

EDUCATIONAL DEMOCRATIZATION
IN POLAND:
TRADITION
AND POST-COMMUNIST
TRANSFORMATION

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL TO RURAL AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The socio-political system forced upon Poland after World War II brought about remarkable changes in rural local communities. The transformation in property, fought against the remains of the „old” system, and compulsory collectivization in the form of equally compulsory cooperatives are only a few characteristics of the Polish rural area in the early post-war period.

Although persecution of the peasantry as a group in which traditional social and religious traditions survived relatively untouched decreased after 1956, it was still noticeable in the policy of the state and political authorities. They took the form of economic restrictions on activity carried out by both the individual and the whole rural community.

The economic decisions to industrialize the hitherto rural regions aimed at the change in social and political changes in the system. The budget industrial plants built in rural areas were not only to eliminate so-called „hidden unemployment” in rural population but to create a new social deal as well. No wonder then that industrialization was found to be the primary aim. The political authorities accepted industrialization with no reservations even though it was followed by unfavourable effects which should have alarmed the government. The disadvantages of industrialization occurred in different spheres of life. The growing disintegration and deterioration of the cultural identity of particular rural communities were just two of them.

An important effect of the above-mentioned policy was the transformation in the system of fundamental values, which resulted in the replacement of the local mores and cultural patterns by those followed by the whole society.¹ To

¹ Komendera A. *Wiejska społeczność lokalna w Polsce* (The Rural Local Community in Poland). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe WSP, 1991, p. 186.

understand the transformation of the system which was and is under way in the 1980s and 1990s these earlier extensive changes in rural communities should also be taken into consideration. Moreover, it should be assumed that the period of the last several decades was a transformation period in the rural area and in Poland as a whole.

Both the transformation imposed by the communist regime and that stimulated by world-wide civilizational achievements resulted in the disappearance of cultural differences between rural and urban communities. Apart from this the system transformation which started in 1945 brought about a strong centralization in the decision-making process whose outgrowth was the incapacitation of individuals and whole rural communities. Thus spontaneous informal social activity declined, to be replaced by control of decision-making and inspection of local authorities by anonymous top officials. As a result, social and cultural activity in rural areas atrophied. By no means surprising, this atrophy of social and cultural activity in rural communities was „reinforced” by more and more extensive access to mass culture. Mass culture and the availability of civilizational goods contributed to the processes of disintegration, deprivation and deterioration of social ties, which are so important for the proper functioning of each social group.

And so rural communities became one of the main „victims” of the post-1945 transformation. As T. Plich claims „di-formism of settlement, spatial mobility and globalization of culture lead to the decline of such groups as the neighbourhood, the housing estate community etc., and result in total anonymity and a constant decrease in the social interactions of an individual”. „Additionally”, the author emphasizes, in the case of rural communities, the break-up of isolation, aggression of cultural margins, the fall of patterns and urbanization processes deprived the rural area of the traditional attributes of a local community and its power to socialize an individual”.²

The rural area was invaded by new, so far unknown, institutions of a usually non-local nature that promoted an urban life-style. This encounter, typical for precipitated industrialization and urbanization processes, between traditional rural culture and its urban counterpart brought about a defeat of the earlier one. Numerous villages not only lost their cultural identity but having destroyed their local culture and social organization they received emptiness, social and cultural helplessness and prostration in return for this.

² Plich T. Środowisko lokalne – struktura, funkcje, przemiany (Local community – structure, functions, transformations). [in:] T. Plich, I. Lepolczyk [ed.] Pedagogika społeczna. Człowiek w zmieniającym się świecie. Warszawa 1993, p. 164.

As was mentioned above, the negative modifications in rural communities resulted not only from civilization changes in Poland but were also stimulated by the political powers unfriendly towards peasant solidarity and rural autonomy, the traditional values of this community. The break in space, cultural and economic isolation came first and brought about the deterioration of the rural area ethos. „Then propaganda began to present the rural area as the centre of obscurantism and backwardness. Rusticity became a disadvantage. Social promotion meant leaving the rural area. Industrialization and urbanization were glorified. The rural area and rusticity together with all its characteristics and educational implications appeared to be shameful to accept. As a result all traditional rural mores and sanctions accepted by the rural community were degraded and rejected”.³

The social, political and economic crisis which began in the 1970s contributed considerably to further destruction. It was followed by further deviations in social life, and the deterioration of many institutions that often functioned successfully in rural communities, carrying out socio-cultural activity. When in December 1981 martial law was declared in Poland many more or less formal forms of social activity were banned, not to return to life after the marital law restrictions were revoked.⁴

All this resulted in the marginalization and self-marginalization of the rural area. „The awareness of many blockades and threats”, K. Szafraniec wrote in 1991 present in the mode of functioning of the social and political system, is accompanied by strong claim attitudes parallel to an extremely defensive adaptation strategy: to survive at any price. In terms of psychology, the sense of rejection and insecurity in a social system led to planned distrust of the government and consecutive projects aiming to „heal” agriculture...”.⁵

Deterioration of social ties, stagnation in genuine cultural and social activity, a crisis of rural patterns, and the authorities which accompanied these frustrating phenomena resulted in the weakening of the educational influence of rural local communities. Social life in the rural area was the „price” to pay for civilizational promotion that meant higher living standards.

On the other hand, the developing democratization of social and political life has created new favourable conditions for transformation that stimulate

³ Plich T. Środowisko lokalne..., p. 163.

⁴ Malinowski J. A. Wsparcie społeczno-kulturowe w wiejskich środowiskach lokalnych (Sociocultural Support in Rural Local Communities). *Wychowanie na co dzień*, No 10–11, 1996.

⁵ Szafraniec K. Młodzież wiejska jako efekt socjalizacji pogranicznej (The Rural Youth as an Effect of Border-line Socialization). Warsaw: PAN-IRWiR, 1991, p. 82.

propitious circumstances for the revival of the rural area as a social and educational community. At the same time, however, the function of the state as a patron of culture, non-school education, sport, tourism and social welfare security institutions has become considerably limited. In this new situation (not only for the rural community but for the whole of Polish society) the urgent demand for the new strategy of activation and development of local communities emerged, a strategy adequate for the period of the system's transformation. Although, thanks to Professor T. Wierzbicki,⁶ the concept of activation and local community development itself is quite well-known in Poland, the time has now come for it to be accomplished. Social pedagogues and sociologists have noticed an opportunity to materialize this concept and emphasize its idea of multidimensional cooperation between individuals and groups that form a local community.⁷ Moreover, it was only the transformation process initiated in 1989 that created the new quality prospect for Wierzbicki's ideas to come true. This is what he wrote in the early 1970s: „It seems that the movement of activation and development of local communities gives a new opportunity since there are not least a few people, „local patriots”, in each community who are able through properly defined targets and adequate work to activate the community and to integrate it around this new programme. Obviously the question of fundamental importance here is how to work out a correct model of this movement adaptable to a given time and place and to people's mentality both in terms of global society and a particular local community in which the movement of activation and development is to be a roused”.⁸ To continue what Professor Wierzbicki said, the necessity to notice and recognize in practice the specificity of given local communities and to consider a different level of unfavourable changes in each of them should be emphasized. Even though, to show general tendencies more clearly, the present image of the rural area was painted in a very dark colour, it can not be forgotten that not all communities were affected by these unfavourable changes which resulted in their disfunctionality. There are numerous rural

⁶ See: Z. T. Wierzbicki, A.L. Bertrant *Socjologia wsi w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Stan i tendencje rozwojowe* (Rural Sociology in the United States. The Condition and Development Tendencies). Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków: Ossolineum, 1970; Wierzbicki Z. T. *Aktywizacja i rozwój społeczności lokalnych* (Activation and Development of Local Communities). [in:] *Aktywizacja i rozwój społeczności lokalnych*, Z.T. Wierzbicki [ed.]. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1973.

⁷ Radzewicz-Winnicki A. *Modernizacja niepostrzeganych obszarów rodzimej edukacji* (Modernization of the Unnoticed Areas of National Education). Katowice: Wydawnictwo „Śląsk”, 1995, pp. 43–44.

⁸ Wierzbicki Z.T. *Aktywacja i rozwój...*, p. 20.

communities which having rejected globalization of culture have managed to prevent disorganization, have preserved efficient social structures and still show cultural vitality. Moreover, there have begun to appear „external” initiatives in support for rural communities which aim to activate different spheres of social and cultural life.⁹

First of all, however, this dark portrait of the contemporary rural area is to stimulate a wider than hitherto scope of activities to revitalize socio-cultural life in the rural area. It is a challenge not only for the Polish rural area; it is a global European problem where the rural area and its population are experiencing sometimes really dramatic transformations. The movement of the European Council for Villages and Small Towns proves the necessity of an equal approach both for the people and the place they live in, i.e. the environment and cultural heritage. It calls for integrated work for the rural area by all spheres of public and local administration and by the people themselves; it shows the importance of consultation and involvement. Such an approach results from a correct to reveal assumption that the authorities without the involvement of local people are not able to stimulate a revitalization process. That is why the only acceptable way is to „search for methods and means to enable local communities to reveal and define their needs and aspirations and to utilise their hidden potentialities. Effective ties should be created between the authority of different rank and local communities (...) in order to accomplish a concept of the economic, social and cultural revival of the rural area”.¹⁰

As any other structured movement the activation of rural local communities must have its leaders; these can be leaders of local communities themselves and their „social potentialities”.¹¹ Leaders of social communities take a role of public opinion spokesmen, and thanks to their leadership gift they are able to infect the

⁹ See the report on activities in Lucim village: Kaleta A., Wiczorkowski K. The telecottage as an Instrument of the Cultural Renewal of the Village. *Culture and Education*. 1992–1993, pp. 71–78.

¹⁰ Kaleta A. Podstawowe założenia odnowy obszarów wiejskich Europy. (The Basic Assumptions for the European Rural Area's Revitalization). [in:] *Odnowa wsi. Między mitem a nadzieją*, M. Wieruszewska [ed.]. Warszawa: PAN IRWiR, 1992, pp. 16–17.

¹¹ The founder of Polish social pedagogy – Helena Radlińska defined „social potentials” as „currently emerging or hidden (possible) values of individuals and social groups, conveniences and institutions which give a social pedagogue a support in his/her work provided they are activated and become leading factors in the reconstruction and assimilation of values” (Radlińska H. *Stosunek wychowawcy do środowiska społecznego* (The Educator's Approach to the Social Environment. Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia 1935, p. 16–17).

others with the ideas and to stimulate them to work for themselves and for their community.¹² It is possible when leaders receive support from institutions whose goal is to revitalize rural communities.

One means of such support is to teach local community leaders the knowledge and skills necessary in their work of social, cultural and educational activity. This can reinforce their enthusiasm and initiative with elements of sociological, pedagogical, psychological and praxiological knowledge. Not less important for them seems the ability to negotiate, solve social problems and conflicts, as well as to find allies, sponsors and „assistants”.

The system of training for rural leaders will affect the personality of their work. Moreover, the influence of leaders will depend on their personal values, the most important of which are „physical fitness, psychical balance, the capability of concluding and understanding”.¹³ The above-quoted writer notices also the importance of the leaders' personal involvement coherence between the ideas they promote and their behaviour in private life, responsibility and self-criticism. Therefore, particularly when educational opportunities for community leaders are limited, a proper selection of candidates becomes an essential factor. It should be remarked, however, that an adequate selection of candidates subordinates them, in a way, to different institutions, educational ones in particular. Moreover, the leaders recruited from ideological organizations are likely to fall under their influence to a much greater extent. On the other hand leaders coming from social and cultural socialities seem to be more immune to any ideological pressures and thus better qualified to revitalize the activity of local communities. Therefore these societies should show local communities lost in the new reality how to find their own proper way.¹⁴

A special role in the process of local communities' revitalizations falls to local governments. Any social activity, and that which requires financial support in particular, depends very much on the councillors' understanding of the cultural

¹² See e.g. Olubiński A. Problematyka sił społecznych środowiska wychowawczego (The Problems of the Social Potentials of the Educational Environment). *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, vol. 4; Radzewicz-Winnicki A. Modernizacja...

¹³ Żebrowski J. Zawód i osobowość animatorów kultury (The Profession and Personality of Cultural Animators). Gdańsk 1987, p. 40.

¹⁴ An example of such a society is the Rural Housewives Club whose activity was remarkably weaker in 1989–1994. Compared to five years earlier, as many as 5,000 clubs stopped working. The remaining 30,000 clubs show a different scope of activity and dry to the new situation, e.g. to much lower financial support from governmental institutions. See: Sawicka J. Koła gospodyń wiejskich jako społeczno-zawodowa organizacja kobiet. (Rural Housewives Clubs as a Social & Professional Women's Organization). *Więś i Rolnictwo*, No. 2, 1996.

and educational problems of the rural area. In the meantime, these problems are often treated with neglect and thought to be less important and marginal. Local authorities seem unaware that investing in culture and education will soon bring measurable effects. This socially essential problem requires the carrying-out of wide scientific research.

The institution which cannot be missed in the process of local community activation is the school. It has a real opportunity to shape attitudes based on real rural values and to teach its pupils to be proud of their rural background and the community they live in. Young people with such a mentality, so rarely met today, will be ready to work for their communities, to participate efficiently and wisely in the activities of local government bodies, and to take efforts aimed at the reconstruction and building up of social ties. Some rural schools have already transformed their educational programmes and included in them ideas close to traditional values specific for rural communities. And they are frequently teachers who take the role of local leaders who find the system's transformation to be a good opportunity for both the school and the whole local community.¹⁵

However, a pre-condition to benefit fully from these opportunities to revitalize rural local communities are systematic collective efforts, genuine creative agitation in order to stimulate the involvement of the whole local community in social and cultural life and in solving even the most difficult social problems.

¹⁵ The evidence can be an analysis of projects presented in the competition „Small Homelands’ which was held in 1993 by The Academy of Small Homelands and the Foundation of Culture.