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The ends of revolution: capitalist de-democratization and nationalist populism in the east of Europe

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Abstract The dissolution of Soviet-type socialism has been often taken to signal various ends: the end of history, ideology, and revolution; the foreclosure of the symbolic and epistemic space of emancipation opened up by the French, Russian, and anti-colonial revolutions. Yet, the celebrations of the march of liberal democracy and capital have soon given way to alarming observations about a new wave of right-wing populism that feeds on the contradictions of inequality and freedom, largely generated by neoliberal capitalist globalization. Based on my field research in Poland, my paper engages with this familiar problem, which is often discussed as the "crisis" of liberal democracy, or "dedemocratization." I show how the ends of communism and revolutionary politics have contributed to the social environment of emptiness, nihilism or the void, in which right-wing groups were able to thrive and claim to be the real voice of social change and justice, as opposed to the liberal establishment. To explore the way that void has been historically and materially constituted, my paper traces the shifting conditions of collective action or revolutionary practice in Poland and Eastern Europe since the 1960s. Specifically, I focus on the tragic dissolution and absorption of the massive "Solidarity" worker movement into neoliberal state building in the 1990s and thereby engage with the often-invoked dialectic between insurrection and constitution, or movement and institutionalization that haunt the revolutionary struggles.

Keywords Revolution · Socialism · Neoliberalism · Populism · Class politics · Poland · Eastern · Europe

> Today [the communist states' and movements'] dissolution leaves an emptiness in politics: it is empty of errors, crimes, and manipulations, empty of organizations, disciplines, and revolts, but also empty of stakes and problems. To me this nihilistic

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> situation does not seem foreign to the dull anxiety that makes a number of our contemporaries jump from the "end of communism" to the "end of ideologies," and from there to the "end of politics," and finally to the "end of history."
> Étienne Balibar, "Europe after Communism"

> You have no right to utopia. Nothing went wrong and now you're in Europe. You're just a normal country with a normal economy and normal problems. I'm sorry it doesn't get better than this but you can't expect miracles from life…. Don't be upset; you need to smile…. Poles are happier today.
> Jeffrey Sachs, Warsaw, June 5, 2014

Jeffrey Sachs appeared visibly upset, however, when his interlocutor from "Political Critique" (*Krytyka Polityczna*, KP) reminded him that about 2 million people have migrated from Poland to seek employment abroad since the European accession in 2004 and that almost 25% of the current labor force consists of temporary workers, employed with, literally, "thrash contract" (*umowa śmieciowa*). The left-leaning KP invited Sachs to Warsaw for the 25th anniversary of 1989. June 4, 1989, the day the first "semi-free elections" were held, which brought the first non-communist government, is designated by the post-1989 establishment as the victorious end of communism in Poland and even Eastern Europe. That end also had a global relevance. It was taken to mark many other ends: that of utopia, history, ideology, and revolution.

The elections of 1989 were the product of the round-table agreements between the leaders of the famous labor movement "Solidarity" (*Solidarność*) and the party-state. Sachs was the key IMF economist who pitched the neoliberal "shock therapy" policies. To the young KP audience that filled the room, he recounted the usual story of economic salvation. It was more or less a one-night thing. During his short visit to Warsaw in 1989, where he barely left his hotel, Sachs had a memorable meeting with the new Labor Minister and the popular dissident activist, Jacek Kuroń. Kuroń explained him that they badly needed an economic program for a quick recovery from the ongoing crisis. Hearing Sachs' proposal, he devoured one cigarette after another, which left Sachs literally breathless in the room. Frustrated, Kuroń occasionally banged on the table, uttering the phrases that signaled Poland's predestined future: she had to "return to Europe" and become a "normal" country.

Sachs said he never denied the painful aspects of his economic program, but it was a necessary violence and was much better from the other two alternatives that were considered at the time: Scandinavian social democracy and democratic socialism based on worker self-management. In any case, the "Solidarity" leaders, Sachs said with satisfaction, supported his ideas. Like many ex-dissidents in Poland, Sachs still appeared proud after two decades of 'transition.' He could not stand a bit hearing about the criticisms of 'ungrateful Poles.' At the meeting, he projected his colorful charts of economic growth and increasing happiness in Poland, and offered another 'advice,' this time to the young people in the room. In 1989, he said, "the world came to *rescue* you" because of a sympathy for Poland's fight against communism. But today, warned Sachs, "*no one will come to rescue you*. You are now a normal country, so be careful and work hard." It was hard to miss the occasional laughter of the audience, something like a nervous breakdown, in response to the patronizing attitude of this male Western economist that well survived 1989.[1]

[1] My account is based on the live-stream of the KP meeting on June 5, 2014.

For anyone familiar with the history of Poland, Eastern Europe, or imperialism, there is not much novel in what Sachs said. His talk once again highlighted the unequal relations of power between the East and the West, the normality associated with some idealized Europe, as well as the ostensibly inescapable necessities dictated by building capitalism and modernizing the country to 'catch up' with the West. In its centuries-long history of the "development of underdevelopment," Poland has shared many of the problems of uneven accumulation and exploitation, arrested modernization projects, and dependency on foreign capital, with other peripheral countries of the world economy (Sowa 2014; Wielgosz 2009).[2] The events of 1989 seemed to signal the "Third Worldization" of the so-called Second World, putting back the former socialist countries to the usual track of 'developing' capitalist economies (Balibar 2003). Whatever its factual value or empirical reality as a point of rupture, 1989 continues to stand as a global event that thoroughly has juggled the historical time and horizon of emancipatory politics. It has inspired melancholic reflections on the ends of communism and revolution, has instigated widespread denunciation of almost any comprehensive, social transformative vision as totalitarianism or terror, has animated triumphalist narratives of capitalist democracy and liberal legalistic transition, and has contributed to the rehabilitation of the memory of fascism across the world (Grandin 2010; Traverso 2016; Verdery 1996). With the so-called foreclosure of the symbolic and epistemic space of emancipation opened up by the French, Russian, and anti-colonial revolutions, we were supposed to step into the "postrevolutionary" age of human rights, rule of law, and neoliberal capitalism (Arato 2012; Michnik 2014). The term "revolution" has also come to be invoked mainly as a reified thing (one makes 'it'), devoid of the critical questions of contingency and praxis, and has become used prolifically and banally to refer to all sorts of media, technological events or simply drastic change (Smith 2016; Traverso 2016).[3] Yet, the contradictions of social inequality and privatized freedom of this 'new' age have soon caught up with the celebrations of liberalism. In postsocialist Poland and Eastern Europe, as in other parts of the world, a powerful right-wing populist formation has emerged to challenge the values and institutions of liberal democracy (e.g., separation of powers, free speech, private property), articulating the problems of inequality and exclusion to their conservative nationalist language of sovereignty, security, and purity.[4]

In this article, I want to dwell on this familiar problem by focusing on the ends of communism in Poland. This problem is often discussed as the erosion or "crisis" of liberal democracy, or what is called "de-democratization" (Brown 2015; Kalb 2009; Tilly 2007), under the dominance of neoliberal regime of accumulation and economic rationality, and the concomitant rise of right-wing authoritarian populism. By coining the term de-democratization, I also aim to highlight the undersides and failures of the "democratization" process in

[2] It is arguable that the socialist bloc including the USSR ever managed to fully de-link itself from the capitalist world. See, e.g., Boswell and Chase-Dunn (2000).

[3] Revolutions have drawn much historical, sociological, and anthropological reflection, which I cannot fully discuss here. See, e.g., Donham (1999), Skocpol (1979), and Sewell (2004).

[4] Ost (2016) describes lucidly the policies followed by the current Polish and Hungarian governments: "Eviscerating the Constitutional Court and purging the judiciary, complete politicization of the civil service, turning public media into a government mouthpiece, restricting opposition prerogatives in parliament, unilateral wholesale change of the Constitution or plain violation of it, official tolerance and even promotion of racism and bigotry, administrative assertion of traditional gender norms, cultural resurrection of authoritarian traditions, placing loyalty over competence in awarding state posts, surveillance without check—with such policies and more, right-wing governments in Hungary and Poland are engaged in a direct attack on the institutions of democracy."

Eastern Europe that is until recently told as a success story. Today Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Hungary, seem to once again draw international attention; this time to understand some of the key dynamics of right-wing populism that are observed across the world (Kalb 2014; Ost 2016). Let me underscore that I do not approach right-wing populism as some sort of a pathological phenomenon, essentially alien or inimical to modern democracy.[5] Nor do I view it simply as "the return of the repressed" subaltern and working classes under neoliberal capitalism, as if those people have been frozen in time and merely 'return' to the political arena (for instance, in the form of Brexit or Trump) from the past or their 'hidden' locations untransformed, *without* their experiences and self-understandings mediated by the social-political struggles, events, and discourses that have been accumulated and publicly disseminated over the years (see Streeck 2017).[6] Instead, I find it more useful to engage with the anthropological studies of labor that explore the shifting social-material and ideological-political conditions that *mediate* the "local histories" of class (Kalb 2014) and give rise to a right-wing populist formation, especially in "postsocialist" Europe (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014; Kalb and Halmai 2011). I am interested in how the nationalist populist groups have come to determine the "language of contention" (Roseberry 1994), through which the working people and subaltern classes express their resentment and criticism of the present (dis)order. For that, I draw on the anthropological research that suggest that the "language of contention" does not emerge in a vacuum, but changes and becomes what it is in a dynamic relation to the unfolding forms and language of domination and by feeding on the memories of struggle that are communicated or recreated across time and space (ibid; Gill 2016; Narotzky 2011).

I cannot explore here all the conditions that give way to right-wing populism. My focus will be primarily on how the ends of communism and revolutionary politics and praxis have contributed to the environment of emptiness, nihilism or the void, in which right-wing groups were able to thrive and claim to be the real voice of social change and justice. Like the end of communism in Eastern Europe, this nihilistic situation has had a global dimension, affecting the Left (Marxian) and communist movements, as well as the narrowly conceived democratization processes and human rights activism around the world (Balibar 2003). In Poland, some of the symptoms of this emptiness may be observed in the often-noted apathy of Polish voters (low turn-out at elections), lack of genuine, distinct party-political programs (no identifiable differences between the parties' economic policies and vision of change), the generalized feeling of political impasse, and widespread existential depression and uncertainty (e.g., Buchowski 1994; Jowitt 1992; Rakowski 2009; Sokol 2016). I do not rehearse here the familiar Durkheimian argument that explains such negative social states as resulting from the dissolution of some preexisting social solidarity. The history of state socialism including that of the opposition groups in Poland cannot be considered as a cohesive, integrated society or consensual moral order. One might better consider the nihilism of 1989 as an effect of the eclipse of utopia. For this eclipse entailed, as Traverso (2016) has suggested, not only the collapse of the horizon of transformative action, but also the dominance of "presentism" that dissolved both the past and future into an eternal present, disabling the communication of the

[5] See Panizza (2005) for an insightful overview of the scholarship on populism.

[6] For instance, for all its insightful criticism of what he calls "neoliberal revolution," Wolfgang Streeck's (2017) recent article entitled "The Return of the Repressed" still considers the social groups supporting "populist" organizations as people who have "at their disposal" only the "pre-political, untreated linguistic raw material of everyday experiences of deprivation, economic or cultural." This account of "the return of the repressed" with their "raw material," in my view, obscures more than it reveals by uncritically employing, among other things, the language of trauma.

living memory of struggles across generations. When Jeffrey Sachs said, "you have no right to utopia" he expressed more than a hardline economic realism. His words were also about the supposedly outmoded, finished past and a future that could only be an extension of the neoliberal present.

While this account of the eclipse of utopia helps understand the sense of nihilism or void, it does *not* say much about the way that void has been historically and materially constituted. For the void has not simply emerged by itself, but has arisen as a combined effect of particular legal-institutional arrangements, social-political and class struggle, and capitalist development. In this sense, utopia or nihilism, I suggest, must not be conceived merely in the symbolic order or on the plane of ideas and affects, but must be seen as embedded in and dialectically related to the social-material processes and struggles, which operate often simultaneously at different levels, local, national, and global. Furthermore, exploring this terrain sheds light on one of the major contradictions that has confronted many social movements around the world: how is it that rising to positions of power, these movements tend to succumb to the sovereignty of capital and the dictates of state security and implement policies (e.g., neoliberal and authoritarian) that contradict their prior aspirations? I do not claim to offer here a definitive answer to this question. But I think revisiting certain episodes of the massive "Solidarity" trade union movement and its gradual, yet tragic dissolution and absorption into the project of building capitalism provides a valuable insight to think that question. In doing so, I will also engage the often-invoked dialectic between insurrection and constitution, or movement and institutionalization that marks the revolutionary struggles (Balibar 2014; Smith 2016), and reflect on what I call the 'tragedy of Kuroń' that found a visceral expression in his "chain smoking" and "banging on the table" described by Sachs.

In what follows, I will first focus on the "Open Letter to the Polish United Workers' Party" that Jacek Kuroń co-authored with his lifelong comrade Karol Modzelewski in 1964. The Letter has been one of the most important documents of revolutionary Marxism that emerged from the East bloc, and both Kuroń and Modzelewski later became prominent "Solidarity" activists and public figures of postsocialist Poland. Tracing the local, national, and international life of this Letter and the struggles by which it was invoked, silenced, or discarded throws light on the shifting social-material and political conditions of revolutionary practice. My discussion of the Letter and struggles does not claim to be exhaustive or pretends to do justice to the convoluted history and marginalized actors of those struggles, especially women activists whose formative role in the struggles has been systematically silenced.[7] By reconstructing the history of the Letter, I aim to develop the following simple, yet often sidelined argument that it is in the course of struggles that ideas or visions find articulation, gain efficacy, or disappear into oblivion. The force of the ideas and affective dispositions cannot be thought independent of praxis and its material conditions. In this respect, I will be specifically concerned with the historical trajectory of labor and human rights activism (the changing language of contention), and the military suppression and fragmentation of the struggles against the communist state, which has led to the proliferation of divisions and suspicions of betrayal among the working people, and opened up a space for the neoliberal accumulation of capital and state transformation.[8] Finally, in the last part of the paper, I will focus on a recent miner

[7] There is a huge literature on "Solidarity" which I do not cover here. Recent studies suggestively focus on the work of women activists and of rural and provincial "Solidarity" committees in the movement, which is typically overlooked and silenced by the dominant historiography of the opposition. See, e.g., Penn (2006).

[8] See also Gill's (2016) work on Colombia and Diane Nelson and Carlota McAllister's (2013) edited volume on Guatemala that explore the way neoliberalization and (para)military suppression of popular struggles have contributed to the fragmentation of the social relations of subaltern and working people in those countries.

strike in Jastrzębie-Zdrój, located in the industrial region of Poland, to discuss further the problems of social struggles in the context of neoliberal de-democratization.

As I hope the following sections will show, many problems regarding communism, capitalism, and revolutionary practice that I analyze are not specific just to Poland or even to Eastern Europe, but they are often produced through the interplay of global, national, and local forces, ideas, and practices.

The open letter and its critics

The Letter was an inspiring product of its time, one that aspired to chart the contours of an unfolding proletarian future. It drew on the historical experience of 1956 uprisings and workers councils in Poland and Hungary, as well as Yugoslavia's experimentation with worker self-management; critically engaged with the slow-going destalinization, but rapidly growing inflation and widening austerity and political repression of Władysław Gomułka's rule in Poland; rested on the observation of student protests, anarcho-syndicalist movement, and communist and socialist organizations in Italy; and inspired from the recent and ongoing "liberation struggle of the Greek partisans, Korea, Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, and Congo" (1972, 72). In a word, the global horizon of human emancipation felt so near at the time.

Kuroń and Modzelewski conceived the Letter in light of that future.[9] They were also well aware of the brutal suppression of many emancipatory struggles around the world. Before their text saw the day, it was confiscated by the Polish secret service in late 1964. Both of them were hastily expelled from the socialist organizations, which they had attended. It soon became clear that none of the concerned disciplinary committees ever saw the text, so they decided to rewrite it from memory to make it public. They ended up writing what became, as Pierre Frank called it in the French edition of the Letter, "the first revolutionary Marxist document to appear in the workers' state since the physical annihilation of the Left Opposition and the assassination of Trotsky" (1972, 9). Kuroń and Modzelewski sent the text to the relevant party and university committees and youth organizations in Poland as an "Open Letter to the Party."

The Letter was part a revolutionary program, part a rigorous Marxian critique of the East bloc party-states. It argued that unlike how it was often assumed, the nationalization of property by the state did not necessarily mean socialization or social ownership of property. The outcome of this process depended on the class character of the state and the organization of productive relations. In Poland and other Soviet states, they observed a systemic monopolization of power by an "autocratic" bureaucracy, the new ruling class, which appropriated the surplus value, produced by the workers through the state, and invested it to reproduce its power. This class rule, Kuroń and Modzelewski argued, was defined by its systematic exploitation of the working people who had no control of their own labor and its product, had no means of self-defense, and had no say in running the state or deciding the social goals of production, investment, and consumption. Like other social organizations, they wrote, trade unions, which were the "traditional organizations of workers' economic self-defense… have

[9] The Letter was not simply a product of two individuals. Kuroń and Modzelewski had been members of a collective, which regularly met at Warsaw University and included leftwing intellectuals and students who later became influential during the 1968 protests.

become passive and obedient tools of the bureaucracy or, in other words, of the political and economic power of the state" (20).

With the Letter, Kuroń and Modzelewski sought to refashion a revolutionary Marxism to overcome the party dogma and organize a common platform for workers and students. They conceived it as part of the larger world revolutionary movement, and were convinced that they had to strive for overthrowing both the modern "bureaucratic dictatorships" of the East bloc and the monopoly-capitalism of the imperialist West. They denounced the pact of cooperation and stability brokered by the two great power-blocs, which hindered the development of revolutionary movements both at home and abroad in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The self-emancipation of the working class was, in their view, the precondition for the realization of any kind of freedom that is not purely fictitious or formalistic. They proposed workers council democracy in place of the hierarchically organized party-state, multiple worker parties in place of one-party rule, armed worker militias in place of the standing army, and long-term transformation of agricultural production in place of speedy and violent imposition of collectivization on small farmers.

When these 'bold' statements reached to the party circles in Poland, they were quickly dismissed as "utopian" and even threatening to instigate some sort of a revolution of hordes. Workers democracy, the critics said, was not a realistic idea; the realistic course of action was supposed to be a reform from above, the "technocrats' program," what Kuroń and Modzelewski suggestively called "the socialism of the plant managers" (85). Other critics claimed that any revolutionary road, for that matter, the program proposed by the Letter would end in the "triumph of anti-socialist forces," either because "the working class was reactionary" or because "the bourgeois elements in society were still powerful." For Kuroń and Modzelewski, it was rather these views that were utopian and reactionary, and fearfully so: the mere technocratic reform would not be able to transform the material base of the bureaucracy's power and, thus, would not prevent the increasing social antagonism. Further, the party's defense of the present system as socialist, identification of the working class as anti-socialist, and elimination of any Left opposition, they argued, would further push the popular discontent toward the political rightwing currents (e.g., anti-Communist nationalists and clerical Church) (86). This would eventually lead to the complete erosion of the Left in society.

After a secret trial, Modzelewski was sentenced to prison for three and half years, and Kuroń for three years. But part of the Letter's vision and critical elań made its way to the next decades, especially with the struggles organized around the "Workers' Defense Committee" (*Komitet Obrony Pracowników*, KOR) and the "Solidarity" trade union. The Letter's focus on the self-defense of workers against the state, as well as its attempt to bridge the historical divide between the intellectuals and workers will be put into practice. Whether one fully agreed or not with the Letter's analysis of the "bureaucratic dictatorship" and its revolutionary program, one could clearly see that what it feared most turned out to be accurate: the forthcoming impasse and failure of the liberalizing technocratic reforms of state communism; the brutal suppression of the worker strikes and popular uprisings by the army and other security forces, including the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968; the opportunism of state firm managers and technocrats who quickly allied themselves with the class project of building capitalism in the 1980s; and finally, the increasing pull of the popular classes toward the anti-communist nationalism in the next five decades in the absence of an effective Left opposition and anti-capitalist position.

The liberal turn and the "state of war"

In his recent autobiography, Modzelewski (2013) lamented that the Letter's circulation did not extend into the factories as much as he and Kuroń wished. After their imprisonment, he recalled, the Letter came back to Poland mainly by the publication of a well-known Paris-based émigré magazine "Culture" (*Kultura*) and the broadcast of the Polish section of the Radio Free Europe. Later he observed that the text became more popular outside Poland, translated into many languages and embraced by young revolutionaries and Leftist groups around the world. Thus, in a sense, the Letter not only expressed an internationalist viewpoint but its very material life also made tangible the connections between different locations such as Warsaw, Moscow, London, Paris, and Istanbul.

In Poland, the Letter became known mainly among the party circles, intellectuals, and students in the 1960s. It became influential in its appeal to the young and as the revolutionary manifesto of the generation that came of age after the Second World War (Michnik 2011, 12).[10] Moreover, the Letter, whether in the form of a court trial or controversial political issue attended by renowned leftist intellectuals enjoyed much publicity. In fact, shortly after Kuroń and Modzelewski were released from prison in 1967, they were again arrested for leading the so-called "anti-socialist" student protests of 1968.

As is often noted, the student unrest and intellectuals' protests were relatively easily crushed by the party-state. The government managed to isolate the masses of factory workers from protesting students and intellectuals. The division between intellectuals and industrial workers and peasants in Poland has been a deep one, having played a decisive role in many historical uprisings and in general, nation and state formation since the nineteenth century (Kubik 1994). But the conditions in which this division becomes rearticulated have varied. Unlike the 1960s' austere heavy industrialization and import-substitution policies, the 1970s sought to develop a sort of 'consumer socialism,' close to the Hungarian path of "market socialism," running on the debts collected from the Bretton Woods institutions and aiming to boost consumption. When the Letter was conceived, both the opposition and the government were concerned with egalitarianism; where the opposition underscored class disparities, the government claimed to accomplish the upward mobility of unskilled workers and the rural poor. However, in the 1970s, as Gdula (2014) observes, this egalitarian drive was largely replaced by the promotion of ideas of individual self-realization and entrepreneurship, which brought about a more differentiated management of labor. As may be recalled, this was also the time when the so-called capital-labor pact of the "golden age" welfare capitalism was challenged in the West by worldwide social-political protests and the economic crisis, which was dealt by the financialization of economy and introduction of post-Fordist organization of production (Arrighi and Silver 2012, 65–67).

By the mid-1970s, the government's grand development projects funded on Western credit began to freeze and turn into gigantic ruins. The import-led growth fell in disarray, as the burden of debt increased dramatically, a situation shared by other East European socialist states such as Hungary and Romania (Kalb 2014). The burgeoning opposition of the 1960s was not there, however. The violent suppression of worker strikes and student protests, the purge of critical political voices, and the Warsaw pact invasion of Czechoslovakia decimated the opposition groups. The party was no longer the main addressee of critique, as was the case

[10] The appeal to the young must not be underestimated. At the time about 65% of the population in Poland was below the age of 35 (Kuroń and Modzelewski 1972, 7).

with the Letter. The oppositionists, whatever remained of them, sought for new forms and platforms for action, aspiring to create an alternative self-governing society and networks of solidarity beyond the party-state's reach. The shift in the party government toward a more individual-centered, Western credit-based, consumerist orientation also brought about a change in the language of the oppositionists, who increasingly began to employ the legal and moral framework of citizenship and human rights.

At the time, the dissidents from other Eastern European countries, especially Hungary and Czechoslovakia, expressed similar views. However, those views failed to enjoy the social force they did in Poland due to the lack of a popular movement that could carry them forward (Gdula 2014). In Poland, it was not until when the workers took to the streets in June 1976 in Ursus and Radom that the opposition started gaining a popular force. To defend the workers against state repression, Kuroń and his comrades found the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR). Most of the members were already established public figures, involved in the 1968 protests. KOR refashioned the idea of workers' self-defense rehearsed in the Open Letter in light of the new conditions of opposition. It merged together the emergent 'rights activism' and the problems of labor. Initially, it sought to provide medical and financial help, and legal counseling to the workers and their families affected by state violence. In the course of action, KOR activists also accumulated insight on the daily lives of workers. This exchange between the dissident activists and workers became crucial for the future formation of the "Solidarity" movement (Kubik 1994; Lipski 1985).

In the international arena, it was Adam Michnik who stood out as the main spokesperson of the thriving opposition in the 1970s. While raising funds and spreading the word of the opposition, he closely followed the post-1968 debates in France on Marx, met the exilic Soviet dissidents (e.g., Solzhenitsyn), and exchange views about human rights and Eurocommunism. As the historian Robert Brier (2011) suggests, his interactions with eminent ex-Marxist, liberal-left, and conservative intellectuals at a time when the violence of Soviet communism was heatedly denounced, made Michnik an ardent advocate of an anti-totalitarian, individual human rights-oriented position. While establishing himself in the West as the authentic witness of 'totalitarian repression,' Michnik brought to Poland the ideas of the disillusioned ex-leftists like Francois Furet on the French Revolution and emancipatory politics.

The exchanges did not only follow the West-East route. The dissidents from the East also had been in contact with each other (see, e.g., Brier 2013). By the second half of the 1970s, dissident groups (e.g., Charter 77) also embraced the main tenets of political pluralism, civic liberties, and individual human rights. The signing of the Final Act of the Helsinki agreements in 1975 legitimated the invocation of human rights in the opposition groups' programs. As moral and legal language, human rights became an important reference, especially when these groups sought international support and financial aid. Different Helsinki Committees in Hungary, Poland, and the Soviet Union were established to monitor human rights violations (Bolton 2010; Thomas 2001). In contrast to these new venues of moral-legal engagement, the kind of revolutionary program envisioned by the Open Letter seemed to be retreating from the horizon of collective action, a trend which may be also observed in the leftwing movements in other parts of the world, especially South America (Arthur 2009; Gill 2016; Moyn 2012). However, as far as the activities of KOR were concerned, the separation between labor and human rights was not fully there. While monitoring human rights violations, KOR also engaged with the working conditions and rights of the workers.

If "Solidarity" had a legalistic orientation as a trade union initiative aspiring for official recognition, it was also an egalitarian social movement toward political and economic

emancipation. It sought to combine the ideas of democratic self-determination at the workplace with those of pluralism and freedom of association and expression (Ost 1991; Wielgosz 2005). Emerged out of the social circles of striking shipyard workers, it spread over other working-class communities around the country, particularly the steel workers and miners in Silesia. Oral testimonies of the participants highlight the self-transformative aspect of becoming involved in such a massive movement (e.g., Bloom 2013). With "Solidarity," people began to discuss openly political affairs with strangers, stepping out of their close circles.

As "Solidarity" became legal and expanded through rural and urban committees, it also came under firmer state repression and surveillance, and the tensions within the movement became more acute. In that, it shared the fate of other social movements, which gradually became fragmented and fraught with all sorts of suspicions of betrayal. Not only did the gap between the "national leadership" with its distinct body of "advisers" consisting of intellectuals, and the rank-and-file workers become deepened. But the disagreements over tactics between different groups became increasingly divisive and lethal (Barker 1987; Bloom 2013). While some "Solidarity" groups desired a direct and violent confrontation, others opted for negotiation and non-violent action, trying to avoid the further disruption of daily life. In the meantime, the government formed national fronts to show "Solidarity" anti-Polish and responsible for chaos and economic crisis in order to isolate it. With the declaration of, literally, "state of war" (*stan wojenny*) in December 1981, which formally lasted for three years, the party-state became further militarized. "Solidarity" was brutally dismantled and pushed to underground. Different underground "Solidarity" groups emerged, each claiming the true legacy of "Solidarity." There was considerable confusion about where "Solidarity" was and what it was about. When there were too many "solidarities," there was no solidarity, however (Ost 1991, 153).

As it often happens in the military suppression of popular movements, the martial law government also came up with a strategy of forming alliances and softening its appearance. It sought to develop positive relations with the intelligentsia and the Roman Catholic Church, and supported cultural events. It further liberalized the command economy and introduced the institutions of judicial review associated with Western liberal democracy. In the meantime, the ideas of Friedrich Hayek, Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher became more influential among the oppositionists (Kowalik 2012). It was not that the ideas of market reform were not in circulation before, but the conditions of the martial law significantly contributed to the growing popularity of the ideas of free-market and private property. This coincided with the liberal and conservative groups' increasingly trenchant criticism of the leftist ideas of the KOR for the dissolution of "Solidarity" (Ost 1991). Labor politics earned a bad name, as the Left became unpopular. Unlike in 1980, economic reform started to be prioritized over political reform. Both the new liberal "Solidarity" leaders and the party's reform communists agreed to undertake market reforms and privatization, most of which were conducted in secret (Ost 2005).

Such policies met a wave of combative factory occupations and strikes of young workers in 1988 throughout the country (see Kalb 2014). The government was hopeless in the face of the strikes except to ask the national "Solidarity" leadership to talk out the young workers. Lech Wałęsa took this task but only hardly succeeded. For many workers and rank-and-file "Solidarity" activists, his intervention revealed that the national leadership of "Solidarity" had already turned into a new elite standing next to the government officials and technocrats. The growing antagonism within "Solidarity" and between the young workers and newly formed opposition groups, and the senior "Solidarity" leaders exposed the fragile position of the leadership, which claimed to speak for the entire opposition and Polish nation.

The round-table agreements between the "Solidarity" leaders and party-state authorities took place in this environment. Only a handful of "Solidarity" activists including Michnik and Kuroń attended. Modzelewski did not attend. Many workers who had made "Solidarity" a powerful force in the first place were interpellated as spectators. The agreements concluded with the decision to hold a limited "free election." For some oppositionists this was a great success, something unimaginable before, for others it was a treacherous compromise, or the cooptation of the democratic revolutionary struggle.[11] The turnout for the June 4, 1989 elections was only about 60%. Ten out of 27 million eligible voters did not go to the ballot box. Political apathy, fatalism, and nihilism seemed to rule the day. Such was the so-called victorious "end of communism."[12]

The tragic ends of State communism

> "Lech Wałęsa alone must have been thinking about capitalism [in the 1980s]. I certainly wasn't. I wouldn't have spent a week nor a month, let alone eight and half years in jail for capitalism."
> Karol Modzelewski on the 25th anniversary of "Solidarity," 2005

Since 1989, Modzelewski (2013) had different occasions to reflect on what he recently called "The Great Transformation" (*Wielka Transformacja*), alluding to Karl Polanyi's well-known work. As mentioned before, the Letter had brought him and Kuroń a notable recognition outside Poland. The "Solidarity" movement and the events of 1989 compounded it, but imbuing it with a sense of tragedy. In his foreign trips in the early 1990s, Modzelewski often faced the question: how was the massive labor movement like "Solidarity" so quickly absorbed by the project of building capitalism that aimed at demolishing the working class by cutting public spending, eliminating workplaces, silencing protests, and devaluing altogether the category of labor? What came of the 'social dialogue' between the intelligentsia and working people that KOR and "Solidarity" had embraced?

Once Lionel Jospin asked him that question, recalled Modzelewski. A few years later, he became the prime minister of France and Modzelewski wondered, "how Jospin managed the tension between his principles and neoliberal policies, which bended down the neck of the socialist prime minister of one of the biggest countries of Europe?" (2013, 122). At another time he met the Italian unionist Emilio Gabaglio. He wrote, "We had known each other for more than ten years. Emilio started the conversation with the same question that Jospin asked. Emilio was still a unionist with leftist orientation—though he was more a Christian than a

[11] The round-table was opposed not only by conservative anti-communists, but also by the newly formed radical left/left-wing groups: "Polish Socialist Party-Democratic Revolution" (*PPS-Rewolucja Demokratyczna*), "The Movement for Freedom and Peace" (*Ruch Wolność i Pokój*), and "Fighting Solidarity" (*Solidarność Walcząca*).

[12] This specific "Polish" account of the end of communism has wider relevance. Many East European states were dissolved at the time through negotiated or "velvet revolutions" (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia) and the ideology of "transition to democracy" was influential across the region. But there were also differences. In addition to the particular state of oppositional movement and party government in each country, the specific ends of communism were shaped by the shifting geopolitical and economic relations across the globe in the 1980s such as the Reagan administration's aggressive anti-communist policies of armament and human rights, and Gorbachev's more liberal, reformist policies of "transparency" (glasnost) and "restructuring" (perestroika) (see Kotkin and Gross 2009; Verdery 1996).

"Red" descent. He also read the Letter when he was young… Shortly after our meeting he became the chairman of the European Trade Union Confederation. To his luck (*na jego szczęście*), that was not a social role (*rola społeczna*) which forced him to change his position on neoliberalism" (ibid).

In a sense, Modzelewski was also 'lucky', not occupying a government position like other "Solidarity" activists. He remained on the opposition, criticizing the post-Solidarity governments for lacking program and ex-dissidents for abandoning the working people in the interests of capital. As opposed to the increasingly personalized relations of interest and favor, he called for the "loyalty to the strangers," to the people who not long ago constituted the popular force of "Solidarity" and who today seemed like an anonymous mass of survivors (1993). Unlike him, Jacek Kuroń took the risk of occupying a government office as a Minister of Labor and until his death, remained preoccupied by his involvement in it. Later, he undertook self-criticism on many occasions.

How to make sense of this tragedy of Kuroń and indeed, of the Great Transformation? Tragedy has been one of the key notions through which revolutions and political struggles or actions have been thought. It highlights the historical contingencies and the risks of defeat or death in which one wages a struggle and, through that, becomes a political subject. Tragedy highlights the turns of events, the shifts of historical processes, and their unintended effects (Scott 2014; Traverso 2016). I suggest that the tragedy of the Great Transformation needs to be understood in light of the shifts that we have seen in the previous section. These shifts largely set the parameters of the emergent theoretical-practical field of hegemony and praxis, the conjuncture that determined what seemed possible in the early 1990s. In this regard, the martial law was a crucial turning point for the future of "Solidarity" and communism: while "Solidarity" was an egalitarian movement aspiring for political and economic emancipation before the martial law, the ends of "Solidarity" came to be dominated by the vision of a top-down economic liberalization shared by liberal party members and technocrats, as well as the leading oppositionists. What started as the workers' defense and social self-defense from below against state power transformed into an economic reform imposed from above, which deprived many working people of livelihood and the means to participate in political and economic government. While the 'economic' increasingly became a field of expert calculation detached from the social question, the 'political' was reduced to the project of building capitalism and multi-party electoral democracy, following the dominant Euro-American norms. In the same vein, the sanctification of private property and privatization of the party-state had the individual-centered civil and political rights move to the core of legal and human rights activism while disabling or marginalizing the activism around social and economic rights. By emancipation, it was now mainly meant, "liberation from communism," a "normalization" that was to be achieved by creating an affluent middle-class on the basis of private property and capital accumulation (Kurczewski 1999, 204). In separating the individual subject from "species-beings" and defining liberty and equality as a formal, abstract right independent of its social-material and daily conditions of realization, such emancipation was certainly far removed from what Marx (1978) meant by "human emancipation."

If this was the void that was constituted by the "end of communism" and that marked the tragedy of Kuroń, it also shaped the "postsocialist" state and class formation, and had a world-historical dimension. The events of 1989 appeared as the ultimate material evidence of the exhaustion of the critical force of historical communism, even if that exhaustion had been long visible since at least the late 1960s (Balibar 2003). In the same vein, emancipatory struggle and desire for social revolution has come to be described as a matter of youthful illusion at best, or

a dangerous, totalitarian fanaticism leading to terror. This view, which found its strongest expression in Francois Furet's work and is embraced by the liberal celebrations of the end of communism and revolution, has also framed the past struggles in Poland and Eastern Europe, including the revolutionary ethos of the Open Letter (Michnik 2011). For ex-dissidents like Michnik (2014), the only revolutionaries that were left in the 'postrevolutionary' era seemed to be the "right-wing Bolsheviks," who called for a national purification of society from ex-communists. These 'primitive,' vengeful nationalists, in his view, seemed to have failed to catch up with the new era of democracy and tolerance. This view is widely shared by other liberal ex-dissidents and dominant classes, who keep invoking the old traditions of nobility and messianic nationalism to highlight their "civilizational superiority" over the popular classes and justify the different forms of dispossession and inequality generated and reproduced by the transition (Buchowski 2006; Sowa 2014).

Likewise, the issues of labor seemed to belong to an outmoded past for the ruling classes. Trade unions and labor activism have become gradually monopolized by conservative nationalists aspiring to articulate the resentment of working people by recreating the memories of national anti-communist struggle, which they see as being constantly reenacted in the present against the 'shadows' of communists and their secret allies. Hidden treacheries, specters of communism, anti-Polish conspiracies, and the new riches and cliques connected to foreign capital, Moscow, and Brussels have become the major themes of the popular cosmology of postsocialist class formation, especially for the urban and rural poor (Kalb 2014; Ost 2005). The political arena has become dominated by the two major blocs: secular liberal groups embracing civic nationalism and the values of individual human rights and rule of law, and conservative nationalist groups embracing religious- and ethno-nationalism and the ethos of anti-communism and national sovereignty, honor, and purity (Zubryzcki 2006). None of the blocs expressed an anti-capitalist position or developed a class-based critique. With the increasing division and polarization between the blocs, the problems of workers, women, and ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities have faced serious limitations in achieving social support and public visibility.

Let me illustrate this with an example. It is about the miner strike that I attended in April 2011. Located in upper Silesia, Jastrzębie-Zdrój has been one of the main centers of worker protests that led to the formation and expansion of "Solidarity" in 1980–1981. In 2011, the miners of the Jastrzębie Spółka Węglowa (Jastrzębie Mining Group, JSW), the European Union's largest coking coal producer with about 22,000 employers, faced another scheme of privatization brokered by the firm management and the Polish government. Since the 1990s, the Silesian mining sector has already gone waves of privatizations, which resulted in downsizing the labor force and cutting the social services. Older workers that I talked to still lamented at the loss of fellow workers and the top-down privatization of their means of social reproduction (cultural centers, leisure facilities). When I approached the entrance gate, an elderly security officer yelled at me: "You see, nothing good will come out of this. People have no jobs today and these people still go to strike to increase their paychecks. Soon they will also lose what they have. It is going to be bad, so bad…".

One did not need a guardian to hear such words. That has been the typical portrayal of worker protests in postsocialist media. The popular daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* (GW) of which Adam Michnik is the editor-in-chief, was no more sympathetic to the strikes. The small coverage on the strikes revealed the well-known platitudes: the current inefficiency of the mining industry, the need for further privatization and concrete individual owners to make the mines profitable, and the militancy of the miners which could chase away potential foreign

investors. The JSW manager claimed that he sympathized with the worker strikes of socialist Poland, but unlike those strikes, which were governed by the idea of "freedom," he said, the current strike was not rooted in any idea (GW, 18 April 2011). Besides receiving scant media attention, the striking miners also complained about the lack of support from their city. No longer the iconic proletariat of socialism, they were often told that times had changed and they should work just like other people. It was only the conservative nationalist media agency that came to the mines to cover the strike.

The fear of losing job was widespread among the miners, especially the elderly ones who were concerned about their deteriorating health and the current state of the labor market, which devalued their skill and experience. Some other miners were skeptical about the strikes, but they ardently denied the media representation of the strike as only about their paychecks. "We know what is coming. More privatization and lay-offs. We are here for job security and our other benefits concerning retirement pensions, health service…" The two young miners who began working a few years back were deeply skeptical about the trade unionists from NSZZ "Solidarity" (alluding to the historical memory of "Solidarity") who led the strike. Those "Solidarity" unionists only cared about their own pockets and political interests, I was told. They took benefit of the workers' precarious situation and used it to gain leverage for the right-wing "Law and Justice" party, which they openly supported. Those unionists were indeed visibly sympathetic to the conservative nationalist line followed by that political party. The rooms of the union that I visited were thoroughly decorated with national and Christian icons that framed the history of "Solidarity" movement as mainly a religious-national struggle against communism. Learning that I was a student at a U.S. university, the chairman of JSW "Solidarity" began telling me about how Poles brought down communism and the "reds." In response to my questions about the current condition of labor in Poland, he talked about the moral decay of Polish society and accused the JSW manager of corruption. Finally, seeing me interested more in the specifics of the ongoing strike and the problems of capitalism, he said with excitement: "Yesterday we smashed communism. Today we do the same to capitalism!"

This struggle, which the mainstream media barely covered, was important to make sense of the current political impasse that gives way to right-wing populist formation. It was *not* that the JSW "Solidarity" chairman personally aimed to dismantle labor or supported capitalism in principle (as far as my conversation is concerned), but it is widely known that many "Solidarity" unions across Poland also have served as one of the grassroots organizations of right-wing parties, which aim to *nationalize* and *moralize* capitalism rather than challenge it (see also Kalb 2014; Ost 2005). Besides manufacturing social support for nationalist populist parties, these grassroots organizations typically *recreate* and institutionalize a particular type of memory of "Solidarity" discarding, for instance, the role played by KOR and other leftwing groups. They develop a language of contention, in which labor struggle is mainly articulated in the terms of exclusionary identity politics, pitted against the rights of women, sexual, religious, and ethnic minorities, and foreigners—all that does not seem to fit into their definition of the 'Polish worker.' This phenomenon, in my view, has crucial implications for all fronts of democratic struggle including labor. Let me give an example. Recently, a new civic initiative, which called itself "The Committee for the Defense of Democracy" (*Komitet Obrony Demokracji*, KOD), emerged. It invoked the historical memory of "The Committee for the Defense of Workers" (KOR), replacing "workers" by "democracy." It was formed as a response to the increasingly authoritarian measures employed by the current right-wing government. It expanded its social base through a series of colorful street protests and gatherings in public squares. Together with other ex-dissidents, Karol Modzelewski took part

in KOD, speaking out against the government's xenophobic, sexist, repressive nationalist policies. However, the protests soon became locked in the usual division of blocs, presenting KOD as the liberal, cosmopolitan, educated, 'civilized' face of Poland, as opposed to the primitive, backward, uneducated masses from the countryside. Failing to produce a new common language and space for action, KOD slowly has lost its popular appeal, falling back on the already existing political-cultural divisions of postsocialist class formation. So long as the striking miners and other dispossessed and disenfranchised people and 'democracy protestors' from big cities remain isolated and pitted against each other, there seems to be a little hope for changing the course of neoliberal de-democratization.

Conclusions

By reconstructing the historical course of the Open Letter and underscoring the prevalent sense of emptiness surrounding the ends of communism, I do not mean to offer another account of a demobilizing, narcissistic "Left melancholia" that is fixated on the loss of its object (Brown 2000). With Traverso (2016) and Scott (2014), we can in fact think of a form of melancholic engagement that may well be a critical practice, exploring the tragedies and defeats of past struggles in order to draw insights and rethink the possibility of alternative futures. Along that line, my aim has been to revisit, certainly not exhaustively, some of the revolutionary struggles under state communism in Poland to reflect on the changing social-material and political conditions and languages of social struggles today. The Letter's rigorous criticism of the undemocratic, militarized, nationalist, and state-centered nature of historical communism offers a valuable insight into the ongoing thinking of emancipatory politics under the conditions of contemporary capitalism. Building on the historical experience of interwar era fascism in Europe and the state suppression of popular struggles both in the East bloc and in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the Letter also prophetically speculated—at least as far as socialist and postsocialist Eastern Europe is concerned—about the political impasse of top-down technocratic reforms, the increasing nationalization of social inequalities and antagonisms, and their absorption into right-wing political currents in the absence of effective Left opposition. Furthermore, the 'tragedy of Kuroń' and the defeat of "Solidarity," I have suggested, needs to be understood not only as an effect of the neoliberal policies prescribed by Western organizations, but within the historical development of labor and human rights practice in Poland and across Eastern Europe and Latin America since the 1970s: the decoupling of labor and human rights struggle and the de-radicalization and marginalization of social emancipatory visions; the shifting vocabulary of justice and rights; the state repression and suppression of the popular struggles, especially in the 1980s (martial law); and the increasing force of (Western) capital in shaping the contours of political action and social transformation.

Capitalist de-democratization currently unfolds in this environment. To counter it, I think, critical revolutionary thinking and practice, engaged at different levels global, national, local, is crucial to examine the historical and emergent conjunctures, modalities, and structures of power (see also Smith 2016). The memory of struggles and defeats has been an important aspect of Left revolutionary thinking and practice. From Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, to Walter Benjamin, not to mention the social organizations (parties, unions etc.) that communicate memory from one generation to another, there is a vibrant tradition on the Left that engages the past struggles and defeats as historical experiences to be accumulated and reworked through in the present. That is a living memory of the struggles that is not simply

waiting to be monumentalized, or buried in time. Perhaps, this type of endeavor will be more vocal in today's Poland with the work of the thriving collectives such as "Together" (*Razem*) and some circles of "Political Critique" (*Krytyka Polityczna*) that draw on the memory of the Letter and aim to refashion an alternative future to neoliberal or national-conservative capitalism.

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