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The Polish Post-Communist Transition: Are Workers' Beliefs Positive about the Communist Era?

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ABSTRACT/RÉSUMÉ

With the rise of a “wild” capitalism in post-communist Poland the stresses on male and female Polish workers have increased. This paper provides an analysis of the attitudes of ten workers, gender balanced, who were adults when the transition to capitalism began post-1989. Through a semi-structured interview the individuals were provided the opportunity to express their understanding and attitudes towards the economic changes they have experienced. The purpose was to see if the attitudes of Polish workers were positive about the communist era. The ten individuals interviewed expressed grave concerns about what they describe as “wild” capitalism, which has become the economic model being followed in Poland post-1989.

Introduction

Poland has been in a post-Communist transition to capitalism since 1989. Understanding the stresses this has caused those living in Poland is the purpose of this paper. I interviewed five men and five women, all in their forties or older, to research how they comprehended the changes from communism to capitalism. I will outline workers' status under communism, how capitalism altered this status, then discuss how these changes affected all workers, and particularly women. I will define my concept of class. My question is: Do contemporary Poles, who have gone through the Communism-Capitalism Transition, have positive beliefs about the Communist Era?

Under communism workers were given more employment and social security, though fewer political rights. Kramer notes “workers were accustomed to full employment, to the receipt of numerous benefits at the workplace, and to a relatively lax work regime [...] workers' living standards were very low and the quality of most goods and services were poor (1995). Unlike under capitalism, workers under communism “were able to make certain claims on the regime through an implicit ‘social contract,’ which assured them full employment, subsidized prices on staple goods, social services, relatively egalitarian wage policies, and low performance standards at work” (Kramer, 1995). Workers preferred employment stability to welfare support and as long as they had this, political participation was unimportant to them: this kept their living standards low, but it was apparently high enough to allow them to live acceptably (Kramer, 1995).

The communist state controlled the movement of people: “travel at many scales of time and space was facilitated, managed and subsidized by the state, often through the workplace (Stenning, 2005b). This meant that workers could not work where they wanted to, citizens could

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not travel unless they had permission from local authorities. Issues of employment stability, its benefits or detriments, what the standard of living was under communism, and what it was like to work under the past regime will be investigated with my ten respondents.

Capitalism, according to Karl Polanyi, requires that labour, land and money be commodities for sale (2001). This is done by land being enclosed so that it is owned privately, which prevents labourers from being self-supporting so they have to sell their labour power “freely.” Money becomes commodified once it can be used as capital. However, Polanyi was very concerned that when this commodification of labour, land and money was allowed “to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment [the result would be the] demolition of society” (2001). This commodification leads to the formation of the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the working class, who sell their labour-power. The Polish working class, selling their labour-power under capitalism for the first time in half a century, sees a rise in poverty as a consequence of being “free” to sell that labour-power: “Clearly the issue of post-socialist poverty is a very important one. The years since 1989/91 have been characterized by rising unemployment, declining real incomes and the wide-scale emergence of poverty. Notwithstanding official rhetoric, poverty clearly did exist under socialism, but it was limited to around one in 25 of the region’s population [...]; in contrast, it was estimated that in 1998 one in five was living in poverty (Stenning, 2005a). Stenning argues that being working class, under capitalism, was becoming a very important “influence on life chances and well-being” (2005a).

For the purposes of my study I define class using a classical Marxist definition because that really approximates the class experience in Poland, which is not a sophisticated labour market like Canada. Marx defined class based on the ownership of the means of production:

“In Proportion as the bourgeoisie, *i.e.*, capital [ownership of production], is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed – a class of labourers, who live only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piece-meal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market.” (Marx, [1848]1978b).

Karl Polanyi writes in a dystopic way about the consequences of a market system like capitalism being allowed to utterly control everything that happens in the economy of a society: “the alleged commodity ‘labour-power’ cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused, without affecting also the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity. In disposing of a man’s (*sic*) labor (*sic*) power the system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and moral entity ‘man’ attached to that tag. Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the

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effects of social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime and starvation” (2001). Polanyi believed that the state needed to intervene to protect workers and the environment from such ‘wild’ capitalism: “Undoubtedly, labor, land, and money markets *are* essential to a market economy. But no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude fictions even for the shortest stretch of time unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill” (2001). Marx discussed the concept of ‘estranged labour’ to describe what Polanyi argues above:

“This fact expresses merely that the object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour. Labour’s realization is its objectification. In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labour appears as loss of reality for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and *object-bondage*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*.” ([1844] 1978a).

My respondents will be asked to discuss the nature of the capitalism they are now “free” labourers in. I will be seeking evidence from my respondents to see if their sense of alienation grew or diminished with the introduction of capitalism in Poland.

Many changes came to Poland with the introduction of capitalism and workers had to adjust: “post-socialism is marked by a contradictory widening of horizons and the shrinking of lifeworlds. The promises of mobility falter on the realities of dislocation, immobility and insecurity” (Stenning, 2005b). This happens because of the market mechanisms ‘needed’ by capitalism to be profitable as mentioned by Polanyi above: “As reformist and post-communist leaders have sought to restructure and privatize their countries’ economies, worker have had to confront heightened performance pressure, the prospect of unemployment, involuntary furloughs, lay-offs, the possibility of enterprise bankruptcies and closing, higher prices, competition from entrepreneurs and foreign goods (because of open market entry), growing income disparities, and inflation” (Kramer, 1995).

Women’s rights were better protected under the communist mode of production: “Under communism, public discourse was always officially ‘pro-women,’ and the state’s language and ideology stressed equality between men and women” (Hauser, 1993). Since the introduction of capitalism women’s working lives in post-communist Poland have been seriously affected: “the move from socialism to the market economy and the new political forms has peculiar consequences both for gender construction and for gender inequality [such as] a growing exclusion of women from the public domain” (Pine, 2002). Pine makes three predictions about women’s involvement in the post-communist state:

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1. The exclusion of women from civil society and full citizenship
2. Their lack of formal employment, and over-employment in “part-time, ad hoc and badly paid work”
3. Growing responsibility for elder and child care that was previously the responsibility of the state (Pine, 2002)

There is also evidence that work is becoming “sexualized,” meaning that younger, attractive women will gain employment over “middle aged and older women” (Pine, 2002). Rukszto states: “current hiring and firing practices in Poland show an overt, widespread push towards redefining women as solely mothers and wives, not as workers. Job advertisements are organized by sex, which means that women have [fewer] job offers to choose from” (1997). Incredibly “while 50% of the unemployed were female, there were job offers for only .83% of unemployed women [...] Some of these job advertisements specify the length of skirt to be worn for the interview, or the preferred shape of the potential female worker’s legs” (Rukszto, 1997).

As well as workplace discrimination, which would be criminal in Canada, there is also the influence of the Catholic Church in organizing against women’s rights: the Church’s influence is nowhere more clearly seen than in the new capitalist state’s record on reproductive rights. Restricted access to abortion and to contraception entrenches women within the ‘private’ sphere, as well as it impacts on women’s physical and emotional health. Since the inception of the anti-abortion law [in the early 1990s], Poland has seen a growth of what are called ‘abort tours,’ organized trips for pregnant women to neighbouring countries where they can obtain abortions. (Kopczewska, 1994 in Kukszto, 1997).

The Catholic Church was instrumental in the banning of abortion in Poland after the fall of communism (Fuszara, 1993). In Catholic Poland the church has always played a very important role in the lives of its citizens. Candidates for political office must respect the wishes of the Catholic Church hierarchy (Fuszara, 1993). As Poland lost its independence in 1918 the Catholic Church created “the model of the heroic Polish woman coping with all sorts of burdens. What was demanded from a woman was endurance and steadfastness in her duties” (Titkow, 1993). Women were to sacrifice for their homeland and family “not expecting anything other than acknowledgement in return” (Titkow, 1993). This image of a woman sacrificing her life for a family is Catholic Church ideology and is alive to this day in Poland (Titkow, 1993). Titkow argues that gratification from family life is still more important for a majority of Polish women than is satisfaction from paid labour, which is observable in women’s lack of status in decision-making and politics (1993). This is reflected in the teaching of the Catholic Church in Poland as women’s position is subordinate there: “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (*I Timothy* 2:8 in Van Voorst, 2006). Titkow argues that this is a positive influence: “The political and economic transition going on in Poland, however negative it may appear for women, should be seen as only a factor modifying the process of achieving

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gender equality” (1993). The influence of the Catholic Church will be discussed with my respondents in relation to women’s rights and its influence on state policies. Titkow’s paradoxical belief that gender equality will happen, though it will be modified by the Catholic Church-sponsored oppression of women within politics and the economy will be investigated with my respondents.

The changes in Poland since the end of communism can be interpreted not so much as the amorphous ‘wild’ capitalism, as so described by my respondents, but more theoretically, according to Polanyi, as the consequence of disembedding the market from society. Under communism the economy is embedded in a way that is only possible in capitalist countries if laws are in place to protect workers. In Canada we have laws, and unions, that somewhat protect workers from excessive exploitation (working hours, work safety, workers’ compensation, and pensions) and laws that protect women’s rights. The stresses felt by workers in Poland can be understood within Polanyi’s concept of disembeddedness: the market mechanism, which was once embedded in society under communism, has become separated. How this has affected the beliefs of workers in Poland about their labour status since 1989 is the purpose of this paper.

Methodology

During August 2006 I conducted ten semi-structured interviews in the southern part of Poland with working class people. My focus was to understand if Poles, who have gone through the Communism-Capitalism Transition, have positive beliefs about their labour status during the communist era.

My sample was purposive: I needed to be comfortable with the people I was interviewing to ensure they would trust me with the very private information I was asking for. For this reason I chose neighbours, who through a snowball methodology, introduced me to their acquaintances: a network of trust was assumed and aided in my respondents being forthright. My purpose was to understand their experience of the transition from communism to capitalism. Each of the people I interviewed were adults during the communist era so they are very aware of the changes caused by the new capitalist state.

I chose only working class people, with a range of ages for differing perspectives. My participants were five males and five females and were between the ages of forty-two and sixty-eight. I approached a total of eleven individuals and ten of them agreed to be interviewed. Participants of this study accepted my assurance of confidentiality and were very happy to speak their mind.

I chose five areas to focus on for the interview and developed questions for each area. These areas were:

- A. Demographics
- B. Cultural Capital

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- C. Past: The Communist Era
- D. Present: The Post-Communist Era
- E. Future

I wanted to know my respondents' demographics to see if they had an impact on their experience of past, present and hopes for the future.

I felt very comfortable interviewing these individuals in our mutual Polish language. These people felt very comfortable talking to me as I spoke with their accent and was familiar with their locality. The participants were willing to discuss private aspects of their lives with me because they felt comfortable that I was "one" of them. Only one individual did not feel totally comfortable talking about his present work experience as it was clearly making him upset, though he did complete the interview.

Most of the interviews were conducted at my participants' homes; where they felt most comfortable. On two occasions my participants were answering my interview questions while drinking one glass of beer. I did not comment on this as I thought it could stress them out more than the impact that glass of the beer could have on them. The beer did not affect my respondents' ability to answer my questions but made them comfortable.

For reasons of confidentiality I have assigned gender and number identification to my respondents with minimal personal details:

- F1 — Female, 51 years old, textile worker, on the pre-pension unemployment benefit, has three independent children;
- M2 — Male, 55 years old, plumber, on the pre-pension unemployment benefit, has three independent children;
- F3 — Female, 46 years old, dental assistant, on unemployment benefit, has two Independent children and one dependent child;
- M4 — Male, 51 years old, driver mechanic, employed, has one independent and one dependent child, has one independent and one dependent child;
- M5 — Male, 47 years old, driver mechanic, employed, has two independent children and one dependent child;
- F6 — Female, 54 years old, midwife, employed, has two independent children;
- M7 — Male, 69 years old, mould technician, on pension, has one independent Child;

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F8 — Female, 64 years old, physical worker in the factory, one pension, has one independent child;

F9 — Female, 42 years old, store and sale person, employed, has one independent child;

M10 — Male, 42 years old, retired fireman, employed, has one independent child.

Findings

A. Demographics

My ten respondents grew up and have lived most of their lives in the South East area of Poland. They range in age from early forties to late sixties. They are all married for at least twenty years and all have at least one child.

Poland is a Catholic country and this is reflected in the fact that all my correspondents but one (M7) stated they were Catholics. For most of them religion continues to be important in their lives.

Their political views were moderate with most of them stating that they felt half way between being liberal and conservative.

Six of my ten respondents completed high school (F1, F3, F6, M7, F9, M10) and none of them had any college or university experience. Though their trades involved plumbing, dental assistant, auto mechanic, casting technician, unlike in Canada where such trades are certified in colleges or university, all of my respondents were trained on the job during the communist era.

In terms of class only two of my respondents self-identified as working class (M4, M7) much like Canadians, they had difficulties correctly identifying their class position. The term middle class came up often without a proper definition. When they were asked to describe their social class, discussions about the wages and education came up. The majority of my respondents described their social class in terms of not having enough money. For my respondents money seemed to be the determining factor of class. Four of my respondents once ran small businesses, though they were not doing so at the time of my interview (M2, F3, M5, M10). Other respondents earned extra money doing crafts or service jobs (F3, M4). They were all selling their labour-power, or were retired at the time of my interview.

B. Cultural Capital

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My respondents were lacking in contemporary cultural capital as their knowledge was of cultural figures who had been dead for decades. Television was a favourite form of culture as the cinema or theatre were too expensive. Only one of my respondents has been to an art gallery (M5). Only four respondents could name a museum that they enjoyed (F3, M4, M5, F6). My respondents were not readers as only three of them could name a book recently read (F3, M5, F6). The authors mentioned by my respondents were from centuries past: Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), Stefan Zeromski (1864-1925), Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916), Jan Kochanowski (1530-1584), Juliusz Slowacki (1809–1849), Ignacy Kraszewski (1812-1887), and only one respondent (F8) mentioned a contemporary poet and a winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize in literature: Wieslawa Szymborka (1923- present).

Only half of my respondents could name a Polish visual artist (M2, F3, M4, M5, F6) and the one named most often, Jan Matejko, (1838-1893). Most of my respondents had a great deal of trouble naming an important living Polish scientist though seven of the ten named the long dead Marie (Skłodowska) Curie (1867-1934). Oddly, when asked to name a living scientist, one of my respondents named a contemporary writer, and then former president Lech Walesa (M2). Most of my respondents travelled during communism in Warsaw Pact countries only.

My respondents felt higher education, for them, was unimportant for work: “Education gave us nothing. We got it, but did we need it on the job?” (M4). Others felt that education was about “inside satisfaction” (3F) or “It gives a different level of thinking” (F6). When it comes to education for their children, however, my respondents are aware that Poland is part of the EU and that education will make a difference in their ability to find work in different countries. They note, though, that work in the EU, right now, seems related to trades, more than skills gained at university. Even though trade jobs can be found, most of my respondents still believed that higher education was best for their children.

My respondents are very frustrated with current labour conditions in Poland. They all expressed desire for a great number of changes in their society centred around the need for more work for people and for better pay for that work. My respondent were not happy that young people finish university and cannot find a job, that social assistance is low, that the clergy have too much say in government policy, and are unhappy with the form of the post-communist government.

My respondents all recognized that they live in a “wild” capitalism and they wanted a return to the social assistance that prevailed during communism: “There are many things to change here in the country. If the attitudes here in the country change maybe people will have different lives. Right now the social attitude to the citizen is, I would say, dismal” (F10).

When asked about the consumption of the alcohol, half of my respondents believed that the consumption of the alcohol was smaller during communism due to rigorous laws, less availability and high prices. When asked if they consumed more alcohol during communism only four of my respondents stated that they drank more. Six of my respondents believed that the

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amount of the alcohol consumed in Poland is affected by capitalism as it became cheaper and more accessible and those who are unemployed drink more.

Nine of my respondents believed that women's rights were more protected during communism. Pregnant women in the work force were not performing physical tasks as there were "protected departments" for them. In capitalism women go on maternity leave and do not know if they will have a job to come back to. There is no social protection under capitalism and women are especially discriminated against in this new mode of production: "What they could take away from women they took it away. If a man did not pay child support, during the Communist era, a woman would receive money from the government: now such protection does not exist. There was much more social assistance for the family. Now, they just take it away from us" (F3).

All of my respondents supported individual access to birth control. All of my respondents believed that sex education should be taught in elementary school so children could be responsible for their own actions. When it came to support to women's access to abortion they believed that women should be able to decide for themselves. They were especially supportive of abortion in a case when a pregnancy was a result of a rape, when a women's health was in danger, or a pregnancy is threatened. One of my respondents was not supportive of abortion as a preventive means of birth control. Another reflected the involvement of the Catholic Church in the abortion issue: "I support women who make this decision and women who are against it as well. Because every one of them will be some day absolved because this is murdering people" (M5).

A. Past: The Communist Era

My respondents' paid employment during Communism ranged from a skilled worker checking the quality of the fibre in the lab, to plumber, dental assistant, truck mechanic, midwife, foreman, factory worker and a fire fighter. They found their work right after they finished school as during Communism employment was obligatory and if one did not want to work one was ordered to find work immediately. Some of my respondents found their work through mediating institutions: the school would send a file to a government work institution that contacted the employer, who would then hire the person concerned. Others went to school that were run by the institution that hired them. One of my respondents found it through connections.

My respondents believed that their relationship with their bosses and workers during Communism was good. What they liked about working during the communist era was that they got paid promptly and had benefits in the form of bonuses (F1, M2, F9, M10). They felt respected at work and did not have to worry about losing their job. Often they got paid even if they did not work.

When asked what they did not like about Communism, my respondents named the fact that there was nothing in stores, they believed that wages should have been higher as they were

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just enough to survive, one of them did not like the parties that took place on the Day of the Transporter (believe it or not, there was an annual holiday celebrating those who transported goods or people around Poland) as they resulted in excessive drunkenness. Three of my respondents did not find anything they disliked. They liked the comfort of secure employment.

Most of my respondents believed that they lived relatively well during Communism in comparison to others. One of my respondents stated: “Nobody made enough to live well. Every one was poor but equally” (M7).

A majority of my respondents believed that there was no unemployment during Communism and if there was it was hidden as everyone appeared to work.

I found that connections during Communism played as large a role as in a Capitalist society. The majority of my respondents believed that party connections were responsible for a promotion in their job during communism. In the case of the textile worker, plumber, and fire fighter among my respondents, it was not party connections that led to a higher position, but increased qualifications for their job.

All of my respondents believed that their job during Communism was secure. The most frequently named benefits that they were guaranteed were money and the ability to go on paid vacations, subsidized by the public institutions they worked for. My respondents also stated that they were able to take long term credit for a house from where they worked.

When asked about any illegal activities in the work place, four of my respondents said that they were aware of any illegal activities in their work place (M2, M4, M6, F9). One respondent did not admit to any illegal activity although I know that this respondent participated in an illegal activity (F8). The rest of my respondents believed that either “there was not an opportunity for illegal activity” (F3) or provided me with a negative answer. A majority of my respondents were aware of illegal activities taking place in public offices in the form of bribery on a day to day basis. I found it interesting that one of my respondents listed a strike for higher wages as one of the illegal activities that took place in his work place. (M2).

My respondents believed that during Communism there were many more work opportunities because everyone was ordered to work. People finished school and were guaranteed a job. Now, people with university degrees have a very difficult time finding a job. My respondents believed that work opportunities are difficult for a majority except those with connections. They believed that employers do not want to pay taxes so they employ workers for three months and let them go to escape paying taxes. Some people work only for a year or a half year to earn a right to collect unemployment benefits and after that go back to work again. In Communism young and old were guaranteed employment, now nobody is and one of my respondents stated that she believed that women over forty years will not be employed (F6).

When my respondents were asked if they prefer how the work place was run during Communism over what is happening now, the majority said yes. The fact of a guaranteed job was the most frequently repeated reason. During Communism people could complain to their bosses and they would be listened to. They had respect. The institution where they worked was

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like a family as there was common respect among workers and bosses. And now: “people will knock each other off their stools to gain a position” (F8). Private businesses exploit workers. My respondents believed that the system during the Communist Era was not as corrupt as it is now. Those who did not like how the work place was run during communism believed that there was too much bureaucracy then as the work done by a hundred people could have been done by five. During Communism managers were promoted due to attendance at party schools and party friendships not because they were experts in a certain field. They argued that during Communism the institutions were not efficient, being run for the sake of it. In capitalism it is the economic outcome that is important.

My respondents believed that women’s role during capitalism have changed for the worse. Although my respondents believed that women during Communism did not occupy managerial positions they had workplace protection: no woman was allowed to be fired after she came back from maternity leave. Now a pregnant woman who goes on maternity leave does not know if she can come back to the job she had. My respondents believed that in the capitalist mode of production these women are being notified about the loss of their jobs by a registered letter. I noticed inherent sexism in one of my respondent’s response as he said that “women are not made to do men’s jobs” (M2). My respondents believed that women’s work during Communism was easier and that now women are more exploited.

B. Present: The Post-Communist Era

At the time of the interview, three of my respondents were on unemployment benefits, two others were on pensions and only two out of ten were performing the same job that they did during communism (although they did not stay with the same employer). Although one of my respondents was employed as a driver he was doing any work that his employer wanted him to do. If there was a need to work on the field he worked there: “I am employed as a driver but I do everything that has to be done in the work place. I am a painter too. If am needed on a car, I drive a car. If there is a work on the tractor, I drive a tractor” (M4).

All of my respondents except one found their jobs through connections but they described it in terms of “luck”. I find it amazing that none of my respondents found a job through governmental services that are supposed to help people find work. One of my respondents found his job without any connections, by simply asking in person if they would employ him (M10).

When my respondents were asked to compare their relationships with their bosses in the work place between the Communist Era and Post-Communist Era, they were irritated to be asked a question that seemed so obvious. My respondents would say that not much has changed but they would end their response by giving me a contradictory statement: “Although my boss has good and bad moments. Sometimes he is okay, sometimes he yells. He is moody, he will yell, yell and his bad day will pass by” (M4). My respondents believed that the Communist work place was easier and calmer. People were respected and now as one of my respondents put it:

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“these are such vicious times with even more vicious people who goes to the bosses saying things about another person because he is afraid for his own ass and therefore behaves as not a person” (M5). My respondents believed that they avoid conflicts by doing what they are told and not challenging the work provider because the moment you do your employment will be threatened. In the post-communist workplace people are afraid about losing their job and are jealous when others have more than themselves.

Most of my respondents liked nothing about their post-communist jobs. The only thing they liked was that they were making some money: “I like nothing. I go to work of necessity to support the family. I do not like anything. I do not like these relationships, I do not like these people. I am not impressed with anything. I am most eager to win a million in ‘toto lotek’ and do what I really like. [...] I like to be free and independent” (F6). What most of my respondents disliked the most was the nature of the relationships in the workplace because people envied others if one had more. A person who was a sales clerk in a grocery store did not like that she had to be available to her employer on call twenty four hours a day, as under Communism one worked eight hours a shift and that was it. This has changed.

All of my respondents were not making enough money from their jobs to live well in the Post-Communist era. One of my respondents who was on unemployment benefit, taking care of her three year old daughter, was receiving 450 zloty a month which was not even enough to pay for the rent (F3). One of my respondents calculated the money that he got paid per hour to about 2 or 3 zl./hr, which for him was a laughable amount (M5). All of my respondents are lacking money to live well and to have the comfort of not worrying they might lose their job and not have enough money to pay the bills. My respondents knew that the level of unemployment in Poland was high.

For a majority of my respondents promotion was not possible in their work places. Only for one of my respondents was promotion a practice at his work place and was related to a higher pay: “The promotion is done when a worker works a half year, did not do anything wrong, ‘so okay we have to give him something’” (M5). A majority of my respondents did not feel that their job was secure. They were receiving no benefits in their jobs and felt they were lucky to have a job. The only benefit for them was work itself and the money they received from it.

All of my respondents were aware of illegal economic activity being higher since the fall of Communism and that in this new mode of production they have no employment opportunities due to their age. A majority of them believed that the workplace under capitalism was run worse because people are exploited, disrespected, and had no social security. One of my respondents said that if you work for a capitalist the bathrooms are not clean and are often not accessible (F3, M4), and believed that people in managerial positions, with connections, benefited the most from the change over: “Sharks of the power. Everybody who had some power in their hands made money from it” (M5).

My respondents believed that there is a big difference in value between the working class and the middle class since the fall of Communism. They comprehended middle vs. working class

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differentiation much as people in Canada do: they thought ownership of money, not the means of production, defined the main difference between the classes. They believed that in a capitalist Poland there are only two classes: the rich and the poor, people who can afford things and live a good life and people who must save every zloty to survive from month to month.

E. Future

Although my respondents had very bleak views of the future they wished that if they were respected, paid more and their worker's rights were protected, their employment opportunities would change in Poland. One of my respondents stated: "I do not want to work on Saturday when I sign that I will work Monday to Friday. I wish to have a bathroom that I could use in dignity. I wish I could have a mirror there to comb my hair and wash myself. I wish to throw the water from washing the floor to the toilet, not outside, in the twenty first century. I wish to have conditions to be able to eat breakfast in the storeroom not on the boxes from the shoes, but a place for me to eat, to have a room to put tea on, not on the box with the sandals" (F3). A majority of my respondents would consider working away from Poland. They would also want their children to work outside of Poland because they believe that they would be respected more and have better opportunities: "Here is backwardness and I would not want to have anything to do with this rabble. We should be going ahead and we are going backward; we are only creating anniversaries [for events that were over long ago]. And ahead we cannot go with anything. Everything died: work, construction, nothing is happening. And we are going backward like a crayfish and maybe to the inquisition we will arrive" (M7).

My respondents have lost hope in the ability of government to change their present situation. Paradoxically considering their belief about leaving Poland for work, they believe that if everybody leaves, nothing is going to change in Poland. (F3, M4, M5)

My respondents have sexist and hopeless views on how women's roles will change in future under Capitalism: "I think women are liberated now. It is not that a man is higher and a woman is lower. Although with a salary it is various. The woman is always paid less. It is understandable that a man is stronger so he will do more work" (M4). One of my female respondent's (F3) hope was for women to have more comfortable lives by being able to breastfeed their babies in public. Another respondent blamed the clergy for women's situation in Poland and believed that it is only going to become worse: "It will definitely change for the worse because the clergy wants [women] to be house servants again. [...] So an educated woman for them is a tragedy" (M7).

When my respondents were asked about what is the proper role of women in a Capitalist economy they had a difficult time answering this question. I noticed inherent sexism in respondent's answers in both genders: "Women should do what they want to do: stay at home or work. And the husband should be able to make enough money to support the home" (F3).

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A majority of my respondents believed that the transition time from communism to capitalism was lasting too long. They were tired of waiting for improvements in their standards of living and had lost hope for any improvement. My respondents believed it would take at least another generation for things to get better.

Discussion

My question is whether contemporary Poles, who have gone through the communism-capitalism transition, have positive beliefs about the communist era. All of my respondents talked about the communist era in positive terms as they had more social security than now. During communism, the state guaranteed them work, regardless of their performance, as the work was obligatory. Unlike in capitalism, Polish workers were not free to sell their labour so had more security economically and socially. Now, in the new mode of production, they have lost that security as they are “free” labourers in a market not yet properly controlled by state intervention which would ensure similar social programs and workplace regulation enjoyed in the rest of Europe and in Canada.

Kramer believes that during communism workers did not care about political participation as they were satisfied with their jobs (1995). My respondents under capitalism are not satisfied with their standard of living but that did not lead to their political participation. It seems that they have the worst of two worlds: no job security and no political involvement under capitalism. They also do not join unions. Esping-Anderson offers an explanation: “When workers are completely market dependent, they are difficult to mobilize for solidaristic action. Since their resources mirror market inequalities, divisions emerge between the ‘ins’ and the ‘outs’, making labour-movement formation difficult” (2005). Esping-Anderson describes why under Communism Polish workers felt more secure: “De-commodification strengthens the worker and weakens the absolute authority of the employer” (2005). Little wonder my respondents were remarkably frustrated.

This research supports the work of Stenning (2005b) as all interviewed respondents noted that during communism they and their children enjoyed vacations organized and subsidized by the work place.

My research clearly shows that during communism the economy was embedded in society. Now that it is disembedded, much as Polanyi argued, my respondents now suffer. People in Poland face unemployment and inadequate pay for the work that they are doing, with no benefits involved. Current “wild” capitalism in Poland is a perfect example of what Polanyi called disembedding.

For the purpose of this study, the Marxian definition of class is used to determine my respondents’ class position. My respondents were unable to state their class position. They comprehended it in terms of money and ability to afford commodities. They did not recognize that in both communism and capitalism they were earning their living through selling their

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labour. In both systems they were working class. In the Communist Era they were making little money relative to western standards but since everybody was poor, and the economy was embedded in the state, the workers felt secure. When social standards are maintained even if they are low, people do not feel threatened. As Esping-Anderson states above, when such people enter the commodified labour market under capitalism, they are unable to see the benefits of collective actions as they are acting individually, in a disembedded economy.

Marx believes that workers are alienated as they do not have control over what they are producing. With the end of communism workers became more alienated as their labour was not respected by private owners of the means of production. The new capitalists are exploiting the working class to produce as much profit as possible and unless the state will provide legislation that will protect workers, unless the economy will be reembedded in society, the alienation will be the product of it. Workers in Poland have few rights, other than to earn money, but incomes that are not enough to reproduce themselves. With the economy disembedded in a capitalist mode of production workers become alienated. With high unemployment rates of 18% as of 2003 (Stenning, 2005c) capitalists have a huge reserve army of labourers and know that they can act as they please, especially since the state is behaving poorly by not acting to protect workers with legislation. With high corruption rates workers feel as if their work is somewhat pointless since they believe that those in the government steal money and honest workers have no choice but to work fourteen to sixteen hours a day to support their families.

My research shows clear support for Kramer's work as all of my respondents were faced with the pressure of higher performance and the threat of unemployment in the new capitalist mode of production. Polish workers regardless of the nature of the performed work had to obey the orders of their bosses and perform any work they were asked to do knowing that challenging their employer or reminding them about the ineffective workers' code will result in their being fired. In capitalist Poland workers feel helpless, faced with growing expectations that are not reflected in higher earnings.

My women respondents are excluded from civil society and full citizenship in two ways:

1. Their lack of formal employment, and over-employment in "part-time, ad hoc and badly paid work"
2. Growing responsibility for elder and child care that was previously the responsibility of the state (Pine, 2002)

Women in Poland are excluded from civil society as they do not have a control over their bodies. In Poland, after the fall of communism, abortion became illegal. Women who become pregnant and go on maternity leave lose their employment. That makes women less than citizens.

Women who participated in my research were performing work, as in Canada, in the service areas in which women are overrepresented.

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Since the fall of communism women have been taking over the responsibility for care of elderly and children because they cannot afford to put children in kindergarten. Often the reason they take care of the elderly might be that their older family member provides them with the financial resources, through a pension, to survive.

Although all of my respondents showed support for women's access to abortion, their responses were sexist. They set conditions on women's control over their bodies. Women who had as many children as they could afford might be allowed to abort another one. Or women who were assaulted, such as in the extreme case of rape, or who were physically unable to have a baby, were to be allowed an abortion. None of the respondents believed that women should be able to control their own bodies: there are less than full citizens to all of my respondents, male or female.

The trust between my respondents and me allowed them to be comfortable expressing very confidential information. For my purposes, because I knew them so well, I was able to catch inconsistencies in their information. My results might be skewed to the negative as I was interviewing people in a particularly economically depressed part of Poland. Perhaps in a richer part of the country, or in an urban area, my findings would have been rosier.

My study reveals how ten contemporary Poles feel about communism and the changes that continue to happen to them since 1989 with the introduction of a "wild" capitalism. My research provides an unpleasant, but relevant, insight into how a disembedded economic system seriously affects the life chances of millions of people.

Conclusions

My question has allowed me to explore the understanding of ten contemporary Poles of their life since the 1989 fall of communism: Do contemporary Poles, who have gone through the Communism-Capitalism Transition, have positive beliefs about the Communist Era? It is clear that my respondents are suffering terribly in economic and social terms. The capitalism they have been working under for almost twenty years is not yet properly controlled through state or union intervention. Compounding my respondents' difficulties is the intrusion of the Catholic Church into politics, especially into the lives of women: women's lives are threatened when their access to abortion is arbitrarily stopped.

My respondents were confused about their class position, and about women's rights: it seems that their concerns are personal and not well-thought out. Instead of joining political parties, or unions, they are focussed on their personal problems and interpret them accordingly. They are perfect citizens under capitalism, as they were under communism: focused only on what is affecting them personally, not wishing or able to organize to protect themselves collectively.

The influence of capitalism and the Catholic Church, unless countered by state and union action, as has been done in North America, will allow decades of abuse of workers in Poland.

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One hope is Poland's membership in the European Union. This allows Poles access to the European Court of Justice in Brussels where denial of abortion access are being fought by women, with one case being recently won against the Catholic-influenced Polish state's criminal denial of abortion rights to women. As well, the European Union's unwillingness to provide money to a Polish government that is corrupt, sexist, and non-transparent is a potential source of help for the Polish working-class: Unless Poland is willing to meet European Union's social standards Poland will suffer from a lack of billions of euros of subsidies. It is difficult to believe that this will not have an effect on changing the recalcitrant attitudes of Polish politicians.

Poland is out of step with the rest of Europe. Sexist legislation is egregious, but Poland is trying to have a preamble attached to the proposed constitution of the European Union making a reference to "Christian values:" fortunately European Union members are unwilling to allow this. Poland currently represents a curious mixture of capitalism and religion that is as confusing to my respondents, as it is foreign to the rest of Europe and to North America: even Catholic Ireland has attempted to adjust abortion policy in the face of "abort tours" of over 6500 Irish women to England every year (Oaks, 2002). If Polish politicians do not show such flexibility, the working class in Poland will continue to suffer in ways not known in other western democracies, which long ago removed direct religious influence from their political structures for purposes of social harmony. Do Polish politicians not remember the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia which removed religion as a cause of wars between independent European states? If Poland continues out of step with the rest of Europe it seems alienation is possible, from their fellow EU members, on the basis of religion for the first time in centuries. Is it possible that Poland can be seen as a fundamentalist religious-capitalist state such as Saudi Arabia: a monarchical state where the government reflects only the desires of the ruling class, where patriarchy and capitalism are 'wild,' where women suffer because of few political, economic, or social rights? The comparison is extreme yet the similarities are obvious. For the people of Poland to hear such a comparison would be offensive, however my research indicates that such a comparison would not be out of place.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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