

SOCIETY—ECONOMY—POLITICS

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Commodification in an Officially Decommodified Economy: Institutional Contradictions and Everyday Practices in Poland’s Real-Socialism

Abstract: The processes of commodification and decommodification have been important dimensions through which social, economic, political and also cultural changes can be analysed. They turn out to be particularly useful for studying everyday practices, both overt and hidden. This article—concerning the period of real-socialism in Poland—has two goals: (a) explaining the paradox of commodification phenomena in a formally decommodified socialist economy and (b) exemplifying these practices in a dynamically changing political and economic situation. Such an approach has made it possible to reveal not only the internally inconsistent system of the plan-command-distribution economy, but most of all the rich set of social adaptation practices that enabled it to function during conditions of shortage.

Keywords: commodification, decommodification, real-socialism in Poland, everyday life in the People’s Republic of Poland

Introduction

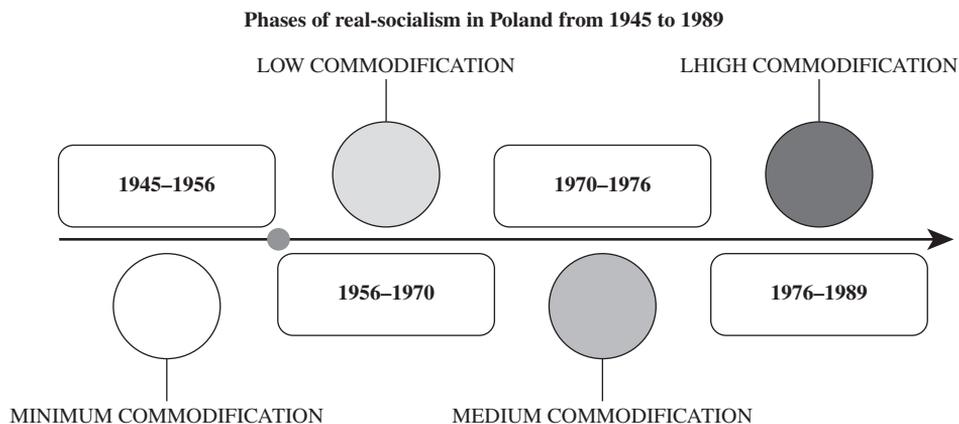
In this article, we aim to show that the categories of commodification and decommodification, most often associated with the capitalist market system, can also be deployed in order to analyse institutional and individual practices within the socialist economic system. That is why we are primarily interested in the period of “real-socialism” in Poland, which ran from 1945 to 1989.¹

¹ It is evident that Poland shares many commonalities with neighbouring Central and Eastern European countries, firstly in the functioning of this region as a periphery of the world capitalist economy, from the 16th century, and secondly during the introduction, development, decline and then fall of the real-socialist system, followed by the post-communist transformation. The degree of similarity between individual countries and during particular periods may however differ. In the Czech Republic, for example, which had stronger ties to the German lands than Poland until 1918, social and economic processes (including commodification) took on a shape closer to the Western European model. This raises the question of whether and to what extent the introduction of real socialism after 1945 unified the situation in both countries.

Taking into account different theoretical conceptions,² we assume that commodification and decommodification are processes, through which products, services and, more broadly, social relations, are transformed into goods of exchange value (and most often, although this is not a condition *sine qua non*, can be bought or sold on the market) or, on the contrary, cease to be commodities (Ziółkowski, Drozdowski, Baranowski 2020: 56–57). The important element of our theoretical frame is the Karl Polanyi’s (1957) conception of four basic types of the organization of economic life: the self-sufficient household, reciprocity, redistribution and market exchange.³ In our analysis of everyday practices, we also refer to a broader anthropological “processual” concept of commodity and commodification.⁴

The first part of this article outlines the historical context of the development of the commodification processes in Poland, up until the end of World War Two. Next, we characterise the institutional practices of commodification and decommodification in real socialism, taking into account the then existing social structure. In the next section, we go on to describe some selected daily individual strategies implemented to meet social needs. Particular attention will be paid to the dynamically changing institutional and legal conditions (Hollander 1983); and to the grassroots and inventive social activities that emerged as society adapted to its environment. For the purpose of this study one can roughly divide the period of real socialism in Poland in consecutive phases according to Figure 1. An important caesura is “the Polish October” 1956, the starting point of the “Gomułka Thaw,” i.e., the political liberalization of the communist system, which in turn made possible the gradual—at first very timid—growth of commodification. Since 1970 the commodification processes accelerated, first, in the phase of dynamic economic

Figure 1



Source: own elaboration.

² Karl Marx, Gyorgy Lukács, Elinor Ostrom, Gosta Esping-Andersen (See: Ziółkowski 2004).

³ While Polanyi’s approach is—quite obviously—especially useful in the analysis of the post-communist “new great transformation” (which—let us add—will be the topic of subsequent study), it proves to be very helpful to understand the mechanisms of economic life in real socialism.

⁴ E.g., Arjun Appaduraj (1986: 13–16) views commodity as a certain phase of existence of things (a phase of their “lives” or “biographies”).

development and modernization (which lasted until 1976), and second, in the phase of growing economic crisis, the self-limiting revolution of *Solidarność* (1980–81) and the years of the final demise of the *ancien régime* (up to 1989). This growing commodification was first politically encouraged and controlled by the authorities, but especially in the late 80-ties it went out of control and permeated the whole economic life. The changing nature of the commodification processes is described in detail in the following sections.

In the final subsections, we briefly describe the Polish experience against the background of other countries in the region and introduce the specificity of the so-called second economy. We end with a summary of the text.

The Historical Conditions of the Weaker Development of Commodification in Poland until 1945

Let us start from the concept of Immanuel Wallerstein,⁵ who points out that from the mid-fifteenth century, a system which he termed the “world-economy” had begun to take shape in Europe. This was made up of an innovative centre producing highly processed goods and an emerging periphery exporting raw materials. This resulted in an increasing imbalance in exchange.⁶ Poland exported grain and semi-finished wood, which made up only a small percentage of production and came exclusively from the farms of the nobility, whilst the peasant sector remained at the level of a ‘natural economy’ and subsistence farming.⁷ The emerging bourgeoisie was small in number in Poland, encountering numerous legal and economic restrictions.⁸

After the territories of Poland had been divided up by the occupiers, it was only in the second half of the 19th century that hired labour became the main form of work in agriculture.⁹ When Poland regained independence after World War One, the agricultural population remained dominant.¹⁰ On the other hand, very little progress was made in industrialising the Polish economy.¹¹

At the outbreak of World War Two in 1939, around two-thirds of Poland’s population was concentrated in rural areas. As a result of the enormous war losses, estimated at around

⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-system analysis: An Introduction* (Durham and London, 2006). Wallerstein explicitly referred to the case of Poland, following on from the previous analysis carried out by Marian Małowist. Marian Małowist, *Wschód a Zachód Europy w XIII–XVI wieku. Konfrontacje struktur społeczno-gospodarczych* (Warszawa, 1973; cf. also *Sosnowska 2004*).

⁶ One of the fundamental causes of this situation was agrarian dualism, whereby the nobility sought to increase their income to the west of the Elbe, reducing serfdom and leasing land to peasants, whilst east of the Elbe the estates enlarged, land was taken away from the peasants and serfdom grew.

⁷ As Witold Kula (1962: 55) claimed—only 10% of peasants’ products were sold on the local market.

⁸ They could not purchase landed property and the merchant profit margin in Polish inland cities remained low.

⁹ Remunerated partly in kind and partly in money (including propination compulsion, i.e. the obligation to use the inn which belonged to the lord), which instigated the development of a commodity-money market (Ihnatowicz, Mączak, Zientara, Żarnowski 1996: 440).

¹⁰ People employed in agriculture and forestry accounted for 77,1% and in 1921 and 70,3 % in 1931 (Szuman 1999: 189).

¹¹ This was partly caused by the unification of the Polish lands, which cut the industries in the separate regions off from the markets of their former partitioned states (e.g. the sugar industry in Wielkopolska and textile industry in Łódź), and was partially a consequence of the great economic crisis of 1929–1934.

6 million citizens of the Second Polish Republic (Grabowski 2018), and the post-war reforms introduced by the communist authorities, the socio-professional structure of the population changed significantly. During the war, the greatest losses were suffered by the petty bourgeoisie (largely Jewish), intelligentsia and liberal professionals, with the workers suffering less losses, and the peasants the least. As a result of the government's policy after the war, the landowning class, the bourgeoisie, and then the non-agricultural small-scale sector were liquidated (during the so-called 'trade battle' in 1947–1949). As a result, during the first years after the war, Polish society was predominantly a society of peasants, or those from the first or second generations who had migrated to the cities from the countryside.

Commodification and Decommodification in Real-Socialism

Without attempting to describe in detail the nature of real-socialism at this point (Kurczewska 1995; Lebowitz 2012), we will concentrate on those elements that allow us to better understand the status and ways of functioning of broadly defined commodities in this system.¹² The decommodification of socio-economic life, in the real-socialist economies, was rooted in the partial decommodification of labour. Eyal et al. (2001) explained how these economies had industrialised via an incomplete separation of immediate producers from their means of subsistence and production. Therefore, as in a capitalist market economy, large parts of the self-employed and peasant economy were eradicated and wage labour universalised. However, workers' labour was not fully commodified, due to such things as the state policy of full-employment, which diminished the marketable nature of labour power.¹³ Furthermore, as the vast majority of the economy was state owned, economic interests were largely shaped and determined by individuals' and social groups' relation to the state and political authorities, rather than by market relations (Narojek 1973).¹⁴

The basic model of the social structure of real-socialism (which describes particularly well the situation in Poland during the 1950s and 1960s [cf. Figure 1.], after which it was slightly modified) can be described as follows (Kolarska and Rychard 2016: 42–57). Real-socialism consisted in subordinating all spheres of social life to one centre,

¹² The debate on the nature of real-socialism has been going on for many years. The various approaches can be divided into four groups (Lane 1982): orthodox-Marxist, neo-Marxist, neo-Weberian, and those referring to the notion of totalitarianism. In the following remarks we mainly consider the neo-Weberian approach, which assumes that in order to describe real-socialism it is necessary to adopt a broad notion of exploitation, resulting not only from the ownership of the means of production and the profit it generates, but also from the question of access to power (cf. Giddens 1973; Parkin 1979).

¹³ The decommodification of labour in the real-socialist states was diametrically opposite to that in western European welfare states (Baranowski 2021a; Husson 2019). For example, Esping-Andersen (1993) wrote that the level of decommodification in a welfare state is determined by whether a person is able to maintain a socially acceptable standard of living when s/he is not engaged in productive work (measured through such things as the availability of universal public services and benefits). However, in the real-socialist states, de-commodification was assured through a generalised guarantee of work (although this could be withdrawn for political reasons) and many social benefits and services (holiday facilities, some health care services, pensions, country homes, etc.), were connected to an employee's workplace (Esping-Andersen 1993).

¹⁴ Such an opinion was shared by Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 14–18), who believed that the dominant form of capital within the real-socialist economies (around whose accumulation and distribution social inequalities were structured) was political capital.

particularly the economy. The principle of economic rationality was subordinated to other social considerations. Some of these were related to attempts to implement socialist ideals: social justice or the superiority of collective over individual interests. However, we agree with the opinion of Györgi Márkus, that one of the basic goals of the economy was to “maximize the amount of material resources remaining at the global disposal of the power apparatus.” (Feher, Heller and Márkus 1983: 65) Using Márkus’s idea we assume that the socio-economic structure of real-socialism had three main features. These were: (1) statist homogenisation, i.e. striving for all working persons to be either directly employed,¹⁵ or directly or indirectly controlled by the state (mandatory supplies for individual farmers; the possibility of private medical practice only if the primary place of employment was the state health service; lawyers or artists obligatorily belonging to state unions in order to receive, for example, an allocation of painting materials, etc.); (2) the basic dichotomous antagonism contrasted the ruling group, or “the united triumvirate of the party ideologist, policeman and technocrat” (Konrád and Szelényi 1979: 148; Lane 1982), with direct producers.¹⁶ The members of the ruling group had various financial and non-monetary economic privileges, with an extensive reward system for the nomenclature, or in other words, the “praetorians of the system”; (3) both opposing groups were internally differentiated, but this differentiation depended primarily on power. Obviously, the authorities determined the hierarchy within the ruling group, but more importantly, by controlling employment and wages in the economy, it shaped the income differentiation and determined the economic and social position of individual professional groups. One of the forms of this control was the principle of prioritizing industry, which manifested itself in a significantly higher level of remuneration for those working in production sectors, especially heavy industry, thus lowering the value of intellectual work.

The basic form of property in real-socialism was state property (Baranowski 2021b). This had partly been inherited from the Second Polish Republic or taken over after the border shifts in the Western Territories. Some had also been expropriated from private owners via the reforms of the 1940s, and the rest built through the enormous mobilisation and effort of Polish society after the War. As a result, on the one hand, the state authorities had at its disposal (formally on behalf of society) significant accumulated wealth that had been built up over several decades,¹⁷ and on the other hand, they could satisfy the basic needs of citizens chiefly through providing them with public goods and services financed or subsidised by the state budget.

Public goods and services fall into several categories. The first one includes those goods that, once produced, can be consumed by an additional consumer at no additional

¹⁵ This situation is also referred to as ‘salarisation.’

¹⁶ According to the concept of E. Wright (1985: 83) the ruling class in this system consists of managers and bureaucrats, and the basic mechanism of exploitation is the planned appropriation and distribution of surplus based on organisational hierarchy. Louis Althusser’s concept of the expansion of the state apparatus as a means of realising the interests of the ruling group can also be applied to the real-socialist states. Finally, a critique of the actual functioning of both Western democratic welfare states and real-socialism is undertaken by James Buchanan’s theory of public choice, according to which the ruling group influences the shape of the political-economic system, using it to gain profits and privileges for itself.

¹⁷ These assets are usually referred to as public (or state) property, while Gavin Rae (2015) calls them public capital.

cost,¹⁸ i.e., made available to all citizens (national defence, internal security, basic transport infrastructure, public spaces, etc.). It is worth adding that in Poland this availability was (and still is) greater than in many other societies. This applies also to unlimited access to some natural goods: like free entry to state-owned forests and collecting mushrooms in them, or the general (though not always followed) principle of free access to lakes or sea. One of the basic, and somewhat defining features of real-socialism was the second category, including those social benefits that were—on the basis of top-down ideologically motivated political decisions—quasi completely decommodified (basic health care, sickness and retirement benefits, pensions, assistance for people with disabilities, education, family allowances, childcare for children under five years old, etc.). Finally, the third category includes services sold as goods, but subsidised by the state (including public transport, energy, water, sewage, municipal construction, culture and the public media).

The construction of real-socialism in Poland, corresponding to the top-down theoretical model, which was ideologically justified and praised in the official propaganda, was therefore largely based on the policy of decommodification covering all three of the above-mentioned categories of public goods. Some aspects of public space were treated as being generally available; basic social benefits were theoretically free; and paid public services were relatively (i.e. compared to other goods) cheap. This system functioned in a form closest to the top-down model in Poland until the turn of the 1956 and the following years up to 1970 (cf. [Figure 1](#)). In addition to this top-down decommodification, of statist homogenisation (salarisation), there also existed a process of bottom-up decommodification.¹⁹ However, both the top-down and bottom-up pressures for decommodification were of course accompanied by various forms of commodification.

The economy of real-socialism can be also aptly described in the terms of Karl Polanyi's conception, especially in its Ivan Szelényi's "reconstruction" ([Szelényi 1991](#); [Szelényi, Mihályi 2021](#)), which treats Polanyi' as a theorist of the "mixed economy". In all historical epochs one of the three principal historical modes of the organization of economic life distinguished by Polanyi (reciprocity, redistribution and market economy) is a dominant one, but it is always accompanied by the elements of other secondary modes. In the pre-capitalist society, there existed isolated enclave markets based on commodity exchange. In the real socialism, the dominant integrative mechanism was politically controlled redistribution, which was, however, complemented not only by the market mechanism but also by some elements of (sometimes corrupted) reciprocity. In the Polish agricultural sector, a limited role was also played by the self-sufficient individual farms.

Let us remember that the commodification processes appeared gradually, as presented in [Figure 1](#). The first and most common way in which goods were bought and exchanged had characteristics similar to those in a commodity economy, although it was obviously based upon a different logic. People tended to purchase those generally available goods (apart from during periods of crisis) which had a utility value for the purchaser or were bought

¹⁸ In the economic theory these goods are usually defined as both non-excludable and non-rival ([Samuelson 1954](#); [Mankiv 2009](#): 226; [Kwiatkowski 2017](#)).

¹⁹ For example, "compensatory claims" were maintained throughout the period of the People's Republic of Poland—with society expecting egalitarian and egalitarising principles of remuneration rather than those based upon efficiency and market logic.

with the intention of selling it on. However, a specific feature of this system was that the prices of the vast majority of goods (especially basic necessities) were regulated and not determined by the market, meaning they did not reflect the laws of supply and demand. Regulated prices also included the above-mentioned transport, rental, water and energy services. Thus, throughout the lifespan of this system, both the prices of essential products and the prices of essential services were mostly subsidised by the state. This aligned with the assumed ideals of socialism, and was supposed to prove its superiority over capitalism. However, while some elements of such a policy could function in capitalist welfare states (especially in Scandinavian countries), its implementation in Poland and other countries of the region encountered insurmountable difficulties (Glasman 1994).

From its foundation, real-socialism was—as Perry Anderson (1964) put it—a “socialism of scarcity.” Regardless of the economic backwardness and peripheral nature of these countries at the time of the system’s inception from 1945 (which especially in the case of Poland included enormous war damage), the main reason for this state of affairs was the very mechanism of the functioning of the state economy as a shortage economy. This was generally described by Janos Kornai (1980) and in Poland by Władysław Balicki (1989).²⁰ They both show us that, somewhat perversely, a specific understanding of optimisation emerged in the real-socialist economy. This is not so much the optimal relationship between inputs and results, nor the pursuit of sustainable development against the mismanagement of the available resources, but rather a level of efficiency which is both acceptable to the political and administrative centre and does not require the maximum mobilization from others.²¹

As a result, it periodically occurred that this inefficient economy did not allow for the maintenance of artificial low prices, because supply could not meet demand. In response the authorities used two main policies: rationing goods (the ration-card system) or top-down increases in official prices. The rationing of goods first operated in Poland during the years 1944–1949 and 1951–1953, which was by no means exceptional in a devastated post-war Europe. The ration-cards were abolished in 1953, resulting in a drastic increase in official prices. Two further attempts by the authorities to significantly raise prices (in December 1970 and June 1976) led to huge social protests, which not only forced the government to withdraw its announced increases, but also helped to change the political history of the Polish People’s Republic (PRL).²² Unable to introduce price increases, the authorities

²⁰ As Balicki showed, in the system of the plan-command-and-control economy, the rational executor of the plan did not strive to maximize production and profit, but to execute the plan and thus receive rewards from his superiors. The possibility of implementing the plan was maximalised by striving for the largest possible allocation of resources, both for current production and as reserves for the future. Hence, there was a tendency—fully rational from an individual point of view—towards excessive demand, accumulation and using means and resources. Moreover, company managers learned that increasing production and exceeding the plan in a given year often raised targets for the following year making them difficult to meet or exceed.

²¹ Paradoxically, this systemic consent, not to maximise productivity, functioned throughout the entire period of the real-socialist economic model in Poland, both as an important factor stabilising the system (the lack of strong, decisive pressure on the economic outcome was in fact one of the aspects of socio-economic security, allowing the suppliers of most goods and services to feel relatively free from pressure) and as one of the main causes of its progressive delegitimation.

²² The protests of December 1970 were first crushed by the authorities with bloody repressions, but then they not only withdrew the price rises, but were also forced to make changes in the highest positions of the state. The

reintroduced ration-cards, which remained in place to differing degrees during the years 1976–1989, authorising the purchase of strictly defined quantities of designated goods (mainly food, but also, for example, children’s shoes). Sugar ration-cards functioned from 1976 to 1985, and they were also introduced for products such as soap, washing powder, chocolate, alcohol and gasoline. Ration-cards often became commodities themselves, with, for example, a certain amount of sugar on the cards exchanged for half of the moonshine produced from this quantity.

The system of regulated prices, realised and unrealised price increases, and the rationing of goods were the basic tools of top-down political control over the economy and a way of satisfying the minimum needs of the majority of society.²³ The essence of the system of real-socialism was, however, that the authorities also had a second tool of distributing various privileges: firstly to the functionaries of the system—its ideologues, technocrats and praetorians, and secondly also to selected professional groups. Additional remuneration for the system’s functionaries, consisted not so much in awarding them significantly higher wages (thus allowing for the vision of socialism as an egalitarian system to be maintained), but mainly in enabling them to purchase a variety of goods: either basic products at very favourable prices, or luxury products that were not available elsewhere. It was also important that these products were intended either for direct consumption or for further resale in free circulation. In the latter case, they became a form of investment, allowing for the exchange of non-wage privileges for cash, or by barter for other desired goods. Therefore, one can speak of a peculiar mechanism through which the corrupted form of non-market exchange (or reciprocity in Polanyi’s terms) contributes somewhat indirectly to commodification, as the beneficiaries have the opportunity for reselling gifts.

This system of privileged distribution took many forms. Until 1956, there existed secret “yellow curtain shops,” where top party officials and the Ministry of Public Security could buy unavailable, often luxurious, goods at very low prices. Allocations for cooperative housing were also a privilege. Until the end of the 1960s, the authorities fully controlled the sale of the very few new cars in Poland at that time, only providing allocations for their purchase to selected people. As the number of cars produced in Poland increased in the 1970s, a prepayment system was created (with those who had fully paid entering a lottery to determine when they would receive the car), and the system of top-down vouchers for their purchase was expanded. A used car of several years old, sold on the market, obtained a price much higher than its purchase price per coupon, and privileged persons were awarded such coupons every few years.²⁴

At the same time, a whole hierarchical ladder of dependencies was created, where those on the higher rungs had the opportunity to provide goods to those below. The stronger the position of company directors, the more they received both car vouchers and (after 1976)

protests of June 1976, which were also ruthlessly suppressed at first, forced the authorities to withdraw price increases and contributed to the establishment of the Workers’ Defence Committee (KOR) and the strengthening of the democratic opposition, which in turn led to strikes in August 1980 and the creation of the Solidarity trade union.

²³ This basic feature of the system is well reflected in the already cited title of Feher, Heller and Markus’ book *Dictatorship over Needs*.

²⁴ As calculated by Jan Winięcki (1991) the difference between these two prices, in the case of the *Polonez 1500* produced from 1978, corresponded to an average five-year salary.

additional cards, which they then distributed principally among their employees but also to friends and family members. As Ireneusz Krzemiński (2004: 111) described it, the “quasi-feudals” and their “clientele” functioned in this system of dependencies. It should also be emphasised that allowing someone to purchase a certain product on special terms was not just a one-off act. A more lasting relationship was created between power and its privileged persons, described in many theories of exchange.²⁵ Some of the privileges already used and commodified (a car bought on a coupon and sold at a profit) could not be taken back by the authorities who at the most could not grant new coupons. However, in the case, for example, of the allocation of housing, a disloyal person could be deprived of previous privileges and the resulting material benefits. Thus, in the case of some commodifiable privileges, they at least partially continued to be dependent upon power relations. The top-down system did not only cover a small group of the highest officials of the regime but also the employees of the army, militia and security services.²⁶

The top-down granting of privileges was, however, much broader. The government controlled employment and the income differentiation of individual professional groups but also granted special privileges, especially to heavy industrial workers, in particular miners and to a lesser extent steelworkers and other employees in large industries. This policy resulted from several factors: the belief in the primacy of productive physical work and striving through propaganda to show—in accordance with the official ideology and the very name of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR)—that real-socialism was built in the name and interests of the working class. However, it also reflected the belief that industrial workers (particularly miners) had a high “potential for protest,” which is a good example of how the competitive struggle for political capital helped to determine the system of social stratification. As a result, certain groups of workers (such as miners) not only received higher wages, but also had access—through special stores—to products unavailable to other professional groups (e.g. colour TV sets), which they could, for example, sell at a significant profit. Thus, the top-down application of the prioritizing industry principle, sometimes led to the commodification of granted privileges.

In a situation of a constant shortage of goods, the government responded in two main ways. Firstly, it could increase official prices and rationing, determining the satisfaction of needs of the vast majority of society. Secondly it could distribute privileges to selected individuals and groups based on the criteria of political loyalty or favouring particular industries. However the authorities consistently sought a third way of controlling the availability of scarce goods. They gradually introduced the possibility of purchasing goods at prices much higher than official prices to all those who had the appropriate means. Access to wanted goods was no longer dependent on one’s relationship with the authorities, and had more to do with the amount of money which one possessed. It is worth emphasising, however, that although the level of satisfying needs was no longer

²⁵ Peter Blau (1964), for example, describes how individuals who provided goods and privileges, that could not be directly reciprocated, were often rewarded only with loyalty and obedience, which could also be taken away when the recipient ceased to be loyal.

²⁶ From 1949, for example, the Military Commercial Centre operated for several years, running a closed network of retail stores and canteens for soldiers. For many years there also existed ‘Konsumy’ (where militiamen and security service workers could purchase cheaply priced products) as well as subsidised canteens in various offices and police headquarters.

directly politically controlled, but dependent on the financial capabilities of the buyer, the authorities obviously had to first create the appropriate conditions and regulations for carrying out such transactions.

Such a possibility was first created for people with foreign currency. While from 1950, even possession of foreign currencies was strictly prohibited, this was legalised in November 1956 although they could still not be freely traded. Then the so-called foreign exchange shops of the PEKAO bank, and in 1960 PKO gift certificates, were introduced. At the same time, foreign currency accounts were opened and their operation gradually liberalised (at first, only the so-called documented funds sent or brought from abroad and declared upon entry could be deposited into them, before even this condition was removed).²⁷ In 1972, the chain of Internal Export Companies shops (PEWEX²⁸) was established and at the same time the Foreign Trade Enterprise shops (Baltona) functioned. At first, these were only intended for sailors, fishermen and people who had lived abroad for a long time, although access was soon extended to all who possessed a foreign currency.

The second option was the introduction of so-called commercial prices in the 1970s, which were usually two to three times higher than official prices.²⁹ In this way, it was possible in local stores to either stand in a long queue to purchase sometimes inaccessible cheaper goods, or to buy the same goods immediately, but at a higher price. A dual market for commodity goods under real-socialism was created, which corresponded to a capitalist dual labour market. Growing material inequalities, as well as shortages of goods, created enormous social tensions. Therefore, amongst the twenty-one demands put forward by striking shipyard workers in Gdańsk in August 1980, were those for the introduction of ration-cards for meat (postulate 11) and for the abolition of commercial prices and foreign exchange shops (Postulate 12).³⁰

The Sociology of Everyday Life and the Practice of Commodification / Decommodification

The various forms of commodification described above resulted from the top-down systemic decisions of the authorities. We would now like to look at some individual instances of commodification, which usually take the form of daily exchanges between people in different roles: professional, institutional and informal. The form of these daily exchanges was determined primarily by the basic fact that the real-socialist economy was an economy of shortage. This fact was used primarily, as described above, by all groups

²⁷ The successively introduced, and generally increasingly liberalised regulations on foreign currency accounts, are presented in more detail by Józef Jan Skoczylas (1978: 153–169).

²⁸ They sold both state-imported goods (earning a trading margin) and domestic goods at higher converted prices. It can be said that the prices in these shops were approaching equilibrium prices. Similar enterprises existed in other socialist bloc countries: in Czechoslovakia—Tuzex, in the GDR—Intershop, in Bulgaria—Corecom. In Romania—Comturist.

²⁹ For these inflated prices one could buy flats (from 1974 in the Foreign Trade Office "Lokum"), cars (e.g. Fiat 126P for 120,000 instead of 69,000, with an average salary of around 3,000 to 4,000 PLN), and from 1976 food products.

³⁰ The government actually eliminated commercial prices by introducing coupons for meat (from January 1981 until the end of July 1989), although sales in foreign currency stores were maintained until 1990.

and individuals who had access to commodities and commodifiable privileges granted by the authorities. However, the everyday grassroots behaviour of people deprived of these privileges was much more diverse. They attempted to cope with and adapt to the situation where there was a lack of goods, either through defensive actions to meet basic needs, or (less commonly) through offensive activities by seeking to gain advantages out of the situation. The description of everyday behaviour in the conditions of the real-socialist economy of scarcity is extremely interesting, and some of the methods used were surprisingly ingenious and may even be difficult for outsiders to understand.³¹

It should be emphasised that the situation was highly volatile, with the government constantly inventing new solutions to try and deal with economic challenges, and then abandoning them and replacing them with others. They also regularly changed the definition of what was allowed or forbidden and society was forced to try and adapt to these changing circumstances, or use them creatively and profitably. Thus, the authorities introduced and liquidated the ration-card system; granted vouchers and introduced a system of prepayments for cars; it used the official price system and then set commercial prices two to three times higher when selling both cars and apartments; created and closed shops for the privileged, etc. Simultaneously, the government severely punished people for trading in dollars, and then created a network of stores for foreign exchange and PKO bank bills; allowed people to possess foreign currency accounts; fought against private trade and then allowed it; strove for the collectivisation of agriculture before abandoning this plan; treated certain actions as punishable speculation, and then made these actions legal.³²

It is difficult to describe here all of the bottom-up adaptation strategies, related to the commodification and decommodification processes. We shall therefore only present some cases, in order to highlight the paradoxical reality of the times of real-socialism in Poland. One of the mainstays of socialism was supposed to be the provision of decommodified free social services for all, or at least for the vast majority of society. In particular this concerned both education and health. It is worth pointing to a specific dualism and tension between these official decommodified services and the multiplicity of commodified alternatives created from below.

The healthcare system in the PRL lacked hospitals, equipment, and above all, doctors and staff. In order to get to a state hospital or clinic and to ensure better and faster treatment, patients often additionally rewarded their doctors (as well as nurses). This was done in various ways: from gifts given by patients completely voluntarily, as an expression of gratitude after the procedures had been performed, through giving them gifts based on the belief that this was the social norm; up to additional gratuities, which the doctors more or less directly demanded before an appointment or surgery.³³ Doctors also sometimes only admitted patients to a state-run free hospital after they had privately paid for a consultation

³¹ A separate sub-discipline could, for example, be established for such a description: the sociology or anthropology of everyday life in an economy of shortage.

³² The relativity of permitted and forbidden acts is well illustrated by the case of an old man who was treated as a speculator after he sold bread rolls every day in places where they had previously been unavailable for a few groszy more than he had bought them for.

³³ These gifts and gratuities came in the form of money, perishable produces (such as chickens in the countryside or alcoholic drinks in the cities), albums and works of art (sometimes doctors let it be known what they liked or what they collected), etc.

or preparatory treatment.³⁴ Also, hospital equipment was sometimes used privately, as were common tools and fertilisers from cooperatives or state farms.

Similar phenomena occurred in the education system, although on a much smaller scale. One of the forms of teachers' additional remuneration was paid private tutoring. Sometimes pupils chose this as a way of extending their knowledge (Ristić and Marinković 2019), but it was also sometimes primarily about buying favour and guaranteeing that a pupil would be treated better by the teaching staff and gain an advantage over her/his peers.³⁵ However, it was also common for the whole class to give teachers gifts at the end of the school year. These were mostly non-utilitarian gifts (flowers, chocolates, albums, etc.) although there were known cases of heated discussions taking place within parent committees about whether the form teacher could receive difficult to obtain items such as tights.

Another category, concerned the search for and use of those jobs in the state sector, which, given the very low official wages, created opportunities for obtaining additional legal and illegal sources of income. Bribes were given to petrol-station employees and the position of a salesperson in a shop selling both basic and luxury hard to come by goods was very desirable. Barter often took place in these stores, with a customer, for example, exchanging meat for furniture or household appliances. Access to goods was not only controlled by store managers. A customer who managed to buy, for example, some bricks in a shop, may then have to bribe an employee to deliver them from the warehouse, in order to ensure that they were of a decent quality. Another way of earning money was to stand in line for scarce goods (so-called 'Rollers'—who were mainly pensioners) in exchange for a small remuneration. Also attractive were those jobs that offered the opportunity to travel abroad, or take long holidays or seasonal trips and engage in trade tourism.

Thus, it can be seen that in real-socialism, in which the boundaries between power and the economy were blurred, and the basic redistribution mechanism failed to eliminate common scarcity, corruption and corruption-like phenomena appeared as a fairly common mechanism for satisfying needs. They appeared both in the system of top-down clientelism and in 'horizontal' daily interactions based on reciprocity. These encompassed, on the one hand, a very wide scope of activities, but on the other hand they merged into one another, becoming one of the most important, often expected and even obvious aspects of social life. Social actors had justified expectations that those with whom they cooperated would break certain norms, and moreover, they treated such violations as being individually rational, and therefore often responded and adapted to them in a similar way. Consequently, in accordance with one of the theses of the social labelling theory, deviant behaviour became a kind of conformism to social expectations. These norms concerned in particular which

³⁴ Ewelina Szpak (2018: 235) cites a document summarising information from the Office of Letters and Complaints at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in 1987, which pointed "to the widespread bribery... [to the fact] that the only way for a sick person to get to a hospital is through 'green' and private doctors' offices." As reported in turn by "TVP Tygodnik" (2011), because the best gifts were cognacs, whisky or tins of export ham, available only in PEWEX, "in the capital there was even a special commission, where you could buy or sell popular cognac. One doctor recounted that when he wanted to cash in his gift, he was told by the seller that this particular bottle had already been sold twice."

³⁵ This corruptive context of tutoring later became, in the Third Republic of Poland, one of the main arguments for the introduction of the so-called external examinations. Since 1999, students' written exams have been assessed not by the teachers who teach them, but by external examiners.

professional duties or favours became a commodity with an additional price, while this commodification took place in secret or “in the penumbra” and was associated with actions that were more or less morally questionable, semi-legal or even illegal.

Due to the general shortage of goods, a low or “defective” use value of products did not necessarily remove them from the market. Some poor quality items were often purchased under the assumption that they would then have to be “rebuilt” at the customer’s own expense.³⁶ This was related to the above-mentioned tendency to buy products not only for one’s own needs, that is for the use value of the commodity, but often for its predicted exchange value (defined in economics as a form of speculative demand).

In the real-socialist economy of shortage, where supply was lower than demand, there existed two contradictory phenomena. While the above-mentioned position of the seller or the time spent by a ‘roller’ in a queue were commodified, advertising was of very little importance, because almost everything could be sold. There were no advertisements in the PRL, interrupting radio or television programs. Even before the daily news bulletin, one could only see the clock hand turning, sometimes for more than two minutes, as this prime time slot had no value and was not subject to commodification.

The socialist economy of shortage increased the symbolic and prestigious value of certain goods. This mainly concerned attractive products imported from the West. “Westernness” was a source of prestige, which applied to products like plastic lighters,³⁷ as well as the first CD players and VCRs imported into Poland. However, such prestige also applied to certain goods from the socialist bloc, which—like cameras from the GDR and USSR—withstood competition from leading world brands and had a certain propaganda value for the ruling authorities. The fact that a significant proportion of these products could only be bought by the privileged, in government-controlled stores, strengthened both the legitimacy of the authorities in the eyes of the privileged, as well as raising the prestige of the privileged amongst the rest of society.

Scarcely available domestic products were also highly valued: Polish industrially designed products, furniture, ceramics, crystal and Hoffland branded clothing designed by Barbara Hoff. Goods purchased at PEWEX retained a high social status, especially branded jeans worn proudly on the street. People gained prestige not only through possessing such goods but by showing that they had the ability to obtain them. Walking down a city high-street with ten rolls of toilet paper hung on a string as a trophy necklace, led not only to envious glances, but also to many questions from passers-by: “Excuse me, where did you get these?” In fact, real-socialism created the twentieth-century equivalent of a hunter-gatherer society, in which individual products were hunted for consumption, sale or further barter, and a successful hunter was admired or envied. At the same time, goods not used for exchange, but as presents for friends and colleagues, also possessed very high value. These included items considered common and cheap in western market societies: lemons and oranges, chocolate bars, children’s clothing and shoes, etc. In the general grey real-socialist reality, the thresholds of the hierarchy of prestige of goods consumed was lowered

³⁶ During the 1980s, in Warsaw and other larger cities, craftsmen operated who made new Soviet cameras or washing machines for use, but which first had to be purchased and brought to the “service.”

³⁷ Disposable lighters from the West were converted by craftsmen into lighters that could be recharged multiple times

and it was relatively easy to stand out (in the sense of distinction as analysed by Pierre Bourdieu) through conspicuous consumption.

Adaptation to the “deficit” reality of the PRL period was also characterised—as can be seen from the perspective of the 1990s and onwards—by a rich culture of *prosumption*. The self-manufacturing of goods and services³⁸ was, however, meant not only to satisfy one’s own needs but to be exchanged for other goods. In the economy of shortage, these self-made products have therefore not only use value but also exchange-value.

This created a very progressive culture of reducing waste, through the use of such things as reusable bottles, paper wrappers, and even special containers for stale bread that were used to feed farm animals in the countryside. These prosumption activities were linked to satisfying needs that were not met by the centrally planned industries of the shortage economy, but also to the creative pursuit of goods imitating those produced in the West.

The Specificity of Polish Agriculture Compared to Other Countries in the Region

The de/commodification processes in Polish real-socialism occurred in a different way to other countries in the region, largely due to the fact that the government was not able to collectivise large swathes of agriculture. People working in agriculture constituted a huge part of the total number of employed persons after the Second World War, which fell from 57.2% in 1950, to 38.6% in 1970 and 27.8% in 1988. The agricultural cooperatives operating in 1948–1956 took over only 5.9% of individual farms and less than 10% of agricultural land (in Czechoslovakia the maximum percentage of land seized was 66.9%, in Hungary 67.8%, and in Romania 58.5%) (Bukraba-Rylska 2008: 338), while the state-owned farms established in 1949, and which grew the most during the mid-1970s, covered only 10% of arable land, mainly in the Western Territories (Bukraba-Rylska 2008: 347–348), where individual peasant farms had not previously existed. A special form of exchange developed between the cooperative and individual cooperative workers. Farmers tended to work more intensively on their own farm plots than the land of the cooperative, whilst also using cooperative machines. Half of the cooperatives’ plant production was used to feed pigs on these plots; ensuring that common property functioned as a base for individual breeding (Bukraba-Rylska 2008: 339). Employees treated the assets of state-owned farms as being ‘owned by nobody,’ meaning, for example, that taking fuel for one’s own needs, and not the state-owned farm, was not treated as theft (Szpak 2005: 98–99). The behaviour and attitudes of workers in collectivised agriculture are described in a broader theoretical and historical context by Martha Lampland (1995) in her work on the situation in Hungary, where collectivised agriculture was dominant. On the basis of detailed case studies, she shows that the life attitudes of the inhabitants of the collectivised Hungarian countryside (especially in the late socialist 1980s) were oriented primarily towards the achievement of individual utilitarian benefits. There was a characteristic contradiction in their attitudes: they praised the ideals of socialism, but at the same time perceived the

³⁸ It included sewing clothes stylised in Western patterns, growing vegetables and fruit in common allotment gardens, breeding and slaughtering animals and curing the meat at home or even in local smokehouses, manufacturing and repairing household appliances, decorating apartments, and, obviously, moonshining.

entire socialist project as contradictory to human nature, and in parallel, although they saw the injustices of both capitalism and the market, they treated them as a necessary evil (Lampland 1995: 13). As a result, as the author points out, the functioning of the socialist state, contrary to its ideology, only reinforced the tendency to commodify human labour, which was, after all, supposed to be one of the basic features of capitalism.³⁹

In Poland, however, throughout the whole period of real-socialism, individual peasant farms dominated in the countryside and the behaviour and attitudes of individual farmers still had a huge impact on other social groups, especially on workers coming from the countryside and peasant workers who did not leave the countryside. Meanwhile, as shown by Izabella Bukraba-Rylska (2008: 173, 177–178 and also Romaniszyn 1994: 83), the basic traditional strategy for the peasant was always not to seek profit, but to protect the self-sufficiency and survival of the family farm, seeking external help as a method of adaptation and defence against the harmful effects of its integration into the dominant economic system.⁴⁰

Let us add here that, according to the opinions cited by Bukraba-Rylska, some elements of these protective strategies still function in the transformation period after 1989. In agreement with this analysis, it can be concluded that many of the values regulating social relations and economic strategies in the rural environment are actually more permanent, independent of systemic changes and the transition from peasant (under feudalism) to farmworker (under real-socialism) and then farmer (under capitalism). The mechanisms of mutual assistance and defense against the real-socialist mechanism of control and redistribution were of primary importance, and both of these mechanisms were still extremely influential during the transformation period, impacting upon the commodification of the agricultural economy (Burawoy and Verdery 1999).

The Development of a “Second Economy”

From the mid-1970s, an economic crisis hit virtually all of the socialist countries. There were two attempts to overcome this crisis.⁴¹ The first was to try and improve and rationalise the central bureaucratic and distribution mechanism, a policy undertaken for example in

³⁹ Lampland’s analysis of collectivised agriculture in Hungary can also be applied to the situation of all hired workers in the state sector in Poland. On the one hand, it is obvious that the commodification or reification of labour in the sense of Marx and Lukacs cannot be eliminated also under socialism, and one can only compare the degree of de/commodification in different systems understood as the level of satisfaction of needs according to Esping-Andersen’s concept. On the other hand, her research shows that especially in the final years of real socialism in Hungary, there were growing tendencies towards commodification and the associated utilitarian-individualistic mentality, which corresponds to the situation in Poland we are analyzing.

⁴⁰ As Bukraba-Rylska claims, the Polish countryside had, for centuries, been a victim not so much of the economic pressure of more developed countries, but of the policies of its own Polish elites. These elites reacted to the change in the economic model in the 16th century by developing manor farms, and then for a long time rejected the demands to abolish serfdom. During the 1930s the Polish government implemented a harsh fiscal policy towards the countryside, and after the Second World War, the communist authorities introduced collectivisation and draining capital from the countryside. Therefore according to Bukraba-Rylska (2008: 173, 231–232), the learned helplessness, entitlement and demand for a protective state are not effects of a *homo sovieticus* syndrome, but rather a phenomenon with “a much more distant and respectable genealogy.”

⁴¹ The nature of this crisis can be explained in three ways (cf. Szelenyi 1988): (1) pessimistically—from the very beginning the system was economically inefficient; (2) optimistically—by referring to the concept (e.g. by

the GDR (Szelényi 1988). The second was to introduce so-called market socialism, in which state-owned enterprises were guided by market mechanisms (money, price, profit), an option propagated for example by Kornai (1986). Some countries (Yugoslavia, Hungary, China, and from the mid-1980s also Poland) attempted to implement such a strategy. However, there existed virtually no private capital in Poland, but only state capital, with no one risking their own capital, because basic economic decisions (e.g. those concerning investment) were made by bureaucrats distributing state money. As a result, neither of these approaches increased the productivity of the Polish state economy, which remained (even more so than before) an economy of shortage.

In the situation of a deepening crisis in the state sector, and due to both grassroots activities and a greater consent given by the authorities, a so-called second-economy developed which is one of the main features of a “second society” (Hankiss 1988). The second economy combines fully legal, paralegal and completely illegal activities and entities that are both registered and unregistered. Marek Bednarski (1985) and Steven Sampson (1987) (using the typologies of Kornai [1986]) identified the following elements of this second economy in Poland: (1) an official legal private system in production, trade, services and agriculture; (2) unregistered private business activity, expansion of activities in a private establishment that is not privately registered; (3) private economic activity in state-owned enterprises using official working time, tools, raw materials, etc.; (4) undeclared work (“jobs”) on the second shift or during the weekend; (5) speculation, uncontrolled private commercial activity; (6) commercial tourism, foreign contracts (long and short term, legal and illegal); (7) elements of a natural economy, including barter, and simple trade in services. The scope of this economy varied in individual countries of the region, in the GDR it accounted for around 6% of GNP, whilst in Poland it comprised about 24% of the total labour force and made up 20% of income in 1980, and 32% in 1983 (Sampson 1987: 128).

It is important to emphasize that the second economy at this time was neither a remnant of the old pre-socialist system, nor did it represent isolated islands of capitalism in the prevailing state sector. Rather, it was a reaction to systemic conditions, especially the shortage of goods and services. Moreover, large parts of this second economy could not function without the state sector; it drew raw materials, tools and working time from it, operated in special profitable areas where there was no competition, and functioned in the producer rather than consumer market.⁴² Due to the deepening crisis of the state sector, the second economy was gradually becoming a more and more important element of the “socialist mixed economy” in the sense of Polanyi and Szelényi.

Travel abroad became an increasingly important source of additional income for many. From the beginning of the 1970s (cf. Figure 1), the passport policy was significantly

Michal Kalecki) of cyclical development and crises of the socialist economy, which did a good job of describing the situation of the 1950s and 1960s, but was not sufficient to explain the later deepening crisis; (3) assuming (which seems closest to the truth) that it was an inevitable crisis of transition from extensive growth, which the economy was able to achieve despite its enormous costs, to intensive growth, which would have required radical structural, technological, management and motivational changes.

⁴² We can describe this economy through an analogy to the natural world, with its participants acting as ‘destructors’ (similar to bacteria and fungi), drawing life energy from an inefficient economic system and adopting some of its components to meet social needs.

liberalised. Poland and Hungary became the two socialist bloc countries from which it was easiest to go abroad, not only to other socialist countries, but also gradually to Western countries, which was practically impossible, for example, in the GDR. As mentioned previously, from 1970 private persons could possess foreign currency accounts, from which they could also withdraw money (at first only that amount which had been declared upon arrival from abroad). At first, large numbers of Poles participated in quite profitable commercial tourism in other socialist bloc nations, and even engaged in short-term work abroad in western countries from which they could earn significantly more.

The economic importance of the second economy, including access to foreign exchange, is shown in the list of income sources for the economic elite, which is defined here as the 10% of the population with received 30% of the total income in Poland in 1987 (Toruń, *Wiadomości*, June 1989). High incomes were ensured by: (1) employment in the state sector—21%; (2) private work abroad—15%; (3) commercial tourism—15%; (4) Individually owned farms—14%; (5) the illegal section of the second economy—12%; (6) the legal non-agricultural private sector—10%; (7) freelance professions—7%; (8) official work abroad—4%; (9) pensions (including foreign ones)—2%. In the 1980s, access to hard currency became increasingly important, as the black market exchange rate for these currencies was completely disproportionate to incomes earned in Polish zlotys.⁴³ Currency became the basic instrument to protect oneself and hedge against inflation. Currencies deposited in foreign exchange accounts accounted for 15% in 1983, and in 1988 made up as much as 60% of all the population's savings. Therefore, as only a small and ever decreasing part of high incomes came from the state sector (see points 1 and partially 7, 8 and 9 above), access to money gradually became less dependent on political power and was subject to a kind of democratisation.

The state sector was increasingly losing its ability to motivate people to work and to pay for this labour adequately. This applied to rank and file employees in the first economy. However, it also applied to senior officials, as well as military and militia officers, whose earnings could not match some of those abroad. Already at the end of the seventies, a student could earn more during a two-month summer job in West Berlin, than a policeman could in Poland during a whole year, and it was easier for students to leave than it was, for example, a police colonel. This gave rise to social frustration, as well as a feverish search for other, not necessarily fully legal, sources of income outside of the state sector. This is confirmed by the fact that in 1988 there already existed about eighty private enterprises which had been established by members of the government apparatus (Staniszakis 1988). The possibility of withdrawing from the state sector was strengthened and fully legalised, after the introduction of the extremely economically liberal law (the so-called Wilczek Bill)⁴⁴ in December 1988. This permitted private economic activity and opened the way for the “enfranchisement of the nomenklatura” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, instigated grassroots economic initiatives from below. All this meant that a part of the power apparatus, interested in economic success, also supported the changes in the

⁴³ Despite some fluctuations throughout the period from the 1960s, the sum of \$20 to \$30 was equivalent to the average monthly wage.

⁴⁴ Mieczysław Wilczek was then the Minister for Industry.

political system, which made it possible to hold the “round table” talks and hold semi-free parliamentary elections on June 4, 1989.

Commodification in Real-Socialism: Reconciling Systemic Principles and Pragmatism

As we have seen, commodities and various phenomena of commodification functioned in the officially decommodified economy of real-socialism. Of course, goods had their use and exchange values, but they were valued not according to the criteria used in a market economy, but on the basis of additional, non-market criteria. This concerned, first of all, that all goods were redistributed from above by the government and served primarily to build a system of clientelism and reward political loyalty. However, they were also deployed to support selected professional groups connected to particular industries. Many of these commodities did not function in a single market that was open to all, but in partially independent and intertwined markets, accessible only to the privileged or initiated. Also, specific commodification was an essential component of the bottom-up strategy to adapt and deal with the scarcity of goods and low wage economy. Various forms of commodification were used by the holders of scarce goods and services (sellers or doctors) as well as by people who wanted to obtain hard-to-reach goods or gain better access to public services. These resulted in the existence of different types of corruption.

It is also important that in the history of real-socialism in Poland, the processes of commodification underwent quite significant changes. In the first phase (until 1956), the commodification and creation of particular markets and enclaves of exchange were regulated and controlled by the authorities from above. Citizens adapted themselves to these in a mainly defensive manner. In the 1970s, access to attractive goods gradually became independent of relations with the authorities and became increasingly dependent upon the financial means of citizens. This tendency intensified in the period of the deepening economic crisis from late 1970s and the development of the second economy in response to this crisis. In the 1970s and 1980s (except during the martial law period), trips abroad, as well as obtaining and trading foreign currencies, became easier. As a result, obtaining higher incomes and access to attractive goods became even more democratized and independent of political power. In the final period of the system’s existence (until 1989), bottom-up economic activity within the second economy began to provide greater material benefits than additional privileges under the top-down official system. In reaction to this, the government allowed the official private sector to also function outside of agriculture. However, the growing inefficiency of the state economy and the possibility of obtaining much higher incomes in the private sector meant that some of the government apparatus also supported the changes to the political system in 1989.

One can also formulate a more general theoretical conclusion here. The economic history of real-socialism, clearly shows once again that the phenomena of commodification cannot be linked solely to the private sector and privatization. Commodification in Poland first took place within the state economy and on the basis of political, top-down (and constantly changing) decisions of the authorities, creating particular and non-transparent

markets. Only gradually, alongside the crisis of the economy of scarcity, did private forms of commodification appear, both at the grassroots level and with the consent of the authorities. It seems that the interplay between commodification in the state sector and the private sector also appears in other societies and may be a fascinating subject for analysis. It certainly reveals much about the post-communist societies during the period transformation.⁴⁵

Summary

Taking into account the above-mentioned facts, it can be concluded that real-socialism (or at least its Polish version) not only did not eliminate the commodity logic from economic life, but in many cases unintentionally or intentionally contributed to its survival or even strengthening. We shall try to highlight a few of the most important features, in our opinion, of the peculiarities of real-socialist commodification within the more than four decades of this system (cf. [Figure 1](#)).

Firstly, notwithstanding the fact that many of its specific manifestations could be perceived as the silent marketisation of socialism and a more or less discreet departure from its ideological assumptions, paradoxically commodification served to protect the real-socialist order and increase its chances of survival. This was firstly due to the fact that there existed all sorts of mechanisms for rewarding and obtaining loyalty from people who were part of the party-state apparatus. Secondly, because it alleviated the problems associated with the chronic shortage economy.

The second specific feature of real-socialist commodification results from the fact that under the conditions of the real-socialist economy, goods had a specific use value not only for the buyer (which is obvious), but also for its state administrator-seller. From the point of view of the latter, the use-value did not disappear along with the formal and legal sale of the goods (this is another paradox of the real-socialist economy), but because the sold goods very often retained a certain “loyalising” potential. The telephone number assigned after a long wait could be taken away and handed over at any time to someone “more needy”; the car bought thanks to an award was supposed to arouse and maintain a sense of gratitude and even debt to the rulers; even the ration-card system, which made access to the most scarce products more egalitarian, was supposed to embed the belief in society that it is impossible to function outside of the state framework and that one should obey the authorities.

Thirdly, the peculiarity of real-socialist commodification also lay in its instability and unpredictability. As a result, a significant part of the concluded transactions took into account not so much the current legal and economic conditions, but the anticipated actions of the state, which could well lead to the increase and reduction of commodification

⁴⁵ Paradoxically, many of the commodified privileges, accumulated during the real-socialist period, transformed into contested decommodified structures after the transition to a capitalist economy. This included such things as guaranteed pensions for certain groups of workers (e.g. miners or uniformed workers); labour protections (such as the so-called ‘teachers’ card’ for school teachers); or holiday homes (often granted through state industries). During the transition from real-socialism, certain social groups defended interests formed during the real-socialist period, which in turn stood as obstacles to the commodification of economic and social life ([Mokrzycki, Rychard, and Zybortowicz 2002](#)).

(or to the commodification of some spheres of life while depriving others). Since many purchasing decisions were based not only or primarily on the actual, but rather the anticipated, exchange value of purchased goods, these were necessarily treated less as acquired goods for use and consumption, but more as investments and / or as resources collected for speculative purposes. This applied equally to currencies bought “for rainy days” and intended for protection against inflation, as well as cars, which some owners looked after more than they actually drove them. It applied equally to both luxury goods (where real-socialism did not differ much from real capitalism), as well as everyday goods—washing machines, televisions, furniture and even deodorants and cigarette boxes.

At risk of some simplification, it can be said that in the 20th century a significant part of the (mostly peasant) Polish society passed from the phase of domination of the order based on Toennies’ communities and their respective norms regulating social and economic life (and relatively poorly developed supra-local trade exchange) to the phase of domination of top-down state collectivism, steering and controlling the activity of individuals (including at the level of the economy, as a command economy), having little experience before 1989 of liberal individualism or a capitalist market economy (Lewenstein 2020; Ziółkowski, Baranowski, Drozdowski 2020). Hence, among the Karl Polanyi’s four mechanisms of the organization of the economic life, relatively high importance in Poland was always given to the self-sufficient household, alongside reciprocity and modifying the redistribution mechanism (Kassner 2021). In turn, all of these three mechanisms—the household, reciprocity and redistribution—have also played a significant role from the beginning of the transformation in 1989, coexisting with the dominant mechanism of market exchange or significantly modifying its functioning.

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