

BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT: DEALING WITH TRANSFORMATION IN RURAL POLAND

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This article discusses experiences of postsocialist transformation in rural Poland. It is based on a year-long ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a peripheral region of southern Poland. Its inhabitants today face problems of unemployment and instability, as not only were state-owned farms closed but the new political-economic order and Poland's accession to the European Union have caused a radical reshaping of the agricultural sector. However, rather than being passive observers of these ongoing changes, people are determined to have some say and to shape their own lives and the place they inhabit. This article argues that a fruitful way of studying these processes is through a focus on local leaders and civil society activists. Examining new forms of social organization, cooperation, and leadership, it describes local people's ability to creatively draw on their socialist experiences, adapting them to new contexts and transforming them into innovative strategies for coping with new challenges. Beyond exploring local people's narratives of socialism and their assessments of present-day developments, the article also questions some widespread assumptions regarding the role of rural areas in the process of postsocialist transformation.

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This article discusses experiences of postsocialist transformation¹ in rural Poland. It is based on a year-long ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a peripheral region in

¹ In my article, I speak about "transformation" rather than "transition," following the observations of those scholars who recognize that the paradigm of transition means focusing on the final end rather than on the process of getting there (see Burawoy and Verdery 1999:14–15; Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, and Rychard 2000:19).

southern Poland. Its inhabitants today face problems of unemployment and instability, as not only were state-owned farms closed but the new political-economic order and Poland's accession to the European Union have caused a radical reshaping of the agricultural sector. At the same time, however, rather than being passive observers of these ongoing changes, people are determined to have some say and to shape their own lives and the place they inhabit. In so doing, they develop a range of "coping strategies," drawn from past experiences, by means of which they deal with new challenges. This article argues that a fruitful way of studying all these processes is through a focus on local leaders and civil society activists. Exploring their narratives of socialism and their assessments of present-day developments, I put forward three strongly entangled arguments.

First, drawing on recent debates on civil society in postsocialist countries, I propose to reexamine civic activities in relation to the state and to look for the preconditions for collective civic actions in socialist societies. In addition, I argue that a problem requiring careful consideration is the question of individual practices as bases of civil society. Second, taking under scrutiny the biographies of three local leaders, I demonstrate that socialist experience "enters the present not as a legacy but as a novel adaptation" (Burawoy and Verdery 1999:4). Examining new forms of social organization, cooperation, and leadership, I describe local people's ability to creatively draw on their socialist experiences, adapting them to new contexts and transforming them into innovative "coping" strategies. Third, this paper asks to what extent the practices and discourses described should be seen as specific to the postsocialist period and to what extent they are longer-term strategies developed over centuries by inhabitants of marginalized areas. Furthermore, all these arguments invite critical engagement with an idea widespread in Polish journalism and scholarly writing—namely, a conviction that the inhabitants of rural areas have unable to successfully adapt to the new socioeconomic context or to actively participate in the process of change after 1989.

The paper starts with a short description of my fieldsite. Next, I provide some theoretical remarks on the concept of civil society and reflections on why approaching postsocialism through the problem of civil society may shed new light on present-day developments. This section concludes with observations regarding the scholarly and journalistic discourse on rural areas. What follows is the ethnographic evidence, which aims to illustrate the functioning of civil society in a postsocialist rural context, paying special attention to the role of local leaders.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

I carried out my year-long ethnographic fieldwork² in the commune³ of Uście Gorlickie, situated in the Małopolska region, which lies at the border with Slovakia in the

² My research methodology comprised participant observation, interviews and life stories, archival research, and a photographic workshop with students at local schools.

³ The commune denotes here an administrative unit (region—district—commune—village).

mountainous area called Lower Beskid. Uście Gorlickie is one of the biggest communes in Poland, but it is also one of the least populated; the commune's 6,500 inhabitants live in twenty villages, of which nineteen count as separate administrative units (*sotectwo*). Traditionally, Uście Gorlickie was an agricultural commune; however, for the reasons outlined below, its economy has recently shifted towards the tourist and service sectors. Although an analysis of the ethnoreligious landscape is not the main focus of this article, it is worth pointing out that the commune is religiously and ethnically diverse.⁴

During the socialist period, many people combined work on their own farms⁵ with employment on a state-owned farm (*Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne*; hereafter *PGR*), while those who ran only their own farms looked for additional sources of income, for example from woodwork, food trade in neighboring towns, and different kinds of seasonal labor. Assessing their economic situation in the socialist period, a majority of inhabitants admit that apart from a few periods of hardship they lived relatively well. This is not to say that they deny the problems and difficulties of life under socialism or reject the post-1989 transformation, but their recollections of socialism are far from black and white. In presenting the different factors which made the experience of socialism "bearable," they come close to what Gerald Creed (1998) defines as the "contradicting complementarity" of the socialist realm. First, since they were self-sufficient in terms of food, they did not experience the food shortages of the late 1970s and 1980s—at least not to the extent as did the inhabitants of Polish cities. Second, they claim that due to the area's peripheral location, the regime's policies were not strongly felt there. Men would tell me that nobody seemed interested in joining them in bars or outside shops, where they would chat over a bottle of beer, and thus they felt free to speak their minds. Women would corroborate this by noting that authorities seemed even less interested in what was going on at rural housewives' evening gatherings, during which they used to sew and chat. And third, in their narratives of the socialist period they describe a variety of everyday "coping strategies" which the local community developed in order to overcome difficulties and shortages (such as, for example, a lack of building materials or different kinds of control over farms)—strategies frequently developed "in cooperation" with local state authorities (cf. Pasięka 2012).

Today, the number of people making a living from agriculture is in decline. The changes of 1989 and the closure of *PGRs* resulted in increased unemployment, yet the impact has not been as drastic as in other regions of Poland. Many of the former state-farm workers continue to draw a pension, while others continue to work part-time, in or outside their villages. The younger generations have a greater range of options: some commute to neighboring towns and work in the service sector, others move to big cities (leaving the rest of the family at home and returning to the village

⁴ It is inhabited by seven religious communities (Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Orthodox, Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Buddhists) and two ethnic groups (Poles and Lemkos-Ukrainians).

⁵ Unlike in other Eastern Bloc countries, private property persisted in Poland under socialism.

once or twice a month), or choose temporary migration. Among those considered to be lucky are people who have managed to set up their own businesses and state employees who work in local schools, the commune's offices, or in medical centers.⁶ Another relatively well-off group are people working in tourism: owners of guesthouses, agritourist farms, and restaurants. Undoubtedly, the most likely and beneficial employment option is a combination of the occupations mentioned above. It is common among couples that one spouse will take care of the house and farm (which includes a small piece of land and some animals), while the other spouse has a permanent job outside the home; yet it is equally common for both spouses to have occupations outside the home and deal with farm work in the mornings and evenings. Many of my informants stress that people in this region have always struggled to make a living and have always found inventive ways to make ends meet. Nonetheless, they also stress that there is no real poverty today and contradict the view that there are no jobs, stating that there is work but what is lacking is the will to do it.

Apart from the post-1989 changes to the economy, a development that has had a great impact on the commune's life has been Poland's accession to the European Union. Indeed, an analysis of contemporary developments seems to confirm the findings of Fedyszak-Radziejowska (2009), who claims that 2004, and not 1989, was the watershed moment for the Polish countryside and Polish agriculture, as it brought both structural funds for individual farms and subsidies for the modernization of villages. Moreover, as a result of EU policies, the commune became part of the "Nature 2000" program, which imposes a number of constraints and regulations on, for example, the use of fertilizers, milk standards and quotas, and the construction of houses. Despite subsidies for "ecological farming," there is much criticism of these very exacting EU regulations. At the same time, inhabitants acknowledge the positive developments in their villages—especially those which improved infrastructure—and they are likely to attribute these to European Union funds and programs. Undoubtedly, the EU-related developments are of particular importance for a discussion of "postsocialist societies." On the one hand, they constitute yet another factor which accounts for the variation in postsocialist paths (marking distinctions not only between those countries which joined EU and those which did not, but also between "more" and "less" successful accessions), and, on the other hand, they make us reflect on the validity of foregrounding the "postsocialist" aspect against, for example, the "post-accession" one.⁷

Overall, people's attitudes towards the "present times" are quite ambiguous: many inhabitants are nostalgic about the socialist era (or rather about some features

⁶ Although employment by the state is not particularly well paid, it is perceived to be profitable and stable.

⁷ Yet another issue worth mentioning is people's tendency to draw similarities between the socialist and the "European" experience. Local inhabitants remark, for example, that present-day bureaucracy is not better than the one remembered from the socialist period or suggest that the communist ideology has been replaced by "ecology ideology." Importantly, a similar tendency is also observable in political discourse, especially among right-wing and anti-European parties, which compare the "rule of Brussels" to the "rule of Moscow."

of the era; see Pasięka 2012), but they also gladly admit to the range of new opportunities that recent years have brought. Also, while they complain that their region is neglected, old and young inhabitants unanimously admit that the streets, buildings, and public places in the villages have never been as trim as they are now. Indeed, walking through the villages of Uście means walking past well-kept houses and neat courtyards, clean pathways and playgrounds, renovated and modernized communal buildings, mushrooming guesthouses and tourist attractions, which attest to both the authorities' policies and people's attitudes towards the locality. Lastly, although the inhabitants miss the sociability they remember from the times of the People's Poland, the commune's social life remains both lively and diverse. The commune organizes many fairs and folk festivals during spring and summer, and in the autumn and winter months village leaders, school teachers, priests, circles of rural housewives, and local musicians join forces for celebrations of annual events, such as Seniors' Day, Women's Day, Carnival, and Shrove Tuesday. The presence of different religious and ethnic groups makes the calendar even richer in celebrations.

What is especially worth emphasizing and most relevant to my article are the dynamics of the local public sphere and local civic activities. As indicated above, local actors are people of different professions and backgrounds, who, driven by different experiences and motivations, join forces in setting up various community initiatives. They are actively supported by the members of the local council; in fact, the activities of the local council account for the close relations between the state's administrative duties and the civic ones. A close link between the two is a widespread tendency on the local level (e.g., Frączak and Skrzypiec 2010). These two factors—the question of the experiences and motivations behind undertaking civic activities and their position between the state and the domestic realm, yet not strictly separated from either of them (Hann 2002)—are what I find to be the most inspiring point of departure for the topic of this special issue: for a discussion on “the creative ways people inhabit their new situations” and “the multiple paths through which people reconfigure the socialist past in alternative strategies for the present.”⁸ A detailed exploration of this issue follows in the next section.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND POSTSOCIALISM

In a recent study, Webber and Liikanen (2001:1) observe two trends in current debates on civil society in postsocialist countries: examinations of civic activities in relation to the state and studies of preconditions for collective action in socialist societies. In other words, they indicate two tendencies which challenge the dichotomous view which used to dominate in discussions on civil society: in the first case a strict opposition between state and civil society, and in the second the idea that civil society developed differently in Western and Eastern Europe with the implication of a lack or impossibility of civil society in the latter. These two approaches summarize a debate on civil society carried out mainly by anthropologists working in postsocialist

⁸ As formulated by Caterina Borelli and Fabio Mattioli (<http://www.nomadit.co.uk/easa/easa2012/panels.php5?PanelID=1052>).

and postcolonial states who argue against the Gellnerian idea that a market economy and modernity is a precondition for civil society (cf. Hann 2004; Kubik 2000; Layton 2004), challenging sociological analyses of “cultural patterns” (cf. Harris’s 2003 critique of Fukuyama; Schneider and Schneider’s 2005 critique of Putnam). They call for an investigation of “local patterns of sociality” and local “analogues” of civil society (Hann 1996, 2004) as well as for rediscovering the constituents of civil societies in a country’s history (Hann 2003; Skąpska 1997), for instance in the similarities between the role played by local communities and civil society (Parekh 2004). They also stress the potential role of families and informal networks as platforms for civic activities (Buchowski 1996) and the importance of religious associations (Kubik 2000). In this way, these scholars argue against the separation of civil society from both “domestic society” and the state (Kubik 2000), inviting us to rethink the public-private division and encouraging the inclusion of informal civic activities in research agendas. Expanding the concept of civil society, Hann proposes to understand it as “a broad flow of social activity, the study of which has always been central to anthropology, between the domestic sphere on the one hand and the state on the other, but not sharply separable from either of these” (2002:9). In a similar manner yet emphasizing the purpose of civil society, Layton approaches it as “the social structures occupying the space between the household and the state that enable people to co-ordinate their management of resources and activities” (2004:22; 2006). Importantly, then, this reconsideration of the concept of civil society stresses its connection with both the state and the private sphere while not precluding its political character. On the contrary, it enables us to view civil society as a political sphere, marked by negotiations, debates, and diverse interests.

Yet, a discussion of civil society is not my aim with this article; what I strive to do is to use this scholarly debate as a means of investigating postsocialist transformation. Certainly, my study of local civil society begins from the above premises and gives credit to the importance of the “anthropological turn” in the study of civil society. However, while building on these discussions of civil society, I focus my attention on the issue of individual agency, which, in my view, has seldom been given enough consideration. Multiple understandings of civil society—attempts to define its place, shape, role, and the possibility of “measuring” its quality—have paid relatively little attention to the issue of who carries and leads civil society and to those individual and communal actions that constitute civil society on an everyday basis. Perhaps it is due to this lack of attention to the “human factor” that the concept of civil society has become reified and is often considered to be meaningless. Although the human factor is taken for granted—the notion of civil society without human activity is simply preposterous—it is precisely this assumption of involvement that leads to a neglect of the individual dimension and weakens the analytical and descriptive value of the concept. This oversight means that civil society seems to have suddenly come into existence out of nothing or—as is very common in analyses of postsocialist democracies—to have been “parachuted” into the local context. In

other words, what is overlooked is the local history, understood as the history of actual people performing actual activities which developed into civil society deeds over time.⁹

Importantly, such an approach to civil society mirrors debates on the “arrival” of neoliberalism in Eastern Europe. Engaging critically with the view of “parachuted” neoliberalism, many scholars emphasize the dynamic relations between new ideologies and practices and preexisting structures. Presenting the situation in a privatized Polish factory, Dunn argues (1999:126) that neoliberal ideology is “filtered through local cultural formations and historical experiences.” In a similar vein, discussing the situation in Slovakia, Smith and Rochovská (2007) focus on the process of “domestication” of neoliberalism, which entails reworking established practices and networks of relations for a new context. Drawing on Michael Burawoy’s work, they emphasize that the study of neoliberal attempts to “remake person’s” needs to be accompanied by a focus on “assets”—skills, networks, professions—which are used by people as they attempt to “create and maintain cohesive communities,” make their new reality “more tolerable,” or simply “get by” (Smith and Rochovská 2007:1176). All these reflections undoubtedly constitute an important point of reference for an analysis of civic activities in the postsocialist context.

Thus, two interrelated questions are important here: the issue of how such locally grounded practices continue through time and the issue of individual agency. The first issue has been addressed by the aforementioned researchers of civil society, who argue that it is possible to speak about civil society in socialist systems. Their understandings of this issue differ: while some cite forms of civil society which were “by-products” of socialist policies (Buchowski 1996), others claim that, rather than building civil society, socialism failed to destroy already existing traditions of civic activity (Skąpska 1997). The ethnographic data presented below show that these two interpretations do not necessarily contradict each other. Some practices and institutions can be seen as showing both continuation and innovation or as following certain patterns that are activated and modified for new purposes, within the frame of current situations and current needs. In reference to the above discussion on the “domestication” of neoliberalism, they can also be approached as “assets” that people use while adapting to and making the best of their new situation. Connecting these observations with the second issue, namely the question of individual agency, it needs to be stressed that what makes these processes possible is the transmission of locally developed “ways of doing.” And thus the question requiring further exploration is this: who are the people who make up civil society?

SPOŁECZNICY AND THE PURSUIT OF THE COMMON GOOD

The attempt to comprehend this phenomenon meets a linguistic difficulty, namely the lack of an English equivalent for the Polish concept of *spółecznik* (plural

⁹ While stressing this aspect, I do not question the fact that people’s agency has to be always seen in relation to various structural constrains. Quite the contrary, I believe that by bringing to the fore the acting subjects and focusing on civic activities in historical perspectives it is possible to display the dual character of human practices (structure and agency).

społecznicy).¹⁰ Neither “community worker” nor “social activist” conveys the full resonances of this word (cf. Malewska-Peyre and Londe-Tarbes 1997:354). *Społecznik* denotes a person who acts selflessly for the benefit of a community; its meaning derives from the notion of society (*społeczeństwo*); the term has numerous historical and literary connotations, especially positivistic ideas of “organic work.” I refer to it here as both an emic and an etic term. Local people I talked to use this term to describe those of their coinhabitants whom they consider to be particularly devoted to and engaged with local life, whom they praise for their strong rooting in the place they inhabit. In becoming familiar with the work of local activists, I too found the notion of *społecznik* the most suitable to reflect the character and scope of their doings. Interestingly, though, just as some civil societies tend not to “fit” the definition promoted by civil society “agents,” the life trajectories of every local leader might not fit the *społecznik* model.

A good example of this fact is a recent article entitled “A biography of a *społecznik*” (“Biografia społecznikowska”), published in a volume dedicated to local communities (Palska and Lewenstein 2004). Although the authors draw on interviews with NGO leaders to present their findings, they tend to generalize their conclusions to all kinds of Polish activists. They emphasize the importance of “family tradition,” “rich cultural capital,” “patriotic upbringing,” and “elite education.” The people they describe are former scouts, dissidents, and (great-)grandchildren of insurgents who fought for Polish independence during wars and uprisings. But above all, being a *społecznik* means, according to the authors, the cultivation of an “ethos of the Polish intelligentsia,” and thus the entire analysis of the activists’ biographies, starting from their families’ (intelligentsia) origins, is centered on this issue. As with any “ideal type,” the one drawn by Palska and Lewenstein (2004) constitutes a more or less accurate reflection of reality. However, although their observations would likely apply in many contexts, they ignore numerous others. They leave aside the experiences of throngs of social activists, whom Palska and Lewenstein barely mention, limiting themselves to the statement: “[*społeczniczy*] rarely have a peasant or a working-class background.” Regardless of the fact that the authors’ findings are, at least in part, a result of selection bias, the portrait of *społecznik* they draw reflects, intentionally or not, a trend that is widespread in present-day journalistic and scholarly writing: the conviction that the inhabitants of rural areas are unable to successfully adapt to the new socioeconomic order and to actively participate in post-1989 transformation. Consequently, contemporary Polish society is being (discursively) divided into “active” and “passive,” “modern” and “backward” citizens, those who bear “good” and “bad” social capital.

Such statements have been recently severely criticized by many rural sociologists and anthropologists, who not only prove them to be loaded with stereotypes, myths, and unfair assessments, but who demonstrate that the actual relation between the rural areas and the rest of the country is the opposite of what is commonly believed (Bukraba-Rylska 2009, 2011; Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2010; Mikiwicz and Szafranec 2009). For

¹⁰ The notion corresponds to the Russian concept of *obshchestvennik*.

instance, Bukraba-Rylska makes the important observation that “the most general approach which asserts that the countryside is a debtor in this relationship should be replaced with an assertion that the Polish countryside is, in fact, a creditor for the rest of the Polish society and that this relationship resembles that between Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* and his portrait” (2009:576). According to these scholars, lack of recognition of this fact results from the “tools of measurement”¹¹ as well as from Polish intellectuals’ astonishing unwillingness to (strive to) understand their own society. Putting forward such a claim, Fedyszak-Radziejowska (2010) states that “nowhere in Europe is there an opinion-maker elite, which would be so reluctant to get to know the problems of its own countryside”; while Bukraba-Rylska (2011) interprets this situation in Gramscian terms, seeing in the simplistic discourse on the rural areas a tool that permits the elite to perpetuate “cultural hegemony” and to naturalize the discourse on “winners” and “losers” of transformation. Analyzing different dimensions of life in the countryside—such as economic development, levels of social trust, and engagement with local matters—these scholars present rural inhabitants as excelling in various processes brought by the transformation.

Undoubtedly, this kind of criticism and invitation to embrace a more complex perspective may seem obvious for anthropologists who tend to question the rural/urban divide and, more generally, an elitist perspective on society. However, I find it important to bring up this issue here for two reasons. First, I believe that the discourse presented above exemplifies some broader aspects of postsocialist transformation in different countries. One of them is, in my view, the aforementioned practice of “internal societal orientalization” (Buchowski 2006:466). Second, by bringing up this point I want to call attention to the question of what role anthropological knowledge and ethnographic perspective play in widening our understanding of postsocialist changes. Its importance goes beyond bringing in the oft-repeated grassroots perspective and consists in raising our awareness of the multidimensionality of studied phenomena—that is, the necessity of looking for long-term implications, diverse causes, and multiple conditionings of observed facts and behaviors. Besides, the ethnographic perspective permits us to grasp best the “domestication” of new sociopolitical systems and their constitution through everyday lives and practices (cf. Smith and Rochovská 2007).

Thus, in explaining the readiness of rural inhabitants to act for their locality, anthropologists highlight the character of social ties and traditions of mutual help, the role of local leaders (who are perceived to be “one of us”), and the importance of historical experiences which made rural inhabitants self-sufficient and reliant on local resources (cf. Mikiewicz and Szafraniec 2009:119). In other words, the Polish countryside is—and has always been—molded by different kinds of *społeczniczy*. They may be farmers, entrepreneurs, parish priests, village leaders, teachers, members of circles of rural housewives—it is such people that I present in the following section, discussing the experiences of a member of the local council (Miron), a school

¹¹ For instance, despite the fact that the discussion on different understandings of “civil society” has been taking place for a long time, the “condition” of civil society is still measured by the number of NGOs.

director (Franek), and an agritouristic association head (Irka). These people differ in terms of profession, education, and socioeconomic status, but what brings them together is their will to act upon the place they inhabit. They do not need to set up an organization, yet more and more often they decide to formalize their activity in order to get funds for various endeavors—whether it be renovation of a walking path or playground, organization of summer leisure for needy children, or promotion of local traditions and heritage. In realizing those aims, local people are sometimes supported by local authorities, sometimes receive EU funds, and sometimes rely on their own resources: they work in turns, lend each other necessary equipment, or organize money/gift collections to finance new undertakings.

At the same time, however, such activities do not necessarily imply idyllic cooperation and harmonious coexistence of the local community. The activities of *społecznicy* entail negotiations, discussions, and disputes on how to best handle the community's best interests and find the best solutions. And it is precisely the dialogue between these different positions and ideas that is the engine of local initiatives and the best evidence that these different biographies, different life experiences, and different motivations are vital prerequisites for the richness of local initiatives. Such an understanding of the community's best interests corresponds with the idea of common good put forward by political and social philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre (see Rehg 2007). Discussing the social conception of the common good, Rehg (2007:10–11) argues that there exist irreducibly social goods that involve benefits and excellence on the part of the group as a whole. However, he does not undermine individual benefits drawn from joint activities and endeavors. Rather, he highlights those cases wherein individual excellence is achieved most fully through the joint one and wherein collective excellence determines what counts as individual achievement (13). Furthermore, referring to Taylor's and MacIntyre's works, he emphasizes the role of both "shared culture and tradition" and individuals' "contributions, ongoing criticism, and innovations" in establishing what is to be perceived and pursued as a "common good" (13). Thus, Rehg's proposal offers a dynamic approach to the common good, an approach that does not preclude negotiations and disagreements and that perceives common values and interests as products—and not only preconditions—of joint activities.

In order to illustrate all these reflections, I proceed now with presenting the biographies of three local leaders. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that these three cases may be very informative about wider social experiences of postsocialist transformation. Thus, it is not my aim to juxtapose the activity of these people with that of the rest of the population. Quite the contrary, not only do I argue that their civic activities need to be seen alongside those of other inhabitants, but I show that they result from and depend on local cooperation.¹²

¹² Referring to the above discussion on common good, I would like to stress once again that I am far from suggesting an idyllic view of local cooperation or an incontestable support for the community's leaders. Discussing the social conception of common good, Rehg explains: "This does not mean the group acts as a single unit in its exercise of authority. Rather, the authority of the group is distributed unequally among members, some of whom have accrued a kind of individual

MIRON, FRANEK, AND IRKA

Miron, a sixty-year-old inhabitant of Uście, is undoubtedly one of the best-known people in the region. He was born in a small village to a farming family. This outspoken and self-confident man started his professional career as a supervisor of local agricultural cooperatives. One of his duties was to visit local farms and control both the quality and the quantity of agricultural products. Yet, Miron's understanding of "control" differed from what this notion would commonly entail; he attempted not only to supervise farmers' work but to help farmers to hide—from higher-level authorities—shortcomings and lack of production. Such kind of control was particularly important in the periods of economic hardship and in the context of some specific life events, such as weddings or funerals, when local inhabitants needed to preserve more food products for their own use. This does not mean, however, that Miron acted against the authorities or that he had poor relations with them. Quite the contrary, he contended that in order to "make things work," some kind of collaboration with the authorities was necessary and the role he assigned for himself was that of a mediator.

The work of supervisor had several important outcomes. First, Miron got to know the entire commune. In our talk, he frequently repeated, with a roguish smile on his face: "I know everything about each house in this commune: where to have a good chat, where to have a good dinner, and where to have good sex." Second, despite the fact that the quoted opinion might not make all the (male) inhabitants happy, thanks to his knowledge of the area Miron gained people's trust and respect. And third, due to his role as mediator, he became an experienced and skillful political player. All these factors influenced the election of Miron as one of key members of the local council. Considering that he has been elected three times since 2000, his performance must have been successful. Asked about the reasons why they voted for Miron, interviewees would usually provide me with similar explanations: "he is one of us," "he knows our commune so well," or "he loves the area".

Indeed, my encounters with Miron confirmed these opinions. Although he is often absent due to his job (much of his time is spent in travels and meetings at the regional level where he promotes the commune), he seems to be very up-to-date about most recent developments in the respective villages. He would provide me, for instance, with detailed information regarding levels of unemployment, migration patterns, or school performance in different localities. He gains this insight from talks with suppliants and from village meetings, which he holds in every village once or twice a year. Participation in several of such meetings was for me a great opportunity to observe him and to understand what contributed to his success. On the one hand, he would present himself as a local leader aware of the problems and needs of inhabitants but also of abuses and dishonest behavior. He would not hesitate to criticize some residents and, while condemning tax evasion or lack of care for the

interpretive authority in virtue of widely recognized demonstrations of excellence. Such authorities have displayed a level of interpretive competence that qualifies them, in the eyes of others, as experts on the practice and its commonable concepts and values. Their interpretations are broadly regarded as reliable, or at least as deserving serious consideration" (2007:14–15).

environment, he would always refer to the notion of common good and benefit to the community. On the other hand, however, this attitude of the local leader went alongside a very friendly and democratic approach. Miron would intertwine criticism with jokes, attempt to stave off disputes among neighbors, and highlight the contribution of every single inhabitant to the local community's life.

It is important to mention that due to the function Miron performs and his busy schedule, our interactions differed from those I had with other inhabitants. Since conducting a "regular" interview turned out to be impossible, I would try to catch him for a short talk during different occasions (such as village meetings or my visits at the commune's office) and simply observe his interactions with other people. As mentioned above, what impressed me during our talks was his broad knowledge about the region and its inhabitants. No less important was his fascination with agriculture and forestry and his dedication to local development. When it came to Miron's communication with other inhabitants, I was caught by his very personal attitude towards others.

During fairs and festivities Miron would move from one table to another, striving to have conversations with as many people as possible, and during village meetings he would do a great job describing in detail the achievements of different inhabitants (whether these were promising entrepreneurs, folk artists, or young athletes). Such an attitude should not be evaluated exclusively as a personal quality but seen in a broader context of rural life. Intimacy and depth of social relations, as well as a holistic view of other people, are often highlighted as characteristic of rural societies.

Yet another interesting observation with regard to Miron's work is the fact that his and his colleagues' activities often go beyond the duties of the local council. Organization of sociocultural life, the ways the networks of social help are established and functioning, and the record of programs and grants obtained by the council—for purposes as different as the improvement of local infrastructure, developments of leadership skills, or preventing unemployment and violence—all these dimensions of local life account for the aforementioned connection between administrative and civic activities. In other words, a good deal of the activities performed by the local council is not determined by the state's regulations but depends on the council members' wish to act upon their locality. This and the above examples account for the connections between civil society, the state, and the domestic sphere. More broadly, they also demonstrate that the context of postsocialist transformation and people's experiences of sociopolitical changes are good lenses through which to study this interconnection.

Similar observations can be made with regard to the employees of local grammar schools, whom I would like to describe by presenting the example of one headmaster. Franek, a cheerful man in his forties, has been working as a physical education teacher for nearly twenty years. He was born in Uście Gorlickie in a working-class family. After his studies and military service, he decided to go back to the area and take a job at one of local grammar schools. He is married to one of the teachers with whom he has two children, and he is widely respected as a good neighbor and colleague. Due to his engagement in school activities, several years ago he was appointed as

school headmaster and he has successfully performed this function ever since. In order to understand the importance of this position, it is crucial to emphasize that in the village realm school plays a multitude of roles, going well beyond strictly educational aims.¹³ The school is a platform for local sociocultural activities and a venue for meetings. Moreover, the school's director is in charge of distributing monthly social aid as well as providing people with important announcements and information regarding local government's current initiatives. For all these reasons, Franek has insight into inhabitants' lives, making him a great guide to local life.

My interactions with Franek involved both more and less formal conversations (recorded interviews as well as unstructured chats) and shared participation in diverse school activities, ranging from everyday classes to yearly festivals. All these encounters let me identify foundations of his work for the village, which I shall now summarize paying particular attention to the question of (dis)continuities between socialist and postsocialist eras.

For Franek, being a school teacher also means being an educator (*wychowawca*), and school is an institution that children should leave equipped not only with knowledge but with ideas and guidelines on moral and ethical issues, such as responsibility, civic duties, and respect for others. Taking into account the fact that the school is located in a multireligious and multiethnic area, the latter issue is of fundamental importance. That is why Franek maintains that one of his main aims is to teach children "real tolerance"—a tolerance that does not mean "to bow to each other" but to show "a selfless respect for others." What is also crucial to emphasize, is the fact that Franek and his fellow teachers aim to shape children as both state citizens and residents of their villages: while acting in the name of a state institution, he strongly advocates for and develops children's attachment to the region. He encourages people to take part in the national elections and to be active in the local public sphere, as both of these enable them to have a say in and influence over their lives.

Generally, his assessment of current developments is mixed; while recognizing some dysfunctions and weaknesses of present-day social life, he always tries to find some "bright side" and suggest means by which problems can be addressed and the situation improved. For instance, he admits the decline of sociability in terms of both informal neighborly interactions and village meetings, yet he is far from drawing a picture of an atomized society that is no longer able to communicate and cooperate. Rather, what Franek emphasizes is the fact that it was not the will and need to communicate that has disappeared, but the means that have changed. (He is referring here to the "telephones that ruined social life"—a constant refrain of local, especially elderly, inhabitants.) Franek also stresses that while in the past many initiatives were born spontaneously, today similar activities demand a well-defined leadership and division of responsibilities, which results from a very pragmatic fact—namely, new opportunities to apply for grant funding. He thus acknowledges that locally developed

¹³ As I mention further, the school played equally important role in socialist times. However, the fact that the end of socialism brought the end of many institutions has only made the school ever more important.

networks of cooperation may be maintained only if “reworked anew” for the contemporary context (cf. Smith and Rochovská 2007). Still, his belief in local cooperation does not prevent him from being critical towards the inhabitants and disapproving of people’s reluctance to work for the local community. He strongly criticizes local people’s tendency to complain about the lack of money (“Ah, this mentality of the Polish nation, or maybe of all Slavs—they would complain even if they had millions”) or about the lack of jobs which results in an abuse of social assistance (“If a man receives a fish, he eats it, but if he gets a fishing rod, he has to learn how to fish”).

Likewise, Franek’s views on the socialist era are very complex. He recognizes all the dysfunctions of the previous political regime and supports the new system. However, he is very critical of the simplistic dismantling of the “remains” of the previous order, especially those that had little to do with the state’s ideology. What he regrets most is the dissolution of the Scout movement, which constituted a great opportunity to teach children cooperation, responsibility, not to mention a variety of practical skills. He attempts, however, to preserve the tradition of scouting by organizing frequent hikes and rallies in the area. What Franek recognizes as particularly valuable is the fact that, due to the scarcity of resources, in socialist times the school became a “common good” of the villagers. Being a product of joint practices and care, it enabled inhabitants to realize and pursue common interests and values: providing educational opportunities for all children, making the school a venue for social meetings, having a sense of responsibility and acting in solidarity. Illustrating this fact with records from the school’s chronicle, he would recount to me in detail different “social deeds” and joint works which the inhabitants carried out for the school. Also, he would emphasize that it was in the socialist time that different local actors—the school, parishes, local associations, and administrators—started to work together. For instance, the circle of rural housewives would help to organize summer camps, some of the parishes would sponsor the awards for sport competitions, while the Forest Administration would supply the school with wood. Such examples undoubtedly account for the complexity of local civic activities and the necessity to problematize state/civil society and formal/informal dichotomies.

Even if carried out by different means, similar forms of cooperation exist today. Practices of voluntary work for the school as well as networks of cooperation among different local actors constitute important “remains” from the socialist period, which current leaders such as Franek adeptly use in the new circumstances. At the same time, however, it is important to notice that the idea of common good thus conceived—tied around notions of togetherness and solidarity¹⁴—seems to be characteristic of rural communities in general, and especially of communities experiencing transitions. For example, High’s (2006) description of joint works in rural Laos bears many similarities with the picture presented herein. An issue of

¹⁴ It can be argued that the notion of “solidarity” (*solidarność*) has a broader meaning in Polish than in English. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, “solidarity” denotes “agreement between and support for the members of a group.” According to the *PWN Polish Dictionary*, *solidarność* means “the sense of community and co-responsibility which result from common aspirations and beliefs” and “common responsibility for a common commitment.”

particular importance, common to both contexts, is the often contradictory behavior of local actors who eagerly act for the locality while claiming to be tired of the place they live, are proud of their local leaders yet complain about their overzealousness (cf. High 2006:31, 36). This observation alerts us to the necessity of a dynamic understanding of common good and recognition of its negotiable and even contestable nature.

While Franek considers being a teacher his vocation, the factors that stimulated Irka to act were her own children and her desire to earn money for their education. In the early 1990s, when the commune's inhabitants faced problems of unemployment, this energetic and enterprising woman decided to take the initiative. Having recruited a group of friends and neighbors, she established an association which brought together local agritouristic farms. The aim of the association was to both provide inhabitants with work and improve their material situation as well as to promote their village and the commune. Hence, the activities of the association quickly spread, involving more and more inhabitants. On the occasions of touristic fairs and folk festivals, the association was supported by local circles of rural housewives, folk ensembles, and artisans who were jointly promoting the commune and whose performances were awarded numerous prizes by regional authorities and organizers. In the late 1990s, when Irka's husband was elected village leader, she encouraged him to organize the village's first "folkloristic fair." The fair has been organized each summer since then, attended by local people and an increasing number of tourists. Supported by the local government, the fair entered for good into the calendar of events.

During our conversations, Irka would always stress that being a social activist is something one needs to learn. In order to prove this fact, she would show me a chronicle of the association's activities, which today constitutes a thick volume filled with photos, diplomas, and newspaper articles. This material illustrates well the development of the association and the richness of its agenda. Searching through the chronicle, she would compare different leaflets presenting the association. She laughed at her first attempt to promote agritourism—scraps of paper containing a short list of agritouristic farms—and she was proud of the latest ones—beautiful, carefully prepared folders containing detailed information and highlighting the specificity of each place. Hence, Irka stresses that her biography as a social activist is a process of acquiring skills, which went along with an increased zeal to work for the local community. Asked about the beginnings of her social activity, she mentions her membership in the Association of Rural Youth (*Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej*) in the 1970s. She observes that such associations are taken today at best with a grain of salt, but most commonly in a critical and simplistic way—as tools of communist indoctrination. Notwithstanding the fact that the official aim of such organizations was indeed the popularization of the socialist state's ideals, Irka emphasizes that for her and her colleagues membership in the youth association was a lesson in civic attitudes that spurred them to act for their local community. Her view corresponds with the observations of anthropologists who note that socialist associations and organizations were political "on the top" and nonpolitical "on the bottom" (Buchowski 1996). As the head of the association, Irka strove to improve her skills by participating in diverse training courses, such as the training for local leaders or

a series of classes aimed at empowering rural women. Not only did she use these skills in her work, but she shared them with other members. In her accounts of the agritourism association, she also stressed the role of her husband, sons, and sisters, who supported and cocreated the association and who, in one way or another, were all “infected” by the spirit of social activity. These facts account for the aforementioned contention that the civic realm should not be seen as separated from either the domestic sphere or the state.

Irka is today sixty years old and due to a severe illness she can no longer be as active as she would like to be. On the one hand, she finds it important to make room for younger members with more energy, yet, on the other hand, she continues to follow the announcements about competitions and fairs, suggests to younger members of the association her ideas for new projects, and supports them in building on the network of contacts and friendships which she has built over the years. It is also important to note that Irka’s accounts of the association’s activities combine enthusiasm and pessimism. While she is very proud of the younger colleagues who continue her work, she highly disapproves of all those people who would like to profit from the association’s work without dedicating any time and energy and who expect that things will be organized by others. She would also complain about people who disturbed the events organized by the association, for example by littering and making noise during cultural events or simply refusing to help the organizers. Such accounts constitute yet another argument against representations of the common good and civic activities as generally shared and approved values and practices. They invite us to recognize the existence of various dissenting voices and a variety of reasons why leaders’ activities may be contested and rejected. Taking into account both the context of sociopolitical transition and the specificity of rural life, it is important to note that such reasons include not only different life experiences, such as the sense of marginalization and deprivation, but also interpersonal relations: competition, envy, and neighborly squabbles. The intimacy and deepness of social relations which characterizes rural realms is here a double-edged sword. However, it is precisely this complex background that permits us to comprehend the role of local leaders in pursuing a community’s best interest and, at the same time, to recognize the negotiable nature of these interests.

Summing up, Irka shares with Franek a belief in the importance of developing and transmitting the idea of the common good. Likewise, her example proves that present-day leaders draw on their past (socialist) experiences, using them to “inhabit” the new situation. And, as with Miron and Franek, despite some bitter experiences she recognizes the necessity to “reach out” to people, to convince them to cooperate and take responsibility for the local community. This kind of approach undoubtedly resonates with the ideal of *spółecznik*. According to the positivist view, the task of *spółecznik* was precisely to “reach out” to people. Besides, it can be said that this kind of understanding was further strengthened by socialist ideology and EU programs¹⁵ which, in their attempt to craft “neoliberal subjects,” combine an emphasis on local

¹⁵ I owe this observation to Fabio Mattioli.

leadership with the promotion of communitarianism. And finally, Irka's example challenges constructions of the model *społecznik's* social biography, proving that is not an innate "inclination" but something that can be learnt and needs to be shared.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of my article was to discuss Poland's postsocialist transformation through the prism of the experiences of rural inhabitants. In particular, it attended to the realm of civic activities and their connection with the postsocialist transformation. In this way, by presenting the biographies of three local activists, I strove to elucidate some key aspects of postsocialist change. On the one hand, postsocialist change opened many possibilities and a field for new kinds of civic activities, but, on the other hand, it also brought a variety of constraints and generated a need for local leaders to step in and take the initiative. In both sorts of situations, local activists proved capable of creatively reconfiguring their socialist experiences and "assets" for contemporary action. Notwithstanding the post-1989 turmoil, the evidence presented in this paper also suggests that the postsocialist transformation needs to be seen as *one* of several transformations, as *one* of many of such experiences which—whether labeled as "postwar," "postsocialist," or "post-EU"—have compelled local people to develop different "coping strategies."

More specifically, my analysis of civil society in postsocialism has highlighted the role of individuals as actors in civil society. Taking under consideration the biographies of rural activists, I put forward three main arguments. Firstly, departing from the anthropological definition of civil society, I focused on its interconnection with both the state and the domestic sphere. The functioning of such state institutions as the local government or the school is closely connected with civil society activities, and rural inhabitants' activities in the public sphere are often dependent on and strongly supported by the private one. Secondly, I have shown the importance of the transmission and sharing of "good practices": the fact that local leaders not only build on the experiences of past generations but also constructively use their own life experiences in responding to new demands and circumstances. Local people do not reject Poland's "socialist heritage": while they are not uncritical of the previous system, they attempt to preserve from demise those elements which are useful in the present—be they networks of cooperation, skills, or a tradition of "social deeds." Hence, I have argued that while not neglecting "socialist legacies," it is important to "recast them as contemporary questions instead of historical answers" (Creed 1999:240) as well as highlight how people creativity "negotiate and reshape structures within which they live" (Dunn 1999:147). And finally, I have demonstrated that people of different backgrounds, professions, education, and political positions become leaders in the local community and that what connects them is their attachment to the place they inhabit and their will to act for a common good, which, albeit strongly connected with notions of togetherness and solidarity, does not preclude negotiations, disagreements, and changes.

Tying together the question of individual agency and historical trajectories, my article emphasized the importance of local culture and traditions and individuals' contributions in shaping ideas of common good and, as a result, local civic activities. Furthermore, it argued that it is thanks to this diversity that local civic life is rich and alive. Taking into account this diversity, it is important to stress that the three presented trajectories ought not to be seen as exemplary cases but as a means for unpacking wider experiences and explaining the dynamics of postsocialist developments in rural areas. Arguably, the relevance of these cases goes beyond the realm of rural areas and permits us to understand other postsocialist contexts marked by the "domestication" of new ideologies and practices and negotiations of the new order.

Last but not least, all of these features of local activities challenge the elitist views of both rural areas and civil society that dominate contemporary, especially journalistic but also scholarly, discourse in Poland and other postsocialist societies. They prove that there are numerous paths of postsocialist development and that binary oppositions cannot accurately render this multiplicity and complexity. Likewise, they demonstrate that the life trajectories of *spotecznicy* may be composed of very different experiences, motivations, and positions. This is why, in my earlier reference to the study "A biography of a *spotecznik*" (Palska and Lewenstein 2004), I did not aim to question the assumption that "rich cultural capital" or "patriotic upbringing" are favorable factors in the development of civic attitudes. What I aimed to question was the one-sided reading of these notions in Polish discourse, the fact that what is "cultural" and "patriotic" is often defined in terms of the number of bookshelves and pictures of partisan grandfathers. While in the local understanding—the understanding I aimed to convey in this paper—"cultural" and "patriotic" may have many different meanings. They may refer to "a selfless respect for others," to possessed knowledge and skills, or to efforts at preserving local traditions and heritage. They may also refer to a spirit of solidarity and cooperation; to an attachment, transmitted through generations, to the place one inhabits; or to the simple fact of "carrying on" in the face of difficulties and challenges.

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МЕЖДУ ПРОШЛЫМ И НАСТОЯЩИМ: ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ СЕЛЬСКОЙ ПОЛЬШИ

Агнешка Пасека

Агнешка Пасека проходит постдокторскую программу в Институте славянских исследований Польской академии наук. Адрес для переписки: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, ul. Bartoszewicza 1b/17, 00-337, Warsaw, Poland. aga.pasieka@gmail.com.

Исследование, о котором идет речь в этой статье, проведено при финансовой поддержке Института социальной антропологии им. Макса Планка (Галле) и Фонда Фольксвагена. Работа над статьей стала возможна благодаря стипендии Института гуманитарных исследований (Вена). Автор благодарит Дейва Петруччелли, Фабио Маттиоли и двух анонимных рецензентов за ценные замечания и предложения.

В этой статье обсуждается опыт постсоциалистической трансформации в сельской Польше. Работа основана на этнографическом полевом исследовании, продолжавшемся в течение одного года в отдаленном районе на юге Польши. Ныне, после закрытия государственных сельскохозяйственных предприятий, его жители столкнулись с безработицей и нестабильностью. Вследствие перехода к новому политико-экономическому порядку и вступления Польши в Евросоюз радикальной трансформации подвергся и сельскохозяйственный сектор. Однако сельские жители отнюдь не являются пассивными наблюдателями происходящих изменений. Они намерены твердо отстаивать свою позицию, обустроить свою жизнь и место, где они живут. В статье утверждается, что плодотворным для изучения этих процессов является исследование, в фокусе которого находятся в первую очередь местные лидеры и активисты гражданского общества. Анализируя новые формы социальной организации, сотрудничества и лидерства, я показываю, что местное население способно творчески использовать свой опыт жизни при социализме. Оно может адаптировать его к новым контекстам и создавать инновативные стратегии, позволяющие справляться с вызовами нового времени. В работе представлен анализ нарративов о социализме и о том, как жители оценивают тенденции развития последних лет, кроме того, в ней ставятся под сомнение широко распространенные мнения о незначительной роли сельских областей в процессе постсоциалистической трансформации.

Ключевые слова: сельская местность; активисты гражданского общества; постсоциализм; трансформация; общественное благо