Towards a geography of ‘Solidarność’

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Abstract. A reflective review is undertaken of the initiation of Solidarność as a social movement and of its activity to date with special reference to its regional structure. Much weight is placed on the potential significance of the Union and its goals in the debate over human agency in history.

1 Introduction
In this essay, an attempt is made to reflect on the territorial aspect of Solidarność as a trade union and social movement before, during, and after martial law. This aspect is viewed as a possible vehicle for an assessment of the significance of the movement. This assessment involves, of necessity, an entanglement in the specificity of the Polish situation, in time and in space. It is thus neither a ‘case study’ from a theoretical given, nor an attempt to generalise to other social movements elsewhere at other times. It is best viewed as an interpretation of the significance of the movement and its relationship to history (compare Touraine et al, 1982, page 19).

Commencing with a description of what I describe as the ‘resident’ social formation, based on the work of Nowak (summarised by Hajnicz, 1981), we will proceed to sketch the birth and activity of NSZZ ‘Solidarność’ as a trade union and social movement (truch społeczny) up to the declaration of the state of martial law. Special attention will be given to the feature of territoriality in its functioning. The essay will close with some reflections on the use of space in the control of social activity since 13 December 1981, in particular the use of inhibitions to travel and communication as a method of repression, and on the significance of territoriality as a means of social control.

2 The resident social formation
In the most simplified stereotype of Western society, the economic level in the resident social formation is composed of capitalist forms, the political level of parliamentary democratic forms, and the ideological level of conflicting religious, secular, and media-based programmes. It is possible to identify links between the economic, political, and ideological elites, allied in their interests in preserving this formation. However, as often as not there occur conflicts between the particular elites over methods of struggle, and over short- and medium-term goals. These conflicts derive from the autonomy in the moral values and the ethics of the three levels, and imply a disjoint loyalty of the elites, in some measure at least.

The kernel of Nowak’s model is that, in the social formation now resident in Poland, the elites of the three levels are integrated and are identical: he calls this the trójpanów (triple-lord) formation:

“The party apparatus has become a new ruling class, gathering in a single grasp the three principal elements of power: ownership, force, and propaganda. Instead of the promised classless society, the most expressly class society in history has been constructed, at one pole of which is concentrated political, economic, and doctrinal authority, and at the other are the popular masses who have lost everything (—everything but their chains as Marx would have said)” (quoted in Hajnicz, 1981, page 6; compare Starski, 1982).
In the struggle for the ‘salvation’ of the social formation, interest groups and lobbies within the elite can call on a whole range of forces (from military and economic to media and educational), because all these forces are subject to the primacy of the Party, and in the last instance of the Central Committee, its Secretariat, and the Politburo. Further, the social formation is watched over by a powerful inquisition apparatus, which vets the ‘propriety’, not only of behaviour within the Party, but also of society at large. The trój-panowie are legitimised, not so much in relation to those outside the elite, but rather in their relationship to the inquisition apparatus, that is, their relationship to a set of superordinate loyalties.

Though it is not difficult to follow Nowak’s argument that the supremacy of the Party in all fields must lead to a conflation of the economic, the political, and the ideological, it is perhaps less than easy to perceive the need for the apparatus of inquisition. A term which has been used in this context is ‘Leninist’; a Leninist party should conform to rules different from those of any other political party. These rules allude to ‘democratic centralism’, to party discipline, to the ‘nomenclatura’, to one-person responsibility, and to the difference between ‘fractionalism’ and constructive debate, among many other key concepts. Their effect is to concentrate decisionmaking power over the whole range of military, economic, political, social, cultural, and other fields at the very top of the party hierarchy. Since the party line is endowed with infallibility, and is historically ‘inevitable’, this ironically permits a minute number of agents to commit some quite unexpected ‘inevitable’ acts in accord with their roles as midwives of a new historical epoch. Of course, errors and misinterpretations occur in the execution and realisation of the party line, but these do not undermine its infallibility, since they can result solely from the corruption or ideological pollution of individual agents (compare Davies, 1981).

Legitimation of the resident social formation has shifted between two conflicting modes: legitimation in relation to the inquisition apparatus and the superordinate loyalties versus attempts to achieve popular legitimation by adherence to the stated goals of the Party and the State. This is bound closely to the political cycle in economic policy through attempts to achieve legitimation via material incentives. These incentives, however, have often led to corruption and to Party–Militia conflicts at the level of the voïvodships (a network of administrative provinces existing within their present boundaries since 1975). It has been suggested that these conflicts were aggravated by the reform of Polish voïvodship boundaries in 1975, which more than doubled the number of Party and Militia territorial organisations, along with their trappings of office and patronage (Lewis, 1982).

Can one find spheres of life within the trój-panów system which are not conflated under the ruling interest groups? In the case of Poland, two structures stand out in their autonomy: the peasant farmers and the Roman Catholic Church. The Party apparatus gave up its direct assault on these two features of Polish life in 1956 and has been diligently sapping them ever since with remarkably little effect. Over three-quarters of Polish agricultural land is in the hands of the peasant sector, which, despite discrimination in the land market and in the distribution of means of production, is still far more efficient in relation to capital, chemical, and energy inputs than the ‘socialised’ sector. The moral authority of the Church is unquestioned in society at large; it is indeed possible to link its social teaching and doctrines with the policies followed by ‘Solidarność’.

3 August 1980 and social movements in Poland
In spite of their uniform depiction by East-bloc propaganda as ‘counterrevolutionary’ and ‘antisocialist’, social movements in Poland have been characterised by one of two main assumptions, neither of which threatens the formation with destruction.
The first assumption is that the ruling elite is, in the last resort, rational, and will accede to reforms in the organisation of the formation in exchange for legitimation. The second is that it is, in the last resort, so irrational that the system must collapse before long. Opposition is then neither negative nor destructive, nor does it attempt to offer an alternative formation, that is, to take power. Its role is to build a ‘self-governing society’ within the framework of the resident formation, which is itself treated as an unwelcome necessity made inevitable by the abandonment of the rights of Poland during and after World War II, and by the development of a world ideology of two rival superpower blocks (Kulerski, 1982).

The characteristics of social movements have varied with their basic assumptions, but they have always been based on strengthening social consciousness and on reinforcing interpersonal bonds as a direct response to the alienating penetration of the informer mentality and of material incentives, and the annihilation of the ‘internal self’ (Wat, 1977). They have used oral transmission of modern history and the study of documents and literature banned by censors. They have had access to radio stations broadcasting from the West, offering uncensored news and reports when they have been free from jamming (for a full documentation, see Raina, 1981). These social movements may thus be broadly understood as a common will expressed in action for the achievement of social goals over a period ranging from a few hours to years, and in scale from thousands of desperate workers to the tightly defined group of public members of the Committee for Workers’ Defence (KOR).

In what sense is Solidarność linked to prior social movements? Can one consider this understanding of ‘social movement’ as anything other than a catchall, that is, a gathering of all signs of opposition to the ruling system whatever their origin? I would argue that the concept of social movement must reflect the relationship between that movement and the authorities (the ruling elite defined by the resident formation). In the case of Poland after 1944, we must therefore relate the concept to a specific type of formation, which is not only perceived by the majority of the population as imposed from without, but also as repressive and false. In this light, I suggest that Solidarność can be viewed as a full emergence of the underlying social movement which has fleetingly surfaced for short periods during the preceding thirty-five years. I would hold that the social movement has existed as a form of passive resistance ever since the contemporary resident formation was installed and that it is likely to continue until the formation succumbs or is reformed. It is not a movement of one generation, since the movement is now in the hands of people born after 1944. In my concluding remarks, I will return to the values which have always animated this movement.

July 1980 saw the introduction of arbitrary price increases, which proved to be the policy step which released the looming social crisis. The economic crisis had long been expected, but the Party seemed unable to deal with its social ramifications. Having acceded to International Labour Organisation conventions and the Helsinki agreements, and bearing in mind the experience of social unrest in 1976, the Party apparatus judged that some tactical withdrawals were in order. The usual methods were (often large) pay rises and a policy of ‘divide and rule’. It was only a matter of time before such carrot-and-stick tactics would fail to patch over social unrest; this eventually happened in Gdańsk, Szczecin, and finally in Jastrzębie (see figure 1).

Earlier, in other centres, the workers had made contact with each other, but it was only with the coming into being of the MKS—the Interplant Strike Committee—in Gdańsk that society’s cohesion in space came into full play. This ‘regionality’ combined many elements. One was a reflection of local abilities, including knowledge of local informal contact networks (for example, parishes) which could be harnessed by local people taking initiatives in their own interests. Another was an increasingly
full-voiced expression of the grievances incurred over past decades by the local communities, be they colliery accidents, environmental pollution, corruption, or (most notably) previous clashes with the authorities which had ended in bloodshed. These grievances were mainly felt locally, since wider knowledge of them had been suppressed.

The full extent of this regional social cohesion in space became evident in September 1980 when KZs—founding committees—were being formed almost everywhere. Most tried to contact Gdańsk and other major industrial centres to find out what an independent self-governing trade union could look like. For this reason, draft statutes diffused very quickly. In localities where no MKSs had formed, the KZs of the plants located there created MKZs—interplant founding committees—delegating workers from individual-plant KZs to work in the ‘region’. There were tendencies which quickly died away to set up ‘branch’ unions, centralised by sector: they were replaced in Solidarność by sectoral coordinating commissions with advisory powers. Neither did the emergence of the network Sieć of large plants indicate a weakening

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Figure 1. Reported strikes from 1 July 1980–6 September 1980 [source: Buletin Informacyjny KSS KOR (1980)].
of the regional principle, since this lobby was most concerned with coordinating Union thinking on legislative issues like self-management.

Early versions of the Solidarność statute (Raina, 1981, pages 608–624) refer to three levels of organisation: the KZs, which after early elections became plant commissions with the same initials; the MKZh, which turned into ZRs, regional councils, after elections in the summer of 1981; and the KKP, the National Coordinating Commission, which became the National Commission (KK) after the election of its members at the Union's first Congress in October 1981. The statute drafts did not regulate the affiliation of KZs to MKZh: this was decided formally on a majority vote at the KKP in January 1981(1). This decision was only confirmed after considerable debate at the Congress; one of the reasons for the disagreement was the relative overrepresentation of small MKZh on the KKP, which the larger regions felt gave the smaller MKZh too many votes. The main point at issue was the difference in the areas covered by the registered KZs and administrative boundaries. KZ registrations to regional MKZh represented the choices made by the individual-plant union organisations, reflecting their perception of the 'natural' or 'sensible' pull of alternative regional centres. This has attracted attention as a unique example of grass-roots regional aggregation, particularly because of the difficulty of combining big-region efficiency and power with small-region flexibility and proximity. Unfortunately, subsequent efforts to assemble information about the preferred regional affiliations of KZs proved fruitless, and the network of official voivodship boundaries was adopted by the Union as well. There were four multivoivodship regions, including Mazowsze and Dolny Śląsk, and voivodships which remained split included Tarnobrzeg, Płock, and Opole. An example of KZ cross-affiliation was the registration in the Wielkopolska region of plants located in the Kalisz and Leszno voivodships (see figure 2).

Voivodship boundaries had the attribute of 'naturalness' in the case of conflicts with State authorities at the same level (for example, over the prosecution of corrupt officials and the social use of Party or Militia buildings). These conflicts sprang up

Figure 2. Membership of Solidarność in September 1981 by region [source: Wiadomości Dnia Regionu Mazowsze (22 September 1981 issue)].

(1) Uchwały KKP 21/81 and 41/81 (resolutions of the National Coordinating Committee); compare "Regiony — małe czy duże?" Tygodnik Solidarność issue 9, 29 May 1981 and issue 10, 5 June 1981.
from Suwałki in the north to Bielsko and Wałbrzych in the south. For negotiations on rationing, housing, environment, and a myriad of other matters, the ‘competent’ State authorities were those at the voivodeship level, who played on fragmentation in the Union’s regional organisation. The same form of organisation suited voivodeships with a solid core of plants behind the Union; the Union withdrew to these at the time of the Bydgoszcz provocation.

The voivodeship boundaries, however, dated in some cases from as recently as 1975. They lacked the traditions and habits of regional loyalty still possessed by the older voivodeship boundaries or by those dating back to the pre-1918 partitioned Poland. In addition, though the new units have a certain passing resemblance to the map of functional regions defined by daily journeys to work, there are many points of mismatch. The newly-created voivodeships seem not infrequently to have been based more on hopes that a functional region would develop than on its actual existence.

The territoriality of the Union meant that the Union, through its spatial communication links, was able to distribute information very quickly. This was achieved using telex messages, which could serve, not only to disseminate decisions, but also to speed the gathering of information. Both Gdańsk and Mazowsze published daily telex information services—uncensored by the State since they were matters internal to the Union—which at times of crisis provided members with an almost hour-by-hour overview of events. Most larger plants had telexes to which the Union had access and which the Union used to receive the broadcast news tapes(2). No ‘branch’ union structure would have been able to secure this kind of intra-organisational communication.

In its first four months, it seemed that Solidarność was a realisation of passive resistance as an active trade union. However, it soon became clear, especially to workers in the MKZs, that the population at large regarded the Union as an agency to whom they could turn in pursuit of their rights in any kind of conflict with the State and its officials. The Union would have been wrong to turn them away—and indeed could not do so and maintain its statutory obligations. The Union, by its independence and self-government, found itself in the role of a social movement seeking for its members, and for society as a whole, something different from what had been delivered by the resident formation to date. Much of the first Congress was spent working on draft documents of this Union programme, which eventually began to crystallise around the concept of the self-governing commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita samorządna). The question which remained was the practicality of persuading the Party, with its inquisition apparatus and brother parties, to acquiesce in the programme’s implementation.

The answer was provided on 13 December 1981. The execution of the Party’s response was as competent as they could make it, along the lines of the suppression of factory committees, the SRs (Social Revolutionaries) and the SDs (Mensheviks) in the Soviet Union (Brinton, 1975; Newbery, 1981).

The formation bared its purpose in the interdiction of interpersonal links, in the separation of each person by severely limiting movement, and by monitoring of the post and telephones. These actions were formally eased during late 1983, but have been replaced by cost barriers, with rail and coach fares rising several hundred percent and with the continued rationing of petrol to thirty litres monthly for small cars. Community solidarity has come to the fore as a main expression of resistance to the regime, through the Church and through neighbourly self-help in the difficult times of rationing, shortages, and enormous price increases. These have put a third of society below the very meagrely defined poverty line. Legislation passed in July 1983

(2) Polish telex subscribers pay only a flat rate for their lines; individual messages are not charged.
forbids nonprivate employers from engaging workers who cannot show clean sheets of reference from their previous employer for work above the lowest pay rate, thus using the collapse in real wages to enforce passivity in the workplace.

The territorial structure of the Union permitted it to go underground once the first repressive actions were taken (Bujak, 1982). Though the national structure took a long time to rebuild, many regions had formed underground coordinating committees quite early on. They began publishing newsletters and carrying out normal Union functions, such as collecting dues, helping the families of those detained, and paying fines. Because the Union had been territorially organised, local and regional inter-plant contacts are often strong and reliable and have been functioning from 1980 onwards.

4 Human agency and social movements

There is one word which, in the discussion of the ethics of this social movement, is difficult to render in any other language: podmiotowość. Its literal translation is ‘subjectivity’, but its meaning has more in common with ‘independent self-governing human agency’. It refers to a desire not to have one’s history prescribed or proscribed exclusively from without; not to do exactly as one wishes, but at least to have the right to try, and to make one’s own compromises. When Party spokesmen maintain that the values underlying the movement are based on Western ideological diversion, one can understand that they have to adopt such a pose. They are after all only listening to the dictates of “history”:

“The party is in combat with a political enemy. While his main concentrations have been annihilated, and the plans and actions targeted on Socialist Poland unmasked, and while working people ever better perceive the true goals and damage done by the counterrevolutionary opposition, the enemy is still active. Inspired and supported from abroad, he has turned to poisoning the social atmosphere, and magnifying various tensions. We are decidedly going to defeat this enemy. He has no historical chances’” (Jaruzelski, 1983; my emphasis).

The irony of the situation is, as I have pointed out already, that the diligent ‘servants of history’ watching over the formation and defending its State are themselves the same kind of human agents. The questions which are posed by Solidarność for Western social science are manifold and have not been answered to date (compare Gregory, 1982). I have no doubt that Thompson’s (1978) structtures are well-founded; he speaks of the millstone of our ignorance concerning the ‘practice’ of the resident social formations in the Eastern bloc (page 169). Until we have come to terms with this blind spot, I fear that any ‘progress’ in thought or practice may be merely a matter of self-deception, albeit with the most laudable motives. Solidarność, the largest social movement in Europe, at least since the Spanish Civil War, and most probably this century, cannot be treated as an historical aberration. It is my conviction that the affirmation of human agency as a value in itself by the members of Solidarność must finally give the lie to the view that history can be a process without a subject.

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