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The Countryside and the Young Rural Generation From Social Advancement to Social Marginalization

In situations which are socially and sociologically ambiguous — as in the Polish countryside of the late transformation period — there is a growing need for theoretical categories which allow the sociologist to see what cannot be seen without their application. There are many analytical categories at the disposal of a sociologist which can be applied to the situation and problems of the present day Polish countryside (although according to many current researchers the cognitive usefulness of many of these is illusory). The one adopted in this presentation, although not very brilliant in its theoretical foundations, has an important advantage in that it allows one to notice some particular problems (social, political) resulting from the socializing singularity of borderland environments. We are convinced to use this category by classical approaches and applications dating back to Simmel's concept of 'the alien,' or, later, the concept of the 'marginal area' and the 'marginal man' coined by representatives of the Chicago school. This is appropriate for the description of psychological and political consequences of both the borderland and marginal positioning of the countryside in the structure of industrial society. The borderland concept points not only to the specific socializing processes which individuals living in a cultural borderland are subjected to or how the internal organization of the marginal group is formed yet also the psychological and political consequences of longterm marginalization. The marginal area is conceived as a region where two cultures overlap and the occupying group partakes of the traits of both cultures. Psychologically the marginal area is a kind of cultural area, which acts as a mature, fully-fledged cultural space, endowed with its own socializing power (Goldenweiser, 1925: 245). In these concepts it is stressed that borderland (marginality) is a specific place (or position) in the social structure, which has a particular socializing power and which shapes out specific psychological types, known in sociology as the *marginal man*.

A *marginal man* is somebody who, living in the borderland of cultures or groups, has found himself on the margin of each culture, but is a member of neither (Park, 1928: 881–890). It therefore happens that the *marginal man* is considered as an alien in a given society. In another approach the *marginal man* appears as a result of incomplete participation in the structures and cultures available in society, somebody ‘non-defined’ in the language of the society he lives in. The above facts have important psychological consequences as well as social and political ones. Psychologically, a *marginal man* may be a cultural hybrid characterized by feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and rejection, which are common aspects of strong social or race stigmatization (Park, 1928: 892). In either case he is somebody who possesses the feeling of cultural conflict resulting in dual identification and dual loyalty — especially when the state emphasizes assimilation of all cultural minorities (Stonequist, 1935: 1–12). Moreover, the *marginal man* can be characterized as ‘not being a true “marginal” individual in the defined sense, but as a participant member of a *marginal culture*, every bit as real and complete to him as in a non-marginal culture to the non-marginal man’ (Goldberg, 1941: 53). This can involve the inability to define his self-identity.

Both the feeling of marginality and the lack of such a feeling, which expresses itself in hypersensitivity, imply specific social behaviour which in turn, from the point of view of the majority of society (or its political leaders), is often unwelcome. First of all, it has certain traits of clientelism, pretence and helplessness. Marginal hypersensitivity felt by people dissatisfied with their place in social structure constitutes a threat to the stability of the social order (as well as being a carrier of social change and anxiety). Involuntary (not problematized) marginality, which is expressed by the lack of feeling of self identity and atomization of group bonds, makes any organized political action difficult or virtually impossible (as well as being an excellent medium for all spontaneous actions or manipulations). These two kinds of reaction acting together result in a situation in which marginalized social groups easier become the object of social changes than their subject. This fact does not diminish their social strength but makes it more relentless and blind, and scarcely subject to political rationalization.

Nowadays, mostly due to postmodernism, yet another understanding of borderland problems is promoted. Here the difference (cultural, social) — being ‘in between’ — is not necessarily regarded as a source of marginalization and restrictions but as a value, challenge and developmental chance. Within this understanding of borderland, the most adequate kind of presence in the world becomes not blurring the borders, but exposing and crossing them, which in turn enriches people and guards them against traps of postmodern communities. Borderline ‘ethos’ is here to serve as an exposing factor for traditionally stifled marginal cultures. Being aware of both

the strong and weak points of places which we inherit lets us model new, borderline, solutions which can be carried into effect within the framework of existing structures and authorities.

Although functioning on the social outskirts in most modern societies, the countryside offers opportunities which are in many countries equivalent to those in town. In communist countries, where the policy of marginalizing the country and private farming stemmed from doctrine, the country was deprived of social awareness as a valuable space of identification.

Although the socialist state enfranchised the Polish peasants, it could not accept and support private land ownership for doctrinal reasons. Being too strong and important a part of Polish tradition, and, above all, a very significant factor of economic equilibrium of the state, and consequently a factor guaranteeing social peace, private land ownership had to be tolerated by the state. Private land ownership was not considered a threat to the system only because all rights to purchase, possess or use land were subject to strict control and restrictions imposed by the state.¹

For the same doctrinal reasons no important social position was available to peasants within the system. The slogan of the workers — peasants' alliance, being one of the ideological principles of socialism, in reality constituted a demand for the acceptance of the system. At the same time, many pejorative stereotypes of the peasant — kulak, the peasant — sponger, the ignorant and cunning peasant were constructed for social use. During the last period of socialist rule the authorities frequently declared a protective attitude towards privately owned farms. This fact together with growing protectionism of the state for ineffective farms were seen by the remaining social groups as groundless privileges granted by the system to peasants and in reality deepened the social isolation and marginalization of the country during that political epoch.

In the new social order communism provided neither a proper place for private land ownership and social classes connected with it, nor any room for ideologically alien cultures. In the clash with the offer of the socialist system peasant culture was to collapse, disappear, break down as an anachronistic, weaker, less attractive, worse offer. Rapid industrialization, although economically well grounded (acceleration of development of a civilizationally backward country), also had evident and hidden political goals. Among them there were a radical change of social structure, changes of mentality and lifestyle, together with attitudes flowing from pre-communist traditions, all for the sake of superiority of socialist modernism.

¹ E.g., because there existed a legally approved maximal area of privately owned land, there was no place for any differentiation of social structure and hierarchy among the peasants, and, moreover, the process of natural selection of leaders and independent political representation in the country was blocked.

Socialism was a very attractive offer for the poor, first of all it brought a promise of egalitarianism and the historic social justice, compensation for the unjust treatment of the socially discriminated. Educational egalitarianism, carried into effect with great emphasis and political enthusiasm, meant a chance for social rise for the young rural generation. A new system of opportunities appeared, offering new social positions, a new lifestyle, new ways of participating in social life and culture. All those offers clearly went beyond the local village system. The country, according to the rhetoric of assimilationist socialist policy, was never recommended as a worthy possibility. Thus taking on the challenge and employing new life opportunities, put forward by socialist utopia, was equivalent to leaving the hitherto occupied environment and building new anti-rural identifications.

Stamped with the policy of both 'repressive tolerance' and assimilation, the countryside was more and more clearly losing its social charm for the young. Opportunities presented by the countryside could obviously not be as attractive, as other, extra-rural, value criteria. Older farmers, leaving their farms to their fate, also soon became convinced that a career in town is the only reasonable life choice. Today, in an advanced period of the system transformation, considering the country a place forgotten by people, God and history is especially common among its inhabitants; moreover, such opinions carry the burden of highly negative emotions. This fact is manifested by a rising wave of peasant contestation, peasants' opinions about the course of changes taking place since 1989, the plans and life aspirations of rural and peasant youth and an absolute lack of generation conflict in the country. Should all these phenomena be a measure of the country's position in the social system, despite a radical change of the political system, it would undoubtedly still be marginal.

This thesis seems to be well supported by both current events and by the results of numerous sociological studies. Here we present one of them, a longitudinal study carried out by the researchers of the Institute for Rural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences.² This method, rarely employed nowadays (due to high costs and the need for teamwork), consists in investigating the lives of a chosen generation of young people and the systematic measuring of consecutive movements within the chosen group of population. This research has been carried out for twenty-five years and has become a *double longitudinal study*, because we now deal with two generations (Figure 1). The examined cohorts (each consisting of a few thousand people) consist of, on the one hand, those born in 1957 ('children of

² The studies were led by Prof. Z. Kwieciński (the author of many works on educational socio-pathology), Prof. R. Borowicz (interested in the problem of school selection) and recently the author of this paper (investigations of social personality in relation to social system changes).

the former system'), and on the other, those born in 1984 ('children of the transformation period'). Both groups were studied for the first time when the young generation representing them was 15 years old. This means that 'children of the former system' (the forty-year-olds now), were first studied in 1972, and the 'youth of the transformation period' in 1998. At the same time, i.e. in 1998 the last survey of the generation of forty-year-olds took place. Complete cohorts of school children were always included and these were always post-primary schools in the Toruń region. With time the number of people researched dropped (migration beyond the research area, deaths, refusal, absence).

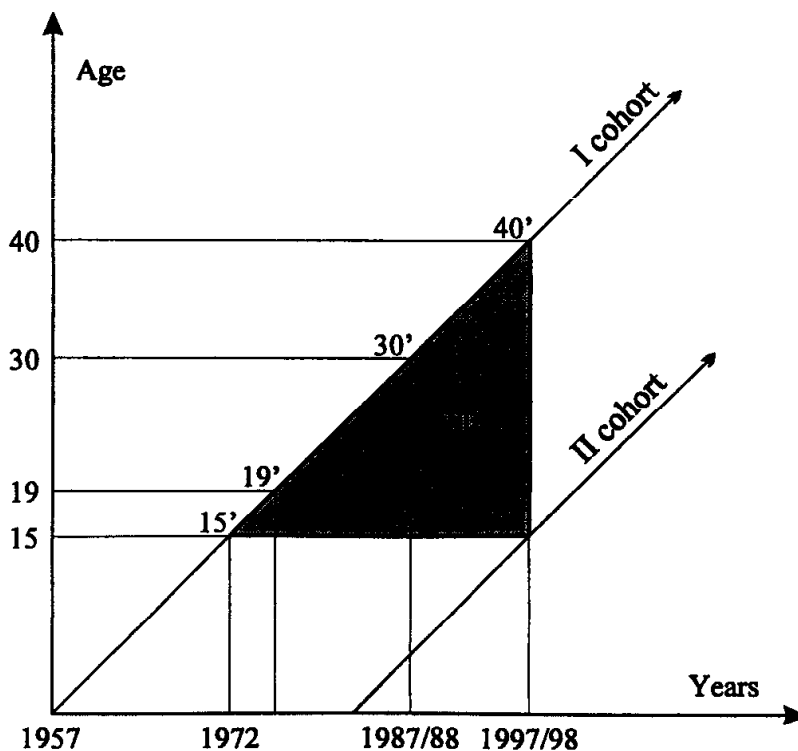


Figure 1. The procedure of Toruń longitudinal research

Explanations: 15' — age of first cohort during first research (beginning of first series of surveys); 15" — age of 2nd cohort during first research (beginning of second series of surveys); TIC — triangle of inter-generational comparisons.

Designing our study in the way described above, we achieved the possibility of many different comparisons, diachronic and synchronic, inter-generational and inter-systematic. Various research methods and techniques were applied — quantitative and qualitative, educational (school tests), psychological (IQ tests, personality surveys), sociological (questionnaires, subject interviews, biographical interviews). In the second series of surveys which we have recently begun we are trying to apply the rigour of repeating the research from both the quintessential point of view (analysis of the youth's school and cultural competences, their educational aspirations and

future plans, family living conditions) as well as from the technical point of view (the same research location, similar time-frame, same survey methods and tools).

The research, whose problems developed together with the studied generation, was originally aimed at noticing (socio-cultural and economic) conditioning in the school careers of the young, and proved the existence of deep inequalities between the town and the rural areas in a country where educational and social egalitarianism constituted the foundations of the political system. Although the number of issues grew, rural aspects have always been a priority in our research. In this paper we present only the results illustrating the processes of marginalization of the Polish country, mainly in their subjective aspect.

At the end of the eighties, according to World Bank economists the best post-war years for Polish agriculture, about 40% of the Poles lived in the countryside, and the rural youth constituted 38% of all Polish youth. In the research under consideration, we noticed a trend showing that, at that time, 15.3% of the youth (from the same demographical class) migrated from the countryside into towns, and that 7% of their peers came from towns to the countryside. Due to those movements, e.g., the number of young farmers doubled (from 8% to 16%), and increased the number of young rural intelligentsia (from 6% to 8%) within one studied generation. These changes do not reverse the stratification typical for the average Polish village, but at least prove some increase in the level of attractiveness of rural life that can be observed when the condition of its main economic sector improves.

Who were the young people remaining in the countryside in those years? A monographic aspect of the same study revealed that the young rural generation in socialist Poland hardly showed a positive identification with their own environment, their social position and the resulting vision of their own future (11% of those studied). In most cases we dealt either with some form of negative identification (40%), or with cases of marginalized personality — culturally indifferent, equivalent to Merton's category of the retreatists (49%). All these types referred to life patterns based on family, work and financial prosperity, and gained fulfilment using mostly conservative, survival oriented life strategies.

Two important features can be noticed in this picture. Firstly, a weak socializing power in both local (rural) and global (socialist, state controlled) reference systems. Clear-cut social types, which would show the domination of homogeneous cultural influences (either rural or socialist) were hardly ever present. Secondly, the hybrid nature domineering in personality characteristics of types pointed out to very weak, unclear and blurred identifications. The strongest socializing trend consisted in a specific cultural 'vagueness' of young rural inhabitants, and a greater or lesser feeling of social alienation, which in turn began to acquire a form of political apathy (Table 1).

Table 1

Young Poles' attitude towards 'real socialism'
just before the collapse of the system

	Big town	Small town	Country
Positive	11.4	16.0	14.5
Negative	20.3	20.0	16.3
Ambivalent	13.4	15.0	14.0
Indifferent	55.0	49.0	55.2

Source: Empirical study, *Thirty-year-old cohort*, 1988 (N = 4831).

During the following ten years, i.e. the first ten years of the system transformation, we noticed within the studied group a trend consisting of the withdrawal of the young rural generation from the countryside or typically rural professions. Farmers are a special case here. While in the eighties we noticed a return to the profession of farmers, there is now an opposite trend, only 60% of farmers remained in their jobs. 'New' people have arrived, but they only constitute 11% of this group, moreover, the majority of them are former unqualified labourers who lost their jobs in towns. This phenomenon illustrates the evaluation of the rural situation in Poland after 1989, and confirms the rather unenthusiastic opinions of rural dwellers about the general changes taking place in Poland (Table 2).

Table 2

The young generation's attitude towards changes taking place
in Poland after 1989

	Big town	Small town	Countryside in general	Farmers
Positive	73.1	67.5	55.6	47.8
Negative	11.3	9.2	21.8	38.2
Ambivalent	12.0	16.6	17.2	20.5
Indifferent	3.6	6.7	5.4	3.4

Source: Empirical study, *Forty-year-old cohort*, 1998 (N = 1250).

The experiences of ten years' change mainly taking place at the cost of young rural inhabitants dwellers (unemployment) confirm nostalgic attitudes towards socialist Poland present in the countryside. In our study, 1/4 of the young rural generation shows strong pro-socialist attitudes (and even more than that, namely 1/3 of the studied farmers). A pro-capitalist attitude is characteristic for 22% of rural forty-year-olds (and only 17% of farmers).

There are many reasons for such a situation. The main agitation is caused by the consequences of the state agricultural policy, privatization, social inequalities, the behaviour of the ruling elite, the unprecedented crime rates, and so on. The greatest dissatisfaction is, however, caused by poor economic conditions and the low standard of living. In Poland there is still a certain regularity, namely the less urbanized the environment, the more low income inhabitants live there, and vice versa. While in a big town 26% of those studied are at a low-income level, in the countryside there are 42% of them, and among farmers as many as 62%. Such bad results are only characteristic for families of the unemployed and pensioners.

A politically powerful factor is the evaluation of the current standard of living in comparison to the former situation (especially before the system change). Situations where people believe that their standard of living has improved are politically proper. Those where a social group has a strong feeling of its own degradation are politically troublesome. In present day Poland such groups firstly comprise farmers and workers living in the countryside (Table 3).

Table 3

Standard of living evaluation in comparison to the end of the eighties

	Big town	Small town	Countryside in general	Farmers
Higher	54.3	47.2	41.7	32.5
The same	14.7	17.8	12.5	14.5
Lower	31.0	35.0	45.8	53.0

Source: Empirical study, *Forty-year-old cohort*, 1998 (N = 1250).

Table 4

Would you count yourself among those who in new Poland have

	Big town	Small town	Countryside in general	Farmers	Unemployed
Good opportunities	28.8	22.8	17.6	8.5	8.1
Average opportunities	56.0	62.3	62.7	66.7	59.0
No opportunities	15.2	19.7	19.7	24.8	32.9

Source: Empirical study, *Forty-year-old cohort*, 1998 (N = 1250).

A comparison of the living conditions of rural and farmers' families with the past period shows a relatively frequent feeling of social deprivation and degradation. This is a very important reason, for which rural inhabitants, especially farmers, do not see any special chances or new opportunities for themselves in the Polish transformations. Only the unemployed and pensioners feel even more pushed aside (Table 4).

It is worth considering that, in such a situation, young rural inhabitants are no less optimistic and convinced of their opportunities of success than other representatives of their own generation, i.e. the majority of them seem to have will power and a strong personality which seems beyond rational explanation. Taking into account the economic condition of their families and of Polish agriculture in general, farmers really seem to be a very special group. The analysis of their plans and life strategies shows that they cannot be considered among those who are going to remain passive simply in order to survive. Such behaviour is characteristic for only 11% of their representatives, which is the lowest coefficient in the studied generation. Farmers do not show very strong or specific consumerist attitudes, either. Such attitudes appear less frequently than in other social groups. A distinctive feature among farmers is their pro-family attitude, and, what is worth stressing, their pro-investment attitude. This means that those relatively young farmers are concerned on the one hand with their children's future (i.e. their success away from the countryside), and on the other hand, with the good condition of their own farms. Such attitudes have always been in conflict, because educating children and planning their future outside the countryside left farms without successors. Nowadays, farmers do not hesitate to let their children go away to towns, regardless of the future consequences of this fact for their farms. But anyhow, good farming is always a historic and life necessity (being the only source of supporting a family) because land is a value in itself. And, last but not least, land may be the only safe guarantee of children's future in case the outside world proves hostile forcing them to return to the countryside.

This is even more probable as data at our disposal point out that social differences with regard to the education accessibility still exist, or have even grown in Poland. It is clear that access to good education now limits the level of social rise in our country more than ever. Although 90% of the respondents think educational opportunities are plentiful in Poland nowadays, it is clear that the wide educational offer is only available to children from well-off families, living in big cities. The more rural the environment, the sharper the social consciousness of the existence of those barriers. These feelings are confirmed by the social distribution of secondary school youth, where rural or peasant youth are a relatively smaller percentage of those attending good secondary schools, guaranteeing easier access to

further education (Table 5, first row). Rural youth generally attend schools of the worst kind, offering basic vocational education (Table 5, third row).

Table 5

Secondary school choices according to permanent domicile

	Big town	Small town	Countryside in general	Farmers
Secondary school	49.4	42.2	27.0	24.7
Vocational college	19.9	25.6	33.7	40.1
Basic vocational school	24.6	32.1	36.1	35.2

Source: Empirical study, *Fifteen-year-old cohort*, 1998 (N = 5000).

A new phenomenon is the fact that the majority of young students, despite their background and the type of school they attend, aspire to higher social positions and plan further education (Table 6). Although the level of aspirations is subject to classical, social and environmental stratification, higher educational expectations are immensely popular (considering Polish standards), even among rural and peasant youth.

Table 6

The level of educational aspirations according to permanent domicile

	Big town	Small town	Countryside in general	Farmers
Low	7.9	8.6	13.2	13.8
Average	23.3	23.8	25.5	27.7
High	56.5	51.8	41.9	40.2
Unspecified	12.2	15.0	19.4	18.3

Source: Empirical study, *Fifteen-year-old cohort*, 1998 (N = 5000).

The same study shows that a little over half the rural and peasant youth would like to live in the countryside. If this happens, in the future only 14% of our respondents will go there (now rural youth constitutes 1/4 of them). Only six of the 5000 people in the study would like to be professional farmers. This fact surely says most about the attractiveness of the rural life offer in present day Poland. Rural youth want to live happily and affluently, many of them want a good education and to achieve professional success — far from the countryside and typically rural professions. These young people, much like their town counterparts, would like to consider the new Polish reality as a world of personal opportunities. The system trans-

formation going from specific 'real socialism' rules to typical 'real capitalism' rules normally requires employing individual resources, i.e. all the energy and ambition promoting the pursuit of individual success and happiness. This is a great opportunity for developing individual abilities. It is also a chance for converting personal and individual values into foundations of a new social order. The young rural generation, consisting of more and less experienced people, have far fewer chances of joining the stream of changes. The marginalization processes, which the country was subjected to for over forty years, left behind a heritage which is not fully compatible with the logic of the transformational process.

The Polish transformation is not only about internal changes of the system, but also exposes Poland to the influence of western culture. We all live here not only on the borderland of political epochs, but also in different cultural worlds. The feeling of marginality is experienced not only by the political elite striving towards unification with the economic and military structures of Western Europe, but also a feeling familiar to the majority of Poles aspiring to western life patterns. The years of cultural isolation, opening of the borders and the multimedia flood of western culture have created a situation where western patterns are commonly accepted as the obviously right and valuable choice. European policy, ideologically stressing the necessary assimilation of associate countries of a United Europe, strengthens the pro-western aspirations of many Poles, which are, moreover, connected with the long lasting feeling of marginality. All those factors greatly complicate the identity of the Polish youth. Thanks to, e.g., Erik Erikson, we are aware of the possible consequences of the young person's inability to identify with an excessively opaque and incomprehensible world. This may mean negative identity, escaping into schematic visions of the world, being subjected to manipulation or indoctrination, xenophobia, etc. Therefore, elementary cultural competences which are acquired by the youth at home and at school are of fundamental importance.

Table 7

Intellectual level (as shown by Thorndike and Forshay's reading comprehension test) according to family status

	Intelligentsia	White collar workers	Entrepreneurs	Workers	Farmers
Low*	3.6	6.2	7.4	14.5	15.1
Average	46.2	60.3	60.5	66.1	60.5
High	50.3	33.5	32.1	19.3	24.4

* 'Low' here means the level of functional illiteracy.

Source: Empirical study, *Fifteen-year-old cohort*, 1998 (N = 5000).

There is no doubt (Table 7) that there is one more factor putting rural youth in an even worse position and confronting them with a much more difficult task than their town counterparts. Rural youth are poorly educated, the majority are deprived of roots, they have meagre chances of achieving their goals and fulfilling aspirations (economic and cultural poverty of rural families, the poverty of rural education), moreover, they are in danger of being unemployed.

It is clear that the simultaneous expectations of both rural generations (youth and their parents) to leave the countryside as soon as possible (in order to be successful) were not confronted with a positive programme for the peasants' countryside (it might be archaic, anyway). In such a situation the most reasonable strategy (on the part of the state) seems to be investing in people (in education) thus giving the youth the means to leave the countryside with a feeling of a life opportunity. The main guarantee of such an opportunity (first of all to the system) is graduating from a good school available to a rural child. And this means priority of the educational reform in Poland and a necessity for profound 're-socializational' work devoted to the group of decision making reformers.

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