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THE MAKING OF RELUCTANT SOCIALISTS: CLASS, CULTURE AND THE POLISH STATE

The 1970s were a time of intellectual ferment around "development" (largely defined as capitalist industrialization) and its possibilities in what we then called "The Third World". Former colonies in Southeast Asia and Africa were asserting independence after both violent and peaceful departures from the rule of their colonial overlords and were seeking models of development suitable to their economic and social circumstances and consistent with their political views. At least some of the successful political movements claimed to be some version of Marxist and its leaders were aware that the simultaneous socialization of the industrial and rural sectors would be disruptive to workers and farmers alike, and was likely to cause increasing inequality and human misery. What would become of the rural majority, mostly rural farm owners, farmworkers, and peasants if their small farms were to be displaced by rural industrialization? The Soviet Union offered a mostly negative example, especially with respect to the human and material costs of rural industrialization. Newly emergent Third World nation-states were unlikely to successfully emulate western industrialization even if they wanted, as that process depended in large part on the exploitative importing of raw materials and labor power from the less-developed places in the world. By the late 1970s, the world had pretty much run out of colonies to exploit. Further, capitalist development was a process that occurred in "the West" over centuries, not decades. Poland and Yugoslavia offered (or so I thought in my naiveté) a possible alternative to both the Soviet and the western models. In those two countries, the state owned and controlled industry, but agriculture remained largely privately owned and operated. I wondered if there be lessons there for newly independent Third World states.

These were among the questions that animated my pre-dissertation graduate studies in anthropology at the University of California, which focused on politi-

cal economy and peasant studies. I studied Polish at the Kosciuszko Foundation Summer School in Kraków in summer of 1977, and during a brief side trip sought agreement from a family in a village in Galicia to host me the following year, if I were able to secure funding and obtain permission from the Polish government to conduct research there. Professor Grzegorz Babiński was especially helpful. Later that year and in early 1978, I wrote a research proposal to my academic department, International Research and Exchange Board (IREX), and the National Science Foundation (NSF) to investigate how Polish peasant farmers worked with and against the state government to achieve their economic, cultural, social and familial aims. My proposal was funded and in fall of 1978 I arrived in Kraków with my children, aged 14, 12, and 9 to meet with the Polish sociologist whom the Polish Academy of Science had assigned as my advisor and to set up my official affiliation with the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. This process was facilitated by IREX. The late Professor Andrzej Paluch, his family, and his graduate seminar students at the University of Kraków were receptive to my research, unfailingly helpful to me personally and professionally, and always intellectually stimulating. Jan Kubik, Chris Hann, Przemek Bogdanowicz and Frances Pine were among the seminar participants. I regret that after so many years, I cannot remember additional names. After spending about a month in Kraków, my children and I departed for the small farming village of Wola Pławska in the gmina of Borowa in Galicia, returning to Kraków once a month to meet with the seminar, collect my university stipend, and to check in with *Pan* Bogdan X, a member of the internal police department. He questioned me relentlessly about why I was in Poland, why I was living in a village, why I brought my children, what happened to my husband, and much more. While my colleagues at the university were a delight and I looked forward to my three or four days in Kraków every month, *Pan* Bogdan was a low point in my life for the next 14 months.

The research

It was not long after I began my research in Wola Pławska that I came to understand that my original hypotheses – that people made decisions about their lives, their farming practices, and their relations with the state and its institutions more or less in concert with choice theory was stunningly and completely misguided. It simply was not how people made decisions and lived their lives, not in Wola Pławska, nor anywhere else, for that matter. I take up these issues at length in my dissertation and later in a monograph based on this early fieldwork (Nagengast 1991), so I will not say more here. I argued that the inhabitants of Wola Pławska participated in an historically derived sociocultural order in which the values and practices of capitalism were incipient and which enabled some to prosper at the expense of others.

I left Wola Pławska for home in the winter of 1979 and did not return until 1992. By that time, I had become acquainted with Professor Michał Buchowski, Dr. Jacek Schmidt and their colleagues at the Instytut Etnologii, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza in Poznań. After a period of discussion in person and via email over the next two years, we devised a new collaborative project, which was funded by a grant from the Wenner Gren Foundation in the United States. The 1994 project was entitled "Learning Capitalism, Practices and Discourses in Poland" and was to examine the changes in Polish culture, economics and society as the influence of the Soviet Union waned and Poland aligned itself more closely with the European Union. We gathered data in Wola Pławska and another farming village near Poznań called Dziekanowice that contrasted with Wola Pławska in meaningful ways. Other research sites included workers at Hipolit Cegielski, a then still state owned factory in Poznań and a group of urban entrepreneurs in Swarzędz, a town near Poznań. We intended to examine the problematic nature of what appears on the surface to be the inevitability of the introduction of the liberal capitalist political-economic order into Poland and to give names, faces and experiences to the abstract notion of "the transition". During the next two years Prof. Buchowski and his colleagues did the fieldwork in Dziekanowice, Swarzędz, and I returned to Wola Pławska for the summers of 1995 and 1996.

Prof. Buchowski has published parts of the project elsewhere (Buchowski 1997, 2001) and I elaborated and published the results of some of this research (Nagengast 2001). It became clear to me during this research that shared popular memory or what was remembered of the communist past and what was forgotten, what stories were told to justify present actions, excuse past ones, and create new popular culture and consciousness often encompassed pitched battles over different definitions of reality. These were waged at the level of social reproduction such as choice of marriage partner, school and curriculum, at the level of expressive practices such as joking and story-telling, at the level of style such as dressing, grooming and eating and at the level of Culture with a capital C, as well as through overt economic activities, politics and social movements.

Going to "the field" in Poland in the 1970s

It is long past time for me to acknowledge a long-standing debt to the people of Wola Pławska. Wola Pławska was the ancestral village of my mother's mother, whose ancestry I have traced to Johannes Seiler, born in 1808 and Caterina Schroeder, born in 1811, both "colonists from Germany". Fast forward a hundred years and we find some of their descendants immigrating to the United States. Following her two older brothers, my grandmother, Katarzyna Rec, immigrated to New York State in 1909 at age 13, posing as the daughter of a related family with whom she traveled. She lived in Watervliet NY where her two Polish-born

brothers had already located and she worked for almost six years in a shirt factory. In 1916 she married my grandfather, Michal Malek, who was from a village directly across the Wisłoka River from Wola Pławska, but whom she met in Watervliet. My mother, the eldest of their seven children, was born in 1918. Neither of my grandparents ever returned to Poland but both kept up a correspondence with their family members, including my grandmother's siblings in Wola Pławska. They lost regular touch after my grandfather died in 1963.

My extended family in Poland was an abstraction about which I had only the vaguest idea until as a graduate student in anthropology in the mid-1970s I began to consider Poland as a potential dissertation field site. My grandmother provided the names of her two living sisters and their addresses – both in Wola Pławska – when I went to Poland for the first time in 1977. I emphasize my Polish ancestry and especially my kinship ties to Wola Pławska now in order to offer belated thanks and gratitude to people who helped me enormously in settling into Wola Pławska with my children in the fall of 1978 and to acknowledge the role they have played in the anthropology I do today. Politics and personal circumstances have changed dramatically since I first went to Poland in 1977; all of my closest relatives have since died, and my family ties can no longer matter to anyone. In 1977-1978, however, my grandmother was still living and she had two sisters – my Great Aunts – living in Wola Pławska, both of whom were a source of great personal comfort to me as I faced a difficult year with three young children in a foreign environment, as well as my very best informants and subjects of their own stories. Letters home took a long time and I had reason to believe they were read by persons unknown before delivery and of course this was decades before the existence of email and Internet. Even a phone call to the United States, which was pretty expensive for a graduate student, had to be booked two days in advance and entailed two bus trips to Mielec, the nearest city, and a hike across town to the post office. Reception was bad and there was zero privacy, so I think I only did it two or three times that year.

A first cousin once removed provided my children and me two rooms in her house at great inconvenience to her family and possible political peril. She also fed my children and me three meals a day and in fact, if I had to stand in lines to procure food and prepare food for the four of us, I am not sure I could have completed the field study at all. Readers old enough to remember pre-1989 will remember the long queues to buy even basic commodities. Women especially often spent hours every day just to get food for their families. I paid my cousin room and board in dollars, which was a boon to her, her husband and their two children because of the buying power dollars provided.

Extended family members – first, second and third cousins once and twice removed – introduced my two younger children (nine and twelve) to the village school and ensured that Pani Dyrektor did what was necessary to cause they were enrolled in the appropriate grade. They learned Polish quickly and more or less

fluently, with special mastery of childish vulgarities. Villagers looked out for my kids before and after school, just as they did everyone else's kids. If they misbehaved, they were scolded. If they did it again, they were scolded and Pani Dyrektor heard about it. She instilled fear into all hearts. Another relative went with me to install my oldest daughter into the freshman class at the high school in Mielec and made sure she had friends to look after her, and to otherwise ensure her well-being. She became popular with the English-language students who wanted to learn the American rather than the British accent and of my three children became the least proficient in Polish. At fourteen and then fifteen, she was also past prime language acquisition age.

As for me, I had people to coach me in the intricacies of life in a village in which everyone knew everyone and everything about them. There were enormous upsides to this and some downsides. I was automatically invited to all family gatherings, work parties, weddings, baptisms, funerals, Sunday lunches, and more – providing numerous opportunities to interact with and observe people in their daily lives. My fieldwork would have been different had I had to make appointments to see people to formally interview them, to gain their confidence so that they could be as straight forward with me as they wished (I do not deny that they were not always straight forward, but at least they did not fear me politically). I was not usually invited to the "other" factions' social occasions and did have to make those formal appointments to visit and interview. However, I believe I had the best of all worlds. Every small community has cliques and any beginning field guide cautions the young anthropologist that he or she will be pretty slotted into that of whoever provides them living quarters or serves as their primary informants.

I gave back to "my people" in Wola in every way I could manage, including by translating or better said, explaining innumerable letters in English to villagers with relatives and English-speaking descendants in the United States – a surprisingly large number of people. When I acquired a car after several months, I was called on many times to drive in wedding and first communion processions, to take people to the doctor and occasionally to the hospital in Mielec and once in a while to provide "joy" rides to young people. My association with a particular extended family did not prevent allegations that I was associated with the CIA, the Polish Secret Service or both. I inadvertently lent credence to this belief by carrying around a very small tape recorder in the early weeks of my residency. My Polish was far from fluent and I hoped in this way to re-listen to some conversations to improve my understanding. I cannot tell you what a mistake this was! I was appropriately "called out" and paid penance in a variety of ways, often as the butt of stories about how I had tried to spy on people or as the protagonist of jokes about the Polish or Soviet government and their leaders. I know there were people in Wola Pławska who never trusted me, either because of my gaff with the tape recorder or just because I was an American woman whose justification for

being there was never entirely plausible to them. That perhaps is also part of the anthropologist's field experience anywhere in the world.

In spite of the closeness to my extended family that I developed between 1977 and 1996, at no time during this period did I emphasize my family connections to anyone outside of Wola Pławska itself, mostly especially to officialdom in the form of the aforementioned Pan Bogdan but not to those at the University either. When I was studying Polish, applying for Polish university affiliation, living in Wola Pławska, writing my dissertation and later my book (Nagengast 1991) I acknowledged that I had kin in Poland only when asked, but I avoided identifying any member of my family by name because, in the political climate of the day, I thought it possible that I would be endangering them. Poland did not have an excellent human rights record in the 1970s. Furthermore, many Poles of my acquaintance – relatives and non-relatives alike – were evading and even flouting minor laws with alacrity and often a certain delight. Finally, we were all experiencing daily the political and economic conditions that eventually led to the emergence of the trade union Solidarność just a few months after my departure and in due course to the demise of the Polish socialist state. Finally, I went to Poland several times between 1980 and 1989 in conjunction with my work with Amnesty International, though I only went to Warsaw and Kraków and did not visit Wola Pławska or contact anyone living there. I did not think my affiliation with an international human rights agency would be of any direct help to my relatives and indeed in the political climate of the 1980s it could have brought them some discomfort. While some readers may think I was being over-cautious, I thought at the time that there was good reason not to call attention to my rural kin group.

The *Learning Capitalism* project with Prof. Buchowski in the early and mid-1990s was my last in Poland and I have not returned since 1996, mostly for geographic and logistical reasons. I had accepted a position as Professor of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico in 1993 and found myself increasingly engaged in areas of interest to graduate students in Latin America and the Southwest of the United States. By and large, student interest did not include Central Europe, nor did the University of New Mexico adequately support Eastern or Central European studies with robust language programs or appropriate classes in history or contemporary political science studies. While my theoretical interests in history, human rights, and political economy did not change, my geographic and substantive focus shifted to indigenous undocumented migrant workers from Oaxaca, Mexico to the United States. The fundamental theme of this work centers on the notion of transnational communities. Transnational communities are territorially located in two countries – in this case Mexico and the United States – but to a great extent they reproduce economically, socially and culturally in a de-territorialized third space that obeys dynamics distinct from those in either of the national domains. My late husband and intellectual partner, Professor Mi-

chael Kearney of the University of California, Riverside and I refer to this space, which comprises both Oaxaca and California but is distinct from either as Oaxacalifornia, a term many migrants themselves have adopted. This work engaged us until Kearney's death in 2009 and resulted in a number of individual and joint publications. Although I am now retired from the University of New Mexico, my research with Oaxacan migrants to the U.S. continues to engage me via graduate students and ongoing relations with the members of a specific village in Oaxaca, with whom I interact here in Oaxacalifornia on a regular basis.

Given other commitments and my personal circumstances it is unlikely that I will get back to Wola Pławska or publish anything more about Poland. Therefore I want to end by saying publicly that its people gave me far more than I ever can acknowledge and that I learned to be an anthropologist at their collective knee. My Polish colleagues have always been an inspiration to me and I shall cherish the memory of working with you in ways that were mutually beneficial and rewarding.

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