Prof. Agnieszka Kolasa-Nowak
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-5318-5171

DOI: 10.48261/INRR240609

POLISH SOCIOLOGISTS ON THE TRANSFORMATION. THREE DECADES OF CHANGING **INTERPRETATIONS**

Abstract
The aim of the paper is to show how the understanding of the transformation evolved over the last thirty years and how the way of thinking about this process has changed in Polish sociology. The subject of the analysis are sociological studies that concerned the transformation itself and its key dimensions. It was understood as modernisation in all its dimensions: economic, political, cultural, and social. Its main purpose was beyond dispute. Sociologists' interpretations changed mainly under the influence of new circumstances, but their visions and beliefs also evolved. Over the course of three decades, three successive visions of the transformation were created, which indicated key structural factors, dominant actors, or conflicting interests: the idea of a quick transition, in which sociologists focused on recording changes and comparing them to a presumed goal; the concept of post-communism as a separate transitional period marked by a departure from rapid imitative modernisation; and a vision of transformation as an element of a wider, international context, crucial in which are the semi-peripheral location of Central and Eastern Europe and the regional history of modernisation of an underdeveloped area.

Keywords: political transformation, sociological research, visions of transformation

Information about the original version: The original version of the article was published in Polish: Kolasa-Nowak, Agnieszka. "Socjologowie o transformacji. Zmieniające się interpretacje w perspektywie trzydziestolecia." In *Transformacja ustrojowa w Polsce. Nowe perspektywy*, eds. Michał Przeperski and Daniel Wicenty. Gdańsk-Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2022: 148–167.

Introduction

After thirty years, we look back at the social changes brought about by the systemic breakthrough of 1989 from a distance that allows us to attempt a comprehensive understanding of the path we travelled. This distance is also useful in reconstructing the sociological knowledge developed on an ongoing basis in relation to the successive stages of those transformations. For many years, systemic transformation constituted the basic framework within which sociologists viewed virtually all social phenomena in Poland. Many analyses and empirical studies were conducted, knowledge grew, but above all, the understanding and context of transformation changed.

The purpose of this text is to present the evolution of these approaches and to provide a synthetic outline of the various images of social change over the decades. All of them were variants of a vision of the country's modernisation, as in 1989 it was commonly assumed that the goal of changes should be its development along the lines of the societies of Western Europe, and that a series of reforms and institutional changes was to serve that purpose. In their analyses, sociologists also assessed the transformation project and the degree and nature of its implementation – and since this remained a key topic in public debate for a long time, their interpretations became part of that debate and were often incorporated into political disputes and discussions.

Systemic Breakthrough and Stages of Transformation

The fall of communism, which entailed the need for creating a new system to replace it, was a rare case of a comprehensive systemic change. It defined new frameworks for social reality and the rules of everyday life, and this, in turn, initiated bottom-up processes of

Surveillance photo of people waiting for the bus near the railway station in Bydgoszcz, after 1971. The picture was taken from a special covert surveillance post, set in order to detect and document possible demonstrations or riots. Street surveillance photos unintentionally offer a glimpse into everyday life under dictatorship. Photo: Institute of National Remembrance Delegation in Bydgoszcz Archives, ref. no. AIPN By, 770/224.

social dynamics. People developed strategies for adapting to the new circumstances, assigned meanings to the transformations taking place, and subjected them to interpretation, guided by a common need to grasp and understand them. In this exceptional moment, the task of the social sciences was equally exceptional – they were to satisfy this need by continuously interpreting the meaning of these transformations, while at the same time the subject of their research was open, undergoing changes, and emerging in the everyday life of people, including the sociologists themselves. There was a fairly close connection between the academic discourse and the public discourse. An important role in this process was played by the social involvement of researchers and their attitudes towards the successive stages of change. It is also worth remembering that the protracted, yearslong period of transformation encompassed a generational change, which inevitably also affected social researchers.

The subject of this analysis is sociological studies concerning the systemic change itself and those aspects of its dimensions which the authors considered significant, even crucial, in defining its nature, course, and effects. It does not include research devoted to many other

social phenomena observed during the period under consideration, which, however, were not interpreted as constituting part of the phenomenon of transformation. I present here, in a synthetic manner, the results of a comprehensive review of the sociological works of a scholarly nature that interest me, citing the books and articles that have had the greatest impact on the sociological discourse on transformation (a detailed analysis of the body of sociological research on this subject can be found in Kolasa-Nowak 2010). These are texts by researchers recognised in the Polish academia, often cited and commented on, and sometimes even known and used in public debate.

Transition

In the initial period of transformation, there was a widespread feeling that the destination of changes that had begun was clear and unproblematic. A project of imitative modernisation was being implemented, copying institutional solutions from developed economies and mature democracies. The profound transformations associated with economic liberalisation, changes in ownership, and the restructuring of socialist enterprises entailed large-scale social consequences, opening up opportunities for life advancement for some, but also destroying the foundations of entire social groups. The main collective entity of the Solidarity social movement, the workers of socialist combines and factories, irretrievably lost their position and jobs. All this, however, took place in an extraordinary atmosphere of a long-awaited return to normality, especially to market rules. Hardly anyone at that time questioned the effectiveness of the Western solutions being imitated. This revolutionary change occurred without pathos or slogans about creating a new world; instead, it was dominated by a sense of self-evidence, best captured by the ironic phrase about the "historical necessity of transition to the market and democracy" (Sułek 1995).

The difficulty in defining the processes taking place in the early years was that, although the transformations were perceived as profound and radical, they took the shape of reforms, introducing new institutions and rules from above. This specific *refolution* was therefore based on a project aimed at restoring the principles of social life that had been removed by decades of state socialism (see Pakulski 1991, pp. 4–16). The model adopted was that of a capitalist economy in its neoliberal version and a democratic system founded on an

extensive public sphere, an active civil society, and universal social participation. Referring to examples of democratic transformation in Spain or Latin America, Polish sociologists expected a rapid transition, that is, a swift passage to the intended state, as they believed that the establishment of new rules would stimulate normal, spontaneous, bottom-up processes of new social order. The ease of implementation of this project was based on the belief that it met the expectations and aspirations of Poles, was rational and guaranteed success, following the example of highly developed Western countries. It was understood that the reforms had been carried out in a non-existent "theoretical interest" (see Staniszkis 1991; Wesołowski 1995, pp. 3–26; Ziółkowski 1993), that is, in the interest of the middle class as the ultimately most important social base of the new Poland (see Domański 1995).

Sociologists focused primarily on possible obstacles to the implementation of the programme of change. The main source of these obstacles was considered to be the mental ballast of the Polish People's Republic – the "socialist residues" (see Marody 1996) that made up the well-known *homo sovieticus* syndrome, that is, attitudes developed during the era of state socialism, particularly in its final, crisis-ridden phase, such as claims upon the state, the grey area of personal arrangements, and tendencies to maintain informal [transactional – editor's remark] relations. For a long time, there had been indications of a withdrawal from public activity in favour of narrow actions driven by private interests, a phenomenon described by Stefan Nowak as the sociological vacuum (Nowak 1979, pp. 155–173). However, the concept of *homo sovieticus* also encompassed social values that can be viewed differently today, not necessarily negatively, such as egalitarianism, condemnation of social inequality, or the persistence of former class identities (Świda-Ziemba 1990; Świda-Ziemba 1994, pp. 35–50).

Poles were also considered unprepared for the challenges ahead, as they lacked the habits and skills needed in the new reality. These deficiencies in "cultural imponderables" included a lack of mutual trust, solidarity, and loyalty, as well as a low level of openness to collective action in everyday situations (see *Imponderabilia…* 1999). These competencies were described as civilisational, that is, achieved through a long process of embedding new principles within the social fabric. This way of thinking about the pace of change is well reflected in the popular metaphor of the "three clocks": the fastest measured the time needed for political transformations, the slower for institutional changes, and the slowest for the development and social rooting of new patterns of human behaviour (Dahrendorf 1991).

From the very beginning, modernisation of the economy, the state, and society was the unquestioned goal of the transformation. This task was understood differently from socialist modernisation, which had been a selective, unsuccessful, or even false attempt (see Ziółkowski 1998) to impose modernity on certain areas of social life while preserving remnants of traditional society in many others. The period of the Polish People's Republic froze certain aspects of social life, preventing them from evolving; after the collapse of the system, these aspects fully re-emerged, hindering the implementation of the modernisation project. Only the fulfilment of two conditions – not merely the exit from communism, but also the creation and internalisation of new rules of social life – could pave the way for development, leading to the emergence of a modern, prosperous, and democratic society.

In the early years of the transformation, sociologists recognised this task as justified and assumed the role of agents of change. They adopted a technocratic approach, focusing on short-term diagnoses of the situation and determining the distance remaining to achieve the adopted goals. The direction, costs, or possible alternatives to the ongoing changes were not subject to reflection during this initial period, which was dominated by enthusiasm and belief in the relatively easy and rapid introduction of a market system and democracy.

Post-Communism

In the mid-1990s, the new rules of political and economic life were tested by everyday experience, and the process of social transformation entered a less intensive and less spectacular phase. Formation of the new order was still underway, driven on the one hand by many new laws and institutions, and on the other by people adapting to them. From 1998–1999, four reforms fundamental to the shape of the system were carried out in Poland, in the fields of healthcare, social security, education, and administration and local government. A new social order was emerging. Over time, however, the prolongation of transformation processes, the slowing down of the pace of change, and even the stabilisation of the new system in its unfinished, incomplete form began to emerge. For sociologists, this marked the clear end of the possibilities of a "top-down revolution," that is, the stage of major systemic reforms (see Staniszkis 2001).

This new period of transformation demanded investigation and classification. Sociologists who, in the final years of the Polish People's Republic, had provided important analyses of the system's crisis, assumed the roles of experts, often publicly interpreting the ongoing processes and providing concepts for describing and assessing the new reality. The need to interpret the meaning of the observed phenomena and the disputes over their definition were also linked to the desire to identify the most significant aspects of the transformations and their determinants. It was widely agreed that processes stemming from the immediate past had a considerable influence on the changes. This period was perceived as a kind of "grey transitional zone" between socialism and the new order (Mokrzycki 1997, p. 44). The belief that the Polish People's Republic had a strong influence on the new system was clearly expressed in the description of this stage of transformation as post-communism (see Staniszkis 1994).

At the same time, social research provided grounds for the thesis of a spontaneous and bottom-up process of shaping the new order as a result of individual adaptation strategies. From the second half of the 1990s, the situation was no longer treated as provisional and transitory and began to be ascribed the status of a new reality, gradually domesticated through everyday action (Marody 1996, p. 274). This brought about a significant change in social attitudes – instead of merely reacting to new circumstances, as had been the case until then, people increasingly took deliberate action and decided for themselves where they stood in the emerging reality. In other words, strategies focused on survival began to be replaced by strategies aimed at recognising and incorporating the new social order.

As noted by Piotr Sztompka, Poles' adaptative actions during this period became increasingly creative and innovative, and they drew more frequently on available resources (see Sztompka 2000). From this perspective on transformation, the destination was less important than the journey itself. Systemic change appeared as the product of a confrontation between the normative world and the world of real people and their strategies. The transformation gradually lost its radical, groundbreaking character, and its intentionality and linearity as a reform project being implemented diminished (Rychard 1996, p. 9).

In the 1990s, Poles' activity ceased to take the form of mass public participation and shifted to the local and individual spheres. After the breakthrough, the first actors in social life unfolding under the new rules appeared in the roles of consumers – it was in the market sphere that an institutional space conducive to the development of activity,

and especially individual entrepreneurship, emerged, responding to the expectations that had been growing since the economic crisis of the 1980s (Rychard 1995, p. 11). This rapid shift of the sources of social dynamics from the sphere of politics to that of the market was, for social researchers, one of the greater surprises of the transformation (Morawski 1998, p. 219). It meant that the driving force of systemic change had shifted as a result of people's spontaneous activity.

However, since informal institutions were characterised by considerable durability and passive cultural habits were deeply rooted, what occurred was only a "partial disintegration" of the former structures (see Wnuk-Lipiński 1991). Social order was therefore regulated by two distinct, and even contradictory, sets of principles – one derived from the real socialism of the past and the other resulting from market and democratic reforms – which led to the emergence of hybrid solutions, institutions, and practices (see Staniszkis 2001). A significant, though not the only, example of this was hybrid capitalism, combining market and political elements (Morawski 1998, p. 107). Post-communism as such had a hybrid nature, and in that form it gradually became consolidated.

A separate but related issue was the phenomenon of "post-communist liberalism," which Jerzy Szacki described as a peculiar blend of norms and rules of conduct that were very distant from one another and even mutually exclusive. He doubted the chances of liberal ideas taking root in a society that had not only been subjected to the long-term effects of real socialism, but had also previously been marked by delayed economic and civilisational development and a lack of its own statehood, resulting in a deficit of liberal content within the Polish public sphere (see Szacki 1994).

The transformation process involved various social costs, and the new system brought with it new pathologies. When addressing these issues, sociologists often treated their research as a form of participation in public debate. As they pointed out, the most widespread phenomenon, already observed a few years after the beginning of the transformations, was the division between the winners and the losers (see Marody 1996; Adamski and Rychard 1995). It was the result of the introduction of new rules of the game and depended less on activity and more on the resources possessed at the time of the systemic breakthrough, which were re-evaluated under its influence. This revealed the most painful aspect of the changes – the fact that social games were being played not only for direct benefits, but also for establishing the very rules by which those benefits were to be distributed.

Over the years, a clear distinction emerged between Poles integrated into the new order and those excluded from the system, for example, the long-term unemployed or inhabitants of Poland's peripheral regions (Rychard 2002, p. 252). Analyses of social inequality also pointed to the consolidation of a dichotomous social division. The polarisation of the extreme social classes deepened as a result of the so-called Matthew effect (this metaphor, popularised in sociology by Robert Merton, refers to a passage from the Gospel of St Matthew, Mt 13:12: "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath"). The reason for the society's "broken structure" lay not only in the differences in people's ability to adapt – there was also a structural cause. The newly introduced economic model favoured the privileged classes and exacerbated the problems of those who were already weaker and marginalised (Słomczyński and Janicka 2008, p. 125). These problems were compounded by the development barriers faced by rural regions and post-industrial areas undergoing restructuring. Growing social inequalities and high unemployment gave rise to further social problems, such as increased poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion (see Tarkowska 2000). Sociological diagnoses clearly assessed these phenomena as serious, negative consequences of the transformation.

Sociologists also focused on the basic social categories of the Polish People's Republic. Workers – the great collective actors of the democratic changes at the end of the socialist era – were described several years later as the biggest losers of the transformation (see Gilejko 2001; Gilejko 2005). In the name of rapid and effective economic transformation, the working class was degraded and marginalised, as evinced, among others, by its exclusion from decision-making processes and its subordination to the neoliberal organisational system (see Dunn 2008). This was accompanied by acceptance not only from the rest of society but also from the workers themselves, who were interested in the new opportunities for individual entrepreneurship (see Gardawski 1992). The part of this class most involved in the activities of the "first Solidarity" joined the ranks of small business owners (see Gardawski 2001, p. 40), and many were satisfied with the opportunity now available to them to fulfil themselves as consumers (see Gardawski 2008, p. 83; cf. Rychard 1997).

Peasants – a "class from the past" that had survived the years of the People's Republic of Poland in a civilisational niche – became redundant in the new reality; they no longer fitted into the social

Polish peasants were seen as socially and economically "obsolete class" despite their significant social contribution. Mirosława Chudolińska in her farm near Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki (1974). National Digital Archives in Warsaw, collection Archiwum Grażyny Rutowskiej (Grażyna Rutowska's Collection), ref. no. 3/40/0/2/8

structure nor matched its new logic (Mokrzycki 2001, pp. 52, 61). They were regarded as a "troublesome class" slowly coming to an end, to be replaced by agricultural entrepreneurs (see Gorlach 1995). Later, however, opinions emerged that rural areas had played the role of the main buffer of transformation, which contributed to their weakening (Bukraba-Rylska 2009, p. 31).

The distortions of the new system and the pathological phenomena occurring within it included corruption and clientelism, as well as the façade-like nature of various areas of the public sphere. During the period of intense privatisation, sociologists began to study the links between state power and the economy. The dysfunctionality of the

new order – although partly resulting from the imperfections of the rules – was regarded primarily as the effect of the deliberate actions of individual and collective actors driven by their own interests and wielding varying, often hidden social power. The market and the state were thus seen as enmeshed in a network of mutual connections based on clientelism and political dependency (see Staniszkis 2001; Gadowska 2002; *Manowce…* 2001). Andrzej Zybertowicz wrote about the role of the security services as one of such hidden actors of change (Zybertowicz 1993; Zybertowicz 1998; Zybertowicz 2002, pp. 234–249; Zybertowicz 2005). In his view, the legacy of communism was a peculiar form of social capital inherited from the police state. The political scene was shaped by informal arrangements and covert actors, and the division between the façade and the backstage of democracy seemed to persist despite the passing years (cf. *Utracona dynamika?...* 2002).

Analyses of the phenomena that make up the specificity of post-communism are committed and expository in nature. Sociologists, guided by civic concern and in keeping with the *intelligentsia* ethos, propagated their interpretations of growing social inequalities, new divisions, exclusion and poverty, the dysfunctionality of the public sphere, and the pathologies of the political and economic system. They warned, exposed phenomena unknown to public opinion, and sometimes challenged the prevailing enthusiasm, seeking to influence dominant discourses and visions of Polish change. In this way, they participated in the public debate on transformation, developing increasingly diverse positions. The main backdrop of their disputes was the idea of modernisation understood as imitating Western solutions and opening up to Western influence. These divisions became apparent above all in the final phase of the transformation, which was initiated by Poland's accession process and integration with the European Union.

Integration with the European Union and Globalisation

Poland's gradual integration into international structures and the increasingly clear prospect of EU accession changed the context of thinking about post-communist transformations. Poland's place in the new Europe and a rapidly globalising world became the central question now . Regional differences and spatial variations in economic, social, and cultural phenomena gained significance. To understand

these, it became necessary to look back at their often distant historical roots. The very idea of transformation as a form of modernisation imitating Western solutions came under critical scrutiny. Sociologists began to challenge the existing vision of change, raising objections such as its secondary character and its failure to match reality.

From that point, much more attention was paid to the differences between post-communist societies, no longer referring to the experiences of real socialism, but to the common history, peripherality and backwardness of Eastern Europe. This broadened the field of reflection to include historical issues of local differentiation and enduring traditions resistant to change, including to top-down modernisation projects. The focus was on the clash between the universal model of modernisation and local specificity.

By questioning the optimistic vision of "catching up with Europe," sociologists argued that it represented "an unwarranted projection of the historical experience of the West onto the rest of the world" (Sosnowska 1997, p. 63). Poland's EU accession process contributed to a deeper understanding of the distinctiveness of post-communist countries. Sociologists began to discuss the category of Eastern Europe and its separate historical path. It was recalled that there had been multiple paths to modernisation, and that the shape of social change depended on the course of capitalist development and state reforms. The East European path was defined by factors such as refeudalisation, a return to a serfdom-based economy, delayed industrialisation, and insufficient urban development. This historical context reshaped the perception of the transformation, which began to be viewed as yet another – following the attempts of 1918 and 1944 – effort to overcome backwardness through a comprehensive, state-driven project of change (Kochanowicz 1998; Sosnowska 2004; Leszczyński 2013).

Emerging from communism, Poland once again found itself on a historically shaped path of peripheral development, which was most clearly evident in the pace and nature of economic change. The transformation was therefore treated as the end of the communist experiment and a return to the former subordinate position in Europe. At the same time, the concept of integration with the European Union was seen as yet another opportunity to overcome backwardness and escape the trap of dependent development. The belief in post-communist uniqueness gradually weakened, while the cognitive potential of research focused solely on the specific characteristics of societies shaped by state socialism for over four decades seemed

to have been exhausted. It was much more important to assess the resources developed in the past and the opportunities and ways to finally break out of the trap of underdevelopment and make a successful "leap into modernity," as well as to identify, on the one hand, unnecessary burden and, on the other, the valuable legacy of the transformation. The imitative vision of "catching up with Europe" recognised the existence of certain necessary stages of modernisation, which is why descriptions of the transformation emphasised the simultaneous presence of aspects of several developmental phases. To fully understand post-communism, especially in its cultural dimension, sociologists proposed to take into account components of both early and late modernity, as well as postmodernity (Ziółkowski 1998). The post-communist transformation was thus marked by a peculiar "compression of time" – the coexistence of features typical of different historical stages of capitalist development, combining traits of both the most developed regions and the peripheral regions imitating them (Staniszkis 1994; Staniszkis 2003).

Moreover, scholars noted that due to Poland's relative backwardness, the values underpinning modern institutional arrangements lacked social embeddedness. This absence was attributed primarily to the lack of a liberal or social moment in Polish history due to the country's statelessness at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a key period in the formation of a modern economic system (Sosnowska 1997). The debate over the significance of local specificity took on a political dimension. Authors critical of the dominant liberal and pro-European ideology, such as Zdzisław Krasnodębski, argued that "the outcome of modernisation changes depends on how well it can be integrated with a society's own tradition" (Krasnodębski 2003, p. 221).

Understanding the nature of peripheral status and the role of historical development became one of the main goals of the later analyses of transformation. This perspective reflected the growing importance of European and global interconnections – with globalisation becoming a crucial context for Polish changes. Jadwiga Staniszkis described its negative effects on Poland, consisting in blocking the local path of modernisation, which was proceeding at its own pace and in continuity with tradition. She also emphasised that the growing dominance of global mechanisms was conducive to an identity crisis, which was a particularly acute problem for post-communist peripheral states, as global processes deepened the historical deficits of these regions, hindering modernisation and constraining their autonomy (see Staniszkis 2001).

In sociological analyses, it is difficult to find guidance on how to effectively counteract global economic or political influences; instead, scholars examine the cultural dimension of globalisation and analyse the risks it poses in symbolic and cognitive spheres. Studies focused more extensively on discourses concerning post-communist transformations, with particular attention given to the world-systems perspective of Immanuel Wallerstein combined with Pierre Bourdieu's theory and critical discourse analysis. From this viewpoint, inequalities between the core and periphery regions of the global capitalist system are expressed through discursive domination – the imposition by the core of narratives and descriptive language for processes occurring on the peripheries. Drawing on postcolonial studies, Tomasz Zarycki investigates the mechanisms by which Eastern European regions are constructed not only as economically weaker but also culturally unfit to meet the challenges of the modern world (Zarycki 2009; Zarycki 2014).

The critical sociology of transformation has also taken up self-reflective themes. With the benefit of hindsight of a dozen years, scholars recalled the popular post-1989 image of society as a passive object of reform. The focus on social deficits in the implementation of the modernisation project meant that the discussion on the shape of the newly created system, as well as the durability and utility of inherited cultural content, was often neglected. Over time, it frequently became apparent that it was the new institutions that had to adapt to old habits rather than the reverse. Poland's accession to the EU confirmed that the country had implemented the minimum required rules of a free-market and democratic order, but significant differences remained (Hausner and Marody 2001). Critical perspectives addressed not only the transformation project and the way it was carried out but also the role of the elites, including sociologists themselves. There were accusations of paternalistic attitudes towards society and arbitrary judgements (Bukraba-Rylska 2004). The latter often reflected political divisions – a positive assessment of tradition clashed with the thesis of developmental problems stemming from the burdens of the past, and the axis of the dispute concerned Poland's relationship with Europe and the choice between the Western model and entrenched local values.

It was generally agreed that the accelerated modernisation processes associated with transformation both changed and deepened the divisions within Polish society. This is most evidently manifested by regional differentiation, which has become more significant as

a result of Poland's accession to the EU and EU regional policy. The varying degree of advancement of modernisation processes was the basis for distinguishing between individual regions . According to the accepted model of cultural diffusion, the historical process of adopting capitalist models of economic activity in Poland progressed gradually eastwards. This resulted in inhabitants of the western regions not only being better equipped with material goods and wealthier, but also exhibiting a personality type more suited to the challenges of a market economy (Hryniewicz 1996; Gorzelak and Tucholska 2008). Weaker outcomes in coping with the challenges of transformation have been linked to the location in the peripheral, less modernised eastern part of Poland (Gorzelak 2001; *Rozwój lokalny…* 2002; Szczepański and Ślęzak-Tazbir 2009). In addition, the high development potential of the territories of the former Third Reich acquired in 1945 under the decisions of the Potsdam Conference (the so-called Western Lands) was linked to the socially advantageous identity of their inhabitants, shaped by postwar resettlements that forced the establishment of new bonds and communities. The break in cultural continuity and the resulting rejection of tradition proved to be a factor conducive to better adaptation to the new rules of life (Machaj 2005).

The link between regional differences and the various stages of modernisation is well expressed in the observation that "a journey between Warsaw and a village in north-eastern Poland is a journey through time" (Giza-Poleszczuk 2004, p. 265). Research on spatial differentiation of regions drew attention to contexts shaped by the distant past, and it has been observed that trends in voting behaviour and political profiles corresponded with the historical borders of the three partitions and the Western Lands [obtained after 1945 – editor's note] (Zarycki 2002).

Acknowledging these differences meant recognising the impact of tradition on the culture of local communities and on styles of collective action. This contextual approach was based on the conviction that a person's cultural environment shapes the meanings attributed to actions, thereby modifying patterns of behaviour, and moreover, that it is relatively resistant to change, retaining many elements from the past. For this reason, over the years, the effects of transformational changes have varied from region to region depending on the historical background, creating a mosaic of communities with varying capacities to meet contemporary challenges. Peripherality thus became a gradable category, linked to the opportunities for completing the modernisation project.

Summary

From the perspective of thirty years after the systemic breakthrough, we can see how the concept of transformation has evolved in sociology and how ways of thinking about this process changed. The initial sense of revolutionary change and rapid progress toward the goal has been replaced by the image of a prolonged transitional stage of post-communism, while a subsequent stimulus – Poland's integration into the structures of the EU – contributed to a much broader and more critical view of social processes in Poland.

Transformation essentially meant the modernisation of the system in all its aspects: economic, political, and institutional, but also cultural and social. Its fundamental goals were not subject to debate – after the collapse of state socialism, they consisted in joining modern, developed Western societies, achieving economic development, and consolidating a democratic state governed by the rule of law.

Sociologists' interpretations changed primarily under the influence of new circumstances, but their visions and beliefs also evolved. When conducting research on the transformation, they were dealing with the rare situation of a social process unfolding over decades and producing changes across many levels of reality. Comprehensive diagnoses of such macro-processes are rarely made on an ongoing basis. It should also be remembered that the beliefs and values of the researchers themselves play an important role in disputes over their interpretation. Drawing a comprehensive assessment requires distance, which is easier from the perspective of history – sociology primarily provides ongoing reports and analyses of selected aspects and specific issues developed within many specialised subdisciplines.

Looking back, it becomes clear that after the initial sense of opportunity to create new institutions and rules of social life, awareness began to grow of the barriers and difficulties that marked the planned course of change. Sociologists sought their sources, pointing to the interplay of individual and group interests, social attitudes, and various strategies of action. Historical conditions became increasingly important, both at the level of individuals and broader economic and political factors. While the departure from communism was viewed through the lens of social and mental structures created in its era, later changes were explained through the influence of external mechanisms. Poland's gradual opening up to global processes, particularly to the world market, and its subsequent

EU accession, meant that social phenomena began to be analysed in a global context.

The transformation thus became more of an adaptation to the demands of external pressures than an internal process of creating new structures. It was perceived less and less as an original, innovative attempt to rebuild social order after the failure of the communist project – rather, it became evident that there was a long history of attempts at social modernisation in this part of Europe. Since sociologists have different views on the imitative aspect of the changes, the main focus of discussion has become the country's place in Europe and the world and the resulting discrepancies in the interpretation of history.

Disputes over the transformation divide both sociologists and the Polish public. This remains one of the key political issues in Poland. Sociologists have written extensively about disadvantaged, excluded and marginalised groups, or those living in peripheral parts of the country, aiming to draw attention to them, strengthen their position, and give them a voice. There have also been many analyses of the resources of specific regions and communities that are conducive to modernisation, or of the shortcomings in modern social attitudes, civic activity, and organisational culture.

Sociological research on the transformation neither produced a single unified vision of this process nor concluded discussions on the balance of its outcomes. Over the course of three decades, three successive visions of transformation emerged, each highlighting structural factors, dominant actors, or competing interests that were crucial at the time.

Initially, transformation was seen as a rapid transition. Sociologists focused on recording changes, with the framework of their analyses defined by the direction and goals they accepted – establishing liberal market rules, building effective democracy, and fostering an active civil society. When interpreting the changes and assessing progress, they referred to this imagined endpoint of transformation. The source of all problems and obstacles was attributed to people's behaviour rather than flaws in the project or its implementation. The idea of accelerated modernisation modelled on Western solutions was advocated, and the actions of individuals were assessed according to whether and to what extent they aligned with it.

After several years, the concept of post-communism as a distinct transitional period became widespread. Finally, attention was given to the adaptive strategies of individuals, which turned out to be different from what was expected. For the first time, historical context

was recognised as a factor reducing the effectiveness of reforms. Consequently, sociologists described this phase in terms of hybrid forms – transitional and incomplete – and phenomena that were different from expectations, often pathological. Critical assessments were made of the way the transformation was carried out, and social behaviour, as previously, was often assessed from the perspective of a model of modernity.

In both of the above cases, sociologists were engaged in the project of change, which can be seen as a continuation of their pre-1989 stance, when, through analyses of the crisis of the socialist system, they supported social aspirations leading to the systemic breakthrough. The third image of transformation, however, was further distanced from the idea of modernisation and placed it in a context that went far beyond national processes. After Poland joined the EU, interpretations of social transformations began to refer to the global history of modernity. This vision of transformation also differed from previous concepts in that it no longer reflected a belief in rapidly catching up with developmental disparities. This new approach likely also stemmed from a generational shift – it was the work of sociologists who began their academic careers after the fall of socialism. During this period, the practice of sociology itself changed, with internationalisation being an important aspect of this change. Incorporating sociological research into the global scientific discourse contributed to the universalisation of Polish transformation, framing it as one of social changes resulting from the varied trajectories of modernisation. In their research on the transformation, sociologists began to apply theoretical models drawn from the global social sciences, for example, the postcolonial perspective, the concept of centre–periphery divisions, or Pierre Bourdieu's theory.

Recently, there has been a growing trend of critical reflection on the main discourses on Polish society and its transformations. Research conducted within this framework addresses, among others, the mechanisms of extending knowledge about transformation as a social practice, in which the consolidation of a new identity and the creation of a new vision of society played a significant role. Moreover, after thirty years, sociologists now view the post-communist transformation as a regional phenomenon embedded in a long historical perspective, while simultaneously recognising its discursive aspect. They are becoming increasingly aware that narratives about the end of socialism, the systemic breakthrough, reforms, and the social processes they initiated reflected the expectations, ideas, and convictions of the elites, but not necessarily those of other social groups (Kolasa-Nowak, Bucholc 2021).

References

Adamski, Władysław and Andrzej Rychard. "Zakończenie." In *Polacy '95. Aktorzy i klienci transformacji*, ed. Władysław Adamski. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN 1998.

Bukraba-Rylska, Izabela. "Socjolog czasu transformacji – portret z negatywu." In *Zmiana czy stagnacja? Społeczeństwo polskie po czternastu latach transformacji, ed.* Mirosława Marody. Warsaw: Scholar, 2004.

Bukraba-Rylska, Izabela. "Polska wieś czasu transformacji. Mity i rzeczywistość." *Wieś i Rolnictwo* 4 (145) (2009): 29–49. DOI: https://doi.org/10.53098/wir.2009.4.145/02.

Dahrendorf, Ralf. *Rozważania nad rewolucją w Europie*., trans. Maja Gottesman. Warsaw: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1991.

Domański, Henryk. *Polska klasa średnia*. Wrocław: Fundacja na rzecz Nauki Polskiej, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2002.

Domański, Henryk. *Społeczeństwa klasy średniej*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 1994.

Dunn, Elisabeth. *Prywatyzując Polskę. O bobofrutach, wielkim biznesie i restrukturyzacji pracy*. Transl. Przemysław Sadura. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2008.

Gadowska, Kaja. *Zjawisko klientelizmu polityczno-ekonomicznego. Systemowa analiza powiązań sieciowych na przykładzie przekształceń sektora górniczego w Polsce*. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2002.

Gardawski, Juliusz. "Degradacja i wykluczenie klasy pracowniczej." In *Wykluczeni. Wymiar społeczny, materialny i etniczny*, ed. Maria Jarosz. Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2008.

Gardawski, Juliusz. *Powracająca klasa. Sektor prywatny w III Rzeczpospolitej*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2001.

Gardawski, Juliusz. *Robotnicy 1991. Świadomość ekonomiczna w czasach przełomu*. Warsaw: Fundacja im. Friedricha Eberta, 1992.

Gilejko, Leszek. "Robotnicy w transformacji. Ocena ich położenia i szans." In *Wygrani i przegrani transformacji*., ed. Maria Jarosz. Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2005.

Gilejko, Leszek. "Robotnicy. Przegrana klasa." In *Manowce polskiej prywatyzacji*, ed. Maria Jarosz. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2001.

Giza-Poleszczuk, Anna. "Brzydkie kaczątko Europy, czyli Polska po czternastu latach transformacji." In *Zmiana czy stagnacja? Społeczeństwo polskie po czternastu latach transformacji*, ed. Mirosława Marody. Warsaw: Scholar, 2004.

Gorlach, Krzysztof. *Chłopi, rolnicy, przedsiębiorcy. „Kłopotliwa klasa" w Polsce postkomunistycznej*. Cracow: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1995.

Gorlach, Krzysztof. "Czy zmierzch klasy chłopskiej?" In *Śląsk – Polska – Europa. Zmieniające się społeczeństwo w perspektywie lokalnej i globalnej. Xięga X Ogólnopolskiego Zjazdu Socjologicznego*, eds. Antoni Sułek and Marek Stanisław Szczepański. Katowice: Polskie Towarzystwo Socjologiczne, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1998.

Gorzelak, Grzegorz. "Przyszłość polskich regionów." In *Jaki region? Jaka Polska? Jaka Europa?* ed. Marek Stanisław Szczepański. Katowice 2001.

Gorzelak, Grzegorz and Anna Tucholska. *Historyczno-kulturowe uwarunkowania rozwoju. Polska i Ukraina*. Warsaw: Scholar, 2008.

Hausner, Jerzy and Mirosława Marody. *Polski talk-show. Dialog społeczny a integracja europejska*. Cracow: Małopolska Szkoła Administracji Publicznej Akademii Ekonomicznej w Krakowie 2001.

Hryniewicz, Janusz. "Czynniki rozwoju regionalnego." In *Oblicza polskich regionów*, ed. Bohdan Jałowiecki. Warsaw: Michał Swianiewicz, 1996.

Imponderabilia wielkiej zmiany. Mentalność, wartości i więzi społeczne czasów transformacji, ed. Piotr Sztompka. Warsaw-Cracow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1999.

Kochanowicz, Jacek. "Transformacja polska w świetle socjologii historycznej. Między Trzecim Światem a państwem opiekuńczym." Kultura i Społeczeństwo no. 1 (1998).

Kolasa-Nowak, Agnieszka. "Od idei homo sovieticus do mentalności folwarcznej Polaków. O używaniu przeszłości w dyskursie socjologicznym i publicznym." *Res Historica* 46 (2018): 301–320. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/rh.2018.46.301-320.

Kolasa-Nowak, Agnieszka. *Zmiana systemowa w Polsce w interpretacjach socjologicznych*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2010.

Kolasa-Nowak, Agnieszka and Marta Bucholc. "Historical Sociology in Poland: Transformations of the Uses of the Past." *East European Politics and Societies* 37, no. 1 (2021): 3–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254211057908.

Krasnodębski, Zdzisław. *Demokracja peryferii.* Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2003.

Leszczyński, Adam. *Skok w nowoczesność. Polityka wzrostu w krajach peryferyjnych 1943–1980*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej : Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2013.

Machaj, Irena. *Społeczno-kulturowe konteksty tożsamości mieszkańców wschodniego i zachodniego pogranicza Polski*. Warsaw: Scholar, 2005.

Jarosz, Maria, ed. *Manowce polskiej prywatyzacji*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2001.

Marody, Mirosława. "Między realnym socjalizmem a realną demokracją." In *Oswajanie rzeczywistości. Między realnym socjalizmem a realną demokracją*, ed. Mirosława Marody. Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Społecznych, 1996.

Mokrzycki, Edmund. *Bilans niesentymentalny*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2001.

Mokrzycki, Edmund. "Od protokapitalizmu do postsocjalizmu. Makrostrukturalny wymiar dwukrotnej zmiany ustroju." In *Elementy nowego ładu*, ed. Henryk Domański and Andrzej Rychard. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 1997.

Morawski, Witold. *Zmiana instytucjonalna. Społeczeństwo. Gospodarka. Polityka*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1998.

Nowak, Stefan. "Przekonania i odczucia współczesnych." In *Polaków portret własny*, ed. Marek Rostworowski. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1979.

Nowak, Stefan. "System wartości społeczeństwa polskiego." *Studia Socjologiczne* 4, no. 75 (1979): 155–173.

Pakulski, Jan. "Rewolucje wschodnioeuropejskie." *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 3, no. 35 (1991).

Płoszajski, Piotr. "Polskie reformy. Trudna sztuka uczenia się i zapominania." In *Ludzie i instytucje. Stawanie się ładu społecznego. Pamiętnik IX Ogólnopolskiego Zjazdu Socjologicznego*, eds. Antoni Sułek and Józef Styk. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Polskie Towarzystwo Socjologiczne, 1995.

Jałowiecki, Bohdan and Marek Stanisław Szczepański eds. *Rozwój lokalny i regionalny w perspektywie socjologicznej*. Tychy: Śląskie Wydawnictwa Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Zarządzania i Nauk Społecznych im. ks. Emila Szramka, 2002.

Rychard, Andrzej. *Czy transformacja się skończyła? Powstawanie nowego ładu w perspektywie socjologii zmiany instytucjonalnej*. Warsaw: Instytut Badań nad Gospodarką Rynkową, 1996.

Rychard, Andrzej. "Ludzie i instytucje – kto tworzy nowy ład?" *Studia Socjologiczne* 1–2 , no. 136–137 (1995): 5–16. https://www.studiasocjologiczne.pl/img_upl/studia_socjologiczne_1995_nr1-2_s.5_16.pdf.

Rychard, Andrzej. "Ludzie i instytucje. Obszary atrakcyjności i wolności z perspektywy jednostek." In *Elementy nowego ładu*, ed. Henryk Domański and Andrzej Rychard. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 1997.

Rychard, Andrzej. "Polityka i społeczeństwo w Polsce. Ewolucja porządku instytucjonalnego." In *Utracona dynamika? O niedojrzałości polskiej demokracji*, eds. Edmund Mokrzycki, Andrzej Rychard, and Andrzej Zybertowicz. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2002.

Słomczyński, Kazimierz and Krystyna Janicka. "Dychotomie w strukturze klasowej: o efekcie świętego Mateusza i pogłębiających się nierównościach społecznych." In *Co nas łączy, co nas dzieli?* eds. Janusz Mucha, Ewa Narkiewicz-Niedbalec, and Maria Zielińska. Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2008.

Sosnowska, Anna. *Zrozumieć zacofanie. Spory historyków o Europę Wschodnią (1947–1994)*. Warsaw: Trio, 2004.

Sosnowska, Anna. "Tu, tam – pomieszanie." *Studia Socjologiczne* 4, no. 147 (1997): 61–85. https://www.studiasocjologiczne.pl/img_upl/studia_socjologiczne_1997_nr4_s.61_85.pdf.

Staniszkis, Jadwiga. "Głos w dyskusji 'Challenges to Pluralism and Democracy. Views form Inside and Outside.'" *Sisyphus* 7 (1991).

Staniszkis, Jadwiga. *Postkomunizm. Próba opisu*. Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2001.

Staniszkis, Jadwiga. *W poszukiwaniu paradygmatu transformacji*. Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 1994.

Staniszkis, Jadwiga. *Władza globalizacji*. Warsaw: Scholar, 2003.

Sułek, Antoni. "Inauguracja Zjazdu." In *Ludzie i instytucje. Stawanie się ładu społecz- nego. Pamiętnik IX Ogólnopolskiego Zjazdu Socjologicznego* Antoni Sułek and Józef Styk. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Polskie Towarzystwo Socjologiczne, 1995.

Szacki, Jerzy. *Liberalizm po komunizmie*. Cracow: Znak, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, 1994.

Szczepański, Marek Stanisław and Weronika Ślęzak-Tazbir. "Tropami markiza de Custine'a. Region i regionalizm w transformacyjnej Polsce." In *Człowiek – miasto – region. Związki i interakcje. Księga jubileuszowa profesora Bohdana Jałowieckiego*., eds. Grzegorz Gorzelak, Marek Stanisław Szczepański, and Weronika Ślęzak-Tazbir. Warsaw: Scholar, 2009.

Sztompka, Piotr. *Trauma wielkiej zmiany. Społeczne koszty transformacji*. Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych, 2000.

Świda-Ziemba, Hanna. *Mechanizmy zniewalania społeczeństwa. Refleksje u schyłku formacji*. Warsaw: Uniwersytet Warszawski. Instytut Stosowanych Nauk Społecznych, 1990.

Świda-Ziemba, Hanna. "Mentalność postkomunistyczna." *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 1, no. 38 (1994): 35–50.

Tarkowska, Elżbieta. *Zrozumieć biednego. O dawnej i obecnej biedzie w Polsce*. Warsaw: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, Typografika, 2000.

Mokrzycki, Edmund, Andrzej Rychard, and Andrzej Zybertowicz eds. *Utracona dynamika? O niedojrzałości polskiej demokracji*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2002.

Wesołowski, W. "Niszczenie i tworzenie interesów w procesie systemowej transformacji. Próba teoretycznego ujęcia." *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2, no. 39 (1995): 3–25.

Wnuk-Lipiński, Edmund. *Rozpad połowiczny. Szkice z socjologii transformacji ustrojowej*. Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 1991.

Jarosz, Maria ed. *Wygrani i przegrani polskiej transformacji*. Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2005.

Zarycki, Tomasz. *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2014.

Zarycki, Tomasz. *Peryferie. Nowe ujęcia zależności centro-peryferyjnych*. Warsaw: Scholar, 2009.

Zarycki, Tomasz. *Region jako kontekst zachowań politycznych*. Warsaw: Europejski Instytut Rozwoju Regionalnego i Lokalnego, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Instytut Studiów Społecznych, Scholar, 2002.

Ziółkowski, Marek. "O imitacyjnej modernizacji społeczeństwa polskiego." In *Imponderabilia okresu wielkiej zmiany. Mentalność, wartości i więzi społeczne czasów transformacji*., ed. Piotr Sztompka. Warsaw-Cracow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1999.

Ziółkowski, Marek. "O różnorodności teraźniejszości. Pomiędzy tradycją, spuścizną socjalizmu, nowoczesnością a ponowoczesnością." In *Śląsk – Polska – Europa. Zmieniające się społeczeństwo w perspektywie lokalnej i globalnej. Xięga z X Ogólnopolskiego Zjazdu Socjologicznego*., eds. Antoni Sułek and Marek Stanisław Szczepański. Katowice: Polskie Towarzystwo Socjologiczne, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1998.

Ziółkowski, Marek. *Polacy wobec ładu postmonocentrycznego. Społeczeństwo polskie i jego instytucje w 1992 roku*. Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 1993.

Zybertowicz, Andrzej. "Antyrozwojowe grupy interesu. Zarys analizy." In *Kręgi integracji i rodzaje tożsamości. Polska, Europa, świat*., eds. Włodzimierz Wesołowski and Jan Włodarek. Warsaw: Scholar, 2005.

Zybertowicz, Andrzej. "Odwrócone spojrzenie. Czy służby specjalne znajdują się na marginesie transformacji?" *Colloquia Communia* 2, no. 73 (2002).

Zybertowicz, Andrzej. "Sztuka zapominania. Państwo policyjne jako nierzeczywistość." In *Świat historii. Prace z metodologii historii i historii historiografii dedykowane Jerzemu Topolskiemu z okazji siedemdziesięciolecia urodzin*, ed. Wojciech Wrzosek. Poznań: Instytut Historii UAM, 1998.

Zybertowicz, Andrzej. *W uścisku tajnych służb. Upadek komunizmu i układ postnomenklaturowy*. Komorów: Antyk, 1993.