

THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL LIFE OF FOOD IN SOCIALIST POLAND

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While food is increasingly recognized as being an important component of personal identity (Scholliers, 2001), its consumption can also be a deeply political experience. During the period of Socialist rule in Eastern Europe, food, like most aspects of everyday life, took on a newly significant role both for individuals and society collectively. Popular experiences of food inevitably touched upon the wider context of tension between the government and the individual, and the struggle between state control and personal autonomy. In Poland, where political opposition was the most successful, everyday food exchanges worked simultaneously to create spheres of small-scale social networks, enabling people to survive under the regime, as if living outside of it. Collected memories, however, also reveal that despite shortages, food was still enjoyed for its own sake, remaining an integral part of traditions and celebrations.

This article is based on a pilot study for a planned future project investigating memories of 'everyday life' in socialist Poland. Four in-depth interviews were undertaken with people who migrated to Britain from Poland in the 1980s and early 1990s, based on their experiences of living under the socialist regime.

During the socialist era in Poland there were many occasions when food became closely linked to the changing political fortunes of the state. Food, as with other elements of consumption (Crowley 2000), was subject to governmental regulation - in theory the state had a monopoly on production and distribution, in addition to controlling food prices. Furthermore, state propaganda campaigns in the early years of the regime demonstrated that the new society of workers was expected to take an active and 'noble' role in the provision of food for the nation. As Aulich and Sylvestrova (1999:159) illustrate in their research into political posters in Eastern Europe, agricultural laborers throughout

the Eastern Bloc were carefully depicted as 'the force capable of liberating the people from hunger.' In Poland, as elsewhere, the ability of the regime to provide for its people rested on the promise of food for all.

Food in Poland, however, later provided a rallying point for workers' disillusionment with the state, with food price rises triggering important riots in 1970, 1976 and 1980, played out as economic protest, but simultaneously galvanizing an increasingly politicized popular opposition. Not only was the regime failing at home, but international media images of long queues, particularly in the early 1980s, helped to cement western convictions that communism was not succeeding. Politically, therefore, it can be argued that food played an integral part in the rise and fall of socialism in Poland. Food was used in both internal and external representations of the regime, and was in a sense at the heart of its decline: No other issue showed the juxtaposition between early promises and later failures in quite the same way. It is interesting, however, that these specific political aspects of food do not feature in the collected testimonies. Memories of food instead focus on the everyday arena of shortages and queuing, surviving through alternative networks of supplies, and food for special occasions. Accounts relating to food address politics only indirectly, but nevertheless hint that no aspect of everyday life under the regime could escape political meaning at some level.

As Slavenka Drakulic (1992) argues in her work on the everyday lives of women in the Eastern Bloc, food in socialist Poland has to be understood in an entirely different context to food in western Europe: through a culture of need rather than 'like.' It is no surprise, therefore, that the collected accounts illustrate early memories of food shortages and the need to queue for food. As one man remembered:

Queues were always under communists. In the '50s and the '60s when I was young I remember my mother and father going to a different town to buy a piece of butter, the butter was available twenty five miles from the place, and then of course there was a queue for the butter. (Polish man, 2002, emigrated to Britain in 1983)

Queuing for food, in fact, remained an integral part of life throughout the regime. As another man recalled:

There was always food shortages, I remember there was always propaganda after the war. I remember many times queuing in a shop when I was a small boy to buy sugar, to buy salt, to stock...It was the late '70s and '80s. I think it was like when people had more money, there were increasing salaries and people wanted to buy more goods. The queues were terrible. When [my daughter] was born I remember I used to go on Saturday morning to buy sausages and meat, we had coupons so people could buy, I don't know, two and a half kilos of meat per month per person. I was like queuing from six o'clock in the morning on Saturdays 'til one o'clock or two o'clock to buy meat. Sometimes I queued for butter like I was going to work and I just stopped because there was a queue to buy butter Each Saturday I was queuing for meat, and occasionally I was queuing for cheese and butter. (Polish man, 2003, emigrated to Britain in 1987)

Much of the existing literature on queuing emphasizes the negative aspects of food shortages and associated queuing. Zinoviev (cited in Ledeneva 1998:91), for example, referring to queuing in the Soviet Union, argues that faced with the need to queue for goods, "you must always be in a state of confusion, anger, and ready for all sorts of unpleasantness." In her research into Russia, Humphrey (1995) also draws out the vexations and inconveniences of queuing for food. The interviews, however, paint a more complex picture of the queuing culture in Poland and the significance of the meanings and sentiments surrounding it. One woman, for example, became visibly unsettled when recounting her memories of seeing mothers queuing for milk: "Oh, this is no good. Sorry. When I see mother with two small children, and one bottle of milk. And it was one bottle one mother. It was [19]82, '83" (Polish woman,

2002, emigrated to Britain in the early 1990s). Indeed, all four respondents demonstrated what Drakulic (1992:20) has argued: within the context of food shortages providing food for the family becomes an activity heavily invested with emotion – as she puts it, food equals love. This is made particularly clear in accounts of queuing for food for children:

I remember queuing with my wife one day, all day, trying to buy grapefruits, and we bought as many grapefruits as it was enough for the kids for the entire winter. It took us one day, we got God knows how many kilos, because of course it was rationing, so you cannot buy as many as you want, so two kilos or three kilos each. We managed to go five rounds each, which means twenty kilos or whatever. And this was enough for the kids to have one grapefruit a day for the end of winter. (Polish man, 2002)

Similarly, Jancar (1978) and Wedel (1986) draw out the negative gendered aspects of queuing, asserting that as women were predominantly responsible for the household, they suffered disproportionately from the queuing culture, shouldering a 'double shift' under the regime. While obviously taken from a very small sample, the evidence from the collected interviews, however, points to a much greater degree of shared responsibility for queuing between genders; women might queue more generally throughout the week, but men were perhaps more likely to join long queues at the weekends.

Rather than focusing on the inconvenient and divisive nature of queuing, the accounts actually depict it as an embedded cultural phenomenon that enabled extended social contact. For example, one man recounted how he used his time queuing as an opportunity to discuss politics, while another recalled:

It was a huge social system, queuing societies and discussion clubs developed, and a beautiful system of reserving places in queues. You stood in one queue and said, sorry I'll be back in ten minutes, and then go to another queue and reserve a place in another queue, and then you come back. So it was a huge social life around these queues as well. Of course, a lot of fighting and arguments, but it was a huge complex

cultural structure, the queue. (Polish man, 2002)

In the context of a regime that aimed, albeit unsuccessfully, to limit collective social autonomy, the queue offered an unregulated arena for open discussion. As Crowley and Reid (2002:15) have argued, “the queue outside the shop produced forms of sociality that might be coded to demonstrate the existence of values and a close-knit solidarity in spite of the alienating effects of socialism.” While not overtly political in nature in itself, queuing for food carried with it the potential for political engagement.

Possible political connotations of queuing were further touched upon in one interview in particular. All of the respondents agreed that food shortages were not usually responsible for the longest queues; these were typically for toilet paper, a much more mundane shortage that, as one man noted, was in danger of being used by the international media to misrepresent and exaggerate the gravity of shortages in Poland: “the most spectacular queues that were photographed by foreigners were actually for toilet paper, because they were of incredible length and they dispersed very quickly, because toilet paper could be sold very quickly” (Polish man 2002). Food was even politicized in popular culture. This same man recounted a joke about the food situation in Poland in the early 1980s, weighing up the problems of a weak economy against the benefits of a more relaxed political culture:

There is a joke. Poland in the ‘80s it was a poor country in physical terms. A person had to queue twice for food all night, and my personal record for queuing was for two weeks in front of a shop for a washing machine, one member of my family had to be in front of that shop. On the other hand it was relative freedom of speech. “You know that one of the Polish dogs in the ‘80s got so fed up with the fact that there was no food he decided to escape to Czechoslovakia, and right on the border he met another dog, escaping from Czechoslovakia to Poland. And he asked, ‘what the hell are you doing? Why are you going to Poland, it is such a poor country you can’t even find a sausage’. ‘OK’, he said ‘that’s right, but at least you can bark’.” So in other words Poland was to some extent an exception. It was repressed but political repression was mild. Perhaps

the price to pay was low economy. (Polish man, 2002)

The overwhelming message to be drawn from the interviews, however, is that food shortages were not an insurmountable obstacle in everyday life. One man asserted that despite the shortages, “it was a system under which you could live, and you could enjoy life to some extent, in a different way” (Polish man 2002). Another argued that the shortages often only applied to luxuries: “There were food shortages in the sense that the basic things were there, there was bread, butter, but there was not any imported goods like oranges, bananas, peaches” (Polish man 2003).

Furthermore, the collected accounts place the conditions in socialist Poland into their historical perspective. Difficulty in obtaining food was not a new phenomenon, and as such did not bring with it any problems not already successfully negotiated by earlier generations. As Drakulic (1992: 14-15) observes about her own mother, first hand experiences of wartime hardship had a significant impact on the perception of subsequent living standards: ‘She experienced World War Two and ever since, like most of the people in Eastern Europe, she behaves as if it never ended. Maybe this is why they are never really surprised that even forty years afterwards there is a lack of sugar, oil, coffee or flour’. In the context of war, living conditions under communism could be considered an improvement. In fact, for Poland, where food shortages are hardly without an historical precedent, coping in adversity has entered the national narrative of struggle and survival:

But it was like that for us, it was like normal living. You have to understand in Poland it was for the whole history it was always war, every twenty years there was a war or uprising, so people from a historical point of view, they learn how to simply survive. One way or another they had to survive, so they were adapting to it, and trying to find the way how to go around sometimes, like how to organize things. (Polish woman, 2003, emigrated to Britain in 1988)

Surviving under partitions, occupations and in war is an integral part of the Polish national heritage (Davies 1984), and therefore it is not

surprising that coping under the socialist regime does not stand out as remarkable.

The collected testimonies also demonstrate that unpredictable conditions simply demanded special, tailor-made strategies. One woman, for example, recounted how she relied on having her children with her to gain advantages in the queues:

I didn't queue because it is a tradition that old persons and the mother with the small children or babies are put first. So if there was something and I could take [my daughter] in my arms, then I could skip the queue, and people were putting me at the front, especially if you have a baby in your arms, so then you can go first. (Polish woman, 2003)

As Janine Wedel (1986:49) has demonstrated in her research into socialist Poland in the late 1970s and early 1980s, shortages necessitated a culture of being ready to purchase goods whenever and wherever they were available: "Everybody shops all the time. People constantly look in store windows to see what can be had and ask those standing in line what they are waiting for." One man confirmed that, "there was a psychosis that whenever something appeared in the shops people queued to buy it whatever it was, even if people didn't need something" (Polish man 2003). This need to be flexible even stretched to working hours: "You were working in an office and somebody arrives saying there are sausages in the shops next to you. Office deserts, nobody is in the office, everyday has gone to queue" (Polish man 2002). In fact, as the following account illustrates, survival strategies penetrated even the most banal aspects of everyday life:

You had to be prepared to buy things wherever you found them, taking an opportunity, so it was a common thing that everyone in the '80s was walking around the streets with a long piece of string in your pocket, because if you have a long piece of string and it happened that toilet paper was delivered to the shop, you could immediately buy twenty, fifty rolls, put it on the string and carry it like that, so the piece of string was a normal piece of equipment for everyone. (Polish man, 2002)

Only experience of an alternative system highlighted the highly specialized nature of survival developed under socialism. In this case, migration to Britain required the learning of a new set of household skills:

When I arrived here for me it was reasonably difficult to adjust, but for my wife it was a nightmare. The skills of running a household were completely different from Poland and here. My wife was proud of being very good in queuing, she knew in which queue to queue, when to queue, where to find goods and so on. When she arrived here and found out that she can find everything but she has to economize, she can buy this but she can't buy that and so on, it took her a lot of time to adjust She got very depressed here because she couldn't use her queuing skills, and instead of that she was looking that she spend more money on food than the neighbors. So you need completely different skills to survive in this society. (Polish man, 2002)

Surviving, of course did not revolve purely around queuing. As one woman put it, "when we didn't have [the children] we didn't queue, because we didn't bother, simply" (Polish woman 2003). Sufficient mechanisms existed in society to provide an alternative to queuing as the only way of obtaining necessary goods. In a similar way to the operation of 'blat' in Russia, Polish people were able to draw on a wide array of social networks and informal exchanges to sustain adequate lifestyles, both supplementing and in some cases replacing formal state controlled exchanges. As Ledeneva (1998:1) illustrates, 'blat' – 'the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures' – played a central role in strategies of survival under socialism. In Poland, as Wedel (1986) observes, 'blat' translated into 'załatwionie' - arranging and acquiring goods through informal means - something equally integral to everyday life, as the collected testimonies show.

Firstly, the accounts offer clear evidence of 'payment in kind' arrangements. As Ledeneva (1998:39-47) argues, these fell short of bribery and corruption, but were undoubtedly outside the official sphere of the state. One woman disclosed that her position as a doctor had made queuing unnecessary, as she simply

traded medicine and her professional knowledge for provisions:

I never never [queued] because I didn't have any time, I worked as a doctor. I had too many people who I gave them a better life, and they gave me a better life. The people working in the shop, I go to him and I give him too much, when I was a doctor. That was no good, but it was very important for me because I had no time. When I had nothing I ate nothing. But that situation was no good for me because it was illegal. But it was friendly, the system was not legal but it was friendly. (Polish woman, 2002)

While she clearly had mixed emotions about using her position as a doctor to obtain food, the stress placed on the friendly nature of these exchanges is significant, illustrating the pivotal role of personal friendships and contacts in independent survival. Other accounts reveal that similar bartering practices were widespread, a normal part of life that despite being conducted in veiled language, were recognized, understood and accepted:

If you had somebody working in a good shop you were super privileged. I remember adverts in the press like "I am selling meat in a shop, I am looking for accommodation." Everybody knew what it was all about. She was not supposed to pay for her accommodation, because she had a good access to meat. It was a typical advert. (Polish man, 2002)

Furthermore, as the following extract confirms, it was also usual to utilize local contacts and networks for more straightforward purchasing practices. Living in a farming area, for example, ensured that this family always had a steady provision of meat because of the failure to collectivize all Polish farms:

We had more on the table than usual, because we were surrounded with the small villages where everywhere there were small farms. So they were having these piglets, small pigs, somewhere they hadn't been counted. So those people were bringing them to the town... so that was quite cheap. I used to buy one quarter of the animal, and that was very fresh because they were bringing them on the same day they killed them. (Polish woman, 2003)

In fact, as Wedel (1986:61) argues, within this culture of taking advantage of whomever or whatever was available to secure goods, the boundaries between legal and illegal exchanges were not necessarily clear or even important: "I had assumed that legal and illegal activities were well-defined, yet Poles themselves were often unable to explain the lines of demarcation between the two."

Significantly, however, there was a strong element of pride attached to managing to acquire items outside of state control. As Verdery (cited in Humphrey 1995:56) argues, "organized shortage made procuring something – anything – a major triumph." There is almost a sense that by deliberately incorporating so much that was beyond the regime's realm of influence into everyday routines, people were able to play out their own small-scale resistance movements, very similar to those that Verdery (cited in Humphrey 1995) asserts were created by popular consumption. As the following testimony shows, state controls were unable to permeate long established social support networks, destroy the mutual trust and co-operation underpinning them, or quash popular creativity and resourcefulness:

I remember one thing, [my daughter] had her first communion and I invited many people for a party. That was at a time of food shortages, and I had a table full of food there, there was no place to put anything more.

Q: Where did this food come from?

A few things I was getting from shops, sausages or something. I told you meat I was getting from farms. I learned how to do ham, I was preparing this myself, I was getting it from somebody who was smoking it, and I had my own ham which was really brilliant. Even now I am doing my own pâté, or I bake some meat to get a ham taste. I used to prepare a lot of things like that. Sometimes I was buying things that were available, and you do something from that. If you don't have something you always work it out from whatever you have. And also when it is a more difficult time, the people are more friendly and it is a bigger operation with others. I had a lot of friends, if somebody had something I didn't have, and I needed to have it because I was giving a party or something, they were

giving me and I was giving them, and we shared things. (Polish woman, 2003)

Memories of food in socialist Poland, however, do not entirely revolve around implicit narratives of struggles with the regime; food is remembered just as much for its celebratory connotations as for its shortages. As the above testimony reveals, special occasions were not undermined by a lack of food, but rather reinforced by the sheer effort expended to ensure their continuation. Even everyday food is remembered positively: "There was not any exotic fruit or anything like that so mum used to fry onion, slice onion and fry it, and have it with bread or something. I remember I ate bread with lard; it was very popular, with sugar or salt, freshly baked" (Polish man 2003).

Interestingly, while the shops could be empty during the year, provisions were always available for Easter and Christmas: "Special traditions there was always things, shops were supplied specially for Christmas and Easter, you could buy things, oranges" (Polish man, 2003). Given the centrality of these religious celebrations to representations of national identity in Poland, this was most likely an attempt to avert mass public unrest. Furthermore, the collected testimonies illustrate that food provided by the state for certain occasions was well received: any notion of personal resistance did not prevent a pragmatic embracing of whatever food was available. As the same man remembered, the summer camps organised each year were openly used for the practical purposes of 'fattening up' the children: "I used to go to this holiday camp, it was like the time when the children had to gain weight in the holidays, so they were weighed before, and were weighed after, and they recorded it, who was gaining more weight" (Polish man, 2003). As the following account of gifts presented at state parties reveals, even within the context of shortages, memories of food can be both positive and evocative:

When I was young I used to go to such parties, and the presents were sweets, or sometimes very small toys, and I remember there were always oranges there. I remember we never had an orange all year, but we always each of us had an orange for Christmas. I remember 'til now the scent of the orange, because when you opened this box it was usually the size of a shoebox, it was like a chocolate there, an orange, some

nuts, some biscuits, all different things that you really didn't have during the year. (Polish woman, 2003)

To conclude, food in socialist Poland has to be contextualized through the wider culture of political control and reduced social autonomy. Under the socialist regime the consumption of food could not escape political connotations, whether it was through official propaganda, or the need and desire to find an alternative to state provision. Perhaps more significant, however, is the assertion that everyday life continued almost unhindered by the food mismanagement of the regime. Even when something as fundamental as food supplies were threatened, life carried on. These interviews have demonstrated that choices in socialist Poland, food orientated and otherwise, did not necessarily have to polarize between supporting the state or mobilizing against it. Lives could be lived in two different spheres, through official institutions and, simultaneously, informal networks and contacts, perhaps facilitated by a comparatively relaxed political culture. Patterns and experiences of food consumption offer an important example of this duality in everyday life, illuminating the course of daily interactions both within the official sphere of the state, and outside of it.

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