

# 68 Several Reflections on the Theme of Solidarity

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First, I would like to begin by looking at Fr. Jozef Tischner's profound analyses dedicated to Solidarity in order to later consider the place this value occupies in the contemporary world – a position that is both widely questioned and ambiguous.

In *The Ethics of Solidarity* Tischner gives a convincing voice to the presuppositions of the movement which electrified Polish society during the early 80's, which likewise played a part in liberating Poland and also, one might argue, the whole Soviet-Bloc. Tischner captured the spirit of this battle on a sufficiently deep enough level so that his observations had meaning for people who found themselves in a completely different situation. The book describes the wrongs which created the impetus for the birth of Solidarity, plus the aspirations and hopes tied to this movement – this last concept, hope, is a very important category in Tischner's thought.

When we look at this work from today's perspective – whether in Poland or in any other part of the world – we become aware of the immense distance between the hope and the reality which Solidarity helped to create. I do not bring this up in order to complain, nor to accuse anyone of betraying ideals, because we are dealing here with something much more fundamental. The vision born of the Poles' struggles during the 80's finds analogues in the social life of the West, yet at the same time it considerably diverges from it. The tension between these two facts is continually present in our existence, even if it is negated or downright veiled by ideological simplifications.

I would like to start with the judgment that Tischner presents two levels of solidarity in his book. In the first instance we are talking of a solidarity deeply grounded within existing relations; the second instance is concerned with a solidarity that exceeds such relations. The essence of solidarity depends upon a calling to, "carry one another's burdens" (p. 6).<sup>1</sup> Yet, in the example Tischner gives right after this definition – the parable of the Good Samaritan – the act of solidarity is not mediated by any previous relations between the one who helps, and the one who receives help. The point of the story is that the good-will of the Samaritan is able to cover up the gap in social relations. This man, who outwardly is a total stranger, feels mercy when faced with the sufferings of another human being. Not a thing in the world as it exists calls him to act – and yet he takes it up. I consider this aspect of things to be inextricably connected to the calling of the parable. Here, in the most pure state, we see the second aspect of solidarity which I mentioned earlier.

Despite that, the better part of the book deals with the solidarity of the first type, more concretely, in a solidarity grounded in pre-existing relations between people, which reveals and realizes the real, but hidden, meaning of these relations, because in any given situation they are negated and masked by those that rule. I would like to take up this variety of solidarity here, because it seems to me that, for the most part, Tischner's reflections are incontestable, yet at the same time they cannot be fully realized in modern society.

I will first attempt to sketch out what I consider to be Tischner's theory of what I endeavor to call, "anchored solidarity." We can present this theory with the help of one crucial metaphor in order to reach deeper presuppositions about the human condition, and also to articulate their consequences.

This basic metaphor is based upon the analogy between the social economy and conversation: all the products and processes of production are equated with speech acts, which are the objects of exchange between interlocutors. This similarity depends upon the fact that in both instances there are certain contextual presuppositions which cannot be openly rejected, because that would amount to questioning one's own right to

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<sup>1</sup> All page references are from an earlier translation of *Etyka solidarności*, entitled *The Spirit of Solidarity*, trans. M.B. Zaleski i B. Fiore, Harper&Row 1982, [trans.].

70 participate in this mutual activity. The presuppositions of conversational exchange have been articulated many times, for example: that which we say ought to be truthful, we should express ourselves honestly, we talk in order to be understood, our articulations should be relevant, stick to the topic, etc. (The texts of Jurgen Habermas occupy an important position within this current of thought and there are some interesting analogies with the output of Tischner).

Conversation would totally fall apart in the face of judgments such as: things present themselves this way for X, but I don't believe it anyway; or: I did not make the least effort to convince myself whether things are really for X in the way that I see it; or: I know that you couldn't care the least bit, but I am going to pass on this piece of information to you (unless we are dealing with a threat: this should concern you, so I will make sure that you know about it). Similarly, no one will say: here is my product – you could poison yourself with it; or: it is totally worthless; or: it was made thanks to the fact that I took advantage of the poor souls working in my factory. It does not matter whether these affirmations correspond to the truth – both in conversational and in economic exchange – one must pretend that things are otherwise or the given type of activity will lose its meaning and our partner will refuse to cooperate in future undertakings.

In both instances that which is offered is an offer to someone (p. 25). Otherwise, it would lose its most elementary meaning.

Naturally, this analogy only applies itself to an economy in which, on all levels, the processes of exchange are voluntary. However, there are conditions of bondage or such great inequality of power that those in control over the conditions of exchange no longer need to pretend. Tischner thus speaks of an economy in which free subjects freely participate, that is, one which allows people to be free subjects. The degree to which modern societies are forced to at least pretend that things are really this way is the degree in which they fulfill the conditions of meaningfulness that are analogical to the requirements of conversation. In reality, we can cheat on a grand scale, but the whole process of exchange requires us to pretend that things are otherwise.

This is how the fundamental metaphor, from which we can develop a deeper anthropological description, presents itself. It naturally shows that people are created for the sort of collective life which reminds one more of free participation in conversation than subjection. The voluntary acknowledgment of the social organs is the norm, and not forcing some kind of social formula, even if it somehow has the good of the community's members as its aim. What's more, freedom must, at the very least, be accompanied by some degree of equality, because in this "conversation," which depends on the mutual satisfaction of needs, an inequality of power immediately becomes unilateral and one party dictates conditions to the others – without regard for their wishes. Where one side is able to control the conditions of exchange, as we saw above, there former partners become, against their will, servants.

This vision of human nature and this model of economy implies the existence, perhaps usually hidden, of a mutual responsibility that lies at the foundation of economies of this type: that we act for one another in conditions of freedom and mutuality. This requirement is a fact that is inseparable from the activity, just as truth-telling and honesty constitute the established truths of verbal exchange. Unfortunately, in practice we often do not uphold this obligation. We can now see that in such situations we are dealing with betraying the trust of the other. When we are exercising control over his actions we not only cause him harm and take more from him than he wants to give; at the same time we betray his trust and negate the silent agreement to uphold mutual trust.

Fr. Tischner used that very strong word, “betrayal” (p. 92–95). Our society is based upon mutual trust; we either uphold the vow, or we break it. Faithfulness is the principle of solidarity (p. 95).

One can easily notice in what sense solidarity as used here is “anchored.” Our life is continually based upon a series of obligations: that we will work for one another, that we will give back the same amount as we have received and that we will not negate the work of others. In reality we often, if not always, break these vows. Tischner calls this faithlessness, “exploitation.” Within the context of the idea of mutual trust he gives new meaning to this word – so relevant to the Marxist lexicon where it was analyzed in a well-nigh Scholastic manner on the basis of the ultimately empty theory of surplus-value.

In Tischner’s lexicon “exploitation” regains a comprehensible meaning. People are exploited when they do not receive what they deserve for their work; or also, when their work or the fruits of their work are expropriated, because they are used for aims not commensurate with their original purpose (i.e. using a bread-knife to wound someone); and finally, when we allow the fruits of work to go to waste, thereby robbing the effort expended to produce them of any meaning (this is a particularly visible occurrence in so-called socialist economies). To put it another way, exploitation is an abuse that depends upon excluding certain people from the exchange between free and equal subjects who work for one another. On the most basic level it is a faithlessness toward the trust upon which the whole exchange depends (p. 23–26).

What does this have to do with solidarity? The thing is that such a betrayal can only be rectified through mutual action. First, it must be mutually agreed that a betrayal of trust has occurred. Precisely because the mutual acknowledgment of reciprocity is so fundamental – if we put in doubt the whole structure, if we openly and consciously step away from reciprocity (just like a liar quits a conversation when he openly admits that he is a liar) – our actual betrayals have to be masked. One must impute to them an aura of normalcy, as if everything were alright and as if there were no contradiction of the idea of reciprocity. This is how the “official version,” which we dare not unmask, easily comes to be: either because by disrupting the *status quo* we would call forth the wrath of the people,

72 or because those responsible for the betrayal are in power (which of the essence is usually the case) and we fear their reaction. This leads us to the conclusion that we easily accept the official version or we make peace with it.

How can we awake from this? A different aspect of Tischner's anthropology comes to voice here. We are all given a conscience – each and every one of us knows what evil is. Evil does not only depend upon our not getting our due share, that our labor is in vain, that our work is wasted. It hurts. But betrayal hurts even more, “To the weariness from work, to the boredom and exhaustion, to the threat of hunger is added a dead weight, a pain of the soul, a heartache” (p. 29).

This awakening cannot remain an act of a single individual. We have to break through the official version, bring the truth into the light and bring it into public consciousness. We can only achieve this in dialogue (p. 15–18). In a certain sense this is the first step toward solidarity. Together, serving one another, we can achieve it – it would be impossible all alone.

Obviously, this observation was especially relevant in the context in which Fr. Tischner wrote his book. Naturally, the despotic rulers will go to great lengths to prevent such a community of consciousness. They aim at the isolation of their citizens – even if in their hearts everyone knows that something is wrong, no one person can be sure how many fellow citizens share his feelings and who, in the face of opposition, might back him. About two centuries earlier Tocqueville formulated identical reflections. This is the reason why the communist authorities controlled the ownership and use of copiers and they even registered typewriters.

For the same reason John Paul II's pilgrimage to his homeland in 1979 was an event with a deep historical meaning. All of a sudden people received a wonderful occasion to gather and express their support – without having the control and scripting of the central authorities forced upon them. It weaved together horizontal contacts. Everyone could see how many other people share their feelings. In a way this created the foundations for the Gdańsk Shipyard strikes which began a year later.

And so therefore first we have a solidarity of consciences. This leads to partnership in action. Also, in this instance, the only way to sew up the tear in the sphere of mutual exchange is action that is supra-individual. I do not take up action just for myself – in order to ease my plight, to repair an evil that has visited me – instead, I act for us all. Together we carry one another's burdens. This is the only way in which the mutuality of exchange – when we act for one another – can be reinstated.

The reason why I call this solidarity “anchored” is obvious. Thanks to previous commitments which are taken up by a given community, our conscience calls us to work with the members of this community in the spirit of these injunctions.

Solidarity is the engine of healing social action. Solidarity is indispensable if we want to return to the spirit of the social bond. It is indispensable for a community to come alive again and to actualize itself. This is the

main message of Fr. Tischner. Even outside its context it is a moving and powerful message; it's not hard to imagine how extraordinary his power was in that place and time – how much it was needed in that key moment when the aspirations of a whole nation were emerging.

What can we do with this theory today? Can we relate it to the world of the modern West? My answer will not be univocal, instead it will be internally divided. Because that's how, as I see it, the situation presents itself to us. To be honest, we cannot abandon this theory, because it plays too large a role in the whole project of modern democracy. On the other hand, we are not capable of living in harmony with it.

Let's start with the negative aspects. Tischner's interpretation of the economy immediately brings to mind, as historians call it, "moral economy" (i.e., in Edward Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Classes*). This term is supposed to describe a spontaneous feeling of rightness – which allows for a designation of fair prices, interest rates, and to describe the requirements of reciprocity – to which simple people, workers and peasants, appealed in order to protest high prices, additional burdens, smothering taxes, low wages and exploitation. On the whole these protests were doomed to failure, what's more, our civilization exists because they ended in a fiasco.

This is due to fact that the protesters were often against the introduction and expansion of market relations. The physiocrats, the new managers of economies, proclaimed: the end of the control of wheat prices; let's let grain circulate freely within the kingdom and in the end prices will reach some reasonable state of equilibrium. We will not burden industry in its infancy with too many restrictions, because even if some of the workers will get into hot water we will still achieve unprecedented economic growth: the tide of riches will buoy all boats, even those in stuck in the shallows.

History shows that some of these risky decisions proved to be, with time, right on target. "In the long run," we could say, while remembering Keynes' famous apposition: all the while many of those peasants starved and many workers lived in abject conditions.

If it were only a matter of considering former victims, we could, in all honesty, feel moral discomfort knowing that we consume fruits from a grove saturated with the blood of our ancestors, but this fact would not influence our present actions. The crux of the matter is in the fact that a similar situation is repeating itself today, for example, in Third World manufacturing, but also in our developed industrial societies where many former workers have hit rock bottom, because their "secure," or so it seemed, positions were downsized due to global competition.

Quite often we cannot negate the gains that arise from such scenarios. These gains reach some disproportionately, and probably for the most part, at the cost of all the rest. (It is notable that the above mentioned gains might be negated by the global expansion of capitalism, which simply ignores the existence of boundaries for development that are marked out by exhaustible resources and the stiff thresholds of

74 tolerance; in order not to complicate things, I will avoid this thread – my thesis will not suffer for it).

We need not appeal to instances of total abjection. It is enough that we stick to the income curve. In the last thirty years, in almost all developed countries, we see a continual intensification of differences with respect to this. We are dealing here with a whole series of instances: from the economy of Japan on one side of the spectrum to the economy of the United States on the other, where the inequalities are becoming more and more glaring, nevertheless, the differences are starker everywhere now. There are many causes for this state of things, but one of the main ones is functional: the skills which have proven to be valuable and comparatively rare are better rewarded. The reverse of this process are the tragic instances of downsized workers whose earnings suddenly drop considerably, or the situation of young people who are only offered “McJobs” – they can only find part-time and temporary work.

Tischner’s idea of a moral economy implies the possibility of paying fairly for everyone’s individual output. On the other hand, we pretend that everything is alright by simply declaring that every price assigned on the market is a “fair price,” however, this situation inevitably leads to caricatured consequences. It is all the more obvious if we become aware that the market ties together not only those who currently have a job (which was something we could assume in the communist system where everyone was employed), but also all those who would like to have a share in it. Those condemned to unemployment have no chance to have such a share – and it would be hard to admit that this state of things is in tune with the establishment of reciprocity.

These observations lead to an obvious conclusion: the capitalist economy also depends upon a silent agreement of a different kind. The allocation of positions and incomes, the organization of work and the differentiation of wages, etc., is accomplished through the market, that is, they are the consequence of decisions made by entrepreneurs who are motivated by their own profits and their main driving forces are the conditions of surviving within their given economic niche. If we leave the process all to itself like this the results will frequently be contrary to the agreement which lies at the foundation of the economy understood as a mutual exchange between free and equal subjects – because it will become apparent that subjects not only accept or reject existing offers, but also influence the shape of the conditions of exchange.

Well, one might say, “all the worse for the moral economy.” In order to take advantage of the production potential that capitalism unleashes we have to agree to let the market decide and forget about the spirit of reciprocity. Yet, things are not so simple, because our societies are also democracies and they function according to a basically a silent agreement, which is reminiscent of the one sketched out by Tischner in the economic context: the people are sovereign, and therefore the rulers rule for the people; the category people encompasses everyone, that is, every person without excep-

tion; everyone is equal, meaning, discrimination is excluded. As a matter of fact, Tischner sketched out a version of what I would call, “the modern moral order,” meaning, the silent presuppositions needed for the legitimation of a community in the democratic age. They first found expression in the theory of natural law, for example, in Locke’s version: free individuals will associate, will make a contract, and this decision is motivated by mutual gain. Locke is obviously mainly concerned with a sphere of security, with the protection of life and property, yet, he also sketches out the framework of a theory of economic exchange – the institution of private property is at its foundation and it leads to mutual enrichment.

This is only one formulation of an idea which has been put forward many times in the past: Rousseau gave it new character, and later also Marx. The same presuppositions lie at the heart of John Rawls’ contemporary theory. The readiness to associate under certain conditions is a good criteria of the honesty of these conditions. They are honest, because their acceptance brings brings the same gains for all concerned.

If we want to maintain the community, we cannot reject these silent presuppositions of modern democracies in an overt and open manner. That is also the reason why our rulers always say they are serving the common interest, that people are getting fair pay for their efforts, or at least that they will get it once the party’s program will be put into action. We can go further on the road Tischner pointed out to us: democratic societies are based on trust; without a certain dose of trust they will burst at the seams. However, this trust is connected with the above-mentioned conditions of reciprocity: the rulers rule for the people, discrimination is avoided, when the contract is broken the people can put into action remedial measures, etc.

This is how the source of the deep tears in modern capitalist societies presents itself. There are two contexts that justify our deeds; we can define them as the “democratic” and the “capitalist.” To be honest, we cannot reject either one. We cannot reject the democratic context, because it has become a central, inseparable element of our vision of legitimacy. We also cannot reject the capitalist context, because we have long ago passed the stage where we would be satisfied with a stagnant economy. Thus, we have to come to terms with them both. The first context is a great source of solidarity. When we manage to awaken and activate the feeling of our common citizenship we are capable of acting in often surprising ways by authentically devoting ourselves to others or in the name of the common good. This is especially apparent during times of war or during movements of national liberation – in a certain sense “Solidarity” was an important instance of such a movement. The second context demands that we slide solidarity to the side and agree to bend or even break the rules of reciprocity in the name of effectiveness, which, it is apparent, we cannot renounce.

There is nothing strange in the fact that the dream of integral socialism was so strong in our civilization, and even stronger in those societies



76 which had not yet tasted the fruits of capitalism, but already knew the steep price that had to be paid at the beginning. When speaking of “integral socialism” I have in mind, for example, the Marxist dreams of abolishing the market and replacing its allocative functions with democratic self-rule, or in the form of central planning, or in the form of a bottom-up worker self-rule, or also in some sort of mixed form.

The experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century showed, cruelly and clearly, the limitations of such dreams. The production of goods showed itself to be possible only in a closed and stationary economy, but this was usually tied to a great loss of freedom, so much so that democracy had become a fiction. When we reach the final destination there is no market, nor self-rule. This does not mean that there isn’t anything: there is a certain level of security whose loss the citizens of post-communist countries still bemoan. But we know that this will not suffice for democratic societies.

There remains an analogical yet opposing illusion, which is not at all weakening, instead it is growing more intense. There is not a full symmetry: what is at stake is not the thought that the market will control democracy even if some extreme liberals dream, so it seems, about this scenario; what is at stake instead is that the market will eventually produce the same conditions which are required by voluntary practicing of reciprocity. I have already mentioned this illusion, it is without a doubt an illusion.

This does not mean that the hope is totally in vain, because in the final analysis, in mature capitalism, the riches will be divided more equally. Yet, one must remember that, firstly, before this moment arrives many will leave the world; and secondly, when it actually arrives, it will be the doing of not only the market, but also the politics of democracy, which create its frames: through various redistributive moves of the “welfare state,” such as, unemployment insurance, health-care systems, social security, also minimum wage, governmental investment policies, and so on, and so on. The proponents of the market as the source of universal prosperity should not take credit for the effects of these steering mechanisms, because in practice they always complain about them and want to limit them or totally remove them – all of this in the name of an unconstrained market.

(These demands are all the more absurd, because some of these government programs are necessary so that the market will not lead to various forms of self-destruction. The regulation of financial markets constitutes the most discussed example. There is also a governmental politics of investment thanks to which certain branches of the economy are kept alive or perish in a gentle manner. It also happens, one might say most of the time, that in the United States intervention takes on the shape of excessive protective expenditures, but at the same time avoids the stigma of government “handouts”).

Maybe we can, in part, give the market credit for democratization if we agree with the theory that the free market awakens an appetite for self-rule. In the short run, it seems, many developing countries are flourishing under the rule of half-despotic regimes – which illustrates well the

early phases of capitalism in the new Asian “tigers.” Later there appeared facts pointing to the conclusion that democracy is only a matter of time. China will be an immense experiment for this thesis.

Even if we accept this theory, it still remains the case that the market will lead to a widening of prosperity only thanks to the functioning of the democratic system, which it helped to create. Left to itself, it would not be able to accomplish any of this.

It is hard to believe that there is no perfect and harmonious solution. This is the reason why the death of integral socialism left behind a neo-liberal illusion that we can solve all problems, if only, “the government will stay out of our way.” Perhaps nobody really believes this, for certain, nobody outside the United States. Yet, the United States is an immense power and the present principles of international trade have created such loopholes around the instruments of democratic rule that this right-wing daydream could lead to chaos in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and all that despite the sad consequences of 20<sup>th</sup> century left-wing daydreams. Let’s hope that we will be able to prevent it in time.

This task, first of all, demands clarity about our present position. We find ourselves in a deeply conflictual situation, because our acts are grounded upon two contradictory principles of social life. Neither one of the sides has a solution. What’s more, there is not a “third way,” meaning, a perfect alternative solution which would guarantee the goods generated by the first principle without compromising the goods of the second one. There is only a series of temporary compromises, which aim at limiting all interruptions of reciprocity, while at the same time minimalizing market intervention whether through regulations or laws. Solidarity must find some form of expression, otherwise we will totally lose legitimacy, and also, we should add, we will have to live with a deafened conscience, with a deeply muffled “pain of the soul.” And yet, we must accept the limitations of this ideal, otherwise we will destroy the wheels of progress, and with them, we should add, certain crucial human goods such as inventiveness or entrepreneurship.

This is what we mean when we speak of the existence of “third ways.” All Western democracies essentially follow such paths – whether they admit to it or not. By taking up these provisional compromises, some show themselves to be better, more creative. Perhaps not in a universal sense, because the situation of democratic countries varies widely, plus, it changes over time. Nevertheless, there are better solutions in every situation, solutions which increase the effects of solidarity, while at the same time minimizing costs in economic effectiveness. The necessary condition of success is clarity as to our position, but this requires us to distance ourselves from traditional ideologies of the left and right.

Solidarity, as Fr. Tischner showed in a moving and convincing way, is an indispensable imperative in our democratic times, and at the same time, it is a calling which we cannot answer unconditionally. This is the tragedy of our current position.