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Polish Countryside in Times of Transition: Myths and Reality

Abstract: Any attempt to recapitulate research findings on the countryside during the transition period should not neglect the prevailing view of the countryside in sociology. The systemic transformation in Poland did not bring a parallel transformation in thinking within sociology. The prevailing paradigm is that of modernisation, i.e. an anti-rural view which sees the countryside as an inferior sector, doomed to adapt to current trends: to communist rules before 1989 and to market economy and civil society rules at present. Numerical data for the last 60 years, reflecting the essential social and economic transformations in the countryside and agriculture, suggest a viewpoint which is different from the prevailing one. The agrarian segment has not been undergoing a transformation but, rather, desolation. The latter is a consequence of another modernisation paradox experienced by Poland after 1989, i.e. transformations effectively financed by the countryside and implemented at the expense of the country's rural areas.

Keywords: agrarian segment, transformation; social capital; rural population; statistical manipulations; sociological stereotypes.

The past two decades are usually described as a period of rapid and thorough transformations following a direction which raises no doubts: towards a civil society, democracy and free market. Against this background, the picture of the Polish countryside emerging from the public debate and academic research seems particularly unfavourable in respect of each of those goals. Already in the early days of the transition some voices claimed that rural dwellers might become gravediggers, not only for the market economy but also for democracy (Rychard, Federowicz 1993). Those concerns were reiterated in subsequent years: the Polish countryside was thought to be a ballast, slowing down the much-needed reforms, and the Polish agriculture was labelled as backward and inefficient (after Fedyszak-Radziejowska 1995). Rural dwellers in general, and peasants in particular, were believed to have “mental barriers” and to harbour “anti-European phobias” (Kośmicki, Czaja, Janik 2000; Kocik 2001). Worse still, they were thought to exhibit learned helplessness, taking too much for granted and, thus, turning into “groups of thieves and beggars” who beg from the more powerful and steal from the poorer (Tischner 1982). According to other authors rural dwellers fostered “amoral familism,” had no ability to build civic associations and the only associations they built were “dirty communities,” riddled with corruption and nepotism. Finally, rural dwellers were described as ones that “do not fit in the social structure because they live ‘in an anachronistic niche, its roots going deep into

the past' and the sheer fact of their existence today bears testimony to the country's backwardness" (Mokrzycki 2001: 52, 54).

This paper intends to pursue three goals. Firstly, it aims to demonstrate that such opinions are groundless. A closer look at the data supplied by agricultural economics suffices to develop a different view on the condition of the Polish agriculture in the early days of the transition. Our analysis will take two directions, i.e. an internal one, based on data from the entire post-war period, and an international one, drawing comparisons with other European countries. This paper will also challenge rural sociologists' critical observations on the self-organisation potential of rural communities, primarily by contesting the criteria and assumptions underlying most studies.

Secondly, the paper will challenge the belief that the transformations described by many authors have been, indeed, taking place. The three most important dimensions in the transformation of the countryside and agriculture in Poland can be summarised in three words: deruralisation, deagrarianisation and depeasantisation. If one thinks that the required transformations can be expressed using these three notions, then the reason for the proposed transformations must be provided on the one hand, and, on the other, the actual occurrence of those transformations needs to be proven. Is Poland really witnessing these processes, typically found in countries which first undergo modernisation and then a transformation? The aforementioned trends were supposed to intensify after 1989 yet we will also draw on some earlier data in order to demonstrate the illusory nature of those trends.

Thirdly, this analysis will conclude with a hypothesis that the relationship between Poland's society, its economy and the so-called agrarian segment is tight but its nature is opposite to what is commonly believed. It seems 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 between resembles that between Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray and his portrait. Therefore, the optimistic vision of the transformations in the Polish countryside will be negated in this paper and replaced with an interpretation which views the past two decades as a time of regression.

In addition to the directions of discussion proposed above, it would be interesting to uncover the drivers behind the strongly negative image of the countryside in the public debate and in the social sciences. Undeniably, the core orientation of sociology plays an important part here as the birth of the discipline coincided with the collapse of the traditional order, equated with the agrarian society, which means that sociology represented the interests of the industrial era (Habermas 1995: 25; Poleszczuk 1990: 68). Another aspect which should not be neglected is that anti-peasant resentments still persist among Poles, notably among the Polish intelligentsia, as emphatically described by authors such as Józef Chałasiński, Władysław Grabski or Juliusz Poniąkowski. An advocate of the agricultural reform in the inter-war period, the latter thinker also stressed that the higher classes of the Polish society at that time were utterly ignorant about rural and agricultural problems (Poniąkowski 2004). This discussion will seek a cause in the political views of sociologists, shaping their reluctance towards traditional rural communities. Halamska writes, "The voting patterns in the

countryside are quite different from those in the cities and there are significant relationships between the agricultural character of the countryside and the support for peasant-populist parties” (Halamska 2006: 19). This criticism of the status quo as well as the proposed modernisation projects for the countryside reveal their non-academic, clearly ideological stance. Incidentally, the situation looked similar in the post-war Europe: in 1950 farmers represented 25% of the total workforce in Germany, 30% in France and 43% in Italy. Fears of radicalisation within this numerous social group were at the root of the agricultural reforms undertaken in the West in those times. Tony Judt emphasises that the real significance of the Common Agricultural Policy was inherently political rather than economic (Judt 1998: 18). The main goal of those very costly, large-scale measures was to achieve a dramatic shrinkage (down to an average of 5% in the ‘old EU’) of the population which represented a hard and fast electorate of non-liberal parties. In Poland, such a radical modernisation is prevented by scarce resources, and its most hyped symptoms are still rather feeble.

The Countryside in Numbers, or Nothing is Obvious

The sustainability, size and importance of the Polish agrarian segment has been long analysed in terms of a “systemic residue” (Szafraniec 2002). As a rule, indicators such as the size of the rural population or the percentage of population employed in agriculture are taken into account. Poland does, indeed, deviate significantly from the European average in these respects: at present 26.6% of the total population in Europe live in rural areas (vs. nearly 39% in Poland), and employment in agriculture stands at around 5% (vs. 14.7% in Poland) (Wilkin 2008; Wilkin 2002). A somewhat more comforting picture emerges from comparisons between Poland and countries such as Greece, Portugal or the new EU member states. For instance, the share of the rural population is 41% in Greece, 42.4% in Portugal, 46.3% in Romania and as much as 49% in Slovenia. (Wilkin 2008: 48) whereas employment in agriculture is similar in Poland and in countries such as Portugal (11.4%), Greece (11.7%) or Lithuania (12.3%), not to mention Romania with more than double the figure (30.6%).

However, what is much more important than the size of the agrarian segment, no matter how calculated, is the significance ascribed to it. The prevailing view is that this segment provides “evidence for the anachronistic social structure in Poland” (Domański 2004: 221) and represents “our weakness, considerably restricting our growth potential and obscuring the transparency of social change” (Szafraniec 2002: 81). Proofs to support this view are sought in economic indicators (e.g. low productivity of the agricultural sector, reflected, for instance, in its low contribution to the country’s GDP) and, on the other hand, in deficits of civic attitudes and community involvement among rural dwellers (these claims are illustrated with data on the level of social capital). Both these beliefs perfectly fit into the overall framework of sociology where the concepts of social change stress the significance of agriculture not only as the earliest stage of development but also as a measure of a country’s progress towards modern civilisation (Walt Rostow, Daniel Bell, Daniel Thorner), whereas

the transition from community-based societies to association-based organisations is deemed to be a measure of progress. It is worthwhile providing two examples in order to illustrate the ambiguity of diagnoses which rely on seemingly unquestionable data (apparently objective, quantitative measures of the phenomena in question).

Even before Poland's accession to the European Union, employment in agriculture was eagerly presented side by side with the share of agriculture in GDP in Poland and a few other countries. The employment ratio, significant in itself, as it reflects a more or less agricultural profile of a country, gains an additional meaning when combined with the share of agriculture in GDP. This relationship reflects the productivity of the agricultural sector and in other sectors of the economy. The condition of Polish agriculture in 1990s (with the average employment of 19.8% and a 6.3% share in GDP) was viewed critically from that perspective, and the unfavourable proportion between those two figures was stressed: the share of working population was about three times as high as the contribution to the country's GDP. However, if we analyse data from other countries in the same fashion, we will see that the Polish case is by far not as disastrous as it may seem. For instance, German agriculture performs much worse in this respect (3.3% of employment and 0.5% share in GDP). The proportion for Germany is twice as high as the one for Poland, which means that the share of the German population employed in agriculture is six times as high as the sector's contribution to the country's GDP (Rosner 2001: 50).

Systematic analysis of the relationships between employment and share in GDP in the Polish and European agricultural sectors was conducted at that time by Tadeusz Hunek. The social efficiency of agriculture, defined as the capability of a working individual (i.e. a person employed on a full-time basis) to create added value, was definitely higher for Poland. The social efficiency ratio calculated on this basis for agriculture was 0.626 for Poland and 0.339 for the EU in 1995. The respective figures for 1996 were 0.650 and 0.340, reaching 0.698 and 0.333 in 1997. During the same years the parity of the agricultural sector's efficiency in building GDP (with the other sectors taken as 100%) reached, respectively, 59.9, 62.6 and 67.6% in Poland but the level for the EU was half as low, i.e. 32.7, 32.9 and 32.2. This meant that agriculture in the EU not only had a half of the social efficiency achieved in Poland but that it created only 1/3 of the potential in comparison with the remaining sectors. Moreover, this meant that the social efficiency of Poland's agriculture was higher than that of the other sectors of the Polish economy. In 1995 the agricultural sector reached a ratio of 1.5633, whereas the industry achieved 1.5131. The respective figures for 1996 were 1.5499 and 1.5024 and the ones for 1997 were 1.5995 and 1.4879. According to Tadeusz Hunek, those relationships proved that the efficiency of Polish agriculture (despite the above-mentioned decline in output) was much stronger than that of the industrial sector. On this basis, he concluded: "efforts to maximise the country's economic growth rate are more likely to be hampered by manufacturing and industry than by agriculture" (Hunek 2001: 49).

The results achieved by the Polish agriculture during that period will seem even more significant if we remember that the level of available financing was much lower in Poland than in the EU. Support for the agricultural sector, measured with PSE

(Producer Support Estimate), was only a half of the EU level at that time (Wilkin 1998: 73). This regularity was reflected in the agricultural income per 1 hectare. In mid-1990s economists from the Gdańsk Institute for Market Economics were surprised to see a relatively high income per hectare of arable land in Polish farms, which came quite close to the average farming income in the EU: with subsidies deducted, the figure for Poland reached USD 285 per 1 hectare whereas the respective figure for the EU was only USD 281 (Wilkin 1999: 33). These comparative data cannot be disregarded when thinking about internal competitiveness of Polish agriculture versus other sectors of the economy or about its external competitiveness on international markets (Woś 2001a, 2001b). Moreover, they irrefutably prove that Polish researchers' dislike for the domestic agrarian segment does not have its roots in the sector's economic performance.

Likewise, it is useful to take a look at findings concerning the civil society in rural areas. Many studies conducted to date seem to confirm the accuracy of forecasts formulated at the early stages of transformation, especially those which measure community involvement with measures such as membership in organisations, sense of impact or level of trust. According to the European Social Survey 2002 data, the highest level of community-oriented activity was recorded in large cities (15.7%) whereas the countryside had the lowest levels (7.5%). Indicators of activity, measured in the survey, were lower not only for respondents from rural areas but also from those living in regions with a stronger "agricultural profile" (Halamska 2008). However, the criteria employed in the survey rightly give rise to concerns as participation in civil society is measured only on the basis of membership in associations and foundations (NGOs), disregarding traditional forms of organisation such as country wives' clubs, voluntary fire brigades or informal activities initiated by parishes etc. If we take account of these special patterns of rural living, with its social bonds, self-organisation methods and the place of those institutions in the local community, we will find that rural dwellers, especially farmers, outpace residents of big cities and managerial staff in many respects. For instance, involvement in community work in 2004 was declared by 51% of farmers and only by 41% of managers and intelligentsia, whereas the percentages showing active community involvement were, respectively, 30% and 20% for in the countryside and the largest cities (Wilkin 2006: 105).

Each of these two definitions of civil society will render a dramatically different picture of the Polish countryside, also in the spatial dimension. The new forms of association are found primarily in western and northern Poland, where they multiplied much more dynamically than elsewhere in the country, especially in 2002–2005 (108.6% in the Szczecin area, 98.8% in Lower Silesia, with only 37% in Silesia and 48.6% in Little Poland) (Herbst 2008: 43). If, on the other hand, we analyse the typical countryside ways of organisation and community involvement, we will get quite an opposite picture: the so-called 'Old Lands' (central, southern and eastern regions) have a clear advantage over the so-called 'Regained Territories,' the latter looking almost like a desert in this respect. However, if we disregard the aforementioned difference between the authentic, bottom-up forms of self-organisation and the new civil society institutions, established in a top-down fashion, we would need to draw an absurd

conclusion that the areas which saw only nominal integration between locals and new settlers (described as successful only in official documents of the communist times) and where the majority of state-owned farms were located, were, in fact, a bastion of social capital. Consequently, we would have to conclude that the local communities in the former Galician villages had no social capital at all.

On the surface, the problem outlined in the preceding paragraphs seems to be a methodological one. However, in reality, it touches upon essential theoretical considerations: the definition of the civil society and the understanding of social capital. It also implies the need to ensure equitable treatment of the “community-based model,” typically found in the countryside, and the “association-based model” typical of urban areas (Klekotko 2005: 107). Given the multitude of existing guidelines, there seems to be no reason why anyone should adopt the ones which rely exclusively on participation in non-governmental organisations while excluding trade unions or religious organisations. There is another reason why this kind of definition would not be adequate: in Poland the latter two groups have been the ‘spores’ of authentic social bonds based on the sense of community rather than on contract or individual interest (Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2003). Rural communities have a greater propensity to undertake informal and spontaneous task-based activities, which also proves that this participation pattern has a richer tradition than activity within formalised structures, the latter being typically found in urban areas (Śpiewak 2008). A failure to consider all of those specificities might lead to accusations of negligence and cultural racism, i.e. preference for certain types of institutions and behavioural patterns.

Since there is no doubt that “the belief that rural dwellers have a relatively weaker propensity for self-organisation definitely stems from the different forms and traditional ways of building bonds and mutual co-operation, not always fitting into official statistical surveys” (Kamiński 2008: 10), it is a good idea to ask why Polish sociology commonly endorses the modern tokens of social capital, originating from the Western universe, while deprecating the well-established local rural communities. One of the most commonly quoted arguments refers to the limitations of community-based forms: they are supposed to represent the more primeval, “bonding” social capital, limited to the family and the immediate neighbourhood and necessarily eliminating outsiders. It is assumed that association-based forms offer a more open, inclusive bonding patterns, typical of the “bridging social capital” (Putnam 2008) in its bridging-horizontal variety or bridging-vertical variety. However, as Robert Putnam writes, it is difficult to find reliable evidence of social capital which unambiguously distinguishes between bonding and bridging (Putnam 2008: 42), so the use of these notions is little else than ideologically saturated rhetoric.

Another argument supporting the allegedly higher value of association-based social capital is that such capital is not prone to pathologies whereas community-based capital is accused of being conducive to “amoral familism,” expansion of “grey zones” in activity and consolidation of “dirty” communities. It is only recently that researchers have been willing to admit that the modern non-governmental sector “is not free from pathologies and disturbing phenomena” and the “dirty civic activity continues to be a considerable dimension of the sector’s existence” (Gliński 2006: 12

and 13). It seems that Polish sociologists will need to challenge their views on the civil society even further, taking into consideration the debate which took place at the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP) in June 2009. George Soros, who was invited as a guest, firmly stated that many civil society institutions (notably NGOs) were too formalised, had no legitimacy and served the interests of elitist groups. On the other hand, it is recognised that forms of self-organisation typically found in rural communities are free of at least some of those vices. Therefore, the most common arguments in favour of “association-based” rather than “community-based” social capital are unfounded and the probable reason behind this differentiation must lie elsewhere.

Perhaps it lies in a consideration mentioned by Putnam. When comparing the importance of official organisations and informal networking, he points out that when people hear philosophers speaking effusively about ‘civic involvement’ and democratic deliberation, they are encouraged to think of community organisations and public life as higher-order forms of social activism (Putnam 2008: 162). Meanwhile, informal bonds play an important part (for instance, visiting friends and entertaining guests at home), and Putnam includes those in the Social Capital Index. He even ventures to say that activities such as writing greeting cards, sitting in a pub over beer or playing cards (esp. the game of bridge, which he considers a highly social pastime , p. 175) are more important for the generation and maintenance of social capital than participation in new forms of organisation, such as neighbourhood watch, which are little else than a poor substitute of the missing social capital in traditional neighbourhoods, artificial sociological grass used only where the real grass does not grow (Putnam 2008: 181).

This would imply that only susceptibility to the charm of grandiloquence would explain why rural sociologists fail to notice civic potential in the institution of “village bench” (which Andrzej Bieńkowski aptly likens with the Greek chorus and states: “The Greek chorus still exists. In a village, it takes the form of a bench with a few women, or, less commonly men, sitting on it and commenting on everything and on everyone”) (Bieńkowski 2008: 9), but they try to notice the same potential in NGOs. Those institutions received the right assessment in the West a long time ago: in more recent times the old civic America was ignored and pushed aside by a herd of professionally run non-profit institutions, rarely involving the membership that would deserve this name. The idea of shared citizenship and impact was compromised in that process, as Theda Skocpol observes (Putnam 2008: 563).

Ostensible Changes or Fluctuations in Times of Transition

The multitude of opinions regarding the desirable changes in the countryside and agriculture, and the selection of data to illustrate the flow of such changes offer a strong prompt to start thinking in the opposite direction. It may be worthwhile wondering that at least some of those phenomena might not be indisputable social facts but, rather, something that shows the “ontological status of appearances,” as put by Jadwiga Staniszkis. Consequently, they may represent an artifact stemming from

the methodological approaches and methodologies used rather than a reflection of objective reality (as was the case in the aforementioned descriptions of the condition of Polish agriculture and self-organisation potential in rural communities). In order to confirm these suspicions, we will need to look at some essential data illustrating key trends in the agrarian segment in a few crucial dimensions, usually referred to as deruralisation, deagrarianisation and depeasantisation.

Are these processes actually taking place in Poland? If we take the end of the World War II as our starting point, we will see that the size of the rural population showed a significant decline in percentages, i.e. from 66% in 1946 to 38.1% in 1995, yet the absolute figure did not change significantly: merely from 15,597,000 to 14,724,000 (i.e. just under 900,000 over a half of a century!), and started to grow slightly since 2000, reaching 14,799,000 in 2007 (38.6% of the total population). Therefore, one can hardly talk about deruralisation in its most basic demographic sense. Incidentally, spatial mobility in post-war Poland was never too impressive, except for 1945–1960 when 5 million people migrated from the countryside to towns and cities, and the dynamics was several times as high as the ratios in the U.S. during the period of the fastest growth (Pohoski 1963: 67). In 1960–1970 an additional 1.5 million people moved to urban centres but the transition period turned out to be, softly speaking, ‘friendly to localities and sustainable forms of life,’ i.e. exceptionally conducive to immobility, even in comparison with the immediately preceding period. ‘The share of adult Poles who lived in the same village/town/city in 2005 and at the age of 14 was 60% (approx. 17 million); the respective percentage for 1992 was 52%’ (Szawiel 2008: 58).

The situation looked similar with regard to the agrarian character of the Polish society. The share of rural population earning its living from cultivation of land was 73.2% in 1950 but shrank to 39.3% in 1988 (Wyczański 1993), yet in 2000 BAEL found that the percentage of rural dwellers (aged over 15) working in agriculture reached 54.2%, declining somewhat in 2007, to 46.2% (Frenkel 2008, p. 185). Also, the number of rural dwellers working in agriculture fluctuated in an unusual way: it stood at 44.2% in 1950, declining to a mere 24.2% in 1988 and then rising by 13.1% in 1997 (Czyżewski, Grzelak 2002). This was a sustainable trend because the figure was as high as 45.5% in 2000, falling to 35.3% in 2007 (Frenkel 2008: 191)—again, much above the figure recorded at the end of the communist era. Deagrarianisation, defined not through the main source of income (exclusive, core, additional) or type of professional activity but, rather, through ownership of arable land, also seems quite dubious: 52% of rural families in 2002 had a farm. The respective figure for 2005 was 43% (Wilkin 2006: 76) but a new increase was recorded in 2007 when the share of such families reached 49% (Wilkin 2008: 11). As seen from these cases, the progress of transformation turns out to be highly illusory: the situation tended to deteriorate after 1989 and this trend was not entirely reversed in subsequent years, either.

Moreover, the transformation occurring in agriculture and among the agrarian population reflect a difficult process which certainly cannot be described as ‘development’ or an evolution in some predictable direction. While the agrarian structure improves (the average area of a farm slightly increases), mostly as a result of the liquidation of state-owned farms in 1991, the process is slow and fairly unimpressive,

and highly differentiated across regions. In 1960 the size of an average farm was 4.7 ha, whereas the respective figures for subsequent years were as follows: 6.3 ha in 1988, 6.9 ha in 1996, 5.8 ha in 2002 (8.4 ha for farms exceeding 1 ha), 5.9 ha in 2005 (and 8.7 ha, respectively), and 6.3 ha (and 8.8 ha) in 2007 (Wilkin 2008: 31). The changes affecting farms are even less significant if we look at their economic power (European Size Unit, ESU). In 2002 the strongest farms, generating 40 or more ESU, represented 0.6% of the total and by 2007 their share grew only slightly, to 0.8%. During the same period the number of the weakest farms, generating under 4 ESU, rose from 78.6% to 80.5% (Dzun 2008: 99). If we consider productivity of the Polish agriculture after the transition, we should no longer talk about faint progress but about a decline: after 1989 the sector not only contributed less to the country's GDP (7.2% in 1990 but 3.4% in 1999) but also its productivity (added value per one working person) also shrank: in 1985–1987 productivity of the sector corresponded to 33% of the figures for the remaining sectors whereas in 1992–1994 it fell to 23.3%, shrinking dramatically to 14% in 1997–1999. Andrzej Czyżewski and Aleksander Grzelak write: “This trend is different from what we see in developed economies where the importance of agriculture for GDP generation has been declining but, on the other hand, productivity of the sector has improved” (Czyżewski, Grzelak 2002: 62). In parallel, agricultural production has been shrinking as well: by 10% in 1990–2003; reaching merely 90.2% of the 1990 figure in 2001 (Hausner, Marody 2003). Another author assesses the situation in agriculture even more pessimistically. He estimates that the agricultural output, converted into millions of tons of grain, was 79 million in 1990 whereas it reaches merely 54.5 million at present, which implies “a long-term downward trend in agricultural output in our country” (Michna 2008: 38). Therefore, one may talk about deagrarianisation only in the sphere of agricultural output, yet this should not be a source of satisfaction, especially after Poland joined the EU, since the accession was expected to bring a significant boost in various spheres, including the agricultural sector.

Analysis of changes in farm profiles during the first dozen or so years of the transformation renders even more puzzling findings. Two studies conducted by Maria Halamska (in 1988 and 2001) revealed interesting regularities in the structure of various farm types in three selected rural communes. In 1988 enterprise-type farms (strongly integrated with the market), represented 33.1% of the total, “family-run farms” made up 19.9%, and “traditional peasant farms” (i.e. mostly subsistence farms) accounted for 28.5% while the transitional (alternative) types constituted 18.5%. During the 12 years between the two studies the number of enterprise-type farms shrank by 47%, the number of family-run farms declined by 44%, whereas the number of subsistence farms increased twice and the share of transitional farms rose by one third (Halamska, Lamarche, Maurel 2003).

This trend seems very strange, indeed. The reforms applied in the Polish countryside seem to have brought exactly the opposite of what was intended. Instead of stimulating the liquidation of traditional farms, the reforms increased their number, thus undermining the modern commodity production on farms. As the nearly 13 years of allegedly capitalist economy lead to a collapse of nearly fifty per cent of reasonably

prosperous agricultural enterprises, and the number of traditional subsistence farms doubles, such developments certainly prompt us to challenge the reasonability of the mechanisms at work and do not allow us to talk about depeasantisation. Moreover, one cannot quite agree with the opinion that this situation stems from the “change in the nature of the market which transformed from a communist-style, closed quasi-market of shortages, able to absorb nearly any quantity of any product, becoming an open and competitive market but also an unorganised market” (Halamska 2000: 73). Instead of blaming the insufficient business-mindedness of Polish farmers, we could take a more critical look at the shape of capitalism developing in Poland after 1989, and there are quite a few views to draw on. For instance, Jadwiga Staniszkis writes about “post-communist peripheral capitalism” and its stages: “bolshevik liberalism” in 1990–1993, followed by “political capitalism” and “state capitalism without a state” (Staniszkis 2001), whereas Janusz Beksiak points to the “creeping return” of regulatory practices (i.e. anti-market practices) such as restrictions on private entrepreneurship, state intervention, persistence of monopolist structures, increased fiscal burdens, expansion of central government administration in the economy etc. (Beksiak 2001). In this situation, it is hardly surprising that Polish farmers do not adapt to market economy since there is hardly any such economy in the country.

These observations on the Polish agriculture can be coupled with some other phenomena: a return to self-subsistence and autarchic existence outside the market, the growing reluctance about accumulation (declared by 59% of the respondents in 1988 and only 40% in 2001), a upsurge of employment in such farms, a parallel increase in the number of bioccupational farmers resulting from permanent under-employment in farmers’ families and from poor income levels of farms (moreover, the number of farms engaging in nonagricultural activity grew by 46% in 1996–2002) (Wilkin 2006). All this leads us to a quite different diagnosis: instead of “the end of peasants” in the Polish countryside we are witnessing the opposite process i.e. re-peasantisation (Halamska, Lamarche, Maurel 2003: 101). Czyżewski and Grzelak summarise their analysis as follows: “In 1990s no progress was recorded towards the goals of sustainable increase in farmers’ income or advancement of agriculture, the latter understood as improved productivity of factors of production, or better living standards of agricultural producers” (Czyżewski, Grzelak 2002, p. 64). Has anything changed in this respect in recent years, notably after Poland’s accession to the EU? Agricultural economists emphasise that “despite some positive symptoms” the value of net fixed assets in agriculture continues to decline, and the sector has a low share in capital investments (3.3% in 1995, 2.25 in 2004 and merely 1.9% in 2006), which indicates that “further decapitalisation of fixed assets in the near future is inevitable” (Poczta 2008: 30).

Transformation—Desolation?

One question that has accompanied all deliberations about the shape and course of the Polish transformation is the one about its direction, dynamics and degree of regu-

lation. Literature provides a good account of notions such as *revolution* and *refolution*, *democratic transition* and *changeover* (Mach 1998). If we look at the consequences of those processes, however we understand them, and if we analyse the situation of the countryside and agriculture versus the rest of the society, we should employ another notion: desolation. This notion was used in agricultural economics to describe a process of (often intentional) destruction of fixed assets and reduction of the production capacity of a home farm, undermining its value and leading to bankruptcy (Kula 1962: 38). Many of the data cited above suggest that this was exactly what happened in the Polish countryside over the past two decades. Some more indicators may be added to the picture (e.g. income obtained by rural dwellers, their level of education or unemployment in rural areas) to illustrate the social consequences of the deteriorating situation (poverty and poorer physical fitness of the young generation).

Starting from 1990, farmers' income remained in considerable disparity versus other occupational groups and the situation has been deteriorating: in 1988 this ratio stood at 120%, reaching a record 151% in 1989, falling to 92% in 1990 and shrinking to 49–53% in 1992–1997. The ratio dropped further to 42% in 1998 and to 40% one year later, slumping to 38% in 2002 (Hausner, Marody 1999; 2000). As a result, the countryside experienced a spread of poverty. In 1989 poverty affected only 10.7% of labourers who also worked on a farm (so-called bi-occupational farmers) and 19.8% of farmers proper, but poverty levels recorded in 1994 soared to 51% and 59.5% respectively (Beskid 1999). The subsequent years did not bring an improvement: while in late 1990s all of Poland saw their household income go up by 7.3%, farmers suffered a 31% decline (i.e. households using land) (Hausner, Marody 2003), which meant that as many as 68.5% farmer families found themselves under the social minimum threshold (Klank 2001). This dramatic decline of farmers' income resulted from the systematic deterioration of the economic standing of most households: between 1995 and 2000 the number of farms which reported an increase in income shrank visibly (from 18.2% to 4.6%), whereas the number of those reporting a decline rose significantly (from 50% to 72%) (Szafranec 2002: 88). It is the declining profit-making capacity of agriculture that should be viewed as the cause of apparent deagrarianisation. This trend is described as "apparent" because it results from deterioration rather than improvements in this sector, forcing farmers to seek other sources of income in addition to that earned from agricultural activity. Multi-occupational status driven by such causes does not reflect progress but, rather, marks a return to traditional practices undertaken by farmers' households which did not ensure employment for all of their labour force, nor did they secure full subsistence for the "production crew" i.e. the family (Seręga 2005).

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that "the economic situation of agriculture and the agricultural population improved considerably after Poland's accession to the European Union" (Klank 2008: 54). Among the population groups concerned (farmers, self-employed people, hired workers, retired citizens and disability pensioners) the highest increase in income (by over 43%) was recorded for farmers, yet this group remained least well-off. This relative improvement did not change the long-standing disproportions between rural and urban areas. Authors of the *Social Diagnosis 2005*

state that “personal income grows in a linear fashion as the size of domicile increases: rural dwellers earn 68% of the income earned by people living in major cities” (Czapieński, Panek 2005: 22). The disposable income data for 2007 indicate that if the average income (equalling PLN 688.5) is taken as “1,” entrepreneurs would come first in the classification (with an index of 1.26), followed by hired workers (1.06), retirees and disability pensioners (1.06), farmers working in and outside farms (0.77) and farmers working on a farm only (0.70). This means that the income of the richest group was 81% higher than that earned by the poorest group (Gorczyca 2007). If we additionally consider the polarisation of income, which is highest in this group, as measured by the Gini coefficient (0.335 for the total Polish population and 0.418 for farmers) (Hausner, Marody 2000), it is not surprising that farmers’ households have been at the highest risk of poverty for many years. In 2006 the percentage of households earning an income at the statutory poverty threshold was 10.5% in urban areas, 22.6% in the countryside and 23% in farmers’ families (Wilkin 2008: 24), and those ratios had been systematically declining since 2002. Despite less favourable financial conditions, it was the countryside which experienced the fastest growth of dwellers with university degrees: 1.8% in 1988 (9.4% in urban areas), 4.3% and 13.7% respectively in 2002, 6.4% and 20.7% in 2006 (Wilkin 2008, p. 53), but it is the rural dwellers who are more likely than urbanites to pay for their children’s education in private schools.

A very clear and a completely objective proof of the disproportions discussed here can be found in their biological consequences such as differences in body height and in other somatic characteristics between young people living in rural and urban areas. Anthropological studies on social stratification, conducted in Poland since 1967, provide a sensitive barometer of economic fluctuations (periods of growth, stagnation or crisis) and, as such, a token of the existing differences between social strata. The 1967–2001 results confirm the persistence of social inequalities between groups, measured with biological indicators such as body height, weight and *menarche* (age of first menstrual bleeding). Despite the systematic improvements in the parameters concerned (except the crisis decade in 1977–1987, when young people’s bodies immediately responded to deteriorated living conditions, with visibly delayed puberty), the differentiation across social groups and regions in Poland remains significant. Those observations prove that the prospects of biological classlessness of the population (achieved, for instance, in Scandinavian countries a few decades ago) are still a remote prospect for the Polish population (Łaska-Mierzejewska, Olszewska 2003).

What is even more intriguing, there was a very perceptible improvement in the physical fitness of rural dwellers living in Polish territories under the Russian rule in mid-nineteenth century. Measurements taken by conscription committees operating in the so-called Congress Poland were analysed by a contemporary historian and irrefutably proved that those times brought civilisation-related advancement of the countryside. The progress was reflected in the average body height in young men, rising from 163.3 cm in 1866 to 166.2 cm in 1913 (nearly 3 cm in less than 50 years, i.e. 0.6 cm per decade!). Moreover, during the same period the differences between various groups of rural population (farmers, farm labourers and craftsmen) began to blur, which means that differences between social strata diminished. While the difference

in body height between sons of farmers and those of farm labourers was as high as 2 centimetres at the beginning of the period concerned, it shrank to a mere 0.5 cm just before World War I. On the other hand, in 1965–1995 the differences in height between rural children, sons of farmers and non-farmers, albeit small (i.e. 0.5 cm), persisted for 30 years! (Łaska-Mierzejewska, Olszewska 2003: 142). This phenomenon, Michał Kopczyński believes, fully deserves to be labelled ‘a great transformation’ and reflects the release of the genetic potential of the rural population. Therefore, the second half of the 19th century in Congress Poland brought a dynamic improvement in living conditions for the largest, and previously most disadvantaged, social group. Property rights granted to peasants, an increase in income and positive economic trends in agriculture translated into an increased consumption of food, which was enough to release the previously locked genotype reserves to the extent which was perhaps greater under the much hated foreign rule than now, in a country which enjoys independence (Kopczyński 2006).

The difficult situation in the countryside was additionally aggravated in the past 20 years by the rising unemployment, both the registered one, and the one which is much harder to capture, i.e. the estimated agrarian unemployment in individual farming households. While the percentage of economically active rural dwellers was 72% in 1988, it did not exceed 56% in recent years [Raport 2008: 15]. The onset of the transition led to immense economic passivisation of the country’s population as a whole: between 1988 and 1998 the number of economically inactive population skyrocketed from 16.5% to 44% (Kabaj 2005), with subsequent years bringing a slump in the number of jobs (in 1995–2002 24% of industry jobs disappeared, their number shrinking from 3,728,000 to 2,856,000; and the building construction sector suffered a 20% decline, with the number of jobs decreasing from 827,000 to 659,000) (Kaleta 2005). The bi-occupational population was first to fall victim to those structural transformations: they were among the first to be laid off by employers. As Andrzej Rosner writes, “this very factor drove an estimated 400,000 people to go back to work on their farms” (Rosner 2000: 58). In turn, the liquidation of state-owned farms in 1991 revealed hundreds of thousands of “excess people.” Consequently, the countryside saw soaring numbers of unemployed dwellers: 1,157,000 in 1994 (or 40.8% of the country’s total unemployment), and 1,126,500 in 1995 (42.8%). If we recall that around 38% of Poland’s population live in the countryside, we will clearly see that the burden of unemployment was shifting from urban to rural areas already at that time. This trend was noticeable even in the official, registered unemployment, which rose steadily (reaching 1,341,000 in 2002) but latent unemployment must also be brought in the picture. Added up, both figures gave a total of 2,838,000 of unemployed citizens in 1994 and 2,236,000 in 1997. In total, surplus labour force “put in storage” in rural areas and in agriculture was estimated at nearly 3 million in the pre-accession period (Frenkel 2001). 2005 saw a decline in official unemployment (to 1,150,000), with 2007 bringing an even more visible trend (unemployment in the countryside was as low as 765,000), but the share of the countryside in the total unemployment rose to 44.5% (Frenkel 2008). Undoubtedly, migration of urban population in search of work to EU countries played a role here. The data from the Institute for Market, Consumption

and Business Cycles Research (IBRKiK) show that legal migration alone reached approx. 650,000 in 2004, going up to 800,000 in 2005 and soaring to 950,000 in 2006. Young people, aged up to 30, accounted for the majority of those figures (70%) whereas migration from towns with over 200,000 inhabitants represented a mere 30% (Konferencja 2008 r.).

The past fifty years were aptly summarised by Krystyna Szafraniec: ‘the countryside bore the main financial and psychological costs involved in the country’s modernisation under the communist rule and it was the countryside which also incurred the cost of Poland’s transition from communism to capitalism. Contrary to popular beliefs about costs and losses suffered by the society due to “backward” agriculture and “all-too-agrarian” countryside, we can say that the countryside considerably disburdened the budget of our poor country, overloaded with various responsibilities, and released its social system from numerous tensions. This was the case in the past, when the countryside was the main “supplier of human material” for the dynamically growing industrial sector in communist Poland, and it is the case now, when it absorbs surplus labour force from non-agricultural and non-rural labour markets’ (Szafraniec 2002: 102). The term “desolation,” proposed as a characteristic of the condition of rural areas after 1989, best fits with the notion of “transformation” and not only because they rhyme together.

Polish Countryside or the Picture of Dorian Gray

The phenomena described above fully justify the claim that the countryside has been fulfilling the role of a shock absorber in the country’s transformations. It is important to remember that this role has been always played by the agrarian segment in Poland. In order to understand its essence, it is enough to focus on a few key moments in the country’s history i.e. those when enlightened elites decided to modernise Poland, integrate it with Europe and bridge various gaps in advancement, however defined. In this sense, a development strategy was formulated for the first time in the 15th century when it was thought that Poland would make an excellent source of raw materials for the Western European economy which, at that time, was evolving towards the modern model. Thus, Western countries were building capitalism, establishing their overseas empires and investing in efficient, future-oriented spheres of the economy whereas Poland assumed the role of a ploughman and lumberjack, perhaps picturesque but certainly not profitable. Moreover, even the first modernisation project was based on the assumption that the countryside could be sacrificed to achieve the much desired goal. As a result, peasants were burdened with the yoke of serfdom, expected to maximise the gains of their owners and generate money for the public purse. Economic historians (Kochanowicz 1981) estimate the total burdens at min. 65% of the capacity of the enslaved labour force who financed comfortable lives of their lords first and only then made financial contributions to the state.

A similar situation happened again a few hundred years after the idea of turning Poland into “Europe’s granary,” which permanently placed it at the peripheries of

the global system. The partitioners' governments undertook reforms, granting land ownership to peasants with a view to ending the feudal order and initiating the development of capitalist relations of production in Poland. Again, this modernisation programme was biased as the transformation of land ownership was steered to protect major land owners and turn millions of petty peasants into cheap hired labour at their disposal. Researchers refer to this phenomenon as "modernisation paradox," which means that one part of the society develops at the expense of another which is kept in backwardness and economic dependence. The partitioners were probably well aware of what they were doing: many years later land was much easier to retrieve from noblemen than from peasants. Aleksander Świętochowski wrote about Poznań citizens, "representatives of the nation," many of whom crowded at the "germanisation fair" and sold their goods to the German colonisation committee, and then travelled to Paris to spend money bewailing the loss of their patrimony (Świętochowski 1976).

After the World War I, with its newly regained independence, Poland consistently supported industry at the expense of agriculture "by simply shifting the income generated in agriculture towards the industry," to quote Józef Poniatowski, an author of a work on gigantic overpopulation (estimated at nearly 9 million) in the Polish countryside between the two world wars (Poniatowski 1936). Such "shifts" of economic value between sectors are termed by economists as "inter-sectoral flows." While it is clear that the economy as a whole would not be able to operate without such shifts, economists have no doubts that such dramatically asymmetric relationships between sectors may lead to a collapse of one of the sectors in the long run. Undeniably, this is the situation that we have witnessed in Poland for many years because the large-scale drainage of the countryside and agriculture was also happening after the World War II. Worse still, 1989 was not a turning point in this practice or, rather, malpractice.

After 1945, in line with ideological guidelines and the needs of the selected/imposed developmental model (described as "strenuous, forced and unbalanced industrialisation" [Węgleński 1992]) agriculture was again regarded as a natural and easily accessible source of primary accumulation and was effectively drained of its human, material and financial capital. Agricultural produce and food were underpriced (throughout the years of communism, Polish cities were "fed with stolen bread," to quote Andrzej Koraszewski [1992: 61]) and restrictive mandatory supplies, progressive taxes and indirect burdens were introduced. According to economists, such burdens reached approx. 1/3 of the sector's net output, which "should be viewed as the contribution of agriculture to the overall economic growth," writes Augustyn Woś (2001a: 24). All funds obtained from the countryside using those methods represented a contribution to the country's growth. Moreover, researchers also emphasise the substantial role of migration: many rural dwellers migrated to towns and cities during intensive industrialisation and the hosts of bi-occupational farmers grew in numbers. As a result, statistics showed an increased output in industrial segments but the costs of raising and maintaining workers for those segments continued to be borne by the rural parts of the country.

Yet another form of drainage (or robbery) within the agricultural sector can be observed nowadays, during the country's transformation. In order to find proofs, one

can look at EU farm subsidies expressed in ratios such as PSE (Producer Support Estimate). While the PSE was around 40% in Western countries, Poland had merely a half of that figure and recorded a negative value (−20%) in 1990. This very number should be taken as a proof that it was the agriculture that supported the rest of the economy, not *vice versa*! [Wilkin 1998]. As researchers point out, the free market does not behave neutrally but “redistributes added value, permanently deprecating agriculture” (Woś 2001a: 16) and this process, regrettably, is aggravating. Subsidies for Polish farmers, providing a good illustration of the EU’s “economic apartheid” policy (as they are a small proportion of what Western farmers receive) only slightly mitigate this intensive, albeit undercurrent and invisible, transfusion of resources from the agrarian sector to other parts of the economy. The invisible hand of the market delves some pockets in order to fill others, while complaining about the aggravating situation of the former. Hardly any arguments would be more cynical and would present a more distorted picture of reality.

The phenomena described in this paper do not only explain the situation of rural dwellers (especially those engaged in farming), but they also unambiguously point to the ever deepening, dramatic split in the Polish society, covered and well documented by the authors of the book entitled *One Poland or many? (Polska—jedna czy wiele)*. The book draws attention to Poland’s dual-route development. On the one hand, we see an arrival of modern, affluent Poland, furnished with competences that are essential for living in the modern civilisation (urban Poland). On the other hand, the traditional, poor, marginalised country (rural Poland) still persists (Domański, Rychard, Śpiewak 2005). The accuracy of this diagnosis is reflected not only in results of numerous sociological studies but also in collective indicators (e.g. Human Development Index), which place Poland in an international comparative perspective. They also reveal a distance between the part of the country which meets the criteria of a developed society (HDI of min. 0.800) that is urban Poland (HDI = 0.828) and the underdeveloped rural Poland (HDI = 0.794) (Raport o rozwoju społecznym 2000). Undoubtedly, this situation evolved as a result of repeated attempts to modernise the country (according to the same unfortunate rule). It seems that those strategies were not pursued fully consciously in the 15th century or even after 1989; they just resulted from the very short-sighted calculations of the country’s elites as Poland has always been ‘blessed’ with narrow-minded politicians. Halfway through the transition Jan Szczepański wrote that Poland’s most recent transformation could also be described as a process “pursued in a trance, in a psychological condition when people have weakened will and act in a daze” (Szczepański 1999: 64).

In the light of macroeconomic analysis concerning the aforementioned inter-branch flows, we may venture to say that the Polish countryside is like “The Picture of Dorian Gray” for the rest of the society. In his well-known novel Oscar Wilde described a mystic bond between a living man and his portrait: all of the protagonist’s vices and sins were imprinted on canvas, leaving the perpetrator intact. Is this not a good metaphor for the relationship between the countryside and the global society? The repeated attempts at modernising Poland over the centuries have been based on the same paradox: small progress in the country is achieved through an incommensu-

rate devastation of the agrarian segment, seen (presumably in line with Physiocratic theories) as a miraculously renewing reservoir of values, goods and human capital. Consequences of this wasteful exploitation are then blamed on the countryside and agriculture, which, it is argued, must undergo a thorough transformation or, better still, rid itself of its current characteristics. However, anyone who has read Wilde's novel must remember how it ends. The protagonist destroys his portrait, a magical reflection of his deeds, but as soon as he stabs it, he dies. This is the last moment when the affinity between the man and his image on canvas was seen: when the servants entered "they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (Wilde 2005: 164). Perhaps it makes sense to ask if the same fate awaits Poland when the dreams of deruralisation, deagrarianisation and depeasantisation, i.e. the liquidation of traditional Polish countryside, harboured by some sociologists, come true?

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