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Peasants – Moderators of Social Change in Poland

Abstract

Further to the research entitled 'The Poles' (carried out between 1980 and 2000) a view is presented here on the basis of which the countryside and peasants are a unique residue of the system. This is our kind of 'deposit,' a previously unresolved problem which enters further stages of social development and debilitates the structural readiness of the system to take on new, more complex challenges resulting from Poland's opening towards the West, world economic trends, etc. We also believe that the Polish countryside and the peasants in particular fulfil an exceptionally important (yet still ambivalent) role in the process of social change: much like after the Second World War, when socialism was being built in Poland, the peasants are now also moderators of the profound and socially arduous system transformation. Bearing a large proportion of the burden of transformation, they alleviate the intensity of social shock. However, they moderate the change which could come about sooner and be more dynamic as well as making it less clear, while also making it gentler to the system and seeing that it does not generate too many social tensions.

At the same time, as a result of the permanent exploitation of the countryside its former resources have run out. Further change will be more and more dependent on change in the wider social context, particularly changes on the employment market and the success of the education reform. The lack of an active and rational policy in this regard will result in the inhibition of the current rural situation and Poland will enter the next phase in the process of change with the burden of the system residue which distances us in relation to other countries, incapable of undertaking new challenges.

Keywords: peasants, countryside, social change, the process of social development.

The countryside and agriculture have always been an essential part of the Polish specificity. That is a residue of our system – an unresolved problem which enters subsequent stages of social development, debilitating the structural readiness of the system to undertake other, more complex

assignments emanating from the process of Poland's opening towards the West, world economic trends etc. While the West underwent intensive industrialisation and urbanisation in the 19th century and almost 70% of the population lived in towns (as in the case of 19th century England), in Poland over 70% of the population still lived in the countryside during the inter-war period (Malanowski, 1970: 69). This very fact already then distanced us from the West. After the Second World War the countryside and fragmented peasant agriculture were among the more serious problems for the socialist modernisation of Poland which the Party authorities failed to solve. The price which agriculture had to pay for the state's rejection of compulsory collectivisation was its exclusion from the list of priorities and consequently, a long-time backwardness with which it entered the market economy era. It currently continues to be the most sensitive issue in the system transformation in Poland. For politicians, farmers continue to be the 'troublesome class' (Gorlach, 1995), and the so-called peasant issue raises fervent social emotions, hindering important political decisions. The prospect of EU integration aggravates this problem even more.

There are essentially two views on this matter. The first is connected with the conviction that the countryside and the peasants – anachronistic and culturally backward – are an obstruction to transformation in Poland. The second assumes that Poland's agrarian and rustic features are not only her ballast but an opportunity for development, whereas the proposed standards connected with EU integration violate Poland's elementary economic interest and push us onto a path which does not protect us from repeating the serious and very costly mistakes which were earlier made in agricultural and rural policy by the more developed countries. A third view may, however, be constructed on this matter. It is backed by some historical and specifically sociological facts.

I shall now try to show that the Polish countryside and the peasants in particular fulfil an exceptionally important, yet ambivalent, role in the process of social change – that they are the *m o d e r a t o r s* in the profound, socially arduous system change. Bearing the burden of most costs of transformation, they alleviate the intensity of social shock. While moderating the change which could be faster and more dynamic they also make sure that from being uncontrollable and violent it becomes gentler and smoother, thereby not generating too many social tensions.

The Peasants' Role at the Time of Building Socialism and at Present

The peasants played a similar role in the post-war period. According to Jan Szczepański they enabled the efficient implementation of building socialism in Poland. Not only because the majority of the working class was

recruited from the countryside, which the new system and young Polish industry required but also because the peasants bore the main costs of socialist modernisation of the country. Tax collected from them, i.e. mainly so-called compulsory deliveries were the fundamental protection for reforms from after the war until the 1970s (Szczepański, 1967, 1973a, 1973b). Thus the specificity of the social position of the peasants (food owners and producers) as well as the specificity of socialist industrialisation of the country (not having financial resources resulting from the natural accumulation of capital, dictated by the processes of economic growth) led to them being burdened with the essential costs of industrialisation. It is hard to overrate their contribution to the financing of industrialisation. Compulsory deliveries not only relieved the burden of feeding the nation but, relying on food prices, allowed the authorities to calculate low maintenance costs and concentrate essential state financial resources on building socialism (Szczepański, 1973b: 22).

Every radical project involving social change is linked with a specific psychological cost – it demands sacrifices from the people until the results of change appear, commencing a process of growth. This willingness to make sacrifices is very important particularly in plans foreseeing an intense pace of development. Socialist industrialisation, using and mobilising social and moral forces more than other historically known types of industrialisation could rely on the patience and generosity of a considerable section of Polish society after the war. Nevertheless, it was only the peasants who, due to their mentality and ethos which demands the protection of land value and ownership, patiently approved of being exploited. That ‘consented exploitation’ as described by Szczepański after J. W. Krutch (1967: 15; 1973b: 15) was all the more severe since the first two phases of the most intensive industrialisation occurred at a time of equally intensive armament and the Cold War with the West. On the other hand, the 1980s brought essential changes which are considered as most important for Polish agriculture (and consequently, for the further shape of social change in Poland). That period, which meant stagnation and predicted the economic downfall of the system was ‘the golden age’ for the Polish peasants. While most social groups were experiencing the consequences of the economic crisis and food shortages, for the first time the income and financial position of the agricultural population began exceeding average incomes of the entire employed population. As a result of the general economic recession and lack of supply of production means, peasants could not invest their money in farming and thus spent it on consumer goods and the improvement of their standard of living (Sikorska, 1998). In this way they clearly reduced the distance which separated them from the town. At the same time peasant farms – in the light of further change – appeared incapable of undertaking the challenges of the market economy and were uncompetitive.

As a result of the countryside's poor technological, cultural and development level in the nineties it was designated a client's role in the transformation process (Szafraniec, 1998). The countryside was given key importance on account of the direction and dimensions of transformation. The countryside was in a very unfavourable position. The model and structure of agriculture were not congruent with solutions which were considered appropriate in the new social reality. Two conditions were necessary for change to take place – intensive economic development enabling the allocation of a rural labour force and a thorough education reform which would assist social change. The expectation for economic growth for reasons which constitute another problem was replaced by a deepening recession. The education reform appeared to be mainly a search for financial cuts in state education. The countryside became, on the one hand, the object of free-market forces and, on the other, of paternalistic moves by the state which spent public money under political pressure without any conception. Unemployment, both official and unofficial, the drastic fall in incomes in all social groups, the growing number of people living on benefits, agriculture's low contribution to GNP were but a few of the problems pointing to the necessity for changes which were to take place in the countryside (and, according to liberal doctrine – by its own means). In the second half of the nineties it became increasingly clear that the key role of the countryside and farming in the processes of transformation in Poland began meaning something totally different. In the face of the enormity of social duties and financial troubles of the state as well as the numerous tensions generated by the process of social change, it became increasingly clear that the countryside and family farming are a buffer bearing many of the tensions of the system. It can therefore be stated that nowadays, during Poland's capitalist modernisation which is occurring in an equally complex international context, the countryside and the peasants seem to be fulfilling a role similar to that of the early decades of the Polish People's Republic. In the meantime, their patience and consent for exploitation are running out. Nevertheless, the countryside continues to be an effective absorber of socially superfluous people. It has taken on and feeds large numbers of peasant workers who were the first to lose jobs in the early years of transformation. It takes on and feeds the rural youth for whom there is no work on either the local or wider job markets. Polish farmers, independently and without much state agricultural support, have been making the effort to adapt to new market economy demands with all the political consequences.

Sources and Context of Analysis

The analyses in this paper are based on 20 years' research, *The Poles*, conducted at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Acad-

emy of Science.¹ This research included twenty most significant years of Polish transformation: the Polish way of quitting socialism in favour of democracy and the free market (1980–2000). The author of these words was invited to the research programme and this text is an attempt at showing the dynamic of change in the Polish countryside with particular emphasis on the changes taking place in the peasant stratum.

The panel carried out on representative tests comprising the whole of Poland, numbering from 2500 (1980) to 1746 people (2000), maintained a constant proportional share of rural inhabitants in the overall number of those researched (38–40%). The proportion of farmers varied according to the current situation. When the category of ‘peasants-workers’ existed in Polish society, people working in farming (farmers and ‘peasants-workers’) represented well over a third of the entire researched group (beginning of the 1980s). When the ‘two-profession’ category disappeared, the peasant samples were from 19% (1990) to 10% (2000) of the researched group.

Rural Social Resources – Changes in Social Structure and the Employment Market

From the end of the Second World War until now the Polish rural population has only slightly risen (from approximately 14.7 million to 15.5 million). The proportion of rural inhabitants in the entire Polish population has not changed, i.e. 38–40% (Frenkel, 2001). Since the beginning of the 1990s a growing number of people aged below 35 have been moving to the country. This proves, on the one hand, the interruption in the departure of young people from the countryside to the city, on the other, a generation exchange among farm owners. At the same time, there is clear social polarisation in the country. The number of professionally active people is falling while there are growing numbers of people living on unearned income, who are without regular work and considered useless.

Unemployment is, of course, the main cause of these changes. Growing numbers of young people, aged under 35 are without work. Since the mid-nineties they have represented a third of the professionally inactive in the countryside. Twenty-year statistics, confirmed by GUS, show that in the analysed period the number of people living on unearned income has almost doubled: from 23% to almost 40%. Unofficial rural unemployment is another phenomenon existing mainly on peasant farms. It is estimated to include over 800,000 people (1995 GUS data). There is a current employ-

¹ This paper is the result of team research conducted at The Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, The Polish Academy of Science, led by Władysław Adamski on the synthesis of research results in the series ‘The Poles.’ The research was carried out thanks to the KBN grant: ‘The social dynamic of transformation. The Poles 1980–2000: a comparison.’

ment surplus of about 1.26 million people in Polish agriculture, whereas if territorial norms for farms were to increase, that number would potentially be 2.5–2.7 million, i.e. that many people would have to stop working in agriculture for it to rationalise its structure according to the western model (Frenkel, 2001; Rosner, 2001; Rosner, 2001a).

Office workers are the employment group which is growing most dynamically in the countryside (from 5% to 10% of the rural social composition between 1995 and 2000). The rural intelligentsia seem to be a dying category (an unprecedented drop since the war to just 2% of the entire rural population). Rural entrepreneurship is developing steadily (at a level of 5.5% over the past few years). Farmers, the fundamental rural social group, are undergoing growing differentiation. Lets take a closer look at this process.

The system change meant exceptional challenges for Polish agriculture. Peasant smallholdings, which were very fragmented and technologically backward had to face the processes of capitalist rationalisation in the entire economy (Gorlach, 2002). The first visible effect of adaptation were changes in the land structure of farms. These changes only affect 1/4 of farms and occur most dynamically on large farms (i.e. over 20 ha in Poland). There is a stabilising trend among medium-sized farms (11–19 ha) and particularly small ones which, together with the specific rules permitting the registration of agricultural plots as smallholdings entitled to state benefits, has led to the growth in number of small and very small smallholdings, under 5 ha (from 32.1% in 1995 to 59.8% in 2000). There are currently 462,000 very small smallholdings (under 2 ha) and this number is on the increase (Frenkel, 1995; Rosner, 2000; Wilkin, 2000). A second clear consequence of the adaptation processes in agriculture are the worsening economic conditions of the majority of farms. In the second half of the 1990s the number of people with an income increase dropped from 18.2% to 4.6%. Whereas there has been a growth in number of those whose financial situation has worsened (50% in 1995 to 72% in 2000). The economic stability of the remainder (23.4%) in fact means vegetation.

Despite such unfavourable changes, in the mid-nineties there still existed noticeable interest in searching for a development strategy for their own smallholdings. Whereas by the end of the nineties the optimism of owners of developing farms broke down dramatically – the dominant strategy was now a battle for survival (table 1). Farm investments dropped. In the mid-nineties over half of the farmers were still making investments (53.3%), by the end of the nineties this number dropped to a mere 29%. The owners of large, high-income farms continued to be the most dynamic but by the end of the nineties the owners of middle-sized and small farms were also making investments. These were generally small investments but proved the farmers' determination to maintain the economic efficiency of their farms.

Table 1
Changes in farmers' plans for their farms – the dynamic of the late nineties
(% of reply)*

Plans	1995	2000
Develop current production	60.6	17.6
Develop specialised production	34.5	5.2
Wait and see while producing for family requirements	56.9	67.6
take up extra work**	–	8.0
sell, get rid of farm	5.5	8.4

* Since respondents could choose any number of replies in both tests, rates exceed 100%.

** This question was not set in 1995.

Source: research *Poles 95* and *Poles 2000*.

Taking various features into consideration, three categories of farms can be distinguished in Poland. The most numerous (55%) includes those which are in such a bad condition that they will be unable to feed their families in the future. The financial shape of the second category (approximately 30%) is currently either average or bad, planning to improve financially in the future (incapable of competing with western markets, they will function efficiently on local markets). According to our calculations, developing farms include approximately 15% of the total. It is interesting that these include not only large western-style farms (approximately 10%) but also smaller ones which are now making investments and have enterprising owners.

There is no doubt that the future of many farms will be determined by the interest of peasant children in the question of succession. Although it is currently very low among school-age peasant youth, in the future, with growing unemployment, taking over the patrimony may turn out to be the best possible solution. According to current owners, over half of the farms (53%) have secure successors. Over 80% of the prosperous and half of the less prosperous farms have the assurance of such a secure future. Farms without successors are mainly small, poor and without future prospects – these number over 40%.

Positive future prospects and secure succession set active farm strategies in motion (intensified production or specialisation). On poor farms without successors the most typical strategy seems to be one of hibernation. Nothing appears to be happening on deteriorating farms without successors – wait and see or sell the farm is the dominant attitude. This group of farmers have come to terms with their future and the total decline of their farms is only a question of time. It is interesting that it is not here that one meets the strongest resistance towards changes taking place in Poland. This is re-

vealed far more aggressively by the owners of poor farms which will in the future be taken over by their children. These farms are in the largest trap: being poor and backward they will soon have to provide sources of livelihood for the next generation of owners and their families. This awareness gives rise to various forms of political contest.

Table 2

Expectations regarding state agricultural policy
in various social groups
between 1995 and 2000 (% of affirmative replies)

Expectations	Farmers	Townsppeople	Differences (%)
Allowances and agricultural subsidies	1995	84.2	12.8
	2000	92.8	6.0
Minimum purchasing prices	1995	80.5	14.7
	2000	88.9	8.2
Only support promising farms	1995	66.9	24.5
	2000	48.0	0.3
Limit the size of farms	1995	14.8	3.9
	2000	17.0	0.1

Source: research *Poles 95* and *Poles 2000*.

That is all the more likely, since confidence in the effectiveness of economic moves as a way of improving one's situation has declined considerably among farmers. They no longer believe as they did a few years ago that the development and intensification of agricultural production could improve their position (that is what 85% of farmers thought in 1995 and currently 73%). Support for political forms of defending one's interests has clearly grown. 59% of farmers were in favour of organising protests to enforce a more advantageous state agricultural policy in 2000 (47% in 1995), over 80% were in favour of supporting the peasant parties. At the same time, in the nineties the front of all farmers narrowed as regards formulating group interests, claims and to a general social consolidation in rural matters (table 2). This happened in spite of growing economic differences and divisions within the peasantry and despite the long-time successful positioning of public opinion against the backwardness and uselessness of agriculture.

Rural Inhabitants' Aspirations and their Financial Situation

In the 1970s Polish people still considered personal and family happiness as the most cherished value. It was the leading value in the countryside and in peasant families. By the eighties 41% of rural families considered aiming to ensure a suitable standard of living for their families as being of greatest importance. At that time, farmers made the most meaningful re-valuation of their own goals – matters concerned with their farms were positioned third on their list of priorities – after consumer aspirations and expectation of personal happiness. The nineties brought a decisive growth in rural consumer appetites, particularly among farmers (25–30% of this group at most can be excluded from aspirations of this kind) and evident disparagement of the values of personal and family happiness.

Nowadays, rural inhabitants highly value the standard of living and financial well-being of their families. The supply of goods and media pressure regarding consumerism have enlivened their material aspirations. While in the eighties the standard of rural households was way behind that of urban households, by the end of the nineties rural household standards had clearly moved up to urban standards. In 2000 the majority of rural families had bathrooms (87.3%), telephones (67.6%), automatic washing machines (66%), cars (61.3%). Nevertheless, differences regarding material standard of living between city and countryside continue to exist. They are particularly evident in real incomes (table 3).

Table 3

Monthly income per person – differences between the 1980s and 1990s (%)

Years		In town	Non-peasant families in the country	Peasant families
1985	below average	11.1	34.1	44.6
	above average	48.1	30.2	25.6
1988	below average	23.8	58.3	54.0
	above average	47.9	17.8	25.5
1990	below average	9.2	33.2	17.7
	above average	47.7	17.4	35.2
1995	below average	22.6	51.3	67.3
	above average	30.1	11.8	9.4
2000	below average	26.4	46.5	49.7
	above average	36.2	20.7	16.1

Source: own calculation based on further data in *The Poles* research series.

The bad financial condition of rural families was never a marginal phenomenon. In 1997 62.5% of people in the countryside and 28.3% in towns lived below the minimum wage (*Sfera ubóstwa*, 1998). In the best period for the countryside (the late 1980s) a third of families were on below average incomes, this was the case for over 50% of families in the mid-nineties. The end of the nineties brought relative improvement in rural incomes. It is, however, significant that this did not affect the majority of peasant families who were undergoing growing differentiation. In so far as every second family on large farms and every sixth family on the smallest farms were on above average incomes, families on middle-sized farms were in the worst situation. This is where tensions were highest between farm maintenance costs and family living standards.

There were several reasons for this. Firstly, medium farms which are production-oriented, make less use of unearned sources of income and are not aided by extra money from the state budget (disability, retirement pensions or other benefits). Secondly, due to their larger land size it is impossible for them to undertake extra work (full or part-time) beyond their farms. Thirdly, the concept of the farm being the principal source of income means that tensions between consumer and investment expenses are very high and more often solved with the idea of the farm's rather than the family's needs. As a result, we observe a process of resemblance (i.e. pauperisation) in living standards between medium, small and very small farms and an alienation towards them of the large high-production farms which have not been as seriously menaced by the changes.

The Question of Helplessness and Demand Making in the Polish Countryside

The growing discord between features of social status and life expectations, particularly visible among farmers leads to the assumption that it is in the countryside, as a result of changes, that an elementary structural readiness to contest the project of change in Poland was reached. At the same time, the inability to counteract the unfavourable situation by most families living there brings about and consolidates a particular kind of inactive style of adapting to change. This is, on the one hand, behaviour depending on the maximum legal use of privileges guaranteeing minimum social security (the example of the above-mentioned phenomenon of the dynamic of small and very small farms), on the other, the strategies of coping with poverty i.e. having to tighten one's belt. Despite the bad situation of most rural families they have far less of a habit of complaining than townspeople. Rural families clearly accept the idea of living frugally and providently more than other social groups do. In a test conducted in 2000

53.3% of rural inhabitants voted in favour of a modest and frugal lifestyle as opposed to aiming towards the pleasures of life. Farmers show greater consent (63%) regarding daily sacrifices than is the case among the intelligentsia (40%), workers (42%) or the unemployed (55%).²

The more active life strategies are far less clearly defined. Although there is great interest in looking for work (on average, every second rural inhabitant recently looked for work), this search is generally fruitless and at most connected with casual work (between 6% and 20% of unemployed people briefly get such work). Interest in further education continues to be rather low (although ten times higher than five years earlier). 20% of rural inhabitants take part in its various forms. Although progress is evident, results are few. The most frequent form of further education are courses although they are generally attended not by those who need work but those who already have it (rural office workers, the rural intelligentsia etc.).

All of this may lead to the formulation of the thesis about helplessness as a permanent feature of the Polish countryside. This term, which has long functioned in political and sociological writing, in accordance with the classic idea on this issue refers to individual behaviour and committed by the individual (Seligman, 1996). A helpless person in this sense is someone who has lost control of his/her own fate, does not perceive the connection between his/her own activity and the possibility of improving his/her position, who after a few unsuccessful attempts at changing the situation is convinced that nothing can be done and that further attempts are useless.

It seems that there are a few reasons for considering the helplessness of Polish rural inhabitants which is evident in many empirical tests in categories of social helplessness i.e. within a wider complex social situation and similar life conditions of the larger community (Grzelak, 1993). When speaking about social helplessness emphasis is made on involving the fate of individual people in situations beyond their control which are created and carried out by other social actors (institutions, organisations, government authorities). An example of this is unemployment in rural areas – often structural, preventing many individual initiatives, transforming people's problems from being solvable into the insoluble.

In a difficult, insoluble situation three forms of social reactions appear. Firstly, the option of getting out of this situation (e.g. emigrating in search

² Several questions were raised in the tests: *Which of the following ways do you consider better in current times: live modestly and frugally or aim for the pleasures of life? Did you and, if so, how often after 1988 did you undertake the following activities? One of the possibilities (you restricted expenses to the bare minimum) in the countryside was chosen most frequently and the choice of such answers grew from year to year, as in questions testing the areas and standard of deprivation of the basic necessities of life (How often do you lack money for...?).*

of work – to the city, abroad). Secondly, trying to restructure the difficult situation and by organised social action changing the situation from being out of control to one which is under control (putting pressure on the authorities, political self-organisation for defending one's interests). Thirdly, surrendering – breaking down, losing motivation, lowering the level of fulfilling ambitions (Zinserling, 2002).

The possibilities of applying the first solution are currently limited for rural inhabitants. Will this situation change with Poland's entry into the EU – will her markets be realistically accessible to Polish workers? Our research does, however, show that one fifth of rural inhabitants would try to get work in a EU country, such a possibility (i.e. willing to do any kind of work whatsoever) is not excluded by the least professionally and linguistically prepared, yet most determined rural inhabitants. Considering the specific nature of western labour markets (saturation with specialists and the unwillingness of EU citizens to undertake primitive, hard and dirty work) it may turn out that instead of Polish specialists, the least qualified Polish rural workforce will be the most attractive asset for those labour markets. The limited receptivity of western labour markets will, therefore, not solve our internal problems. If that is the case, the state will become the main recipient of social expectations on this issue. This is confirmed by our data. Every year the Polish people are showing a greater need for the state's participation in regulating various social problems and tensions. Over 90% of those researched expect the government to create new jobs, modernise industry, support collapsing enterprises. There is no limit to this list.

Farmers who previously went no further than formulating their demands and expecting their realisation are now clearly getting organised socially and politically. In the eighties they were still definitely opposed to demonstrations, strikes and all forms of political protest. Nowadays as many as 46.5% of them would support street demonstrations and 51% would support strikes. The actual number of peasants taking part in protests has increased two or three-fold (from 1.8% before 1989 to 4.7% after 1989). The support for political organisations defending rural and peasant interests has grown from 70% in 1995 to 80% in 2000.

This kind of behaviour is frequently interpreted as a symptom of excessive peasant demands and is viewed negatively. A trend of unauthorised assertiveness is accentuated: making demands which only appear important for those who speak up for their own interests (Lewicka, 2002). It seems, however, that some of them are based on socially pertinent reasons and the spirit of an emerging civic independence can be perceived in the peasants' demands (Rawls, 1998). Nowadays, the peasants are not the only group calling for a return to paternalism and state involvement in Poland's public life. This is a well-defined social group – they are numerous, economically

threatened and politically resilient. They have their own political representation and the peasant party played a role in government.³

Without belittling the significance of political activities, proving the resilience of the peasant stratum in Poland the process of peasant political consolidation is the result of the overall social situation and the unfavourable changes in the social position and farmers' frame of mind in the new circumstances. It is a well known fact that country people have for years been least in favour of social change. Rural inhabitants, the peasants in particular, cope badly in a situation of social chaos. We recall their considerable aversion to strikes during the 'Solidarity' period, their lenient evaluation of martial law, their unenthusiastic approach to changes introduced in 1989 (Adamski, 1998).

Table 4

Awaiting favourable changes – the dynamic of feelings in selected social groups (data in % of people awaiting favourable changes)*

Years	1989	1990	1995	2000
Townspeople	39.2	37.2	35.8	25.7
Country people	30.8	28.4	21.9	17.4
Intelligentsia	54.3	54.3	56.2	35.6
Workers	32.5	28.4	26.9	18.8
Farmers	33.0	29.4	19.4	11.2
The unemployed	32.8	30.1	21.5	11.2

* In the 1989 and 1990 research the question investigated the level of expecting changes for the better and in general, including that in relation to one's own situation; in the 1995 and 2000 research people were asked whether the changes taking place in the country bring more opportunities than threats. In both cases the set refers to replies pointing to the levels of observing changes as being favourable (1989/1990) or bringing more opportunities than threats (1995/2000).

Source: research in *The Poles* series.

The years of transformation are a difficult process of adaptation for the countryside, as a result of which most of its social composition and structures have been degraded and pushed aside. To begin with (in the early nineties), this deepened the political distance between the countryside and other social groups, and then (in the late nineties) when those who earlier benefited no longer did so to such an extent, these differences clearly diminished. A type of political consolidation of Polish people around funda-

³ The government coalition with the peasants' party was dissolved at the beginning of 2003.

mental issues connected with the direction of changes taking place can be observed. It is interesting that it is not the farmers' or rural inhabitants' confidence regarding change which is diminishing yet the views of the earlier advocates of change are coming closer to the peasants' more suspicious point of view!

The late nineties were a decisive period. At that time the refusal to accept growing social inequalities in Poland became more widespread. Even representatives of the intelligentsia and entrepreneurs became more pro-egalitarian under the pressure of growing social inequality. In fact it is not the farmers, but the entrepreneurs who seem most disillusioned with the direction of changes taking place in Poland. In the mid-nineties 27% of farmers and 54% entrepreneurs trusted in capitalism's development opportunities, five years later these figures were below 21% farmers and 38% entrepreneurs.

Table 5

The frame of mind of the Polish people in the context of change
in selected social groups (% of affirmative replies)

Frame of mind*	The countryside in general	Farmers	Entrepreneurs	The unemployed
Helplessness	50.4	52.1	20.6	64.3
Loneliness	27.8	26.1	6.0	37.2
Meaninglessness	42.2	43.9	21.6	54.2
At a loss	51.6	55.2	21.4	63.3
Hope	77.2	73.6	81.4	67.8

* The frame of mind of the Polish people was tested using a scale applied in international comparative research, consisting of the following statements: (a) *I cannot cope with most problems nowadays*, (b) *I often feel lonely*, (c) *my daily duties do not satisfy me*, (d) *life is so complicated nowadays that find it difficult to cope*, (e) *I think of the future with great hope*.

Source: research *The Poles* (2000).

The inconsistency of changes taking place in Poland in the late nineties which also began affecting the earlier beneficiaries of transformation, meant that there was a growing feeling of social conflict among Polish people. This awareness was particularly strong in the countryside. In 1985 social conflicts were felt by 36% of rural inhabitants, by 1990 such was the feeling of 54% and by 2000 almost 100%. Pessimism, helplessness etc. took the upper hand over positive emotions here and appeared far more often than in the groups considered to be coping well with the transforma-

tion (entrepreneurs and the intelligentsia). 57% of farmers felt that they had no opportunities for the future whereas such views were held by 21% of entrepreneurs. While over half of the entrepreneurs are inclined to assume that the situation of people like them will gradually improve, less than 1/4 of farmers are of this opinion. There were many similar examples. They show (table 5) the effect of bringing the Polish soul to a standstill (Czapiński, 2002) and also the paralysing effect on the feeling of activity of individuals and socially marginal groups. This effect distinguishes two social groups – farmers and the unemployed and is far more noticeable in the countryside than in town.

The world of politics, generally perceived as not being very transparent, unfriendly, misunderstood and alien has a depressing effect on rural inhabitants. In 2000 72% of rural inhabitants and over 75% of farmers agreed with the following statement: *Politics is so complicated, that someone like me cannot understand what it's all about.* Corresponding rates among the intelligentsia and entrepreneurs were 41% and 43% respectively. Cognitive perplexity of the rural population, bordering on the inability of understanding the surrounding world is additionally linked with the conviction about the overwhelming influence of politics on the life of the individual. 69% of rural inhabitants and 78% of farmers agreed with the following statement: *My financial situation depends more on politics and decisions made above than on my own talents and hard work.* Even the professionally passive population do not feel as incapacitated in the 'new' Poland.

When analysing these changes, it is hard not to have the impression that things could be far worse, that people living in the Polish countryside could be far more demanding (Szafraniec, 2001). Meanwhile, the peasants seem to have chosen the way of political self organisation which they have greater ease with when other social groups are weaker, less clear and less politically stable. The intelligentsia and entrepreneurs who approach the changes ideologically, under the influence of unfavourable phenomena accompanying the transformation process (adverse economic circumstances, the pathologies of privatisation, corruption, an ineffective legal system), are changing their political option. The workers' political behaviour was always erratic, anarchic. It always oscillated between a profound attachment to some vision of a better social order and the hasty contestation of practical solutions, if they did not meet their current interests. In this sense the attitudes and political behaviour of farmers seem most stable, realistic, resistant to the capriciousness of political elites, loyal towards social agreements and reliable. And, in spite of everything, they are far from authoritarian solutions. Between 1986 and 2000 the view that Poland needs a strong leader as opposed to democracy lost almost as many votes in the countryside and among the workers (a drop from 90% to 56%) as among

the most pro-democratic groups – the intelligentsia (from 71% to 30%) or entrepreneurs (from 84% to 41%). Nevertheless, the peasants' growing maturity and political strength does also contain certain dangerous elements.

Final Remarks

I have presented rather an extensive view of the problems of the Polish countryside, referring to the results of sociological research carried out over many years and to historical sources. Tests which were carried out showed that the Polish countryside bore the main financial and psychological costs of sociological modernisation in the process of Poland's passing from socialism to capitalism. Despite general views about the costs and losses, which Polish society carries as a result of backward agriculture and an excessively agrarian countryside we can say that the countryside, both when it was the main provider of human resources for the dynamically developing industry in the Polish People's Republic as well as nowadays when it absorbs the excess manpower from non-agricultural and non-rural labour markets, significantly relieves the budget of the poor and over-worked state and alleviates the social system of many tensions. The sum of money allocated for rural social needs raises considerable political tensions though it involves almost the entire amount of state expenses on agriculture and burdens the taxpayer, is in any case much lower than the sum which should be set in motion in order to create new jobs and manage the rural employment surplus.

These calculations, which are hardly consoling from the financial point of view are not politically insignificant. No social group in the previous or current system transformation has shown as much patience and psychological resistance towards change as the peasants. And if their patience is now running out that is evidently due to their consent for exploitation which has reached a critical level and the peasants' internal reserves have run out. The Polish countryside does no doubt require support, but more than anything it requires a sensible agricultural policy, capable of entering Polish agriculture into the wider spectrum change and lead it on to the path of development. This is an exceptionally difficult task both as a result of current tensions and the amount of work demanded by a state undergoing modernisation, as well as the level of complex development problems which we inherited from the past. While in the West the peasants were already pushed out of the social structure in the 19th century and the systematically aided and modernised agriculture increased the development potential of particular countries, in Poland the opposite trend still exists – the countryside and agriculture were never the object of particular concern, and despite that the

peasants survived as the most numerous, energetic yet most threatened social class, clearly adjusting their feeling of threat into a powerful political strength.

Poland's economic troubles, the range of social expectations and needs, the process of negotiations with the European Commission and the growing political position of peasant parties do not predict easy solutions. One thing is very clear: not doing anything about Polish agriculture we are freezing the current situation and are entering the following phases of the process of change burdened with such a deposit. Considering the pace of change in the current world and the already existing distance (in relation to countries of the former socialist camp, which due to their successful earlier collectivisation do not have as serious problems with modernisation of agriculture) this time it would be a passive adaptation on the margins of large political and economic structures, excluding us from the circle of European countries undergoing modernisation.

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