

Is Poland Unfit for Capitalism?

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Social change under Communism was different from that in both developed “core” countries (growth of the middle classes) and the less developed countries of the periphery (small middle class and large, marginalized lower class).

Poland, like most countries of the region, was predominantly peasant. As the blows of war shattered mostly the upper strata of society, the peasantry became increasingly important. Communist modernization and urbanization produced a specific “new middle class” strongly influenced by peasant cultural traditions. For a time, this segment of society proved very efficient in finding various ways to change the Communist system to its own advantage (construction of the so-called “parallel economy”).

However, whether the cultural traditions of Polish society make it well prepared for modern capitalism is questionable. There is, instead, a serious possibility for the kind of development characteristic of peripheral societies—economic stagnation, income differences, populism, and so forth. Therefore, instead of letting market forces alone effect the transition, the state should take a more active role—especially in creating the infrastructure of a modern market economy and investing in human capital.

Speaking about the Polish "shock therapy," a Western author has recently remarked that

[s]urely such an approach is doomed in a country which has not the market structures, the legal mechanisms, the economic institutions, nor the culture to support such radical changes. While giving lip service to capitalism and radical economic reform, the vast majority of the Polish people are hooked on socialism and are not likely to change anytime soon.

It is only a matter of time before the next political upheaval occurs in Poland in response to unfulfilled economic expectations. ¹

This view of an author, convinced that "Poland is the European equivalent of Argentina," is typical of the voices of uncertainty which have been recently raised with respect to what's going on in Poland. Briefly speaking, Polish society--or Central European societies in general--is considered unfit for capitalism and democracy. How much truth is in that assessment? The answer is not easy. To be more precise, we must talk not about the whole society, but about its various segments, as different groups have different interests and different visions of the world. We must, therefore, talk about the social structure. But do we know it? Moreover, can we foresee its evolution? An economic historian should perhaps leave the answer to this questions to the sociologists. If he can help in any way, it is by evoking the past evolution, the long-term

¹ Thomas H. Naylor, in review from The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe: Economics and Politics from the Middle Ages until the Early Twentieth Century, Daniel Chirot, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), in Contemporary Sociology, vol. 20, no. 1, January 1991, p. 31.

tendencies and the experience of others in order to shed some light on the future.

With what, however, to compare the Polish situation, and how far should we glance back into the past? We have to start with a preliminary diagnosis of the present. Where are we? Apparently, at the end of a certain social experiment, an experiment which is now considered by many a failure. It had two parallel aims: to build a society of a new type, classless and just; and at the same time to modernize societies which were backward and basically peasant. If we are to compare social change under Communism, we have to contrast it, on the one hand, with the "core" countries and, on the other hand, with those of the non-Communist periphery. Obviously, in a short paper, only a very sketchy attempt at such a comparison may be undertaken.²

Social change in the Center and in the Periphery

Let us start with an idealized model of social change in the core countries during the transition from agrarian to industrial and then to post-industrial society. Basic features of this process are given by any textbook of sociology: urbanization, demographic transition, movement of the working force from the

² I find a distinction between "core" and "periphery"--implying some sort of structural relation--more illuminating than a distinction between "development" and "backwardness." I am not full convinced, however, by arguments of dependency or world system theorists who stress the role of terms of trade or exploitation. That may often be the case; in many other cases, however, the peripheral regions are just excluded from a mainstream of development, while not being exploited.

first to the second and then to the third sector. Decrease in the significance of "status," increase in the significance of "class." Development of the mass society: on the one hand, alienation, on the other hand, mass democracy. New forms of social discipline, new perceptions of time, new legitimizations of the social order.

These changes were gradual and are difficult to pin down chronologically, but undoubtedly the very important period was the years 1870-1914. Although the inter-war period (Depression) probably slowed the pace of change, it later accelerated in the fifties and the sixties, with the "coming of post-industrial society." It was then that a generalization of a model of life of the "middle class" took place: relative affluence, relative safety (due to constant economic growth and to the welfare measures), a margin of personal freedom incomparable with anything in the past. I am leaving this description deliberately vague: I am concerned more with the myth of the middle class than the actual reality in the Western countries. It is probably this myth as much as the reality itself that made for the last fifty years of social stability in the Western World, and its attractiveness for other people.

The middle class was a main source of savings, indispensable for constant investment, and a main source of recruitment of highly skilled and ambitious people needed to run the immensely complicated social and technological systems. The hero of the last decades is not a member of a leisure class, but rather an

ambitious workaholic "symbolic analyst,"³ whose only pleasures in life are work and success. A modern, sophisticated education system is the main way of producing this kind of person.

This social order is based on a combination of innovation and continuity. Innovation, as Schumpeter demonstrated, is necessary to keep the system moving. There is, however, a basic continuity of market structures and legal institutions, of values and cultural patterns, of educational institutions, even of family traditions, which goes far, far back and which provides a solid base of support for modern capitalism.

The society is divided not so much into bourgeoisie and proletariat, as into lower middle, middle and upper middle classes on the one hand (with skilled blue collar workers part of the middle class), and an "underclass"--marginalized, excluded and redundant people--on the other. If there are sources of instability, they lie not--as Marx taught--within the exploited proletariat, but rather within this "underclass"--people who are undereducated, drop-outs, ethnics, migrants, and so forth. They are at the same time frustrated and angry at the system and ashamed that they can't make it. But the middle class plays a crucial role, its value systems and world view dominate, it is capable of neutralizing the tensions. So the system works--at least as long as economic growth continues.

³ The expression of Robert Reich, "Secession of the Successful," The New York Times Magazine, January 20, 1991.

Let us take a look now at the peripheral countries. Many of them also have undergone a transition from a basically agrarian to a semi-industrial stage. Their problem consists, however, in the fact that this transition was not a simple, albeit late, repetition of what happened in more advanced countries. Their modernization and industrialization have had a partial character: industry developed in some regions, while in others it did not develop, but rather stagnated or even regressed. These societies entered into the first stage of demographic transition, decrease of mortality, which caused a demographic explosion. Their urbanization has had a pathological character--the number of inhabitants of towns grew much faster than the number of jobs available, and the urban infrastructure has never been able to cope. Their social structure consists of a small upper class, small middle class and--if we keep the previous terminology--an enormous underclass of rural and urban poor, a source of constant social instability.

Members of these societies are under tremendous pressure of the demonstration effect: they watch TV and would like to have the same houses, cars, clothes and gadgets as the people in affluent countries.⁴ The sequence of modernization has been

⁴ For an interesting analysis of the role of the demonstration effect in consumption, but also in politics, see Andrew Janos, Politics and Paradigms. Changing Theories of Change in Social Sciences (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 84-95.

reversed in these countries--it started with consumption, not with production.⁵

Many of these societies acquired traits of the mass society, together with formal democratic institutions (elections and media), which allow the people to express their feeling and discontent. As they lack the economic and social basis of stability, they are prone to cycles of populism and authoritarianism.

Having these imprecise models in mind, we may take a closer look at the Polish experience.

Ambiguous Heritage

There is an obvious discontinuity in Polish social and economic history, especially if one looks at the beginning of the Communist phase of her past. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to look back at her social history in order to see what kind of a heritage--or maybe "an unbearable burden" of history, as Jerzy Jedlicki has put it recently⁶--this society is bringing into the future.

Polish social history gives, to say the least, an ambiguous message. At the end of the eighteenth century (beginning of the industrial revolution in England!) definitely backward in every sense--economic, social, political. In the thirties of the

⁵ Observation of Ignacy Sachs, personal conversation.

⁶ Jerzy Jedlicki, "The Revolution of 1989: The Unbearable Burden of History," Problems of Communism, vol. 29, no 4, July-August 1990.

present century, on the eve of the Second World War and Communism, once again backward--per capita income one-third that of France or Germany, sixty percent of her people in the countryside, between two and four million hidden unemployed in agriculture, one-third of the population unable to read or write, deep national conflicts, authoritarian regime and an apparent inability to defend herself against her neighbors.

But... In the second half of the nineteenth century the Polish Kingdom was the most industrialized part of the Russian Empire (overtaken only in the nineties, during the "great spurt" of Russian industrialization). Modern corporations came into being here in a surprisingly short span of time, and there were evident successes in privatization of state industrial enterprises.⁷ Silesia became one of the most industrialized parts of Germany (true, Silesia had not been part of Poland since the fourteenth century, but part of it was incorporated into Poland after the First, and the rest after the Second World War). Agriculture in Great Poland in many respects was as efficient as agriculture in many parts of continental Western Europe.

Much of that progress was destroyed during the First World War. Nevertheless, despite the war with Soviet Russia, post-war reconstruction (or rather construction), inflation in the twenties and Depression in the thirties, there were some bright

⁷ Cf. "Trzeci raz w prywatne ręce. Rozmowa z prof. Andrzejem Jezierskim z Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, historykiem gospodarczym" [For the third time into the private hands. A talk with professor Andrzej Jezierski, an economic historian from the Warsaw University], Życie Warszawy, October 29, 1990.

moments in industrial and urban development. Although many today do not like to admit it, these successes were due to statist policies.⁸ Gdynia and C.O.P. (Central Industrial Region) can not be dismissed out of hand, nor the growing strata of modern technicians and managers in both the state and the private sector. The private sector, although far from the strength of its Western counterparts, by no means was restricted to petty business. On the contrary, "Lewiatan"--the association of Polish industrialists--included representatives of really big businesses. Parallel to that, the Polish Socialist Party (P.P.S.) represented a modern, mass social-democratic movement; the Polish welfare system and labor protection were probably as well developed as those in Western Europe; and--to give a small example--socialist-sponsored housing projects in Warsaw look modern even today.

If we say that the message of Polish social history is ambiguous, it is because we are presented with evidence of backwardness and development at the same time, the evidence of peripheral modernization. There is no way to say what would have happened if... if there were no Depression, or no war, or no Soviet Communism. We can't say what kind of forces would have proved stronger--gravitational, pulling Poland towards the more

⁸ Jan Kofman, in a recently published book, Nacjonalizm ekonomiczny [Economic Nationalism] (Warsaw: Warsaw University, 1990), after considering arguments for and against, gives a qualified, but positive evaluation of protective and statist policies in the countries of Central Eastern Europe in the inter-war period.

developed center, or centrifugal, pushing it towards the periphery. I am not an optimist by nature, far less an enthusiast of pre-war Poland. I would only like to remind the reader that the two forces were present, and not only one.

Shattered Structures and Stalinist Modernization

But, as we know, Polish history is that of discontinuity. Its economic "base" and its social structures were shattered by the Second World War and its consequences. The sheer numerical population loss was over 20 percent, but the loss was not distributed evenly. Whole segments of society--especially the Jews--were eliminated. (Although culturally isolated from the rest of the society, they were before the war an important element of the lower middle class.) The Polish bourgeoisie was either physically liquidated by the Nazis and by the Soviets, or at least pauperized. Members of the intelligentsia, of government, of administrative and officer corps were systematically persecuted both by the Nazis and by the Soviets during 1939-41 and after 1944. The landed classes were evicted from their estates both in the territories taken by the Soviet Union and in those incorporated by the Reich; those who retained their land in the Generalgouvernement had it taken away, together with country homes and personal possessions, in the Communist land reform of 1944. Frontiers were moved 300 kilometers to the west and millions of people resettled. The decks were cleared

for the Communists to seize power under the protection of the Soviet army, and then for Stalinism.

Stalinism was a system of totalitarian government and social organization in post-peasant, quickly industrializing societies. Communist parties in power, as we noted at the beginning, proclaimed two parallel goals: to build a new type of just, classless society, and a fast modernization, which was to surpass the highly developed Western capitalist societies both as far as technology and consumption standards were concerned.

The goal of creating a new society was attempted by a very systematic destruction of what was left of the former social structures.⁹ Bourgeoisie and landed classes having been eliminated already, the "battle for commerce" (1947) hit the non-Jewish lower middle class by the liquidation of private wholesale commerce and most private retail trade. Workers, or "working masses" were put--in theory--atop the social structure in the emerging "peoples' democracies." This meant that the rights of all citizens were not equal now; children of the former upper classes were barred partially or totally from university education, and each person's "social origin" was taken under scrutiny when job application was considered.

Blows at the social structure were accompanied by attempts at a total remodeling of the national culture. School and

⁹ Apparently, Stalinism was less harsh in Poland than in other central European countries, in Czechoslovakia and Hungary in particular. One might argue that it was so because war shattered social structures much more in the Polish case.

university syllabuses--especially those of the humanities--were profoundly changed: history started to be taught according to the idea of class struggle as an engine of history; former national heroes (now called servants of the oppressing classes) were replaced with leaders of true or alleged peasant uprisings and workers' strikes. Religious life was suppressed, and the Church held up as a prime example of a reactionary institution.

Destroying the Old Order (or what was left of it after the War), Communists put forward ideas of the new one, which was to be not only "just and classless," but also modern. It was this modernizing appeal rather than the Communist utopia that at last partially legitimized Communist parties in the eyes of substantial segments of society. Soviet-style industrialization and urbanization moved vast masses of people geographically from villages into towns, and socially upward. Although they lived in appalling conditions in those towns, their life in villages left behind had been even more miserable. They were promised a better life in the future and for the time being this promise worked, while the best and the brightest climbed up the bureaucratic ladder.

Like most of the countries of the region, Poland was predominantly peasant. As the blows of war shattered mostly the upper strata of society, the relative importance of the peasantry increased. There was a paradox in the Communist rule: while it was definitely anti-peasant in a sense that it aimed at destroying the independence of peasant farming, peasants were in

some sense also the winners and even supporters of the system. A substantial part of peasant society--the rural poor--was to gain from the land reform. What was even more important, however, was the opening of possibilities for social promotion due to urbanization, industrialization and bureaucratization.

If we think in terms of the models of change sketched at the beginning, we may see that the Communist proposal--modernization for the vast masses--might seem much more attractive than the type of peripheral development that people knew from before the war. They might have disliked the anti-religious and pro-Soviet character of Communism, but work in town, electric light and running water, and a chance of office jobs for children appealed to them.

To what degree the Communist proposal of modernization was actually realized is another question. Undoubtedly, something else was achieved--a Communist version of an urban, mass society. The gradual rise of first consumer and then of political aspirations was perhaps an inevitable result of this social transformation.

Post-Peasant Society

Stalinism did not last very long in Poland. The year 1956 is the symbolic date of its end. In a matter of months, mass terror ended, ideological controls were relaxed, and measures were taken to increase the standard of living. Despite the dramatics of 1956, however, the process of social change started by Communism

was continuous. There were two basic interrelated causes of its dynamic. Both had their roots in the Stalinist modernization, both operated even more forcefully later.

First was a gradual disintegration of the command economy; second were changes in the social structure. I do not want to enter into a more detailed analysis of the disintegration of command economy, as I have done so in another place.¹⁰ It might be said that it could function in a way which was satisfactory for the ruling bureaucracy only as long as the resources (labor, energy, etc.) were cheap, as long as technologies were simple, as long as society was isolated from the West and kept under police control, and--last but not least--as long as it at least partially accepted the official legitimization of the system. When these conditions disappeared, the economy entered into the phase of "diminishing returns," or long-time crisis. Foreign credits prolonged its life, but since the late seventies the economic downturn was more than evident. Consumer aspirations, a product of modernization, were more and more difficult to meet.

The second factor of the social dynamic was changes in the social structure: urbanization, demographic change, education and the crystallization of new segments of society.

¹⁰ Jacek Kochanowicz, "Economic System of Communist Poland: The Origins and Disintegration of Command Economy," draft version of a chapter for Poland in the 1990s, Kaz Poznanski ed. (Westview Press, in preparation).

Before the war, two-thirds of Polish society lived in the countryside, in the sixties it was only one-third. During the years 1946-1960, 2.5 m. migrated from the countryside into the cities.¹¹ Not only was there a sucking force of industrialization, but towns in pre-war Polish territories were depopulated by the war, while those of the Western portion, belonging before the war to the German Reich, were emptied due to outflow during the Russian offensive and after the Potsdam agreements. Even when the saturation point was reached, there was no problem with employment for the migrants--on the contrary, it was lack of proper accommodations and lack of urban infrastructure which made this exodus from the villages weaker than it otherwise could have been. (The result was the emergence of the strata of peasant-workers.) Despite housing problems, conditions of life and incomes were generally much better in towns than in the countryside, the more so since mostly people from the poorer rural strata migrated.

Polish demography presents another aspect of change. Post-war Poland was a country of fast population growth, characteristic of early phases of demographic transition, undoubtedly reinforced by the post-war compensation. This demographic process took place in conditions of migrations from

¹¹ Mira Marody, "Jednostka w systemie realnego socjalizmu" [Human Individual in a System of Real Socialism], in Co nam zostało z tych lat... Społeczeństwo polskie u progu zmiany systemowej [What Those Years Left to Us... Polish Society at the Threshold of Systemic Changes], Mira Marody, ed. (London: Aneks, 1991) p.230.

the overpopulated countryside to underpopulated cities. Polish cities had taken--socially and culturally--a "peasant" character.¹² As was brilliantly shown by Kazimierz Piesowicz, patterns of demographic reproduction characteristic of rural society were thus transferred to the cities.¹³ These for a time being were dominated by first-generation city dwellers and their children. The Polish working class, as well as the new ruling bureaucracy and the "new intelligentsia," have a definitely rural background. At the same time, the Polish population--due to traditional patterns of reproduction--was, and is, generally young. In 1980, 50 percent of the population was under thirty¹⁴--a fact worth remembering when trying to explain "the Polish revolution."¹⁵

The new urban population received a relatively good education, the expansion of schooling being one of the few real achievements of Stalinist and early post-Stalinist period.

¹² Cf. J. Wasilewski, "Społeczeństwo polskie--społeczeństwo chłopskie" [Polish society--peasant society], Studia Socjologiczne 1986, no. 3.

¹³ Kazimierz Piesowicz, "Les facteurs sociaux dans l'évolution démographique de la Pologne dans les années 1945-1970," Acta Poloniae Historica, vol. 31. See also a full account of his research into the changes of the social and demographic structure of the Polish population during the years 1939-1949, published posthumously in Studia Demograficzne.

¹⁴ 50.8 percent between 0-29 in 1980, 21.8 percent between 18-29. Rocznik Statystyczny 1989 (Warsaw: GUS, 1989) p. 44.

¹⁵ The expression of Timothy Garton Ash. See interesting remarks on the usage of the word of "revolution," Tadeusz Lepkowski, "O problemie rewolucji w Polsce w latach 1944-1989" [On the Problem of Revolution in Poland in the years 1944-1989], Magazyn Historyczny Mówia Wieki, 1990, no 7.

Formal education--especially on the university level--was regarded as a symbol of success and social promotion. TV was introduced into Poland at the end of the fifties, which was another step towards rising cultural standards.

The crystallization of the new segments of society is a difficult question to address. As the issue was heavily politicized, social structure started to be studied by Polish sociologists only in the sixties. The studies of that period tried to combine the official Marxism with the demands of empirical sociology. The vision proposed was that of a society divided into non-antagonistic classes, or strata of workers, peasants and intelligentsia.¹⁶ The division between "workers" and "intellectuals" played, in fact, its role in the crises of 1968 and 1970, when each time one of these groups acted, while the other stayed indifferent. In 1980, on the contrary--and before that, in the K.O.R. (Committee for the Defense of Workers) movement--the effort was undertaken to bridge the cultural gap between these two groups. It seems, however, that--as a keen Western observer has noticed recently--

essential class differences between workers and intellectuals remained, and, if anything, they have become exacerbated over the last several years [...] intellectuals in general--able as they are to draw on a range of technocratic skills, linguistic aptitudes, and far-flung worldly contacts--do seem to stand a considerably better chance of navigating the tricky rapids involved in the coming transition to a free

¹⁶ A good example seems to be the work of Włodzimierz Wesołowski--see his Klasy, warstwy i władza [Classes, Strata and Power] (Warsaw: PWN, 1966).

market than do their worker counterparts on those outmoded assembly plants.¹⁷

The parallel vision, developed by opposition writers since the mid-sixties (and inspired either by neo-Marxist, or by liberal theories), stressed rather the basic opposition of interests of the ruling bureaucracy and the workers or society in general.¹⁸ The latter vision had an enormous importance during the period of formation of open opposition (late seventies), during the sixteen months of Solidarity, and in the eighties. It obviously tended to underestimate, however, the degree to which the Communist system permeated the life of everybody. As one of the leading Polish sociologists sees it,

the system of the real socialism [...] forms a part of each of us as unconscious cognitive and motivational schemes, as "interiorized" expectations and modes of reactions to social reality, as claims, treated as obvious, and directed towards state institutions and authorities.¹⁹

The "opposition" vision of social structure also tended to underestimate the extent to which the ruling bureaucracy was a product of actual Polish society.

¹⁷ Lawrence Weschler, "Shock," The New Yorker, December 1990, p. 121.

¹⁸ I have in mind Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, Leszek Nowak, Jan Drewnowski, Maria Hirszowicz.

¹⁹ Mira Marody, "System realnego socjalizmu w jednostkach ludzkich" [System of Real Socialism in Human Individuals], in: Marody, ed., p. 267. She gives an ample empirical basis to her claim that the support, given by the public to "socialism" even in the second half of the 1980s, was related to basic acceptance of the Communist welfare state (cf. p. 255).

The works of Jadwiga Staniszkis, looking at Communist society through the categories of the sociology of organization and taking into consideration ideological power and ideological techniques of conflict-solving, stand in their own category.²⁰ As far as I can grasp her approach, she would refuse to agree to an idea of an "objective" social structure, but would instead try to show social dynamics in terms of a process of constant ideological re-definition and re-articulation. Still, stressing (in her account of the dynamics of "Solidarity") the "semantic incompetence" of workers, she seems to consider the division between "workers" and "intellectuals," or intelligentsia, as the main cultural dividing line of Polish society.

Finally, recently some observers--I have in mind especially Jacek Kurczewski or Andrzej Jeziarski--have formulated yet another vision of the social structure, putting at the center of the picture a specific, Communist middle class.²¹ It comprises

²⁰ Jadwiga Staniszkis, Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Staniszkis, Ontologia socjalizmu [Ontology of Socialism] (Warsaw: Krytyka 1989).

²¹ Here I follow and develop ideas of Andrzej Jeziarski presented in (an as yet unpublished) paper for the Congress of Polish Historians, Łódź 1989. In earlier publications, he gave the following shares of "income groups" in Polish society, in 1984:

-higher	9.6%
-middle	45.6%
-lower	40.9%
-lowest	3.9%

(Jeziarski and Barbara Petz, Historia gospodarcza Polski Ludowej 1944-1985 [Economic History of Peoples' Poland 1944-1985] (Warsaw: PWN, 1988), p. 438; see also Jeziarski, "The Structure of Society," Polish Perspectives, vol. 30, 1987. Obviously, income is only one of dimensions of status, and I give these

highly skilled white-collar and blue-collar workers, school teachers, university professors, administrative officials, factory managers, doctors, lawyers, market-oriented, and efficient peasant farmers, small private businessmen, etc. If there were something common within this category, it was that these people have acquired a relatively high level of education, or vocational skills in the case of blue-collar workers. In contrast to the pre-war type, classical intelligentsia, this education was acquired not due to family cultural traditions, but due to the expanded system of state-organized secondary and vocational schools and colleges. People belonging to this new middle class, we may say, have been socially similar. They have had similar incomes, similar conditions of life, similar ambitions. Therefore, authors of this last approach--although they did not elaborate on the ideological, cognitive and mental aspects of this model--seem to consider that the main dividing lines of Polish society cut across, and not along, the three main socio-professional groups--white collar workers, blue collar workers and farmers.

This new middle class emerged in the course of the Communist industrialization and urbanization. A great majority of its members came from the countryside or small towns and had a strong peasant cultural background. Many still today retain strong ties with parts of their families still in the countryside--a fact of economic importance in times of economic

figures for an orientation only.

difficulties. For many, especially those holding executive positions or active in intellectual life, membership in the Communist party was a necessary condition of promotion and personal success. Their value systems, however, had nothing to do with the Communist ideology. Their loyalties were mainly to their families--a heritage of peasant society.²² Their main goal was a personal success usually measured in material terms. The style of life, or rather a style of consumption which they wanted to imitate (consciously or unconsciously), was that of the Western middle classes. Coming mostly from lower segments of a deeply Catholic society, they did not renounce their faith, but often had to hide it. It was an additional reason for their frustration with the Communist ideology to which officially they had to adhere.

The middle-level Party apparatchiks were not different from the whole of this group. In contrast to people who joined the Party earlier (before, during or just after the War, when it was dangerous and required a strong ideological commitment), many--if

²² Cf. Elżbieta Tarkowska, Jacek Tarkowski, "Czy Polacy są 'amoralnymi familistami'?" [Are Poles 'amoral familist'?), unpublished manuscript, quoted after Marody. This is an attempt to interpret patterns of behavior in Poland in the light of the Edward Banfield hypothesis that says--in the lack of associations--people would act according to the rule: "Maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family, assume that all others will do likewise." Banfield, The Moral Basis of a Backward Society (London: Macmillan, 1958). Agreeing with this model, I would argue, however, that in both peasant societies and in Poland the horizon was not that short and that the reference group might be somewhat wider than the nuclear family. Cf. Kochanowicz, Spór o teorię gospodarki chłopskiej [A Controversy over a Theory of Peasant Economy] (Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, in print).

not most--of those who joined later did it out of opportunistic motivations, treating the Party as a sort of a ladder, necessary to climb in pursuit of personal success. Work in the Party apparatus was like any other job, and a Party bureaucrat of the sixties, and the seventies, working "from nine to five" and thinking about a better car and about how to arrange for apartments for his children, had very little in common with a devoted fanatic of pre-war times. The events of March 1968, with its anti-intellectualism and anti-Semitism, can be interpreted as a sort of "cultural revolution" of this "post-peasant" part of the apparatus (consisting mostly of people in their thirties and forties) against, on the one hand, its other segments (pre-war Communists of often intellectual and/or Jewish background), and on the other, against cultural domination of remnants of the pre-war intelligentsia.²³

Paradoxically, the Solidarity of 1980 was also, to a large degree, a movement of this new middle class. When the possibilities of advancement through existing channels were felt to be blocked--the social structure began to close in the second half of the sixties; it opened up in the first half of the seventies, to close once again in the middle of this decade--when the young generation could not see the future for themselves and while the "Old Order" did not allow for the articulation of social, political and ideological aspirations, the ground for the

²³ I owe this observation to Professor Marcin Kula, with whom we discussed this subject many times.

revolution was prepared. Both in the 1980-81 period of open activity of the Union, and once again after 1989, anti-intellectual and anti-Semitic tendencies have been visible--very much alike to the phenomena observed within the Communist party at the end of the sixties, and probably for of the same socio-cultural reasons.

The Minor Apocalypse

Changes in the social structure were reflected--or rather accompanied, because it is difficult to sort out the causal relations--by changes in culture and ideology. The real--if unspoken--ideology of the Post-Stalinist system was that of a realpolitik, legitimized by the supposedly eternal long shadow of the Soviet Union.

The official "vision of a good life" became much more individualistic, or rather family-oriented, then under Stalinism, and much more consumption-oriented. The propaganda did not speak now about a radiant future under Communism, but promised an acceptable standard of living for the present generation. This vision--reflected in many pseudo-scientific discussions about "the socialist model of consumption"-- comprised now not only a subsidized apartment, but also a locally produced car, and even a "dacha" for those lucky enough, an availability of locally produced household appliances (color TV and washing machine being on the top of the list), and from time to time a cheap vacation on the Black Sea coast. Prices for food and cultural goods were

still supposed to be subsidized and stable, education and health care free, and employment full. For the Communist middle class, that was the world of their aspirations and those were the measures of personal success. One does not need to elaborate about the tension between this vision and the hard facts of a sagging economy.

This idea of a good life was definitely family orientated, but did not eliminate egalitarian and collectivist traditions from Communist society. There were limits to how much personal wealth was socially acceptable. A modest dacha--yes, but not a country manor and, obviously, no capital assets. Money counted in the pursuit of those goods, but social and political position were more important. Consumer possibilities were rewards for conforming to the rules of the game rather than things one could simply buy for money. The system--called in the Hungarian case "a goulash socialism"--may as well be called a "bureaucratic paternalism."

It was a world of--as Staniszkis put it--a "detotalization from above," with the ruling bureaucracy trying to solve subsequent crises through various institutional, and--what is even more important--ideological shifts, resulting in a change from a totalitarian to a corporatist, authoritarian system with a consumer ideology.²⁴

People were left alone in their private lives, creating a social vacuum between, on the one hand--a family, and on the

²⁴ Staniszkis, Poland's Revolution, ch. 4.

other, a nation.²⁵ The importance of family in social life was a product of the Communist system, but it might be argued that it was also a result of strong, peasant, Catholic tradition. Perhaps an economic historian is not entitled to make too categorical statements on the subject of cultural transmission, but it is hard to resist a feeling that it must have played its role in shaping peoples' economic behavior in the case of the new urban population and the "new middle class."²⁶ This family centrism had a very strong material component. In the general context of an economy of shortages, the desire to possess things material and to show them to others seemed even more important than in the supposedly materialist culture of Western capitalism.

Combined with an unclear, elastic legal system, with a lack of respect for the state, and with the near impossibility of strictly capitalist activity, this materialistic orientation led towards the widespread development of a "parallel economy"²⁷

²⁵ Cf. esp. studies conducted in the seventies, excellently summarized by Stefan Nowak, "Systemy wartości społeczeństwa polskiego" [Systems of values of Polish society], Studia Socjologiczne 1979, no 4.

²⁶ It was brilliantly shown by Ivan Szelenyi to what an extent a different type of cultural heritage--that of pre-Communist entrepreneurship--helped some Hungarian peasants to turn once again, when opportunities arose, into entrepreneurs. Szelenyi, Socialist Entrepreneurs. Embourgeoisement in Rural Hungary (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). Studies on the role of ethnicity in the United States give, obviously, an abundance of material on the subject of cultural transmission.

²⁷ Once again, it is striking to what extent one can see a similarity, and perhaps a continuation of parallel economy across time. See my example for the 18th century--Kochanowicz, "Between Submission and Violence: Peasant Resistance in the Polish

and towards a profound corruption, visible especially on the borders of the state and private sector. The presence of a parallel economy and economic behavior bordering criminality was morally rationalized by the claim that bureaucratic restrictions and shortages made it impossible to arrange legally not only for higher incomes, but even for simple items of everyday life. Thus post-peasant tradition, operating within the Communist system, gave rise to a new kind of a "moral economy"--or perhaps to a rebirth of an old one, legitimizing ways of obtaining a socially approved level of living.²⁸ "Socialist ownership of the means of production" led to treating things public as belonging to nobody. The system of guaranteed, but very low pay led to an attitude summarized by saying "they pretend that they pay us, we pretend that we work," and to a conviction that in such a situation one is allowed to care for oneself in one's own way.

The ruling bureaucracy came to terms with reality--the reality that people do not care very much about the official Marxist-Leninist ideology. As a matter of fact, the bureaucracy--subject, in Staniszkis' words, to a "schizoid uncertainty about

Manorial Economy of the Eighteenth Century," in: Forrest D. Colburn, ed., Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989), and another example for Hungary in the forties and fifties of this century--Ivan Rév, "The Advantages of Atomization. How Hungarian Peasants Coped with Collectivization," Dissent, Summer 1987.

²⁸ I am referring, of course, to the concept of moral economy as developed by E.P.Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 72, cf. also James C. Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

the status of events"²⁹--did not care about it as well. Officially, however, the ideology was not renounced, although it was less and less spoken about. The consequence was an enormous hiatus between private thinking and official language and an acceptance of double thinking and double morality, so well described--in a Soviet case--by Alexander Zinoviev in The Radiant Future.³⁰ This had poisonous effects, especially on the younger generation, taught from the very beginning that different language is used at school and in the home, as was excellently shown by Tomasz Zygadło in a documentary about primary school pupils, made in the seventies. Those eight- or ten-year-olds seemed to understand perfectly well why the teacher was telling lies about the workers' riots in 1970, and why there was nothing wrong in saying different things in public and in private.

Many artists tried, in fact, to show this moral degradation, as was done by the so-called "cinema of moral uneasiness" or in the fiction of Marek Nowakowski. In Wesele raz jeszcze [A wedding Party once again],³¹ party guests, symbolizing all possible social roles (a priest, a militiaman, a university professor, an owner of a private shop, a boss of a local

²⁹ Staniszkis, Poland's Revolution, p. 244.

³⁰ See also Staniszkis' remarks about intelligentsia "ironic speech" and its socio-psychological effects of regression. Poland's Revolution, pp. 128-9.

³¹ The title and content are an allusion to the most famous Polish early twentieth drama Wesele [A Wedding Party] by Stanislaw Wyspiański, and to a Maria Dąbrowska short story published in the fifties, Na wsi wesele [A Wedding Party in a Village], which also alluded to Wyspiański.

cooperative, a wealthy farmer, etc.), drink vodka and talk about their shady dealings and small material successes. Their social cohesion and solidarity is that of a gang of thieves. Mała Apokalipsa [A Minor Apocalypse], a sad, ironic and surrealist novel by Tadeusz Konwicki, paints perhaps the most vivid picture of the total material and moral decay of Poland at the end of Communism. Sociological research, done in the eighties--during the so-called "decade of the crisis"--shows the same phenomena in a more scholarly language, speaking of "normative un-reality" and generalized "feeling of a lack of sense" of surrounding reality.³²

There is no place here to analyze the causes or mechanism of the Polish revolution--the nine years since the August 1980 strikes to the August 1989 creation of the non-Communist government. There is one point, however, worth making: the long-time process of economic, social and moral disintegration of the Communist system led to a gradual loss of whatever legitimacy it ever had, the martial law giving only a final blow. Subsequent years brought about not only a decrease in the standard of living, but also the widespread belief that the crisis would last long, perhaps a generation, the pervasive pessimism and the belief that Poland would become more and more like a Third World

³² See an excellent synthesis by Mira Marody, "Jednostka w systemie realnego socjalizmu" [Human Individual in the System of Real Socialism], in: Marody, ed., p. 247ff.

country. These feelings were especially common among the better educated groups.³³

Apparently the crisis of legitimacy was felt not only by the wider public, but also by the very segment of society which constituted the power core. The Polish nomenklatura has had enormous difficulty, since 1980 at least, and during martial law and after, in explaining not only to society, but to themselves as well, the reasons for them to maintain power. It is worthwhile to notice that most of the propaganda of the eighties was phrased in the discourse of reform, repeating in fact much of the rhetoric of the other side--hardly a language in defense of even the post-Stalinist version of Communism. The martial law was relatively mild, and then the Communists renounced power with practically no resistance. In my view that is explicable by the nomenklatura's resignation to the fact that the system was doomed anyway. And that explains the personal strategies of nomenklatura members, preparing themselves fall-back positions in the emerging private sector.

³³ These are the results of research on the attitudes of Polish society, conducted in the '80s. Stefan Nowak, Polish Society in the Second Half of the 1980s: An Attempt to Diagnose the State of Public Consciousness, IREX Occasional Papers, International Research & Exchange Board, 1986, pp. 10-11.

The Landscape after the Battle³⁴

What kind of economic and social system is going to emerge after the fall of Communist rule is far from clear. The neo-Smithian optimists apparently count on a natural, automatic development of Western-type capitalism. One can have certain reservations as to the likelihood of such a scenario. Western capitalism was built upon centuries of specific cultural traditions, upon particular systems of values and of social discipline. There was--as the proponents of an "European miracle" interpretation notice--nothing inevitable in the rise of capitalism (or modernity) in Western Europe, as it was rather a result of a particular coincidence of ecological, economic, social and political circumstances. Other, more ancient and highly sophisticated civilizations did not develop capitalism.³⁵ In Asian countries, where it succeeded during the last two or three decades, it was the state, which deliberately introduced missing institutional preconditions of capitalism and promoted export-oriented development.³⁶

³⁴ I have borrowed the title of this section from an Andrzej Wajda movie depicting Polish post-World War Two Displaced Persons trying to piece together their shattered lives.

³⁵ See for example E.L. Jones, The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Similar argument is made, on the base of a very rich material, by Fernand Braudel, Civilisation materielle, économie et capitalisme (Paris: Armand Colin, 1979), vol. 3.

³⁶ See in particular Chalmers Johnson, MITI and the Japanese Miracle. The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925-1975 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982); Alice H. Amsden, "The State and Taiwan's Economic Development", in: Bringing the State Back In,

At present, the economic system of Poland lacks internal logic. The so-called "regulatory sphere" of the economy is inconsistent: command measures and planning do not function any more, while the market is only rudimentary and practically restricted to commodities. The private sector seems to concentrate mostly on primitive commerce, his representatives looking rather like the "peddler capitalists" of Third World countries than "symbolic analysts" of the First World. There are still few medium-size manufacturing companies, and one doubts their technological possibilities and world market competitiveness. The whole process of transformation still hangs in the air, since there is no legal, banking and technical infrastructure of modern capitalism, neither is there enough capital and managerial expertise. It seems, although this is much more difficult to pin down and the opinions may differ, that Polish society--granting its history, outlined above--lacks this type of social discipline and work ethic that helped to build capitalism in Western Europe, in North America or in Asia.

It is up to the sociologists to say more about the changes of the social structure under the impact of the previous order's disintegration, the "shock therapy" and the longer-term process of transition to market and capitalism. A historian, as I have already said, may only put forward some hints and some questions,

Peter B. Evans et al., ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alice H. Amsden, Asia's Next Giant. South Korea and Late Industrialization (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

based on his knowledge of past experience or the experience of others. So, referring to the sketchy models from the beginning of this essay and keeping in mind the nature of the "post-Communist" social structure, what kind of prospects should we foresee--a move towards the "core" model or a move towards the "periphery"?

What we see is a creation--out of the ranks of the former "upper class" (top ranking nomenklatura, a few really big businessmen, probably some artists of world reputation, and so forth) and out of the Communist middle class--of a new bourgeoisie. There is very little research on the rising Polish entrepreneurial class. It seems, however, that those fortunes and types of entrepreneurial activities which--on a Polish scale--might really be considered as serious, took decades to develop and often were built upon more than one generation of entrepreneurial and managerial experience.³⁷ It is here that the first important question arises: how can it substitute for the lack of expertise, which--in other countries--was built upon generations of family business tradition, years of grooming and practice? Will this new bourgeoisie be able to produce in large numbers truly innovative, Schumpeterian entrepreneurs who will be capable of pushing the economy forward? For if there is no growth, the rest of the transition really does not matter. A market economy, we have to remember, is only a necessary, but not

³⁷ See a journalistic survey done by Danuta Zagrodzka, published in Gazeta Wyborcza (I am relying on a reprint in Nowy Dziennik, January 4, 1991).

a sufficient condition for success. It provides the rules of a game--an international game, by the way--in which there are more losers than winners, the more so if we think in terms of countries, and not just individual businessmen.

The post-Communist middle class--what will happen to it? Will it be capable of reproducing, on a mass scale, its cultural and educational standards under conditions of a deteriorating system of public support for culture and education? If we want to privatize state industries and to introduce a stock market, will these people be capable of investing their savings in a sound way having had no experience with a capital market whatsoever? (Recent experiences of Stockbridge Funding in New York City and of the Mr. Lech Grobelny affair in Warsaw are not very encouraging).³⁸ How many members of this group will be able to change into successful businessmen? Perhaps we would be advised to keep in mind a recent remark of Dariusz Rosati that

the assumption that there is the baton of an entrepreneur in each Pole knapsack [...] is a manifestation of a market romanticism, the unprecedented blossoming of which [...] is a sociological phenomenon of its own.³⁹

³⁸ Stockbridge was a mortgage banking corporation which persuaded many Polish immigrants to put all their savings there, and later collapsed because, apparently, it was using new deposits to repay the interest on old ones. (The New York Times, January 29, 1991). Mr. Grobelny, an owner of a network of change offices in Warsaw, did a similar thing that also led to the ruin of many small investors who were not taught that they should spread their risks.

³⁹ In an article in Zarządzenie, quoted by Nowy Dziennik, February 13, 1991.

Will this group produce honest and competent civil servants, capable of developing the much needed infrastructure of a market economy? To organize an educational system, without which we can forget a dream about a modern economy? Will this group furnish daring and innovative managers of the state enterprises, which are likely to stay with us longer than the enthusiasts of privatization want to admit?

Finally, if we look at the lower parts of the social pyramid, we can easily see unskilled and semiskilled workers, poor peasants, under-educated boys and girls from the countryside, from provincial towns or from working class neighborhoods of the cities. Their life under Communism was relatively safe, if not particularly happy. What will happen to them? Will they be able to compete for their place in the world? Will they see chances for themselves? Shall there be enough training programs, or enough welfare measures to keep them from utter desperation? Won't they turn into a sort of Third World underclass, ready for populist demagogues?

In posing these problems in such a rhetorical way, I might sound as a total pessimist, claiming that we are already on a slippery slope. This is not the case. While not an easy optimist, I am not a fatalist either. We have examples of countries which successfully escaped from the periphery: in Europe, Austria, Finland or Spain, in Asia, Korea or Taiwan. Surely, none of these teach an easy lesson to follow and obviously there are more cases of those who tried and failed. I

have also pointed out that we have--in our own Polish history-- experiences of partial successes in modernization in the conditions of backwardness, although, due to the unfortunate discontinuity of our history, we cannot rely on this tradition directly. In putting the problems in the above fashion, therefore, I did not want to sound pessimistic. I rather wanted to speak about dangers in order to prepare ourselves to reduce them. I do not think that Poland is unfit for capitalism. I rather think that it will not come automatically, and if it would, it could bring dangers of peripheral type of development-- or even a peripheral stagnation. To ward that off, we can not rely on easy prescriptions and automatic solutions. Intellectual and political effort is needed in order to introduce those preconditions of market economy and capitalism which are in short supply--social discipline, work ethic, managerial and entrepreneurial skills and so forth. Perhaps that part of this task will have to be undertaken--in a democratic way by the state--not an easy task in a country where the state was never particularly admired and where it compromised itself totally during the last forty years.

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