

# Vested Interests Versus Systemic Transformation Strategies in Poland

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**Abstract:** The article consists of five parts: (1) the claim that a sociological definition of systemic transformation (ST) should include not only structural but also cultural dimensions; (2) the author's concept of the structural-generational model of systemic conflict as a background to the collapse of the socialist system in Poland; (3) an analysis on the basis of Polish data of the achieved level of ST, as well as group interests opposing the process of further change; (4) a discussion and evaluation of the prospects for applying neo-liberal vs. social-democratic strategies of ST; (5) finally, the presentation of six hypotheses on the role of group interest conflicts and possible strategies for their accommodation.

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## 1. The sociological notion and dimensions of „systemic transformation“ (ST)

It is assumed that approached as an historically unique sequence of cumulative processes of radical social and political change neither the adequate theories nor research methodologies are available for our understanding of the present course of ST in Poland, let alone for its future development. The relative abundance of political science literature on the Latin American experience of the „transition“ from authoritarianism to democracy is usually taken as a source of inspiration in this field [Przeworski 1986, DiPalma 1993]. However, these historical precedents are hardly comparable with the East-European, and especially Polish, problems and challenges posed by the collapse of totalitarianism and the new creed of liberalism.

What makes such comparisons difficult, or even scientifically unacceptable, is first and foremost linked with the structural/cultural uniqueness of our „state-socialist“ legacy, which stems from the prolonged absence of a real market economy. Under these circumstances, the envisaged scale of systemic transformation and, subordinated to it, strategies of action, should address the following crucial points: not only (a) how the inherited system of ownership and, related to it, social class and social-professional structures are to be changed, but also (b) how most of the technologically and structurally obsolete industries, as well as traditional peasant agriculture and public service institutions are to be modernised, and (c) how the need for a basic reorientation of people's mainstream value preferences and group interests is to be met.

Sociology's contribution to the understanding and management of the ongoing transformations, as well as of the challenges they pose to the prospects of European integration, should be evaluated as rather one-sided and quite often misleading. Such is the fate of those sociologists who perceive Polish society as either „totally amorphous“ or characterised by „the lack of clear class and group interests“ [Jałowiecki 1992], or as a society stigmatised by so-called „learned powerlessness“ and a „sociological vacuum“. In

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this respect, the soundest, most influential and, unfortunately, also most frequently misinterpreted, appears to have been Stefan Nowak's thesis on the „sociological vacuum“. It was originally formulated by the author at the end of 1980s with the aim of re-establishing the disrupted social ties between the family and the state, as a precondition of the possible renaissance of civil society. Contemporary critics of the literary interpretation of this thesis rightly claim that „social ties in real socialism have by no means disappeared“, but have merely changed their contents and ways of functioning.

Nevertheless, to voice this point and stress the importance of informal privileges as a structural basis for social ties in „real socialism“ does not explain how these ties or, broadly speaking, social actors at the grass-root level actually contributed to the collapse of the system and why they are now supposed to play a „conservative“ role in the course of further systemic transformation.

An opportunity to clarify such contradictory statements is offered by those sociologists who believe that the enterprise is a crucial institution in the on-going processes of modernisation and systemic change [Sainsaulieu 1992, Morawski 1993, Pańkow 1993]. The enterprise level, primarily the one represented by large firms in heavy and metal industries, did gain a lot publicity as a stronghold of the Solidarity movement. Unfortunately, it has been not analysed seriously enough (only management specialists having thus far dealt with it), and has been wholly omitted from the mainstream sociological concepts of transformation. The Polish discussions on enterprise as a place of social self-organisation at the time of industrial restructurisation is, however, quite promising in this respect, although what is still lacking here is an attempt to link the present position of industrial employees with their broader, structural legacy of state-run, socialist enterprise and its unique social and political functions.

## **2. The structural-generational model of conflicting socialisation at the socialist work-place**

Three methods of isolating the potential Polish conflict are proposed. The first refers to the social-political system and its function as a distributor of scarce resources. This orientation enables us to differentiate people either according to their closeness to the power centres or according to their bargaining potential in relation to these centres. The second means of tracing the sources of conflict involves traditional class stratification, which stipulate that the relationship of a given social category both to distributive power and to the means of production constitutes the basic structural dimension of group interests. However, any of these methods applied in isolation may well prove to be a failure if it ignores generational divisions. These divisions run „across“ basic structural categories, and proved to be highly effective in detecting conflict-producing factors in the initial stage of conflict. This approach permits the distinction of the conflicting socialisation model created by socialist enterprise, the structure of which was founded on skilled workers and specialists (especially those employed in crucial industries) – social groups which were in a privileged enough position to influence state policy. However, their strategic position in the economic system, and even their concentration in large factories, offers only a partial explanation of this phenomenon. What was crucial from this point of view for the Polish industrial scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s is that the needs, aspirations, and interests of younger generation employees were in strong structural conflict with the needs, aspirations, and interests of the older generation employees [Adamski 1990].

This structural-generational model of social conflict distinguishes those generations jointly creating the conflictual situation. Viewed in the light of the 1970's, they can be defined as the younger or „ascendant“ generation, including those born after World War II, and the older or „stabilised“ generation, the most representative among the latter being those whose social and political maturation took place in the first decade of People's Poland. The sources of generational conflict are strongly differentiated by social-occupational and class categories. The majority of industrial employees form part of the „ascendant“ generation and a minority, occupying relatively higher positions, form the older, stabilised generation. Since state social policy did not take into account the problems attendant upon the entrance of this group into the workplace, their primary deprivations and their economic status demands were transformed into a sense of deprivation aimed at the political system.

The younger generation of industrial workers and specialists proved to be disproportionately active in triggering the Polish conflict, and this not only because they have been structurally blocked in the fulfilment of their basic needs: their distinct values and life orientations constitute an equally important factor. Higher levels of non-conformity, more pronounced feelings of independence vis-à-vis power, and stronger antagonistic attitudes, are features specific to this generation.

The higher conformity found in the stabilised generations can be attributed to the adaptive model of socialisation in operation during their youth. The social structure and political institutions dominating the first two post-war decades as well as the social policies and the ideological influence of the state, contributed to a model of socialisation favouring the formation of attitudes and behaviour that were adaptive with regard to the system of power. It was connected with the composition of the first generation of working class, being characterised by both peasant origin, low levels of education and social aspiration and high levels of conformity.

The interplay of structural, political, and ideological components constituting a model of socialisation in the 1970s was completely different. The model's basic components contradicted one another, producing the potential for conflict on a massive scale. If we accept this premise, then the first step in locating the source of the younger generation's rebelliousness should be to identify and analyse those factors responsible for the transition from a basically adaptive to an inherently contentious model of political socialisation under state socialism.

Among the factors generating the societal conflict in Polish society, the role played by the generation shift and the specific features of young skilled workers and specialists continues to be underestimated. As shown by comparative analyses on the basis of Polish and Czechoslovak experience, the younger generation of Poles achieved a relatively higher level of schooling and an extremely heightened level of aspiration for both further education and social promotion. [Adamski 1985] However, in contrast to their Czech and Slovak counterparts, they were, on average, assigned to relatively lower ranks and positions. This holds true, above all, for secondary general vocational school graduates. While their Czech colleagues of equal educational levels nearly always enjoyed the prestigious status of „white-collar workers with professional qualifications“, the majority of Poles with either of these educational credentials had good reason to consider themselves downgraded or underemployed. The lot of graduates with basic vocational education demands special attention. While in Czechoslovakia a substantial percentage of these graduates were placed as white-collar workers, in Poland almost all of them

entered the ranks of blue-collar workers, thus creating a separate generational stratum within the working class.

The structural determinants of the socialisation process of the post-war generations and of their integration into Polish society at large must also be considered conducive to the development of specific attitudes in these generations. These attitudes constituted a sense of independence and of certainty about the imminent fulfilment of their social aspirations, later to be followed by an evolving sense of being thwarted in the realisation of their expectations. It was evident that both promoted generational self-consciousness. In this respect, wide circles of young industrial workers and employees, especially those who were placed in the large, newly built industries, exhibited a pronounced tendency to form a separate generation. Both the fact that access to the social-vocational and political roles corresponding to their educational achievements and career aspirations was on the whole barred to them, as well as the fact that in their general life-orientations these age classes had developed rebellious rather than passively adaptive attitudes, could not but be strongly felt in a crisis situation.

Another factor behind this is the fact that since the late 1960s the Polish intelligentsia had been gradually losing its privileged economic position, being downgraded to the level of skilled workers. This process of proletarianization applies mostly to those university graduates who were deprived of any power position. In spite of the fact that skilled workers rather improved their income position, their heightened aspirations nevertheless rendered them no less aware of their deprivation as specialists and, therefore, rebellious. Hence, the alliance of proletarianised intelligentsia and the new working class has contributed to an enduring structural background to the conflict.

### **3. The achieved level of ST in Poland and vested interests as a barrier for its further development**

What has been achieved in Poland since 1989 centres mostly on provisions for a political democracy, the smooth expansion of small business and visibly efficient privatisation methods in the field of commerce. The consecutive governments' attempts to find the „real owners“ for the bulk of large enterprises are much less concerning. Combined with the crisis-stricken peasantry, state employees proved to be increasingly resistant to the restructuring programs offered them. The President's decision to dissolve the first democratically elected Parliament marks the end of the first stage of ST. It means that no longer will there be an opportunity to continue the policy of economic restructuring without solving a basic structural contradiction generated by state socialism. This well-defined and relatively sustained conflict between the basic social groups' heightened needs and aspirations as opposed to their decreasing or stagnant satisfaction levels, has not actually been as disruptive as it was in the early 1980s, although it continues to exist. To find a solution to this conflict requires either a clear increase in economic efficacy or an equal curbing of peoples' expectations. Nothing of the like has yet occurred in Poland. Thus the crucial problem challenging the newly elected Parliament and government is whether or not they are able to generate more comprehensive systemic transformation strategies.

Let us then examine this problem through the prism of Poles' changing attitudes and preferences to privatisation [Adamski, Rychard, Wnuk-Lipiński 1991]. If considered on the scale of liberal versus social-democratic orientation vis-à-vis various forms of privatisation, the clear majority of Poles choose the middle-of-the-road position. But this general picture differs when the focus changes to specific issues.

The liberal orientation, which aims at unrestricted privatisation, has gained the prevailing support with regard to commerce and state farms. In contrast, support for the maintenance of state property, i.e. the socialist solution, prevails only in the case of hospital services. On the other hand, support for limited privatisation is predominantly connected to large-scale industry and building maintenance.

In spite of a minority base of social support, the liberal orientation is losing its opponents and gaining adherents, mainly where the press, publishing and banking are concerned. However, the number of supporters of the unlimited privatisation of large enterprises remains at the same low level, although the fraction of those who are against any privatisation in this sphere is decreasing.

Socio-demographic factors such as the level of education (the higher level, the stronger the support) and the respondents' age (the reverse dependence) positively correlate to liberal and moderate attitudes towards privatisation. On the other hand, a lower than average income and, in particular, a respondent's negative estimation of his or her family's material standard have proven to be important reasons for holding some reservations or opposition toward privatisation.

State-sector employees' support for or opposition to the privatisation of large industrial enterprises has proved to be interdependent on mainly social and occupational status as well as access to positions of authority and, to a lesser degree, on membership to Solidarity or to other unions. Relatively speaking, the strongest support for the privatisation of industry, especially its moderate variant, is expressed by university graduate specialists and skilled workers. Opposition to any kind of privatisation, however, is clearly stronger among those who hold positions of authority, i.e., the higher and mid-level bureaucracy.

The differentiation of attitudes towards privatisation in the Polish economy are of a structural character, such that support for or opposition to each of the three orientations – liberal, moderate, and socialist – is determined by existential and statutory group interests rather than by these groups' fundamental ideas and guiding values. However, the primacy of group interests must not overshadow the fact that in a situation of stagnating or regressive living standards, these interests tend to be perceived by state employees as threats rather than as opportunities.

As observed in the years 1988-1992, the liberal orientation towards privatisation has clearly gained support among specialists, while workers have withdrawn their support somewhat.

Given the picture of preferences presented above, one must look carefully for those social actors who might emerge from the inherited social structure as supporters or rebels vis-à-vis the economic restructuring and democratic institution-building strategies. There is enough evidence to show that societal support for an extremely liberal structural change strategy in the Polish economy is too weak to balance the opposition on the part of the firm supporters of socialised property. However, support for the state privatisation policy is particularly strong among specialists and employees in the non-agricultural private sector. On the other hand, abandonment of the privatisation policy is most often championed by the peasantry, and next by intermediate workers and by both categories of blue-collar workers.

Among all employees in the state-controlled economy, the category of specialists in non-supervisory posts is distinct. Their support for state policy is similar to that of

managers in the non-agricultural private sector. On the other hand, specialists in supervisory posts are clearly more reserved in their support for the privatisation policy, a stance which may be connected with what is, relatively speaking, a more pronounced fear of losing their positions. The strongest opposition to and the weakest support for the privatisation policy has turned out to be most characteristic of employees from the lower levels of bureaucracy, especially managers from the category of intermediate workers employed within the state service. Skilled workers as well as technicians and white-collar workers are usually positioned on the middle level of support for privatisation. In contrast to the case of specialists, being in a position of authority in these categories clearly strengthens this support. However, the resistance to radical forms of privatisation should be interpreted not only as an expression of the threatened interests of most of the intelligentsia and skilled workers in the state-run economy, or merely as their sense of responsibility for the fate of the work-places: they continue to view themselves as „co-owners“ of the national economy.

#### **4. The relevance of strategies and human agency in the ST process**

In spite of the popular concern for the crisis related to economic hardship (as measured by unemployment and drops in individual and family living standards), it is assumed that the success of the envisaged transformations would primarily depend on the quality of strategies applied. The crucial problem is whether or not the applied privatisation and modernisation strategies – both on the level of government policy, and regional and community action – are founded on the real economic and political interests of the social groups concerned, or whether they are rather a product of the ideologies, interests and value preferences represented by those political leaders who have actually remained in power.

When stressing the importance of policies and strategies offered by the power elites, we are not solely approaching the processes of transformation as a „revolution from above“. On the contrary, it is assumed that to achieve a real systemic change would be somewhat impossible without constant pressure being exerted by those „from below“ on those „from above“. At least such is the message one can draw from the Polish experience.

Hence, the need for an unbiased perception of the structural legacy of the past regime. Of special importance here is the dynamic of both spontaneous, as well as institutionalised, group interests (i.e. their articulation, aggregation and satisfaction), as more and more independent agents of systemic transformations. Contrary to neo-liberal politicians and economists, we dare to claim, however, that in any attempt at constructing a viable transformation strategy, this legacy should not necessarily be approached as a barrier or a negative phenomenon [Balcerowicz 1993]. An equally dubious assumption in the light of the specifically Polish legacy of the past, is the one claiming that any opportunity for the emergence of political interests (to be able to contribute to „the general consolidation“ of democracy) would not arise „until the twin shocks of marketisation and privatisation produce more substantial, and more stable class, and sectoral differences.“ [Schmitter and Karl 1992].

There is enough evidence that in Poland we have increasingly clear „class and sectoral“ divisions. The most pronounced among them are still the ones deeply rooted within the state dominated economy. [Rychard 1993] With the exception of the industrial workers and, allied with them, specialists deprived of power, Polish peasants in the

1990s should also be seriously considered as partners in the political game. Unfortunately, in the transformation period, both social classes have proved ineffective in elaborating their strategies for establishing a place within the newly-emerging system. [Kozek and Frieske 1992] Hence the great challenge to the power elites, intellectuals and educationalists: how to make use of the human capital accumulated by these agents and transform their contentious attitudes and social experience into the potential for constructive participation in transforming both the economy, and the social and political institutions.

To face this challenge, one has to teach those affected by the restructuring of the economy how to articulate and realise their interests by going beyond strikes and other protest behaviour, i.e. through negotiations, participation in decision-making processes, and the utilisation of political procedures which characterise the democratic system. Without a doubt, meeting such expectations requires considerable creativity on the part of leaders at all levels of social activity. It also requires the profound reorientation of the role of trade-unions as representative group interests. Hence, the real problem facing the unions is – as expressed by Renaud Sainsaulieu – „How to pass from a stage of collective bargaining to a kind of partnership in co-managing the social issues...“ [Sainsaulieu 1992]. If this is really the most promising option for accommodating the Polish conflict, then it would open the door for a model of democracy which relies not only on „electoralist“ but also on „consociational“ procedures, to use Philip Schmitter’s classification [Wiatr 1993].

##### **5. Hypotheses on the role of group interests in the process of systemic change in Poland**

1) In spite of the slow pace of economic recovery, the level of individual and family needs and aspirations reached before the crisis (and this applies above all to state employees and, among them, to skilled workers and professionals of the post-war generation) tends to have become consolidated and autonomous, i.e. unrelated both to the real options available to the State and to the employees’ efficiency, both individual and collective, in the workplace. Consequently, regardless of the crisis, people still expect the government, if not to improve their living standards, then at least to satisfy the achieved levels of needs and aspiration. The emergence of strongly autonomous needs and aspirations not only adds to the emotionally loaded rejection of any State attempts to bring employees’ expectations into line with what the economy can produce, but it also helps to translate unmet economic demands into feelings of deprivation and rebellion.

2) The feelings of economic and political deprivation especially prevalent among the skilled workers and specialists who count among the first in the People’s Poland baby-boom generation, makes them extremely sensitive to any existing social inequalities and, in particular, to perceive those in power and new businessmen as undeservedly privileged. This psycho-sociological mechanism of transforming deprivation into aggressive collective protest actions based on group interests in the workplace seems to be facilitated by the propensity of deprived individuals and social groups to perceive the people in power, as well as the representatives of better-off businessmen, as their main reference groups.

3) Under state socialism, needs and aspirations were blocked for so long that they reached the level of „obligation“, hence contributing to a growing awareness of separate group interests among the basis social categories of industrial enterprise employees. When the hidden conflict evolves into an open protest movement, the phenomenon of

group awareness also embraces the people in power – especially bureaucrats and managers who increasingly feel threatened and inclined to behave as if they were a „quasi-class“ (in Dahrendorf's term) or an interest group.

4) Whether the gap between people's heightened and autonomous aspirations and the striking inefficiency of the system can be bridged will depend on the central authorities' strategies in tackling the process of systemic transformation. The prospects for avoiding conflicts or chances for conflict resolution through social consensus will be greater if the strategy of participation and power-sharing is used.

5) The greater the strength of potential interest conflicts among the employees of major state industries in particular, the greater the chance that the process of political and economic restructuring will be pursued at a deliberate pace and that the idea of power and ownership-sharing will have to accommodate the threatened group interests of the politicians, state bureaucrats and managers who would likely tend to preserve their control over the dominant state resources.

6) The success of industrial workers and, allied with them, the intelligentsia, deprived of power in the common fight against the ancient regime, was achieved due to their solidarity in organising the protest actions. However, they seem to be ineffective in adapting their individual and group strategies to the requirements of the newly emerging system. Hence the great challenge facing the elites and society is how to transform the contentious and vindictive attitudes of basic social groups and, secondly, the inherited work and career aspirations, into a workable potential in the process of systemic transformation.

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