



Young Researchers and the Problems of Polish Rural Areas

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HOW TO COPE IN THE SYSTEM: SOME TACTICS OF THE INHABITANTS OF SELECTED POLISH VILLAGES¹

Introduction

A considerable part of research dealing with the transformation trauma describes Polish people using on the one hand the categories of marginalization or social exclusion but also on the other the efforts aiming to ‘re-integrate’ them. The people – as it seems arbitrarily – have been labelled as the ‘underclass’ in the newly-born Capitalism. However, in the light of contemporary research in the humanities and domination adopting such a perspective may prove disconcerting, unfair or even dangerous in the sense that it mystifies the realities of our collective life. It may turn out that using the distinction between the ‘beneficiaries’ and the ‘victims’ of the transformation leads to certain limitations in the analysis of what has really happened. Consequently, it may promote those allegedly more dynamic and entrepreneurial on the one hand but treat unfairly the others – often described as ‘impoverished’ or ‘degraded’ – functioning away from the ‘mainstream’.

It is important to realize that contemporary humanities do include the research perspectives that may constitute a true inspiration for writing about everyday life of many Poles in a somewhat different way. These perspectives comprise, among others, the concepts of ‘new cultural history’² as well as ‘strategies and tactics’ by M. de Certeau (de Certeau 2008). I dare say that both of them are valuable tools offering a – slightly different from the commonly held – view of the life of Polish people in the past quarter of the century. The historians belonging to the “New Cultural History” object to any form of subjugation, including the symbolic one. They see no reason why the poor, for example,

¹ The materials used in this article come from doctoral dissertation entitled *Dynamism of rural cosmologies: social orders and world visions*.

² The most important works dealing with the issues of *Cultural History* include: Burke 1997, 2012, 2012, 2011; Chartier 1993; Darnton 2012; Davies 2012; Ginzburg 1989; Ladurie 1988.

should be denied the right of independent thinking and expressing their opinions about the old or the new system. Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that the research whose starting point is people's material situation largely narrows down the researcher's perspective and, consequently, the conclusions reached. Moreover, considering the reservations connected with the elements of domination in humanities, doubts may occur as for the ways of carrying out the analysis from the perspective of the expansive, 'market logic' *mainstream* trends, that fail to take into consideration the essential dialogic relationship of the researcher and the researched.

Nowadays – as T. Rakowski states in the Introduction to *Humanistyka i dominacja* [*Humanities and Domination*] – “mechanisms are unveiled in a mechanical way; the pattern-creating mechanisms – usually including the central circulation of social ideas – rooted in institutions, seem not to recognize the presence of grass-roots experience; and if they do recognize them, they are accepted in dissolved, subordinated forms. This results in a situation where the grass-roots discourses and social practices remain either unheard or recognized as inadequate and incorrect. At the same time there is a group of opinions culturally dominating, created usually by intellectual elites functioning in some criss-crossing fields (arts, social sciences, journalism, public debate, politics) and generating knowledge that gains the status of legitimate one thus creating the binding standards of recognising and defining social problems” [transl. K.P.] (Rakowski 2011: 11). It is difficult not to agree with the researcher that “the most essential problem is... such a state in which central circulations are capable of generating, among the ‘local’ people including ourselves, such situations in which sometimes the most important experiences and actions start to be recognised as insignificant and devoid of any value. It is all about pushing the dominating central discourses in such a way that this subject expression, a kind of ‘internal speech’ – turned both towards others and ourselves – acquire the right momentum” (*ibidem*: 21–22).

This conception coincides with the objectives of this paper inspired by de Certeau's work. His views may not ideally fit the idea of perceiving the ways the *ordinary* people think or behave as simple carbon copies of the ones offered in the main current of culture. That is reflected in de Certeau's distinction into the ‘strategies’, connected with possession and power, and the ‘tactics’ describing the activities of ‘the weak’ forced to function in an order imposed by the strategists. This conception allows us to move away from the well-known notions of ‘passivity’, ‘exclusion’ or ‘marginalisation’ and to show how – often with the use of cunning and reflectivity – the people situated in the lower layers of the social structure ‘cope’ with the reality that seems to them alien and hostile.

Inspired by the above perspectives I will try to reconstruct the ‘tactics’ of some inhabitants of the contemporary Polish village. This notion, nonetheless, will be given a broader meaning than in de Certeau's conception. ‘Tactics’ are

all kinds of ways of ‘coping’ in the system that the inhabitants apply. Also, the ones that are expected by the power-holding ‘strategists’. It should show a relatively broad spectrum of the choices made by the villagers – those in line with the ‘system thinking’ as well as those that oppose it. The material used in the article has been gathered by the author herself in two villages in Mazovia (a region in Poland) which had first manors (Polish: folwark) and then state-owned farms (Polish: PGR).

The manor is a kind of breeding and tending farm that functioned in Poland since 12th century. It had two characteristic features; it produced goods (usually corn) for outside markets and used serfdom (initially free peasant labour). The turn of 17th and 18th centuries witnessed a crisis resulting from many a political and economic factor and a major slump in the prices of agriculture products (Skodlarski 2007). Manors, fluctuating over centuries, survived until mid-20th century. After the Second World War they were replaced by state-owned farms which were the state property and operated in Poland between the middle and the 90s of the 20th century. They resulted from the Socialist ideal – popular in Poland at that time – in the way that they constituted the ideal’s economic exemplification³. Research shows that in 1989 they covered 3,340,000 hectares (17.7% of the farmland in Poland). They offered jobs to 435,000 people; together with their family members around 2 million. That, naturally, puts a question what happened to these people after the state farms collapsed. Some of them have taken over parts of the farms, some found jobs in state or private farms, others got re-trained and found jobs other than farm-work. Yet another group stopped working and started to live of old-age or disability pensions or simply never found any job whatsoever (Halamska 2001: 197–199). The contemporary tactics of the ex-employees of state-owned farms from two selected villages will be described in the further part of this paper.

The fieldwork was carried out in 2011. It included staying in the villages and interviewing people following a pre-prepared disposition scenario. Both of the villages are situated in the Polish region of Mazovia. The material analysed in the article consists of around 30 deepened interviews (lasting one to five hours) with the inhabitants of the villages of Grabowo and Wroblewo (both names changed, for the sake of anonymity of the interviewed). The people were different age, randomly chosen. An important element beside the fieldwork itself was the observation – so crucial for an anthropologist. The conclusions, therefore, are limited to the reconstruction of the ‘tactics’ of the inhabitants of two Polish villages with a characteristic history.

³ The state-owned farms (Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne) and their social and cultural aspects and the ways they functioned are described in detail among others by Zadrożyńska, Psyk-Piotrowska and Szpak (Zadrożyńska 1983; Psyk-Piotrowska 2004; Szpak 2005).

De Certeau's strategies and tactics and the New Cultural History

According to de Certeau, as well as the "New Cultural History", viewing people as "passive consumers" functioning in public discourse is unjustified. The scholars focus their work on the relationships between the dominating order and the 'elites', who support it, as well as the practices of ordinary people who are forced to adopt it. It is well illustrated by the aforementioned division, offered by de Certeau, into the 'strategies' and 'tactics'⁴. The first ones are connected with power and authority, whereas the latter describe the behaviour of the weak; the activities of the people forced to function in the order that has been imposed upon them.

The key idea for de Certeau is the objection to the dogmatic order defined as obvious and generally binding yet, in fact, based on particular interests of the power-holding groups. The scholar follows closely even the smallest activities of the weak, like 'deceits' and 'jokes', which are intended to mock the dominating system. The appeal of the scholar's message can be best shown by quoting the original fragment from his work where he talks about the 'tactics' chosen by the Indians colonised by Spain: "The cautious yet fundamental inversions brought about by consumption in other societies have long been studied. Thus the spectacular victory of Spanish colonization over the indigenous Indian cultures was diverted from its intended aims by the use made of it: even when they were subjected, indeed even when they accepted their subjection, the Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them; they subverted them from within – not by rejecting them or by transforming them (though that occurred as well), but by many different ways of using them in the service of rules, customs or convictions foreign to the colonization which they could not escape... They metaphorized the dominant order: they made it function in another register. They remained other within the system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally. They diverted it without leaving it. Procedures of consumption maintained their difference in the very space that the occupier was organizing" (de Certeau 1988: 31–32).

Parallel mechanism, according to de Certeau, concerns accepting the discourses created by the *elites*. Ordinary people 'manipulate' the lawful message in

⁴ The detailed description of the "strategy" and "tactic" can be found in: Certeau M. de (1988), *"Making Do": Uses and Tactics* in: *The practice of everyday life*, p. 29–39. The notion of tactic and other elements of the conceptions used in the text will not be distinguished in the further part of the article. In every case they should be understood following the definition offered by de Certeau.

such a way that it can be used for the purposes considered by their own environment as the right ones.

This mechanism is perfectly illustrated in the articles by R. Darnton published in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* [*Wielka masakra kotów i inne epizody francuskiej historii kulturowej*] (Darnton 2012). The author reconstructs there the *cosmology* of the inhabitants of 18th century France; how they see the world and the behaviours which reflect such thinking. A strong advantage of Darnton's perspective is the introduction of the clear distinction in the ways the reality is perceived by the French society. Equally important are the cosmologies and practices of the weak who, in diverse ways, try to work over – also in a discursive manner – the painful consciousness of the social position they were in as well as its practical consequences.

In defence against the unjust system they resort to clever symbolic tricks which for them constitute one of the few freedom areas. "For the peasants fables are such freedom spheres because the weak can win there thanks to the only weapon they possess – their own cunning" (*ibidem*: 69). Fables, according to Darnton, were to perform two basic functions in the peasants' lives – on the one hand, they informed them about the basic rules governing reality and, on the other, indicated the ways to *cope* in such reality. The folk fables usually have the nature of *warnings*; they show that the world is cruel and dangerous. Although the people you meet may turn out to be *princes* or *fairy* godmothers, it is highly likely that you will meet a *wolf* or even a witch as well.

A famous example of using the commonly known symbolism to achieve an advantage by the weak is Darnton's *Great Cat Massacre* viewed by its participants as really "amusing". In an 18th century a printer shop the apprentices, as an act of symbolic rebellion against the master, open a trial of the cats they had caught in the surroundings – including the shop owner's wife's cat. They try and slaughter the animals. This situation, in the light of the contextual explanations offered by Darnton, can be understood as a symbolic "judgement over the master" with the use of a clear symbol; a symbol that is not ostentatious enough to get punished themselves for the deed. *The Great Cat Massacre*, put in a broader social and cultural context, also constitutes a symbolic attack on the dominating social order.

The story described by Darnton clearly shows how skilful the people, labelled as the *subordinated* ones, can become in coping with the dominating order. This thesis contradicts the image that frequently functions in public discourse of the people usually associated with 'passivity', 'subordination' and 'resignation'. It can be concluded that, according to Darnton, the people considered as 'marginalised' or 'excluded' can quite skilfully 'manipulate the symbols' in order to achieve an effect that is beneficial to themselves and that includes an intentional humiliation and symbolic defeat of the opponent.

Material analysis – the tactics of the inhabitants of two Polish villages

The choice of the analytical frames is justified by, among others, a fragment of an opinion of a woman living in one of the villages in question. The woman describes her feelings connected with the stigma that is carried even today by the workers of *state farms*: *At that time it was a normal workplace for us, like any other. Yet, always, I don't know – in the past I never observed it – later I always seemed to hear it – it was the last resort, as if all other places had been good and that one bad. Yes, it was like that. That's the system we had. That was the workplace. People could get a flat here, it always was kind of attractive in a way, wasn't it? Later, you always heard «...like in a state farm», «...because in the state farm» [...]. Or even now you can often hear on TV or on the radio «...because it is the old state-farm environment», «an old state-owned farm village». I only wonder when it stops, when they stop talking like that. 'Cause I don't know if it matters, if somebody says «it's an old state-farm village», «it's a state-farm society», as if... '.*

What made the unfavourable image of the state-owned farm environment was not only the TV documentaries, or newspaper articles but also the research focusing on the *post-transformation life of the inhabitants of the villages of the post-state farms*⁵. We have to bear in mind that there were many post-state owned farm environments, and that time may have affected these people's situation. It cannot be excluded, however, that there has recently been a change in the rules of correctness accentuated in the domination in the humanities. Inspired by the conceptions of the above mentioned scholars I will try not to concentrate on the dimensions of 'exclusion' or 'marginalization' but on the tactics that – more or less – fit into the logic of the system⁶ in the two selected Polish villages.

The issues are exceedingly complex rendering it virtually impossible to describe all the tactics used by the people. It is, therefore, absolutely essential that we create a set of tactics and put them into three age-group categories – the elderly, the mature (productive age) and the youth. The analyses will be carried out basing on the materials gathered in two villages of Mazovia – Grabowo and Wroblewo (the names of the villages are changed), though most of them come from the first village. The commune (Polish: *gmina*) is situated to the north-east of the Ciechanow county (Polish: *powiat*). One of the villages in question – Grabowo – is a local administration and service sector centre. Both villages lie a few kilometres away from Ciechanow and about 100 kilometres from Warsaw. The characteristic feature of the district is that there is no industry. It is an agriculture district – the

⁵ NB. among others Palska (1998), Tarkowska (1998), Tarkowska (2002), Karwacki (2006).

⁶ The nature of contemporary culture, its characteristics that I mean, are well reflected in the works by Sandel, Sennett and Środa (Sandel 2012; Sennett 2006, 2010; Środa 2003).

arable land constitutes 90% of its area and around 70% of its inhabitants earn their living in agriculture. The districts' population is about 6,000. The inhabitants have low level of education; only a small percentage hold a university degree; 40% are people with primary education.

The tactics of the elderly: immersing in everyday life and reflectivity

The age categories referred to are purely subjective – ‘the elderly category’ includes the people who receive old-age pensions which, in turn, largely influences their behaviour. The people referred to as ‘mature’ do not receive such benefits. This means that they have to cope with the contemporary world in a different way – these people are around 35–60 years of age. I will start my analysis with them.

The elderly people's tactics observable in Grabowo can be divided into two main categories – those who have achieved their life stability and now reflect on the situation and those who are trying to follow the current events and thus form their viewpoints. The first category will include the inhabitants of the estate (Polish: *osiedle*) who earlier worked in the state farm and soon after the farm close-down gained a financial security guaranteed by the old-age or disability pensions obtained from the state. These people usually function in a stable way, enjoy the sense of security and tend to focus on the contacts with their neighbours or family as well as on looking after their grandchildren. The past plays an important role in their lives and is perceived as a kind of Arcadia. The ways of coping with the world are largely reminiscent of the tactics of the people living in a similar situation in a manor or a state-owned farm; the only difference is that they colour up their everyday existence by frequently watching TV, particularly soap operas. Life, in their case, passes slowly and monotonously; and is only occasionally interrupted by some arguments with the family or neighbours. In fact, this kind of tactics is not new; they fit perfectly well into the well-known picture of rural life. From time to time a scandal occurs, for example informing the police about one or another neighbor. Such situations, nonetheless, have a short life so that soon everything returns to normal. Everyday life with family, neighbours and a small garden make up the basic activities of a large share of the Grabowo population.

There are also people in the estate who dramatically differ in their thinking and reflectivity. These are the people who would manage well both in the state-farm period and the ‘post-transformation’ reality. It can be well observed from the declarations on their salaries; in the new system treble that of the state-farm ones. These are not the people who have reasons to complain about contemporary life just because they are the victims of the system changes. On the contrary, the changes have elevated their material status. However, they do not see today's life

as ‘an Arcadia’. The type of practices prevalent among the elderly people may be called an adaptation to new conditions; it is a kind of ‘writing into’ the new order yet, at the same time, viewed in a strongly negative way. The unfavourable perception of today is, however, well-grounded. The greatest contemporary scourges, according to these people, include the atomization of the society, insecurity, treating employees like *slaves*; insufficient courage to express one’s own opinions or *stealing* from the state under the veil of making positive changes. Furthermore, *stealing* the state property which is allegedly done by the people from the Agricultural Property Agency (Polish: Agencja Rolna Skarbu Państwa) together with hyping modern investments (for example a newly built road) and downplaying the achievements of the previous system, for example rebuilding the country after the war. What is more, they complain about the deterioration of psychic condition of the people (proven by suicide statistics); *looking after your own business* within an institutional framework under the veil of common cause as well as *fooling* people by offering them TV entertainment on the one hand and neglecting *high culture* on the other. All that makes a pessimistic picture of contemporary life. One of the interviewed men says: *go forward, jostle and aim for things at any cost. You should not teach such things to children, no. You have to work, you have to learn and be good at what you do – not at any cost. But that is what reality is like – you have to steal, cheat and be ruthless.*

The man is knowledgeable about the contemporary problems; he can easily use the Internet, mainly to compare news offered by different portals and various computer programmes, e.g. Photo shop. All the technological novelties and gadgets, absent in Poland in the past, do not change the ever-present conviction in his speech – that despite all the grand tragedies and dramas in the past, life was less dangerous than nowadays. This is, mainly, due to the fact that in the past people would be interested in the world that surrounded them, they discussed and thought of what was important for the whole society; whereas now, everyone cares just for themselves.

A very similar thought has recently appeared in an interview with a historian, a man involved in the system transformation in Poland, K. Modzelewski, according to whom: “People think today that the world is imperfect and nothing can be done about it. Instead of fighting together with the injustice, they try to adjust individually. Even the political left does not believe that the world can be changed. It is a result of being overwhelmed by some conservatism and the conformity to the neo-liberal economic doctrine that pretends to be a mathematic law. We have collectively accepted the market rule. Well, since it is inevitable, what can we do – flog the dead horse?” (Modzelewski 2013: 14)⁷. The biggest drawback of

⁷ A detailed description of the Modzelewski’s views can be found in the recently published book entitled *Zajeżdżimy kobyłę historii. Wyznania poobijanego jeźdźca* (Modzelewski 2013).

contemporary times is that people do not talk to one another, are not interested in what is going on because, in the common opinion, there are “inevitable” laws of history at play and nothing “can be done” about it; the only way is but to accept it. However, the contemporary order is only one of many different orders, and the key role is played not by the commonwealth but individual ways of surviving.

The vision of the world described above together with the tactics inevitably bring to mind the case of the Indians quoted by de Certeau. On the surface they accept the rules that are imposed upon them, which does not mean that they internalize them. Just the reverse; they cleverly use them for their ends having a firm conviction that they ought not to be taken seriously. As de Certeau claims, “people are not stupid”, and however negative the general view of the former state-farm workers might seem, the material gathered does not corroborate it. The people “cut themselves emotionally off” the mainstream, keep distance to it and, what is more, they do it deliberately. Their attitude is a privilege of the chosen ones, those who were lucky, or unlucky enough, to get to know different world orders. It is usually conducive to creating a sensitivity that enables them to get to know the assumptions hidden in every ideological message – the assumptions which are commonly presented as obvious, imminent and unchangeable.

To sum up, it can be stated that the elderly people living in Grabowo, even though well-adapted to contemporary reality and understanding its mechanisms, do not accept or support them.

The tactics of mature people: withdrawal, adaptation, traditional farming, using state benefits

The part of the population of Grabowo, who can be categorized as mature people, since closing down the state farm have tried to cope with the new reality in many different ways. The moment of the collapse of the farm is well-remembered by everyone as humiliating and traumatic: *I still remember the view; those men standing as if in real. Well, some kind of “selection”, I said it was a “selection” taking over those workers; they dealt with it in a disgusting way, it was so humiliating that.... I don’t know.* This sad and unpleasant event left a lasting mark in the people’s lives.

Despite the initial difficulties, the inhabitants of Grabowo tried to cope with the new reality in many different ways. It was easiest for the people with university degrees, those in managerial positions since they were the first to find jobs, for example in the local schools as teachers, the self-employed or in nearby towns, like Ciechanow or Warsaw. The remaining state farm ex-workers started to receive pre-retirement benefits, after that early-retirement benefits often thanks to a legal clause of working in difficult conditions. For many of them the pension

is the main source of income, yet it is not always the case. The people who are still working and functioning on the labour market refer to contemporary reality in a few different ways ‘withdrawal’, ‘adaptation’, ‘traditional farming’, as well as ‘using state benefits’.

Withdrawal

The first kind of tactics is represented by a woman whose ancestors had worked in the manor before the state farm was founded. The tactic is an attempt at carving out a ‘niche’ an own closed space in the external world seen as hostile, expansive, invasive and incomprehensible. It could be inferred from, for example, the following statement: *Maybe, maybe it has limited me, the fact that I got rooted here. Perhaps if I were to have been elsewhere in a city, or move somewhere, I would have had to fight, to find a place for myself and yeah, earn my living, maybe I would develop... Because I am, I can find lots of energy when necessary, and here it seems to me that I got closed up here in a sort of, around me, such a – sort of nest, and I am sitting here and I am scared that someone may destroy it and I again will have no opportunities... It may have dragged me down, on the one hand.*

The woman who expressed the opinion has always had difficulties with adapting to the life in changing conditions. The negative consequences of the choices she had made result from the fact that she decided to drop out from her studies and come back to her home village of Grabowo. Also, her personal life that she chose at that time turned out to be a failure – she was subjected to home violence and she was the first woman in the village to get divorced. This has had an impact on her relationships with the locals. Nowadays, the difficulties with adaptation occur at her work in the museum, especially after the new boss had taken over.

The tactics of survival in contemporary reality in this case rely on building a ‘niche’ for oneself; one that is clearly detached from the outside world and where one can introduce their own consciously chosen – not imposed – order. The tactics of this kind rely on detaching yourself from the outside world which you do not accept. This can, sometimes, be perceived as a mere passivity, a legacy of the ‘hopeless proletarian person incapacitated by the master’.

Adaptation

The second type of tactics among the mature community of Grabowo consists in desperate attempts at adjusting to the ‘market’ rules of the new reality. The people try to lie in accordance to the recommendations propagated in public discourse

which is supposed to bring them life success. One can include here, among others, mobility, active job search not only in the vicinity but also further away, getting a university degree, the knowledge of foreign languages, a peculiar assertiveness and independence. Superimposing these values onto the vision of the world that is shaped by the 'manor', then 'state farm' and the systems of meanings, results in a vision of the world that is internally 'torn apart'; a vision comprising sometimes contradictory values. On the one hand people declare that family or community is the most important; they complain about the loosening or deteriorating of interpersonal relations, on the other hand, however, they complain about the ever-present gossip and constant vigilance. They dream of leaving Grabowo for another, more anonymous place.

The tension can be observed in the tactics of the people on many levels – the relationships within family, with friends, neighbours and work colleagues. Within family relationships there is a far-fledged practicality and tight control which can be illustrated by a statement of one woman: *My marriage was one of convenience, less of love, 'cause love is... I was a bit calculating when I decided to get married, I was more after personality, what a person is like, whether one is wise enough in my opinion to talk to him, to get my message across, to decide together, 'cause life is not just dating or holdin' one another's hand, isn't it? Later, there is a load of things to sort out that earlier were seen to and now you have to do it on your own. So that is why I was guided not only by love. Love was something extra – yeah, one could love that man – that's how I would put it, something like that. Not that just love and I am not interested in anything else, no.* In a good relationship, as it turns out, one needs not only common sense but also a large dose of mutual control; you have to constantly control the situation which translates into some particular tactics in your personal life.

Similarly to personal life, control and discipline are needed also in the life of the estate's inhabitants. The community of Grabowo negatively view the attitudes of those who drink alcohol in front of the local shop as well as those who permanently use the benefits from the local Social Welfare Office (Polish: Gminny Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej). It can be observed in the following fragment: *those that hang around the shop, for example, are getting on my nerves. I somehow feel as I were responsible for the village and its image, so I'd like, well, if someone comes here to see it as a neat, friendly place, that there is no rubbish or that the drunkards are not seen outdoors. Well, I don't like it, although...* The blame for drinking alcohol near the local shop is not only on the men who do so but also on their wives who apparently accept it. In Grabowo there is no social acceptance for the people who permanently use social benefits. The villagers raise their reservations at the meetings with the commune authorities and they try to exert influence on the situation. In a community with limited resources people carefully protect common goods and ponder who might and ought to use them as well as who abuses the benefit system simply because they do not want to work.

Many a time can we hear an opinion that, the people hanging around the shop do not want to work legally, so they choose not to work at all. It can be read as a form of resistance to the dishonest practices of employers. It often happens that the employers offer 'irresistible' conditions, namely officially the minimal wage, while 'under the table' they pay them the rest of the salary. It allows to effectively evade the state control and is a frequently used employers' tactic to cope with the system.

From the stories told by the people of Grabowo one can easily see that they use a whole gamut of tactics to cope with reality whether with family, friends or neighbours. Sometimes, however, even hard efforts do not work and, as a result, people painfully get convinced that the 'self-made man for everyone ideal' is just a myth; that it is just an illusion because the ready recipe for success in the real world is deceptive. The people of the villages in question who choose the tactics to adapt to the declared requirements of the system often get bitterly disappointed. It can be well exemplified by a woman who for many years has been trying to make her children leave the home village of Grabowo. Those hard, yet futile, efforts include trying to find a job for one of her daughters and borrowing money in order to buy a flat for her in a nearby town. The flat had, however, to be rented to other people (to save money). As a result, the daughter, together with her husband and children, is still living with the parents in Grabowo. The parents do their best to give the other daughter a proper education so that she could avoid the problems of her sister. She is studying foreign languages now. However, according to the mother, also in this case one cannot be certain that the girl will find a job. It is, therefore, highly probable that, despite being active, i.e. trying to get the knowledge and skills (indispensable) in contemporary world, people cannot fulfil their ambitions often called in the previous system 'social upgrading' (Polish: awans).

The social structure puts a strange resistance, which can also be seen in the large-scale research carried out in Poland. The people who hoped for a change in their life situation and who have taken concrete measures to achieve it, feel embittered, disillusioned and resigned when it turns out that they have failed. They claim to have no power to keep fighting because it is completely pointless. What is left to them, is just living among the people who do not want to change their monotonous, gossip-filled everyday reality.

Although life in Grabowo is not seen today as it used to be, that is a land of plenty, an Arcadia (w 'krainie lat szczęśliwych')⁸, the contact with the outside world is a source of disappointment, too. The villagers surveyed mention the *rules of the jungle* and say that everything is up for sale. The main problem of nowadays

⁸ *Kraina lat szczęśliwych* is a book by Łukasiewicz on the life of the people of Grabowo in 19th and beginning of 20th century.

is that everything can be *put down to money*, it is difficult to find something that does not have its price. This painful lesson is a result of the villagers' experience with the outside, *great world*. This agrees with the conclusions of some eminent philosophers, including M. Sandel, who described it in his work entitled *Czego nie można kupić za pieniądze: moralne granice rynku* [*What money can't buy. The moral limits of markets*] (Sandel 2012).

Traditional farming

So far, our conclusions have concerned the life of the village of Grabowo. However, the research was carried out in yet another village, Wroblewo, where reality was quite different. People lived, looked, talked and behaved differently here. Also, they differently coped with the world. The so-far description of the tactics used by the inhabitants of Grabowo will be complemented with the knowledge about a nearby village that has had a similar history yet, due to the fact that it is much smaller and has never been a local administration centre, it has changed differently. The village has now a farm following very old rules and is run by a private owner living in Warsaw.

After the collapse of the state-farm the people living in Wroblewo felt hurt and cheated. They tried to use all ways possible to find support. The ways included writing letters of complaint addressed to the Party (Communist party). Nowadays there is nobody to turn to if you need help: *You know, madam, I get the benefit, but you know it's such little help that..., I get forty or fifty zloty so it doesn't count. This help is almost nothing... In the past, when there was the party...; so if you went to Ciechanow, talked to them, you could get some help. And today... I went and talked today to the borough leader (Polish: wójt): if there were the Party I would know how to help – he told me. Now he himself has nowhere to turn to. It's as simple as that.* The local authorities in the villagers' opinions cannot offer help as effectively as in the past. There were institutional forms, within which the people could voice their complaints and expectations. One could turn to the Party, whereas now there is no one to go to. The situation described here is in stark contrast to the conclusions of the researchers dealing with the ubiquitous sense of threat and fear in Communist Poland. It can be seen that the inhabitants of Wroblewo not only had no fear of the Party but treated it as a kind of providence, that made sure that no harm was done to them. If problems occurred, the state-farm worker could readily report it to the authorities and they tried to help. This vision seems today downright unbelievable yet, perhaps, partly explains why many people in Poland are missing the past.

The inhabitants of Wroblewo are convinced that nowadays politicians *cheat* people, that they give promises but never keep them. What adds insult to injury,

is the fact that you can *buy* votes. In response to an innocent question if one of the women living in Wroblewo voted in election, the following discussion started between her and another local man: [*Do you vote in election?*] [*Ms. S.*]: *Very much so. [„Man”]: So what, they come to give each of you thirty zloty and show who you should vote for. [Ms. S.]: No, I myself go voting, I go to X (name of the place)... I voted to choose the borough leader, you know and the leader cheated us too. There was a meeting in the dairy; they brought lots of vodka, ham and appetizers. [Man]: That is how the election.... [Ms. S.]: Yeah.*

That shows what contemporary ‘local democracy’ looks like; apparently ‘close’ to the people. Because it is known that one cannot turn to *the Party* anymore, and that you cannot *count* on the contemporary authority, the inhabitants of the village are left with one of the options: working for a new owner of the old state-farm, getting benefits from the Social Welfare, or working in other towns or villages.

The first of the ways means working for a man who bought out the land and buildings that used to belong to the state farm and now runs his own farm employing a female worker living in this village (who once worked in the state farm). Asked what she did for a living she answered: *Well, what can I do here. Well, I, you know, I work “privately”, you could say – not legally, no nothing. But it is my job, I mean I look after pigs, there are a few, there are sows, piglet are there; new ones are born. But you know, I get some log wood, a pig from time to time, sometimes he pays my electricity bill; here, look Wiesiek also paid me all the summer. It’s an electricity bill... that’s how you live. Be it some carrot, or potatoes. „Cause you know, this boss of ours...; he runs such things. You know, you don’t buy potatoes, you don’t buy carrot, onion you don’t buy... Meat – from time to time a pig is killed so be it. A bill is paid. And some money. So where should I go then?*

The new owner’s farm follows traditional rules that immediately bring to mind pre-industrial economy and the old manor order. The work is not documented; it is based on an oral agreement between the owner and the people who work for him. One of the women workers living in Wroblewo earns PLN 800 but she gets extra her bills paid and a range of payment in kind, including coal, vegetables or meat. Then, there is some money you can get extra, when her son goes to a holiday camp (PLN 400) or when the animals are *well tended*. The main problem, however is the lack of registration, i.e. making the employment legal, since the woman needs for years of documented working period to get her retirement benefit. That is why she tried to get a legal job. She eventually found it, thanks to the local Job Office. It was cleaning the station in Cechanow. The woman, however, never started the job because she had no money to buy the monthly travel card to get to the town – the ticket cost around PLN 250 at that time. She also stopped going to the Job Office to sign the necessary documents. As a result she has no social insurance. That is mainly why working for the local owner is so important

to her. Besides, the woman likes her job and is ready to do it whether she gets paid or not. When asked if she would like to do something else, she said: *I would prefer working on a farm and... that is why..., as I go there with pleasure. It is not that I go there because I „have to”. When he doesn't pay me this week or for two weeks, I don't go for a day or two or whatever; I don't go until he comes and pays. But I go with pleasure. When the right time comes, he will find the money and will pay me. I am not like that...*

The material gathered in Wroblewo allows us to draw a few conclusions about the tactics of the villagers. First of all, the work is very traditional and is based on an informal agreement between the employer and the employee. The remuneration, often long overdue, is paid out in two ways: in money or in kind. An important element of the loyalty towards the employer results not only from the ethical norms but also from a simple calculation that any form of *cheating doesn't work*. This also shows that there is no tacit approval in the village for peddling the stolen goods. Such deeds immediately become commonly known. Probably out of pure spite the local farmers will immediately make the information public. The old institution of denunciation is at play, and that constitutes an effective way of exercising social control.

The interviews also offer an invaluable knowledge about how the traditional farm is managed, namely by carrot and stick (rewarding and punishing). Punishments, as one of the interviewees implies are traditional that is 'corporal', whereas the rewards are various 'goods' like extra money, or a pig for Christmas. Possibly, one of the tactics of the inhabitants of Wroblewo is working out some skilful ways of dealing with the employer by weighing up what may *pay* and what should rather be avoided. It is no good cheating, whereas good honest work will usually be appreciated. Such a situation clearly shows that there exist the forms of living out of any control – whether by the 'market' or 'the state'. In difficult situations people themselves, that is without any institutional forms, work out the rules of regulation that they later observe.

Another way to survive or improve their material situation that the people of Wroblewo use is gathering the 'goods' offered by the forest. This phenomenon is not new, either. Rakowski described it in his work *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy: etnografia człowieka zdegradowanego* (Rakowski 2009). It turns out that gathering brings the villagers relatively considerable profits. The inhabitants of Wroblewo also benefit from the Social Welfare. Some of them manage to find a job away from the village; people work in chicken farms in the Białystok area, they lay sett stone or clear snow off roofs in Warsaw. Very often fathers take their sons to work alongside. The tactics also include finding ways to survive without a job. Sometimes, as it turns out, people can rely on their family.

It is undeniable that Wroblewo constitutes an interesting, and somewhat odd, micro-world governed by its own rules. One, where different orders (the one of the 'manor', 'state-farm' and 'modern') co-exist. They comprise the 'pre-indus-

trial economy working system' like in the manor; state-care, the Party and fixing problems - like in state farm period, as well as 'running after money' which appears necessary to survive in contemporary world. One can also leave it to a chance or a blind fortune and simply buy a lottery ticket that offers a hope for a better life. That is what a woman, living in a small Mazovian village, has been doing for some time. She apparently hopes that one day a miracle will happen and her life will change.

Using the state aid

In Grabowo and its surroundings, like in many other places in Poland, there is a group of people, who do not work – for different reasons. There are people who do not want to work illegally, some do not accept a job for PLN 1500 a month, because they think it is too little. Not only the inhabitants of Grabowo but also those living in other nearby villages realize it very well. They emphasize that in the past people would want to work but today they do not. The interviewees stress that there is something in contemporary reality that does not encourage people from the lower layers of society to be more active. In the previous system, all the people not only had to, but also wanted to work which, as we can conclude, was not solely because of the legal regulations *ordering people to have a job* but also because of the different atmosphere in the Polish countryside. In the past a village *bustled with life* and now it is *ghostlike*.

The inhabitants of Grabowo and Wroblewo admit that they see a lot of people around who could easily earn a living but who simply do not want to do so. The main reason behind it is the change connected with a different way of remunerating people. In the past – both in the manor and in the state-farm – people did not earn a lot, yet they would receive part of their wages in kind (Polish: *deputat*); many useful goods, necessary for life; they also had their rent paid. It is, therefore, probable that the problems with money-spending diagnosed by social workers, are rooted in this very mechanism – the model of 'pre-industrial economy' that descends from one generation to another. The benefits or low salaries that the people receive are spent on the goods seen by others as simply unnecessary. They include *plants, photo frames, elephant figurines, sheer curtains, serviettes* as well as kitchen stuff, like *spoons, little pots or plates* – all in excess. The phenomenon of buying *trifles* observed by social workers can, of course, be explained by the contemporary tendency of 'consumptionism' and a love for shopping. In many cases such an interpretation can be relevant. However, in the context of the village researched, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. The love of 'baubles' among the people of Grabowo and the nearby villages is nothing new. It is deceptively similar to the stories of the women enthralled by

the ‘pins’ and ‘baubles’ brought to the manor by Jews in the past. That culture could not be labelled as a ‘consumptionist’ one. Perhaps, the phenomenon can be explained by the desire for a touch of luxury; some acting and thinking which can help us take your minds off the drab, mundane everyday reality filled with determinisms and necessities – as P. Bourdieu put it. Bourdieu claims that people with the *folk background* are frequently left with only the choice of “necessities” and, like a *magnetized* “needle” they instinctively and unconsciously turn towards what “is for them”. It may then turn out that the irrational or reckless behaviour of many ‘poor’ and ‘weak’ people – usually read as the symptom of thoughtless wastefulness and recklessness – can be interpreted as the need to ‘get away’ or ‘escape’ from the systemic limitations; as a kind of poor substitute for ‘luxury’. And, at the same time, as one of many, perhaps unconscious tactics allowing them to survive in the overwhelming reality.

In Grabowo as well as in the neighbouring places one can meet the people who can, quite effectively, get public money. Their attitudes do not, however, find approval on the part of other members of the community who, on many occasions, openly admit that they do not like scroungers, slobs and studs (Polish: *darmozjady*, *nieroby* and *dziecioroby*). The tactics relying on using systematic benefits have their limitations. The workers of the institutions distributing them as well as the inhabitants of the village themselves – tired from work – make hard efforts to eliminate or, at least, to limit such unwelcome practices. The inhabitants of Grabowo feel the need to tighten the distribution of public resources to which, in their opinion, they themselves contribute.

Young people: in search of ‘better’ future

The lives of young inhabitants of Grabowo form a few characteristic patterns. Some young people, after graduating from junior high school, (Polish: *gimnazjum*) do not continue their education which is caused, among others, by their material situation. They simply cannot afford to cover the commuting costs and cannot count on their parents’ support. These young people usually look for some short-term part-time jobs, for example working on construction sites, removing snow from roads and roofs or fruit-picking. It is a tactic that is imposed by structural determinisms and consists in living from one day to another, with no plans for future. Putting plans into effect might take too much time turn out impossible. The young people leading such lives do not write in the mainstream at all; they live on its margins filling in the social and cultural gaps. For the inhabitants of Grabowo it is fairly obvious that the life of young people is largely dependent on their parents’ support – both financial as well as emotional. Quite often, however, young people who try to improve their situation by finding a job or getting edu-

cation not only cannot expect support from their parents' but they even get discouraged. Other people born in Grabowo choose the tactics which rely on getting a university education, finding a job somewhere nearby, and settling down in the area, yet not in the estate where they were brought up. A strong control exercised by the community, especially by its older female part, is a sufficient reason to look for one's place away from Grabowo.

The village is also inhabited by the young people who decided to settle down in the estate which was once built for the state-owned farm workers. They treat it, nonetheless, as a temporary situation and as soon as an opportunity emerges they plan to move out and live in another nearby village or town. There are many flats for sale in the estate. One of the reasons, apart from numerous neighbourly conflicts and lack of privacy, is the difficulty with taking children to school or extra-curricular classes in the nearby town. The young people who decide to stay and in Grabowo often live in difficult conditions and, practically, cannot cope without their parents' help. The situation becomes even harder when their children are born. Then – as one of the interviewed men said – *everything is subordinated to money*. Both the older and younger inhabitants of Grabowo agree that in the past life was easier, that *it used to be better*.

Another category are the people who decided to resort to the tactic of symbolic 'escape', made an attempt at cutting off the roots, separating from the neighbours and the too 'stuffy' atmosphere or 'mundane' everyday humdrum. It can be stated that the difficulties these people face and the solutions they choose are quite universal and have already been well researched for example by Chałasiński (1938, 1964) in Poland as well as more contemporarily by Bourdieu (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). The choice of the 'social advance', transgressing the structural conditioning, inevitably leads to a sort of dilemma which was called by Bourdieu 'habitus split'? This phenomenon can be observed in the opinions of the young people from Grabowo who have already had a chance to know the world: *I think there are no opportunities for young people in here. You just have to get away from here, to start something new. Like me, I just moved to Siedlce, 'cause I saw my passion there – languages – it is something I like; so I just left. I come here as often as I can and I am happy that I can spend some time with my family. You now, life is... But passion and achieving your goal is number one for me*. The content functioning within the mainstream – as the scholars in *Cultural History* point, including Ginzburg or Chartier (Ginzburg 1989; Chartier 1993) – is not in vain, but overlaps with the knowledge acquired within the primary socialisation. The functioning of this system can be also observed in the attitudes of the young people from Grabowo. Although they painfully feel the limitations resulting from living in a small, hermetic community, they have no knowledge that would support their practical sense and that would allow them to function well in a more anonymous, fraught with danger world of the city. The material gathered shows that the people brought

up in small and relatively closed environments have major difficulties adapting to life in the places organized in a different way. Even a superficial contact with a city causes fear, sense of threat or helplessness. Not everyone realises that the sense of getting lost at the Central Railway Station in Warsaw may be a sufficient reason to make a decision to study in a different city or to quit the idea of studying whatsoever. Apparently unimportant events and situations may have an essential influence on people's choices. There is no doubt at all that the life of the people coming from small places is not easy and that it entails huge costs; material and – first of all – mental. Not everyone is capable of bearing them. If moving around the station is a problem, then obviously it may be difficult to cope in the sphere of interpersonal relations in the environment of the people who often have much bigger 'capital' of all kind – *financial, cultural, social* or 'symbolic'. Sometimes, an ordinary and seemingly innocent look from the colleagues may make the person realise the painful truth about the social 'distinction' and difference between people.

In the statements for the young people, also in the one quoted above, there is perceptible a kind of rip involving the attachment to the family, the sense of security in a local group and strong, limiting and irritating control. This phenomenon may be interpreted as a tension between two different orders of thought – the 'traditional' and the nowadays popular 'individualistic' one. The speaker (woman) was brought up in a relatively closed environment, where one could observe specific ways of thinking connected with a particular lifestyle. Leaving the 'locality' is connected with huge emotional costs which translate into a sense of fear, uncertainty and helplessness. Apart from the influences of the local environment the thinking of the people is also affected by the messages of the mainstream which promote 'being active', 'freedom' and 'self-fulfilment'. Much of the disappointment at not accomplishing the passions, as the woman from Grabowo claims, is the result of the thinking that *passions* should be crucial in the life of a modern emancipated person. A large part is also played by the liberation content in the public discourse which remains in opposition to the inhibitions imposed by the local environment that constantly exercises control over its members. This control, deemed in the past as an obvious element of life in a small group, today – perceived from a new individualistic perspective – is becoming particularly severe and makes all the advantages of living in a world that was once close, safe and familiar appear meaningless. People who left the village some time ago see this world with a kind of distance which allows them to see clearly not only its bright but also dark sides. This view is therefore tainted by the perspective of an 'alien', 'citizen of the great world' (Waldenfels 2002). Thus the sense of strangeness starts to accompany the young people of Grabowo not only in the outside world but also in the so far their own 'locality'. This 'locality' perceived from a new perspective slowly becomes less attractive, too monotonous and irritating because of its excessive literality.

Recapitulation

It has to be stressed that the article presents a study of two selected Polish villages, therefore the final conclusions are limited just to them. It cannot be excluded, however, that other inhabitants of Polish villages use similar tactics. Despite many difficulties the inhabitants of Grabowo and Wroblewo try, in many ways, to cope with the changing reality. Their tactics can be divided into three main groups. The first one includes desperate attempts at *adapting*, writing into the order predominant at a particular time. The second involves *resisting* this order, whereas the third one is an unclear form of staying in limbo, in the space between conforming and resisting. The tactics the people use can be analysed with reference to two different systems – local and non-local. It is only one of the ways of attempting to categorise the tactics of the villages in question following the selected classification.

The tactics used by most elderly people are living in accordance with the local order and opposing the ‘individualistic’ non-local one. Young people, in turn, who have contacted the outside world, with some quandaries, dissociate themselves from the traditional values of the group accepting what is connected with the ‘city’ or the ‘world’. These are the tactics of the middle-aged people once working in the state-owned farms, also of their children some of whom leave to study in another town and of some new arrivals in the village. Despite a large number of people who have started to identify themselves with the *mainstream* there are people in Grabowo who, for different reasons, cannot or do not want to accept and implement the ‘individualistic’ patterns. This category includes the elderly inhabitants of the village who defend the old ‘good’ world, the young people who cannot or do not want to leave in order to seek their fortune in a city. It also includes, the benefit-takers from the welfare system, shameless enough to have learnt to use the rules of the present system for their particular ends and ignoring the fact of being unable to live in accordance with the ‘individualistic’ patterns. Furthermore, there are also the jobless who do not want to work illegally and – as they say – prefer spending their time hanging around the local shop and drinking beer. It turns out, that on the outskirts of the contemporary order there is a significant number of people belonging to different categories.

From de Certeau’s point of view the most interesting are the attitudes of the people who ‘flirt’ both with the local and non-local order. The practices of these people, however well suited to contemporary conditions, are not in accordance with the ways of people’s thinking. In their views, the characteristics of individualistic culture are unambiguously negative. Such kinds of tactics can be observed among the higher position ex-workers of the state farm who approach reality in a reflective way. Although, they cope quite well in the contemporary world, they are not enthusiastic about it. These tactics mainly include

the conscious and reflective living, whose important part is ‘reading’ the rules hidden under the surface of the social life and using them to achieve their own, mainly material, ends. Such an ambivalent approach, in which the thinking and practices are carefully separated from one another, allows a ‘tactical’ behaviour, which relies on harmonious co-existence of the conviction that the contemporary world is not good, and involves acting so that you can use the existing system to achieve your own goals. The attitude that comprises such tactics is far from a real involvement, from internalising the values and assumptions of the mainstream. It is a kind of ‘play on the system’, ‘pretending’ that you accept the existing order when, in fact, you do not.

The most general conclusions from the so-far considerations let us determine the conditions which need to be fulfilled by a person included in the category of ‘the weak’ to cope in the contemporary world. First of all, one has to know the real, not the declared, rules of the system. The messages functioning in the public circulation, Barthes’ *myths*, not always contain the truth about how to be successful. Most often, they are targeted at the people who might believe in them, that is at the people who are least reflective and have the weakest skills of observing and following what is happening around them. Once you manage to learn something about the world, you transcend the clichés; it is good to get some distance to the world and look at everything from the point of view of an ‘external observer’. Then, you have to find a space for yourself; a space where you can learn to use the systemic conditioning for your own purposes. At the same time you have to observe the most important rule – do not get involved, do not allow a situation in which you take seriously the judgement offered by the system, including – above all – one concerning yourself. If that happens and somebody becomes ashamed of their difficult situation (of being a ‘loser’), they are not able to use any tactics at all. Then, one becomes too ‘vulnerable’ to muster any activity and, like the inhabitants of Grabowo ‘aspiring’ to live in the ‘city’, they will conclude that they *have no strength* to try anymore. The basic rule of successful tactics is that you cannot get involved, as this involvement, sooner or later, will turn into disillusionment and apathy. The last rule is: with all the complications that life offers, especially the life of the weak, you must have an idea for yourself and try to carry it out, despite any adversities. It is worth stressing that it must be your ‘own’ idea. Paradoxically, ‘the culture of individualism’ makes people conform. To fulfil the *canon* of values they must not only subject themselves to the external control, but also to the oppressive self-control which, as Elias said (Elias 2011: 508), does not have good effects for human “psyche”. Furthermore, it is easy to see that the most effective tactics – in de Certeau’s view – involve playing on the system; seemingly “being on good terms with the system” but, in fact, outsmarting it. This was the way the Indians, referred to in the Introduction, acted; they could use the mainstream messages for their own purposes.

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The aim of this publication is to look at the problems of Polish rural areas from the perspective of the young generation of researchers, to show what problems they are interested in and what study methods and techniques they use to describe the phenomena occurring in Polish villages. The results of their studies were also presented to underscore the importance of these phenomena for the development of knowledge concerning the dynamic transformations in Polish rural areas. The Authors represent different fields of study (sociology, ethnography, economy and geography) from renowned academic centres such as University of Lodz, Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences (IRWiR PAN) in Warsaw, Life Science University of Poznan, Technical University in Warsaw, Institute of Urban Development in Krakow, and Maria Grzegorzewska University. What they have in common is interest in the problems of rural areas and their residents. They focus on the new model of rural development, very often identified with concepts such as multifunctional and sustainable development, on social innovation, the subject of transformations in rural residents' social roles, including rural women serving public roles, as well as on the strategies of coping with the reality used by residents of marginalized villages. The articles introduce the Readers to selected problems of development of Polish rural areas and help them to understand their complexity.



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