Historicizing the Left

A Review of Michał Siermiński

Dekada przełomu: Polska lewica opozycyjna 1968–1980,
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Abstract: This review of Michał Siermiński *Dekada przełomu: Polska lewica opozycyjna 1968–1980* [Transformative Decade: The Polish Oppositionist Left 1968–1980] critiques the author's focus on ideas by offering a class-based understanding of the changes in Polish oppositionist politics, makes a case for the leftism of the "Civil Society" program of the 1970s, and argues that the old oppositionists' discussions of the Church and "nation" were not violations of leftism but a way to frame the left so as to make it more acceptable to more people. The left faces very different tasks and problems now than it did in the 1970s or 1980s, which explains why Siermiński could write such a left-wing critique today. Yet while his book is extremely valuable, and the present left does certainly need a new program, it could still use some of the self-governing ideas of the 1970s in its current struggle against neoliberalism.

Keywords: left-wing politics; social movements; civil society; intellectual history; Marxism; anarchism; Jan Wacław Machajski; Poland

The mystery at the heart of this important book is what exactly Michał Siermiński wants the message to be. It's easy to understand why he decided to write it: a deep irritation with the way many still claim Kołakowski, Kuroń, and Michnik as important left-wing theorists, and a desire to set the record straight by quoting at length from their works. Obviously, however, his intentions were greater. This is evident by the central place occupied by the *Open Letter to the Party*, Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski's radical Marxist, essentially Trotskyist, 1965 tract denouncing the PRL and Soviet-type societies for betraying the interests of workers and calling for a revolutionary transformation to build a system of socialist self-management and thereby establish "real" workers' power. For Siermiński, the Open Letter stands as the benchmark of a proper leftism, the kind which he wishes were more prominent today. Yet Siermiński nowhere offers any defense of the Open Letter, or any argument about why it is still valid today. Indeed, he doesn't even argue why it made sense in the past. He just notes – and this no one would refute – that that kind of leftism disappeared long ago, that the so-called left thinkers discussed here rejected it long ago. Without a defense of the *desired* leftism, however, this book challenges the credentials of these thinkers but leaves us nothing with which to replace them. He clearly intends to give us a lesson, but mainly offers a demolition. In a profound way, the book remains unfinished.

This does not take away from the great service the book renders. For there is no question that the three thinkers interrogated here are some of the most important

theorists of late-twentieth-century Poland. Their ideas, their courage, and their focus on how exactly to dismantle dictatorship peacefully have brought them admirers across the globe. Their works have been translated into numerous languages, their ideas embraced by democratic leftists far and wide, and while all moved away from the left, they never completely renounced it, except for Kołakowski.¹

Yet despite only one of the three figures still being alive, they function more as symbols than as real-life thinkers. Journalists and publicists might invoke their names to argue a point, with the assumption that everyone knows what they stand for. But few under 40 have read their seminal works, and almost anyone who has, probably did so long ago. So Siermiński has indeed done a great service by going through those works carefully and systematically, with quotations long enough that readers don't need to accept Siermiński's interpretations but can make up their own minds on what exactly is being said.

This book will challenge the political right, by shaking up their views of some of their favorite enemies. Obviously, though, it is aimed chiefly at left-liberals and the left. It reassesses some key figures who have had all kinds of charges laid against them, but never from a perspective like this. While I think the book has some major flaws – chiefly, its ahistorical view that “leftness” means one thing for all times – it is nevertheless an important and valuable contribution.

Siermiński's argument goes like this. Once there was a circle of Warsaw leftist intellectuals who were genuine left-wing radicals, pro-working class. This group believed in and called for a true workers' uprising to topple the post-Stalinist bureaucracy that not only lived off the surplus value created by the workers, but deprived the working class of all influence on the decisions made by the authorities. They sought a true socialist state run by workers and citizens themselves. Then came March 1968. This intellectual circle organized protests against the regime, which were suppressed in an especially harsh manner, not just by police brutality but by measures that came out of the handbook of the political right: a campaign marked by nationalism, antisemitism, and anti-intellectualism that resulted in a fundamental transformation of the public sphere. As a result of this “March shock,” the group began speaking of the regime as “fascists.” Even more than the reaction of the regime, however, the young leftists were shaken by the reaction of the rest of the population, particularly the working class. In their view, workers and the mass of Polish society were not just passive observers of the repression, but were “receptive to the antisemitic and anti-intellectual demagoguery of the authorities” (Siermiński, 2016, pp. 16–17).²

1 While in this review I take issue with Siermiński and defend Kuroń and Michnik as left thinkers throughout the 1970s, I agree with him almost completely on Kołakowski. After leaving Poland in 1968, Kołakowski devoted his life to discrediting Marxism and impugning the integrity of left-wing activists fighting against capitalism. Instead of offering any alternative positive program, he increasingly became a shill for the neoconservative political right.

2 The full passage reads: “[...] dla kontestatorów z lat sześćdziesiątych marcowy wstrząs wiązał się bowiem z odkryciem nie tylko obojętności społeczeństwa, ale także jego podatności na antysemicką i antyinteligentką demagogię władzy.”

And so this young left, according to Siermiński, changed, in two ways. First, they stopped looking to the working class to make a revolution and began seeing intellectuals like themselves as the only important actor. Second, since they understood that they still needed the support of workers, who were not interested in democratic socialism, they stopped talking about socialism and started focusing on matters closer to where they thought most people were at: the Church and the nation (*naród*). By the late 1970s, at the end of the titular “transformative decade,” they ceased being leftists and instead became – well, Siermiński never gives them a new name, but “conservative liberals wary of the people and favoring the unchallenged power of intellectuals” would probably do.

My main critique of the book is that Siermiński’s account misses the fundamental “leftness” of the Polish democratic opposition’s program of the 1970s. He does so mainly because the book is not Marxist enough: it does not take into account the changing meaning of the left at different times, depending on the nature of the class structure and the program necessary at any moment to facilitate emancipatory progress. At one point Siermiński criticizes Kołakowski for not seeing Marxism as a “living, developing theory,” but rather as an unchanging “closed doctrine” (Siermiński, 2016, p. 134). Yet this is exactly how Siermiński treats leftism: anything that departs from the Open Letter, departs from the left. Kuroń and Michnik did, in my view, decisively break from the left, but only in the 1980s, during, and particularly soon after, the Solidarity period of 1980–81.³

In the pages that follow, I postulate a class-based understanding of the changes in Polish oppositionist politics, make a case for the leftism of the “Civil Society” program of the 1970s, and argue that the discussions of Church and “nation” were not violations of leftism but only a way to frame the left to make it more acceptable to more people. I conclude by showing that the left faces very different tasks and problems than in the 1970s or 1980s, which explains why Siermiński could write such a left-wing critique today and why his book is thus extremely valuable. Yet while the present left needs a new program, it could still use some of the self-governing ideas of the 1970s against neoliberalism today.

Towards a Marxist Understanding of the New Left of the 1960s–1970s

Why did Siermiński think the Warsaw radicals moved away from the working class and the left and embraced the righteousness of intellectuals instead? Siermiński sometimes pretends to be a Marxist, probably because Kuroń and Modzelewski defined themselves within this tradition, but in fact there is not much Marxism in his analysis. There is, however, a great deal of Jan Wacław Machajski, the *fin-de-siècle* Polish anarchist thinker who denounced Poland’s late-nineteenth-century radical intellectuals for their elitism, their

3 Siermiński calls this periodization, which I argue for in my book (Ost, 2005; 2007), the standard view that he is trying to challenge.

insistence on the rule of “enlightened elites” (*oświecone elity*) over the “uncivilized masses” (*ciemny lud*). According to Machajski, Poland’s first socialists inherited the positivists’ paternalistic fear of the masses, and believed that socialism could come about only if led by decent, rational intellectuals like themselves. They thus called for the toppling of the autocratic system, but only under their own supervision. Everyone must unite, under us – the guardians of true national unity – and fight to oust the old regime and bring about socialism. For Machajski, and Siermiński, this was just a way for intellectual elites to maintain power. By insisting on national unity under their benevolent supervision, these so-called socialist intellectuals “took the autonomous, creative resistance of the subordinate, pacified it, and channeled it to serve the interests of the rule of the intelligentsia” (Laskowski, 2016, as cited in Siermiński, 2016, p. 39).⁴

Throughout the book Siermiński returns again and again to this analogy: just as radical intellectuals once fought tsarism by trying to channel all resistance into a movement that they alone dominated, so the post-1968 generation of Polish radicals called for a fight against state socialism but only through the means they proposed and in a movement they controlled. In Siermiński’s Machajskian view, Poland’s left intelligentsia, feeling betrayed in 1968 by both the state and the workers, came to believe that only correct-thinking intellectuals could bring about a just, socialist world, and so they moved away from socialist discourse in favor of standard Polish notions of nation and Church, hoping in this way to win over “the people” (*lud*) and thus gain the support necessary to replace the authoritarian state with a different one, not fully democratic, under the benign and compassionate guidance of the intelligentsia.

Siermiński’s approach, like that of many anarchist thinkers, ascribes outsized influence to correct thinking over material conditions. That is, he privileges ideas over class structure, making it seem that if only Kuroń and Michnik had kept repeating after 1968 the views that Kuroń and Modzelewski uttered in 1965, “real” workers’ revolution might well have resulted. Any Marxist approach must begin with some analysis of class. Yet class is entirely absent in Siermiński’s account. To be sure, he implies that the intelligentsia is seeking its own class power, but never formulates matters in quite that way. I would say it’s surprising Siermiński doesn’t deploy Hungarian sociologist Iván Szelényi’s large body of work devoted to the question of the class power of the intelligentsia during and after state socialism, except that for some reason Szelényi remains largely unknown to Polish scholars. Still, with a similarly Machajskian world-view, Szelényi would probably be Siermiński’s strongest foundation. Szelényi’s *oeuvre* began with a manuscript arguing that so-called socialist intellectuals were seeking to replace the Stalinist bureaucracy and establish their own road to class power, and had already gone far in realizing this aim. For this, more than ten years after the Open Letter, Szelényi was arrested in Hungary.

4 Siermiński here is quoting a 2016 essay on Machajski by Piotr Laskowski, according to which intellectuals “przechwytyją autonomiczny i twórczy opór podporządkowanych, pacyfikują go i kanalizują, by posłużyć ustanowieniu inteligentckiego panowania.”

Avoiding jail by choosing exile instead, Szelényi has continued the project with a series of books, based on detailed empirical analysis, questioning, reasserting, qualifying (at one point showing that petty entrepreneurs were getting the upper hand), and finally demonstrating that in the post-communist period, since 1989, intellectuals (technocrats, managers, and former dissidents) have indeed succeeded in establishing themselves as the new dominant class.⁵

Siermiński doesn't cite Szelényi or any other sociological work to justify his interpretation. Instead, his interpretation is based on textual analysis of the intellectual culprits. Ironically, though, Szelényi and Siermiński's somewhat Marxist but mostly Machajskian projects suffer from the same flaw: for authors ostensibly devoted to asserting the dignity, authority, and self-governing aspirations of the working class and of the people, both are completely obsessed with the elite. Szelényi has written about little else except the changing nature of the elites who keep the people oppressed, and Siermiński, too, devotes his whole book to the views of one group of elite intellectuals. But why are both so silent about the working class, and about the changes in the working class and in the class structure in general that have made intellectuals, starting in the 1960s, so prominent in leftist thought? In other words, both are certainly correct that intellectuals – including technocrats and professionals, and not just humanist social critics – have played a greater role as left-wing heroes (or as a Marxist would say: as subjects of revolutionary transformation) than they had in the past. But both discuss this without looking at changes within the working class itself.

As a host of works have shown, however, owing to the widespread incorporation of the working class into politics in both the East and the West after World War II, and the growth of a high-knowledge service sector along with the start of the “informational revolution” in the 1960s, the distinction between workers and intellectuals started to get mixed up, the concepts of working class and middle class started to lose their specificity, and new groups of activists emerged who claimed, plausibly, to be both workers and intellectuals. This was the group that began leading the anti-systemic political struggles worldwide starting in the late 1960s. Siermiński, like Szelényi, sees them simply as intellectuals, but this misses both the indeterminate status of many of these new, young, university-trained intellectuals, and the intellectual and upward aspirations of increasing numbers of highly qualified blue-collar workers. (After all, any analysis of the intellectual domination of the workers' movement, particularly in Poland, needs to explain why so many skilled workers went along with the intellectuals' program.) Their approach also misses the way another section of the working class, typically lower-skilled, became increasingly conservative, anti-revolutionary, and pro-systemic.

The concept that best captures these changes is that of the “new working class,” introduced theoretically in France by theorists such as Alain Touraine (Touraine, 1971), Serge

5 His key works are: Konrád & Szelényi, 1978; Szelényi 1983, 1987, 1988; Szelényi, Eyal, & Townsley, 1988.

Mallet (Mallet, 1975), and, most important for our purposes, André Gorz (Gorz, 1982), and examined more empirically in the US and UK by sociologists like John Goldthorpe (Goldthorpe, 1969), Daniel Bell (Bell, 1973) and others. The main thrust of this concept is that the working class is no longer the proletariat of the past – deprived of all resources, having nothing to sell but pure labor-power, so thoroughly stripped of humanity that its rising will be the redemption of humanity. It is no longer the class “which has a universal character by its universal suffering [...]; which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society,” and which, precisely because it “is the complete loss of man [...] can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man” (Marx, 1844). Theorists of the new working class do not claim that nirvana is here and workers are free from exploitation, but they do point to the complexity of the modern working class, the gains that have been made, and the changing nature of wage labor itself, with skilled blue-collar workers, simultaneously upwardly mobile and restless, performing more complex tasks, and service and “intellectual” workers increasingly represented in the ranks of the exploited.

The question, for the left, was how this all mattered. How did it change the standard left-wing and Marxist view that workers are the revolutionary class? Siermiński frequently repeats, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, that socialism, the left, and Marxism mean nothing if not the promotion of the interests of the working class, and faith and trust in the ability of the working class to govern itself. But that is just not true. There is certainly some version of leftism – the anarchist, Machajskiian view that Siermiński endorses – that opts for workers’ power at all times. (This version tends not to delve too deeply into the nature of intellectual labor or inquire the extent to which intellectuals can be producers, too.) For Marxists, however, the idea of the blue-collar working class as the revolutionary subject is not a universal principle but an historical one. Recall the *Communist Manifesto*’s paeans to the revolutionary nature of the *bourgeoisie*: “It has been the first to show what man’s activity can bring about. [...] The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together” (Marx & Engels, 1848). And neither Marx nor Lenin were ever enemies of the intelligentsia. On the contrary, they were convinced that correct knowledge of the world – and thus of the struggle for a better world, for socialism – was possible only thanks to intellectuals, like themselves. While they did see the working class as the one *universal* class, capable of bringing about a socialism in the interests of everyone, they never believed that this meant workers must always be trusted. Marx well understood that in their fight against exploitation, specific groups of workers would seize upon any combination of particular traits, such as skin color, gender, nationality, or religion, to gain some relative privilege vis-à-vis other workers. Lenin, meanwhile, famously promoted the Party as the corrective to workers’ alleged “spontaneity.” That Siermiński’s (or Machajski’s) workerism is not a universally-accepted principle of the left should be obvious from even the most cursory

glance at the fierce fights between Marx and Bakunin, not to mention the unapologetic crushing of the Kronstadt Uprising by the Bolsheviks, or the communist left's repression of the Barcelona anarchists during the Spanish Civil War.

So when Siermiński writes that starting in the 1970s the “Polish left intelligentsia gradually began to place itself in the role of an opposition elite, and to act according to the tradition, well-established in Polish history, of the intellectual fighting for independence,” (Siermiński, 2016, p. 286),⁶ he should acknowledge that this is by no means a violation of all left traditions, or even most of them. While the left has generally set as its goal achieving the maximum amount of self-government and democracy, it has also understood that this is a long-term goal, and that controlling state power – thus becoming a new elite – is necessary to carry out a socialist transformation.

The theory of the new working class challenges “blue-collarism” from a different perspective, however, as it asserts that male, manual, manufacturing workers, with no options other than to sell their labor-power to whomever will buy it, are no longer the defining group of the working class. Instead, it points to the increased qualifications of the working class, a result both of technological necessity and of the gains made by the working class after World War II (with social democratic corporatist states empowering trade unions in the West, and the privileged training of workers as a new elite in the East). The postwar period also saw a huge boom in higher education, giving working class children the kind of training previously reserved only for those from the old elite and intellectuals. As higher education expanded, so did the professional opportunities for the graduates, and the competition they faced. As higher education grew, so did the kinds of jobs graduates do, and the competition they faced. The result was that many of those with higher education now found themselves as workers with new opportunities and new constraints. No longer were they guaranteed, by virtue of their education, a privileged position, either in getting a job or in how they were treated on the job. So many others, after all, now had that education, too.

The new workplace thus now included former blue-collar workers with recently-acquired qualifications thinking more and more like intellectuals, and intellectuals facing competition and new restrictions thinking more and more like workers. (In state socialist societies, engineers working for wage labor and subject to domination by Party-state owners were structurally quite similar to workers.) Most called this the “new working class,” though Polish sociologist Jacek Kurczewski described them as the “new middle class” (Kurczewski, 1993). The point is that the boundaries between the two became increasingly hard to define. For André Gorz, this opened the way for a new kind of left, and a new kind of revolution. In his seminal book, *Farewell to the Working Class* (Gorz, 1982), Gorz presents these new social forces as the *new revolutionary subject*. His was not a rejection of Marxism, but rather an attempt to bring Marxism up to date, to take

6 In Polish: “polska inteligencja lewicowa zaczęła stopniowo obsadzać się w roli opozycyjnej elity i działać w zgodzie z dobrze ugruntowanym w polskiej tradycji wzorcem inteligenta walczącego o niepodległość.”

into account not just the new fact of working class conservatism (which the Frankfurt School Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse reflected on in *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964)), but the dissatisfaction voiced by this new working class, which did not focus simply on economic issues but on the demand for autonomy, for governing themselves, for being free of bureaucratic supervision.

Siermiński thinks all workers want self-management. In fact, it's almost always skilled workers who do, workers who are themselves highly trained. These were the workers Gorz was writing about: those who in 1968 rejected the French Communist Party-affiliated CGT trade union's agreement with the government to end their strike in return for higher wages (workers wanted more control, not more money), or the well-educated young General Motors workforce in Lordstown, Ohio, who went on strike in 1972 not because of wage issues but against speedup and authoritarian management. These were the "new middle class" that Kurczewski saw as the class base of *Solidarność*: "the professors, the taxi drivers, the engineers, the electricians, the shipyard workers, and the specialists" – in short, "the qualified workers, both manual and office." Kurczewski contrasts these activist workers to those non-elites he labels as passive: people in "the villages, and ordinary workers, and the office employees, to say nothing of the government apparatus itself" (Kurczewski, 1994, pp. 397–398).

Such new types of activism showed that contemporary workers were fighting for something more than the old bread-and-butter issues. They were fighting to transcend their role as workers, which Gorz correctly noted was always at the heart of classic ideas of the left. After all, the left emerged as a struggle against the reduction of human beings to wage laborers. It railed against the "alienation" of the industrial workplace, at the dehumanization of labor, at the way manual labor sapped the human spirit. Recall how Blake inveighs against the "satanic mills." Neither Marxism nor anarchism ever aimed to keep factory workers factory workers. They wanted such workers to transcend their fate and be able to be full human beings instead. And in the new struggles of this "new working class," radicals like Gorz saw the possible socialist future.

How is this relevant to Siermiński? It is, in fact, the foundation for the main objection to his thesis. For Siermiński's key assertion is that by moving away from the Open Letter's focus on traditional blue-collar working class power to a new orientation around civic activism and autonomy, the previous left-wing intelligentsia turned away from left politics altogether, and began pursuing an agenda strictly in the interests of the "intelligentsia" and contrary to the interests of "the working class." If we think in terms of a "new working class," however, then that same program fits squarely within the framework of left politics. Being on the left does not always and only mean standing with the least skilled and most exploited of workers. That is, a left sensitivity must be concerned for their plight, but a left politics does not require acceptance or promotion of their sensibility as one's own. For Marx, as noted, workers were the revolutionary class because they were the only ones able to *transcend* capitalist society and push towards a new

world. If some workers are incorporated into the system and no longer seek to transform it, then a left program supports those social forces who do aim at transformation, and if the new working class thesis is right, then that means supporting the aspirations of precisely these new types of workers – the more skilled manufacturing laborers, the marginalized intellectuals. The Polish democratic opposition's orientation to this group, around a program for the revitalization of civil society, was thus not a rejection of the left but an adaptation of the left to new social and economic conditions.

Perhaps the best evidence for this is that the reorientation of the left did not just happen in Poland. Siermiński explains the turn in Poland as a result of the “March shock,” or the impact of 1968. But much of the left, in both the West and in Eastern Europe, moved from a workerist program to a push for an open civil society during this time. Indeed, rather than following 1968, these changes in the left are more commonly deployed to *explain* 1968, with its peculiar features of youth activism, cultural innovation, and the high involvement of intellectuals. An especially intriguing explanation along this line comes from one of the most innovative groups of left social scientists, the world-systems theorists around Immanuel Wallerstein (Arrighi, Hopkins, & Wallerstein, 1992, republished in Katsiaficas, 2001). For them, 1968 arose from changes in the class structure and the emergence of a new class of intellectual workers. Brought into being by the educational boom of the postwar period and the technological reorganization of production, this new class had grander ambitions than the middle management jobs of a Fordist mass production economy, and capabilities that exceeded what such an economy could utilize. This was not just a class of intellectuals. On the contrary, it included what Wallerstein called the “semiskilled stratum” of the working class, trained in vocational schools and on the job, who knew how factories were run and thus saw no benefit in being bossed around by Party officials trained solely, as Birkut's manager in *Man of Marble* put it, in *organizacja*, or mobilizing a mostly unskilled workforce.

Interestingly, Wallerstein et al. use this class account to explain not just 1968 but 1989, as well. They argue that the same class emerged around the same time in both the West and East, but whereas it triumphed in the former in 1968, in Eastern Europe that class had to wait until 1989 before breaking through into political power. (This would explain the curious neoliberal alliance, between the skilled working class in the Solidarity movement and the intellectuals that had just begun to break from Solidarity, marking the period right after 1989.)

The point is that a new kind of left started emerging in the 1960s in all industrialized countries, and that for the new group articulating it, *classic Marxist arguments along the lines of the Open Letter no longer made sense*. If we're not going to argue that everywhere the intelligentsia simply started “betraying” the working class, it's best to accept that the changes reflected transformations in the deep structures of society, and to take seriously that the new left emerging at this time was not a “phony” left, as Siermiński

would have it, but a left that reflected the new social forces of the time, in particular this “new working class.”

Revived Civil Society as a Program of the Left

It's a shame that in a book aimed at denouncing this orientation as a rejection of the left, Siermiński didn't take issue with my first book on Solidarity that argues exactly the opposite. In *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics* (published in English in 1990 and in Polish in 2014), I make the case for the Civil Society program put forth by Michnik, Kuroń, and KOR as very much a left-wing program, on the grounds that by calling for widespread civic activity by all groups of citizens, it was offering a new vision of a democratic polity, with an engaged citizenry, high participation, increased self-management, and without capitalism (Ost, 1990, 2014). In other words, I argued exactly the opposite of what Siermiński proposes here. Readers who know me only for my *Defeat of Solidarity* (*Kłęska Solidarności*; Ost, 2005, 2007), where I strongly attack the legacy of the Kuroń-Michnik KOR political formation for its role in introducing neoliberal capitalism and neglecting the role of workers, will perhaps be surprised by this seemingly contradictory position. But in fact, the two arguments go together: what constituted a left politics in Poland in the 1970s did not constitute one after 1989, because the class structure of society underwent such dramatic change, and because the proponents of civil society in the 1970s meant something very different by the term after 1989.

Siermiński has to go through some unconvincing intellectual acrobatics to present KOR's program as an elitist one. For example, somehow he takes Kuroń's insistence that anyone who participates in independent activity is part of the political opposition, to mean that he and KOR sought to restrict opposition activity only to intellectuals. Yet what could be clearer than the statement, “I consider as part of the political opposition all people who participate in various resistance movements” (Siermiński, 2016, p. 162),⁷ when Kuroń has already made it clear that anyone who engages in independent activity not sanctioned by the state, such as in the budding opposition trade unions, is for that reason alone resisting the state? Of course, to say only such people are part of the opposition is not to say that the opposition works only on behalf of such people, which is what Siermiński implies. The thrust of Kuroń's approach in his “Thoughts on a Program of Action” (Kuroń, 1977) is that anyone can be part of the opposition simply by engaging in civic activity, without asking or waiting for official approval, and that the intended result of such opposition is a society based on the principle of self-organization and self-management. Where do intellectuals control anything in this scenario?

7 The quote is: “Za opozycję uważam [...] wszystkich ludzi, którzy działając w różnych ruchach oporu [...]”

As for Michnik, Siermiński simply ignores most of the pathbreaking 1976 essay, “Nowy ewolucjonizm”, in which Michnik insists that “Every act of defiance helps us build the framework of democratic socialism” (Michnik, 1977b, p. 48).⁸ There’s nothing here privileging intellectuals. On the contrary, Michnik states, “‘New evolutionism’ is based on faith in the power of the working class, which, with a steady and unyielding stand, has on several occasions forced the government to make spectacular concessions” (Michnik, 1977b, p. 44).⁹

And didn’t KOR help organize workers, contributing to the building of the “Free Trade Unions” (Wolne Związki Zawodowe), the precursor to the “independent self-governing trade union Solidarity”? And weren’t KOR activists engaged in Solidarity from the very beginning?

In fact, the Civil Society program was both a break from and a continuation of Kuroń and Modzelewski’s program. It broke from its revolutionary language. It rejected the “revolutionary takeover by the working class of the means of production and the creation of a state based on council democracy” (Siermiński, 2016, p. 162).¹⁰ Yet it maintained the focus on self-governing, on workers *and* intellectuals fighting back against bureaucratic control and taking responsibility for their own affairs. It called for an independent civil society managing itself without the control of either the state or the market. Yet because it was an articulation of this “new working class,” it did not propose a privileged role for blue-collar workers, it did not see intellectuals as an opposing class, and if anything it took a rather skeptical view of unskilled workers, who this new working class suspected might not yet be able or willing to govern themselves with autonomy. Siermiński is right to note that in their 1970s manifestos, Kuroń and Michnik spoke with particular favor about engaged workers, active workers. And he is right to suggest that this way of talking could exclude the poorest workers, the least skilled ones with the fewest resources. But this doesn’t make it any less of a leftist program. The fact is that left movements, like all social movements, are almost never led by the most impoverished, the most needy. Trade unions were historically started by skilled workers fearing proletarianization. Those who have already become proletarians usually have too few resources to make a stand, are too vulnerable to risk fighting back. Even anarchist collectives are typically organized by skilled workers, with some knowledge and experience of running machines. Siermiński champions the Open Letter for calling for workers’ power, but Kuroń and Modzelewski focus on the workers in the factories – mostly male, with more skills and resources than others – and not the janitors, cashiers, or peasant-workers, not to mention women, most

8 In the original: “Każdy akt oporu pozwala i umożliwia wybudowanie już dziś zrębów struktury socjalizmu demokratycznego.”

9 In the original: “Zasadniczym składnikiem formuły ‘nowego ewolucjonizmu’ jest przekonanie o sile środowisk robotniczych, które swą twardą i konsekwentną postawą parokrotnie zmuszały władze do spektakularnych ustępstw.”

10 In the original: “rewolucyjne przejęcie przez [klasę robotniczą] panowania nad środkami produkcji i ustanowienie państwa z ustrojem opartym na demokracji rad.”

of whom only entered full-time wage labor in the 1970s. Their program, too, necessarily privileged some over others. (Siermiński notes that Kuroń and Modzelewski promised that intellectuals would not take over the councils, but if their revolutionary project really got going, wouldn't it have been irresponsible for radical intellectuals *not* to take control and do what they could to keep the movement following what they considered the best policies?)

Any left must be concerned for those with the fewest resources, and try to empower them, which is what the Civil Society program did. (And of course, state socialism, too, especially in its early years.) This does not mean, however, that those with the least resources must or do run left movements on their own, without “intellectuals” – who, in the age of the new working class, are often hard to distinguish from workers.

The dilemma during the Solidarity period was that the intellectuals who were involved with the workers' movement necessarily had to think also about the overall political system, since in a state socialist society an independent workers' movement contradicts the system's foundations. Intellectuals could support the workers, but they also had no choice but to use the workers' movement as a basis for a new kind of system in which an independent workers' movement could be guaranteed autonomy. This is the dilemma that has often led to the takeover of workers' movements, but the intellectuals' involvement in Solidarity seemed to be different. In some sense, they were operating according to a distinction theoretically presented by Gorz (Gorz, 1982), who proposed a political transformation that would maximize the realm of autonomy, while recognizing that politics also required a realm of “heteronomy,” or control by others. For Gorz, although left-wing transformations have always sought the full autonomy of society, such aspirations usually run aground because the organization of complex societies, and the necessity of operating in a world of states, also require some sphere of elite control and decision-making authority. The solution, he claims, is to push for maximum autonomy in the social sphere, while accepting dependence on authorities, or heteronomy, on the state level. If we look at what the intellectuals were doing in Solidarity – supporting widespread and uncontrolled independent social activity, while trying to establish their own leadership in the political movement – we will see that their deep involvement was not aimed at controlling the workers' movement but at laying the basis for a political system that would allow for a strong workers' movement without ceding complete power to it.

Siermiński insists that the Warsaw left-liberal intellectuals rejected the working class because they believed they saw working class authoritarianism in 1968. But Kuroń and Michnik were leftists raised on a critical examination of past revolutionary movements and of where they had gone wrong. And what they came to believe is that faith in *any* single authority, working class or not, to implement the “correct” policies was the trap that needed to be avoided. They broke from the Open Letter because they ceased to believe that workers (and who exactly did that mean?) could always be trusted. But they were

simultaneously aware that intellectuals also could not always be trusted, which is why their entire program hinged on massive participation by all people, in all walks of life. Siermiński presents them as technocrats, or elites who insist that they know everything and that others should not ask questions, offer answers, or in any way be involved. But if they were technocrats, they would not have called for massive social engagement. No technocrat ever does.

What this means, however, is that their program – or the call for widespread participation in an open civil society, tied neither to the state nor the market – can *now* be used against them (and against the right-wing Law and Justice Party). Because, yes, the left-liberals did turn against their own program once they embraced capitalism and private property in the mid-1980s. When they came to believe that democracy required private property and market relations, and not civic participation, they sought to limit that participation in order to establish capitalism. Even worse, after 1989 they used their legacy as proponents of civil society to get people to trust them and not interfere as they set about building capitalism. This is when they became proponents – not of *intellectuals* controlling society, since they fiercely opposed right-wing intellectuals' efforts to do so – but of *liberal intellectuals* controlling society. With this, they were trying to square a circle: they still valued free and open participation, but because they now believed that this could be guaranteed only in a capitalist system, they thought civic participation should be suspended, temporarily, until a capitalist system based on a new property-owning class was put in place. Thus Kuroń, as Minister of Labor and Social Policy in 1990, kept saying that he understood he wasn't implementing a left-wing program by helping to build capitalism, but that once capitalism was established, he hoped civic participation would rise again and that Poland could be governed along participatory social democratic lines. Kuroń famously changed his mind a few years later, and came to realize that he was squelching the civil society that was necessary for democracy. In other words, Kuroń broke from his pro-capitalist position by re-embracing the Civil Society program of the 1970s. And that tells us that the Civil Society program is not the basis of the neoliberal program, but can and should be used *against* the latter. The point, then, is not to denounce the Civil Society program as a betrayal of left principles, as Siermiński does, but rather to recover the emancipatory, participatory, left-wing aspects of that program, which its founders themselves later violated.

Far from violating left principles, then, the Civil Society program was very much a *leftism for those times*. New social groups – not the old proletariat or middle classes but this large “new working class” – were seeking representation, and a program calling for less bureaucratic control and more participation by those with some skills spoke to the interests and aims of these groups. A New Left, cognizant of how previous centralized radical left movements paved the way for dictatorship without intending to, sought a broader understanding of the agent of change, and promoted broad participation to ensure that dictatorship would never return. Wary of rule by a centralized party or by the

tyranny of a majority that can result from “council democracy” (such as advocated in the Open Letter), the Civil Society program sought to institutionalize a diversity of voices in the public sphere without idealizing any one of them. And as Siermiński does repeatedly note, but always tries to play down, it always insisted it was anti-capitalist, anti-market, and committed to the principles of socialism.

Framing the Message

The opposition’s Civil Society program was an attack on the old left in both the East and West. (Note the title of the Cohn-Bendit brothers’ 1968 book advocating widespread civic participation: *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (D. Cohn-Bendit & G. Cohn-Bendit, 1968).) It was also an attack on the right. Siermiński misses this because he is writing as a leftist today. His chapter on Michnik charges Michnik with being too sympathetic to the Church. But the book from 1976 that he focuses on, *Kościół–lewica–dialog* (Michnik, 1977a; translated into English as *The Church and the Left* (Michnik, 1993a)) was aimed at changing the Church, not sucking up to it. Siermiński passes over the passages where Michnik talks about why the democratic left was historically correct to oppose the Church. Yet it was precisely because Michnik so feared such aspects of the Church that he praised and tried to promote those Catholic voices that offered similar reservations of the past. Sometimes Michnik does exaggerate with his praise, which produces passages that can make one cringe today and feed the impression that the young Michnik was just quite naïve. But Michnik was doing what any good social movement activist must do: neutralize the opposition. His expressed commitment to socialism and record of pro-democratic radicalism, along with his prison sentences, had made him a fixture with the left intelligentsia. But Michnik was never comfortable simply garnering applause for his wisdom and courage. He wanted to make a difference, he wanted to change things. He wanted to expand his influence outside its restricted quarters and for this he understood that it was necessary to frame his message as not just a conversation among the left. He would be in conversation with the Church, too, with proponents of (the idea of) the Nation. He would speak to those who he knew could be and were easily attracted to the political right. He would try to show that they really should make common cause with the democratic left that he wanted to build. He reached out to people sympathetic to the symbols of the political right in order to win them over to his side. He was trying to create a new vision of “the people” in contrast to the Party/state other.

Adam Michnik as a populist? Absolutely. In *Kościół–lewica–dialog* he tried to unite different groups behind his own vision of a democratic left. He presented here his view of a people united against a common enemy, and sought in this way to emerge as a leader of that people. Michnik promoted the Church not because he wanted to radically trans-

form it (like anyone with great political ambitions, he thought big, but he's never been crazy), but because he understood he could have some influence on the margins, and that this might be enough to win him support and deflect opposition, which was necessary for the next stage of political transformation.

That he had immense success is obvious from the rage, the fury, the baffled incomprehension with which the right, once it began to gather new energy, treated the Michnik phenomenon. They could not understand how an atheist, a radical, a self-proclaimed socialist – or as others simply called him, a Jew – could have come to occupy such an important role in Polish politics. Rafał Ziemkiewicz devoted a whole book to the problem (Ziemkiewicz, 2006). Michnik might well have moved away from the left, but speaking warmly about a Church moving away from the right is no symptom of that.

Nor were his kind words of Piłsudski, or even of Dmowski. These can be seen as evidence of what Michnik was long a master of: an ability to frame the Civil Society democratization project in order to maximize support. In his analysis, Siermiński keeps coming back to Michnik's first major essay, "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" (Michnik, 1975), about Piłsudski. Siermiński's point is to show how Michnik had moved away from the left and began to situate himself and the current struggle in the context of the battles of the Polish intelligentsia in the early twentieth century. But when I read this text, I keep focusing on a different aspect: Michnik's respect for Piłsudski's iron determination. Siermiński quotes the famous letter to Feliks Perl in which Piłsudski writes: "Let others have fun breeding flowers or [fighting for] socialism, or Polishness. [...] I want to win" (quoted in Siermiński, 2016, p. 228).¹¹ Like Piłsudski, Michnik "wanted to win." Like any successful activist, he understood that to do so, he had to frame his message in a way that society would find appealing. But these are not signs that he moved away from the left. On the contrary, given that he understood the left's mission as expanding the range of accepted voices while maintaining state ownership, and revitalizing civil society free of the constraints of both the state and the market, then his appeal to symbols valued by non-leftists was simply a way to bring to the left those people who might too easily reject it at first sight. That he kept his critical distance from the Church is clear from a major essay which Siermiński completely ignores: "Troubles" (Michnik, 1993b) ("Kłopot" (Michnik, 1987)), written in 1987, just as it began to seem possible that state socialism might really collapse. Here Michnik makes clear that the Church stands as a major potential danger to the democratic future, and cautions against a growing tendency towards an "Iranization" of Poland's Catholic Church – strong words at a time when the world was transfixed by the devastating success of Ayatollah Khomeini in crushing the left and suppressing even basic modern liberal practices (Michnik, 1993b). This was Michnik's boldest reassertion of classic left anti-clericalism in years, but far from clashing with *Kościół-lewica-dialog*, it maintains the latter's central theme that the free expression of

11 In the original: "Niech inni się bawią w hodowanie kwiatów czy socjalizmu, czy polskości [...]. Chcę zwyciężyć [...]."

a diversity of voices, and the resolution of disputes by a process of rational discussion, is crucial to democratic left politics.

Michnik has certainly not stayed loyal to the left. As noted, he began embracing private property and neoliberalism in the mid-1980s, and after 1989 he seemed often to forget his own cautionary comments in “Troubles”, offering no resistance when the new liberal government granted concession after concession to the Catholic Church, even as the Church started pushing back against any expansion of liberal mores and became the main vehicle pushing for cultural counterrevolution. Nevertheless, the Civil Society program, advocated so consistently by Kuroń and Michnik in the 1970s, and denounced by Siermiński as a vehicle for intellectuals to take power, was instead a valid and important left program for the new working class of the time. It led to the powerful Solidarity movement, in which workers and intellectuals both had considerable power. It did lead also to an exclusion of workers *after* 1989: no sections of this new working class were inclined to support the unskilled after the state socialist bureaucracy was toppled.¹² And thus it led to a situation where the left *today* must see the Civil Society program as grossly inadequate, or as a defense of elites – just as Siermiński sees it.

In the end, then, Siermiński is right to criticize the ideas of Kuroń and Michnik as inadequate today. While it's true that their program can still be used against some aspects of contemporary capitalism, it's also true that, in an age of neoliberalism and the precariat, that program no longer speaks to pressing issues. Today the “new working class” is in tatters. Instead of the greater inclusion of blue-collar workers in the past, which led to many of them thinking like intellectuals, today we see neoliberalism's exclusion of both blue-collar workers and intellectuals. The left that is needed is not likely to resemble the Open Letter. But neither will it resemble the program of Civil Society, with its insistence on widespread participation. (In our age of social media, after all, everyone can feel they are “participating” in national debates – while elites dominate like never before.) Once again, the meaning of the left is changing and developing. Today, when the political right is channeling the discontent of the working class – the first time it's doing so on such a mass scale since the fascism of the 1930s – coming up with a meaningful left that can speak to issues relevant to the contemporary class structure is of crucial importance. While I don't think Siermiński gives us the right answers (a new Open Letter is not likely to gain many adherents), he does pose great questions. By reopening a debate about what exactly constitutes the left, he has done a great service indeed.

12 For more on this, see my *Defeat of Solidarity*, chapter 5 (Ost, 2005, 2007).

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Historyzowanie lewicy.

Recenzja książki Michała Siermińskiego *Dekada przełomu. Polska lewica opozycyjna 1968–1980*, Warszawa: Książka i Prasa 2016

Abstrakt: Niniejsza recenzja książki Michała Siermińskiego *Dekada przełomu: Polska lewica opozycyjna 1968–1980* poddaje krytyce nacisk położony przez autora na idee, dowodząc, że zmiany w poglądach politycznych polskiej opozycji należy postrzegać w perspektywie klasowej, projekt „społeczeństwa obywatelskiego” z lat siedemdziesiątych był w swojej istocie lewicowy, a dyskusje na temat Kościoła i „narodu” nie oznaczały zerwania z lewicowością, tylko ujęcie jej w ramy bardziej akceptowalne dla większości. Przed lewicą stoją dziś zupełnie inne zadania i problemy niż w latach siedemdziesiątych czy osiemdziesiątych XX wieku, co tłumaczy, dlaczego Siermiński mógł obecnie napisać tego rodzaju lewicową krytykę i dlaczego krytyka ta jest tak wartościowa. Jednakże choć współczesnej lewicy z pewnością potrzebny jest nowy program, może ona wykorzystać pewne idee z lat siedemdziesiątych w walce z neoliberalizmem.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: polityka lewicowa; ruch społeczny; społeczeństwo obywatelskie; historia intelektualna; marksizm; anarchizm; Jan Wacław Machajski; Polska

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