

28 Perspectives  
of the New Ethos of Work

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Translated by Anna Fraś.

**W**e lack exhaustive descriptions of the ethical aspect of the most important social revolutions that mapped out the roads and dead-ends for the development of modern Europe. When thinking about revolution we usually see in our minds the images of killed rulers and the people defending the barricades. The moral evaluation of revolutionary events comes out negative. They say revolution is something worse than an ordinary war, because it is a fratricidal war. On the other hand, revolution means a leap of history to something new. It is primarily visible on the level of the government – a revolution obliterates the old government and in its place establishes a new one, which is to execute what the old one did not want to. Revolution has then some ethical sense, it is a step on the road of progress. In the voice of the revolution one can hear the speech

of previously mute people. The time of revolution is the time of promoting the downtrodden. 29

The Polish events of the year 1980 were described with the word “revolution,” although not one person was killed, nor any basic change in the structure of government took place during these events. The same communist party is still in power.<sup>1</sup> Were the events of the “Polish August” really a realization of the essence of revolution? Some say yes, it was supposed to be the only truly proletarian revolution in modern Europe. Some say no, it was supposed to be a further step in the process of incarnating the socialist ideal. Historians will be interested in this matter for many years. In spite of this, one thing seems quite obvious – in August 1980 important social changes took place in Poland, and the crucial role was played by *ethical convictions*. Namely, the solidarity ethos came into being.

What does the solidarity ethos mean? Does anything of this kind exist? Even if it does exist, does it lend itself to description? Perhaps Hegel was the last great thinker who had the courage to speak about the role of ethics in history. Soon the Marxist and positivist critiques overthrew Hegelianism and cleansed learning of all ethical notions. Do the Polish events of 1980 force a redirection toward a general idea of ethics? Much seems to indicate it. For we will not advance much in understanding these events by analyzing them exclusively in terms of economy and scientific sociology.

If we take into account the phenomenon of the solidarity ethos, it means that in the center of our attention must stand, generally speaking, the inter-personal relationships which were forming and formed in the past thirty-five years. The focus is both on the horizontal relationships between citizen and citizen and also the vertical ones between citizen and government. The workers’ protest in August referred not only to the economic conditions characterizing the state, but primarily to the ever more unbearable relationships between people. Economic and strictly political issues were only a part of more fundamental matters. Let us then reflect on those more fundamental matters, looking at them from both sides: rebellion and hope, what was already unbearable and what seemed attainable. The solidarity ethos is a synthesis of rebellion and hope – a protest against some evil and a project of a better organization of social life.

## The Crisis of Trust

After World War II, Marxist-socialism became, as we know, the official ideology of the government ruling Poland. The nation entered the period of so-called “socialist building” which was to cover gradually all spheres of social life: from economy to culture. The sense of the socialist ideology was never and nowhere defined unambiguously, it was outlined only by the government’s actual policy. They spoke about “the socialization of the means of production,” but it was never known what range of things was denoted by the concept of “the means of production.” They spoke about

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<sup>1</sup> Please note this was written in the 80’s.

30 “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” but neither the idea of dictatorship nor the idea of the proletariat were clear. A more glaring example of the ambiguity that typified the notion of socialism was this ideology’s approach to religion: at first religion was treated as an anachronism from the past, but later this claim was greatly attenuated. In this situation, an average man’s attitude to socialism could not be clearly defined – socialism understood in such a way was neither fit for rejection nor acceptance. It was often treated as an abstract formula that nothing sensible could be said against – it left people cold. Nevertheless, some contents of the socialist ideology sank in and defined, often in an undetected way, the way people living here viewed the world. What remained? I am not tempted to give an exhaustive answer, I will be content with one aspect: there remained the experience of the future time, a time of liberated man and liberated work.

The vision of the future makes one believe that the history of humanity has some direction. It heads for something. There is some progress in history – from capitalism we are going to socialism, from socialism to communism. The socialist project of the future threw society into the state of *waiting* for a better future.

This project of the socialist future had a two-fold function. Certainly, it awoke appetites, opened up expectations; it served the government as an argument justifying appeals for increased work. On the other hand, it prepared the rod for the back of those who were its spokesmen and made promises to the nation. The spokesmen of this project were often pilloried, blamed for not keeping their own promises, departing from the proclaimed faith, not keeping up with the rhythm of history. Such was the lot of each ideology. Socialism could not escape it. Reproaches could be purged in two ways. It could be said that the whole socialist vision of the future is a mistake. Yet, socialism was like a roof that could be moved, but not removed, so the blame could be shifted onto those executing the plans who either did not know the ideology’s content, or could not put it into action. In this way the ideological history went on for thirty-five years.

Out of this course of history, there emerged a so-called crisis of trust, which bore on, first of all, the relation of a citizen toward the government and also the trust of a citizen toward other citizens. What is trust? Trust is a kind of bond that links person with person, people with people. Trust means that a man can rely on another man not only in ordinary situations, but also during the limit situations of life. The one who trusts another man does not have to subject him to incessant supervision, since one knows in advance what the other will do. The crisis of trust occurs when the elementary bond between people begins to crack. The place of faith and faithfulness is taken by distrust and suspicion. Social life is permeated by gloom, uneasiness and fears are awakened. The crisis of trust can take various forms. It could be, for instance, a simple distrust evoked by the fact of not keeping an obligation or a suspicion caused by making a sham promise. The crisis of trust could involve, and in fact it does involve, a suspicion of formal betrayal. A formal betrayal means making one’s

friend prey to their enemies. Did anything like this occur? I did not say that. I only say that toward the end of the 70's, and earlier too, there appeared suspicions of some betrayal time and again. This was enough to poison the country's predominant atmosphere. 31

I do not speak about this at all to show the political atmosphere of the situation that arose, but to bring out its moral meaning. In the final analysis, the conflicts were of an ethical character and not only political or economic. Politics as such does not know the notion of betrayal. This notion has an ethical sense. As an ethical notion it entered the ideological language of Polish socialism. The postulate of faithfulness to comrades-in-work and the entire working class is, and has always been, an integral part of the socialist ideology, same as an integral part of the Christian ethics is the postulate of faithfulness to the brother in need. The tragedy of the Polish spiritual situation in the recent years was related to the fact that people, both Christians and Marxists, had to live in the shadows – endangered by betrayal. The crisis of trust was grounded in the fact that people were aware of a potential betrayal. Let us repeat, what mattered was not whether there was a betrayal or not, but the fact that this suspicion was there. It was suspected that the party had betrayed the working class, that the police and the army had betrayed the nation, that a worker had betrayed the other worker, that a journalist, a writer, a university professor – that they all betrayed. In this manner, the very substance of social life was endangered as never before.

Endangering the very substance of social life became, as if, a negative point of departure for the birth of the solidarity ethos. This ethos arose spontaneously like a defensive reaction. It found sympathetic grounds in the Christian ethics and especially in the whole of John Paul II's teachings. These teachings focused around three values: human dignity, every person's right to the truth, and the obligation of faithfulness towards the fundamental values of Polish culture. Underscoring the relevance of these values, John Paul II stood out against the growing flood of dangers. He did not formally question any claim that constituted an integral part of the socialist ideology. His teaching was not done in an oppositional idiom, rather it was an attempt to formulate a positive proposition on a different plane from that of the politics defined by the socialist theory. A problem emerged, to what extent was this proposition compatible with the ideology in force? Certainly, there were incompatible points. There were, however, approaches that opened the door to some kind of communication.

## The Renewing of Attitudes

The basic solidarity ethos arises also as an attempt to save what is primary in interpersonal relationships, as an effort to reach to the sources of faithfulness from which the human manner of being derives. Man is a social creature and thus a being spiritually rooted in faithfulness. People of solidarity reveal themselves, above all, as people of faith tried in the limit

32 situations of life. It turns out that there are bonds prior to the bond of class interest, to the recognition of a common social utopia, or to the faith in the same God. Those bonds are constituted by an elementary trust that a man can give to another man met in the street who is tired of work and life. Man is able to be a credible being. Man looks for a credible person beside himself. In being credible there becomes manifest something that constitutes the core of human existence. Man does not want to lie to another man, and he usually does not if he does not have to, or if he does not think that he has to. The experience of mutual trust generated once stands out so powerfully that man prefers to bear the severest punishment than return to the old treachery. To a person who enters faithfulness it seems that a new world begins around him.

Thinking about the solidarity ethos, one needs to take into account more than just a movement of trade unions. An attempt to rebuild the broken or weakened bonds of trust was undertaken by various organizations, political parties among others. The so-called renewal has senses which differ a little in various circles, but one call repeats itself in all of them, the call to return to the attitudes of the ethics of trust.

I should note something here. One often hears the criticism that ethical experiences will not do to change the socioeconomic situation of the oppressed. In the *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel criticizes the attitudes of “beautiful souls,” whose mouths are full of wishful thinking and elevated mottoes, but who are not, however, capable of doing anything concrete for the matter of justice. Perhaps the “knights of virtue” know what should be done and in which value’s name, but they lack the sense of reality and are unable to incarnate their ideal into life. All their acts end in accusations and moral humiliations of opponents. Their mottoes are so lofty that they cannot be objected to, but, at the same time, so abstract that they are not fit for realization. Most often they spur people to counterfeit actions, wordy declarations and vain manifestations. In doing so they work to the detriment of ethics itself, for they make it look as if it were totally powerless. Is the solidarity ethos not endangered with similar verbosity and similar wearing out in mere criticism?

The solidarity ethos seems to head in a direction completely different from the “spirit of ethics” described in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*. Its specificity lies in the fact that it is not a preachers’ ethos but the working people’s. In essence, it is a unique proposition from the field of work ethics. A *sui generis* outcome of the social changes in postwar Poland was, among other things, the emergence of the ethical essence of human work. It turned out that work is not a form of making a living, but primarily an important way of communicating between man and man. Work revealed itself to us as a conversation. Therefore, it should bind people, not divide them. A community of working people is a community of those who understand each other even without words. When a worker gets a sheet of metal into his hands, he knows what should be done with it. When a journalist gets a newspaper assignment into his hands, he knows what

to write. When a pupil goes to school, he knows what awaits him there. Here knowledge is an indication of trust. Trust is damaged when the sheet of metal is bad, when the journalist deceives the reader, and the teacher the student. Then a pathology of work develops. Man, by his very work, begins to deceive other people. The whole of social life stands in the shadows of betrayal.

At the source of the solidarity ethos stands an objective to restore work to its essence. Work should be what it is – a plane of communication between people. For this purpose, all forms of work pathologies need to be unmasked, because they are forms of betrayal that have infected the womb of work. However, it is necessary to make a positive proposition too, and show new horizons of faithfulness potentially rooted in work. Let us reflect now on some cases of betrayal infecting the womb of work and pathologically modifying its shape, and then let us touch upon the opening horizon of faithfulness.

No doubt, one of the work pathologies is the so-called economic exploitation of labor, which has long been known to us. This exploitation consists in the unjust remuneration for work. It was comprehensively described both by Karl Marx and by the classic writers of Christian social ethics. In Marxism the theory of exploitation was linked to the term “surplus value,” and in the Christian ethics with the theory of justice. Details do not matter here. From the standpoint of solidarity ethics, the heart of the matter is that somebody does not keep the promise made to the other. The employer commits to something that he does not fulfill. A suspicion of betrayal emerges. If this employer is the state, then a form of work pathology questions the whole of relations between a citizen and the state. The betrayed feel released from the obligation to be faithful. Consequently, the citizen does not see the need to keep promises made to the state.

A different form of pathology is Judas’ betrayal. Judas gets high remuneration for his “work,” so it is not a case of unfulfilled commitment. Judas gets money for information about his Master. If we take it to be work, then it is the work of a snitch. A snitch “uses” the trust which one has in him and betrays one’s secrets. Judas betrays and next he himself is betrayed, then he commits suicide. No betrayal serves interpersonal communication. For this reason, it cannot be recognized as work but only as a counterfeit of work. Not remuneration but punishment is due for betrayal. A social system with the inherent possibility of betrayal perceived as work is an internally sick system. Universal suspiciousness and the need for incessant control by so-called “third factors” make the normal development of work impossible.

Take one more example of work pathology seen from the standpoint of the solidarity ethos: the pretense that one undertakes any commitment at all. If a builder builds a house, but he is doing it badly, it means his interest is not really to build a house. His commitment is a counterfeit. If the government makes an agreement with some social group, but does

34 not mean to honor it, it means that a betrayal appeared right at the beginning of the action. The pretense to undertake some commitment creates a pathology in the work of a teacher, a journalist, a man of learning, a physician, those who govern and the governed. Inauthenticity creeps into social life. Man cannot be normal at work, that is, capable of undertaking and fulfilling commitments, being a partner for the other. The shadows of betrayal are cast on society again.

One could quote numerous examples, but these are enough to show where the solidarity ethos comes from and how it radiates. The same leitmotif repeats itself on multiple levels of social life and in multiple forms of work – it is the leitmotif of faithfulness.

What is the positive proposition of the solidarity ethos? Its positive proposition is a proposition of communication. The important thing is that man should understand man also, or even first of all, on the plane of common social work. It is not by chance that the solidarity ethos is not an ethos of bloody revolution, which is basically about taking over political power in a country. Where the essential sickness is work pathology, a political coup will not mend anything. One can change the government, but the pathology will remain. The lack of communication has to be filled with communication. Communication is possible only where the value of truth is recognized. Only where truth is upheld, trust can be evoked. Thus, for the solidarity ethos the truth is more fundamental than the value of social justice which was fought for by Christian social movements. Where there is no truth, justice will not be possible either.

What is here understood by the concept of truth though? Surely not the so-called classical concept of truth as correspondence of a statement with reality. Here, we are concerned with something that lies deeper, with something more fundamental. Truth is a condition for comprehensibility, so truth means mutual sincerity and common openness to the world. The dread felt toward other people is the enemy of sincerity. Fear creates illusions which make communication impossible. Ambiguity and mendacity are generated and there arises the suspicion of potential betrayal. Therefore, the perspective of truth as openness is at the same time the perspective of liberating society from various, greater or lesser, social fears.

Let us return once again to protest and let us compare it with the positive proposition. What is it all about? In short, it is about introducing meaningful work. In the final analysis, pathological work is work deprived of sense. Just as sometimes a particular word does not fit the whole sentence, or like a sentence which does not fit the whole text, so in the world of work-pathology, individual work is not in harmony with the whole of social work. Ever greater amounts of work fall victim to waste. Senseless work manifests itself as the fundamental form of the exploitation of labor. This exploitation is not made obsolete by a comparably high remuneration for this type of work. Thus, an ever greater drive to restore sense to work is generated. Work must have meaning in order to create social communication between people.

The striving to restore to work its primary and natural meaning distinguishes the solidarity ethos from the ethos of the “knights of virtue,” described by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Mind*. The solidarity ethos is a concrete ethos. Its bearers are people of work, who are not only conscious of the senselessness of their work, but also have in their hands the means to change the existing situation. So it does not have anything in common with the morality of wishful thinking which is doomed to defeat already at the moment of birth.

## The Issue of Revolution

At the beginning I said that the solidarity ethos was born as an answer to the atmosphere of suspicion which characterized the years of bringing into life the ideology of Marxist-socialism. I also drew attention to the fact that Christian inspiration played a substantial role during its birth. Were these the only sources of this ethos? I do not think so. The very Marxist ideology was of great significance, as its slogans penetrated into social consciousness. The solidarity ethos could be recognized as incarnating into life the ideal of the brotherhood of working people who fought for social liberation. All basic values of the solidarity ethos belong essentially to the range of the socialist values. It seems to me, however, that the main factor was the development of work defined by new scientific achievements.

As a result of the progress of science and technology, the basic structure of human work changed in the industrialized countries. The highly industrialized countries entered the period called the scientific and technological revolution. Far-reaching computerization of production was introduced. There appeared huge international economic communities. This progress would not have taken place if not for the spirit of democracy that opened the door to the free development of science and especially to the fast circulation of information. Progress in the area of work was in a significant degree due to the progress of scientific research free of any kind of prejudice, in particular the ideological one. On the other hand, the newly developed work demanded democracy, the fast circulation of information and free scientific research. Work was the outcome of global communication and global communication defined the quality of new work.

In totalitarian societies, where the circulation of information was made difficult and the free development of science quite impossible, work came to a standstill. Time and again it turned out that some individual work does not fit the system or that the system does not fit the individual work. If we assume that all work consists of an element of energy and an element of reason, then we must say that work was stricken with a lack of reason rather than energy. Thus the solidarity ethos – this ethos is not only an attempt at communication made by people of work but also an attempt to restore work to its own essence. Reason and force must act together. Without this synthesis there is no creation.

Has this attempt of conforming reason to force and force to reason anything to do with the classical understanding of the notion of revolution? If we decide to use this word, it should be understood properly. I do not mean revolution as a political coup to overthrow the government. The mere alterations on the level of political power do not yet change the structure of work. Certainly, sometimes it happens that the political power hampers the development of work, then it should be corrected. But the correction of political power does not automatically lead to the progress of the quality of work. The heart of the matter lies on a different plane. Thus, the concept of revolution may not have the political sense here. It cannot be linked to the image of violence either. The revolution of work does not advance through violence but through persuasion. In order to move forward, it has to be understood that it is not enough to remove obstacles by force.

This factor – the factor of progress in work – is both the strength and the weakness of the solidarity ethos. The solidarity ethos is presently indispensable to the progress of work. Nowadays, the atmosphere of suspicion does not allow for work any more: once it was possible to build a pyramid, but the same is not the case now even with a good radio receiver. This also creates certain dangers. The progress in the field of the quality of work often leads to temporary work crises, in particular, when it comes to the growth of unemployment, staff reductions, etc. The postulate of solidarity at all costs may transform itself into a solidarity with the unjust, the outdated, the past, therefore, constant vigilance is required. The solidarity ethos must be a movement open to multifaceted criticism and only this criticism will save it from stagnation and fruitlessness.