

Both of these books, then, seem to end on notes of defeat, if not failure. Mullen's Chicago radicals end up laying the foundation for *Ebony*, a mass market, middle class magazine, while Maxwell's New York City radicals are, at best, able to leave the left under their own terms. But, in the process of these books, in their analyses, in the stories they tell along the way, there is great hope – hope of a cultural politics that links race and class in constructive ways, hope that links white cultural workers and cultural workers of colour in ways that expand them without diminishing them, hope that comes from understanding what earlier generations of radicals might have done wrong, and, perhaps most of all, the hope that comes from the inspiration of being exposed to the work of Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Nelson Algren, Mike Gold, Andy Razaf, Claude McKay, Chester Himes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Browning, and so many, many others.

Peter Rachleff
Macalester College

¹ Wilson Record, *The Negro And The Communist Party* (Chapel Hill 1951); Harold Cruse, *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual* (New York 1967).

² These arguments are in a similar vein to Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring Of Culture In The 20th Century* (New York 1996). Both Mullen and Maxwell acknowledge their debt to Denning's work.

³ Eric Lott, *Love And Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy And The Making Of The American Working Class* (New York 1993).

Adam Michnik, *Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Adam Michnik's *Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives* provides readers with rich and valuable resources to understand political dynamics in Poland and other East-Central European countries during the dramatic transition: from communist regimes to democratic ones, and then from multiparty systems to "quasi"-democratic regimes.¹ Although the book's subtitle focuses on the post-Cold War era, readers will also find useful information on historical and political incidents in these countries during the Cold War era.

Indeed, the history of the dynamic political transition in Poland can be traced by following Michnik's intellectual journey throughout the book as the author moves: from a communist who "believed then that a Communist was someone whose mission was to denounce injustice. So [he] did" (30) to an anti-communist intellectual leader of the Solidarity social movement, to a politician serving in the *Sejm* (the Polish lower house), and most recently to a journalist, editor of the popular newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. In each of these roles,

Michnik insists that he can be characterized as a Polish intellectual “who fights for freedom and is on the side of the weak” (304) throughout his entire life regardless of wherever he stood politically.

To follow this highly personalized account, it is important to keep in mind how Michnik applies the concept of democracy in Poland. His definition of democracy includes procedural as well as electoral democracy based on a civil society, which is in de Tocqueville’s sense or perhaps still closer to what Robert Dahl called a plural society. In Dahl’s plural society, a wide range of interest groups compete with each other. With respect to civil society, Michnik has attempted to educate ordinary Polish citizens in civic culture through his popular newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, as a way of achieving the ideal type of democratic plural society in Poland.

Moreover, although Michnik’s letters emphasize Polish problems, they also deal with broader East-Central European issues in the context of geopolitics necessitated in these lands between Russia and Germany. In addition, his interview with Václav Havel provides us insights on the democratization process of Czechoslovakia and political social issues after the velvet revolution. This interview gives readers an opportunity to compare Polish politics with Czechoslovak dynamics presented in a short, lucid form in Chapter 22 “The Strange Epoch of Post-Communism: A Conversation with Václav Havel” (224-259).

While his previous book, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (1986), in a sense, reflects his own political struggle for survival against the communist regime, this book maps out Michnik’s political and social identity in the context of democratic values in transitional societies. By identifying himself with Don Quixote, he explains the reason he felt compelled to behave like a lonely warrior against authoritarian people or regimes such as that of the former communist and now (“quasi”)-democratic people or governments. In doing so, he leads readers through the details of important political events in Polish history as he experienced them.

Michnik assigns a substantial portion of his book to the issues of anti-Semitism and the role of the Roman Catholic Church. Without any hesitation, Michnik introduces anti-Semitism issues to readers by revealing his Jewish background in several letters (e.g., Chapter 18, “Poland and Jews”). Readers are able to grasp why and how religion has fueled communal and ethnic conflicts in Poland and East-central Europe. According to Michnik, Jewish people have been political targets or scapegoats throughout human history. The fact that Michnik is a Polish Jew undoubtedly reinforces his political position against anti-Semitism in Polish intellectual society. Predictably, Michnik is against blurring the boundary between the state and the church. In other words, Michnik emphasizes that the religion cannot be politicized in a multiethnic, multicultural democratic society without violating the rights of religious minorities. Hence, he insists that, to achieve democracy, religious norms must

be differentiated from state norms.

What Samuel Huntington called the “third wave of democratization” reveals many political and social problems within newly democratized countries. Many such countries had long not been in a position to develop their own democratic experience. This lack of experience with indigenous democratic political culture has contributed to social disorder after sudden democratization. One of the most imperative and devious issues remains how to deal with the former communists or their crimes. In this regard, Michnik underscores the slogan of “Amnesty, yes; amnesia, no” (324). His conversation with Wojciech Jaruzelski, who declared the martial law in 1981 and banned the trade union movement Solidarity, is a good example of the author’s belief that forgiveness is needed to move forward on the road to democracy. (see Chapter 23, “We Can Talk without Hatred: A Conversation with Wojciech Jaruzelski”).

As a Polish intellectual, his endless search for political and social justice based on forgiveness rather than revenge is one of the main thesis of the book alongside the desire to cultivate Polish civil society discussed above. In the process of dealing with these issues, Michnik’s book provides us not only with a variety of the resourceful, detailed accounts of political history based on his own experience as an insider, but also with some intimate aspects of his love life and his philosophical habit of buying a lotto ticket every day. In other words, readers can easily view Michnik’s political maneuvering and the author’s individual human journey at the same time.

However, *Letters from Freedom* is not exempt from several criticisms. For example, notwithstanding the “Guide to Events and People” at the end of his book, it is not easy for those readers who do not have the basic background on Poland to comprehend some specific political and historical events. Since Michnik arranges his letters by the date he wrote them rather than with regard to the Polish events he chronicles, readers can easily get lost in the middle of each letter. Unfortunately, this problem is compounded by Ken Jowitt’s “Forward: In Praise of the ‘Ordinary,’” which cites several specific sentences from Michnik’s letters by referring to the chapter without noting page numbers.

More seriously, there is the curious omission of an interview chapter with former President Lech Walesa, the leader of the Solidarity social movement, who used be the author’s political friend and is now a political enemy. Since Walesa is as important a political figure for Michnik as Jaruzelski, one could expect a dialogue between Michnik and Walesa or at least an explanation or expression of regret by the author at not having been granted an interview if that was the case. Yet, there is no such a chapter. This raises the question as to why Michnik can talk with the former political enemy “without hatred, without hostility, and with mutual respect while remaining true to our own past” (285), but not with his former political friend with whom he went through political suffering and persecution during the most difficult times under Polish communist governments. Nor does Jowitt’s evaluation that “Michnik’s

genealogy of the 'real' Poland begins with KOR, the 'father,' followed by Solidarity, the 'son,' and their 'spirit,' *Gazeta*" (xiv) or Michnik's own contention that "we've remained convinced that Solidarity is our child, albeit an illegitimate one" (60) help clarifying the issue. It is obvious that the two quotations indicate the important implication of Walesa to Michnik. Seen in this light, Michnik's political ideology or philosophy of forgiveness and reconciliation does not appear different from that of those who advocate political lustration against the former communists and their allies for revenge as he believes.

Meanwhile, although Michnik's liberal and utopian view of Polish democracy, firmly based on the established rules of advanced democratic countries in the West, is expounded throughout the book, it is hard to envision how to implement his political agendas. Considering that Michnik's political tool is primarily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, his appeal may be not as effective with the ordinary Polish citizen who has gotten "used to the fact that above them loomed the all-powerful state that took care of everything and was responsible for everything [so that] they acquired a paternalistic attitude toward the state" (225) under communist regimes as he hopes. Moreover, since he does not distinguish functions of the established democratic rules and laws in advanced Western countries from those of newly, hastily written rules and laws in Poland, Michnik's "gray democracy" (326) sounds somewhat naïve. At a minimum, the return of the former communists and their allies to power in most general elections, and the relatively low voter turnout, indicates that Michnik's "gray democracy" could have a long way to go. In short, on the one hand, Michnik's political utopian worldview may not reflect the wants and needs of the ordinary Polish voters at this time. Or on the other hand, the Western-style political system of democracy which Michnik has in mind may not be the only or best choice for Polish society in the 21st century.

Still, by and large, readers will find more merits than demerits after reading this book. Michnik's letters contain both historical and politically rich primary resources in a readable form. In particular, I strongly recommend it to people who are seeking to understand how the role of intellectuals in the dynamic process of democratization in Poland and East-Central European countries has been influenced negatively by communist political socialization; and positively in regard to Solidarity's catalytic role in the Cold War period as well as in the post-Cold War era.

Seung-Whan Choi
University of Missouri-Columbia

¹ A "quasi"-democratic regime means one in which the former communists and their allies come back to power. Former communists regained political power through free elections, but whether they can represent the demand of the public is in doubt.