

Janusz Żarnowski

STRUCTURES AND SOCIAL ROLES OF THE POLISH INTELLIGENTSIA 1944–1989: PROBLEMS FOR DISCUSSION

The problem pointed out in the title above is not only of historical, but also of considerable political and sociological interest. Historically, it is part of the social transformations in Poland under the communist rule, and its assessment is subject to heated discussions, which continue to be influenced by current political conflicts. One can hardly expect a *balanced* assessment of the social evolution in 'People's Poland', since a tendency prevails to present a negative picture of all the constituent parts of this phenomenon, which has already been condemned by history. However, the conclusions drawn from a genuinely scientific study of the evolution of Polish society may also serve a sociological assessment of the current social transformation in Poland; hence we should not put off this matter until a better time when emotions calm down and the situation is more balanced.

Let us confine ourselves to pointing out the essential issue, that of the middle class. It is accepted that in developed democratic societies the 'middle class' plays an essential social role and is the authentic demiurge and at the same time an emanation of the capitalist socio-economic system and its corresponding democratic social and political system. Thus it is the basic stratum of this system; this class, in the course of its social and economic maturation embraces ever larger groups of society. Other strata are shrinking: the traditional stratum of peasant smallholders loses its characteristic traits and does not constitute more than a few per cent of the population, and the onset of the post-industrial era drastically reduces what we used to call the working class. Those groups that have remained after the downfall of a part of industry,

lose some of their previous industrial working-class specificity, turning into the milieus of specialists who stop identifying, or identify only to a little extent with the workers. Certainly, there are sections of society who remain outside the 'middle class', and create some marginal milieus and strata, joined by the imported labour force — immigrants in search of work. Thus the late Peter Glotz, a German political writer and editor of *Frankfurter Hefte*, called the middle class 'a society of two thirds'.¹

If Poland is also the scene of such processes, the beginnings of which can be observed in the process of social transformation, a question suggests itself about the role of the intelligentsia in the social transformations of the communist and the post-communist period, including its role in shaping the middle class (in the above-presented sense).

The present text proposes the following questions for discussion:

— how was the social structure of the Polish intelligentsia transformed in the years 1944–89?

— how were the social roles of the intelligentsia transformed in that period?

— did Poland under the communist rule allow the formation of the beginnings of the middle class and what was the role of the intelligentsia in this process?

— and what are the present relations between the intelligentsia and the middle class in Poland?

The post-war years were in all respects a turning-point in the life of the Polish intelligentsia. They saw great changes in the general character and the structure of this social group. It would, however, be impossible to contend that the continuity of its history, which started merely two centuries ago, disappeared. Half a century of communism in Poland comprised not one but several eras in the history of the Polish intelligentsia. Nevertheless, many problems vital to this group a hundred or even more years ago, are the order of the day even now.

The inter-war period raised the social status of the Polish intelligentsia very high. The defeat of September 1939 was in many

¹ Janusz Żarnowski, 'Dawne i nowe role inteligencji w Polsce', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, xliv, 2 (2000), 137. See also Peter Glotz, *Die beschleunigte Gesellschaft: Kulturkämpfe im digitalen Kapitalismus* (München, 1999).

respects also the defeat of this group, which was perhaps even more afflicted than any other group of Polish society. In the eyes of wider strata of common people, it lost much of its prestige. Even if the next years did not aggravate its situation, still they did not see an increase in the social respect for this group which grew weaker also due to its persecution by the invaders. Nevertheless, after the war, regardless of how we assess its effects on the whole country and Polish society at large, many members of the intelligentsia who survived could return to their professional work, even if they did not return to their previous social role.

Polish society was bound to organize its life under conditions created by the treaties of the Three Powers signed in Yalta and Potsdam. The structure of population in the first years after 1945 was continually changing, mainly due to the steady influx of Poles returning home. Regardless of who stood at the head of the state — and since 1944 the people at the lead were communists and their close associates — they faced the task of the reconstruction of the ruined country, of settling and organizing production in the post-German Western and Northern territories (the so-called Regained Territories), of creating conditions for economic development and re-arranging the organization of society. Thus the role of the intelligentsia consisted in the first place in providing qualified staff for the reviving country. But the intelligentsia who approached this new role was severely decimated. In this situation also employees without sufficient qualifications could easily find employment as white-collar workers in economy, administration, education, and even in the domains requiring academic qualifications.

Soon after, however, merely 2–3 years later, a clearly ‘socialist reconstruction’ of society was announced with a precisely defined role to be played by the intelligentsia. Its task was to serve the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, that is the rule of the communist party in the domains of economy, administration and culture. With this purpose in mind the authorities wanted to enlist the co-operation — but on terms dictated by themselves — of some groups of the old intelligentsia. But they mainly relied on those people who were derived, in the first place, from the ranks of the party and groupings closely associated with it, and in the second place, mainly, on those derived from the working and peasant

classes. It was supposed that the workers and peasants, due to their 'social advancement' would show the greatest faithfulness to the new social and political order. Therefore the whole system was to serve at first the superficial political and professional training of necessary employees, and in the long run a relatively mass-scale shaping, in relatively normal conditions, in adequately reconstructed secondary and higher education, of the new intelligentsia, the so-called 'people's intelligentsia', which was to replace 'the old one'.²

In the first years following 1944 the conditions prevailing in Poland favoured some kinds of professional and social activeness of the intelligentsia. The reconstruction of the ruined country and of the broken up society was an unquestionable goal shared by everybody. This brought the authorities, the intelligentsia and the rest of society together. The authorities took care to keep up the appearances of a democratic-parliamentary system and institutions. From 1947-8 onwards, however, under the new 'socialist' system, the role designed for the intelligentsia was no longer creative, but executive; this group was to serve the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or the 'rule of the workers and peasants'. As far as possible some groups of the old intelligentsia were meant to be enlisted in this task, but the future belonged to the young professionals derived from workers and peasants. The old intelligentsia were driven into a tight corner: they were not merely required to keep silent, but also to manifest their belief in the 'new faith'.

A matter of primary importance was to use the system of higher education for creating and promoting the new intelligentsia, derived from the working and peasant classes. What mattered more, however, than the attempts at social engineering by promoting young workers and peasants or creating for them privileges at the entrance examinations, were socio-economic transformations, or more strictly speaking, industrialization and urbanization. The same process that supplied industry with hundreds of thousands and millions of workers, made many young people, especially coming from the countryside, try to acquire a higher education. Hence the social structure, and especially the social origin of

² See Hanna T. Palska, *Nowa inteligencja w Polsce Ludowej. Świat przedstawień i elementy rzeczywistości* (Warszawa, 1994).

white-collar workers, and finally the intelligentsia in the strict sense of the word, was gradually changing.

At the same time the system of centrally-directed management favoured a great expansion of central, local and economic bureaucracy. The innumerable multi-level offices employed a many hundred thousand strong clerical staff, usually with very modest general education, most often acquired in primary schools. This great and continually growing mass of people started to acquire specific features, and created something like a new, separate stratum, superficially adopting some features of the intelligentsia, but by its intellectual interests, connections and family traditions more akin to the common people, the working class, the peasantry and the petty-bourgeoisie.

In the years 1949–54 the social and professional structure of the intelligentsia and white-collar workers continued changing. In the first place, due to the accelerated industrialization and an extended and speeded up system of training engineers and technicians, the largest professional group among the white-collar workers consisted of the technical intelligentsia and industrial bureaucracy. In this period, changes had already occurred in the social structure of the intelligentsia due to its enrichment by a massive influx of a new generation derived from the working and peasant classes. The expansion of the stratum of white-collar workers favoured and stimulated these changes. As early as the end of 1956 there were 2.1 million white-collar workers, in comparison to 800 thousand in the years 1938–9, while the population of Poland in 1939 amounted to 35 million, and in 1956 only to about 28 million. In 1956 white-collar workers made up over one third of the total of hired workers, while before the war only one fifth, or one sixth.

Even as early as the 1950s and the 1960s it could be stated, however, that the strategic goal of the communists, that is the creation of a 'people's intelligentsia' had not been achieved, despite the changes in the social origin of the members of this stratum. The majority of its new members, especially those who went through a normal school curriculum, had rather assimilated the patterns of the 'old intelligentsia', than of the postulated model of 'people's intelligentsia'. This had its far-reaching social, but also political consequences.

The renowned sociologist Jan Szczepański said that among the intelligentsia of those times one should distinguish the milieu of intellectuals, creators of culture, together with their direct recipients; the intelligentsia *sensu stricto*, as a rule with a higher, or sometimes secondary specialist education; and the most numerous group of 'white-collar workers' without any substantial education, who cannot be really classified as the intelligentsia, although this term was officially applied to them as well.³

The events of March 1968 lay at the basis of a conflict between the most active groups of the young generation of the intelligentsia and the party. This conflict had led those groups, which soon started to be spokesmen of the views of a large section of the intelligentsia, to the anticommunist camp. Following a short period of the relative prosperity of the country and social approval for the team of Edward Gierek in the first years of its rule, supported by considerable credits from the West, this conflict revived and gained a broader basis. The workers' riots at Radom and other centres in 1976 were the beginning of the collapse of the whole regime, since the oppositionist actions in the working class milieus found allies among the opposition of the intelligentsia (Workers' Defense Committee — KOR).

In those years the changes in the internal structure of the intelligentsia as well as of society as a whole slowed down. Towards the end of the 1970s the number of people with higher education had several times surpassed that of 1945, for example in 1946 there were 7 thousand engineers, and in 1970 — 110 thousand, in 1946 — 7 thousand physicians, while in 1967 — 43 thousand, the number of teachers rose from 97 thousand to 320 thousand. At the same time among the millions of 'white-collar workers', consisting mainly of clerical and commercial staff, almost a half had not even had a GCE. For a long time already the ratio between manual and white-collar workers amounted to 2:1. In 1958 white-collar workers made up 31.2 per cent of hired employees, and in 1974 — 35.4 per cent, thus the difference was not big, though the direction of changes was evident. In the years 1989–90 a similar statistical category ('non manual workers') embraced 38.5 per cent of employees, and in 1996 — 42.7 per cent. In the years 1958–74 the numbers of

³ Jan Szczepański, 'Struktura inteligencji w Polsce', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, iv, 1–2 (1960).

‘white-collar workers’ rose from 2 to 4 million.⁴ On the other hand, the percentage and numbers of employees with higher education, that is the intelligentsia *sensu stricto*, rose much more quickly. The role of this category was very important also because they formed patterns to be followed both by other categories of ‘white-collar workers’ and other social strata. In this role the intelligentsia was more effective than ever, because of its great numeric strength, the fact that their way of life was imitated by the masses of ‘white-collar workers’, and because of their extensive family connections with the working class and peasant milieus.

The model of the intelligentsia that took shape in the late 1950s, after a short-lived and in fact abortive offensive of Stalinism directed at taking control of this stratum, for the next thirty years had mainly undergone quantitative changes. Their numbers as well as their percentage in society were growing. In the 1970s, with the general immobilization of social positions, the process of ‘enrichment’ of this stratum by the influx of professionals derived from the working and peasant classes was halted. At the same time the numeric predominance of technical and economic professions among the intelligentsia was gradually strengthened, among other things because of the deliberate educational policy of the authorities who wanted to limit the numbers of specialists in humanities, in their opinion less necessary and more dangerous. This was partly a result of a progressing professionalization of various services that so far did not have to be performed by employees with higher and specialist education.

The intelligentsia — in its more precise sense — was now a mass stratum. It ceased to be a small group and embraced almost two million people. In 1988 there were 1.8 million people with higher education in Poland, that is about 6.5 per cent of adults (in 1970 only 2.1 per cent). It is not easy to answer the question about the internal social ties of this stratum. The most numerous were corporate groups: teachers or those representing various branches of industry (engineers) — both with many thousand members. Considerable differences in the type and conditions of work, education and remuneration disintegrated the intelligentsia. The official theory of socialist society that saw

⁴ Janusz Żarnowski, ‘Inteligencja’ in: *idem* (ed.), *Spoleczeństwo polskie w XX wieku* (Warszawa, 2003), 102–3.

the intelligentsia as a separate social stratum, as well as the tendentious picture of it in the press, might however arouse some solidarity among this stratum, also because the intelligentsia at large, including the 'white-collar workers', were discriminated against (for example the children of workers and peasants received additional 'points' at the entrance examinations to institutes of higher education and personnel policy also placed them in an advantageous position).

This numerous stratum of the intelligentsia was not separated by any clear barrier from other ('ordinary') white-collar workers; nor did they in their entirety entertain any ambitions to participate in high culture, or that of the intellectual elite. They became integrated to a certain extent with a broader milieu of white-collar workers, as well as with the more active and better educated members of other urban strata in the reception of values communicated at that time by the media. However, there was a group of the intelligentsia who were in a more or less close contact with high culture. It should be noted, however, that the intellectual milieu, now more numerous than previously, constituted a sufficient public for themselves and the cultural values they created frequently circulated only in their own, now quantitatively sizeable milieu.

We should also note the differences in aesthetic sensitivity and cultural activeness in general that appeared between generations. The young frequently created groups that imbibed if not more sophisticated, then at least different spiritual contents, frequently coloured by contestation.

In the years 1982–9, that is after the great 'Solidarity' upheaval of 1980–1, the intelligentsia shared the general fortunes of the rest of society. In the intellectual circles a significant role was played by 'internal emigration' and the boycotting of state institutions, especially the media, with television in the first place. The wider circles of the intelligentsia retained their oppositionist sympathies, although the influence of the illegal 'Solidarity' among them subsided.

Let us now try to define the social roles played during this half-a-century period by the intelligentsia formed in this manner. In previous periods these roles embraced the following domains: 1. Serving social life by the intelligentsia as the category

of managers and experts in various fields, beginning with enlightenment and culture through economy up to political life and the functioning of respective institutions. 2. Distribution of intellectual, civilizational, technical, and organizational patterns most frequently drawn from the foreign centres of contemporary civilization. 3. Preservation, fostering and dissemination of national values — the most spectacular role that was brought to the fore in all the discussions concerning the assessment of the intelligentsia as a social stratum.

This does not mean that *only* the intelligentsia fulfilled the above roles in Polish society, many of them were taken on by other strata and milieus, e.g. the proprietors' class or the clergy (unless we classify the latter with the intelligentsia). However, the widest scope of those 'social tasks' was performed by the intelligentsia.

In the inter-war period, when the Polish state was re-established, the roles of the intelligentsia had undergone some changes and corrections. The creation of a Polish national state opened before the Polish intelligentsia the fields that had been inaccessible to them under the partitions. Hence, the Polish intelligentsia filled all the posts of the state apparatus, and its dependence on the public sector, especially the state sector, always considerable in countries of peripheral capitalism, was strengthened. This meant especially the development of the first of the above-mentioned social roles of the intelligentsia. The years 1918–39 generally, were the heyday of the significance of the Polish intelligentsia as a factor that defined the character of the state, as a whole bearing the mark of this social stratum.⁵

I have already mentioned the disastrous results of German occupation for the Polish intelligentsia. Now I should consider the transformations of its social role in the later period, until the downfall of communism. After the first years of camouflage, the communist party started to launch a political and social offensive. One of its aims was to degrade the internally reconstructed intelligentsia to the role subservient to the party, connected with the degradation of its prestige and financial status. The financial degradation of professionals was most successful, but other aims were not achieved, and after a few years of this offensive, in 1956,

⁵ *Ibidem*, 78 ff.

following the 20th Congress of CPSU in Moscow and the 'October Plenum' of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in Warsaw, communism was finally compromised. After this 'unmasking', the authority of the party and of 'Marxism-Leninism' over the Polish intelligentsia was never revived. Although the new ranks of people from other cultural milieus, including the peasants, the workers, and the petty-bourgeoisie, gained professional education, the influence and prestige of the 'old intelligentsia' was predominant, and the stratum as a whole retained its social aspirations and reluctantly surrendered to the authority of the party which secured the main state and social posts for its appointed representatives (the so-called *nomenklatura*), sometimes ignorant, and most frequently chosen on the principle of 'negative selection' (politically reliable, but professionally and intellectually incompetent).⁶

The intelligentsia, however, had no voice on public affairs. It continued in its previous managerial role rather at the lower levels of power, economy, education, science and culture. The influence of professional experts was a bit wider, but also limited. On the other hand, this stratum was quite successful in transmitting and disseminating the patterns of civilization, mainly Western, even if it did not monopolize this field, for despite the difficulties posed by the party and the secret services to travelling abroad, the direct contacts of people from various milieus with foreign countries were more and more frequent. In both the latter roles the intelligentsia contributed to the modernization of the technical and social civilization in so far as such processes could take place under communism (mainly because of industrialization and urbanization, although the scope of authentic modernization under that system is debatable and requires a separate discussion). The role of the intelligentsia in the preservation and fostering of national values is the most difficult to define. The

⁶ The phenomenon of the 'negative selection of personnel' has been perceived in all the socialist countries by Ivan Berend from Hungary, an outstanding specialist in the recent history of Central-Eastern Europe, now professor of California University of Los Angeles, in his *Central and Eastern Europe, 1944-1989: Detour from Periphery to the Periphery* (Cambridge, 1996), 55, *passim*. See my review in the book: Janusz Żarnowski, *State, Society and Intelligentsia: Modern Poland and its Regional Context* (Variorum Collected Studies Series, 759, Aldershot, Hampshire, 2003).

development of national culture, both as far as its creation and popularization are concerned — although limited by the scheme of the official policy — was a great success, and it certainly must be attributed to the intelligentsia. In the national politics, however, the intelligentsia as a whole did not play a significant role and its representatives operated both on behalf of the power and of the later opposition; they were also active abroad, a fact which can hardly be overestimated, especially during more than ten last years before the downfall of communism in Poland. Various fractions of the intelligentsia took various attitudes in this respect: some connected their hopes with the existing power, many of them counting on the ‘civilizing’ of communism, while others with its future abolition. A relatively minor group joined the power apparatus. Accounts are still being settled with a considerable group of intellectuals who actively co-operated with the communist regime in the most tragic, Stalinist period before 1956.⁷ Most members of the intelligentsia served their country as well as they could. It should be stressed that in the years 1944–89 a considerable integration took place between the elements of the old intelligentsia and the new milieus and generations of plebeian origin, which must be regarded as a considerable achievement of Polish society as a whole, whatever disadvantages it entailed, since the group that expanded was the social elite.

And what can be said in this context about the Polish middle class? I think that the alternative: the ‘intelligentsia’ or the ‘middle class’ is a false formulation, considering the structure of Polish society. In the 19th century attempts were made to find a Polish middle class, a stratum between the peasant masses and the aristocracy that might become the basis for the modernization of Poland. Traditionally, this class was meant to be the Polish burgher class, largely of Jewish or German origin. What emerged, however, in the middle of the 19th century, was the stratum of the intelligentsia, derived from various milieus, but mainly from the pauperized gentry, which in the structure of Polish society fulfilled the role of the middle class. It was this stratum that played a similar role to that of the middle class in the West, that is contributed to the growth of economy

⁷ See e.g. Henryk Ślabek, *Intelektualistów obraz własny w świetle dokumentów autobiograficznych 1944–1989* (Warszawa, 1997).

and civilization, and created and served the national state reconstructed in 1918, and to a considerable extent developed national culture. In relation to the middle class of France, Great Britain or even Germany, it differed by its social origin and structure. The social basis for the Polish intelligentsia (to present it in a simplified form) was the former gentry who settled in towns. In the structural respect the Polish intelligentsia centred round the professions concerned with culture and in the public sector (administration), the latter especially after the Polish state regained its independence and was re-established in 1918. What was lacking was the private-economic sector, the most numerous section of the middle class in the West, since this sector, in Poland very weak, had for ages remained largely in ethnically foreign hands (Jewish, German), and also in the hands of the circles connected with the partitioning powers: Russia, Prussia and Austria. Hand in hand with economic development, this structure changed in the Polish favour, partly in connection with the national assimilation of some groups of national minorities.

In Poland under the communist rule all sectors, both connected with economy and culture, remained in the hands of the state, that is the party. Hence, the system precluded the shaping of the middle class *ex definitione*. Nevertheless, a general shape of mass culture arose that served the majority of the population and as a result considerable numbers of the intelligentsia, white-collar workers, and even the younger and better educated working class generations identified with the mass culture disseminated by the mass media, especially television. Around this culture were formed the structures of the middle class who found new members among the greatest occupational groups (e.g. miners, metallurgical workers, railwaymen, teachers), representing economy and services, which due to their corporate character imposed by the communist leaders enjoyed in their entirety some privileges and were endowed with, perhaps artificial, prestige. In those 'corporations' the categories belonging to the 'intelligentsia' created some kind of communities together with technicians and workers.

Still, all of this constituted only the beginnings of a modern middle class. The latter could develop only after the downfall of communism in Poland in 1989. At the moment, one can only

offer some hypotheses, probably based on superficial observation. Today — following almost twenty years of the so-called social transformation in Poland — we have to deal with two groups, that is a category close to the middle class, operating mainly in the spheres of economy and politics, frequently as entrepreneurs and independent professionals, and the category of ‘state-employed intelligentsia’, mainly employed in the spheres of administration, education and culture — in state institutions. Both these groups are derived from the same broadly-conceived stratum of the intelligentsia to which new opportunities and careers opened after 1989 (and to some extent, even earlier), that they could not find under the system of state communist economy.

The real fate of the intelligentsia and the middle class in Poland, and their mutual relations, will probably only become apparent in the near future. Today we can only speak of tendencies and hypotheses.

(transl. Agnieszka Kreczmar)