

Response to Peter Waterman

Colin Barker

I feel like Peter Waterman's cake: he is trying to have me and to eat me. He praises my empirical and theoretical work and my attention to emotions, but attacks my premises and my conclusions.

In particular, he finds my conclusion - that Solidarity's story showed that aiming to change the world without taking power is a suicidal policy – 'startling' and quite disconnected from my previous analysis. This is a very odd reading.

Surely the bulk of the article is constructed around an account that leads to this conclusion? That's why I discuss the similarities between the inter-factory strike committees and soviets and workers' councils. That's why I suggest the political situation after August 1980 was a form of 'dual power'. That's why I focus on the Solidarity leaders' view that the membership's aspirations were too radical. That's why I point up the leadership's concern to limit the movement. That's why I argue that the Polish regime believed its own existence to be incompatible with Solidarity. And that's why the logic of the situation was that either Solidarity must break the regime, or the regime would break it.

The article suggests there was a revolutionary situation in Poland, in the sense that Lenin or Trotsky - or Tilly - used the term: the rulers could no longer rule in the old way, and the ruled were no longer willing to be ruled that way. Peter apparently disagrees, but doesn't say why, or how he would characterize the outcome of Solidarity's August victories. My reading of the emotional life of Solidarity is bound up with the narrative of how that revolutionary situation arose, and how it was – tragically – resolved. I don't see how you can like the one and reject the other: they're all part of the same story.

Second, such revolutionary situations, or what Teodor Shanin terms 'axial moments', are not everyday occurrences. Their outcomes can shape the pattern of social development – and thus the space within which movements can develop – for many years. Those outcomes are not inevitable, but depend on what people say and do, how they organize. If we are to succeed in transforming the world, we shall pass through further such critical moments, and our theories and our practices will be put to serious test. I think we can learn important things for the future from the study of such moments in the past. One thing the Solidarity experience suggests is that a movement leadership that sets its face resolutely against challenging state power will lead that movement into demoralization and defeat. So the absence, *inside* Solidarity, of a coherent left opposition was part of the story of Solidarity's defeat.

Third, what's at issue is not the 'empirical priority or strategic prioritization of the political party (or The Party) over the social movement(s)'. That's a confusing formulation, setting one form *over* another, and potentially

misrepresenting both. Movements are not homogeneous entities, all of whose adherents think the same. Actual movements are full of debate, opposition, argument. Any movement of any significance is full of 'tendencies', 'factions', 'parties' and the like arguing for different ways forward. Some call themselves 'parties', others (like the Polish dissident intelligentsia or the Church) deny that they are 'parties;' but in reality act like them. There are parties and parties: some are opponents of movements, others are part of their inner life.

Fourth, I find Peter's discussion of *power* as confusing as John Holloway's. Do movements *need* power to achieve their goals? How, for example, can the demand to re-order humanity's relationship with the natural environment even be conceived without a simultaneous discussion of the power required to carry it through – both power to *stop* current destructive practices by corporations and states, and power to *summon and organize the resources* to replace existing energy sources and uses with more sustainable forms?

The real issue is not whether movements need power, but whose power we're talking about and how it should be organized and distributed. What was most exciting about Solidarity was that it created new institutions of popular power, organized and coordinated from below. If Solidarity had sought to 'capture' the existing state power in Poland, that would indeed have been a self-defeating path. For the whole critique of the existing state power that Solidarity's members voiced very powerfully involved an attack on its undemocratic and repressive character, its authoritarian organization and so forth. For Solidarity to pursue power it would have had to extend its own democratic forms, seeking to replace these as the principles of political and social life, against the existing state power. Rather than disempowering and demobilizing its own members (the actual policy of its leaders after March 1981), it would have had to work to empower and mobilize them further. If Solidarity had taken seriously its own social and economic programme, 'For a Self-Governing Republic' (adopted at its autumn 1981 Congress), it would have had to break with the politics of 'firefighting' in favour of active solidarity.

Was there an *audience* within Solidarity for such ideas? My argument (developed further in other writings, referenced in the article) is that there was: sections of the 'radicals' within Solidarity were groping for alternatives to the Walesa group's ideas. The regime did not give them sufficient time and space to develop them.

Such ideas are of more than historical interest. They have re-appeared in struggles in Argentina and Bolivia in the past decade, and they will re-appear again, wherever live social movements find themselves developing the capacity to change the world. Such movements, rooted in the everyday lives of ordinary working people, are the only forces with the capacity to transform social and political life. The job of socialists – and this is ultimately what the argument is about – is to argue *within* movements that they should do just that, rather than restrict themselves to what's possible without challenging the regime in power..

Is this a case, as Peter sneers, for 'a (self-nominated) revolutionary vanguard'? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that those who see the potentials and the dangers

in a given movement have a responsibility to test out their views on their fellows – that's part of movement democracy. There's always an element of 'self-nomination' in any attempt to persuade others of a position. Peter, after all, self-nominated himself as my critic, as is his right. A vanguard only *becomes* such if others accept its arguments, and if it learns to develop those arguments from the conversations it has with others. What's self-defeating is a refusal of intra-movement politics.

About the author

Colin Barker is a retired Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University, currently enjoying "honorary" status. Since the early 1960s, he has been a member of the Socialist Workers Party, formerly the International Socialists. Since 1995, he has been one of the organizers of the (almost) annual International Conferences on Alternative Futures and Popular Protest", held around Easter at Manchester Metropolitan University. He can be reached by email at c.barker AT mmu.ac.uk or barcolin AT gmail.com.