The 1980 strike at what was then the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk is often described as a milestone in recent European history, especially that of Central and Eastern Europe. The documentary film Chil-

dren of Solidarność depicts the strike as the starting shot for the fall of communism throughout Eastern Europe. The same historiography is found in the permanent exhibition Roads to Freedom, next to the Solidarity headquarters in Gdansk, near the shipyard and Solidarity Square, where the monument to the workers killed in the 1970 uprisings stands. In photographic displays, commemorative albums, tourist brochures, and other depictions of the events in 1980, texts recur again and again about how the strikers in Gdansk and the activists of Solidarity proved that non-violence and civil disobedience were successful strategies in the struggle for a life of greater human dignity — for themselves and the generations to come.

The strikers knew the struggle for democracy would take time, but hoped that their children would someday be able to grow up in a free country. A song written during the strike became the movement’s unofficial anthem. It was called “A Song for My Daughter”.

I have no time for you; your mother hasn’t seen you for so long. Wait a little longer, until you’re grown, and I’ll tell it all to you. The story of these hopeful days, filled with talk and heated argument. Of all the long and sleepless nights, of our hearts beating like mad. Of all the people who’ve come to feel, at last we’ve found our way home, Together we are fighting for our today, but most of all for your tomorrow.1

In this article, my aim is to study how the Gdansk shipyard strike and the formation of Solidarity have been remembered and observed afterwards, especially in connection with the 30th anniversary in August 2010. In so doing, I want to explore how people create meaning in past events in relation to current interests, and how the depiction of a shared history is constantly recast and used.

The empirical material consists of printed and published materials — including brochures, web pages, writings, and commemorative albums — as well as field observations and visits to various exhibitions in Gdansk in connection with the anniversary celebrations. The material also includes printed matter and observations from earlier visits to the permanent exhibition Roads to Freedom in 2001 and 2005. Since the central themes in the material are generation, history, and the future, I focus on the passing on from one generation to another of the cultural legacy constituted by the strike and the Solidarity struggle. Beyond this, I will discuss the moral legacy of the activists of the 1980s and the exhortation to solidarity with the rest of the world in which this legacy is materialized in the 2000s.

The theoretical premises of the study are deconstructivist and power-critical, based on the school of discourse theory developed by the political philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. A fundamental idea in this theory is that life is informed by a constant struggle for interpretive precedence about which understanding of the world should be considered the “right” one, and that these interpretations are always temporary fixations of meanings that might have been
utterly different. In this article, this overarching framework will be combined with tools of theory-in-use, primarily derived from ritual theory.

PREDECESSORS AND HEIRS

Among the books for sale in the lobby to the Roads to Freedom exhibition is Freedom: A Do-It-Yourself Manual by Czesław Bielecki, a former Solidarity activist and adviser to Lech Wałęsa during his presidency in the 1990s. The book was intended to inspire and guide young people who want to start their own social movements and is available in several translations: I catch a glimpse of at least Polish, Spanish, and English behind the counter. There is a cover blurb, signed by Lech Wałęsa, which reads as follows:

I was fortunate to lead a unique revolution. In 1980–1989 we won our struggle for freedom bloodlessly. It was as recently as 1956 in Budapest and 1970 in the Polish cities on the Baltic Coast that blood had flowed. We began to disassemble communism with our victorious strike in August 1980. “Solidarity” was created. By joining together millions of people in Poland, we showed other nations how they could escape their totalitarian captivity. We kept up our resistance, and the world supported us with solidarity. The Roundtable of 1989, at which the opposition reached a historic compromise with the government, became the beginning of the end of communism and its rules of lies.

I recommend Czesław Bielecki’s book to all those who want to win their own non-violent fights for freedom. Its title conveys its meaning: If you do something for freedom yourself, others will help you.

The book was published by the European Solidarity Center, an organization founded in 2007 after a ceremonious signing of a Letter of Intent on August 31, 2005, the 25th anniversary of the Gdańsk Agreement, the social accords between management and the strike committee at the shipyard. Like its predecessor, the Solidarity Center Foundation, which was formed in 1999 under the chairmanship of Lech Wałęsa and is still in operation, the mission of the European Solidarity Center is to spread knowledge about Solidarity and the modern history of Poland by means of exhibitions, educational projects, anniversary celebrations, conferences, and publications.

The poetic appeal—and the moral challenge—of Wałęsa’s text recurs on the European Solidarity Center website, where the former director, Roman Catholic priest Father Maciej Zięba, describes the organization as follows:

Solidarity means a commitment and a challenge. It is a commitment for the authors and participants of the events of August 1980 in Gdańsk and in Poland; and it is a challenge for the future generations and for those for whom freedom, dignity, and justice remain a dream. Sustaining memory about the moral message of the “Solidarity” movement and the creative delivery of its legacy to our posterity, indicating how current and universal it is—these are the main tasks of the European Solidarity Center.

The Center strives to achieve the first goal—the
The Eastern European expert and modern historian Timothy Garton Ash has also, in an eyewitness account of the strike, emphasized how dignity was the strongest, most palpable feeling communicated during the weeks of the strike.

Solidarity, morality, and dignity became important discursive elements in the story created around the strike, the Solidarity activists, and the significance of both to the continued geopolitical, economic, and cultural development of Europe.

Through life history interviews with highly educated Poles, the ethnologist Kataryzna Wolanik Boström has shown how personal and family histories are intertwined with important events and phenomena in Polish history. By telling the stories of their lives, they also tell the story of Poland, evoke Polish society as they understood it – and their own place in it, as they would like to be understood. Solidarity, morality, and dignity also have an important place in these stories: no one wants to appear to be part of an oppressive system; everyone wants to understand themselves as a morally comprehensible person. Now, in retrospect, when we know which social system and ideology “won” and which lost – at least from the historical perspective we are capable of surveying today – it becomes important to take a stance on this “truth” (however provisional and potentially open to question it may be). The moral threads become central to the fabric of the projects for children and youth. They are offered a particular, discursively created and politically airtight understanding of historical phenomena – and a great responsibility is laid upon the young generation to be good stewards of their legacy.

MORALITY AND RITUAL

In connection with the 30th anniversary of the strike in 2010, a number of happenings, exhibitions, and manifestations also took place that further underlined this moral legacy (such as marathon and roller skating races, musical, theatrical, film, and art events, conferences, book presentations, and other events in honor of Solidarity and the anniversary of the strike, with varying connections in content). These can – like the anniversary celebrations overall – be analyzed as secular rituals or public events.

The anthropologists Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff coined the term “secular ritual” in the 1970s, meaning a sense of collective ceremonial forms with no religious or magical purposes – ceremonies that mirror, reorganize, and create social arrangements and modes of thought.

The anthropologist"A Test of solidarity" action we want to demonstrate that in spite of distances between various countries, despite all the linguistic, cultural, and religious barriers, political affiliations or inter-
thoropologist Don Handelman instead uses the term “public events” for public ritual contexts that can either be pompous, clearly defined, and solemn with an unambiguous message – “events-that-present” – or playful, messy, rebellious, carnivalesque, and spontaneous – “events that re-present”.

Quite often, the more carnivalesque elements of parades and other events are the province of teenagers and “young adults”.

One of the more playful events during the 30th anniversary celebrations in Gdańsk – which drew a great many young people – was “A Day in the Life of the Conspiracy”, a happening held at the “Klub Rock Café” at the Museum of Polish Rock in Gdańsk on August 30, 2010. Videos from the student movement with connections to Solidarity were shown, a troubadour sang protest songs typical of the times, and participants could print their own flyers with the text “THE CROW CANNOT DEFEAT THE EAGLE”, or a copy of the very first bulletin issued by the shipyard strikers in 1980. Outside the club, passersby could paint slogans and political street art from the same historical events.

“History” is a construction, a negotiation, and a struggle that this book was written. It was written by parents who had been successful at defeating communism, and now they don’t want the next thugs who come along, those who resemble Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Castro, Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, Haile Mariam, or Bin Laden, to turn our common house into a madhouse. And then blow us all up.

The moral legacy to modern youth is emphasized again and again and the authorities are those who personally suffered and fought for a free, more humane society. The many exhibitions and stage productions are effective tools – entertainment and education wrapped up in one – for getting the message across and making it stick in the minds of young people. Other ways of popularizing and passing on the message of the strike and what happened afterwards to a younger generation included the comic strip published in the Solidarity magazine at the XXX Congress in 2009 and the comic book published for the 25th anniversary in 2005. In a book about the importance of museums as political arenas, political scientist Timothy W. Luke emphasizes the power that the exhibition medium has over the public, specifically through this intertwining of education and amusement:

One of the most effective techniques for governing these populations today is entertainment; and [...] some of the most powerful public performances to interest and amuse people are museum exhibitions.

“Roads to Freedom” exhibition tells of people and flyers are being passed out.26 To interest and amuse people are museum exhibitions. It is interesting to note how various events, persons, and symbols are linked in a situation like this. The historiography of the 1980 strike often emphasizes the importance of the Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyła’s election as pope in 1978, and that he, as John Paul II, chose his homeland for his first official pilgrimage in 1979. According to this version of history, he infused hope and courage into his countrymen with his homilies and addresses in Poland – and the very next year the revolt was a fact. The church was also a palpable presence during the strike – in the form of priests who celebrated mass inside the shipyard grounds – for the strikers and for the crowds outside. During the communist era, the church and religion in Poland stood for opposition to the state and for freedom, in contrast to communist ideology and the control machine of the regime. So, there is nothing odd about the close ties between the Polish Catholic church and the Polish-born pope and the events at the shipyard in August 1980 and developments over the next decade. These bonds were strengthened by the death of John Paul II in April 2005, in the midst of Poland’s preparations for the celebration of the 25th anniversary. Five years later, in April 2010, another event with strong symbolic overtones occurred: the tragic plane crash in Smolensk, in which several former Solidarity activists died, including President Lech Kaczyński and Anna Walentynowicz. It is thus no surprise that this event, along with memorials of the lethal shootings in the 1970 protests, were given a prominent place among the more solemn elements of the 30th anniversary celebrations.

Motherhood is also an important symbol, both for Poland as a nation and for the Polish Catholic church (in the person of the Madonna). The family ideology of the communist era, centuries of Polish nationalism, and conservative currents in 21st century Poland: the mother symbol can be related to all of these. That Anna Walentynowicz is tied to Solidarity as a mother figure is thus to be expected. From a feminist perspective, however, this is problematic, as it implies a risk that Walentynowicz will not be fully recognized as a political activist and revolutionary as her male comrades have been, but rather portrayed and remembered based on the archetypal position of woman as mother – albeit on a symbolic level – which makes an understanding of her in a significant political context essentially impossible. We are quite simply incapable – within the framework of the discourses that currently dominate our society – of linking the “mother” with positions of “dissident”, “revolutionary”, and “union and political activist”.

Several memorial concerts were also held during the 30th anniversary celebrations, at which the words freedom and...
solidarity were repeated again and again. I saw two of them on TV at home with friends in Gdańsk. Despite differences in format and setting, the events were remarkably similar. The same kinds of pictures of the strike and the state of war, everyday life in communist Poland, dominoes falling as the Eastern Bloc collapses, suffering and struggling people in other parts of the world. There was also the emphasis on freedom and solidarity in the choice of songs and other expressions; children as symbols of hope and the future; Polish flags, the red-and-white Solidarity logo, the constant presence of religion; and Lech Wałęsa with his fists raised – as a distilling emblem of this entire cultural legacy.

It is interesting how elements from so many different contexts can be brought together in this public ritual (with both presentational and representational, secular and non-secular aspects) – John Lennon’s Working Class Hero, Leonard Cohen’s Hallelujah, and Bob Marley’s Get Up, Stand Up – and combined into something that becomes graspable here and now. The “here and now” constructed by joining these disparate components is the celebration of a Catholic labor and democracy movement with a distinct right-wing profile (even if some of the intellectuals who supported the strike and participated in the founding of Solidarity had Marxist backgrounds). It is obvious that the mash-up works as long as the various elements contribute to switching on the same emotional register.

In connection with the generational theme, it is also interesting to note how a broad program is offered in order to draw the younger generation to the celebrations. Macy Gray, for example, was a huge hit in Poland in the summer of 2001, which I remember from my fieldwork for a previous study, when her songs were played everywhere – and Rufus Wainwright’s version of Hallelujah is mainly known from the animated film Shrek. Both of these are examples of pop culture references that appeal to young audiences.

THE YOUNG GENERATION

But what do Solidarity, the shipyard strike, and the Gdańsk Agreement of August 31, 1980 actually mean to young people today? Is the intensive campaign to ensure the survival of the memory mounted by groups like the European Solidarity Centre a sign that the younger generations in Poland do not care enough about the history of their country? The Swedish historian Ulf Zander has thought about whether the reason for the lukewarm interest in Solidarity among youth in the 21st century is that the strikes of the 1980s and the Solidarity movement were the final link in a long, tradition of rebellion in Poland, rather than the starting shot for something new. He argues that young people are rejecting this and that they are weary of the constant harping on old injustices. In my own thesis, If We Are to Become Like Europe, on the creation of identity among young, urban, well-educated women in Poland, the same tendencies emerge when interview respondents distance themselves from what they consider out of touch in the Poland that is to be integrated into the European Community and become part of the EU. These old and tired (and Polish – which is presented as old-fashioned in and of itself) notions are represented in their minds by the older generation, as well as the poorly educated and the rural population.

Older people often remember the oppression of the communist era and the Cold War – and some of them even World War II – while those born since the late 1970s essentially lack this experience, even if they have assimilated part of the “collective memory” through the stories of others. Among older people, reminders of the strike and the formation of Solidarity in August 1980 trigger enough memories and deep-felt emotion to fill the anniversary celebration with meaning, while the younger generations need more far-reaching connections – references to the war-torn places of today and oppression in countries like Afghanistan, Tibet, and Sudan – in order to switch on a similar emotional register and engagement.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This article has described some aspects of the 2010 anniversary celebration of the strike at the former Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk in August 1980 and the formation of the Polish labor union and freedom movement Solidarity. The focus was on how these historic events are observed and remembered today – through various types of secular rituals and public events – and which elements are presented as important to hold onto and pass on to future generations. I have paid particular attention to concepts like freedom and solidarity, history and future, and the moral legacy from yesterday’s activists to today’s young generation and generations to come.

The depictions of the events in the 1980s and the production of history going on around them – continuously and in connection with the anniversary celebrations in 2010 – are, however, not entirely unproblematic. Historiography is always political, always commingled with power, just as presentations of historic phenomena in words, pictures, exhibitions, and stage productions of various kinds are always the result of specific interests and selection processes. Which groups and figures in modern Poland are out to score political points by constructing the past in this particular way? Timothy W. Luke writes:

The politics of symbols are quite powerful, because they invoke ideals, recast realities, and manufacture meanings. Museum exhibits may not change public policies, but they can change other larger values and practices that will transform policy.

Which values and practices are being changed by presenting history, the present, and the future in this particular way? For whom is it important, for instance, that the Polish struggle is ascribed universal meanings, as emphasized in both the projects for children and youth and the anniversary concerts? Why is it so important that the young generation accepts the baton and carries it “forward”? How are consensus, hegemonic discourses, and “objective truth” about the shipyard strike created, and how are other events linked with this in a logical and graspable chain of phenomena? For example: the election of a Polish pope, and the pope’s visit to Poland in the late 1970s – the strike in Gdańsk in 1980 – the founding and activism of Solidarity in the 1980s – partially free elections in 1989 – the fall of Eastern European communism in 1989–1990 – eastward enlargement of the EU in the 2000s. How are political phenomena shaped and influenced by such discursive linkages, today and in the future? What other voices and alternative versions are silenced and ignored in such a historiography? Further research – especially in the field of history and related disciplines – on the fall of Eastern European communism and its most iconic events, of which the shipyard strike in Gdańsk is one, is needed.

Many parallels to what happened in Poland and other countries in the former Eastern Bloc in the 1980s and 1990s were also drawn in connection with the Arab Spring in 2011. The comparisons describe courageous and desperate people rising up against the oppressive regimes in their countries in joint action – their actions guided by the hope of a better future. Many twists and turns are yet to come before anyone will be able to say with any certainty what the outcome of the revolts in North Africa and on the Arabian Peninsula will be – and what the historiography and memorial rituals surrounding these events will look like. Will they in any way resemble those surrounding the fall of Eastern European communism? Which events will be brought to the fore as special and symbolic? And, in such case, which galling voices will resist these descriptions?
Europe. Poland was written into history as the center of these events—and the shipyard strike in August 1980 is understood by many as that which drove and made possible these developments in the former Eastern Bloc (see, e.g. the official anniversary website 1939–1989: It all began in Poland, http://www.3989.pl/en,15,home.html; retrieved 2011-12-01).


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references

1 From the 2005 documentary film Children of Solidarność, directed by Rafal Lewandowski, which was broadcast on the Swedish Television program Mera historia [More history], Swedish Television Rikssutspelman, 2006-10-29. The song lyrics were written by Krzysztof Kasprzyk and the music by Maciej Pietrzyk.

2 The exhibition was then housed in premises inside the shipyard grounds, Sala BHP, which was the headquarters of the 1980 strike and where the strike agreement was signed. Sala BHP is now used for more temporary exhibitions, while Roads to Freedom has been given new permanent premises a few hundred meters away, near the Solidarity headquarters.


4 Since then, Bielecki has been a Member of Parliament for the conservative and Catholic – some would say right-wing populist – party PiS, “Law and Justice”. PiS was formed in 2001 by the twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, both with roots in Solidarity, who were in government in 2005–2007. Lech was the president of Poland until April 10, 2010, when he and a large number of political VIPs (including Anna Walentynowicz of Gdańsk strike fame) died in a plane crash – known as the “Smolensk Tragedy” – on the way to a ceremony in commemoration of the Katyn massacre of 1940, when some 4,500 Polish officers were shot to death by the Soviet military.

5 See also Gene Sharp, From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation, Boston, MA, 1993; 2010—a pamphlet written by the American political scientist and activist Gene Sharp. This similar manual has been used, for example, in Serbia to overthrow Milošević and in Ukraine during the Orange Revolution in 2004. It is also said to have been a source of inspiration for the resistance movements in North Africa and on the Arabian Peninsula during the Arab Spring of 2011 (CBC News, 2011-02-24, http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story2011/02/23/F-carol-off-gene-sharp-middle-east.html; retrieved 2011-08-02). Bielecki’s book seems to have similar ambitions, but has not, as far as I know, had any significant impact.


8 A historiography confirmed by the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, where one of the events staged for the celebration was a line of dominos set up along the former line of the wall, and where Lech Wałęsa, very symbolically, was given the honor of tipping the first of the dominos. (Dagro Nyheter web edition, 2009-11-09: http://www.dn.se/nyheter/varlden/berlinmurens-fall-frades-under-envist-regnande; retrieved 2011-02-05.)

9 This national self-image has been analyzed by scholars including Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (The Wheel of Polish Fortune: Myths in Polish Collective Consciousness During the First Year of Solidarity, Lund 1992) and Norman Davies (Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland’s Present, Oxford 2000).

10 One example of such people might be the people of Belarus, which is still under Lukashenko’s dictatorial oppression.


19 In Polish, WRON’a ORŁA NIE POKONA. This is a play on the name of the military organization WRON, which governed during the state of emergency in 1981–1983. With the suffixed “a” – won becomes the word wonne, crow, which is set against the old Polish national symbol of the crowned eagle.

20 Bielecki, op. cit., p. 41.

21 Other things can be read into the quotation above – such as a reference to the so-called war on terrorism, in which Poland has been one of the allies of the United States and the former Bush administration.


26 From the field diary.

27 See Randall Collins’s discussion of “interaction ritual chains” through which situations and symbols are emotionally linked and given meaning, e.g., in Randall Collins, Interaction Ritual Chains, Princeton 2004, p. xii.

28 See e.g. Ash, op. cit., pp. 28–30.

29 Wałęsa himself is also known for always wearing an image of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa on his jacket or overcoat lapel.

30 See, e.g. the arguments in Karin S. Lindelöf, Om vi nu ska bli som Europa: Könsutoppi och normalitet bland unga kvinnor i transitionens Polen [If we are to become like Europe: gender construction and normality among young women in transitional Poland], Gothenburg 2006, and Wolanik Boström, op. cit.


32 Ibid., p. 108.

33 Compare this with that which has been said and written about the miners’ strike in Kiruna, in northern Sweden, and how this strike ended an epoch of consensus solutions during the postwar era and entailed the beginning of something else (see Robert Nilsson’s thesis proposal, Den stora gruvstrejken i Malmfälten: Gironadet av en historisk händelse [The great miners’ strike in the Swedish ore fields: The making of a historical event]), Department of History, Stockholm University, 2010-09-28, p. 5).

34 Ulf Zander in Mera historia [More history], op. cit.

35 Lindelöf, op. cit.

36 In addition, the anniversary of the German invasion of Poland, and thus the starting shot of World War II, coincides with the anniversary of the strike: at dawn on September 1, 1939, the German battleship Schleswig-Holstein opened fire on Westerplatte in Gdańsk. For this reason, a solemn memorial service is held every year with the laying of wreaths few hundred meters away, near the Solidarity headquarters.