Polish sociology after twenty-five years of post-communist transformation[1]

An assessment of achievements and overview of prospects

Starting in the late 1980s, systemic change in the post-communist part of Europe triggered a long-term, complex process of transformation which provided a framework for all political, economic, social and cultural pheno-mena in the region. Since the effects of this deep structural change have had an impact on the life of every single inhabitant of Poland, it has long been an important point of interest among politicians, commentators and ordinary members of the public. Indeed, the problems of transformation, its principal direction, assessment of gains and losses, as well as factors accelerating or inhibiting the process are among the key topics of public discourse in the country. Systemic transformation is also a fascinating study area to explore by social sciences. Considering its complexity, none of the individual discipli-nes is able to provide a comprehensive vision of the phenomenon, but rather each offers an insight into some of its aspects. Additionally, transition from socialism to democratic capitalism is an unprecedented and open-ended pro-cess, which adds to the difficulty of its analysis.

In Polish sociology, transformation has long provided a conceptual framework for the description of the country's society. Indeed, references to the process can be found in practically every Polish sociological analysis. My aim is to present the development of Polish sociological thought in the last twenty-five years (cf. Kolasa-Nowak 2010). In doing so, my main assump-tion is that the question of accelerated modernisation and the reaction of Polish society to new challenges arising in the process has been the focal point of the discipline in the period concerned. Initially focusing on the rapid transition to democracy and a market economy, sociologists soon concentra-

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1 Translated from Polish by Piotr Styk.

ted on discovering the peculiarities of post-communist society. The last deca-
de saw an expansion of their horizon of interest, including an increasingly
broader historical perspective of Eastern Europe and the development of
comparative studies. An important issue constantly present in sociological
thought has been that of the social functions of the discipline and its ability
to offer a conceptual grasp of comprehensive social change. The increasing
popularity of critical analysis to be observed in the latest Polish sociological
studies is a reflection of the search for original interpretations of the Polish
transformation and a part of the debate on the social commitment and
public dimension of sociological research as such.

The Beginning

A comprehensive change of the post-1989 period was in fact a rational, top-
down project (cf. Gortat 1992; Kochanowicz 1992; Morawski 1993; Offe
1995). The overall aim involved reforms not just of the economy, but the
entire public sphere, and the new rules were implemented throughout the
following decades. Another impulse for change was provided by the process
of Polish accession to the European Union and adaptation of Polish insti-
tutions to the new institutional environment. From its early days, transfor-
mation has been described using the rhetoric of modernisation, both in
public debate and academic discourse. Such a perspective stemmed from the
domination of an economy-oriented approach and from the treatment of
transformation in terms of an opportunity to bridge a development gap and
›catch up‹ with Europe.

The first response from social sciences to the experience of the changes
of 1989 and the early 1990s was not very much different from popular atti-
tudes, media commentaries or comments from representatives of the new
authorities. Revolving around the paradigm of transition perceived in terms
of modernisation,[2] they all predicted a quick and rather smooth adaptation to
the rules of a market economy and democratic system, without giving much
consideration to the nature of the adopted solutions. Imitating the pattern of
Western institutions and solutions seemed an obvious pathway to follow,
thus any alternative answers and any local peculiarities were perceived as

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2 ›Modernisation‹ was considered a *genus proximum* of ›transformation‹, a much more neu-
tral term.

problems, resistance or deviancy. The reality of communist Poland was treated as a sheer conglomerate of anti-modernisation elements, which were all to be rejected and overcome.

In the previous period of its history, throughout the eventful decade of the 1980s, Polish sociology focused on important new social phenomena, such as grass roots activity, mass participation in the Solidarity movement, new forms of social conflict in communist Poland, or progressive delegitimisation of the old system. The source of those rapid changes was located in individual attitudes and people's reactions to an aggravating economic crisis and delegitimisation of ›real socialism‹. At the time of a mounting social conflict, sociologists studied mainly the state of social awareness and factors motivating people to act together. Finding that the situation had gone beyond the limits of adaptability of both the system and society, they identified spontaneous defence strategies of individuals as the underlying factor of the conflict process. The fact that contestation of the socialist system was a large-scale phenomenon motivated researchers to approach the mechanism of change from the perspective of individual social actors. Studies providing an opening assessment of the post-1989 period aimed to provide a description of ›socialist residue‹ as a hurdle to modernisation (Marody 1991a: 256). Thus, sociologists described the society of ›real socialism‹ as one undergoing the processes of disintegration.

To some extent, the breakthrough of 1989 came as a result of this large-scale rejection of socialism by Poles. Among the tasks that followed was the need for a comprehensive blueprint for change and social scientists became actively involved in formulating and substantiating the new rules, proposing the directions of transformation and assessing the implemented measures. This resulted in the frequent use of the rhetoric of transition in sociology of the early 1990s. The term ›transition‹ itself was used with reference to a rapid modernisation with a clear direction to follow, and a reasonably clear starting point and ultimate effect. This was coupled with a judgmental, clearly engaged attitude. As a social project designed from above, then, the process of departure from communism showed marked similarities with the introduction of the system after the Second World War. At first, this »social engineering of democratic transformation« (Narojek 1993) never became a subject of deeper sociological analysis. The new framework of social reality did not appear to be problematic in popular perception or in academic reflection. Sociologists did not focus on the contents and direction of the reforms, but rather on potential social obstacles to their implementation and on their

long-term effects. The most frequent assumption was that the new rules would stimulate a natural, spontaneous, bottom-up process of shaping a new social order. The idea that the project of transformation to the free market and democracy would be quite an easy task to accomplish was based on a conviction that it met the expectations and aspirations of Poles, as well as guaranteed success similar to that achieved by the developed Western states. There was very little consideration of other possible options involving a ›Polish road to capitalism‹ (e.g. Kowalik 1991). The primary focus of academic interest was the question of overcoming the burden of socialist residue.

The adoption of a modernising perspective of transformation, frequent both in popular and academic contexts, assumed that mental attitudes rooted in the reality of the communist period and persistently present in society would pose a problem to the process. The term homo sovieticus, referring to a type of mentality unconducive to the new order, gained wide currency (Świda-Ziemba 1990; 1994) and was frequently used as an explanation of attitudes seen as dysfunctional or irrational from the point of view of the aims and objectives of transformation. The list of change-resistant, disadvantageous remnants of the socialist past included: acquired helplessness, low tolerance to social inequality, volatility of norms and a peculiar attitude to the legal system (Wnuk-Lipiński 1991a; 1991b). Added to these was also persistent social collectivism and, consequently, a deficit of desirable individualistic attitudes (Marody 1991b: 35–39). The mental outfit of Poles was severely criticised as lacking in civilisational competence: not only did they not have skills and attitudes essential in the free market and democratic environment, but also displayed widespread mentality at odds with the concept itself (Sztompka 1991; 1997).

A configuration of group interests inherited from the old system, and fitting the logic of a socialist distributive state, was a factor motivating people to defend them in the free market environment and made it difficult for new types of interests to emerge. Consequently, the assumption was that reforms had to rely on a yet non-existent ›theoretical interest‹ located in achieving the pre-planned target situation (Staniszkis 1989; 1991b; Mokrzycki 1991a: 57; 1991b: 68). This approach provided both a vision for the direction of transformation and an ideological motivation for reform measures, including their important persuasive function (Ziólkowski 1993: 10). At the time, their ultimate effectiveness appeared rather uncertain, since there were no actual social groups with an interest in accomplishing the transformation.

In the new circumstances, the workers, a great social actor of the 1980s, were forced off stage to assume a relatively minor role. They came to be portrayed as a group threatening the success of reforms due to their ›culture of entitlement‹ rooted in a socialist mentality (Mokrzycki 1991a; Krzemiński 1993), with very rare attention given to a rational necessity to protect their own fundamental interests (Wesołowski 1993: 127). Sociologists observed an increasing discouragement from political involvement, resulting from a rapid fragmentation of the political scene (Grabowska, Szawiel 1993; Wasilewski 1994). At the time, a growing indifference to politics was typical of all post-communist societies (Morawski 1994: 83).

In the first years of transformation, sociologists focused on individual and collective social actors only in two roles: those who implemented the project of transformation as accepted by social scientists, and those who slowed down the pace of the process and came in the way of progress towards a modern society. In the initial phase of transformation, society was not regarded as an active subject of the events. Consequently, research topics rarely reflected real social problems of particular groups or individuals. Rather, the questions of interest stemmed from the project of transformation to democracy and a free market economy. Only in the course of time did sociologists begin to notice that society could not be regarded in terms of a resistance factor or the weakest link in a chain of carefully designed innovations. It was then that individual reactions to the new reality and the ways of coping with change resurfaced in sociological studies.

Neither was the modern nature of post-communist society the focus of sociological study at the time. There was no interest in the extent of modernisation or the areas it affected, but in the faults and limitations of the process. Instead, what was stressed was that ›real socialism‹ produced a particular type of society, characterised by modernisation referred to as selective and imperfect (Ziółkowski 1999), reversed (Buchner-Jeziorska 1993), or false or apparent (Morawski 1998a). It was seen as a mixture of imposed modernity in certain areas of social life and the remains of a traditional society in others. There were also suggestions that the four decades of the communist order were in fact ›a freezer‹ preserving pre-modern components of social life, which were only to surface once the system had fallen (Sztompka 2005: 138).

Initial attempts at finding an adequate language to describe the change in progress balanced between the rhetoric of reform and the rhetoric of revolution. The use of terminology referring to revolution stressed the totality of change and a complete break with the former social order. Sometimes,

sociologists used it to stress the role that grass roots social activity played in the outburst and course of change in Poland. As well as this, it brought into focus the question of replacing the elites or their survival in the new system (Pakulski, Highley 1992; Szelenyi, Treitman, Wnuk-Lipiński 1995). However, it was »a revolution with no revolutionary theory« (Offe 1995: 16). It was also seen as a »neo-traditionalist« exercise, »a revolution in the name of re-turn to normality«, the old, tried and tested rules and social forms (Rychard 1995: 5; Szacki 1994: 15; Staniszkis 1992: 32).

At the same time, however, there was also a growing awareness that change was a gradual and evolutionary process extending over time and cha-racterised by its own logic and dynamics. The nature of its pace was captured in the metaphor of ›three clocks‹ proposed by Ralf Dahrendorf, stressing that transformation of people's behaviour and their acceptance of new social rules is a prolonged process (Dahrendorf 1991). The fact that the transfor-mation in progress was gradual and involved a great role of ›continuity in change‹ was most strongly emphasised by Jadwiga Staniszkis, Witold Moraw-ski and Andrzej Rychard (Staniszkis 1991a; 1992; Morawski 1991; 1993; Rychard 1993). In their approach, the changes involved two parallel process-es: the disintegration of institutional structures of communism and a pro-gressive institutionalisation of the new order, thus making the issues arising from the fall of communism and the profile of the new post-communist or-der closely interrelated.

In view of the fact that Polish reforms were a top-down project, it was their ideological foundation that became the main focus of critical analysis. Indeed, the phenomenon of ›liberalism after communism‹ as a peculiar trans-fer of liberalism to the alien social environment of Eastern European coun-tries came to be broadly studied and commented on (Szacki 1994; Wnuk-Lipiński 1996). The analysis of conditions surrounding the import of liberal ideas to Poland brought interesting conclusions for the future. It became ap-parent that sociological thought should focus on the peculiarities of the transfer of solutions tried and tested elsewhere to Eastern Europe, rather than turn its attention to the general aims and objectives of transformation.

Post-communism and its hybrid forms

The early 1990s saw the emergence of two main approaches towards the conceptualisation of the breakthrough and the ensuing transformation. Some proposed to treat them as entirely new phenomena, or at least ones taking place in unique circumstances. Others, by contrast, saw them as events which could be understood in terms of, and compared to, mechanisms known to sociology and already analysed by the discipline, at least in their basic dimension. The two standpoints determined two different lines of theoretical explorations. However, in the course of time, it was the view that the changes were essentially secondary and imitative in nature that prevailed (Ziółkowski 1999). The intellectual atmosphere of a »revolution in the name of a return to normality« (Rychard 1995) and ›the end of history‹ was not conducive to asking new questions or assuming there were some entirely new elements in Polish transformation that would be worth studying in their own right for their cognitive value. Jerzy Szacki aptly concluded that in the early 1990s the most frequent attitude among sociologists was to focus on »conceiving the ultimate state of affairs to be achieved and observing the remaining distance still ahead and problems on the way« (Szacki 1996: 5). The notion of ›transition from‹ clearly dominated over reflection on the possible points of destination, and the most popular study area was the features of society on the way out of communism, usually analysed in the context of a burden to be overcome in the process of modernisation.

The change was set in motion by new, officially introduced rules, which required adaptation and consolidation of the pattern of individual reactions. The ensuing result was bound to include a mix of intended and unintended changes, institutional decisions, circumstances beyond control, and spontaneous adaptation. Sociologists observed this mechanism quite early. Andrzej Rychard's programme paper delivered at the 1994 Sociological Congress (*Zjazd Socjologiczny*) can be seen as an attempt to develop this view of transformation. In his paper, Rychard addressed the problem of finding a new language to describe the transformation and a new theory to explain it. His key question was: »How to describe a revolution made in the name of a return to the old ways?« Considering that transformation was still at an early stage, which made it difficult to rise up to the challenge posed by the question, the author suggested that the first aim of the discipline should be to closely observe the process and provide an adequate description of the actual social phenomena. His postulate was to capture grass roots processes, every-

day actions of social actors, as well as their interests and orientations. This sphere was seen as crucial at the moment, while results of these processes would be reflected in macrostructures only later. In the meantime, instead of searching for a new theory of transformation, it would be better to resort to what sociology had already achieved as a discipline which developed as a description of great modernising changes (Rychard 1995, Rychard 1991).

In the mid-1990s, Jadwiga Staniszkis referred to the emergent social reality as ›real post-communism‹. Intended to stress the distinctiveness of this transitory period, the term was applied to the entire Central Europe in the context of global change. In broad terms, post-communism of the early 1990s was characterised by a domination of hybrid forms of ownership, progressive polarisation of social structure and underdevelopment of the middle class. As described by Staniszkis, it also involved a largely superficial character of democratic institutions, with the real power games hidden in non-transparent informal networks (Staniszkis 1994b: 97). The intended analogy of the term to ›real socialism‹ reflected the idea that the new order was very different from the original plan, incomplete and deformed, just like in the case of the old system. The deformations were attributed to imposing new systemic solutions on the old institutional framework and mentality.

Sociologists were soon to notice that institutional analysis offered a useful framework which could be applied to provide an adequate description of the making of a new social order stimulated by top-down institutional reforms. The advantage of the perspective is that it combines three different levels of social reality: actions performed by individuals, institutional rules, and organisational forms resulting from their mutual adjustment. In this approach, ›the new‹ is mixed with ›the old‹, with the ensuing result being that of hybrid solutions, considerably diverging from both patterns (Rychard 1995). Apart from its focus on an important and often neglected intermediate level of social life, institutional analysis has other advantages: it avoids ideological assumptions and does not presuppose the aim or direction of changes, which stem from the logic of the longue durée and path dependence, a mechanism whereby future choices are limited by decisions made in the past. Thus, tradition, norms and established social habits are considered as important factors exceeding far beyond the narrow, rational expectation of efficiency, typical of rational choice theories. The usefulness of institutional analysis for the conceptualisation of Polish transformation increased as the period of transition prolonged. Although the institutional model was certainly immersed in the general assumptions of the modernisation framework, it

turned the focus to direct links between institutional rules and strategies of individuals. In this way, it enabled an analysis closer to reality, in which the actual solutions were a resultant of rules and adaptation strategies of individuals and diverged from the universal pattern of the process of modernisation. However, institutional analysis blurred the radical nature of the change of the system. In this perspective, intentionality and the linear character of change as an implemented reform project were diminished (Rychard 1996: 9).

Democracy theories in general, and their political science applications focusing on the study of authoritarian systems in South America and, later on, Eastern Europe in particular (Linz, Stepan 1996), assumed that democratic consolidation was the next stage following the major transformation of rules and institutions. There were certain doubts whether Eastern Europe was already approaching the phase, stemming from a great scope and pace of simultaneous changes in many areas, and from the fact that the case in point involved institutions copied and transferred to the environment lacking the original ›moral and cultural infrastructure‹ (Offe 1995: 29). There were even some predictions that the most likely prospect for Eastern Europe was a chronically unconsolidated democratic system resembling that of Argentina (Schmitter 1995: 48). In fact, as of mid-1990s, sociologists diagnosed a premature consolidation of the system, making it incomplete because of unfinished institutional changes. Thus, the path of Polish transformation can be seen as a summary result of such unintended and unplanned processes as the premature consolidation (Rychard 1998).

It was mainly the hybrid nature of the new system with its peculiar mix of the old and new rules and institutions that made it necessary for the individual actors to adapt their rational strategies to this incomplete system. The adaptive potential of Polish society was perceived as an important asset of social capital, which »could be used to support the changes, had the institutional system forced a ›modern‹ adaptability‹ (Rychard 2000: 187). Referred to as ›a hidden path of transformation‹, the process was recognised as more significant for the future of the social system than top-down institutionalisation.

With time, the distinction between designed and spontaneous changes in analytical studies became increasingly blurred (Rychard 1998). The once popular idea of completing the course of change was slowly replaced by an awareness of a lasting hybridity of the social order in Poland. The old and new mixed together, producing what by the mid-1990s came to be referred to as hybrid solutions (e.g. Staniszkis 1994a, 1994b; Rychard 1995) and hy-

brid or dualistic capitalism, including both free market and political elements (Morawski 1998b: 107). The latter term became widely popular, particularly with reference to the sphere of connections between the state institutions and the free market. In practice, the term was used with the undertones suggesting that modernisation had taken a different course than expected and displayed specifically local features distinct from the Western models. Thus, post-communism was seen as a mixed, hybrid and transitory form that gradually became stabilised (cf. Staniszkis 2001). Later on, the language of sociology tended to replace the term ›hybridity‹ with ›distortions‹ and ›pathologies‹ of the system.

Sociological study became interested in the problems of corruption, clientelism, informal networks of power and in secret operations of government special agencies (Gadowska 2002; Jarosz 2001; Kamiński 1997; 2001; 2004; Zybertowicz 2002, 2005). Thus, dysfunctional aspects of the new order were associated mainly with the institutional structure of the system. As identified, they stemmed from imperfect or contradictory regulations, but primarily from conscious activity of various individual and collective social actors, motivated by their own rational interests, and able to use various types of assets and a different level of social influence at their disposal. These mechanisms were attributed a more important role in the shaping of the new system than poverty, exclusion and regional differentiation, and their proliferation was seen as a proof of faults of the transformation project. Alternatively, the transformation itself was treated as a resultant, or even a result, of pathological activity of this kind. Such aspects of the analysis touched on the perception of the very concept of transformation, as well as on its principal results, and assessment of the process.

One important effect of transformation was that Poland became an increasingly divided country. Indeed, sociologists began to wonder whether there emerged two different societies: those taking part in the transformation and those left out (Adamski, Rychard 1998; Rychard 1998: 370). This involved a different pace and rhythm of development and different developmental prospects of the two groups. Later, the phenomenon came to be referred to as ›a society of two vectors‹ (Giza-Poleszczuk 2004), with growing social differentiation (for example regional) pushing it apart in opposite directions. The issue was also conceptualised as a split between traditional and modern Poland, with the former lagging behind the pace of progress of the latter.

Imitative modernisation

Towards the late 1990s, an increasingly important trend analysed the transformation in terms of the cultural experience of the participants. Reflection on the cultural dimension of the changes was seen as particularly significant, since it enabled a description of how the new rules became rooted in everyday habits of individuals. Cultural change in post-communist countries was often perceived as a clash of the universal pattern of modernisation with local tradition, seen as a burden slowing the process. Piotr Sztompka searched for cultural imponderabilia of successful modernisation and pointed at the components of a mental heritage of socialism which hampered the effective functioning of new institutions (Sztompka 1997). In the course of time, the cultural aspect gained autonomy and came to be formulated within the framework of cultural trauma theory (Sztompka 2000). Sociologists stressed the importance of a social mechanism of generating and assigning meaning as particularly significant in the circumstances of institutional transformation (Marody 2000a; 2000b). Thus, what came to the foreground was the role of culture as a set of tools: notions, approaches and visions of reality required to construct lines of action. It is especially in the periods of transition that culture tends to be a source of new strategies and patterns of behaviour (Marody 1996; 1999; 2000b: 81; cf. also: Giza-Poleszczuk 2000; Rychard 2000; 2002). The attention of sociologists was focused on social reactions in the context of the newly acquired autonomy to rationally define and pursue own interests. For example, Polish ingenuity when coping with everyday reality, particularly in the economic sphere, became a frequent subject of study (Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, Rychard 2000; Marody 2000a).

Sociologists were convinced that, having arrived at a democratic system and free market economy, it was now essential to concentrate on analysing the current process of Poland's joining the world capitalist system. This broadening of perspectives was connected with the forthcoming accession of the country to the European Union. In this context, analyses of ›Polish society in the unifying Europe‹ became widely popular. The process of integration was approached from the perspective of imitative modernisation. As a result of these developments, sociological explanations had to be broader, both in a geographical and historical sense. There was also a growing interest in local diversity of the transformation process, which was reflected in studies on local identities and communities (Kurczewska 2004; 2006; 2008), and on the process of regional differentiation. Both the global and the

local perspective also involved a consideration of more distant history. Looking back beyond the breakthrough of 1989, Polish reforms came to be perceived as a process of overcoming not only the communist heritage, but also traditional wide-ranging backwardness of this region of Europe. Consequently, they were marked by a peculiar mix of orders and logics typical for different stages of modernity. There were also voices proposing interpretations of the Polish post-1989 change as yet another example of a top-down attempt to break away from the backward position, not unfamiliar in this region of the continent or in the global context (Sosnowska 2004; cf. Leszczyński 2013). In this case, a simple model of modernisation was replaced by alternative proposals, such as dependency theory or the global perspective of the world order. The crucial difference here concerns the factor of change: instead of endogenous dynamics from within, a stimulus for development (or elements hampering the process) come from the outside as a consequence of a peripheral location in the world system.

In the course of time, the vision of transformation as imitative modernisation also came under criticism. In fact, the debate went far beyond the adequacy of the adopted paradigm to include also such issues as the direction of current changes and the role of a consciously designed project. Questioning the appropriateness of a unilinear model of development and the prospect of ›catching up with Europe‹ marked a departure from a constructivist approach and developmental optimism. It also had another advantage. As the model which assumed the necessity of copying highly developed Western societies in order to bridge the gap produced by ›the communist freezer‹ was increasingly thrown into doubt, what was needed was a new conceptual framework and an alternative theoretical foundation which would enable a new description of the systemic change. In this way, even partial rejection of an imitative pattern paved the way for new, original interpretations of the post-communist transformation, taking into account the unique dimension of the historical event. Turning to comparative analysis and the findings of historical sociology provided an opportunity for reconstructing the trajectory of transformation which would consider the actual impact of the past, particularly the economic backwardness of the country. After 1989, practices of remembrance made it evident, also to social science, that interpretations of the present are shaped in the course of a constant reinterpretation of the past (Kurczewski 1998: 70). The areas of the past which were found important for the sociological diagnosis of the present gradually expanded. Conse-

quently, the understanding of transformation became a part of the discourse on the past.

The imitative nature of the process of ›catching up with Europe‹ was manifested mainly in a coexistence of elements belonging to different developmental stages. To understand post-communism, especially in its cultural aspect, it was essential to take into consideration its components representing both the early and late modern, as well as postmodern age (Ziółkowski 1998). Thus, while accepting the validity of the backwardness factor, it also had to be acknowledged that Eastern Europe entered the era of globalisation while still experiencing a confusion of different historical epochs (Sosnowska 1997). The post-communist transformation was coupled with ›time compression‹. Such a perspective implied a coexistence of elements that belonged to different stages of the development of capitalism, ranging from those typical of highly developed regions to ones characteristic of peripheral areas, including post-communist countries with their imitative modernisation (Staniszkis 1994a; 2003). As Eastern Europe did not have an influence on the historical context of change, it could not pursue the path of evolution toward the modern form of capitalism according to the logic of its historical development (Mokrzycki 2001: 84). Thus, the only available option was a peculiar pathway involving ›shortcuts‹ and the ensuing result of ›time compression‹ involved coexistence of different regions belonging to different ages. The concept of both ›mixed up‹ elements and ›time compression‹ had an intuitive affinity with the popular notion of hybridity of the social system and hybrid capitalism.

European integration brought to attention the question of peripherality. The adopted policy of imitating Western institutional solutions and preferred values came under criticism as highly selective and detached from reality. Already in 1995, Claus Offe warned that a simple copying of institutions in the environment devoid of the original ›moral and cultural infrastructure‹ could bring effects contrary to those expected (Offe 1995). Zdzisław Krasnodębski criticised sociological analyses for their lack of comparative studies on institutional and cultural reality of Western Europe, the United States and Poland. In doing so, he also stressed the abstract and unrealistic character of the adopted model of modernity (Krasnodębski 2003). Strong cultural identity connecting tradition and modernity was perceived as Poland's opportunity to assume an independent position in the global context. In recent years there has been a growing sociological interest in the role of tradition in the current changes. It is treated not only as a burden of historical underdevelop-

ment, but also as a part of heritage which can be useful in rising up to the challenge of the future. There are research projects on the role of tradition in local communities and on its potential for social self-organisation. Likewise, there are attempts to include factors of local culture in the institutional paradigm. They reject the assumption of the ›engineers of transformation‹ that the ›invisible hand‹ of the market alone is going to make people change their cultural patterns of economic behaviour. The process of ›institutiona-lising institutions‹ which can be observed today consists in filling them with local meanings and rooting them in the context of local organisational culture (Marody, Kochanowicz 2007).

Taming the reality

The late 1990s were a period of ›taming new reality‹ (Marody 1996), which meant abandoning an approach in the categories of ›transition from commu-nism‹ and ›the road to capitalism‹. So far, the current state had been treated as unimportant and transitory, as the main point of reference was the vision of the ultimate post-transformation order. However, sociologists slowly came to remember that »unlike politics, social sciences do not have to put so much focus on defining goals […] On the other hand, they should be inter-ested in the goals that members of society set for themselves, in the measures they take to achieve these goals and, of course, in their chances of making them come true« (Szacki 1996: 7).

With time, sociologists focused on a diagnosis revealing the main tenden-cies within the internal dynamics of the new social system, and on assessing the social cost of transformation. In the second decade of the period, added to these was also the study of pathology and dysfunctions of the system. New fields of study appeared, such as new regional differentiation or the problem of those who have lost on the transformation. As can be seen, the aims and objectives of research into the process of transformation have changed over the years. Their evolution went from the focus on the general course of the changes and the problems involved, through concentration on individual reactions to the new reality and the ways of coping with it, to studying some particular problems resulting from the transformation.

The progress of Polish integration with Europe involved new goals of sociological reflection on the changes. Both academic studies and public dis-

course considered the place of Poland in the global system, and the nature of challenges stemming from opening up of the society to modern global processes. Systemic transformation of the country came to be perceived as a process gradually ›dissolving‹ in global social change. In the new research perspective, the processes going on in Poland became less and less unique and more universal. Clearly, it was a new stage of transformation and required a different perspective of the underlying features of Poland's dynamics.

This meant a return to a macro-systemic approach aiming to analyse post-communist transformation in terms of the *longue durée*, with limitations resulting from historical factors seen as one of the main study areas. The generally accepted modernisation approach still continued, for example in a considerable number of research projects comparing Poland and Western European countries, such as the European Values Study, conducted periodically since 1981. However, even these projects questioned the assumption of a unilinear developmental model of various European countries and of one universal model of modern society (Jasińska-Kania, Marody 2002). Globalisation not only came to be seen as leading to increasing diversification, fragmentation and intensifying inequality, but also as running parallel to the process of glocalisation involving worldwide restratification of society and a new global hierarchy (Bauman 1997: 61). At the same time, cultural contexts of social phenomena stemming from the ›great change‹ were recognised as an important study area. This came as a result of interest in the revival of local and regional communities and the mechanisms of democracy and civic involvement. Thus, ›locality‹ in its unique forms became another research topic.

As can be seen from this account, social sciences have pursued two complementary objectives. Firstly, the aim was to describe the Polish transformation in relation to its external context, both spatial and temporal. At the root of this approach lay the pursuit of a developmental opportunity brought by the fall of communism and opening up to the world. The second objective was to explain how these external, global circumstances influenced the mechanisms of internal social modernisation in the country. They focused on the level of individuals and on micro-strategies of adaptation to the new rules. The spirit of a liberating breakthrough and open opportunities, coupled with a conviction that the challenge of transformation would not be an exceedingly difficult task to accomplish, typical in the early days of the changes, came to be replaced with a growing awareness of limitations,

stemming both from historical factors and from the interplay of different individual and collective interests and rationalities.

A survey of the last twenty five years shows a clear transition from the technocratic vision of a smooth and rapid change to a deeper consideration of the peculiarities of Polish modernisation. Social phenomena have come to be regarded as a spontaneous and often unique result of new institutions, rules and regulations gradually taking root. At the same time, the analytical perspective has broadened to include European or even global contexts. In their search for an adequate approach, sociologists have been involved in public debate on the assessment of the country's ›assets and liabilities‹ and setting its developmental priorities for the future.

Sociological studies conducted in the spirit of a simple model of modernisation have come under increasing criticism, especially from the younger generation of academics, accusing them of a distinctly normative standpoint and an arbitrary, paternalistic tone towards society. Critics also point out that analyses following the paradigm of implementing Western patterns are conventional, lack originality, oversimplify the diagnosis of social phenomena and overlook important areas of sociological study. Arguably, the principal fault is the outside perspective taken by observers, who adopt foreign standards imposed by the logic of modernisation. Thus, there has been a growing concern whether such an approach offers an adequate and comprehensive perspective of the current social developments in Poland (cf. Bukraba-Rylska 2004; 2009; Ziółkowski 2000).

Comparisons in space and time

At the same time, new processes of social differentiation that are not connected with the communist past are becoming more important in Poland. Like the entire modern world, Polish social phenomena are increasingly dependent on external factors and related to global and (owing to EU membership) European patterns. An understanding of the place of Polish society in this frame requires a new comparative approach. While the period of post-communist transformation justified analyses based on the perspective of the intended ultimate effect of the reforms, what comes to the foreground now is a need to address the characteristics of Polish society in the context of external factors. Considering that it is subject to increasing global influences, a

comparative perspective is particularly useful. Such analyses should consider assets and potentials, as well as deficits and distances in an environment shaped by global economic competition and global cultural impacts.

This new situation has inspired a search for contexts of interpretation that would enable a new insight into the Polish social landscape today. A comparative perspective stimulates a sociological focus on historicity and spatiality of social phenomena. Historicity takes into consideration the time factor of social processes and concentrates on the *longue durée*, as well as on historically established patterns, such as path dependence. This approach, close to historical sociology, aims to explain lasting developmental differences both at the level of tradition and cultural heritage, and at the level of systemic patterns rooted in the past. As the communist period does not appear to be a sufficient point of reference, the sources of present-day social phenomena are also being located in more distant history. Such a research perspective is coupled with a growing interest in spatial differentiation at different levels: European and global, as well as regional and local. Sociologists are becoming more aware of an increasing role of spatial aspects of social phenomena. Globalisation brings out new meanings of space and other dimensions of place as a factor of social life, including spatial interrelations between economic, political, social and cultural phenomena (cf. Kolasa-Nowak 2014).

In recent years there has also been a growing interest in analyses of peripherality and its multiple social, cultural, or even cognitive consequences. Sociologists studying the domination of the centre over the periphery are interested in the mechanism of symbolic power. Thanks to its (mainly economic) domination, the privileged centre imposes the language and categories applied to describe a distinct reality of peripheral areas, thus depriving them of their own voice. Consequently, they are unable to define themselves in terms other than those expressed in the alien, imposed language of peripherality and necessary imitation. The question of the special role of intellectual elites is also a factor considered in diagnosing the status of Poland as a peripheral area. This group, including sociologists themselves, forms a part of ›intelligentsia‹, a distinctly Eastern European social category, which, in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's theory, can be seen as the bearer of social capital.

Thus, in Poland, the exceptional status of intelligentsia, ›cultural capitalists‹, has long been based on cultural domination replacing other forms of

predominance.[3] Most importantly, this privileged position meant that intellectual elites »functioned as an intermediary transmitting the patterns of Western modernity and as a peculiar guarantee that the country remained a part of Western civilisation« (Zarycki 2008; 2009). As it were, to be a Polish intellectual necessarily entails adopting a Western perspective of modernisation, which consequently makes it difficult to recognise the essence of local differences. Such interpretations stem from Edward Said's notion of »self-orientalisation« (2005) and are used to criticise sociological studies adopting the paradigm of imitative modernisation, an approach marked by a patronising and arbitrary attitude of researchers towards society to which they belong. As a result of the attitude of ›self-orientalisation‹, academic discourse tends to overlook important questions and significant characteristics of the local social reality.

Translations of major works (Chakrabarty 2011; Spivak 2011) and a continuing discussion over the suitability of the postcolonial perspective confirm an interest of Polish social sciences in the approach (Buchowski 2006; Thompson 2005; Domańska 2008; Skórczewski 2013). The postcolonial inspiration is used both in the study of a complex heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and in the search for ideas which would help to understand the current condition of post-communist Poland. This is connected with the question of overcoming the burden of historical submission and a developmental gap. In addressing such issues, sociologists usually focus on constructions of discursive space and different competing interpretations of the past (e.g. Sowa 2011). At the same time, they are aware of an important public function of knowledge as a source of imagery and interpretations which provide an alternative perspective and stimulate a new type of activity. The political role of such knowledge is manifested in discursive games, opposing the established interpretations of the past and proposing new ones.

These inspirations are also used in relation to the new questions of spatial differentiation, both in the European and regional context. Earlier research on the progress of modernisation already described the emergence of an underlying social division, which in the course of time has assumed a spatial dimension: those benefiting from social changes in Poland and those who

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3 As viewed by Iván Szelényi, the essential difference between the centre and the periphery lies in the dominant position of different forms of capital. While in the former (more modernised societies) it is economic capital that counts, in the latter (economically weaker societies lacking stable economic capital) it is social or political capital that functions as the principal factor determining the social position and compensating for the lack of economic capital, a vital component of the capitalist system (Eyal, Szelényi, Townsley 1998).

lost on them, in other words – those taking part in transformation and those left out (Adamski 1998). Sociological studies observed ›a society of two vectors‹, involving increasing differentiation between the east as opposed to the centre and west of the country. On the one hand, »Poland has been emerging as a modern, cosmopolitan country of high-earning and widely-travelled people. However, it is more and more evident that some regions have not managed to catch up and remained traditional, rural and marginalised. A journey from Warsaw to a village in north-east Poland is a journey in time« (Giza-Poleszczuk 2004: 265).

In analyses of regional differentiation, the eastern regions of the country are generally characterised as the most underdeveloped areas with the lowest development potential. As indicated, their shortcomings result from a lower level of modernisation and involve not only underdeveloped infrastructure, lower industrialisation, urbanisation and a strong position of traditional family farming, but also a low level of human capital. In the dominant discourse of modernisation, eastern Poland appears as a model opposite of strong, rapidly growing regions. As well as this, it is an example of a region where the influence of the past, with its long-established factors of underdevelopment and obstacles to modernisation, appears to be the strongest and virtually impossible to overcome. Importantly, this historical burden is not restricted to economic infrastructure, but also pertains to the mentality and cultural heritage of the population. A backward nature of general behavioural patterns and attitudes to reality is explained in terms of an overwhelming burden of historical underdevelopment rather than the present structural features, such as poverty, low urbanisation, low metropolisation or a high proportion of the farming population (e.g. Gorzelak, Jałowiecki 2010). However, such interpretations are increasingly accused of arbitrary judgments and oversimplification of historical reference (Zarycki 2010; Gąsior-Niemiec 2010). Recently, critical analysis has been applied to the study of the mechanism of constructing images of Eastern Europe and the functioning of the ideology of eastness as an effect of the process of orientalisation (Zarycki 2014).

The question of path dependence in Poland and in Eastern Europe is the key issue for a diagnosis of their current situation and prospects for the future. In this perspective, historical analysis seems to be essential in order to understand post-communist societies. A specific form of historical sociology with its in-depth study of historical conditions could provide a good insight

into their features. In this way Polish sociology has moved from the paradigm of modernisation and the perspective of departure from communism to a more nuanced reflection on the peculiarities of Polish society and a critical approach to interpretations of the transformation.

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