

CONFERENCE REPORT

Poland after 20 Years of Freedom **Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw, 22–24 May 2009**

As Poles celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the memorable year 1989 in their history, the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw organised a conference to reflect on the significance of Poland's deep transformations. The conference was divided into four sessions structured around four essential questions: (i) *Institutions: What Have We Built?* (ii) *Society: How Have We Changed?* (iii) *Processes: What Have We Experienced?* (iv) *Identities: Who Are We?* Papers and lectures were delivered by international guests whose research interests focused on Central and Eastern Europe, as well as by the staff of the Institute of Sociology. The conference also included two additional sessions and a separate event organised by doctoral students at the Institute of Sociology entitled *Polish Transformations: Taking a Different Perspective* (24 May 2009). A total of 48 papers were delivered during three days.

Adam Przeworski (New York University) opened the first session with a keynote speech entitled *Self-government of the People in Our Times*. He reconstructed the discussion on democracy by pointing out its incapability to resolve problems of inequality, representation and the balance between governance and freedom. After reviewing theories and proposing areas for further research, professor Przeworski asked which incapacities of democracy were correctible and which ones were inextricably linked with it. Mirosława Grabowska, who enquired whether political parties were the boosters or hindrances to the democratic system in Poland, outlined the evolution of the Polish political scene after 1989 against the historical, institutional, social and cultural background, and offered a 'soft defence' of political parties: those organisations are poorly designed, inefficient and enjoy low social trust yet they remain an essential factor that supports democracy. Jacek Raciborski addressed Poles' attitudes towards democracy, making a distinction between A-type and B-type civil society. A citizen may influence the state primarily within an A-type civil society whereas the scope of freedoms in a B-type society is largely circumscribed by state-imposed norms. Poles do not make much use of A-type opportunities, which is reflected, for instance, in the country's lowest electoral turnout among EU member states or in high indicators of political alienation.

In her paper, entitled *The Third Sector, Public Institutions and Home-Made Civil Society*, Anna Giza-Poleszczuk discussed the reasons why the civil society is weak and

emphasised that this weakness does not stem from Poles' passive attitudes but, rather, from the organisational and communicative culture imposed on the third sector. She identified the following essential barriers to its development: (i) the legal framework delimiting activities of non-governmental organisations (in order to raise funds, NGOs need to fit into the tasks predefined by the state, by local governments and into the operational logic of EU funds); (ii) absence of channels to express and articulate the existing, spontaneous community initiatives; (iii) the tendency not to perceive local communities as agents (the prevalent view is that of the society as an aggregate of individuals). In line with the reflection on civil society, Cezary Trutkowski, talked about implementation of the subsidiarity principle after 1989 based on a sample of 500 rural communes. Having analysed the structure of local government budgets and opinions expressed by inhabitants of Polish communes, Trutkowski stated that the tasks performed by local governments, enjoying the support of local inhabitants, focus primarily on the modernisation of public infrastructure and less so on the community-enhancing activities in the spheres of culture and of non-school education.

The themes of politics and civil society transformations found a follow-up during the doctoral panels: Jan Dzierzgowski presented a paper entitled *Civic Competence in Contemporary Poland as Prerequisite for Democratic Participation*, Victoria Dunaeva talked about *The Role of Cultural Institutions in the Creation of Civil Society during the Process of Transformation (Comparative Analysis of the Cultural Institutions in Poland and Russia)*, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska gave a talk *On Feminist Modifications of Electoral Systems*, Radosław Oryszczyszyn delivered a paper entitled *1968–1980–1989—Three Systems, Three Generations, Three Transformations*, Wojciech Rafałowski addressed *The Origin and Transformations of the Polish Electoral System: An Analysis against the Background of the Region's Countries*, Tomasz Zając talked about *The Influence of the Electoral System on the Party System in Poland after 1989* whereas Marianna Zielińska's focus was: *What Constitutes 'Good Administration'?—Models of Public Administration in Polish Public Discourse Between 1990 and 2004*.

The only paper in the first session which went beyond the sociology of politics was delivered by Wiesława Kozek, who presented the processes of institutionalisation of the labour market after 1989. She described the path leading from collective strategies (goals of the *Solidarity* movement: shared cause, Poland's best interest, 'us') to individual strategies, with occasional group mobilisation. Professor Kozek juxtaposed the socially reconstructed labour market with the model of an ideal market, indicating its structural limitations: employees' maximisation of their own benefits (employees being the weaker party in encounters with employers, weak trade union movement), mobility of labour force (no tradition, no housing infrastructure), transparency (family and friends treated as the best source of information), competitive games between employees (latent norm of non-competition between the unemployed and working people, inefficient system of education and professional training), high flexibility of wages and salaries (minimum wage, postulated welfare benefits). This lecture was meaningfully complemented by doctoral students and their guests on the last conference day: Anna Kiersztyn *The Scale and Singularities of Polish Underemployment: An Attempt at Measurement*, Ewelina Kuźmicz *The Working Poor in Poland: is a New So-*

cial Stratum Emerging? Mikołaj Lewicki *Work Ideologies: Power, Its Legitimation and Articulation of Conflict in Polish Enterprises after 1989*, Karolina Sztandar-Sztanderska *The Social Construction of the Labour Market Policy, or What We Can and Cannot See through Official Categories*, and Agata Dembek *The Picture of the Professional Individual Based on the Analysis of Personality Development Training Market*. Two other talks concerned broadly understood institutional sociology, namely Piotr Chmielarz's paper on transformations in the Polish army and Łukasz Raciborski's paper on reconstructions in the healthcare system.

During the second session the speakers addressed the scale of social change. Maciej Gdula proposed that after 20 years of transformation, the questions about the heritage of 'real socialism' should be already replaced with questions about the shape of 'real capitalism.' Addressing changes in social structure, the speaker observed an important role of the state in the sphere of employment. He suggested two explanations. Firstly, the state can be seen as a regulator of market transformations which supplies a number of citizens with relatively well-paid and stable jobs. The second neo-marxist explanation is less optimistic: the proliferation of administration is connected with a phase in the evolution of capitalism where the bureaucratic apparatus that mitigates social tensions is expanded in order to streamline accumulation of capital and to restrict workers' claims in the private sector.

Kazimierz Frieske gave an overview of poverty and affluence issues in Poland. The risk of poverty remains highest for rural households, families with many children, single parents, the unemployed, working poor and people employed for a fixed period of time. In the light of comparative data from EU countries those phenomena are not specific to Poland. On the other hand, not many insights into the lives of rich Poles are available. Based on qualitative lifestyle studies one can say that Polish 'affluence' merely means the material comfort of the middle class. Professor Frieske also warned against the attempts to perceive social exclusion as a consequence of income status (however, exclusion does correlate with poverty in some situations) and claimed that social marginality is associated primarily with the emergence of individual identities and group identities which do not fall into the society's institutional order. (This assertion was echoed during the doctoral session where Joanna Erbel showed movable borderlines of exclusion in her paper *The Struggle for City Space—the Struggle Against Social Exclusion*). Izabella Bukraba-Rylska addressed the transformation of Poland's rural areas and emphasised that Polish sociology (and, more broadly, the public debate) is dominated by the anti-rural modernisation paradigm which views the rural reality as inferior lacking various types of 'capitals.' While transformation indicators are indeed highly favourable for the countryside, they are side effects of a long historical process of urban modernization.

Małgorzata Jacyno addressed *The Spirit of Polish Capitalism*, claiming that religious experience is a way to adapt to Polish capitalism rather than a relic of the past. Using references to the modern therapeutic culture, she showed that the collective imagination of Poland's middle class is governed by complex dialectics of emotionality and rationality, asceticism and Catholicism, individualism and collectivism. Małgorzata Jacyno's paper served as a bridge joining two sessions which took

place on the following day, where speakers addressed the issue of social ideas and identities.

While Jacyno showed how religiousness, digested through the therapeutic culture, gives legitimacy to capitalism, Patrick Michel (CNRS), who opened the *Processes* panel, discussed the function of religion in the political sphere. He focused on one of the major challenges faced by the Catholic Church and Polish politicians after 1989 i.e. the transition from a binary world ('us' and 'them') to pluralistic, polymorphous and fragmented reality. Many people still long for the mobilising power of the Catholic utopia whose discourse has evolved into a discourse of exclusion and nationalism. Meanwhile, Sławomir Mandes argued that the Catholic Church actively shaped the democratisation, europeisation and transition to market economy. Two factors played a role here: in 1989 the Church entered the new reality as a key actor in the public life and, for historical reasons, was better prepared than any other institution to participate in accelerated modernisation. During the doctoral session the links between religiousness and public life were addressed by Grzegorz Brzozowski in his talk on *New Religious Experience—Outside Institutions—Toward the Making of the Citizen?* and by Magdalena Smak-Wójcicka who presented the paper on *The Role of Catholic Schools in the Formation of Catholic Identity in Poland*.

Talking about collective memory in the last 20 years, Paweł Śpiewak analysed two public debates which sharpen Poles' contemporary national identity: the dispute about Poles' attitudes towards Jews during the World War II, and the dispute about decommunization. Wondering what differentiates Poles' stances in both disputes, Śpiewak remarked that contemporary ideological conflicts run in parallel with the 19th century conflicts around familiar and Western values. When discussing the place of the Holocaust in their history and expressing various assessments of communist past, Poles are actually wrangling over the prevalence of European cultural norms over local norms or *vice versa*. Joanna Wawrzyniak observed that professional historians hold a privileged position in contemporary disputes about memory. In her talk, she presented the communities of historians and the social mechanisms which influenced subsequent reinterpretations of Poland's most recent history after 1989. The role of memory and cultural representation in public sphere was also addressed in doctoral sessions: Marcin Darmas presented a paper entitled *System Transformation in Movies: A Sociological Analysis of the Heroes of the New Reality* whereas Karolina Wigura analysed *Declarations of Forgiveness and Repentance in Politics as a New Public Institution in Poland after 1989*, arguing that events such as the meeting between the Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in Krzyżowa or President Aleksander Kwaśniewski's apology for the murder of Jews in Jedwabne represent an important ingredient in the construction of modern European identity of Poles.

The last session, with identities as its main theme, was opened by Chris Hann (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology) who delivered a lecture entitled *Does Ethnic Cleansing Work? The Case of Twentieth Century Poland*. Professor Hann presented an anthropological perspective of an outsider on ethnic and national transformations at the Polish-Ukrainian borderland. Referring to his research and comparative observations, he observed that the mass relocations of the population after 1945 lib-

erated the transitional Poland from ethnic problems which were so acutely present in the former Yugoslavia or the Commonwealth of Independent States. Lech Nijakowski, a researcher of the Silesia region, took a similar stance. He believed that peaceful and bloodless ‘reproduction of national minorities after the Round Table talks in Poland’ was enabled by the Post-Yalta policy in the sphere of nationalities. Next there came Michał Łuczewski, who presented the findings from his doctoral dissertation on national transformations experienced in daily life by inhabitants of the village of Żmiąca (Małopolskie voivodship, southern Poland). Referring to the best and longest-standing traditions of Polish sociology (the first monograph of Żmiąca was published by Franciszek Bujak in 1903), Łuczewski responded to a provocative question: *How Do You Become Who You Have Always Been?* He showed how the Polish national identity among rural dwellers was primordialised over the last 100 years. During the doctoral session Łukasz Sokółowski pointed to another dimension of local transformations, examining the relationship between rural villages and global media.

Ireneusz Krzemiński discussed the origins and nature of contemporary Polish anti-Semitism. Ewa Nowicka undertook an attempt to describe Poles’ attitudes towards immigrants from Africa, many of whom hold Polish citizenship. She analysed interviews with people who experience otherness and pondered whether the transformation had changed attitudes towards ‘the other’ in Poland. Ethnic and national themes, were visibly attractive for doctoral scholars. Katarzyna Andrejuk presented a paper entitled *Polish Regulations Concerning Refugees and People Seeking Asylum—Practical Dimension of Application of the Law*. Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper talked about *The Borderlands [Kresy] as an Individuality: The Construction of Circumnational Identities*. Marta Šaranović delivered a talk on *Slow Transformation: Polish Policy of Citizenship Granting and its Social Consequences*, whereas Aleksandra Winiarska’s paper was entitled *Polish-Vietnamese Marriages Before and After the Systemic Transformation*.

After the intensive discussion of ethnic and national issues, the session closed with two papers on the transformation of values as seen by quantitative studies. Aleksandra Jasińska-Kania analysed variations in values professed by Poles in three waves of the European Values Study (1990–1999–2008), by referring to the multidimensionality of social reality, i.e. overlapping of global civilisational processes coupled with the influence of the Polish cultural heritage and the experience of systemic transformation of the last two decades. A long-standing gender researcher, Renata Siemieńska used the findings from the World Values Survey to present the transformation of cultural construction of gender in Poland in a comparative perspective, indicating, among others, the growing public acceptability of gender equality. Gender was also the subject of presentations by doctoral students. In her speech, Katarzyna Perdzyńska talked about *Lesbian and Gay Identity and the Polish Transformation*, Agata Urbanik delivered a paper *The New and the Old Elderness: Changes in the Identities of Elderly Women as an Illustration of Cultural Transformation After 1989* whereas Sylwia Urbańska presented a paper entitled *Parenting, the Home Territory, and Social Change: Construction of Maternal Absence in Biographical Narrations of Migrants*.

One might argue whether or not the conference fulfilled organisers’ expectations i.e. whether it answered the questions posed in session titles. Some participants criti-

cised the speakers for downplaying the heritage of the *Solidarity* movement, accession to the European Union and globalisation. Nevertheless, numerous issues were raised during the conference. So, instead of adding more criticism, it may be worthwhile pondering on what was actually said: what is the picture of Poland and, above all, of Polish sociology after twenty years of freedom? First of all, the sociological analyses presented during the conference clearly demonstrated the prevalence of empirical studies over theoretical deliberations. Second, it is worth noticing that speakers tended to be optimistic (albeit moderately). Political and economic institutions seem to be fulfilling their roles, even if not always working with full efficiency. In terms of culture, identities and values, Poland has been undergoing modernisation processes; these provoke a response from traditionalist movements which, however, do not endanger democratic procedures. As regards social inequalities, the labour market has become their main regulator. Notably, many young researchers focus on analysing the labour market instead of performing the traditional stratification-based analysis. Finally, we have seen a (somewhat blurred) division into older and younger generation of scholars. The latter seem more willing to resort to constructivist and cultural approaches instead of institutional and systemic analysis so keenly adopted by the generation of Polish sociologists who studied the transformation in the 1990s. What remains an open question is whether or not this is because the younger researchers are already part of the market economy, democratic society and global system and they find it easier to analyse the social world by reconstructing ‘the insider perspective’.

Joanna Wawrzyniak
Institute of Sociology
University of Warsaw
e-mail: wawrzyniakj@is.uw.edu.pl