

# On Poland and Power

## Coordination & Electricity

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

Rudy Perkins

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Thanks again for running my article on Poland, and for E.B. Maple's reply. (See FE #309, June 19, 1982, "The Collapse in Poland") Maple seems a little over-anxious for a dispute on the questions raised, in some cases going out of his way to misinterpret what I say, and to ignore parts of the article in which I clearly distinguish the revolutionary movement from the organizations which speak for it, and from the capitalist state which cannot be reformed or seized. Still, there are several points on which we genuinely disagree.

I spoke of power in the primary sense of the word, "the capability of producing an effect, the ability to act," not in the secondary meaning of the word, "control over others." In this sense it should be clear that power doesn't need to be destroyed, but needs instead to be democratically realized. Through a revolutionary movement formerly powerless individuals would collectively achieve power, would achieve the ability to effect and shape their world to answer their own desires. Achieving this collective ability is what I mean by the "seizure of power," and it will require seizing decision-making from the capitalist dynamic and managerial minority now shaping our world.

To achieve this control over our world, people will need control over the material forces which shape their lives—the production of food, the design of cities, the supply of electricity, the system of transportation, housing, media, the peacefulness of neighboring countries or regions, and so on. As mundane as it may seem, the democratic production and management of food, housing, energy and other factors will be an integral part of our freedom and make possible a revolution in daily life.

In Poland these factors are all controlled by the State. But just because we want to abolish the State doesn't mean we want to renounce control over these factors of our lives, or to leave them to chance. Unfortunately, control of these factors may require continued involvement in production processes inherited from capital. It happens that in Poland, for instance, the country's electricity is largely supplied by its coal production. E.B. Maple can denounce my suggestion that decisions on coal production are important to Poles, but he must also then denounce people's control of their electricity supply, and the activities made possible by electricity. No matter what happens in Poland, coal will be, at the least, a crucial transitional fuel, and it is therefore important that Poles be able to stop production for foreign-exchange export, maximize safety in the mines, regulate environmental impact of mining, and have all decisions on coal production in their hands. Of course, the social-political issue of the destruction of state and capital and the initiation of democratic communism is more important than any technical question. However, Maple's comments on coal exemplify an approach that is so eager to denounce all aspects of society as it is, that it completely loses touch with what in practice will make our lives more our own, more social, more free.

Maple implies that I endorsed "a state freed from class rule." I made no such endorsement, and in fact, specifically commented in the article: "the organs of self-management cannot tolerate the existence of the old state/managerial apparatus. The workers councils are the only power or they are nothing."

If people are to live collectively and democratically, and not as isolated individuals, they will have to create structures for the coordination of their activities. Only full democracy and thoroughgoing participation will prevent these structures from becoming a new State, a power separate from and above all the people of the society. Despite the danger of a new State, coordinating structures are a necessary element of the collective realization of freedom.

The anarchist ideology of “power must be destroyed” has too often been the code words for: No coordination of the movement or society, no structure for the movement or society (even a temporary and mutually agreed-on structure), total autonomy of each individual from all other individuals, no control over anything by anybody. This has been the interpretation of anarchism by many self-proclaimed anarchists—in the anti-nuclear movement, for example—and has been a principal cause of anarchism’s reputation as an anti-collective and impractical perspective.

One’s attitude towards coordinating structures inevitably surfaces in discussions of Solidarity. Where does coordination end and representation begin? Viewed from afar, my intuition is that Solidarity had a dual nature, coordinating and unifying people at the base, but also degenerating into a representative, union structure at the national leadership level.

It had aspects of both a repressive union apparatus and a “human community based on free association.” I specifically argued in the article that “the movement (not Solidarity) would have to assume political direction of the country” because I understand the important difference between revolutionary movements and the organizations which speak on their behalf. In practical terms, however, Solidarity involved so much of the population that in many ways it was the movement.

I’m sure most Poles saw it that way. Debates within Solidarity were debates of the movement, and the articulation of positions within the official organization were in many ways the articulation of different trends in the movement. In that light the view of Walesa, Rulewski, Kuron, et al, are important as expressions of different currents within the movement. I would have included views of “the rank and file” if I had access to them. But whether one quotes a Kuron, or an unknown, the process is still one of using a single voice, as a spokesperson, reflecting the views of various segments of the movement. I am not just interested in the number of strikes, or the severity of riots, but also want to hear the articulation of views and theories by the insurgents. This interest in conscious politics, and not just mass sociology (“the daily acts of the unchronicled millions”—Maple), may also be a difference I have with Maple and the Fifth Estate. Your paper at times assumes the contradictory position of being the articulator for the inarticulate, the formulists of the spontaneous event.

I myself am attracted to sweeping denunciations of every type of reform, and to the purity of anonymous, unarticulated, “unrecoverable” acts of violence against-the State, and to movements untainted by recognized organizations. But I am more convinced that the revolution leading to libertarian communism will be prefaced by struggles over reform, by the articulation of political positions by “rank and file” people and intellectuals, and by participation in mass organizations which will carry germs of both revolution and recuperation. Our analyses will have to sort through the value of the actual elements of a movement, and will have to draw conclusions regarding the movement’s options based on the actual specifics of the situation.

Rudy Perkins

*E.B. Maple Responds:* Your remarks regarding the nature of power, what constitutes representation, the revolutionary movement, the need for or lack of coordination, and what is salvageable from capital are the meat of a discussion on the content of a modern revolution. I feel at least slightly uncomfortable with each of your formulations, but let me comment only briefly on two points. A view of spontaneous revolution does not imply a lack of coordination, but rather a refusal to be directed along already pre-determined routes devised by a party, “leading comrades” or self-appointed spokespersons for the movement. All revolutionary mass activity throughout history has created its own forms of coordination and democracy (many times taking the form of revolutionary workers councils), but a lack of planning in advance for either the revolution or its forms has never seemed to me to be the core of the problem faced by revolutionaries. In fact, excessive concern with coordination (and I don’t necessar-

ily attribute this to Rudy) is exactly what produces a formal or informal bureaucracy and is what has stifled so many revolutionary upsurges in the past (such as the role of the CNT in Spain).

As we have said so frequently in the past, the physical plant of capital is what shapes its social relations, so I am decidedly cool to suggestions on how to maintain or, even worse, the necessity of maintaining the machinery capital has produced. I enjoy the benefits of centralized electricity very much, but would under no circumstances, other than having a gun pointed at my head, agree to mine coal in order to generate it. I assume once the coercion of wage labor has been ended, others will feel similarly, and since I would not ask others to do what I would refuse, how then do we get our coal? I would still contend if workers are advocating “democratic” or “socialist” coal production, not much of an advance is being made.

# fifth Estate

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