens without any connection to power decide on its allocation. How to ensure that it won't just be the loudest and least family-encumbered to show up? How, in other words, to avoid the pitfalls of council democracy? The answer was to send people into the community to get people to participate. Provide transportation, and even a stipend, child-care if necessary, and bring people to meetings where the budget will be decided. How to deal with the problem that "ordinary" people don't understand the complexity of politics, and thus can't be trusted to make rational decisions in the interests of all? This of course is the premise that always soothes the conscience of elites who might be bothered by their monopoly on politics: "The people don't understand things, so we have to decide for them, and all calls for 'the people' to make decisions is nothing else but irresponsible populism." The answer of deliberative democrats is to provide neutral experts, discussing different possible uses for the budget, and responding to people's choices about the trade-offs involved.

For deliberative and council democrats, people learn by participating, and by engaging others in conversation. But deliberative democrats stress that participation must be a reflexive process, in which citizens consider alternatives and reflect on their choices and the reasons for them, and hold that such conditions are lacking in the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of councils. Deliberativists have "a commitment to politics as an open-ended and continuous learning process,"<sup>6</sup> and aim to provide a forum in which this learning can take place.

Of course, neither deliberative democracy nor participatory budgeting function today in anything like an ideal setting. As participatory budgeting

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<sup>6</sup> David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 233.

has become mainstream, deployed far from its Brazilian birthplace, it has, not surprisingly, lost its radical edge. Increasingly, only a tiny part of the budget is set aside for public allocation, and instead of broad participation, with special effort to bring poor people into the process, policy-makers seek only a small number of participants, representing groups who usually take part in the political process, anyway. For that reason, it is often now criticized for as simply another façade institution aimed at legitimating elite oppression.<sup>7</sup> Yet just because an institution functions poorly is not sufficient reason to discard the concept altogether. Indeed, in an excellent recent piece, Baiocchi and Ganuza, while recognizing the ways elites have been trying to use participatory budgeting to legitimate their rule rather than change it, point to the ways that the emancipatory elements of participatory budgeting can be brought out – if people are willing to fight for it.<sup>8</sup>

Participatory budgeting brings together the radical participatory ethos of anti-politics with the practical effectiveness of real political engagement on issues that matter to regular people. It is not a salvation for democratic politics, a wand that makes power and oppression go away. Neither, of course, did Solidarity. But given that it's increasingly hard to imagine what exactly can bring about a complete emancipatory politics, the merit of institutions like participatory budgeting is that it keeps hope alive. By building concrete institutions that can empower increasing numbers of people, we can progressively expand the number of people engaging in civic life, and civic participation and interest are the best lesson for the emergence of even more democratic and participatory institutions in the future.

It is perhaps most helpful here to think in terms of Andre Gorz's idea of politics, according to which there are spheres both of "autonomy," in which people actively govern themselves, making decisions about policies and rules affecting them, and "heteronomy," where institutions remain alienated, governed by the state and not subject to the direct influence of citizens. In Gorz's view, radical politics consists in expanding the realm of the autonomous, and limiting that of the heteronomous, while always recognizing that an oppressive sphere of the "heteronomous" will remain, to some extent.<sup>9</sup> Gorz's point is that in some dimensions of life citizens are able to control things and fully govern themselves, while in others they're not.

Solidarity's anti-politics posited a world in which an autonomous society would not be hemmed in by the state. It is here where it failed. But if we think of a world in which the realm of the autonomous is expanded, far beyond where

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the critical set of essays in *Partycypacja: Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej* (Warsaw: Krytyka Polityczna, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza, "Participatory Budgeting as if Emancipation Mattered," in *Politics and Society* 42:1, March 2014. See also Baiocchi's monograph on participatory budgeting in Brazil: *Militants and Citizens: The Politics of Participatory Democracy in Porto Alegre* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Andre Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2001; original: 1980).

traditional Schumpeterian versions of representative democracy allow, then Solidarity played an enormous role in opening up the realms of possibility. There is still a great deal to be learned about what happened in specific cities and workplaces during the original Solidarity period, and I would urge historians and sociologists to do far more research than has been done so far in finding out more about the numerous and various emancipatory practices that went on at that time. In any case, however, the effort to achieve an emancipatory civic politics continues, in other forms, and with other names. Anti-politics failed; long live anti-politics.

*David Ost*

**The Promises and Limits of Anti-Politics: Solidarity's Democracy and Its Successors**

*Abstract*

The first Solidarity period of 1980-81 galvanized world attention with its participatory model of democracy, which I and others have called "anti-politics." Citizens became active in all rungs of life, started to govern themselves while the authorities looked on. To what extent did anti-politics constitute a workable model? Can there be a sphere of politics with extensive participation, free of coercion, yet able to make binding and enforceable decisions? This essay seeks to understand both the limitations and enduring promise of anti-politics. It argues that Solidarity's participatory model ultimately failed because of an inability to engage the political, due both to state policy and to organizational aspects (a decentralized structure generating militant leaders) which made compromise difficult. Anti-politics can transform dictatorships through civic engagement, though cannot maintain high levels of active participation without a political solution. Subsequent developments in democratic theory and practice, however, have tried to build on Solidarity's cultivation of widespread rational participation by seeking ways to maintain activism while accepting limits of the political. Deliberative democracy and participatory budgeting can thus be seen direct descendants of anti-politics, building on Solidarity's legacy while keeping in mind Andre Gorz's admonition that the key to a durable, radical, participatory democracy consists in expanding the realm of the "autonomous," while recognizing that an oppressive sphere of the "heteronomous" will always to some extent remain necessary.

*Keywords:* Solidarity, model of democracy, anti-politics, democratic theory, democratic practice.

*David Ost*

### **Obietnice i granice antypolityki: Solidarnościowa demokracja i jej następcy**

#### *Abstrakt*

Okres pierwszej Solidarności lat 1980–1981 przykuł uwagę świata swoim partycypacyjnym modelem demokracji, który, podobnie jak inni, nazwałem „antypolityką”. Obywatele stali się wówczas aktywni na wszystkich poziomach życia i zaczęli sami sobą rządzić, podczas gdy władze się temu przyglądały. Do jakiego stopnia antypolityka stanowiła funkcjonujący model? Czy może istnieć jakaś sfera polityki cechująca się szerokim uczestnictwem i wolnością od przymusu, a mimo to pozwalająca na podejmowanie wiążących i egzekwowlanych decyzji? W eseju tym próbuję zrozumieć zarówno ograniczenia, jak i trwałą obietnicę antypolityki. Argumentuję, że partycypacyjny model Solidarności ostatecznie odniósł porażkę, ponieważ nie był w stanie wejść do sfery polityki ze względu zarówno na politykę państwa, jak i pewne aspekty organizacyjne (zdecentralizowaną strukturę generującą wojujących przywódców), które utrudniały osiągnięcie kompromisu. Antypolityka może przekształcić dyktaturę poprzez zaangażowanie obywatelskie, lecz nie jest w stanie utrzymać wysokiego poziomu aktywnej partycypacji bez rozwiązania politycznego. Jednak w ramach dalszego rozwoju teorii i praktyki demokratycznej próbowano budować na cechującej Solidarność kulturze powszechnej, racjonalnej partycypacji, poszukując sposobów utrzymania aktywizmu przy jednoczesnej akceptacji ograniczeń politycznych. W demokracji deliberatywnej i budżecie partycypacyjnym można więc upatrywać bezpośrednich następców antypolityki, budujących na spuściznie Solidarności, lecz pamiętających o przestrodze André Gorza, że klucz do trwałej, radykalnej, partycypacyjnej demokracji leży w rozszerzaniu dziedziny tego, co „autonomiczne” przy jednoczesnej świadomości, że opresyjna dziedzina tego, co „heteronomiczne” pozostanie zawsze do pewnego stopnia konieczna.

*Słowa kluczowe:* Solidarność, model demokracji, antypolityka, teoria demokracji, praktyka demokracji.

