
EDITORIAL

Last September a single performance of Solidarity Day was produced in Washington and a few other cities. Organized primarily by the leadership of the major trade unions and inspired by the example of Polish Solidarity, it was billed as a popular protest against Reagan policies. The number of marchers was impressive, upward of 125,000 in Washington, but no less so than the large number and variety of groups represented. It was a textbook display of American pluralist politics. There were marchers to protest welfare and educational policies; sexual discrimination; the relaxation of environmental standards; the undermining of occupational health safeguards; rearmament and defense spending; nuclear power; policies toward Central America and Africa; unemployment and social security cuts; and bias and indifference toward the aspirations of poor, non-white minorities.

No one to the left of Gerald Ford should grumble these days if liberals stage a parade to show that pluralist politics is still alive. If faith is capable of moving mountains, it is capable of reviving an electoral alliance that, with the assistance of a foundering economy, may bring a Democratic victory in 1984.

The thing about Solidarity Day is that nothing followed. If, as some of its organizers maintained, the event had sent a "message" to Reagan, the meaning of the message had been anticipated beforehand—which is why the President did not bother to stay around Washington to receive it. The message is that there is no vision, no unified opposition among those who claim to speak for the people. There is only a common urge for catharsis that is satisfied when each interest is allowed to voice its fears and negotiable demands. Solidarity Day seemed more likely to discourage new modes of political action and vision so that when election day rolls around there will be no place to go except to the Democratic Party, boll weevils notwithstanding. A campaign that promises to be based on little more than Walter Mondale and a Republican depression will simply perpetuate a system of politics that has become so totally at one with the corporate conception of the national interest that even some business leaders are a little nervous at having received, as one of them estimated, 95 percent of what they had asked for from the government.

Does anyone think that Walter Mondale, whose "reeducation" by corporate America was recently described in the *New York Times*, will be the instrument to halt the legalized Abscam by which corporate money finances campaigns, makes presidents, and buys and uses congressmen and senators? or that, given the extreme dependence of Congress upon the money, influence, and favors of conservative interests, it is likely that an aroused legislature will reverse the direction charted by Reagan? that antidiscrimination legislation will be reinstated? that equality among the sexes will be taken up? that the structural causes of unemployment will be searched out and dealt with? that the ideal of universal education will be resumed? that nuclear war and rapidly rising levels of armaments will be rejected? that the CIA and the FBI will become subject to constitutional controls and compelled to recognize the Bill of Rights?

These questions naturally arise when the message contained in the electoral victory and legislative counterrevolution of the Reagan forces is understood. The enormous sums of money, the mobilization of highly specialized talents, and the command over media—phenomena whose presence has overwhelmed what used to be called the simple act of voting—signify that a highly exacting set of prerequisites for gaining and exercising political power has become institutionalized. The unmistakable consequence is that politics is an activity that is beyond the resources of the groups and causes loosely assembled on Solidarity Day. The perfection of the prerequisites has been a long time in the making. Wealth and economic power have generally dominated American politics since the ratification of the Constitution. Domination has taken the form not only of determining legislation and policy but of defining the conditions of political success. The centralization of power, which was the achievement of the eighteenth-century Federalists, instituted new conditions for the exercise of power and authority that challenged and gradually reduced the power of classes, groups, and interests whose resources (time, money, and skill) were adequate for local politics but insufficient and too scattered to compete at the center. The new Capitol of Washington was also political capital. It symbolized a new politics that would capitalize on the distance between the center and the hinterlands, penalizing classes and interests that were unable to project their presence across vast and expensive distances. Over the past two centuries the conditions of politics have become increasingly centralized, although Washington is now a symbol of that centralization rather than its actual locus. The development of new modes of transportation and communication, of media for the manipulation of mass opinion and the shaping of mass culture, and of the managerial or socioeconomic sciences have had a dramatically inflationary effect upon the costs of "playing" politics. They have placed greater power in the hands of those who can purchase them and they have placed power itself beyond those who cannot. The centralizing, rationalizing "logic" of capitalism has now transformed politics in precisely the same

ways that it had earlier transformed an economy of small businesses and family farms. Just as systematic, large-scale organization replaced scattered, individual producers and family businesses, so now the systematic organization of political functions—finance, propaganda, public relations, the purchase of politically useful knowledge from “intellectuals,” selection and support of candidates—has overshadowed the work of political parties. Traditionally these parties have been loose coalitions of classes and interests played upon by politicians whose power bases were local. Local politics and politicians, like local economies and small businesses, still exist, but the one, no more than the other, represents the place where the future is being determined. As the mayor of Newark recently remarked, “I’m not managing hope but managing resources.” Among the first acts of Andrew Young following his election as mayor of Atlanta was to announce a foreign economic policy for his city: Atlanta would seek to attract foreign investment and business.

The new conditions of politics do not necessarily prevent an electoral victory by a candidate of the Democratic Party; they only make it highly unlikely that a candidate will be elected who is committed to greater social and economic equality, political freedom, the restructuring of economic power, and nuclear disarmament. If, by reason of a severe social crisis, such a candidate is elected, the conditions will operate to defeat significant change. If those who care about the democratization of political and economic life are to make use of the powers that are within their reach, they must adopt a new strategy aimed at changing the conditions of politics. They cannot win anything except consolation prizes when they attempt to compete for power under conditions that are defined by and that favor those who control wealth and economic power. They can change the conditions of politics only if they decide to play a different game.

This is why the example of Polish Solidarity is so significant. Polish workers have shown that under the most dangerous conditions—of dictatorship, one-party rule, the constant threat of naked force, and the absence of political liberties—it is possible, nonetheless, to challenge the rules of the game and to alter them so as to create space for new forms of action and new ideas. An independent trade union movement, the resort to strikes, the open circulation of criticism, and sending Solidarity representatives to spread their story in Western countries have created a new set of political conditions. The most important change, the one that underlies virtually everything Solidarity has done, is the change in how the members have understood their own actions. Although the movement originated over basic economic needs—jobs, pay, the price of food and its availability—it was recognized from the beginning that new institutions had to be developed, not only to enable the movement to concert the power of its

members but to express the new relationships toward authority and toward each other that were being envisioned. In the absence of new political forms and new modes of action that will generate political experience and diffuse it so that adherents are turned into participants, economic gains become stopping points rather than stepping-stones. Solidarity understood very quickly that the economic facts against which the workers were protesting—food shortages, prices, wages, etc.—were not simply the consequence of incompetence but of a system of power: the same system that produced a shortage of food also produced a shortage of freedom. So it was as necessary to threaten to strike when the police beat up workers who were distributing pamphlets as it was when the government threatened to increase the tax on cigarettes. The political consciousness raised in connection with Solidarity's political struggles against the state has become the basis for a different attitude toward authority, participation in the workplace, and the movement itself. It has pressed for workers having a greater voice in naming factory directors and for a national referendum on self-management. Equally important, it has displayed a healthy skepticism toward its own leaders, refusing to give unanimous approval to Walesa's leadership, and not hesitating to reject some leaders (as in the recent elections to the national leadership commission) and to criticize others for failure to consult with the membership or for entering into compromises with the government on certain issues.

The unprecedented creation of an independent trade union movement in a near-totalitarian system has had the effect of introducing some dispersal of power in Poland. The state and the Communist party no longer monopolize power or legitimacy. Moreover, there is a kind of contagion in the example of individuals coming together and joining their skills, ideas, and determination. Local branches of Solidarity have launched their own initiatives and, despite the pleas of the national union leadership and the state, they have called strike actions to protest government policies.

Decentralized politics introduces very different rules, the most important of which is that politics is now within the resources of the local players and prohibitive for the national power holders. The latter can scotch an isolated act of defiance but not an epidemic, especially if the rebels are withholding something of value, such as their labor, produce, taxes, and militarily useful bodies.

No one can predict, of course, whether Polish Solidarity will survive, and it is entirely possible that it will have been suppressed by the time this editorial appears. The lessons are, however, clear. The first is that purely economic demands play squarely into the hands of the power holders when the demands are not developed through participatory processes that expand the skills and awareness of the ordinary members in whose name the demands are made. In the absence of such processes the individual is, literally, deformed: his or her material needs are met, but at the cost both of promoting a dependency upon the leaders

who have negotiated the settlement and of stunting the human qualities that participation brings out—the capacity to share, to deliberate with others, and to struggle with the inevitable tensions between the common good and personal interest.

Clearly, America is not Poland. It does not have a homogeneous population and culture, a Catholic Church to mediate, an easily identifiable enemy, like the Communist party and the state, against which to rally democratic forces. To be sure, centralized power is the enemy in America, only it is the power of the corporate state rather than the party state. It is, however, a more difficult enemy than its Polish counterpart because it is the product of choice and, save for the Civil War, of uninterrupted evolution. The Poles, in contrast, had the centralized state and political economy thrust upon them.

Changing the rules of the game is, however, not as bleak a prospect as it appears at first glance. The reason is that the American state is undergoing important changes. The groups that control the state are determined to divest it of several functions, notably welfare, education, and economic regulation. This is in keeping with the capitalist mentality of discontinuing unprofitable functions. As a result, a strategic moment has arrived. Antidemocratic forces are creating the opportunity for democrats to alter the rules of the game, to turn the rhetoric and programs of decentralization into a shift in power. This means exploiting the administration's talk about local initiatives, self-help, and the transfer of revenue from the center to the peripheries. But it also means not permitting the transfers to substitute state and local bureaucracies for federal and corporate ones. Although decentralization is an important tactic for shifting authority over resources, it proceeds by delegating power and hence perpetuating dependence. The immediate task is to generate power, and this requires participatory institutions. Many of these institutions exist, but they lack a vital center. There is only one group in the country capable of playing that role. Without labor taking the lead as a unifying force, not as a simple interest group, the redemocratization of America may be impossible. Which is why the democratization of the institutions of American labor must be the first rule of the new game.

Sheldon S. Wolin
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