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CITIZENS OF COMMUNIST POLAND AS 'SMALL INDIVIDUALISTS'

I

The Polish historiography describing the history of Poland after 1945 has not too frequently or penetratingly raised the issue of adaptation of the Polish society to the conditions of a communist state. The scholars researching into this period mostly focus on political analyses and, in this context, deal with attitudes and behaviours expressing, in the first place, resistance, if not political opposition, against the authorities.¹ Most of those studies did not analyse the question of adaptation; if it ever turns up, it is usually meant to appear different from attitudes or behaviours such as resistance and involvement. This

¹ The major studies within this current include: Łukasz Kamiński, *Polacy wobec nowej rzeczywistości 1944–1948. Formy pozainstytucjonalnego, żywiołowego oporu społecznego* (Toruń, 2000); *idem*, 'Opór społeczny jako element obrony polskiej tożsamości narodowej w okresie realnego socjalizmu', in Magdalena Rupińska (ed.), *Między irredentą, lojalnością a kolaboracją. O suwerenność państwową i niezależność narodową (1795–1989)* (Polska myśl polityczna XIX i XX wieku, 11, Wrocław, 2001), 403–12; Zdzisław Zblewski, *Między wolną Polską a "siedemnastą republiką". Z dziejów oporu społecznego na terenie województwa krakowskiego w latach 1945–1947* (Wydawnictwa "Księgarni Akademickiej", 50, Cracow, 1998); Andrzej Friszke and Andrzej Paczkowski (eds.), *Opozycja i opór społeczny w Polsce (1945–1980). Materiały konwersatorium z 20 lutego 1991 r.* (Prace Instytutu Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warsaw, 1991); Andrzej Friszke, *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945–1980* (London, 1994); Romuald Turkowski, *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe w obronie demokracji 1945–1949* (Warsaw, 1992); Jerzy Eisler, *Grudzień 1970. Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (Warsaw, 2000); *idem*, *Marzec 1968. Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (Warsaw, 1991). This same current is represented by studies, imposing in number, in martyrology of activist and soldiers of the armed and political Underground (clandestine structures) in 1940s, prosecutions and repressions applied against Catholic Church clergy, political prisoners, etc.

differentiation has been most completely and carefully explored within the historiographic framework by Krystyna Kersten. It was Kersten who was the first to notice, as part of her analysis of the 1944–7 period, that the attitude combining compromise and resistance prevailed across the social groups as well as within most of the ideological-political milieus of the time.

[The attitude in question] appeared in a number of variants, depending on the proportion between compromise and resistance, and conditional upon the differences in grasping the limits of compromise and the scope and nature of the resistance. And, there were several dimensions to it: political, profession-related, and daily-life-related. The substratum was formed of, on the one hand, rejection of the existing system, as it was contrary to the national and social aspirations, and, on the other hand, the belief that combat for the demanded values could only be fought within the framework generated by the system, which implied a precluded negation of the existing authority and enforced collaboration.²

The research done by Krystyna Kersten formed the major point of reference for historians dealing with the attitudes and behaviours against the communist authority in the post-war Poland. Most studies have focused however on detailed findings, usually referring to specific forms of social resistance, whilst not attempting at providing a generalised picture of the experience under the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) as far as the authorities vs. society relations are concerned.

Luckily, though, such afterthought did appear in studies authored by sociologists. A number of those authors made attempts to face the issue in question, based upon copious research. This proved all the more fruitful that social adaptation was one of the most frequently explored problems in sociological research. This trend has led to ascribing various meanings to 'social adaptation', effectively making the notion so stretchable that almost any social process appeared 'describable' with the use of it.³

The concept of adaptation has been relatively most extensively developed by Robert Merton. According to his theory, conformity,

² Krystyna Kersten, 'Społeczeństwo polskie wobec władzy ustanawianej przez komunistów 1944–1947', in Mirosława Marody and Antoni Sulek (eds.), *Rzeczywistość polska i sposoby radzenia sobie z nią. Praca zbiorowa* (Warsaw, 1987), 9–36.

³ Cf. 'Adaptacja', entry, authored by Stanisław Kowalik, in *Encyklopedia socjologii*, i (Warsaw, 1998), 13–14.

innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion formed types of individual adaptation in a society as a cultural carrier.⁴ For the purpose of the present considerations, Merton's findings are but of limited usefulness, since his concept takes as its foundation the attitudes and behaviours of individuals within the parliamentary democracy and free-market economy of the United States of America, a context that is not compliant with the realities of the superimposed PRL authority system.

It seems that, given the context, the most interesting analyses are those carried out by Polish sociologists who tried to determine the awareness, attitudes and behaviours of the Polish society in the decades of 1970s and 1980s.

The considerations of Winicjusz Narojek are part of this research current. Narojek, the early-deceased (1995) outstanding Polish sociologist, employed his unusual acumen, which was based for most part upon his intuition as a researcher, and analysed the PRL as a social and institutional order. As aptly noticed by Elżbieta Tarkowska in her reminiscence essay, he was a 'theoretician and empiricist in one', combining the macro-social and micro-social perspective.

Striving for grasping and depicting the complex matter of collective life, he analysed it in a macro-perspective of the functioning of a social system and authority, and in a micro-perspective of 'basic interpersonal situations', with their specific emotional climate and within the context of cultural phenomena.⁵

Narojek claimed that adaptation to an existing order was not identical with an absolute submission to the will of a public decision-maker.

While appearing fallible as an instrument through which a social utopia was meant to get substantiated, the state authority triggers particular strivings within twines of interests created by its own organisation. The real sense of totalitarianisation of a society does not consist in a shaping, with use of propaganda and repressive measures, of personalities inclined to be blindly obedient to those of official authority – which appeared futile, especially in Poland – but rather, in imposing upon those who strive for

⁴ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York, 1968), 175–236.

⁵ Elżbieta Tarkowska, 'O antropologii Winicjusza Narojka', in Winicjusz Narojek, *Jednostka wobec systemu. Antropologia trwania i zmiany* (Warsaw, 1996), 115.

a personal prosperity the rules of organisational game within the state structures. A negative meaning is meant here, which, while not favouring the development of a 'moral-and-political unity' of the state, furnishes the state structures with a pragmatic legitimisation with use of common social behaviours displayed by the people.⁶

It was Narojek (but not only him) who put an emphasis on various strategies through which the 'system' was 'domesticated' and 'managed' by PRL citizens. The actions they took were also identifiable with the concept of social resourcefulness, comprehended in terms of

a sphere of varied pro-social activities, universally estimated as highly functional in respect of the system (although not in each case accepted or supported by state institutions), as well as a set of highly controversial behaviours ('dirty communities', corruption, participation in clandestine legal/economic dealings).⁷

In Narojek's view, such 'system management' often assumed the form of so-called 'small individualism' consisting in 'making a maximum use of the elbow-room opportunities provided by a political system founded upon collectivistic rules'.⁸ This author argues that when it comes to making decisions by instruction centres, there always remains a margin of freedom wherein an area for particular interests to expand appears. This is the area where individual 'small mavericks' as well as various lobbies fight. It is there that one looks for their 'own people' constituting a specific structure of integrated interests within a deficit of consumable goods.⁹

Thus, the question about 'small individualism' primarily concerns the type, reach, and nature of adaptive strategies for the system. In what ways did individuals (with their varied social roles, inclusive

⁶ Winicjusz Narojek, *Perspektywy pluralizmu w upaństwowionym społeczeństwie. Ocena sytuacji na podstawie polskich kryzysów* (Warsaw, 1994), 91.

⁷ Jerzy Kwaśniewski, Robert Sobiech and Joanna Zamecka, *Zaradność społeczna. Z badań nad społecznymi inicjatywami w dziedzinie rozwiązywania problemów Polski lat osiemdziesiątych* (Prace Sekcji Socjologii Dewiacji i Kontroli Społecznej, 3, Wrocław etc., 1990), 8.

⁸ Winicjusz Narojek, *Socjalistyczne "welfare state". Studium z psychologii społecznej Polski Ludowej* (Biblioteka Kwartalnika Politycznego "Krytyka", Warsaw, 1991), 50.

⁹ *Idem*, *Perspektywy pluralizmu w upaństwowionym społeczeństwie. Ocena sytuacji na podstawie polskich kryzysów* (Warsaw, 1994), 92–3.

of organisational structures), social and professional groups take advantage of the aforesaid freedom margin under PRL's institutional system? How did the system itself respond to this type of activity? These are most probably the most important questions I will try to find an answer to (be it a partial one) herein.

Before I attempt at confronting W. Narojek's concept with the outcome of our contemporary social history of PRL, it seems necessary to observe that the said concept is part of a wider spectrum of sociological attempts at interpreting the behaviours of Polish people against their communist authorities.

Andrzej Rychard has made one of the most interesting such attempts. Referring to the realities of Poland in the second half of the 1980s, he stated that concepts he collectively described as 'conflicting' (or 'confrontational') and 'adaptive' had been predominant in scholarly descriptions of the relations between the PRL institutional system and the society. The former type was based on the assumption that it is possible for a uniform interest to exist within the authority structures, if essential to such interest is subordination of the social life in its entirety, economy included, in order to maintain a continuity of political power. As part of such concepts, the society was ascribed a shared interest in that the people strove for getting liberated from a total dominance and assurance of social subjectivity rooted in an attachment to the tradition and culture. The best-known manifestation of the trend for pursuing an analysis of this sort is Milovan Đilas's 'new class' theory. With such interpretations, the main driver for social order's stability is, on the one hand, the option for the authorities to use violence and, on the other, the society's fear of such violence. In situations where the level of satisfaction of the society's civic and material aspirations decreased below a certain minimum level, the violence barrier proved insufficient and conflicts broke out openly – a rather frequent phenomenon in the post-war history of Poland.

In their model version, the 'adaptive' concepts are founded on the assumption whereby speaking of a uniform interest within an institutional system *or* a society is impossible. The economic and political systems are internally diverse, their operation being determined through incessant interplay between various groups of interest. The economy is not treated as completely dominated by a political system – instead, a certain autonomy is ascribed to it, the top managers or

senior executives in industrial enterprises being described as aware of their own interest, striving for autonomy with respect to the political powers and economic administration. Internal diversification of the society, divided into various, often mutually competing, groups, is emphasised within these concepts; their extreme versions assume that the main line of conflict does not separate the 'authority' and the 'society' but instead there is a multitude of division lines inside the society itself. In such a form, the concepts in question gained some popularity in the circle of Polish communist elites of the 1980s as they tried to legitimise the position of the state not as a party in the conflict with the society but as an arbiter in the disputes between various groups.

Regardless of political entanglements, serious sociological studies (done e.g. by Jerzy Wiatr or Jadwiga Staniszkis) have confirmed that directors of industrial enterprises strove for an autonomy. Jacek Tarkowski has drawn similar conclusions from his studies on local authority apparatus. A. Rychard is of opinion that these concepts seem to reject the role of violence as the main stabiliser, instead pointing to the role of pragmatic motives and interests in stabilising the system.

Both the sociologist quoted above and some other experts in the field have indicated the inconsistency, identifiable in the empirical studies, consisting in a simultaneous rejection of, and acquiescence to, the PRL institutional system. In other words, the thing is that the system could remain unaccepted on the axiological (value-related) plane while it was accepted through various types of behaviour, in the 'daily interest' sphere. This latter aspect is essential as on a mass scale it was decisive to perception of the reality in its 'normal' state, i.e. one wherein values, replaced by pragmatic interests, do not perform a regulatory function. Such a situation is perhaps describable as a social anomaly, but it seemingly was predominant in Poland, with varying intensities, throughout the period 1945 to 1989.

To describe this situation, A. Rychard has developed a concept of his own, termed 'active adaptation'. This author claims that among a number of possible mechanisms ensuring such adaptation as a way to reduce the discrepancies appearing between the system and the society, the ones of material importance are those ensuring individuals a fulfilment of their personal aspirations and interests, mainly those related to everyday existence. In terms of such concept, this is an active process,

in the course of which subject to change is not only an individual or a group but also the 'system', which is modified by those getting adapted. ... In the post-war period, the system as well as the society has changed in the course of bilateral adaptive processes.¹⁰

The change in the character of the system basically consisted, since the beginning, in acceptance of material dissimilarities to the ideological pattern. Thus, the change is identifiable with respect to the pattern rather than as resulting from some historical transformations (e.g. the attitude toward the Church or private farming). More dynamic changes include tolerance for a variety of 'informalities', 'off-legal' practices in the economy, and the like.¹¹

The findings of Mirosława Marody stay within the above-described current of thinking. Based upon studies done in 1983–4, she has found that the system was being rejected at the time chiefly in the symbolic sphere – the one of attitudes and assessments; this was not accompanied by actions aimed at changing or transforming the system. Conversely: in the sphere of individual actions, behaviours were observable which, albeit not necessarily propelled by an acceptance of the system, certainly supported or at least did not debilitate it.¹² Referring to the relations between the society and the authority in the entire PRL period, Marody concluded as follows:

There is no-one today to call into question the fact that the political/constitutional model which for forty-five years formed in Poland the institutional social-life framework was an alien model, imposed in a forceful manner. Yet ... it did for a long time enjoy support from considerable factions of the Polish society whose social and civilisation advancement it enabled. It is also true that the Polish society has at numerous occasions manifested an active resistance against, at least, certain actions and doings of the authorities, defending itself against accepting their decisions and/or fighting for changing them. It was not combating but adaptation, however, that determined the everyday functioning of individuals.¹³

¹⁰ Andrzej Rychard, 'Konflikt i przystosowanie: dwie koncepcje ładu społecznego w Polsce', in Marody and Sułek (eds.), *Rzeczywistość polska*, 98.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 89–108.

¹² Mirosława Marody, *Warunki trwania i zmiany ładu społecznego w relacji do stanu świadomości społecznej (próba opisu i wyjaśnień)* (Warsaw, 1986), 18–50.

¹³ *Eadem*, 'Przemiany postaw ideologicznych i przystosowanie w systemie komunistycznym', in Tomasz Szarota (ed.), *Komunizm. Ideologia, system, ludzie* (Warsaw, 2001), 137.

Reflections on the social attitudes and behaviours toward the communist power are present across W. Narojek's entire scholarly output.¹⁴ Central to the work of this scholar is development of a comprehensive conception of social behaviours in the PRL, with general opinions formulated on the nature of the power vs. society relations in Poland in the period 1944 to 1989, based not only on a research but also on the author's exploratory intuition and personal experience.¹⁵ It therefore seems interesting to confront Narojek's way of thinking (and, via his work, with the thinking of other similarly reasoning and arguing sociologists) about the PRL-based experience with the relevant knowledge of historians.

The point is, though, not only to check whether Narojek's and other sociologists' opinions gathered above, mainly based on research done in the 1970s/1980s, remain valid for the earlier periods as well: the same postulate to verify the heritage interpretations also results from an afterthought on the most recent works of Polish economic historians dealing with the PRL.

Apart from attachment to thinking along the lines of a model, an inclination for assessing and quantifying even volatile and hard-to-measure social or cultural phenomena draws our attention in those works. This inclination partly (or perhaps, primarily) ensues, I believe, from the habits informed by the methodology of economic sciences. In a perception of political and social history experts, definitely fragmentary and not fully reflecting the reality, economists (and, partly,

¹⁴ The undersigned has not set as a task for himself to present a complete review of studies in aspects of social adaptation to the communist power in the PRL period. Just to mention some of the other titles worth our attention: Marek Ziółkowski (ed.), *Robotnicy '84-'85. Świadomość pracowników czterech wielkich zakładów przemysłowych* (Wrocław etc., 1990); for interesting comments on the topic, cf. Jacek Kurczewski (ed.), *Umowa o kartki* (Obyczaje, Prawo i Polityka, Życie Codzienne, Warsaw, 2004); Janine R. Wedel, *The Private Poland* (New York and Oxford, 1986); Jadwiga Koralewicz-Zębik, 'Postawy wobec zewnętrznego przymusu (podłoże psychospołeczne Sierpnia 1980)', in Andrzej Siciński (ed.), *Styl życia, obyczaje, ethos w Polsce lat siedemdziesiątych – z perspektywy roku 1981. Szkice. Praca zbiorowa* (Warsaw, 1983), 19–35.

¹⁵ Apart from the already quoted works, Narojek's output also contains the following worthwhile studies: *Spółczeństwo planujące. Próba socjologii gospodarki socjalistycznej* (Warsaw, 1973); *Struktura społeczna w doświadczeniu jednostki* (Warsaw, 1982); *Spółczeństwo otwartej rekrutacji: próba antropologii klimatu stosunków międzyludzkich we współczesnej Polsce* (Warsaw, 1980).

economic historians) are perceived as possessed by the imperative to search for a model; alternatively, they are seen as ones who consider a phenomenon is 'thoroughly' analysed whenever its basic parameters appear countable. Although economists have recently started claiming that 'culture matters',¹⁶ plus there exist scientific disciplines that try to alleviate the tensions between economists and humanists (e.g. economic anthropology), the strength of stereotype makes the quest for reconciliation difficult all the same.

Approached in the way proposed by Narojek, 'small individualism' is an obvious thing for a considerable part of PRL scholars (particularly, historians of the country's society), as it had earlier on been for its citizens – albeit they would themselves have used this term rather rarely. The problem is, how to investigate it in a 'thorough', or scholarly manner? In my further remarks, I primarily make use – apart from the results of research included in the most recent works of social historians – of my own findings, based upon long years of diverse archival queries. The nature of the phenomenon under analysis implies that it is impossible to investigate it in its entire diversity, at least for the time being. What could be ventured is attempts at indicating the problems involved in investigating the phenomenon, describing its scale and complexity, and proposing hypotheses on how to interrelate 'small individualism' practices with other characteristics of the system within which it appeared – this to be done based on selected yet rather in-depth studies of individual cases

II

'SMALL INDIVIDUALISM' AMONG POLISH PEOPLE: RESEARCH SOURCES

From a historian's standpoint, this mainly boils down to the issue of finding appropriate sources – which is problematic in itself. First, what we have to do with particularly often (if not almost exclusively) is pieces of state institutions' reporting, which were compiled in line with the rules implied by the nature of the system. What it means is that we deal with sources that have often been gradually 'cleansed'

¹⁶ Lawrence E. Harrison, 'Why Culture Matters', in *idem* and Samuel P. Huntington (eds.), *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York, 2000), XVIII-XXXIII.

of content, or could have been regarded as inconvenient and backfire the interests of those who authored such reports. Some of these reports contain information on specific behaviours or their types, but we cannot determine their intensity.

Similarly, we cannot make use of the research made in the related disciplines, e.g. sociology. As is known, there were periods in the PRL history without any sociological studies done, while sociology, claimed to be a 'bourgeois science', ceased being taught in the academia. Paradoxically, the public security apparatus tried, in its way, to take over the functions of 'public opinion centres' in that time, which was the Stalinist period. The Ministry of Public Security, for instance, sent once its functionaries to the villages of their origin so that they 'polled' the locals, with use of a detailed questionnaire, on their attitude to collectivisation of agriculture (2nd half of 1948). For preventive purposes, the apparatus of the said Ministry and of the Ministry of Internal Affairs 'researched' into social sentiments in various social milieus using 'their own methods', that is, intelligence-agency/informative structures. Interesting as they include (and highlight) information on illegal or semi-legal behaviours, focusing on actions 'hostile' to the authority system, these sources have at least one major flaw to them (putting aside the disastrous state of their order): what mattered to the Security Office and Security Service officers was the specific case; replying the question about the over-individual scale of the spotted behaviour was usually outside of their interest.

Among institutional reporting sources of non-police provenance, studies or analyses compiled by inspection or control institutions are distinct in a positive sense; the Supreme Chamber of Control (abbr. in Polish as NIK) excels among those institutions. The Chamber's main investigation focus was the extent to which the inspected institutions diverted from their functioning patterns laid down by the legislation. The strong point of a considerable body of collective inspection reports is that they referred to a few dozen if not, at times, few hundred institutions examined at the same time and in the same respect(s). Thus, should the Supreme Chamber have found any irregularities in their functioning, it usually notified what the scale of such irregularities was. Moreover, most of the Supreme Chamber's files are furnished with clarifications or explanations made by the controlled parties, which shed an extra light on the pathologies identified. It ought to be borne in mind, though, that PRL inspection institutions had

their ups and downs, their autonomy with respect to governmental structures was limited at several occasions (most severely by the establishment in 1952 of a Ministry of State Control, reporting to the Prime Minister), and the quality of their work was fluctuating. In spite of all those circumstances, from the 1960s onwards, they form a little-explored and underestimated source of knowledge for investigating various social practices in the Polish society.

The other sources that according to my experiences turn out to be extremely fruitful in detecting various not-yet-known examples of 'small individualism' are court records (investigative, prosecutor's), particularly those concerning manifestations of economic crime. Testimonies of witnesses or defendants, whose situation was often extreme as they were threatened with a severe punishment, comprise information on behaviours that normally eluded the official reporting framework, enabling to better understand the 'ambience of lawlessness' wherein 'small individualism' strategies played an important part.

III

'SMALL INDIVIDUALISM': SCALE AND COMPLEXITY

Another problem related to investigation of the 'small individualism' practices is their common appearance and the challenge of their exhaustive qualitative and quantitative description. It seems that making use of a by-nature-collectivistic system in pursuance of individual purposes was the more universal the less inclined to apply the ideological orthodoxy rules the system itself was, though it never proved free of applying such measures. Under the Stalinist period, when the ideological pressure was at its peak, peasants being members of the ruling party declared once to a visiting delegate of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) that 'it was different with the PPR (Polish Workers' Party) as they'd give people horses, cows, and the PZPR is only grabbing things', and they started giving their party cards back.¹⁷

Joining the authority structures, including the communist party – the least-examined entity in this respect, paradoxically enough – in

¹⁷ Dariusz Jarosz, *Polityka władz komunistycznych w Polsce w latach 1948–1956 a chłopi* (Warsaw, 1998), 432.

view of pursuance or acceleration of one's own professional career was becoming increasingly common and deemed natural, particularly in the time Edward Gierek was in office as First Secretary of the PZPR. It also seems that common appearance and diversity of 'small individualism' strategies applied increased when winning the competed-for goods or services involved special difficulties.

There is a wealth of examples to confirm this thesis to be found in studies of historians dealing with the social history of PRL. For instance, in his analysis of the passport policy pursued by the Polish communist state in the 1970s, Dariusz Stola indicates what he calls 'searching for gaps within the system' which gave the applicant a hope for obtaining a passport. Apart from bribing practices, he mentions a suspicious increase in the number of handicapped and chronically ill people subject to examination by the Provincial Commission of Health in Katowice in the period referred to. As it appears, such health status, if confirmed by official documents, facilitated the receipt of the desirable passport for a trip to West Germany. For the same reasons, the number of marriages with unknown foreigners was recorded: this status, in turn, enabled a Polish spouse to legally leave the country. In an extreme case, a U.S. citizen of Polish origin (colloquially called *Polonus* – an old-date Pole) invited as many as three fiancées to marry him, which came out once a central file of inviting persons was established. Entering into marriages by individuals who have applied for passport or have just been granted a permit to leave was increasingly frequent, thus creating an opportunity for the spouse remaining in Poland to apply for a related permit in order to join his or her closest relatives abroad.¹⁸

Dariusz Stola, Jerzy Kochanowski, Maria Pasztor and the undersigned all have found numerous instances of 'small individualism' on the occasion of everyday soliciting of daily-use goods.¹⁹ Of the younger-generation historians, these processes have been mostly indicated by Małgorzata Mazurek who described a PRL-typical 'jump-over-the-queue' mechanism enabling to 'catch' goods or services

¹⁸ Dariusz Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949–1989* (Warsaw, 2010), 155, 203.

¹⁹ Stola, *Kraj*; Jerzy Kochanowski, *Tylnymi drzwiami. "Czarny rynek" w Polsce 1944–1989* (Warsaw, 2010); Dariusz Jarosz and Maria Pasztor, *Afera mięsna: fakty i konteksty* (Toruń, 2004).

and driven by 'saving for oneself a small scrap of control over the consumption sphere'.²⁰

A little examined area which abounded in pathologies anchored in 'small individualism' strategies was the Polish people's behaviours with respect to the social insurance system binding in PRL, with mass-scale abuses in disbursement of sickness allowances, granting of retirement-pension benefits, acquisition of disability pensions, etc.²¹

In order to confirm the statement that the 'small individualism' strategy was increasingly common as gaining ('winning') of scarce goods was getting tougher, it is worth taking a closer look at the rivalry for residential units in the 1970s. Why? First, the issue is somewhat better investigated than the other relevant ones. Second, as is known from sociological studies, the pressure for acquiring an apartment was then at its peak, due to an extremely high increase in the number of young married couples. The number of dwelling units constructed at the time, mainly by state-controlled residential cooperatives, was all the same the highest within the PRL period (the record-breaking year 1978 saw a total of 284,000 units delivered). Thirdly, studies made in 1981 showed that getting an apartment was for the Poles the most important 'business to attend', prioritised higher than the financial or socio-political situation.²² And it was the most frequent reason for writing request letters to the communist party's Central Committee.²³

For this reason, the catalogue of undertakings of varied degrees of legality, aimed at receiving a flat in general, and, possibly, one of an appropriately high standard in particular, was extremely extensive.

The 'normal', routine way to gain an apartment in PRL consisted in crediting a housing cooperative's account with an appropriate amount, as a means of becoming the cooperative's member and – following a rather long period of waiting, sometimes for dozen-or-so years,

²⁰ Małgorzata Mazurek, *Spółceństwo kolejki. O doświadczeniach niedoboru 1945–1989* (W Krainie PRL, Warsaw, 2010).

²¹ Tomasz Inglot, *Welfare States in East Central Europe 1919–2004* (Cambridge, 2008), 154–5.

²² Dariusz Jarosz, *Mieszkanie się należy ... Studium z peerelowskich praktyk społecznych* (Warsaw, 2010), 117–18.

²³ *Idem*, 'Peerelowskie lamenty mieszkaniowe', in Krzysztof Persak *et al.* (eds.), *Od Piłsudskiego do Wałęsy. Studia z dziejów Polski w XX wieku* (Warsaw, 2008), 307–20.

ensuing from inefficiency of the 'socialised' construction system – of getting a flat of one's own (the 1970s offer mainly included tall blocks-of-flats built of ready-to-assemble prefabricated elements). The restrictions set with respect to private construction initiatives (scarcity of area available, lack of adequate lending facilities against low average incomes), and the fading of municipal construction devised for the poorest inhabitants of urban areas caused the cooperative path to be the only realistic one, albeit increasingly difficult to beat within a reasonable time. Hence, proactive ways were applied (of varied degree of legality) to omit the housing-facility queue and/or accelerate the moment the flat is finally allocated. Already at the stage of soliciting an apartment and gathering the necessary documents, irregularities were occurring a great deal. The findings of the Supreme Chamber of Control on the distribution of flats in 1979 disclosed in nine (out of the forty-nine) provinces that competent institutions commonly failed to check the residential conditions of housing applicants (under the regulations then in force, the primacy of allocation rested with families whose residential conditions were particularly hard); moreover, it appeared commonplace that untrue information was given by applicants in order to create an illusion of urgency to be allocated a flat, or to gain a residential space larger than allocable. Applicants would often report, for a shared accommodation purpose, on persons not previously forming part of a single household together with them, who nonetheless separately applied, or should have applied, for being allocated a unit in an appropriate sequence. Brothers or sisters, cousins, aunts, etc. were all reported in order to obtain a larger apartment allocated; once received, such individuals were not registered as its permanent residents, or deleted from the register soon after.²⁴ Failure of housing applicants to meet the obligation to keep updated their social conditions and income information implied that allocation lists were populated by families having relatively decent apartments, or by such whose healthy adult members did not take gainful labour so they could disclose low per-member income.²⁵

²⁴ Dariusz Jarosz, 'Peerelowskie drogi do mieszkania w latach siedemdziesiątych XX wieku (zarys problemu)', in Grzegorz Miernik and Sebastian Piątkowski (eds.), *Życie codzienne w PRL (1956–1989)* (Radom and Starachowice, 2006), 183.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 183.

The 1970s decade did also see cases of circumventing the obligatory apartment distribution rules. The policy assumed by the authorities whereby a single flat was allocated to a single family was subject to material 'modifications' or, to use the period's propaganda language, 'distortions' when influenced by the 'small individualism' strategy employed by Polish people. Example: a resourceful member of the 'Bałtyk' Housing Cooperative of Gdynia misstated his situation in a declaration submitted on December 9, 1977, saying that he or his family had no other apartment whatsoever – the fact being that he had acquired a single-family house under a notarial deed of 14 November of the same year. On 12 December 1977, he was allocated a cooperative flat which he almost instantly afterwards sold to this family from which he had prior thereto bought the private home.²⁶ The 'Korab' Inter-Works' Housing Cooperative in Ustka, controlled in early 1980 by the NIK, was found to have allocated a flat to someone who was at that time building a one-family house in the same town. This individual next got married to someone who had also received an apartment from that same cooperative. As a result, a single family had two cooperative flats plus a detached house nearing completion.²⁷ Although these examples were not isolated, estimating how common these described practices or determining their typology at the current state of research does not seem feasible.

It is doubtless that relatively frequent were instances of taking advantage of the system of privileges and preferences created for certain social-professional groups. Apart from access to apartments among authorities' members and public persons, which was obviously easier from the system's logic point-of-view, many preserved source materials indicate employment with housing cooperatives as a factor that positively facilitated the gaining of these scarce goods. NIK's inspection findings confirmed that cooperative boards accepted their staff as cooperative members on a fast-track basis and subsequently allocated them apartments, although neither their seniority nor

²⁶ Warsaw, Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereafter: AAN), Centralny Związek Spółdzielni Budownictwa Mieszkaniowego, 5/352, 'Synteza wyników lustracji problemowych dotyczących badania organizacji i realizacji zamian mieszkań i zmian uprawnień do lokali', p. 303ff.

²⁷ Warsaw, Archiwum Zakładowe Najwyższej Izby Kontroli, Zespół Administracji i Gospodarki Terenowej, 1619/11, 'Informacja o wynikach kontroli przestrzegania zasad przydziału mieszkań', Warsaw, May 1980, pp. 35–8.

membership period or actual living conditions provided any satisfactory basis for it.

The Supreme Chamber also proved that for someone willing to get a flat, it was extremely advantageous to undertake a job with the enterprise participating in its construction. Given the conditions of permanent scarcity of construction materials and workforce, cooperatives more and more often ensured for themselves the possibility to deliver new blocks-of-flats for use.²⁸

As the period's social policy assumed, residential units were meant to be an instrument designed to set up complete crews for newly built or redeveloped plants or establishments of special importance to the state's economy. Once implemented, this rule came across difficulties. A NIK inspection of distribution of flats managed by forty-one workplaces, carried out in Q2 1978, confirmed that apartments from the 'pool' allocated for such purposes were also granted to office or institutional employees, sportspersons, stage stars, artists – all those whose breakdown strength in the authority structures proved relatively strong.²⁹

It furthermore appeared that privileging the said group of enterprises in obtaining apartments did not imply the otherwise demanded stabilisation of the teams in existing establishments which already had a basic cadre. A relatively remarkable number of their employees did take jobs with establishments of importance to the economy, so they could faster get a flat on their own or have a small flat replaced by a larger apartment – but thereafter, once their actual objective was met, left the establishment from which they had received their desired apartment. Thus, enterprises were losing not only their useful employees but also residential units, and in order to acquire other staff members, displaying similar qualifications, they reported a demand for extra units.³⁰

²⁸ For instance, the Provincial Housing Cooperative in Szczecin allocated between 1977 and 1979 a total of 117 to six establishments, in exchange of acceptance for delivery of various construction works, supplies or services, applying the following conversion: 10,000 t of materials supplied – 1 residential unit; 8,000 t of aggregate supplied – 1 residential unit; provision of a water-supply, sewerage and heating network worth 7 million zloty – 10 residential units. This was not an isolated case. See Jarosz, 'Peerelowskie drogi', 187.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 188.

³⁰ The 'Polmo' Low-capacity Motor-car Factory in Bielsko-Biała, investigated in this respect as for Q2 1978, was left by forty-five members of staff who received flats distributed by their workplace between 1973 and 1977; cf. *ibidem*.

The example of 'proactive' ways to earn a flat of one's own is indicative, for one thing, of the diversity in the 'small individualism' strategies, whilst evidencing how difficult it is to assess the scale on which they were applied. As is the case with other similar instances, we can only refer (as lawyers do) to an 'obscure', indeterminable number.

Assuming that the system's rules and their real functioning were best known to those exercising power within this system, it should be asked whether it was not, by any chance, themselves and those around them to be the most efficient in the use of strategies of 'small individualism', less and less camouflaged by a care for a common good.

There are quite a number of examples traceable in archival resources to confirm this statement, especially those dating to the periods the subsequent communist teams coming to power tried to 'square accounts' with their predecessors. This was so in April 1981, as 10th Plenum of the communist party's Central Committee resolved to appoint the so-called Tadeusz Grabski commission 'for evaluation of the present course of works and their acceleration in the area of personal accountability of the PZPR executive members'.³¹ As found by the General Public Prosecutor's Office, arraignments extended to a total of 217 people by March 1982, of whom 24 held executive functions with the central state administration, 46 with the provincial (*voivodeship*) administration and 21 with other structures. Moreover, 20 people were bound with the provincial party apparatus and 106 were executive functionaries of the state economic organisations. A former deputy prime minister, former minister, two deputy ministers, twelve former secretaries of Provincial Committees of the PZPR, nineteen former provincial governors (*voivodes*) and city presidents (mayors) plus nine former deputy provincial governors.³² With most of those cases, the charges presented included a 'housing thread'. In most cases, a variety of amenities were concerned (access to construc-

³¹ For the commission documents, see Zbigniew Błażyński, *Towarzysze zeznają. Z tajnych archiwów Komitetu Centralnego. Dekada Gierka 1970–1980 w tzw. Komisji Grabskiego* (Warsaw, 1990).

³² AAN, Prokuratura Generalna PRL (hereafter: PG), 34/15, 'Józef Ostas do kierownika wydziału Administracyjnego KC PZPR tow. Michała Atlasa', Warsaw, 23 March 1982; *ibidem*, p. 121: 'Informacja o dotychczasowych wynikach śledztwa przeciwko osobom wykorzystującym zajmowane stanowiska dla osiągnięcia korzyści materialnych', Warsaw, 23 March 1982, p. 116.

tion materials, works performed with use of equipment and workforce of the subordinate enterprises, reduction of amounts invoiced for the works delivered, etc.) related to construction of villas or chalets and provision of supra-standard equipment and furnishings in residential units, as well as ‘helping out settle’ apartments. The charges included e.g. invoking influential contacts in municipal administration offices and taking bribes for a promise to ‘settle a flat’; using the staff in construction of houses in exchange of ‘settling’ residential allocations; crossing the empowerments related to allocation of garden allotments; lawless allocation of residential units to executives or managers.³³

In line with the investigation’s politically-driven assumptions, the very top of this pyramid of abuses and crimes featured the former top leadership, with Edward Gierek in the vanguard. However, pronouncing them guilty appeared to be an extremely tough task and condemnation proved impossible in many cases.³⁴

It ought to be borne in mind, though, that the social distribution of ‘small individualism’ practices was sometimes even more complex, participation in the power structures not always being its main axis. It so happened that on a local level, these structures were more inclined to support the way of thinking and the behaviours of those ruled than of those they reported to. This was so, for that matter, when it came to determining the labour standards in 1948–9: establishment boards tended to depress them or admitted for them to be arbitrarily depressed, fearing that in case these standards are inflated, the workers would leave their workplace. This is just an example of macroeconomic rationality, defined in accord with the ideologically and politically conditioned PRL systemic rules, proving contradictory to a microeconomic rationality on the workplace level. There have been more instances of such discrepancy we can reconstruct based on the surviving body of PRL archival resources. Following my own queries, I have managed to indicate numerous instances of exchange of goods and services between plants or establishments carried out contrary to the regulations in force but not singular at all, and tolerated. For this reason, to give another example, headmasters of schools situated in tourist-attractive regions of Poland entered into

³³ AAN, PG 34/16: ‘Wykaz osób przeciwko którym skierowano akty oskarżenia do 31 grudnia 1981’ (settlement cases), Warsaw, 21 Jan. 1982, p. 23ff.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

confidential arrangements with plant managers willing to hold holiday camps for children of their employees in those locations, providing for carrying out renovation or other investment projects with the related 'education establishments', far exceeding the needs of such 'holiday actions'.³⁵ For these same reasons, in the period of acute supply shortages suffered in the 1980s, the Central Committee for Eradication of Profiteering condemned instances of agreements between meat plants and enterprises from other sectors using other goods/services as the 'currency' in settling payments for extra supplies of meat or processed meat. These conflicting interests between the centre, formulating the systemic rules, and its local structures, thinking and behaving in a manner consciously circumventing those rules, was also expressed in a variety of planning tenders – with 'own people', described once by W. Narojek, playing a central part in the process.

The reflections expressed herein unavoidably lead to the very basic question: What was the role of the 'small individualism' strategy in the eventual fall of the People's Republic of Poland (and, possibly, other Eastern Bloc countries³⁶)? Was it not merely the case that PRL collapsed just because of the international situation and resulting from a pressure of the intra-system political opposition and social resistance – the complementary reason being that the ruling ones and the ruled, driven by their own 'small individualisms', were increasingly impairing, from the inside, the role of its ideological foundations? As a final result, toward the end of 1980s, the 'Polish Months' experiences over, merely an unideological and unacceptable

³⁵ For a broader discussion, see Dariusz Jarosz, *"Masy pracujące przede wszystkim". Organizacja wypoczynku w Polsce 1945–1956* (Warsaw and Kielce, 2003).

³⁶ The increasingly abundant literature dealing with authority vs. society relations in former Eastern-Bloc countries other than Poland, see e.g. Steven Saxonberg, *The Fall: A Comparative Study of the End of Communism in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland* (International Studies in Global Change, 11, Amsterdam, 2001); Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971–1989* (Schriftenreihe, 349, Bonn, 1998); Peter Heumos, 'Workers under Communist Rule: Research in the Former Socialist Countries of Eastern-Central and South-Eastern Europe and in the Federal Republic of Germany', *International Review of Social History*, lv, 1 (2010), 83–115; Sandrine Kott, *Le communisme au quotidien: les entreprises d'État dans la société est-allemande* (Socio-histoires, Paris, 2001); Sandrine Kott, Marcin Kula and Thomas Lindenberger (eds.), *Socjalizm w życiu powszednim. Dyktatura a społeczeństwo w NRD i PRL* (W Krainie PRL, Warsaw and Potsdam, 2006).

split into the rulers and the ruled remained. The capability of having the power legitimised based upon a socialist welfare state model was getting exhausted. Within a system where there was less and less to win, 'small individualism' as a survival strategy proved decreasingly efficient. In a social sense, Polish communism was overthrown by those who actively opposed it, forming up the Solidarity movement's membership masses, along with those (possibly, often the same people!) who had entered the system's structures (collaborating with the system, to use the language of politics) and once there, taking advantage of these structures to meet their own private or existential purposes, contributed to the system's erosion. It is usual that joining the structures of an undemocratic, state-omnipotence-based system in order to make a use of it for delivery of one's personal or group interest leads to alteration of such system's governing rules in a way that eventually disables the system. This toilsome process, compliant with the Latin apophthegm *gutta cavat lapidem non vi sed saepe cadendo*, tends to be neglected by Polish politics historians who are otherwise enchanted with the myths of stout-hearted heroes of the combat for Polish liberty and freedom.

IV

'SMALL INDIVIDUALISM' PAST PRL PERIOD, OR, 'LIFE AFTER LIFE'

Have the strategies described above left any footprint in the conduct of Polish society after 1989? Sociological studies and focused journalism have formulated a thesis whereby 'learned helplessness' was a feature characteristic to the PRL society. 'Envious egalitarianism', 'mediocrity mindset', 'collectivistic egoism' or 'individualised altruism' all have appeared among the proposed concepts. What was the 'small individualism' manifested by the Poles all about, then? Did it, as a reversal, teach resourcefulness while using the systemic rules for the individuals' personal goals? Did the Poles, with all their 'resourcefulness handicapped', undermine not just the systemic rules but the thinking within the categories of statehood in general? Given this sense, is the journalistic figure of 'far-sighted and thrifty' Pole any tenable, as long as it describes individuals who avoided 'taking any crap' in PRL, were adroit in cheating the authorities and acquired a capital of resourcefulness to which this nation owes the name of

the transition leader after 1989? There is much evidence that strategies of this sort, enforced by what PRL was, did not perhaps prove to be much advantageous to the emergence of a 'normal' capitalism once the system collapsed, showing off their uselessness under the new rules (now, of the 'Third Republic of Poland'), if not merely contributing to a criminalisation of the state – the new state now.³⁷

The strategies of 'small individualism' complicate, if not outright undermine, the one-dimensional picture of the Polish society in the PRL period. In the light of those strategies, it is untenable to think about this society only or primarily basing upon the paradigm of Catholicism, anticommunism and permanent opposition toward the government and the 'system'. That such image of the society in question tends to prevail in public domain stems, I believe, from a martyrological direction assumed in historical research on the past-1944 period, which has to do with the scientific and educative work of the Institute of National Remembrance (albeit there have been works produced by this institution that divert from such a pattern). However, to paraphrase Timothy Snyder, I should only like to say that when boiled down to a morality (a trend usually strongly immersed in current politics), history does not make a society (others would say, a nation) any moral.

trans. Tristan Korecki

³⁷ Małgorzata Mazurek and Jerzy Kochanowski, the afore-quoted authors, are of this opinion.