



**Krzysztof Czyzewski**

## Culture and solidarity

Without equality and fraternity, freedom brings enslavement, writes Krzysztof Czyzewski. And overcoming the ego-centric tendencies that shape contemporary culture remains the central challenge of our times: the search for a culture of solidarity continues.

We return to solidarity like wanderers who are returning home from a long journey on the path to freedom. For freedom, we have created a Cartesian perspective with a human "me" in the centre, but also with two systems. The first is a state system in the service of national independence with a free political system — a representative power elected through the free will of the majority of citizens. The second is an economic system based on private property and the free market. Finally, we created a culture with an inhibited ego of the demiurge–artist in its centre.

We needed time to understand that without equality and fraternity, freedom brings enslavement. In our sovereign nation–states we started to feel threatened by internal and external violence on behalf of those who bitterly experienced the lack of solidarity and whom we ourselves had taught that the constant fight makes the world go around. In the world of civilizational progress and increasing prosperity, which we related to democracy and cultural and economic liberalism, we have experienced the ever growing social divisions, cultural conflicts and an erosion of interpersonal relations.

### **Our people**

In the name of the freedom of nations and the emancipation of individuals, we have rebelled against collective forms of enslavement such as cultural imperialism, repressive states, social conventions and cultural–religious traditions. However, while constantly increasing the field of individual freedom, we have also started to learn the bitter taste of alienation, egoism and loneliness, as well as depression — the most common illness of liberal societies. We needed to have these experiences of modernity to realize that human beings are born to be free, but they become truly free only when they are able to voluntarily give this freedom up.



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That is why we are now returning to solidarity. In reaction to the ineffectiveness, not to say the helplessness, of the nation–states when facing the challenges of today's world such as climate change, security problems, poverty or exclusion, we now look for supranational forms of democracy and global methods of managing them. Consider initiatives such as the Interdependence Movement, which can be seen as a chance for the future in an increasing role of states as anonymous entities cooperating with each other; states for whom the reference domain is interdependence and not — like in the case of nation–states — independence. This issue is the topic of a 2013 book by Benjamin Barber with a telling title, *If Mayors Ruled the World*.

However, the return to the nineteenth–century idea of solidarism (from the French *solidaire*), based on the belief in the community of interests of people which is above all divisions (earlier in history these were mainly class–based divisions), has started to find an audience not only among those who believe in "all people", but also those who prefer the phrase "our people". Yet, by doing so, they give the old ideals of solidarity a nationalistic and fascistic tone, something which in our increasingly multi–cultural world sounds inauspicious.

In 2011, when a wave of protests took place starting from the American Occupy Wall Street movement to the Spanish Indignados, their organizers approached Lech Walesa to ask for his support of this "movement of the discontented". This invitation to the former leader of Polish Solidarity to Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan (even though their invitation was accepted, the visit did not ultimately take place) evokes the memory of a different visit; Walesa's visit to Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) during the Orange Revolution in 2004. There, Walesa was a symbol of an anti–system struggle for independence and democracy. In New York City, on the other hand, he was meant to symbolize social solidarity and the fight against neoliberal autocracy. Within the Polish Solidarity, both the national liberation and the social movements were once together. Today, however, while no sane person questions the fact that it was the Solidarity movement that brought freedom and democracy back to Poland, many question its victory in the area of social solidarity.

Nonetheless, regardless of how we assess of the legacy of Poland's Solidarity and other pro–freedom and social movements in the world in the last decades, the experiences of people and societies who were engaged in them teach us that the sovereignty of states and freedom of individuals do not automatically bring about interpersonal solidarity. In the early years of the twenty–first century, it is this interpersonal solidarity that creates the greatest challenge.

Even more so, it is not just interpersonal solidarity, but also a solidarity with all beings and the entire earth which we subdue. They too need our empathy.

We already know that freedom may enslave us, just as much as we know that equality and love for our neighbours can be a real foundation for our individual and our communities' freedom. These are the principal issues which we have to take into consideration today while reflecting about both culture and solidarity.

### **Spiritual anchor**

Culture, which we have inherited from the last two centuries and are currently cultivating, finds itself well in the area of freedom and independence. At the moment, it has been joined also by the sphere of cultural diversity, understood as a unique diversity of languages and local identities which demand protection from the unifying globalization. The culture that was created on the matrix of the industrial epoch, modernist individualism and Renaissance philosophy has played well with the freedom movement of the nations and the modern states which emerged among them. Culture has also played well with the project of the European Union, which was built under the slogan of unity in diversity. For the nations which, for centuries, had been deprived of their statehood, culture was the true and often only spiritual anchor and basis for survival.

Today, there are places in the world where this mission of culture has not yet been fulfilled. This does not change the fact that the freedom aspect alone, just as much as the sole focus on protecting diversity and respect for it, are not exhausting the mission of a culture which is engaged in the most important issues of our times. In a globalising and more co-dependent world, the greatest challenge is a solidarity that embraces our overall relations, both with other people and nature. But such deep solidarity requires a deep culture.

This proclaims a complete change of the cultural paradigm. For us, it is still difficult to fully realize the breakthrough on the verge of which we have currently found ourselves as well as to foresee its consequences for artistic work and culture practices. The changes that we have clearly been noticing today result from the opportunities that are offered to us by the new media and technologies, and how they influence the processes of culture creation and reception. However, the real revolution in culture is taking place by an increasing growing presence of the "other" in our lives; modern technology is solely a susceptible instrument. Hence, quite soon, it won't be the Cartesian "me" but rather the other person — the "you" — who will make up the centre of our picture of the world. The ego-centric culture is today the culture of distress.

To a large degree, we have become individuals and societies of dialogue or even polylogue. The conversations that take place at this common table are made up of many voices from all over. From culture, we expect interactivity, co-creation and interdisciplinarity on par with egalitarianism and innovation. What is much less satisfactory for us is the participation in culture as passive recipients; we now want to be both the authors and performers of our ideas and aspirations.

We are at the beginning of a long process. We may still not know the masterpieces of a deep culture, but we can already feel that it is not the breaking of the taboos that is limiting the freedom of an individual and not the manifestation of diversity which makes up modern avant garde art. It is rather

the search for new, authentic forms of expression, for a meeting with this "other".

### The connecting tissue

At the same time, we understand that xenophilia, which we are learning to cultivate in the modern garden of culture, is not only the work directed outside us, but also towards others. Leaning towards the other, possible only by passing through our own selves, creates "us". It leads us towards the fullness of our personal being and creates our identity in the very same way as nationality, class identification or tribal membership did in previous eras. That is why solidarity creates the greatest challenge to the culture of this breakthrough period, looking for the basis and legitimization of freedom in co-creation, co-dependence, co-interdependence, cooperation and compassion.

When we created, with a group of friends from the Pogranicze avant garde theatre, which established a foundation, a cultural centre in Sejny (Poland) and the International Dialogue Centre in Krasnogruda, I had to cope with incompatibilities in the thinking about culture, artistic workshops and the tools of practicing culture. Our job was not to continue the freedom culture, one that was rooted in the underground and came from the previous epoch of communist Poland. Neither did we plan to defend Polishness in the former Polish eastern territories (*Kresy*) or build any form of defence fortress. Instead, we worked together with different minorities and people who are different as a result of their language, religious denomination, nationality, age, social status or sexual orientation.

However, this was not the core of our work. We wanted to build an inter-personal and inter-cultural "connective tissue" at Pogranicze — a specific location of painful borderlands full of broken bridges, traumatic memories and inveterate conflicts, different national mythologies and myths of freedom that were painful to our neighbours. Obviously, on many occasions we had to break different taboos, deal with prejudices and different forms of ideological enslavement. We had to work in the field of spreading freedom and independence of culture. But we've never stopped. We have refrained from conducting performances or festivals that are repeated in one town after another. We've always stayed where we were and that is why the interpersonal relations were so important. What mattered was what stayed with people after an evening of poetry or music. It was meant to be a long-lasting and cultivated process.

This is how we understood the continuation of Solidarity's work after 1989. Our name for the solidarity ethos was "borderlands" (*pogranicze*). It is made up of a community with its internal borders and bridges that needs to live. However, we did not have the culture to practice the ethos of borderlands. We did not have the culture focused on big events and media exposure. Our culture was not dependent on the market, or short-term grants. It was not based on narcissistic stardom, glitzy individualism, or trespassing of different taboos — these cannot be part of our bridge-builder's workshop.

The work that is created by such a builder needs to be soaked in depth and continuity. It does not know the perfective aspect; conversely, it has time for conversation and transformation. In the long term, it brings back dignity, memory and trust to the people. In the same way, it is difficult to attach to this craft the old matrix of culture, which is defensive for national identity and diversity but one which does not fit into its frame of the connecting tissue,

which is not — overall — the sum of different cells but an integral entirety, constituting a quality in itself. From the early days of our work in Pogranicze, we had to look for opportunities to build a new paradigm that, in the answer to the obligations of solidarity, would offer an opportunity to create a deep culture born from the transgressions from "me" into "you".

### Curiosity and controversy

In 2011, when we initiated the Cultural Workshops in Lublin during the first Culture Congress of the Eastern Partnership, we were convinced that in Eastern Europe, the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy was meant to complement the Mediterranean Union and also had to take the form of a cultural project. Anybody who has lived in this part of the world knows that projects that are solely political projects or hard projects focused on economy or security are incapable of building authentic partnerships on such a difficult, rich and complex ground as the historical and cultural heritage of these areas. Evidently, cultural cooperation has turned out to be the most dynamic area of this partnership, actively entering into alliances with business, local governments, education and tourism. The greatest resistance we can still see is in the area of political integration, which is connected with the still strongly present post-totalitarian heritage and the threat to democracy that is being posed by the authoritarian regimes.

It seemed that the partnership in the area of culture would focus mainly on culture engaged in anti-regime activities often linked with the defence of national identity, the solving of ethnic and religious conflicts, and different activities enlarging the areas of freedom of individual and community. However, what we saw was the creation of a sphere of reflection along with a visible need for discussion and new practices in the area of cultural socialization. And while such questions as "why do we need culture?" have become quite clear, questions such as "what kind of culture?", "how is it made?", "in what form?", "for whom?", "with whose participation?", "with what long-term effects?" and "with what competence?" have generated greater curiosity and controversy. In the background of these questions we can find a certain, often subconscious, distress regarding solidarity, or more honestly, regarding the dispersion between culture and solidarity.

These questions, which have increasingly accompanied artists from the Eastern Partnership countries, unmask the exhaustion of a solely anti-regime or anti-establishment culture. That is a culture which is easily accepted and eagerly consumed in the West, but is less effective in Eastern Europe. Consequently, in our region a need can be seen to leave the underground, the elitist circles, the metropolitan centres and head towards the people, attempt social change, organic work, go to the provinces and approach the periphery.

During the celebrations commemorating the year of Czeslaw Milosz in the hall of the Music Academy in Minsk the text of Milosz's poem "[You Who Wronged](#)" ("Ktory skrzywdziles") was recited. The excerpt of this poem is engraved on the monument at the Solidarity Square before the Gdansk Shipyard in Poland. However, when it was recited from the stage in three languages — in Polish by Ryszard Krynicki, in Russian by Natalya Gorbanevskaya and in Belarussian by Andrei Khadanovich — it generated strong emotions. But the words which stayed the longest in the memory of the audience, and which I heard repeated backstage, were Milosz's words from his *Treatise on Morality (Traktat Moralny)*: "Together with many other pebbles / You can change the course of an avalanche" (*Lawina bieg od tego zmienia, /*

*Po jakich toczy sie kamieniach).*

## **In search of a critical culture**

The European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk, whose opening is planned for August 2014, faces a serious dilemma: should it commemorate Solidarity or create a culture of solidarity? Obviously, I present this challenge with much simplification, even more as these two issues do not need to contradict each other. And yet there is a real tension between the strategy of building a museum dedicated to the history of the Solidarity movement and the phenomena which have some resemblance to it and which have been observed both in the region of Central and Eastern Europe and worldwide and a strategy of creating a centre of culture dedicated to Solidarity and the ethos of solidarity. In the case of the latter, it is quite natural and almost necessary. A deep understanding of solidarity includes respect and dialogue with those who have lived and worked before us. Such a connection with the past requires an elaborate construction, which is even more difficult when there are many versions of this past and especially when they exist and are closed in the cultural matrixes, usually apologetic, defensive and ideological.

What we lack is a critical culture that would allow us to establish our relationship with the past and build on the ground of solidarity. In other words, we lack a culture that would bring different people together under the same roof of common memory and mutual heritage. The critical nature of culture has nothing to do with denial, a lack of pride or the inability to find joy in success. The issue in question here is finding a way to distance ourselves and being able to make an objective assessment. That is why it should be the critical culture on which one should place the construction of the bridge leading to the past and tradition. The real challenge, however, is introducing this tradition into the contemporary context, into the stream of activities that are important for the world today and tomorrow.

On 25 July 2013, while visiting the Varginha Favela in Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis said: "The culture of selfishness and individualism that often prevails in our society is not what builds up and leads to a more habitable world: it is the culture of solidarity that does so, seeing others not as rivals or statistics, but brothers and sisters [...] only when we are able to share do we become truly rich; everything that is shared is multiplied! The measure of the greatness of a society is found in the way it treats those most in need."

It is, thus, culture that answers the challenge of solidarity, which is becoming the sign of our times. This change is then not yet another superficial change, another cultural trend, a new aesthetic or social issue. What we are experiencing today is a deep revolution of language that has shaped the matrix of our culture and the undergoing change does not only mean a change of vocabulary but also a change of grammar.

Culture must become a part of solidarity not only in what it stands for, but also in the way it is created. Zygmunt Bauman while reflecting on the nature of the "explosion of solidarity", which was the discontent movement and which actually turned out to be a short-term carnival exposing the fact that our cultural reality is indeed "unfriendly towards solidarity", wrote: "Do you want solidarity? If so, face and come to grips with the routine of the mundane; with its logic or its inanity; with the powers of its demands, commands and prohibitions. And measure your strength against the patterns of daily pursuits of those people who shaped history while being shaped by it."

Now we are returning to solidarity, understanding that it is an authentic link for the world of increasingly deeper social and cultural divisions that, at the same time, have also become more and more interdependent. Solidarity appears to us as a new challenge after the lesson of freedom, which found its fulfilment in individualism, independence and diversity but not equality and empathy. All this contributes to the fact that we live in a time in which solidarity has been changing the paradigm of culture, placing it eye to eye with the routine of everyday life and the depth of the "other".

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