Exploration of Wojtyła’s ‘The Acting Person’ and Kolakowski’s ‘Theses on Hope and Hopelessness’ as possible philosophical foundations of the Solidarity Movement in Poland

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This paper aims to engage with some of the philosophical literature that is considered to have influenced the spirit of the Polish Solidarity Movement of the 1980s. The discussion will revolve around Pope John-Paul II’s *The Acting Person*, written whilst he was still Cardinal Karol Wojtyła in 1967, and Leszek Kolakowski’s 1971 essay, *Theses on Hope and Hopelessness*.

Although Pope John-Paul II’s nine-day visit to Poland in 1979 is often regarded as one of the major catalysts which galvanised the Solidarity movement, this essay will primarily focus on Wojtyła’s earlier phenomenological account of human action and participation which could be said to have operated as the philosophical kindling for the spiritual revolution which would be ignited in 1979. Wojtyła’s work will be analysed in conjunction with Kolakowski’s secular and practical account which emphasised the need for the Polish people to exert collective pressure on the despotic socialist system, reminding them that the Soviet model was not impenetrable and organised dissidence could limit and weaken the action of the totalitarian state.

Pope John-Paul II and Kolakowski’s shared vision of hope, freedom and quest for truth, offered workers the tools for a unique and powerful creed. This synthesis of political dissidence and spiritual revolution worked to forge an indissoluble and resilient spirit present in the strikers of 1980.

Solidarity (Solidarność) was the first independent, self-governing labour union in the Soviet bloc, who used a non-violent technology of resistance. It was founded on 31st August 1980 at the Gdansk shipyard, under the leadership of an electrician, Lech Wałęsa, after mass strikes swept Poland with workers demanding better salaries, political freedom and respect for human rights. Within a year, Solidarity membership reached 10 million, (nearly 80% of the total workforce), making it the largest trade union in the world. In contrast, membership to the Communist Party in Poland was only 3.5 million.

Though Solidarity was forcibly suppressed under martial law from December 1981, the union was re-legalised in 1989, with a Solidarity-led coalition government being formed in 1990 and Wałęsa elected as president of Poland.

Solidarity was a primary catalyst that transformed Poland from a repressive communist satellite to a modern democratic state. Yet, what is most captivating about Solidarity was its unique spirit and its lattice formation of endurance, strength, bravery and brotherhood. Solidarity did not champion a specific social theory, set ideology or political program, encompassing many political views. However, whilst one must avoid unequivocal statements, it can be said that Solidarity had clear ethical standards (particularly of non-violence) which reflected Catholic Social Teaching and as a movement, Solidarity sought to address the Communist lie which attempted to smother the truth of the human person and his needs. This mass search for truth,
justice and freedom forged an authentic and exceptional solidarity amongst Poles, which expressed itself in the form of protests, hundreds of underground magazines, Catholic masses and vigils, alternative education and the commemoration of forbidden anniversaries and feast days. Therefore, some possible influences for such a unique and powerful phenomenon will be examined in further detail.

From the 1950s through to the late 1970s, Karol Wojtyła was professor of moral philosophy at the University of Lublin in Poland. He was made Cardinal in 1967 and elected as Pope in 1978, taking the name John-Paul II.

Many have heralded John-Paul II as the Pope who sparked the fall of Communism. However, I do not intend to examine the exactitude of such statements here, but rather explore some of the philosophy of Wojtyła in the years prior to becoming Pope. It is difficult to separate the figure that was Wojtyła from his philosophy, as his philosophical thought was present in all his actions. Although Wojtyła wrote extensively, I will draw specifically on The Acting Person (1967), unpacking its message and exploring how its essence was visible in Wojtyła’s own actions, and later in the spirit of Solidarność.

The Acting Person, offers a renewed metaphysics and philosophy of being that is built upon the whole reality of human experience. The fundamental message of the book is ‘operari sequitur esse’ - action follows being. The irreducible core of the person is best revealed through his actions; his activity is an ‘extension’ of his own existence. Therefore, what we do expresses not only who we are, but also shapes who we become. In contrast to modern day consequentialism which focuses on outcome rather than action, Wojtyła posits that every moral act either builds or compromises one’s character. Fr Robert Barron describes this as a ‘spiritual or moral physics’, whereby a sufficient number of virtuous acts, over time, shapes an individual so that he may reliably perform virtuously in the future, whilst a sufficient number of vicious acts may make a man incapable of choosing rightly in the future.

Part 4 of The Acting Person focuses on ‘participation’. By participation Wojtyła means acting ‘together with others’. This is not simply doing things with others, but participating in ‘the very humanness of others.’

Wojtyła’s discussion on participation naturally leads to one of solidarity, by which he means, a ‘constant readiness to accept and realise one’s share in the community,’ thus respecting all other community members. However, ‘the other’ is not simply another member of the community, but rather another I; he becomes one’s ‘neighbour’. Thus, Wojtyła introduces the commandment of love, creating an ‘inter-human, unique and unrepeatable’ relationship, where human beings mutually reveal themselves, affirming their own and each other’s humanity, in preparation for the existence of an ‘authentic and subjective community.’ Solidarity enables us to answer our calling to live in authentic communion.

In his 1987 papal encyclical, Sollicitudo rei Socialis, Pope John-Paul II held that solidarity was not simply a value or concept, but a Christian virtue, demonstrating that the call to bear the burdens of others is not only necessary for human flourishing, but is also our moral duty. Solidarity demands a readiness to accept the sacrifices necessary for the good of the whole world community, and is the context in which freedom can be ascertained.
The message of *The Acting Person* has universal importance, but had a specific significance for those oppressed under Communist rule. Whilst Polish spirit was hardy, the brute force of the Polish People’s Army (seen in the bloodshed of the 1970 protests) and the constant threat of Soviet tanks, isolated individuals, further empowering the government. However, the state’s depersonalization of its citizens and blatant disregard for human dignity, love and freedom was to be undermined by Wojtyła’s unique philosophy of Christian humanism, which would provide a weapon of hope as he reasserted the truth of the human condition and the power of solidarity.

Even if the readership of *The Acting Person* was small, Wojtyła’s philosophy of the human being and participation would be activated and brought to life through his own actions. He would demonstrate his philosophy first at Nowa Huta and then explosively during his 1979 visit to Poland, as the newly elected Pope John-Paul II.

As Bishop of Krakow during the 1950s, Wojtyła demonstrated the power of authentic action at Nowa Huta, which was intended to be the first ideal communist city in Poland, void of God. When a Church did not feature in the urban plan, Wojtyła supported the people in their fight for a place of worship. A permit was finally granted in 1956, and locals erected a large wooden cross at the designated site, but construction work halted in 1958 and military vehicles sealed off Nowa Huta. Violence erupted between police and the ‘defenders of the cross’. However, Wojtyła responded with peace and endurance, protecting victims of police brutality and holding outdoor Christmas Eve Midnight Masses from 1959 onwards, with thousands of people kneeling in the dirt, despite the severe Polish winter.  

The Church of Nowa Huta was finally built, and consecrated by Cardinal Wojtyła on 15th May 1977, attended by tens of thousands of people. Then, in an act of raw solidarity, the large crucifix placed above the altar was sculpted out of shrapnel taken from the wounds of Polish soldiers, collected and sent from all over the country to Nowa Huta. Wojtyła powerfully exemplified togetherness in suffering. During the 1980s, Nowa Huta became a popular site for Solidarity demonstrations, where demonstrators employed similar methods.

In 1979, after Wojtyła was elected as Pope, he returned to his homeland to stand alongside his people in a historic nine-day tour, where an estimated 13 million saw him in person. The visit was described by Cardinal König as a ‘psychological earthquake’, which transformed Poland. John-Paul told the people, ‘Be not afraid’. Timothy Garton Ash noted that ‘in that nine-day-long outpouring of love and joy the unity of Polish society was transformed from the Potential to the Actual’ as true solidarity was experienced.

In Victory Square, when John-Paul spoke of man’s need for Christ, the people repeatedly chanted, ‘We want God’; the most authentic cry of the human heart by those living in an atheistic dictatorship. A man in Poznan was quoted saying “People wanted to start again, to become authentic human beings. It was an incomparable spiritual experience”.  

On the Vigil of Pentecost, John-Paul promised that “the spirit will come upon you and renew the face of this land”. He was not wrong. Solidarity would negotiate their 21 demands with the Polish government the following summer. The revolution of hearts ignited by John-Paul II’s visit
was the most explosive catalyst in the formation of Solidarity. Garton Ash simply put, ‘it is hard to conceive Solidarity without the Polish Pope’\(^{21}\).

In contrast to Wojtyła, Leszek Kołakowski was a secular Polish philosopher and historian of ideas, who joined the communist party after the war. After attempting to establish a humanist version of Marxism, he later renounced Communism altogether, calling it ‘the greatest fantasy of our century’\(^{22}\). He was removed from his position as Chair of the History of Philosophy at Warsaw University after delivering a public lecture in 1966, openly criticising the Polish government for its incompetence, claiming it had stranded the country in a political landscape barren of hope and freedom. After being put on the list of forbidden authors, he left Poland in 1968.

In 1971, Kołakowski published an essay, *In Stalin’s Countries: Theses on Hope and Despair*, (more commonly referred to as *Theses on Hope and Hopelessness*), in which he proposed a strategy in order to gradually nurture freedom within a totalitarian state.

In the essay, Kołakowski dismantled contemporary arguments that claimed the system of ‘despotic socialism’ in Poland was ‘un-reformable’, and change could not be partial, but only achieved through a violent revolution\(^{23}\). Kolakowski was critical of this ‘all or nothing approach,’ referring to it as a ‘defeatist ideology’\(^{24}\) and actually a demonstration of cowardice, as individuals were willing to define limits for change. He stated that the ‘rigidity of a system depends in part on the degree to which the men who live within that system are convinced of its rigidity’\(^{25}\).

Kołakowski argued that the inescapable contradictions of the system itself (such as the promotion of the loyal but incompetent in government, and the struggle between progress and power), presented cracks in the communist system which made it susceptible to pressure from below. These cracks could be exploited and used as an opportunity for gradual change toward a more tolerable social order.

Kolakowski was aware that a characteristic of monopolistic power was the continued effort to atomize society and destroy all forms of social life not prescribed by the ruling apparat. Thus he proposed that even the ‘most innocent forms of social organisation can … become transformed into centres of opposition’\(^{26}\). Therefore constant pressure, rather than armed conflict, in the form of persistent dissidence and self-organised social groups, had the potential to build the independent sphere, creating the ‘snowball’ phenomenon which could threaten the whole political order\(^{27}\).

Kołakowski’s strategy is similar to that later presented by Václav Havel in *The Power of the Powerless* (1978). Havel stated that the oppressed always contain ‘within themselves the power to remedy their own powerlessness’\(^{28}\), and encouraged individuals to ‘live in truth’, to go about their daily activities as if communism did not exist, such as organising small book clubs or sports teams.

Upon Kołakowski’s death in 2009, he was widely referred to as the ‘father of Solidarity’, as he, along with other Polish dissidents, expressed ideas that would promote the growth of a non-
violent, anti-totalitarian social movement that played a significant role in collapsing of communism in Poland.

Before his exile, Kołakowski had become a leading ideologist for Poland’s younger generation of dissidents, who saw him as a guru, even referring to him as ‘King Leszek I’. In fact, it was a young Adam Michnik, who invited Kołakowski in 1966 to give the speech commemorating the tenth anniversary of the October Polish revolution, which led to his expulsion from the University of Warsaw. Michnik himself would become one of the most persistent opponents of the communist regime in Poland, eventually playing a crucial role in the Round Table talks. Michnik was the editor of the illegal underground newspapers Biuletyn Informacyjny, Zapis and Krytyka, (1977 – 1989). Thus, it is not surprising that despite Kołakowski appearing on the index of forbidden authors, his writings circulated in underground publications as well as the Flying University.

It has been said that Kołakowski’s Theses on Hope and Hopelessness was a source of inspiration for the 1976 Workers’ Defence Committee (KOR), a group of intellectuals who would go on to work very closely with Solidarity. Kołakowski was a member of the Appeal for Polish Workers, an international committee supporting the work of KOR, collecting funds in the West. During the 1980s, Kołakowski also supported Solidarity directly by giving interviews, writing and fundraising on their behalf.

It would be fair to conclude that The Acting Person and Theses on Hope and Hopelessness, are very different texts, and Wojtyła and Kołakowski were very different academics. The Acting Person is a comprehensive exploration of subjective experience, action and participation, whereas Hope and Hopelessness is essentially a manual for effective political dissidence. Wojtyła and Kołakowski’s roles as philosophers differed significantly. As a priest, Wojtyła’s ministry was not political; his duty was to spiritually nurture his flock. Kołakowski however, as a secular intellectual, did not have a specific religious obligation and could address the situation far more politically. Yet, Wojtyła and Kołakowski both gave hope to the hopeless. Kołakowski, through his clear strategic goals and Wojtyła in his constant fight to uphold dignity, love and freedom.

It would be futile to attempt to empirically measure the impact of The Acting Person or Theses Hope and Hopelessness on Solidarity’s philosophical foundations, as ideas disseminate throughout society, with their origin sometimes difficult to trace. However, one can reasonably argue that the essence of both The Acting Person and Hope and Hopelessness were visible in the actions of Solidarity. With regards to The Acting Person, if action is an expression of oneself, then collective action is an expression of the people. The non-violent methods of Solidarity and its example of brotherhood was an expression of the essence of its members, and with each strike these values were strengthened. And while The Acting Person encouraged authentic participation, it was Kołakowski’s Theses on Hope and Hopelessness that illustrated authentic and effective ways to participate with one another.

In all of this truth played a vital part. Kołakowski wrote in The Eclipse of Ideology, ‘It is perhaps the most oppressive part of life under communism. Not terror, not exploitation, but the all-pervading lie, felt by everybody, known to everybody. It is something which makes life intolerable.’ For Wojtyła, this is why the truth of the human being must always match your
acts, because your acts preserve the truth when it has been so distorted by oppressive regimes. If your acts are authentic, the truth will prevail, and it did through solidarity, by Solidarity.

Notes

8 Ibid., p.294.
10 Ibid., p.298.
11 Wojtyła, K. ‘Participation or Alienation?’ p.201.
14 Ibid., par. 9.
15 Ibid., par. 45.
21 Ibid., p.33.
24 Ibid., p.7.
25 Ibid., p.8.
26 Ibid., p 6-7.
27 Ibid., p.7.
30 Ibid.

