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Homo Sovieticus Two Decades Later

Abstract: This article analyzes the concept of *homo sovieticus*. Its point of departure is Józef Tischner's description of the syndrome known under this name. Many of Tischner's general observations have been reflected in empirical research conducted by distinguished sociologists: Stefan Nowak, Mirosława Marody, Jan Lutyński or Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński. Two basic questions are formulated in this article:

- 1) Do the specific characteristics of Polish society which emerge from this research allow us to posit the existence of a specific type of human being with a distinct mentality, way of thinking and social functioning which Tischner portrayed? In other words, did communism really produce a "new man"?
- 2) Is the *homo sovieticus* attitude syndrome useful? Does it help to explain the various problems of systemic transformation?

Keywords: homo sovieticus; communism; systemic transformation; civilizational competences; social values and attitudes.

One of the terms most frequently used to describe the condition of societies in transition from communism to democracy and market economy is the term *homo sovieticus* (Soviet man). This term suggests that the communist system¹ which reigned in Central and Eastern Europe for 45 years after World War II evolved a specific syndrome of attitudes, cognitions and perceptions. *Homo sovieticus* is viewed as an infection whose harmful effects have left their stamp on everyone who happened to live, study and work in the communist system. The phenomenon is so ubiquitous that it is no longer clear what is "healthy" and what is "infected." The malady itself remains largely undetected. Worse still, it is viewed as something "normal." Because of this, the malady has taken a firm hold of people and is therefore extremely difficult to cure in the new, quite different social reality.

A great amount of empirical research and theoretical reflection on transformation following the decline of communism has taken place over the last two decades. The cultural and mental barriers passed down by the former system have been the central focus of this work. Of course one can hardly deny that attitudes and values greatly contributed to the systemic transformation and, more generally, to social change.

¹ In this article by "communism" or "communist system" I mean the political system which existed in Poland in 1944–1989. I do not intend to resolve the interesting problem of whether and, if so, to what extent this system implemented the project for a communist society developed by Marx and Engels. From this point of view the two terms I have adopted are synonymous with the term "real socialism" which was coined in the 1970's and has been henceforth incorporated into journalistic and scientific vocabulary.

Taking this obvious observation as our point of departure, I would like to linger a little longer in this article on the attitude syndrome which defines *homo sovieticus*. Two important questions are involved: the question of the degree to which Polish society did indeed succumb to the effects of “sovietization” and the question of the utility of this category for understanding the process of transition from communism to democracy and market economy. The sense of entitlement of certain social or occupational groups, the poor election turnout, the weakness of the institutions of civil society, the lack of interest in the common good, egoism and asocial attitudes have all been interpreted (particularly by journalists) as signs of a mentality passed down to us by the old regime. Therefore, this general interpretative model begs the following question: is this some significant psycho-social phenomenon or is the *homo sovieticus* concept simply a convenient buzzword, an incantation which we use to solve problems which require much deeper and subtler reflection?

Who is *Homo Sovieticus*?

Let us first take a closer look at the meaning of the expression *homo sovieticus*. Who are we really talking about when we use it? Its career in Polish reflection on post-communist transformation harks back to the early 1990s and to the renowned philosopher and writer, Józef Tischner. His *Homo sovieticus Between Wawel and Monte Claro* published in 1990 and the subsequent essay, *Homo sovieticus*, published a year later stimulated heated discussion among researchers and in the press on the spiritual and moral condition of the Polish people after the fall of communism. Ever since, the concept has been part of the canonical vocabulary in reflection on the social changes which began at the time. This does not mean that Tischner actually invented the term, however, or that it was he who started the discussion of the phenomenon signified by the expression. As a matter of fact we have to be grateful to this Cracow philosopher for the witty style in which he wrote about diagnoses which had already been formulated by sociologists and novelists. I am thinking of Aleksandr Zinovyev’s book whose title was, precisely, *Homo sovieticus*. This is a literary analysis of a man completely devoid of individuality who finds his life’s purpose and meaning in the collective. Any activity he undertakes is motivated not by his own intellectual choices or emotional needs but by profound conformity, the wish to adapt to, and merge with, the majority.

Homosos (this is the word Zinovyev uses to describe *homo sovieticus*—KT) is a collectivist creature. As he reflects the features of the society to which he belongs, primarily the social collective, homosos is merely a partial function of this whole. A plethora of functions of the communist collective are embodied in its various members who then become the conveyors of these functions. This is why the average homosos only experiences his personality (his individuality) as a member of the collective, not as himself. Homosos realizes his potential and exercises his faculties only within the collective. And he has the collective to thank for his worldly goods and achievements in life.

True—Zinovyev argues—this type of person is universal and can also be found in western societies (he is very similar to Ortega y Gasset's mass man) but “the Soviet Union (...) was born (...) of homososes as a mass phenomenon and gave them a dominant role in the process of formation of social consciousness and social psychology” (Zinovyev 1984: 8).

So what is so specific about his way of thinking and his approach? According to Tischner, the syndrome is a “post-communist form of ‘escape from freedom’” (Tischner 2005: 141). *Homo sovieticus* is spiritually enslaved and this enslavement deforms his attitudes and values to such an extent that he is no longer aware that this bondage exists. He treats it as something “normal” or even desirable. He view attempts to free him of this bondage in terms of threat and anxiety which he tries to ward off by seeking new forms of enslavement. In other words, *homo sovieticus* is incapable of taking responsibility for his life decisions. He is even incapable of making such decisions. He is continually looking for some force which would define the framework for his activity, organize his life, give it meaning and put it in order. Tischner names three basic factors which have contributed most to the making of *homo sovieticus* and met his vital needs most satisfactorily: work, power and self-dignity. It is here that the Marxist principle that “existence determines consciousness” is put into practice. Man rediscovers himself not in himself but outside of himself, in material reality, or to be more precise, in political and economic reality. The attitude and cognition syndrome we call *homo sovieticus* is basically ideological. *Homo sovieticus* is not a communist, he is a client of communism, says Tischner. He is completely dependent on the “commodities” with which the political system provides him. Paradoxically, he is willing to overthrow the system the moment it ceases to satisfy his need for commodities sufficiently.

The *homo sovieticus* category refers directly or indirectly to many sociological studies of Polish society which were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. This does not mean that sociology coined the term. On the contrary, it seems as if the fruits of its labours led to the development of a construct which—as I shall try to demonstrate—was hardly scientific. The construct does little to explain the legacy of communism or its effect on the transformation process. What is more, it tries to interpret this sociological portrait of society according to a clearly ideological vision.

So let us take a closer look at the sociologists' diagnoses which give us some insight into the characteristic attitudes and values of Polish society in times of real socialism. Tangible empirical findings should help us to add something to the general portrait of *homo sovieticus* painted by the author of *The Ethics of Solidarity* and justify our doubts concerning this category.

It is worth focusing on the subject matter of the work first because this is where very interesting transformations from our point of view are concentrated. In the communist idea of work Tischner mainly sees an aspect of rationalization of the world, an attempt to invest it with order and inner meaning and thereby to give people the feeling that they are participating in this order. The top-down regulation of economic mechanisms typical for socialist economy plays a key role here. Central planning is a secular form of Divine Providence, says Tischner (cf. Tischner 2005: 142). The sense

provided by central planning is actually nonsensical, however, because human labour is not part of some secret machinery which moves the world, it is a form of free creativity. The “social” (read: state) ownership of the means of production weakens this individual dimension of human labour even further. People were to complete the plan. Their personal contribution and the fruits of their labour were meaningless because they dissintegrated in the grand future project. Work in this sense provided a feeling of security, rootedness in the “collective.” But it also absolved people of any need of accountability or creative aspiration. Its purpose was to subordinate people and incapacitate them, not to facilitate their moral and intellectual development. It was completely out to “receive,” not to “give.” It is to this that we should trace the sources of entitlement and asocial attitudes, so typical of *homo sovieticus*, of which Tischner wrote: “he cannot tell the difference between his own interest and the common interest” (Tischner, 2005: 145). This “receiving” stance was quite specific, however. It was not limited to the issue of remuneration for work. What is more, work was clearly devalued. People were convinced that work would not make them or their families rich. If work was perceived as meaningful it was largely because it guaranteed material stability: stable employment, benefits and privileges independent of individual effort or input (cf. Marody 1987:92; Ziółkowski 2002: 23). All this meant that work was no longer an autotelic value, only an instrumental one. It was neither a source of satisfaction nor did it encourage intellectual development and acquisition of new skills. Finally, it did not allow people to satisfy their material aspirations. Work was not a source of meaning, at best it only gave people the illusion of meaning. This is why work ethic broke down leading to a variety of pathological attitudes.

The *homo sovieticus* syndrome which developed in response to this specific work philosophy was evident in various spheres of social life which it moulded in its own specific ways. Since the act of working was perceived merely as a guarantee of humble but secure existence, people eventually began to show signs of “learned helplessness” (cf. Marody 1987: 93). They lost the desire and ability to engage in any independent activity which could improve their own situation or that of their environment. This does not mean that they were no longer able to cope with difficult situations, i.e., they did not become vitally incompetent, however. Two fundamental characteristics of this “learned helplessness” can be identified. First, people were unable to make long-term plans and develop more prospective action strategies. They focused on the present but were still able or even motivated to find ways of overcoming current difficulties. However, their learned helplessness completely ruined their capacity to think and act in ways which could help them to get to the roots of these difficulties and develop ways of limiting or liquidating them. In other words, their attitude was rooted in profound fatalism, the certainty that neither on their own nor as members of some grassroots community could they possibly influence social reality and change it to suit their interests. Individuals did not see themselves as fully legitimate social agents. They viewed themselves as cogs in some machine they did not fully understand, managed by alien and often hostile groups. This attitude led to the development of another attitude, i.e., the tendency to blame others for their own misfortunes and the consequences of their own decisions. These “others” or the “authorities” in the

broad sense meant all those who were “higher up” in the hierarchy, beginning with the government and ending with their superior at work. The conviction that they were not the masters of their own destiny led people to denounce their own responsibility and make others responsible for their lives. This is a reversal of inclusion in the rational mechanism of the “plan,” as Tischner pointed out. On the one hand, individuals had a sense of security but on the other hand they lost their ability to mould their personal lives and environments or to do anything to change their environments successfully.

This “learned helplessness” is definitely closely linked to the phenomenon which Stefan Nowak called the “sociological void.” It involves the atrophy of individual identity and the shift toward something in between the primal group (family or friends) and the national community. Everything which is beyond the sphere of primal attachments, the realm of strictly personal relations, but does not belong to the realm of national history and culture is viewed as the alien and hostile realm of the state (Nowak 1979).

Continuing our search for symptoms of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome relating to the work philosophy which evolved under communism, we must mention the phenomenon called “amoral familism.” It involves the existence of informal networks within the community of family and friends. This group defines the boundaries between “we” (people to whom we are very loyal and whom we are obliged to ensure the best possible conditions of living) and “them” (who are governed by completely different rules of conduct and ethical standards). The measure of good and evil is only applied to one’s primal group. The common good disappears from the canon of thinking and the norms of conduct. Anything which may be good for me or my relatives is positive, whatever the consequences for social life and society in general. “Amoral familism” not only radically juxtaposed the private and public spheres, it also—very importantly—sanctioned all sorts of informal, illegal or even criminal activities if they could be beneficial for the small group of “us” (Tarkowska & Tarkowski 1990: 46–49).

In this context it is worth mentioning a phenomenon called “the culture of quasi-activity.” Any activity which does not lead to any specific goal but is merely supposed to give the impression that it is doing so gains significance. Such behaviour may be motivated by coercion or fear of sanctions but it is often determined by opportunism and conformity. Obviously, this culture was present in such institutions as parliament and elections which were not really elections in a one-party system where all decisions within the competency of the legislative and executive authorities were actually made by the party apparatus. However, the phenomenon was widespread not only in the world of “grand politics” but also in everyday social life. All sorts of commissions and expert bodies that were to debate on issues which had in fact already been resolved at the political level, “decorative” institutions with no real influence or even the practice of preparing unnecessary documents with the sole purpose of “providing cover” in case of control, reporting (“completion of the plan”), artificial cost underreporting often at the price of poorer product quality for the purpose of propaganda—all this belonged to the culture of quasi-activity. Quasi-activity was ubiquitous and could be felt in all wakes of life. It led to hypocrisy and deception. To behave rationally meant

to “make an impression,” not to produce authentic benefits by engaging in this or that form of activity (Lutyński 1990: 135–149).

This description of *homo sovieticus* exposes not only the way work, one of the aspects of human activity which was modified by communist ideology and reality, moulded social values and attitudes. It also shows how the second important factor which Tischner mentioned, power, operated. *Homo sovieticus*—the author of *The Ethics of Solidarity* pointed out—developed his identity within the sphere of activity of the authorities. He always found and defined himself in the context of some domineering and controlling force which he also wished to tame, over which he wished to gain control, and in some “part” of which he wished to participate. “Participation in power” means two things; possession of authority and exercise of authority. “Learned helplessness” means a profound conviction that one’s destiny depends almost completely on being close to “the authorities” and is expressed in opportunism and servility. It was often clearly detectible in the not fully conscious but frequently manifested belief that all real and imaginary failures are caused by insufficiently advantageous “positioning” of oneself with respect to those higher up and those who wield more power over reality. The wish to “use” the authorities is a direct consequence of this attitude. In the consciousness of *homo sovieticus*, the sole purpose of the authorities is to satisfy particular needs and interests and the authorities are perceived in terms of their privileged access to scarce commodities. In other words, the basic striving of *homo sovieticus*, i.e., to “receive” and not to “give,” and the subordination of the public good to private interests which is so typical of “amoral familism,” can be very clearly observed in the power sphere.

To complete the portrait of *homo sovieticus* we must add one more aspect which, to borrow Tischner’s concise term, we may call sense of dignity. By providing people with a sense of material security and participation in the grand scheme of giving meaning to social reality, the communist system also provided people with a sense of dignity and showed them their place in the new social order. This sense of dignity was rather unique in this specific reality. It was expressed in the striving for egalitarianism. But, rather than meaning the striving to attain a certain level of material or cultural status, egalitarianism meant to level standards down. Rather than encouraging social mechanisms which would ensure equal growth opportunities for all, it limited the possibility of rising above a generally accepted level of mediocrity. What we have here is the complementation and culmination of the two aforementioned aspects of the *homo sovieticus* portrait. As far as work and participation in power is concerned, the basic goal was to instil in people a deep sense of egalitarianism—the feeling that all rights to which they are entitled are “natural” and hence inviolable. The mechanism of elimination of any attempt to stand out from the mediocre crowd was deeply engrained in the logic of this form of egalitarianism. To stand out of the crowd would be irrational (it would ruin the “plan”) and would not serve one’s interests. In short, there was no room for meritocracy in this system. Work and participation in power guaranteed the supply of commodities which were everybody’s due, irrespective of his or her knowledge, contribution of labour or quality of labour. From this perspective, self-improvement and self-growth are quite inappropriate. People sacrifice themselves

for the common good, for the “authorities” however understood, when it is the job of these authorities to guarantee a certain material level of existence and, in the long run, it is the authorities who decide about people’s destiny.

***Homo Sovieticus*—Friend or Foe of the Communist System?**

Tischner drew attention to a certain paradox in his portrayal of *homo sovieticus*. The person whom the communist system had shaped easily became the system’s foe. To draw once again on Tischner’s essays, to be a “client” does not mean to be attached to the stalls where one obtains one’s goods or to the stallholders. It means attachment to the goods themselves. Therefore, if a given stall turns out to be poorly stocked and its owner is unable to remedy the situation, the disappointed client will abandon it and go elsewhere to buy the same goods at a different stall, from a different vender. So, paradoxically, *homo sovieticus* was one of the main factors which speeded up the decline of the communist system. The system’s increasing inefficiency led him to turn his back on the system and try to satisfy his needs elsewhere.

Homo sovieticus emerges from this picture as a person devoid of ideals, extremely materialistic, whose consciousness has been completely determined by “existence.” The author of *The Ethics of Solidarity* also expresses the important intuition that this person is internally split and could easily become an “anti-communist,” i.e., a radical critic of the system, yet still remain a “Soviet man” in terms of mentality and values. This gives rise to the following question: is this mentality the result of adoption of certain patterns instilled by the communist system or is it, on the contrary, a defensive reaction to ideological indoctrination and a way of coping with an often incomprehensible or even hostile reality?

The two phenomena outlined above, “sociological void” and “amoral familism,” are an excellent illustration of this problem. The first of these two phenomena essentially involves making a clear distinction between two spheres of social life, the public, official sphere of formal institutions and the private sphere of friends and family. This distinction was largely axiological. All that was good was associated with the private sphere. It was here that values such as truth, courage or sacrifice were to be found. The public sphere, meanwhile, was thought to be alien, superimposed and enslaving. This clearly dualistic vision of the social order had significant and sociologically interesting consequences. This was a phenomenon called value dimorphism or—after Orwell—“doublethink.” Simply speaking, people apply two different measures in their ethical evaluation of phenomena, different behaviour strategies, depending on the context. Value dimorphism is a schizophrenic state in which the individual discloses a completely different face, a different way of thinking and feeling, a different axiology and different goals in private to the ones that she or he declares in public. In short, the private and public spheres are divided by a truth/lie boundary. We want to and can be ourselves in private but we must pretend, “play games” and don convincing masks in public. Value dimorphism certainly led to opportunistic behaviour in which what was said officially was not treated seriously and what was an important element of

one's thinking and conduct disappeared the moment one emerged from one's privacy. It is here that we must look for the sources of ethical relativism, cynicism and disrespect for fundamental legal norms and rules of social life. Note, however, that this doublethink was a defence mechanism against efforts to enslave the individual and enforce a system of values, a specific life style and specific goals upon him or her. It helped people to create a sphere in which they could be autonomous and independent, a niche in which they could observe traditional axiological norms and "be themselves," at least partly. In other words, this dimorphism of values can be viewed as a protection from complete metamorphoses into *homo sovieticus*, a submissive creature completely subordinated to the ubiquitous influence of ideology and the mechanisms of the political system. Thanks to the fact that individuals could escape to a private sphere or, more generally, a sphere which had not been appropriated by the authorities, such as religion for example, the *homo sovieticus* syndrome could not fully develop.

Another phenomenon can also be traced to this experience, so-called "alternative society." It began to develop in the 1970s and reached its peak a decade later. New forms of cultural, political and economic life began to emerge independently of the state. This was the time of consolidation of oppositional and independent structures such as KOR [the Committee in Defence of the Workers], KPN [The Confederation for Free Poland] and Solidarity. New publishing initiatives could clearly be observed—books which had no chance of publication in the official mainstream or the work of writers repressed by the authorities and with publication bans were published, many discussions, lectures and artistic performances were held. Finally, at this same time, a number of small economic initiatives were launched. These initiatives greatly contributed to alleviation of the scarcities caused by the deficient economy and they also taught grassroots activity and enterprising approaches to coping with daily hassles.

If we take a closer look at the "alternative society" phenomenon, we can clearly see the ambivalence with which we must evaluate *homo sovieticus*. On the one hand, the logic of functioning of alternative society expected or even forced people to bypass the law, seek weak points in the legal regulations and deliberately break the law. This mechanism was based on informal connections, cronyism and "collusions" and success was measured in terms of how efficiently the law had been broken and legal sanctions had been avoided. At the same time, however, the mechanism underlying the development of *homo sovieticus*'s typical dishonesty and disrespect for law and order was not only a reaction to an abnormal situation in the economic and social sphere. It was also a good school of civil society and enterprise. From the perspective of legalism we may doubt whether this was actually the best way to propagate attitudes which are essential in modern democracy and market economy. Note, however, that here too we find the cushioning effect which reduced the adverse effects of living in real socialism. *Homo sovieticus* was the product of alternative society with all its negative features. It also led to the system's internal disintegration and eventual decline. Importantly, it did so not only because people were unhappy with the existing system but also because they actively "blasted" the system from within and created attitudes which were essential for the construction of a new social order.

Looking from this perspective, we may ask whether the term *homo sovieticus* as Tischener understood it makes sense. What does it mean that someone who was brought up and moulded in the communist system was “sovietized”? Does this not lead us to the trivial conclusion that people are always the “children of their time” and are shaped by various social, economic and political factors which are typical of their era? Was *homo sovieticus* not also “homo anti-sovieticus,” not necessary in the sense of some conscious resistance to the existing political order but from the point of view of everyday behaviours which went against the flow, so to say, of the official tendency to produce a “socialist human being”? Finally, is there any sense in talking about *homo sovieticus* today? Has he survived unscathed, disappeared or perhaps evolved into “homo post-sovieticus”? Or perhaps this hot expression is meaningless because one should trace the source of social attitudes and behaviours not only to, and not mainly to, the former system?

Does *Homo Sovieticus* Still Exist?

One of the most popular clichés about the prospects of developing democracy, civil society and market economy after the fall of communism and explaining any failures in this process can be summarized as follows: those countries which were cut off from the world of freedom and democracy by the “iron curtain” after World War II must “catch up” with the countries which nurtured and propagated these values as fast as possible. The success of the transformation can therefore be measured in terms of the speed with which these countries manage to “catch up” with the West, integrate with these countries politically and economically, but also with respect to values and attitudes. Any existing barriers between the two blocks of countries must be removed. We may call this the “substitution paradigm.” It says that “institutional change in Eastern Europe can basically be reduced to modernization which involves substitution of elements of one socio-economic system with elements of a different system. (...) From this perspective, Eastern European history and tradition (whether it is state-socialist or pre-socialist) as well as broadly understood resources which families and individuals have taken away from state socialism are factors which limit individual and organizational modernization in the direction of modern western capitalism” (Mach 1998: 18–19). All this rhetoric relating to the accession of post-communist countries to NATO and EU structures has been largely indicative not so much of fulfilment of certain formal—legal and economic—criteria as of the problem of mental barriers, the most difficult to remove, which may render the integration process superficial or incomplete. When Ralf Dahrendorf reflected (just when communism was falling) on the prospects for countries which had formerly been under Soviet influence, he drew attention to the complexity of the transformation processes in which axiological and mental factors play a crucial role. Without these factors, legal or administrative changes can be rapid, certainly, but they will lack permanency and will not be rooted in the social fibre. “Civil society,” he wrote, “cannot be constructed at all, it must develop, but this will not happen in one season nor even one term of parliament. Sixty

years is perhaps too discouraging a time horizon for civil society to really emerge (...)” (Dahrendorf 1991: 92). Christopher Bryant wrote in a similar vein. He discussed the model of “proto-civil society” in the context of transformation in post-communist countries. Stable political and economic change, he argued, is only possible when a cultural revolution takes place, i.e., when a civil society develops which is open to diversity, willing to make compromises and cares for the common good. “I am not thinking (...) of some indirect pathway between state socialism and capitalism, or between people’s democracy and liberal democracy (...). I am thinking of the slow but prudent progress toward capitalism and liberal democracy—by means of (...) reforming education and making gradual steps toward achievable goals” (Bryant 1994: 75). In other words, only education and acquisition of new, essential competencies will enable the achievement of stable and global transformation. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan were even more emphatic. Although they recognized the uniqueness of the social society which developed in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s, they were also sceptical as to whether this pattern could be transferred to democracy and market economy. Even more important, however, they were very critical of this unique pattern itself and predicted that it would be completely dysfunctional or even harmful in the new reality. Civil society based on resistance to state authorities is basically apolitical. This apolitical nature, justified as it was in the context of opposition against the authoritarian regime, would show its destructive aspect in the democratic context and crystallize “anti-systemic” attitudes and was of thinking where something quite different is called for (Linz & Stepan 1996: 270–272). In short, it was necessary to encourage certain “civilizational competencies”—comprehension of, and ability to manoeuvre in the world of norms and values, goals and behaviours shared with western societies (Sz-tompka 1996: 115–118). Assumedly, facilitation of extensive interpersonal relations, unrestricted flow of information, culture and technology would be the best way to teach these civilizational competencies. In this approach, the transformation model was bipolar. *Homo sovieticus*, an attitude syndrome which was becoming increasingly anachronous and unadjusted to the new reality, would gradually be substituted by a new mentality conveyed by western patterns of freedom and democracy.

What can we say about this vision of the mechanism of transformation today, two decades later? No doubt we can observe very clear and multidimensional influence of western patterns on the lifestyle, aspirations and mentality of the Polish people. We can say that Polish society today is “mimetic” (Ziółkowski 2002: 25). Ryszard Legutko even says that Polish post-1989 culture is in a state of stagnation caused by the ubiquitous syndrome of imitation (Legutko 1998) and Zdzisław Krasnodębski attributes the present social and state institutional crisis to Poland’s imitative modernization project (Krasnodębski 2003: 195–228). On the other hand, however, one can also easily observe aspects of social life in which this influence is extremely superficial or nonexistent. When we point out the negative phenomena in Polish public life such as corruption, nepotism, insufficient civil activity and lack of interest in public affairs, the sense of entitlement in many social groups and the lack of concern for the common good, i.e., low democratic and civil culture, we easily find everything we found in the mentality and behaviour of *homo sovieticus*. *Homo sovieticus* is still alive

and kicking and the systemic transformation has not eroded the foundations of his existence. Note, however, that we are saying this in the context of generation change where a generation brought up and educated in new reality and “uninfected” with communist mentality is beginning to play an increasingly important role. One can therefore hardly explain these phenomena in terms of the *homo sovieticus* concept, at least not as Tischener understood it (as a product of the communist system and dependent on that system). This mentality and attitude syndrome is not a simple continuation of a syndrome or a former era, nor can it be the outcome of reproduction. It is conveyed through upbringing and education. If we are able to identify the key elements of the syndrome in a completely new social reality and in a completely new generation then there must be other reasons for the development and persistence of this syndrome. These reasons have nothing to do with the former system. We must look for them in the institutional shortcomings of the present socio-political system and the errors of the transformation process. If there were equal educational and occupational opportunities, immoral familism would no longer be of any use. If rules and regulations were simple and the law was effectively enforced, corruptive practices would be so risky that they would no longer be worthwhile. In other words, bribes would no longer be the best way to solve problems at the citizen-official interface. If the political elites were able to see the greater picture instead of the fragmentary picture and if they were loyal to the state rather than to the interests of their own parties, this would surely stimulate civil activity and greater involvement with public life.

Therefore, to describe the many negative attitudes we find in contemporary social life in terms of *homo sovieticus* is an oversimplification. This would suggest simple continuity in the sphere of human mentality and behaviour, oblivious to the fact that the sources of these negative aspects usually lie in the present, not the past. We can hardly trace them to soviet roots. Hence, the bipolar vision of transformation according to which the old *homo sovieticus* would die out due to “civilization” processes resulting from opening up to western culture is too simple and too optimistic.

Is *Homo Sovieticus* a Product of Communism?

Another doubt concerning the adequacy of the *homo sovieticus* explanation of the problems of transformation has to do with the origins of the attitudes. Where should we seek the sources of this specific mentality and mode of functioning in social reality? The authors of the concept believe that superimposed communist ideology and the ensuing social practice lie at the roots of *homo sovieticus*. In other words, this system allegedly played a very powerful role in the moulding of the “new man.” It is true that propaganda and the efforts to change society in a revolutionary way were very powerful, especially in the Stalinist days. This in turn—as I mentioned before—led to either submission or ideological involvement or various “adjustments.” This approach has a serious weakness, however. It views the communist times as “point zero,” a point of departure which, by developing a new reality and new man, scored out or

invalidated everything which existed earlier. But even the most radical and profound social transformations always take place on the basis of an existing foundation of culture, value systems, attitudes and mentalities. But at the same time this whole legacy is the legacy of many generations, not just the product of social engineering. In other words, the value system and social attitudes are always the outcome of both the past (historical experience) and the present (current determinants of social life). Ronald Inglehart, for example, illustrates this problem lucidly in his analytic study of value systems in modern societies. Both the value syndrome which he calls “materialistic” and the typical “postmaterialistic” values of the post-industrial era have certain unique features in each country, moulded by the specific historical context (Inglehart 1997: 14–17).

This approach to the *homo sovieticus* syndrome is therefore biased in the direction of exaggeration or demonization of the effects of communism on the individual and hence the shape of society. From this point of view, it is easy to create a vision of a complete and fully transformed human being, a product of the system. This means that we implicitly accept that the communist social experiment was successful. But even superficial reflection on Poland’s social history provides us with ample evidence that top-down indoctrination was not successful and communism’s influence on Polish society’s thinking and value system was limited. Even in the days of most intensive and radical ideological mobilization, traditional values conveyed by primal groups—family, neighbours, friends and the Catholic church, the only significant moral force, integrally opposed to the new, communist social order—were important. We should therefore speak of certain elements of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome in social thinking and conduct rather than a “pure” form of the syndrome. This exaggeration of communism’s ideological impact can be found not only in the area of traditional values and historical legacy. It also assumes that the communist system had an ideological and cultural monopoly by creating a hermetic barrier preventing infiltration of any other cultural patterns. Meanwhile, we can only speak of a far-reaching hermetic system prior to the “thaw” in October 1956. After that, contact (limited but quite frequent) with countries on the other side of the “iron curtain” was possible. Although family, professional and scientific contacts were not easy and replete with restrictions, they were an important determinant of alternative mentalities and perceptions of social reality to the ones propagated by official propaganda. It is not my intention to discuss the complex problem of the origins of certain phenomena which were present in social life in communist Poland and have still survived. What I do want to do is point out the complexity of the typical cultural influences of the era we are analyzing. Piotr Sztompka has drawn attention to this problem. In his analysis of the communist era and the 1989 breakthrough conducted from the point of view of cultural change he identifies three coexisting types of culture:

- 1) The institutionalized culture of autocratic command politics and economy;
- 2) Vernacular cultural traditions evolved over the state and nation’s long history;
- 3) Modern western culture featuring secularism, individualism and universal humanitarianism expressed in great emphasis on civil freedoms and individual rights, tolerance and pluralism (Sztompka 1996: 120–122).

If we adopt this research perspective, it is not so easy to pinpoint the sources of values and attitudes. We can find many convincing arguments in favour of the claim that “sociological void” or “value dimorphism” have a much longer history, harking back to the times of the partition of Poland. It was then that the state was first perceived as imposed from without, alien and hostile. That primal groups began to act as a counterbalance for these forces and the interest of the whole nation and its various members was always understood as something which was in opposition to the interests of political institutions. In a stateless nation, the idea of “positive,” republican freedom, manifested in the belief that it was necessary to coproduce public good and take an active part in political decisions, the lack of liberal tradition accentuating individual independence from the state, empowerment and individualism, all of which were typical in the days of the Gentry Republic, led to the development of collective national resistance and strategic struggle for individual freedom was quite an alien idea. What is more, such an attitude was often viewed as a sign of destructive individualism and egoism.

It therefore makes no sense to use the term *homo sovieticus*. We may speak of the effect of the communist system on social attitudes but we cannot find an example of a total “communist man,” built from scratch. When we use the term *homo sovieticus*, we fail to notice that what we think is the effect of “sovietization” has much more complex origins and determinants.

Is Homo Sovieticus the Enemy of Democracy and Market Economy?

Finally I would like to consider the legitimacy of one of the fundamental claims which was made in the context of analysis of the *homo sovieticus* syndrome at the beginning of the transformation but is still present in reporting and scientific discourse. We often read that people who were shaped by the communist system are incapable of active participation in the process of economic and political mobilization. According to this point of view, *homo sovieticus*'s typical asocial stance, excessive demands, passivity, hypocrisy and lack of work ethic are a major barrier in economic development, comprehension of the mechanisms of market economy, and acceptance of democratic values. *Homo sovieticus* will always be sceptical if not downright hostile regarding post-communist reality. Consumed by nostalgia for the bygone system, or disappointed that the commodities he is looking for cannot be found on the new “stall,” he will feel that the new reality is alien and hostile. He will see freedom as a threat and will expect the ubiquitous authorities to regulate and control everything. He will enviously see foes in everyone who has managed to achieve higher social status and he will reject “return to normality” as a harmful absurdity. It is in this value syndrome that we seek the source of populist behaviour, the main barrier to systemic transformation. Any forms of activity, resourcefulness and farsightedness which *homo sovieticus* may exhibit are viewed as an element of his hermetically closed private sphere. In other words, these “positive” and creative features will not be revealed in the public sphere or they will be revealed pathologically in the form of deceit, bribery and violation of the law.

This approach, however, contains a vision of the transformation process, or more precisely, the relation between top-down initiation by the elite and bottom-up social activity. If we take this line of argument then we must conclude that systemic transformation was largely the work of the political elite. It was the elite which started the process and controlled it. However, for the whole thing to succeed, it had to be socially legitimized (the “reformers” had to win the electorate’s votes) and society had to know how to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the reforms. This requires civil education which can easily shift into a kind of paternalism. The authorities no longer “take care” of the citizen. Instead, they tell him that he must learn to manoeuvre in the mechanisms of the market and the newly won freedom and they make it clear that the efficiency with which he manoeuvres is the measure of his “civilization” and mastery of essential cultural competencies.

We could, however, find some justification for the claim that activity, resourcefulness and enterprise of the “ordinary people,” manifested in thousands of small economic and social initiatives, triggered the transformation. The systemic transformation set in motion by the changes which took place in 1989 was the political and legal crowning of the great animation which could be observed earlier when the communist authorities could not or would not block this activity formally or even officially permitted it. We can compare this process to the appearance of cracks in a building which immediately fill with water which eventually blasts the whole construction. Vending goods from camp beds or make-shift barracks in the late 1980s is the best-known example of this enterprise and activity. There were many local educational and cultural initiatives in those days. All this seems to cast doubt on the claim that *homo sovieticus* was incapable of actively participation in democracy and the free market and reaping the benefits. Of course this does not mean that certain attitudes developed or crystallized by the communist system did not leave their stamp on the shape of these initiatives and hence on the shape of democracy and the free market in Poland. We can easily find many examples of the deficiencies of Polish capitalism: seeking quick profit and the accompanying lack of long-term planning and investment or the practice of taking advantage of informal mechanisms of economic activity. However, this crudeness and often blatant lack of business culture does not imply unwillingness to be active and involved. We should not ignore the optimistic signs of openness to the completely new challenges of systemic transformation and the willingness to learn the necessary new skills.

The claim that the mentality of individuals and entire cultures in post-communist societies are infected with the *homo sovieticus* syndrome is obviously ideologically biased. Rather than helping to diagnose and describe the actual state of affairs, it is an indirect way of presenting a desirable vision of the mechanisms of transformation and creation of a new social order. The key role of the elites combined with specific paternalism have led us to believe that the state’s institutional structure is functioning adequately and if not everything is perfect, imperfections can easily be corrected if the project for “grand change” is properly implemented. In other words, attempts to ignore the “new order” are a sign of lack of elementary knowledge and culture. They are the mental legacy of communist days. This attitude sets the self-fulfilling

prophecy mechanism in motion. Paradoxically, the struggle with the *homo sovieticus* syndrome which has allegedly become deeply rooted in human souls and minds, constructing a mental barrier against modernization of the country which the elites are painstakingly trying to overcome, is petrifying and deepening withdrawal, mistrust of the elites and social alienation. The grandiosity which fills the rhetoric of the actors of the transformation is naturally sharpening rather than levelling the gap between the elites and the citizens, the polity and the “man in the street.” These two worlds are beginning to speak different languages. The language of technical competence which presents the transformation as a highly complicated project and requires appropriate cultural and intellectual competencies, cannot meet with the popular feeling that “return to normality” simply means removing the barriers to unrestricted human activity. The sense of historical mission and the striving for excessive control of the social transformation is in inverse proportion to the efficiency of state institutions and hence the state’s ability to perform its basic functions: to create equal opportunities and ensure that citizens feel safe.

So, from this perspective, the *homo sovieticus* concept is problematic. Not only does it try to create a simplified model of human beings, it also tries to attribute characteristics which they do not possess. *Homo sovieticus* seems to be an artefact, a product of a certain ideological bias.

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