

POSTSOCIALISM AS A DIAGNOSTIC TOOL

Common-Sense Concepts of Power and State in Southern Poland

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Are the common-sense concepts of power and state, used in the rural regions of Poland, manifestations of postcommunist or postsocialist mentality? Several fieldwork seasons spent in the Polish countryside let me to conclude that local concepts of power and authority used by my local informants should rather be called “postpeasant” or “posttraditional” than “postsocialist”. The opinions concerning different forms of authority, as well as the state itself, shaped within the local discourse and shared by the contemporary inhabitants of rural areas of Poland, proved difficult to follow without profound understanding of traditional peasant culture, mentality and value system. Therefore, I suggest the term “postpeasant” to be applied in reference to rural communities of contemporary Poland as more accurate than the widely used term “postsocialist”.

Keywords: common-sense representations, local discourses, postsocialist, postpeasant

Anthropology at Home

Any account of fieldwork conducted in Poland by a Polish ethnologist has to be preceded by a short reflection concerning its status. Is a Pole who is conducting fieldwork in Poland a native anthropologist? Is what she does anthropology at home? In times when fieldwork is explained as “sharing experience” and “negotiating sense”, when we have “reflective anthropology” and the “non-transparent” researcher, conscious of her influence on the research process, the proximity between partners in fieldwork dialogue becomes an advantage. We have to be careful, however, not to be deceived by appearances. A researcher, an educated inhabitant of a large city, is perceived by farmers as a stranger, even when the language both partners communicate in is their native tongue. Sharing the same native language only

creates an illusion of having something in common. Fieldwork very quickly shows how misleading this illusion happens to be, and this does not concern the dialect spoken by the older inhabitants of a rural village. The words that appear in a loose conversation concerning political matters very quickly show their multiple meanings, with the partners in the dialogue – the researcher and her interlocutor – giving the words different meanings and, moreover, with those meanings changing according to the context.

Thus, is the ethnographic research conducted by a Polish ethnologist in Poland any different from the fieldwork conducted, for example, by such American scholars as Janine Wedel, Carol Nagengast or Elisabeth Dunn? I believe the difference is fundamental. First, the researcher, for whom the language of the conversation is her native tongue, has at her disposal

greater means of understanding certain linguistic nuances, different wordgames and idiomatic expressions. Second, an ethnologist educated at a Polish university knows the vast amount of ethnographic literature concerning rural inhabitants from the mid-nineteenth century till contemporary times. The literature is primarily in Polish, with the exception of the famous work by Florian Znaniecki (and William Thomas) as well as a few articles in English, for example those of Jozef Obrebski. Being acquainted with this literature, which is on the whole unknown to foreign researchers, is extremely helpful in understanding contemporary fieldwork experience. I came to understand the importance of this while conducting my own fieldwork, especially when trying to cope with the interpretation of the materials collected.

A Short Description of the Conducted Fieldwork

I conducted a research project entitled Ethnopolitology – Conversations with Polish Highlanders about Political Matters in the years 1999–2005. This took place in the villages near Nowy Targ (New Market), a town in the mountainous Podhale region in the south of Poland, at the foot of the Tatra Mountains and in the middle of the Carpathian range. It is a region known for its stability and attachment to very small farms passed down from generation to generation, and also for the two-hundred-year tradition of economic migration, forced on the farmers because of their highland farming that brought so little profit. In this region fieldwork has been conducted by many Polish ethnographers since the end of the nineteenth century, whereas from the 1970s research was conducted there by Frances Pine, an anthropologist from Cambridge University. The people chosen for study were poorly educated. They called themselves farmers although their actual source of income was temporary manual labour, often abroad. Before 1991 the majority linked work on the farm with employment in a state-run shoe factory called “Podhale”, built in Nowy Targ in 1955 and extended in the 1970s. At that time it employed seven thousand workers.

Fieldwork was conducted according to Polish ethnographic tradition which is quite different when compared with British sojourns lasting for a year. It is more like American research conducted in the Indian reserves which consists of shorter stays in the places where the research is being conducted, at the same time going back there many times so as to conduct long, loosely structured conversations. My project consisted of seven weekly trips in which a group of ten undergraduate and doctoral students from Warsaw University’s Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology took part.

The technique of conducting research presumed that the researcher aimed at receiving statements that would be as broad and free as possible, disciplined only by the research disposition that gave the speakers a great deal of freedom to construct their own narration, choose the appropriate expressions, comparisons and examples. The interviews were conducted in people’s homes, at the marketplace, outside shops or in front of the church. The dialogues that took place between 1999 and 2000 sometimes became multivocal debates, centred around such notions as the state, different authorities, citizens, the nation, political parties, free elections, democracy and freedom. They were afterwards supplemented with conversations about their electoral preferences, and were conducted in a county-town marketplace. Those marketplace debates were extremely emotional, especially before the presidential elections in 2000, the general elections in 2001 as well as the general and presidential elections in September 2005. All the conversations were registered digitally. Over a period of six years we amassed in all about five hundred computer records of conversations that constitute very good material for the interpretation of rural village discourse on politics.¹

The Rural Perception of Authority: Postsocialist or Postpeasant?

The media, both Polish and Western European, often characterize the political views of poorly educated people as a sign of postcommunist,² postsocialist mentality or as an example of the attitude defined after Alexander Zinoviev as *homo sovieticus*. The

results of the fieldwork conducted in Podhale persuaded me to question those essentializing and universalizing definitions. On the basis of the research material that I have managed to put together, I hope to prove that opinions concerning different forms of authority and the state, shared and shaped in the local discourse of contemporary Polish rural villages, are primarily constructed with the help of descriptive categories characteristic of peasant culture, and it is difficult to understand them without knowledge of a farmer's traditional culture, mentality and system of values. Despite undertaking certain modernizing activities, the socialist system preserved this way of thinking, changing it so slightly that describing views of this type by means of the adjective "postsocialist" seems to be somewhat exaggerated.

I will start my argument in favour of this view by quoting Clifford Geertz who believed that the sphere of symbols and convictions was exceptionally resistant to change. He illustrated this with examples from his Indonesian studies. In interpreting Javanese funeral customs, he showed that certain notions, and expectations connected with them, illustrate a surprising stability and are transferred to new economic and political contexts that have come about as a result of Indonesia's urbanization and industrialization processes (Geertz 1973). Marshall Sahlins presented similar arguments (1995). On the basis of exotic examples, he showed that the present situation is always explained in mental categories prior to the real experience. In tribal communities, that previous knowledge was organized around myths; hence he called this *mythopraxis*. Following the thesis concerning the exceptional stability of notions, convictions and a shared system of values, it is necessary to check the truth of this opinion in connection with farming communities. In reference to the stability of notions shaped in the context of traditional farming households, for example, Nestor Garcia Canclini (1995), among others, wrote about the hybridity of the contemporary culture of Mexican peasants that links elements of traditional culture with those of modernity.

In order to argue for the stability of traditional notions in the Polish context, I must briefly charac-

terize the peasant's view of the world. I will concentrate here on the widely known works of Robert Redfield (1956) about peasant mentality and omit the numerous publications in Polish on the subject. The peasant way of perceiving reality was partly shaped by being isolated from the external world and being strictly connected with the farmers' settled lifestyle. This resulted in them perceiving the external world with distrust, a perception created through maximizing the relationships known to them from their own small world experienced on an everyday basis. The knowledge they gained from their everyday experiences was supplemented with what they themselves imagined, which in turn led to creating stereotypes of the "other" and other notions concerning the distant reality, which was fascinating but, at the same time, frightening.

In contemporary conversations about politics we can hear echoes of such a way of drawing conclusions. The research material from Podhale clearly shows the tendency to broaden the relations of authority experienced on the farm to that of the state. For centuries, the inhabitants of the Podhale villages have been functioning within a specific context, that of a peasant farm. Organizing the farmwork, the relationships between the workers and the farmer, and the principles governing the wages received – all these experiences, which have come down over the generations – have become the basis for the way farmers perceive different authorities, both within the family and the state. However, it is worth recalling what Clifford Geertz said in his text on common knowledge (1973), that experience itself does not teach us anything. For it to pass on some message it must be interpreted in categories prior to this experience. In the discussed example, work experience on a farm, interpreted in categories of traditional peasant culture, provides the interlocutors with knowledge concerning what, in reference to those in power, relations within the state should be like today.

Peasant Perception of the State

It is worth starting any reflections on local discursive constructs by tracing the connotations of the

notion “state” as they appeared in the conducted interviews. Depending on the context, it meant either state authorities in general or a combination of territorial authorities, the community inhabiting the given territory and the people in authority within that community. In the first meaning, it was simply used interchangeably with “the authorities”, while in the second, it was usually explained by comparing it to a farm. I used this local simile as a source metaphor (Turner 1975), focusing on the interpretation of fieldwork materials.

From comparing the state to a farm, my informants passed smoothly to complaining about the privatization process that had taken place in Poland since 1990. The fall of state-run factories, the setting-up of private firms on the basis of mainly foreign capital, taking over the existing infrastructure sometimes put to use but often falling into ruin, were all the subject of heated criticism. How the privatization process was assessed locally, expressed in a highly emotional manner through swearing and with raised voices, using sarcasm and bitter irony, can be summarized in the often repeated sentence: “They’re selling off Poland!” My informants were especially angry at the closure of the leather manufacturing complex “Podhale”. It was in this factory that not only our interviewees had worked for years, but also the majority of Podhale families. Shouting out their anger and resentment, they argued: “How could they sell it?! It wasn’t theirs! It belonged to the whole nation! That factory came into existence thanks to our work!”

The indignation brought about by this privatization process can be easily interpreted as proof of the attachment of the factory’s former workers to the socialist ideology that would seep through to them from the factory’s radio loudspeakers. I will try, however, to show that the above described attitude towards the privatization problem may be explained by referring to the peasant way of perceiving the issue of ownership and work. Ethnographical works on the rights of ownership and inheritance laws concerning a peasant farm at the turn of the twentieth century show quite a difference in principles, emphasizing at the same time that the farm either be-

longed to the family or to the community (Thomas & Znaniecki 1958). In this understanding of a farm – primarily the land but also the buildings and livestock – it was generally acknowledged to belong to the family, although from the legal point of view, it was often owned by the person who farmed the land. Even if, according to the inheritance law, the farm was passed down to one person, according to custom and to what was perceived as morally right, it was seen as belonging to the whole family. The farmer who was a good manager, who bought up land, extended the house or invested in more outbuildings, enriched the whole family, also his children and future grandchildren. The farmer who sold off his land would be depriving the present and future generations of the achievements of their father, grandfather and great-grandfather. If we were to look at the privatization process through the peasants’ conviction concerning their property rights and were to refer the same criterion to the state, their indignation becomes fully understandable. Looking at it from the farmer’s point of view, the government in Poland after 1989 acted like a bad farmer, like a squanderer, selling off what belonged to the nation, or, to be more exact, what had been achieved through the work of the nation. Proof of this line of interpretation may be our interviewees’ statements, among which we often heard: “A nation within the state is like a family at home.” “The state is like a farm that belongs to the whole nation.” These were usually brought to a conclusion with the highly indignant statement: “How could they sell the shoe factory if it came into existence thanks to our work?!” “It wasn’t theirs, so how could they sell it?!” Although in such exclamations we can of course see the influence of socialist propaganda, I would prefer to see the attitude described above as having much older roots.

Transferring to the state the relationships known from the farm explains many other complaints about the transformation process. The interviewees often said: “There is no justice in Poland today.” They would then explain that what they were thinking about was the lack of justice connected with remuneration for their work, work done both today and in the past, which was the basis for working out

their pensions. The market economy theory of remuneration is calculated according to demand, the changing prices of products and many other factors, among which there is no place for such moral categories as honesty or justice. Looking at it in this way, complaining about today's lack of justice in remuneration may be perceived as a sign of postcommunist nostalgia, as longing for the ideal of social justice that had been popularized by socialist propaganda. I believe, however, that such a time perspective is too short. Florian Znaniecki presents the understanding of justice in folk culture by describing the relation between employing farmhands and help on the farm (Thomas & Znaniecki 1958). The farmhand was to do his work in an honest manner, in other words, as well as he could. The farmer employing him was to pay him honestly, in such a way that the worker could support himself as well as his whole family. As the example presented by Znaniecki shows, fair remuneration is such that it will support the worker and his family. If from this perspective we look at the economic situation of many farmers and labourers from the transformation period, we can clearly see that it was not possible for them to support themselves and their families. Thus, following the above described train of thought, the remuneration was not fair and this justified the general statement that "there is no justice in Poland today."

Often in the conversations from 1999–2001, we could hear such statements as: "Work should be assured!" The argument was that when so many manual labourers could not find work in Poland and had to look for employment abroad, it was a sign of defeat on the part of the government. The expectation that the state will assure employment obviously seems to have been inherited from socialism, from the times when the state was the largest employer. However, if we look at the relationships governing a traditional farm, the expectation that the farmer will divide the work so that everybody has a job to do is the logical consequence of the assumptions presented in the example of a good farmer. Referring once more to the comparison between the state and a farm, we may notice that the responsibilities of the state authorities, which result from this analogy, are similar to

the responsibilities of the farmer. The former should make sure their citizens are employed in the same way as the latter organizes the work on his farm. If everybody was employed and people did not think about looking for work abroad, Poland would only benefit from it.

Local Perceptions of Authority

Applying the metaphor "manager of the country" on the government very often took on the form of a complaint: "Poland today has no manager! It's just drifting along! There's a need for good management!" Such comments, appearing in nearly every conversation we held in Nowy Targ, confirm the view that people living in the countryside imagine an ideal government through the example of a good farmer and manager, broadly described in literary works dealing with peasant culture. Applying this farming example to the assessment of those in the government has far-reaching consequences, for example the dislike of a representative government in contrast to their liking for autocratic power. In the conversations we held, criticism of Polish members of parliament was very frequent. Utterances that were highly emotional and full of vulgar abuse pointed towards them pursuing their personal interests and profiting from the situation; the informants touched upon nepotism, and many other shortcomings such as drinking too much or leading immoral lives. These outbursts of anger would often end with how one could exterminate parliament with the help of rather extreme methods (such as gassing everybody, blowing them up or hanging them), which can be seen as unquestionable proof of their dislike of this type of government.

Their complaints concerning members of parliament can be seen as having been inherited from communism, with its one-party system and the removal of the general public from having any real influence on whom they vote for.³ However, continuing our interpretation of the fieldwork material through reference to traditional peasant culture, we can look at it in a different way. In one of the utterances, we came across something that explained the dislike for a representative government in farming categories.

An older farmer, commenting on the economic situation in Poland in the year 2000 said: “They manage the country in ... you know ... like a farmer who doesn’t keep an eye on his farmhands. The farmhands will sell off bloody everything! They’ll sell off Poland in the same way!” Looking from the perspective of a peasant farm, its true manager is the farmer who inherits this job from those who came before him. There is no place here for eligibility or for collectivity. Power that has its origins in choice, which is additionally collective, appears as a substitute for real power. If the country does not have a real manager, the nation will be governed by farmhands, just like in the description of parliamentary authority according to farming categories.

In the opinion of our Nowy Targ interviewees, a democratic government’s biggest drawback is its lack of effectiveness, which is connected with many people being involved in the decision-making process and in the blurring of responsibility. That is why in describing the ideal of good government, it was stressed that those in power should be strong and decisive and should rule with an iron fist. In our highland conversations, the nation was often compared to a flock of sheep and the government to their shepherd. Sometimes the nation was compared to children and state authority to a father. Describing society as sheep or children is rather distant from the Enlightenment concept of social consensus that is based on the liberal assumption that everybody has a share, through his representatives, in taking decisions that concern common affairs. The farming way of thinking about the government seems to be quite a long way away from the concept of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other thinkers who created the foundations for representational democracy in Europe.

The lack of correspondence between these two ways of thinking can be seen especially clearly in the examples of a good ruler as presented by our Nowy Targ interviewees. Introduced examples were a parade of historical figures associated with authoritarian strength, power held by one person and assuring the welfare of his subjects. The last Austrian-Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef was often recalled, as

was Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, head of the Polish state after World War I, and Edward Gierek, the first secretary of the Communist Party in the 1970s. The times when they “reigned” were seen by our interviewees to be periods of stability and prosperity in the countryside. There also appeared other, much more controversial, figures, such as Adolf Hitler or Augusto Pinochet, representing the idea of uncompromising power and those who firmly established and consolidated order. It is interesting, however, that among the names listed, Stalin never appeared. The key to the choice of people quoted as examples of good rulers was the category of order. According to our interviewees, it was order, which assured the farmer stability and security, that justified the ruler’s firmness, severity, and even cruelty. On the contrary, any upheaval associated with revolution or war, that is, with the weakening of the state, awakened fear, which can be easily understood if we look at it from the farmer’s point of view. Stability is essential if a farm is to bring profit.

Among the Podhale examples of a good ruler, first place was given to Pope John Paul II, called the Holy Father by our interviewees. He was the embodiment of what they perceived as perfection. They would stress that his papal authority did not come from human choice. Although our interviewees were aware of the fact that the pope was elected by a conclave of cardinals, as far as John Paul II was concerned, they believed that this honour had been granted by God and had been preceded by signs revealing divine will.⁴ It is difficult in the twenty-first century to state that rural inhabitants are expecting a ruler who would be anointed by divine will, but utterances such as “There still hasn’t appeared anybody who would rule with a steady hand” can be heard, which suggests that a good ruler is assumed to be specially predisposed to perform certain duties. What is expected most is charisma or, as they said, power from above. Our interviewees often stressed that John Paul II was a perfect ruler because he was given such great power that he could have influence over the political situation of the whole world. This could clearly be seen in the sentence: “Our Holy Father brought

down the Berlin Wall, overthrew Communism and united Europe.”

The Nowy Targ examples of a good ruler quoted above revealed the acceptance of this type of rule which, quoting Max Weber, can be called traditional, also charismatic, and quoting Michel Foucault, pastoral or patriarchal.

Quoting the example of John Paul II may suggest that in the image of the world which our Nowy Targ interviewees had, power is associated with goodness. This was, however, only the case when the conversations were about the positive models of power. When conversations concerned power in the reality, it was very often described in absolutist terms, and as being diabolical. The following sentence clearly presents the satanist provenience of real power: “You know who’s now in authority?! The Devil!” The pope represented a heavenly ideal, while the earthly reality of authority was perceived as its opposite. This brings to mind the differentiation made by St Augustine between the perfect divine state and the imperfect state created by people.

Reflections on those in authority between 1999 and 2005 primarily stressed their alienation, which brought about an ambivalent reaction. On the one hand, it contains an element of fascination, while on the other, danger. What the Podhale people thought about politicians was also constructed on the basis of fear and fascination. The government was seen by our interviewees as being hostile towards simple, hard-working people. The following sentence reveals this very well: “They’re sitting there in that parliament every day, sitting and debating over whom they can fucking get at. And of course it’s always the farmer, the worker whose arse they’ll go for! They’ll never do it to themselves!” In this rather inelegant manner, they commented on the work of members of parliament and on fiscal policy.

In observing this hostility, we were provoked to reflect on the reasons for such a state of affairs. The answers formulated by our Nowy Targ interviewees to the fundamental question concerning why it was so bad, boiled down to accusing the politicians of being strangers, nationally or as far as their social class was concerned. The suggestions of ethnic foreign-

ness contained the constantly repeated statement: “Now there are only Jews in the government.” Appearing in nearly every answer, “Jews are in charge” symbolically expressed the conviction that there would be a foreign government in the service “of another nation” – as they said. The word “Jews” used in this context did not refer to the Jews who used to live in Nowy Targ and in the surrounding area, whom many of our interviewees still remembered from the times of their childhood. It also did not refer to the followers of Judaism or to the citizens of the state of Israel. The term “Jew” in the context of conversations about contemporary state authority simply served to symbolically stress the “otherness” of the politicians.

This “otherness” was also sometimes described by the word *pany* (plebeian plural form for mister/master). To understand the symbolic dimension of this term, it is necessary to know that according to our interviewees, the Polish nation is divided into two basic categories: “those who work” and “those who don’t need to work,” whereas the verb “work” here implies manual labour. This refers to the social class division into *pany* and *chamy* (plebeian form for the contradiction masters–peasants, derived from the biblical name of Noah’s son Ham) or “of the master” and “of the peasant” that has been described in historical and sociological publications. In today’s Podhale rustic discourse, the historical category of *pany* is doing very well, whereas I never heard my interviewees describe themselves as peasants, never mind rustics. When speaking about themselves, they would say “we – farmers” or “we – simple, poor people”, or even “we – those who work”. In as far as the category “we” was pretty obvious to them, the category “they” (*pany*, “Jews”, “those who don’t need to work”) was fuzzy and vague. Not much was said about “them”.

The term *pany* often appeared when our interviewees presented what they imagined the life of people in power to be like. They would then say: “They’re living like lords. At night they’re drinking in casinos, having a good time with the girls, and fiddlers are playing below their hotel windows.” This utterance, like many similar ones, describes the fas-

cinating side of authority: prosperity and luxury. The interviewees thought the life of politicians to be pleasant but immoral. According to them, it was only the life of a person doing hard manual labour that was honest. The life of politicians was dishonest.

The Rural Understanding of the Notion “Politics”

Reflecting on what politicians are concerned with led us, researchers, to the discovery that the word “politics” has a totally different meaning locally than it has in public discourse. Politics may be defined as the process of setting and achieving social goals (Swartz, Turner & Tuden 1966), whereas the media may also use the word “politics” to describe a certain sphere of discourse. For our Podhale interviewees, though, the word meant the jobs performed by people in authority. They saw politics as only a certain type of work, or rather as the non-work of politicians. They would say: “It’s not normal work, it’s just something they do.” Sometimes there would appear other local explanations: “Politics is just talking about nothing” or “Politics is just something to do for those who don’t have to work.” All these utterances stress that politics is a form of activity that one can hardly call work. Real work comes together with the ethos that is part of this notion in peasant culture. This activity brings in money, guarantees prosperity, but it is seen as taking place in a lazy and immoral manner. This can be observed very clearly in how our interviewees compared politics to gambling and prostitution. Very often we would hear that “politics is a whore.” In rural villages, prostitution is perceived as a way to get rich without working – an easy way and completely immoral. The reason for applying such a comparison was to stress that what politicians do can be characterized in this way. Referring to a prostitute in the context of conversations on politics also had another meaning. From the peasant perspective, prostitution is seen as an exceptional form of dishonesty that is based on pretending love for the sake of profit. This aspect of the matter also concerned what the locals thought about politicians declaring their wish to act for the common good, while under the surface of beautiful

words was only their desire to make money. That is why comparing politics to a whore is, according to our Nowy Targ interviewees, a very good description of what they see as the very core of what politicians do and is the most concise conclusion of the reflections on what politics is.

The Folk Roots of Contemporary Perceptions of the Government and the State

There were many other extremely surprising comparisons and statements that appeared during our Podhale interviews. It was only when we began to consider them in the category of folk culture that they could be understood, as was also the case with many forms of complaint, anger, insults and vulgar expletives. The fact that knowledge about folk culture turned out to be a point of reference facilitating a deeper interpretation of the materials is yet one more argument in favour of the view that the way of thinking described here has not been inherited from socialist times. That is why I believe that the expression postcommunist or postsocialist mentality is not appropriate enough here to describe rural perceptions of the government and the state and should be exchanged for something else. If we were to keep “mentality”, which in ethnology is an extremely essentializing and universalizing word, it is necessary to qualify it with a different adjective. Keeping to the convention that is fashionable today, that is to add the prefix “post” to different adjectives, we could suggest “postpeasant”. This would be in conjunction with the term proposed by Clifford Geertz (1962). We could also use “posttraditional” that has been suggested more recently by Juraj Buzalka (2007).

In contemporary local discourse, the categories of traditional reflection on the reality have been mixed with later ones, with selectively accepted bits and pieces of socialist ideology. Besides these ideological components, we can also hear echoes of national ideals that were promoted in the Podhale villages by elementary schools during the interwar period and continued in their own specific way by teachers in the Polish People’s Republic. In our interviews we could discern the teachings of the Catholic Church that have come down over the centuries and which

would include elements of theological thought (e.g. St Augustine on a divine as well as civil state) passed on to the highlanders by generations of rural parish priests. From small particles of the above mentioned systems of ideas a system of views has been formed over the years, which is striking in its eclectic and heterogeneous nature. It supplies rural thinkers and commentators with a cohesive image of the world, making it easier for them to find their own place in a dynamically changing reality. In order to make a detailed study of the local “archaeology of knowledge”, it would be necessary to conduct an analysis according to Foucault’s principles of studying the history of ideas. However, even less detailed research on common peasant knowledge permits the claim that socialist ideas do not seem to be significant enough here to define this type of reflection on reality as postsocialist. If one of the notional components were to be described as basic, it would be the way of perceiving and describing the world that is characteristic of traditional peasant culture.

The Adequacy of the Postsocialism Category

In conclusion it would be worth taking into consideration the appropriateness of the term “postsocialism” as a diagnostic tool. I agree with Jill Owczarzak who suggests that “<postsocialism> has been used as a geographic label, not an analytic category, in contrast to <postcolonialism>, which has a rich history as a theoretical paradigm” (2009: 4). That is probably why attempts have been made to refer research on postsocialism to theories better grounded in anthropology, for example anthropology of development (Brandtstädter 2007). However, what has turned out to be extremely fruitful has been the results of the postcolonial studies put forward by Katherine Verdery (2002). According to her suggestion, the category “postsocialism” is not so much an analytical tool as an element of Western discourse and practices in inventing the East. Applying this notion is, according to Verdery, a continuation of Western rhetoric from the times of the Cold War that accentuated the stereotypical image of the East for the needs of the contemporaneous ideological war. Today the postsocialism category belongs to the

post-Cold War discourse that presented the East according to the European manner of constructing the Orient. Michał Buchowski (2006) writes very clearly about the “orientalization” of the Eastern Bloc by Western analysts and commentators, stressing that this process started earlier than during the Cold-War period. He points towards its Enlightenment roots (Wolff 1994).

Buchowski also points to the fact that not only is external discourse, which presents the East as it is perceived from the Western perspective, orientaling in nature. An equally significant phenomenon is “domestic orientalism” (2006: 467), which describes the orientaling discourse and practice of the Polish elites, especially the media that dominate Polish political discourse. The elitist “hegemonic discourse” (2006: 476) marginalizes voices coming from the working classes, creating not only the “voice” but also the identity of the uneducated members of society, including farmers, as people not able to cope in a reality shaped by a freemarket economy, privatization and democratization. In this way, writes Buchowski, the “exotic other” becomes the “stigmatized brother” (2006: 463) in Polish public discourse.

Research conducted according to the ethnographic fieldwork method may be a departure from the discursive practice of “domestic orientalization”. This technique forces the researcher to become immersed in local rural discourse, with its specific language and characteristic way of verbalizing opinions. The ethnologist, being a participant of both the “hegemonic discourse” and peasant conversations on politics, presenting a far-reaching openness, can understand how her village interviewees construct their narration on the government, state, nation, as well as on themselves. The ethnologist describes these local discursive constructs by applying categories that belong to the methodology used by the social sciences. She places them within a narrative constructed by her which is formulated in a language that is either academic or destined for the general public. In order to do this, she has to reconstruct local discursive constructs in the elite discourse. Thanks to such an operation, the marginalized voice of the rural commentators has a chance to appear

in public discourse. The ethnological immersion in the underprivileged discourses erodes the “orientalizing” categories such as postcommunist, postsocialist or the term *homo sovieticus* that belong to the hegemonic discourse.

Notes

- 1 This article was translated from Polish by Aniela Korzeniowska.
- 2 The adjective postcommunist (or communist) during the times of the Polish People’s Republic, which was then reserved for the discourse of Polish opposition activists and Western commentators, is now used in narration that is critical of the past system. The term postsocialist (or socialist), functioning in the official discourse of that past system’s authorities and in the then public media, now appears in narrations that are more favourable towards the old system.
- 3 During the times of the Polish People’s Republic voting lists were prepared by the Communist Party and other parties that were linked to it. Voters were advised to vote without crossing anybody out, which meant that the list remained in its original form.
- 4 The sign from God that our interviewees had in mind had been given to the chosen person during the coronation ceremony of Our Lady of Ludzmierz in 1963 (Ludzmierz is the main Marian shrine of the Podhale region). During the procession, the figure leant over and the sceptre fell out of Our Lady’s hand. It was caught by Bishop Karol Wojtyła, who was later to become Pope John Paul II. Our Nowy Targ interviewees interpreted this event as a sign from God. Karol Wojtyła was thus destined for the highest position in the Church and the highlanders were the first to have this revealed to them.

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