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On the globalization of the idea of solidarity

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Solidarity, Marxist and utopian communism

The word solidarity belongs since the beginning to the language of Christian Social Doctrine.¹ We find it also at the beginning of the Workers Movement in the thought of Wilhelm Weitling.²

Oddly enough this idea does not enjoy the heartfelt support of marxists. In the Communist Manifesto³ Marx explains that this idea is based on the pre-supposition of an original bond among men that is attacked by modern individualism and capitalism. This bond is religiously motivated: the existing social order is measured with the metre of the Gospel or of Christian Social Ethics and is found wanting. Exactly for this reason, the communism of Weitling is not progressive and revolutionary but rather conservative and reactionary. He would like to restore the medieval social order against the bourgeois revolution.

Marxist communism, on the contrary, welcomes the destructive traits of the capitalist revolution: it destroys all the bonds among men, all the bonds that keep society together: family, village or neighbourhood community and, first of all, religion. Man is reduced to complete isolation; he becomes just an isolated individual, an enemy of all others and struggling for his own survival and his own pleasure. The existing capitalist system, however, grants

1 See: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the social doctrine of the church*.

2 See: W. Weitling, *Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit*, 1842.

3 See: K. Marx, F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848.

him very scant occasions for pleasure and, in the end, no chances of survival. In front of the incapacity of the system to guarantee its own reproduction, the atomized and individualized workers become united by the need to struggle together against the existing system and to establish a new communist one. The unity of the workers arises on the purely materialistic basis of the hatred of a common enemy, that is, of class struggle. This materialistic basis distinguishes the scientific communism of Marx from the utopian communism of Weitling.

The scientific communism however has failed

On the one hand, the advanced capitalist economies have discovered and used self-regulatory systems that allow them to control their crises. The old Marxist theory of the collapse of capitalism has been transformed into the modern theory of the capitalist cycle. On the other hand, the communist revolution has not created a community of free men. The isolated, selfish individuals produced by the capitalist system were not transformed through the revolution into socialist new men, who perceive themselves now as parts of a greater whole. Without the incentive of individual interest, they could be compelled to work only through a strict discipline and a totalitarian social control system. The results were, however, scanty.

The end of history

When communism collapsed in 1989, Francis Fukuyama drew the conclusion that capitalism had definitively won and that we had reached the end of history.⁴ The society we live in seems to be a society of isolated individuals, kept together by the selfish motivation of maximizing the consumption levels of each one of them. Everyone lives in his own private, virtual world, and the relations to other human beings are mediated only through contracts. All natural bonds have been dissolved. Materialism has triumphed, albeit in a form different or even opposite to that foreseen and desired by Marx.

4 See: F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

The clash of civilizations

The conclusions of Fukuyama have been challenged by Samuel P. Huntington.⁵ He sustains that the future will be determined by the clash of different world visions: the Western, the Islamic, the Eastern, and others. History is not a history of class struggles but rather of cultural identities (we could perhaps say of religions). Subsequent events, like the Gulf Wars and the Afghanistan Wars, seem to confirm this view. The world seems to resist the cultural hegemony of consumerist capitalism and of Western irreligiosity.

From the clash to the dialogue of civilizations

Huntington develops his thesis opposing the West to other civilizations. We accept his vision of the primacy of cultural over merely economic factors in history. We disagree, however, on the fatalistic conviction that civilizations must necessarily clash with one another. Pope Francis laboriously explores the difficult path of the dialogue of civilizations. Now we want to investigate the same problem from within our western culture in the context of a world that is becoming global.

Why did communism collapse?

We begin with the following question: what is the reason why communism collapsed? All historical events of that magnitude have more than one cause. The economic inefficiencies of the system had, of course, a great role. They had been there, however, for a long while, and the system had been able to maintain itself. To understand what really happened, we must introduce, however, a factor of a different order.

5 See: S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, „Foreign Affairs” 72 (1993) no. 3, pp. 22-49.

Solidarność

This factor was Solidarność. Solidarność consolidated itself in the form of a trade union but was something more than that. In the language of Pope Francis, we can say it was a popular movement. The workers, the intellectuals, the peasants, the students, the housewives... were united not first of all against a common enemy but through the hope of a common good that had to be pursued together. They ceased to be a multitude of isolated individuals; instead, they perceived themselves as a community based on truth and reciprocal trust. They perceived themselves as a nation. They could therefore say: “We, the People.”⁶ The people of Solidarność were very different from the proletarians of Marx: they were not the result of the dissolution of all communities; their self-consciousness was not merely negative. They had a culture, a history and a religion. This explains more than anything else the feelings of wonder and revulsion of many Western intellectuals in seeing the workers of the Danzig Shipyards parading the images of Our Lady of Jasna Góra. When we recognize ourselves as a people, we do not stand in need of being governed and directed by an exterior authority that stands over and above us. We are capable of self-government and can take our destiny into our own hands. This was the message of Solidarność.

The proposal of a moral society

They did not want to criticize communism from the point of view of the medieval social system or from the point of view of the capitalist mode of production. They measured the existing system of injustice with a purely ethical meter, and they found it insufficient. They dreamed of a just society in which the community of workers could govern itself. This dream has been only partially realized. Poland is today a free and democratic country, and the communist totalitarian system has been superseded. In the sphere of the economy, we have, however, something very different from a self-governing

6 On November 15, 1989, Lech Wałęsa, Chairman of NSZZ Solidarność, delivered a speech to the US Congress. He began with the words “We, the People” borrowed from the preamble of the United States Constitution. See: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?9914-1>

community of workers. We have a usual capitalist system, and the self-consciousness of being a community is progressively being eroded by the allurements of a consumerist culture.

Did the revolution of solidarity fail?

The old industrial system congregated the workers in enormous factories where they worked side by side. The physical proximity helped to develop a common culture of solidarity. Today the vast majority of people do not work in the industrial sector but in the services sector. They are physically separated from one another and connected through communication systems they do not control. It was impossible to maintain the original spirit of *Solidarność* in a working environment that underwent such a dramatic change. The temptations of a consumerist culture were, moreover, very difficult to resist for men and women who came out of the communist culture of scarcity. One generation of Poles could feel satisfied with the advantages achieved and unwilling to run further risks. The revolution of *Solidarność* did not fail but remained uncompleted or was forced for a while to a standstill.

What is the moral and intellectual heritage of that revolution?

I try to summarize what remains of *Solidarność* in four points:

1. The existing social system can be measured with a moral meter.
2. An ethical mode of production in which the community of the workers has a central role in the social construction is possible.
3. The subject of change is not the product of material forces but of a self-conscious educational process.
4. The workers' movement and the demand for a critique of capitalism do not die with the end of communism. The new critique of capitalism, however, cannot be materialistic but must be ethical and religious.

Solidarity as the social side of the idea of communion

Let me draw your attention to point 3. At the basis of Christian doctrine stands the idea of communion: through participation in the Body and in the Blood of Christ, the disciples become one with Christ and one with one another. They (should) acquire a communion personality in which the good of the individual encompasses the good of all other human beings. I cannot determine my own good against the good of my brothers and sisters or put within brackets our participation in a common humanity. Solidarity is the social side of the idea of communion. I shall not say that Christianity is the only source of a communion personality or of a just social order. Similar conclusions can be reached starting from different philosophical or religious presuppositions. It is, however, impossible to develop a conscience of solidarity against Christianity or without its active contribution.

The criticism of capitalism of Pope Francis

Not by chance, the main representative of an ethical criticism of capitalism today is Pope Francis. We move then, in one sense, from Marx to Weitling, from a “scientific” materialist to an ethical criticism of capitalism. Is it then completely unjustified, the criticism leveled by Marx against Weitling? Or are we looking for a comeback to a pre/capitalist mode of production? This danger is real and we see it in some forms of ecological romanticism and the corresponding myth of a happy decline. Does the criticism of capitalism today coincide with the impossible dream of making the wheel of history rotate backwards?

The problem Pascal and Solidarity as the moral principle of the criticism of an unjust social order

We find an answer to this question in an old book by one of the founders of the Critical Theory of Society, Franz Borkeuau. The book is *The Transition from*

the Feudal to the Bourgeois Worldview.⁷ Borkenau was a Marxist and wanted to classify the different philosophies arising in the years of the transition according to the traditional distinction between reactionary and progressive. He wanted to treat them as the ideological superstructure either of the forces that tried to defend the old order of things or of those that struggled to create the new mode of production. He encountered, however, an unexpected stumbling block: the problem of Pascal. Pascal heeds no nostalgia for the Middle Ages but exercises, nevertheless, an implacable criticism of the new society. He is not the apologist of an identifiable social standpoint. He gives evidence of the fact that philosophy cannot be reduced to a superstructure of an existing social interest. A criticism from a purely ethical and religious standpoint is possible. This standpoint is that of a possible human community in which we make the experience of communion, that is, of belonging to one another in love. This human community is already given; it exists, and we encounter it in the everyday life of families, in true friendships, and in communities. Its existence is, however, partial and fragmented and threatened by social trends that disrupt it and try to reduce society to a mass of unrelated individuals, to a lonely crowd. This purely ethical criticism may indicate the path leading to a better future; it can become the method of the immanent criticism of our existing ideologies and of our existing society. It does not offer us the model of a perfect society but opens up a research programme to see and mend the evils of the society we live in. At the same time, it tells us something about the mode of production of the subject of change. The subject of change is not the Marxist proletariat but, in the language of Pope Francis, the missionary disciple: a man who creates human community, a man who spreads the experience of solidarity. The principle of solidarity, seen in this perspective, is not only the matrix of a fundamental criticism of communist totalitarianism. It is, at the same time, the principle of the criticism of consumerist capitalism.

Use value and exchange value

This criticism will have one point in common with Marxism. This is the doctrine of use value and exchange value. Here, to tell the truth, Marx found an elegant and concise expression for a truth well known since the Middle Ages.

⁷ See: F. Borkenau, *Der Übergang vom feudalen zum bürgerlichen Weltbild*, Paris 1934.

The goods produced by man serve to preserve human life and to make men happy. This is their use value. With the growing division and specialization of labor, we exchange the goods and services we produce, and we make use, to facilitate the exchanges, of signs of value (money). This is the exchange value. With this splitting of value into use value and exchange value, the possibility is given that we orient social production towards the accumulation of signs of value rather than towards the satisfaction of human needs.

This is what the medievals called usury or greed and Dante Alighieri symbolizes with the she-wolf in the *Divine Comedy*.⁸ This is also what is currently taking place in our economies and in our societies.

The constitution of the revolutionary subject

The point on which there is the utmost distance between the “new” and the “old” critic of capitalism or, if you want, between Marx and Pope Francis, regards the revolutionary subject and the modality of its constitution. We have already seen how in Marx the revolutionary subject is the proletariat, a social class of industrial workers that is a product of the economic process and a result of the dissolution of all pre-existing bonds, especially family and religion. That class of industrial workers has lost its centrality in our services economy and seems to be almost disappearing. The revolution based on a purely materialist rebellion could not organize, moreover, a free society. To keep society together, they were compelled to make use of a terroristic control system. In the teaching of Francis, on the contrary, the revolutionary subject is the people. The people are characterized through the experience of solidarity that makes a lonely crowd an organized community capable of self-government. This is the message of John Paul II in Puebla and later of Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Aparecida. The Latin American poor have a culture; perhaps they cannot read and write, and their culture is an illiterate culture, but a culture that contains fundamental values and attitudes in front of life and death, love, work, the dignity of man and the value of the human community. This culture is to a large extent the result of an encounter with the Christian message and solidarity expresses the social dimension or projection of this culture. If we compare the message of John Paul II in Latin America in 1978 and in Poland in

8 See: D. Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, Part 1: *Inferno*, Chapter 1.

1979, we find that it is fundamentally the same message: the message of solidarity. It is of course declined in different forms: in the first case, it is a challenge to the communist empire of the East; in the second, to the capitalist empire of the West.

Solidarity becomes relevant again...

...because of Covid

A series of events have brought back the issue of Solidarity to the attention of our public opinion in these last years.

One of them is the Covid pandemic. We were used to thinking that everyone lives in a virtual world of his own and that the only mediation between these virtual worlds is a contract. Now we have discovered that we all belong to the same human race and to the same world, and whatever we do influences the destiny of others. Our virtual worlds may be dependent upon contingent rules of the game determined by our arbitrary decisions. The real world is dependent upon natural laws quite independent of our wishes, and the penalty for the transgression of those laws is death. These natural laws tell us that if we do not eradicate the pandemic worldwide, and if we do not vaccinate the people of the poor countries, there will not be safety for anybody. We are rediscovering the concept of natural law, beginning with the natural laws of virology and medical prophylaxis.

...because of Climate Change

Another strictly connected issue is the climate and, more generally, the environmental crisis. Although we can imagine we each live in a world of our own, there is only one real world, and this world is regulated by natural laws we are bound to observe under penalty of the extinction of human life on earth. The environmental crisis highlights one fundamental defect of the current economic system. The production oriented exclusively towards the maximization of exchange value has offloaded for centuries onto society the costs of the consumption and destruction of the environment. The environment is a common good of humanity, but it has been consumed for private purposes

without paying the corresponding costs. Now the whole of mankind is called to pay the price of the external production costs accumulated by private companies in the course of centuries of industrialization.

...because of the globalization of World Markets

A third issue is that of the globalization of the world markets. The Marrakech Agreements of 1994 have given freedom of movement on the whole earth to capital, goods, and services. This has profoundly affected the structure of the world economy. Enormous quantities of capital have been invested in very poor countries where the salaries and the protection of workers' rights were very low. Billions of poor people have had an occasion to work, although for very low pay, and the largest part of Asia has grown and has come out of the geography of hunger. There is, however, also a more problematic side to this globalization of the economy. Many jobs and whole manufacturing sectors have been displaced from the more developed to the newly developing countries, the protection of labor has been lessened, and salaries have ceased to grow. Politics has lost the ability to control the economy. If a government wants to impose higher taxes to provide the poor with better education, to improve the health service, or to ameliorate the living conditions of the workers, the wealthy can easily move their capital to another country that offers them better conditions. This shift is further facilitated through the enormous growth of international electronic transactions. In the same way, big companies can blackmail governments that try to implement more ambitious regulations for the protection of the environment.

...because of the need to protect labor on a world scale

A fourth issue is that of the protection of labor at a world level. In 1994, the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade started the globalization of the world economy.⁹ Now we need a Global Agreement on Wages and Labor for the globalization of workers' rights and the defense of the rights of labor. It will not be easy. The wage gap is the fundamental competitive advantage of the countries that are coming out of poverty. The abrupt introduction of equal

9 On 15 April 1994, the Agreement establishing the World Trade Organization (WTO) was drawn up in Marrakesh. See: https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/marrakesh_decl_e.htm

pay would destroy their economies. We have to imagine the modalities of a progressive rapprochement that takes into account an infinity of subtleties and differences. It was no different when they started the negotiations for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade or those for the struggle against climate change, and we can expect that negotiations will be equally difficult and will take their time. This is, however, not a good reason not to begin. A first step could be a guarantee for the liberty of workers worldwide to organize independent trade unions.

A related but distinct problem exists within the European Union: in different member states, workers who possess identical skills and perform identical tasks for the same company are treated in hugely different ways.

A demand for global governance

All these four examples highlight one point: we need global governance to face the global problems of our time. This is one of the central points of the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* by Benedict XVI.¹⁰ A global governance is not a global government. It is a common exercise of sovereign powers by the governments of independent states in situations in which sovereignty can really be exercised only together. In a globalized world, we need a globalization of politics. If this does not take place, the states will lose their sovereignty, and this will mean the end of democracy. We have already seen that, if they act in isolation, the states have lost their fiscal sovereignty. They cannot tax the wealthy to practice redistributive policies in favor of the poor. They have also lost the ability to protect the environment. They are losing the ability to protect the expression of the political will of their peoples in free elections. A limited number of monopolists control the principal channel of information and political debate that is the Internet. They can easily manipulate the electoral results because the people decide and vote on the basis of the information they have, and if the information is manipulated, so too will the outcome of the elections be. They cannot guarantee the protection of the workers of their countries in the rapidly evolving world labor market of our time.

¹⁰ See: Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*.

A demand for popular movements

The fact that we need a global governance does not mean that we will have one. The objective need is not enough if we lack the subjective determination and will. As a rule, when this point is considered, an appeal is made to inspired leadership. Pope Francis, however, seems to see things from a different perspective. He makes an appeal not to a kind of Superman or to a group of great personalities but rather to broad popular movements: great leaders can only arise out of a profound change in the consciousness of our peoples.

We need global movements that make public opinion aware at a world level of the necessity of a common action. We need to balance the globalization of the economy with a globalization of political and ethical concerns. We need to give globalization a human soul.

We need to rediscover at a global level the spirit of Solidarity

Solidarność at the beginning of the '80s was a trade union, but it was also something more than a trade union. It was, at the same time, a national movement. Now we need a world movement of Solidarity that continues on a world scale not only the tradition of Solidarność but also the struggle of the world's workers' movement for social justice. Some thought that after the collapse of communism, the workers' movement had also lost its justification and its essential motivation. On the contrary, in this new stage of world history, the struggle for justice has to be continued and enlarged, encompassing the whole earth and extending its reach beyond the defense of the rights of labor. It is a struggle to put the human person at the center of society in all its dimensions. Science and economy must be put in the service of the human person, and the human person must not be reduced to an instrument for the accumulation of capital. This is the ethical imperative of a moral economy, and this conviction seems also to stay at the center of the message of Pope Francis.

The market must serve the common good of the city

We want to recognize the positivity of the market and of market forces and especially the moral and economic value of entrepreneurship. It unleashes human creativity to find new and better ways to satisfy human needs, to enlarge human welfare and the productivity of human labor. The market, however, is not a self-sufficient reality, closed within itself. It is a part of a broader society in the same way in which the market square is a part of the city. In the city, the goods exchanged on the market are consumed for the benefit of human life. The market must be put in the service of the city, and the exchange value must be put in the service of the use value. This was also a main tenet of the so-called Social Market Economy.

The search for a better society continues

After the collapse of Communism, history continues. It cannot go back to the past, but it would be a defeatism of reason to forbid the research for a new and better form of organization, both of economy and society. Capitalism is better than communism; it is, however, far from constituting a perfect society. All the progress of the last decades notwithstanding, extreme poverty has not been eradicated, and roughly 10% of the human beings living on this earth survive on the verge of starvation. Many more struggle to make ends meet, with few or no prospects of bettering their conditions. In the affluent countries, many people, especially young people, live in a condition of alienation, consigned to “frittered lives and squalid deaths...” Can we really be satisfied with the present state of affairs?

The revolutionary subject

Who is the adequate subject for the change that we as mankind are called to perform in the coming decades? We have already highlighted the role of the Popular Movements. Movements, however, are made by men. What is the

kind of man who can help mankind enter into the new phase that opens up in front of us?

The recovery of objective truth

The capitalist man is a relativist: he pretends to live in a world of his own and to abide by his own truth. In the last few decades, we have seen a growing persecution of the idea of an objective truth that is binding for all human beings. The urgency of our time is to recover the idea of objective truth. In many countries, there is now a stubborn resistance against the prophylactic measures proposed (and sometimes imposed) by public authorities in order to protect public health. Few have noticed that the so-called “No Vax” (anti-vax, no vaccination) is a pure expression of the ideology that has been dominating until the very recent past. They oppose their subjective truth to the objective truth represented by the legislators backed by the scientific community. If we want to preserve the earth, we all have to continue along this path. We will need to recover the idea of natural law in the cosmological as well as in the moral order. The man of tomorrow must be able to recognize a natural law and abide by it.

The recovery of the community

The capitalist man is an individualist: he inhabits his own world and sees reality from the point of view of the maximization of his particular interest. He wants to belong only to himself. The man of tomorrow must be a man who sees that freedom is useless without love. Freedom has the function of allowing persons to recognize one another, to displace their emotional center from the prison of their restricted and selfish individuality towards a bond connecting them to one another and allowing them the transition from an I to a we self-consciousness. We can take care together of the earth and also of our particular political community only if we can create together with others a community that is adequate to the task in front of us.

The self consciousness of the person

The most important and all-encompassing issue is then the reconstruction of the human community, beginning with the self-consciousness of the person. If we look at this concept in depth, we understand why Pope Francis insists on considering these issues as pertaining to the mission of the Church. Through them, the idea of Communion becomes concrete. On the other hand, this is the service of the Church the world stands in need of: the education of Communion personalities that aggregate communities: family communities, workers' communities, national communities, the community of humanity as such. Only through the construction of vibrant communities can the person be put at the center of the social order, and humanity be able to pursue her common good on Earth.

Abstract

On the globalization of the idea of solidarity

Solidarność in Poland was not merely a revolt against communism or a move towards capitalism but a Popular Movement advocating for a moral society centred on human community. However, subsequent developments in Poland and Europe have overshadowed this goal, replacing it with the extension of consumerist West European culture to former communist states. The vision of a moral society critiques both communism and unbridled capitalism, suggesting the failure of communism marks not the end of history but the start of a search for more humane ways of life. Today's dominant social structures face multiple crises: COVID-19, environmental degradation, globalisation, and the erosion of workers' rights. Addressing these requires global governance and, more importantly, a shift in self-awareness—from individualistic and narcissistic to personalistic and communitarian. We must regain the sense of being a communitarian subject, respecting objective laws for the common good. This represents the globalisation of solidarity's ethos.

Keywords: solidarity, community, consumerist culture, moral society

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<https://www.c-span.org/video/?9914-1/walesa-addresses-joint-meeting-congress> On November 15, 1989, Lech Wałęsa, Chairman of NSZZ Solidarność, delivered a speech to the US Congress.

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