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## Thirty Years after the Great Change. The Process of Social Transformation in Poland in Biographical Research Perspective(s)

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This year (2019) we celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the great systemic change. The year 1989 has been symbolically set and accepted in the public discourse as the turning point for the political, social, economic transition. It is associated with two events—the Round Table in February 1989 and the partly democratic elections held on June 04. Poland became the first Eastern Bloc country where the representatives of the democratic opposition gained real influence over the government. This gave rise to political changes, which included “[t]hree components of the social system, that is, politics, economy, and social culture. And these components are known to be interconnected by a network of relations transmitting both the factor stimulating the development of the whole system, as well as the limitations determining the acceptable solutions. Attempts to evaluate the course of these transformations have been made many times. There is an almost continuous discussion and disputes over the results obtained, the costs incurred,

and the need for further reforms” (Pisz 2000:101-102). Although 19 years have passed since the quoted statements, the discussion has been continued up to now and, of course, from the very beginning, the Polish transformation has been carefully studied by sociologists. Until the mid-1990s, researchers dealt with change as such, describing the essence of crucial institutional reforms and only then dealing with the social consequences of systemic change (Kolasa-Nowak 2010:52). Even then most of the researchers concentrated primarily on changes perceived from the macro-social level. For instance, Juliusz Gardawski (2001; 2009) analyzed changes from the perspective of economy and sociology of work. Henryk Domański (1996; 2000; 2002; 2005; 2008) (relying on long-term quantitative research) pondered changes in the social structure, creation of the middle-class, or changes in the hierarchy of prestige. Andrzej Rychard (1996), Mirosława Marody and Anna Giza-Poleszczuk (2004), as well as Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, and Rychard (2000) focused on the process of institutionalization, changing of social capitals, cultural dimension of the social transition, and the way social bonds were shaping after 1989. Sociologists, using profoundly quantitative research, began to describe individual ways of coping with systemic change and developing adaptation strategies (e.g., Marody 1997; 2002; Rychard 2005). Certainly, these are only some examples of sociological works—although deliberately enumerated here—that offered (macro)syntheses of the Polish transformation.

Still another field of research on the broadly understood processes of transformation in Polish sociology has been marked by the works of the

authors such as, to give as examples Maria Jarosz (2005; 2007; 2008), Elżbieta Tarkowska (2000), Elżbieta Tarkowska, Wielisława Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Kazimiera Wódcz (2003), Hanna Palska (2002), who dealt with the rich/poor, winners/losers of the transformation, or those included in or excluded from the elite. These studies were based on qualitative research of thematically oriented phenomena and with the use of classic sociological interview to collect empirical material providing knowledge about social facts.

Another group of studies represent research (there are not as many of them as in the case of quantitative ones) which have been based on biographical approach, in-depth, most often biographical and narrative, interviews. The most recognized studies relate to the problem of poverty and the sphere of work.

With regard to the first mentioned field, “[s]ince 1990 the sociologists from the University of Lodz have been conducting multidimensional analyses of poverty and social exclusion. In 1997-1999, within the framework of two projects, *The Social Cost of Economic Transformation in Central Europe—Social History of Poverty in Central Europe* and *Forms of Poverty and Social Risks and Their Spatial Distribution in Lodz*, family life histories of three generations of the families supported by social welfare agencies were collected” (Golczyńska-Grondas and Potoczna 2016:34). The qualitative material included narrative interviews, in-depth biographical interviews, and family life histories. In the first project, between 1998 and 1999, 90 interviews were conducted, involving at least two generations of 40 families in which a member of

the middle generation was a client of social work. In the second one, 90 persons, members of 49 families, were interviewed (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2001). Today, apart from the analytical input, the materials collected in the 1990s constitute a valuable source of data and record of social history processes experienced from the perspective of individuals, their biographies, and families affected by poverty.

The second mentioned field—the sphere of work—has been studied from the perspective of at least a few approaches. The research conducted by Adam Mrozowicki and Markieta Domecka (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008; Mrozowicki 2010; 2011; Domecka 2014; 2016) within the projects *Coping with Social Change. Life Strategies of Workers in Poland and the End of State Socialism* and *Negotiating Capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe. Between Marginalization and Revitalization of Organized Labor* have been focused on various aspects of work subjected to systemic changes. The documentary effects of both projects include, among other things, a collection of about 200 autobiographical narrative interviews with workers and private engineers from the largest industrial plants in Silesia (Lower Silesia, Upper Silesia, Cieszyn Silesia, and Silesia Opole).

One more project recently guided by Adam Mrozowicki and focused on the work-related sphere (PREWORK—*Young Precarious Workers in Poland and Germany: A Comparative Sociological Study on Working and Living Conditions, Social Consciousness, and Civic Engagement* funded by the National Science Center in Poland and the German Research Foundation) has been devoted to the problem of precarious young people in Poland and Germany and

their life strategies influenced by the labor market (Mrozowicki 2016; Mrozowicki and Karolak 2017; Mrozowicki, Karolak, and Krasowska 2018; also see: Mrozowicki, Trappmann, Seehaus, and Kajta in this volume).

Another researcher who uses biographical narrative interview and has been focused on the sphere of work is Joanna Wawrzyniak, who has recently conducted two research projects *Privatization as a Biographical Experience. Long-Term Effects of Business Ownership Changes in Industrial Plants from the Perspective of Individual Lives* (funded by the National Science Center) (Gospodarczyk and Leyk 2012; Mikołajewska-Zajac and Wawrzyniak 2016), and is currently working through another project *From a Socialistic Factory to Multinational Corporation. An Archive Collection of Biographical Narrative Interviews with Industrial Workers* (funded by NPRH) (Jastrzab and Wawrzyniak 2017). The analyses conducted within these projects are focused on a collective and biographical memory of the past as shaped from the contemporary perspective.

One more project, *Poles in the World of Late Capitalism: Transformations of Biographical Processes in the Aspect of Professional Careers, Social Bonds, and Identity During the Transformation Period in Poland* (funded by NCN), focused on the reconstruction of varieties and dynamics of biographical experiences of three cohorts of Polish society entering the labor market during (and after) the political transformation in the sphere of 1) professional careers, 2) social bonds, and 3) individual, social, and cultural identity (Biały 2015a; 2015b; Kordasiewicz 2016; Haratyk, Biały, and Gońda 2017; Haratyk and Biały 2018).

The last project I would like to refer to is the research on *Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective* funded by the National Science Center.<sup>1</sup> It represents the broadest research approach not limited to one selected sphere of social life (Burski 2016; Kaźmierska 2016; Waniek 2016; Wygnańska 2016; Andrejczuk and Burski 2017; also see Burski; Dopierała; Filipkowski; Kaźmierska; Waniek; Wygnańska in this volume). Its aim is to cover the widest possible spectrum of transformation experiences recorded in the life histories. The research is focused on the biographical perspective of ordinary people experiencing social reality before and after 1989. Such reasoning is based on the assumption that understanding *transformation* as a process requires reconstructing its dynamics, its natural history, which, according to one of the basic terms of the Chicago School of Sociology, means a certain series of events that, especially from the point of view of an actor, was impetuous and uncontrollable, but, at the same time—particularly from the researcher's point of view—predictable and governed by certain regularities (Szacki 1981:649). This statement supports the conviction that we are still entitled to talk about social transformation. Sociologists often expressed their opinions that transformation should be primarily defined in terms of economic and political

<sup>1</sup> The project *Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective*, funded by the National Science Center in Poland, the NCN project number UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100, carried out in the Department of Sociology of Culture of the University of Lodz under the direction of Kaja Kaźmierska. Members of the research team: Katarzyna Waniek (University of Lodz), Piotr Filipkowski (IFiS PAN), Jacek Burski (University of Lodz), Joanna Wygnańska (University of Lodz), Maciej Melon (IFiS PAN).

changes—the transition to a capitalist economy and a democratic system. The transition, understood thusly, was completed at the end of the 1990s (e.g., Marody 1997; 2004; Ziółkowski 1998). However, if we take the perspective expressed above (that transformation is a process that has its own natural history), it can be concluded that it “continues” due to biographical consequences it had for the actors who have experienced it. The scope of these experiences and, above all, their interpretation is diverse and depends on the macro- and micro-structural circumstances. Moreover, this interpretation can change in the perspective of the duration of one's own biography. Thus, the aim of the project was to use methodology (biographical narrative interview) which enables such an analysis and to show the experience of transformation in the biographical perspective, that is, the perspective of social actors who have become active participants, or even co-creators, of the transformation and, at the same time, they have been subjected to the dynamics of this process. In order to get access to different aspects of the process, we conducted 90 autobiographical narrative interviews with informants belonging to three age groups (30 interviews in each), that is, persons born in the following years: 1960-70, 1970-80, 1980-89. We expected that being socialized in educational institutions at different times will be the crucial experience diversifying those groups. Thus, belonging to the first studied decade, means—from the perspective of informants—that they experienced their whole socialization in the educational institutions, as well as some part of their adult life in the People's Republic of Poland; the second decade comprises those who started education in the 80s, but (particularly

in the case of students) graduated after 1989 and gained professional experience in the 90s; the last group consists of those persons who could hardly have any encounter with the People's Republic of Poland.

As a result, we have identified three groups differentiated in various ways by their social rootedness of biographical experiences. The educational criterion is, to some extent, conventional, but it enabled having a starting point for interpretative frames unveiling the diversity of experiences of people under study. Thus, informants belonging to the first group were subjected to still ideologized education (e.g., history school books, compulsory Russian language courses, etc.), and, at the same time, they were brought up in the spirit of stability of occupational career, clear rules on the labor market. They encountered 1989 with a biographical baggage of experiences of socialist reality internalized in their childhood and adolescence. As to the second group, an in-between cohort, some people, particularly at the level of secondary and higher education, benefited from the transition in terms of unideologized curricula, but, at the same time, they were still brought up in expectation of stability on the labor market, which appeared to be more and more difficult. Although they entered their adulthood after the symbolic moment of transition, their memory and understanding of reality before this passage are still biographically grounded by individual experiences. The third group was socialized in a totally new reality (younger persons from this group—born in 1987-1989—have also experienced the current reform of the educational system in Poland); people from this group do not remember so-

cialism and mentally have been prepared for instability of their occupational career. Sometimes they are called the '89 generation (similarly to Germany where this group is described as *Mauerfall-Generation*). We assumed that incorporating this cohort to our project would help to capture a new, interesting image of the transition. Especially because our analysis had a comparative character from the very beginning—we juxtaposed, looked for commonalities and differences, compared, and contrasted biographies of these three cohorts. It should be added that the representatives of the first group were 29 years old in 1989 (so, generally, they either were about to start an adult life or they had already been working for a couple of years), while those from the third group were approximately the same age at the time of the research, which gives additional generational context for comparison. After having collected the empirical material, we can tell that our assumptions were right. The narratives of persons born after 1980 significantly differ from all others (Waniek 2016; also see: Waniek in this volume).

The assumption to expose the diversity of biographical experiences has been related to the fact that the main point of interest was focused on the so-called "ordinary man" or "man on the street," to use Alfred Schütz's (1964) term. Based on his own experience, the ordinary man is "the wide-awake, fully-functioning adult in the natural attitude." The "man on the street" operates according to his (or her) set of naive relevancies, for which "recipe knowledge" is adequate. An ordinary person, acting in the world, is in a biographically-determined situation, doing what he or she does according to the system of relevancies that enables selecting

from the environment and from interactions with others the elements that make sense for the purpose at hand. "The man on the street has a working knowledge of many fields which are not necessarily coherent with one another. His is a knowledge of recipes indicating how to bring forth in typical situations typical results by typical means. The recipes indicate procedures which can be trusted even though they are not clearly understood. By following the prescription, as if it were a ritual, the desired result can be attained without questioning why the single procedural steps have to be taken and taken exactly in the sequence prescribed. This knowledge in all its vagueness is still sufficiently precise for the practical purpose at hand. In all matters not connected with such practical purposes of immediate concern, the man on the street accepts his sentiments and passions as guides. Under their influence, he establishes a set of convictions and unclarified views which he simply relies upon as long as they do not interfere with his pursuit of happiness" (Schütz 1970:240). Sustaining this perspective, we did not interview well-known persons, for example, in the case of the first cohort, the representatives of those who were active creators or contestants of the system and whose activity was recognized in public (e.g., well-known oppositionists or members of the party establishment—still politicians today), and, consequently, in the other two cohorts, we did not search for well-known persons whose voice is present in the public discourse.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It should be stressed that among not too numerous research and publications on the topic, those kinds of people who we can identify, according to Schütz's concept (1964), as "well informed citizens" or "the experts" were the research objects of interest of historians and biographers, rarely of

I devoted so much space to describe this project because the volume presented to the reader accommodates six articles based on its materials. I also believe that the assumptions presented briefly, although concerning the study in question, can be extended to most of the above-mentioned research based on a qualitative and, especially, biographical approach. I particularly have in mind the presentation of an ordinary man's perspective, although the enumerated projects differ in the way the biographical material is used—from treating biography as "a means" to exploring biography as "a theme." In the first case, the question of *what* comes to the forefront. *What* is told enables gathering biographical information and to answer typical sociological questions (e.g., about social structure, strategies on the labor market). Whereas biography as "a theme" is treated as an issue in itself, the researcher's interest is aimed at the structure (narrative/biography) and expressed in the question *how* is the narrative constructed, *how* do the interactive conditions of its production shape the story, *how* does the biographical reconstruction of the life course take place, et cetera (Helling 1990:16).

Apart from the differences at hand, the research mentioned here shows a qualitatively deepened analysis of transformation experiences and, in confrontation with otherwise valuable quantitative research, sheds light on the context of interpretation, experience, and meaning of both macro-social reality and the micro-worlds of individuals. This profoundly contextualized perspective allows, in

sociologists (e.g., Torańska 1994; 2004; 2006; Kondratowicz 2001; Mucha and Keen 2006; Grupińska and Wawrzyniak 2011).



my opinion, describing—after 30 years—the mechanisms of past and present social processes.

I began the text mentioning two events of 1989 regarded as the introduction of the Great Change—the Round Table and June Elections. CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center) has carried out periodical surveys on perception of these events. As regards the Round Table, the author of the recent report writes: “Thirty years after the Round Table Talks, the attitude of Poles towards these events is not clear. It is much more often positive than negative, but the majority of the respondents agree with some reservations regarding the arrangements made in 1989. They claim that the compromise with the communists was too far-reaching and that, as a result, it was possible that the failure to settle the main representatives’ of the past system actions took place, which enabled them to preserve their influence. It can therefore be said that Poles mostly see some flaws in the way the Round Table version of the transition is being implemented, but this does not change their rather positive overall attitude towards these events” (Głowacki 2019:12).

Whereas, in response to the question whether it was worthwhile to change the system, the respondents in 2019 answered: “The majority of Poles have never doubted the sense of the political transformation, and now 81% say that in 1989, it was worth changing the system. The social effects of the changes were worse evaluated five years after the Round Table and in the years 2001-2003. Also, in 2019, the assessments of transformation in terms of individuals, that is, the fate of the respondents

and their families, are much better than those recorded in the previous surveys” (Badora 2019:11).

A comparison of the respondents’ responses over several editions of these surveys shows the dynamics of assessments and collective memory about the events at hand—the overall positive assessment of the transformation is accompanied by a more critical (than in the past) attitude towards certain aspects of the transformation. Also, over time, the percentage of respondents answering “I don’t have an opinion” increases. What is important, they belong to the youngest group (< 37), that is, they do not remember (or very poorly remember) the times at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, an obvious conclusion can be drawn that those who are/were its actors can tell the most about transformation. Thus, last but not least, the perspective of three decades shifts sociological reflection from commenting on phenomena *in statu nascendi* to *ex post* reflection. There are more and more historical studies, as well as self-critical statements by sociologists themselves (Król 2015; Domecka 2016; Giza-Poleszczuk 2018) regarding their own research and interpretative contribution to the scientific discourse of transformation. Slowly, although it is not yet very recognizable by social actors, the image of transformation will begin to be built from the perspective of memory. First, communication memory (Assmann 2008) by the participants/witnesses of this process, but in the background of the cultural memory creating social discourses (educational, cultural, historical, political, etc.) about the past. In my opinion, the materials collected in the above mentioned projects, showing the experiences of ordinary people, allow us to show “pure” bi-

ographical experiences,<sup>3</sup> the richness which is expressed primarily in the diversity of perspectives, judgments, assessments, and theories of oneself.

All the articles presented in this volume are based on biographical materials. Despite the diversity of the issues involved, the transformation process is a reference framework for all of them. The volume is divided into three parts. The first one is entitled *Between the Past and the Present* and contains texts that the starting point is the shadow of the People’s Republic of Poland, presented in different ways (by social actors and the authors of the texts). The discussed issues concentrate on different aspects of biographical experiences and social processes to show, above all, the processual character of social change and mechanisms of continuity in the dimension of experiencing one’s own biography and the related consequences throughout one’s life. This shows that it is impossible to understand the essence of social changes without rooting their past.

The first article by Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek, *The Experience of Systemic Transformation in Contemporary Biographical Narratives of Older Poles*, explores whether—from the subjective perspective of people born before the end of WWII—systemic transformation brought about significant changes in their individual lives. The presented analysis shows clearly the

<sup>3</sup> Of course, there is no “pure” biographical experience in the social sense—it is always the result of individual and social processes. I used inverted commas for this term to emphasize that, first of all, the individuals talked about *their lives*, and, if they did not want to present it in the context of macro social events and processes, they simply did not do it. Among other things, Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek draws attention to this fact in her article in this volume. Whereas in the mode of cultural memory, individual experiences will be worked out and put into discursive frameworks.

discrepancy between individual biographical experiences and public discourses, giving the meaning to transformation processes.

The second text by Renata Dopierała, *Life of Things from the Perspective of Polish Systemic Transformation*, analyzes the status and usage of things in the society of shortage economy and technological devices as harbingers of the systemic change. The material for analysis comes from the above-mentioned project when interviewees—talking about their life—quite often related to material aspects of the past and present.

Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas’ article, *The PPR, Systemic Transformation, and New Poland. Opportunity Structures in the Biographical Experience of Senior Social Reformers*, analyzes biographical narrative interviews with the oldest generation of Polish social innovators being active both under the socialist regime and during and post-systemic transformation. She focuses on opportunity structures which facilitate the professional and personal development of social reformers.

Rozalia Ligus, in the text “*We Are the Poles from Former Yugoslavia.*” *Transformation Processes Shifted in Time—The Biographical Perspective*, investigates a very interesting example of “new localism” based on the nostalgic image of homeland built on the basis of “the old” repertoire of symbolic universe values.

In *Migration as a Source of Suffering in the Context of the Biographical Experience of the Process of Transformation in Poland. Case Study of Weronika’s Life History*, Joanna

Wygnańska presents a case study analyzing the process of interpreting the past and present experiences through the prism of the generational experience of parents and their involvement in the previous system.

Anna Dolińska, in the article *Socio-Economic Costs of Systemic Transformation in Ukraine in the Lens of the Biographical Experiences of Ukrainian Female Migrants to Poland*, combines the contemporary experience of the migration of young Ukrainian women to Poland with the preceding transformational changes and their long-term consequences.

The second part of the volume is entitled *The Young Generation in the "New World"* and contains texts based on the analysis of the narratives with people born in the 1980s.

Katarzyna Waniek, in the article *The Precarious Life Situation Trap. The Case of "Zealous" Julia—a Proponent and a Victim of Neoliberal Reality*, discusses—based on a case study—the analysis of the mutual influence of the individual experiences and the collective processes that result in a precarious life situation being a stage of the trajectory of a suffering process.

Jacek Burski's article, *The Coping Strategies in Biographies of Polish Middle-Class Representatives of (Post) Transformation Period*, is focused on life strategies adapted by representatives of Polish middle-class and biographical experiences of this process.

Adam Mrozowicki, Vera Trappmann, Alexandra Seehaus, and Justyna Kajta present in their paper, *Who Is a Right-Wing Supporter? On the Biographical Experiences of Young Right-Wing Voters in Poland and Germany*, four

biographical cases of people declaring their political support for far right-wing parties. The analysis of the cases leads to the distinction of socio-economic and socio-political pathways to right-wing populist support.

The last part of the volume—*Discourses on Transformation and Biographical Experience*—contains two articles exploring the maladjustment of transformation discourses (in different ways) to the biographical experiences of social actors. This gap often results from imposing the ready-made rationalizations and macro-analyses on the micro-experiences of an individual's level.

In *Winners and Losers of the Process of Transformation as an Etic Category versus Emic Biographical Perspective*, Kaja Kaźmierska discusses the categorization of winners and losers as not only simplifying the description of social reality, but also difficult to be easily biographically justified, since the *etic* categorization is not relevant to the *emic* perspective.

Piotr Filipkowski, in *Narrative Agency and Structural Chaos. A Biographical-Narrative Case Study*, presents a case study where a life path turns out to be an unintended, dynamic journey between different professions, social worlds, and structural positions. This creates a complicated and ambiguous biographical model, which arranges itself neither in the socio-economic advancement of the "winner" nor in the degradation of the "lost" transformation.

I hope that this volume, rich in content and analysis, will become an interesting contribution to the process of reflection on the experience of changes in the perspective of individual biographies.

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