

MODERNISATION PROCESSES IN POLISH RURAL AREAS FROM THE MID-19TH TO THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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(Varsovie)

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The modernisation of rural areas and agriculture was one of the most important problems facing Polish society on its road to modernity in the 19th and 20th centuries. There were three reasons why it was more difficult to solve this problem in Poland than in Western Europe. The **first** was the specific model of feudalism which dominated in the Noblemen's Commonwealth before the partitions, the **second**, the weakness of the non-agricultural sector of the economy, which was responsible for the slow and incomplete development of the capitalist market and, consequently, for the towns' inability to absorb the demographic surplus of rural areas. The **third** reason was the lack of continuity in political, social and economic relations and the resulting rapid changes in the conditions in which the rural areas and agriculture functioned in the Polish territories.

As far as the Polish model of feudalism is concerned, its main pillars were: the fact that only the monarch, ecclesiastical institutions and the nobility had the right to own land, and the serfdom of the peasants, including their duty to work for the owner (corvée). The fact that the peasants were tied to the land, the manorial administration of justice and the lack of possibilities for advancement had far reaching economic, social and cultural consequences. They turned peasants into living tools who had greatly restricted possibilities for taking independent economic decisions and for evolving individual strategies in life. The structural crisis of the manorial serfdom-based economy, which had been deepening since the end of the 18th century, led to a gradual deterioration of the peasantry's material situation¹.

This disastrous situation could only be changed by far-reaching reforms introducing equality before the law (which meant the liquidation of serfdom) and opening the countryside and agriculture to the gradually developing capitalist sector of the economy. This process was extremely difficult in the Polish territories because they were under four different state systems. In central Poland the first reforms changing the situation of peasants were adopted in 1807, when the Constitution of the Duchy of Warsaw introduced the principle of equality before the law. Soon afterwards, in 1809, this principle was adopted in the Prussian zone of Poland. The Polish peasants under Austrian rule had to wait until 1848 and in the eastern territories of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until 1861 to be granted equality before the law.

Another fundamental agrarian reform in the Polish territories was enfranchisement, which was usually combined with abolition of the duty to work for the owner (of the corvée). The first enfranchisement reforms in Polish territories were introduced by Prussia in 1809–1913. The solutions adopted by the Prussian authorities supported the big landowners' efforts to modernise their estates, made it easier for peasants to set up large farms functioning on market principles and led to a gradual elimination of small peasant holdings. In several score years a new agricultural model arose in Pomerania, Greater Poland, Warmia, Mazuria and Silesia, a model in which large modern farms belonging to noblemen and prosperous peasants dominated while a large proportion of the landless population found permanent employment as hired workforce. What facilitated this process was the possibility of emigration from rural areas to the quickly developing industrial centres in Silesia, the Rhineland and Westphalia.

Different principles were adopted by the other rulers of Poland. In Galicia the peasants were enfranchised in 1848, the same year in which serfdom was abolished. They were granted the right to own the whole land they had tilled (they

¹ Witold Kula, *Teoria ekonomiczna ustroju feudalnego*, Warszawa 1983 [English version *Economic Theory of the Feudal System: towards a model of the Polish economy, 1500–1800*, London 1976; French version: *Théorie économique du système féodal: pour un modèle de l'économie polonaise, 16^e–18^e siècles*. Préf. Fernand Braudel, Paris 1970].

paid for it in instalments spread over several score years). The compensations paid to the owners were decidedly too small to allow them to adapt their estates to the new conditions. Another burden which the landed estates had to bear, a source of conflicts between the manor house and the village, was the preservation of the peasants' right to graze their cattle in manorial pastures and collect timber in manorial forests. In the Polish Kingdom the enfranchisement carried out in 1864 was based on similar principles, the only difference being that small plots of land were allotted to landless families. All in all, the reforms in the Austrian and Russian zones of Poland helped to consolidate the previous structure of farm sizes and perpetuated many links of mutual dependence between large estates and the peasants, especially the large estates' dependence on the supply of hired labour by local population and the peasants' right to use manorial pastures and forests. The situation was aggravated by the fact that neither Austria nor Russia helped to modernise agriculture (if only by creating a credit system for modernisation investments). As a result, the rate and lines of evolution of the countryside and agriculture were far from what could have been achieved².

A structural crisis of large-scale agriculture developed in both Galicia and the Russian zone of Poland. Only one-third of the landowners were able to mobilise capital and invest it properly. The majority found it difficult to hold ground and were steadily increasing their debts. Even a small fluctuation in the situation on the market led to a mass of bankruptcies. The situation of small-scale agriculture was better, for some time anyhow. After enfranchisement many peasants started selling their products. They did their best to increase production and change its structure to adjust it to what was needed on the market. They gradually gave up the three-field system, began to use green manure, modern agricultural machines and implements, and increased the share of livestock breeding. They used their increased incomes to buy more land and raise their living standards³, mainly by building new houses (dwelling-houses equipped with an English-style kitchen and large windows) and by increasing the purchases of various products offered by the non-agricultural sector of the economy.

All these changes required effort. In their book *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki presented a faithful picture of the strength of traditional, conservative peasant attitudes which slowed down modernisation processes in the countryside⁴. The traditional, pre-emancipation husbandry was based on the principles of "moral economy", according to which

² Krzysztof Groniowski, *Uwłaszczenie chłopów w Polsce. Geneza - realizacja - skutki*. Warszawa 1976.

³ Wiktor Bronikowski, *Drogi postępu chłopu polskiego*, Warszawa 1934.

⁴ William Thomas, Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Chicago 1919 (Polish ed. Warszawa 1976), cf. Witold Kula, Jacek Kochanowicz, *Chłopsstwo. Problem intelektualny i zagadnienie nauk społecznych*, Warszawa 1981.

the aim of farming was to sustain the existence of the family and local community, and the best way to achieve this was to use tested, traditional methods which limited the risk of failure to the minimum. The result was that introduction of any innovation in the social organisation of a village or in the ways of farming led to a conflict between the “traditionalists” and the “novelty fans”. Although it was the supporters of changes that triumphed in the end, their success was seldom complete. It cannot be said that innovatory ideas usually replaced old social and economic ideas, they were rather placed alongside the old ones. Describing these phenomena, the historian and economist Jacek Kochanowicz put forward an inspiring theory that in the Polish territories (with the exception of the Prussian zone of Poland) the traditional peasant husbandry was not replaced by a modern version; what arose was a POST-TRADITIONAL model of the village and agriculture, a model which combined traditional elements with modern ones. The aim of peasant farming remained traditional, namely to ensure the durability of the patriarchal peasant family, and to preserve autarchy as the ideal way of farming. The peasants were ready to make use of even the most modern ways of farming to achieve these aims⁵.

During the last few decades of the 19th century it turned out that the changes in peasant agriculture did not keep pace with the country's needs. The main symptom of the problem was the quickly growing fragmentation of peasant holdings and a rapid growth of landless population; they were both caused by a demographic explosion. Owing to improved living conditions, the elimination of hunger and a radical reduction of epidemics, the population grew at lightning speed, for the birth rate remained high. More and younger people could no longer hope to inherit their father's farm or inherited only small strips of land. Mass emigration from the countryside was the response to the growing problem. From the 1880s there was an increase in emigration to towns where industry was developing (the Łódź region, Warsaw, the Dąbrowa Basin) and to foreign countries (mainly the United States, but also South America, western Germany and France). In the 1890s, another form of economic emigration, seasonal emigration, began to develop from the Polish Kingdom and Galicia, mainly to Germany and also to some regions of Austria.⁶

It is difficult explicitly to assess the influence of economic migrations on the modernisation of the Polish countryside. They undoubtedly broadened Polish peasants' contacts with the outside world (towns, other countries, different cultures) and reduced the demographic pressure (by 1914 at least 5 million rural inhabitants had moved to towns or emigrated abroad). Very important was also the

⁵ Jacek Kochanowicz, *Spór o teorię gospodarki chłopskiej. Gospodarstwo chłopskie w teorii ekonomii i historii gospodarczej*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 155 ff.

⁶ For the size of migrations in and from Polish territories see: Andrzej Gawryszewski, *Ludność Polski w XX wieku*, Warszawa 2005.

considerable inflow of money sent or brought in from the place where it was earned. On the one hand, this was an essential element of the budget of many families, on the other, the money sent by emigrants led to an increase in land prices and discouraged many peasants from the effort to modernise their farms (it was easier to go to America, earn some dollars and come back than to try to introduce new agricultural technology at home)⁷

An important aspect of the post-emancipation transformations was the peasants' growing integration with other social groups. The gradual, though still inadequate, development of education led to an increase of literacy among peasants. The intelligentsia spared no effort to turn the peasants into good citizens, conscious of their national identity, regarding this as one of its key tasks. Democratisation processes were an important factor which helped to break down the social barriers that separated the peasantry from the rest of society. In the second half of the 19th century the peasants gained influence on local self-governments and gradually obtained the right to vote, the most spectacular evidence of this fact being the formation of an independent political peasant movement in Galicia at the end of the 19th century and the participation of large numbers of peasants in national manifestations during the 1905 revolution in the Polish Kingdom⁸.

To sum up this part of our reflections, it can be said that the transformations which took place in Polish rural areas and Polish agriculture between the period of agrarian reforms and the outbreak of World War I led to the formation of a specific village model, which can be defined as a post-traditional model. Up to 1914 the peasants managed quite well under this system. Considerable progress was achieved in living standards, in the level of farming; in peasants' contacts with the capitalist market and in the peasantry's integration into the national community.

The years of the First World War and the construction of a new order in Europe and the world radically changed the situation of rural areas and the peasantry in the Polish territories. The establishment of the Polish state and its democratic character exerted a favourable influence on that situation. The peasants were granted full political rights, they became the main beneficiaries of the introduction of compulsory education. The agrarian reform adopted by the Polish parliament made it easier to transfer land from large estates to small holders⁹. The Polish authorities supported various activities aimed at raising the level of culture, civilisation and economy in villages. They patronised the development of agricultural education, supported the activity of co-operative, cultural and educational organisations and set up (unfortunately to an insufficient extent)

⁷ Krystyna Duda-Dziewierz, *Wieś małopolska a emigracja amerykańska*. Warszawa 1938.

⁸ Jan Molenda, *Chłopi. Naród. Niepodległość*, Warszawa 1999.

⁹ For a comprehensive presentation of the Polish countryside and its transformations during the inter-war period see: *Historia chłopów polskich* ed. by Stefan Inglot, vol. 3, Warszawa 1980.

financial institutions to serve agriculture. But the effects of the state actions were very limited because the state and the economy of the Second Republic had limited financial means at their disposal. This was clearly visible during the great depression when the state was unable to help peasant farms in their catastrophic situation.

Two factors had a decidedly negative influence on the rate and lines of modernisation processes in the Polish countryside during the inter-war period. The first was the bad economic situation which led to the stagnation of the non-agricultural sector of the Polish economy. The situation, which was by no means good, was aggravated still further by the great depression of 1929–1935 which hit Poland very strongly. As a result it was only at the end of the inter-war period that the national income reached the 1913 level. Since the non-agricultural sector was very weak, it did not offer employment to the masses of young peasants for whom there was no room in agriculture, while the growing overpopulation in rural areas weakened the peasants' economy, restricting their purchases of industrial goods. This was an additional reason for the stagnation in industry. Another factor which deepened the problems of Polish rural areas was the breakdown in both seasonal and permanent emigration possibilities. Hundreds of thousands of persons who before 1914 used to work abroad, sending the money they had earned home, remained in their village, encumbering the family budget¹⁰.

The most important factors which stimulated modernisation processes in Polish rural areas during the inter-war period were: the efforts to maximise farm gains and the aspiration to absorb the greatest possible number of the attributes of modern urban culture. The peasants had to implement their ambitious plans despite a painful lack of investment capital and this is why changes in agriculture consisted mainly in intensified methods of cultivation (peasants gave up the practice of leaving a part of their land fallow, brought increasingly poor strips of soil under cultivation, tried to raise new crops, developed the production of fruits and vegetables) and adapted the structure of production to market needs, developing poultry-farming (eggs), hog raising (pork) and cattle breeding (milk and dairy products). It is worth pointing out that these changes widened the extent of women's participation in farming; women had to work much more intensively than before.

A considerable part of the money that remained at home after the payment of state dues was spent on improving living conditions and the purchase of modern objects. One of the most desirable investments was construction of a new dwelling house or modernisation of the old one. Many peasants found it hard to resist buying town furniture, town clothes, a clock, a watch or a bicycle. Large sums were devoted to the education of children and participation in cultural life (the press,

¹⁰ In the second half of the 1930s the agrarian overpopulation was estimated at 3 million persons at the minimum; Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, *Młodzież wiejska na ziemiach Polski centralnej 1864–1939. Procesy socjalizacji*, Warszawa 2002.

books, amateur cultural movement, cinema, radio in the 1930s). It is no exaggeration to say that the face of Polish villages, especially the way their inhabitants looked, changed radically during the inter-war period. What did not change was the basic hierarchy of the peasantry's social values. Possession of a farm was still what every peasant child most desired. It can be said that the post-traditional village model was continued during the twenty inter-war years. The constantly growing number of modern elements did not lead to a breakdown of the traditional social structure and the peasantry's system of values.

The seizure of power by the communists did not at first mean a radical change in the situation of peasants. The land reform of 1944 improved the situation of peasant agriculture but the improvement was not sufficient to satisfy the peasants' needs. The land reserves in central Poland were so small that the agrarian structure could not be improved by parcelling out large estates while ideological considerations prevented the establishment of large, independent peasant farms in the post-German territories. The possibility of finding employment outside agriculture and the opportunities for social advance offered to the younger generation helped to improve the situation in the countryside.

The beginnings of a breakthrough could be noticed in 1948 when the state authorities launched a campaign to forcibly industrialise the country and collectivise agriculture. The elimination of the peasantry as a social class became the strategic aim of the state. It was expected that some peasants would be employed in socialised agriculture (they were to be induced to agree by promises of higher living standards, better social services, lighter work thanks to mechanisation, etc.) and also by various kinds of pressure and by taxation which discriminated medium-sized and large farms. The "cheap foodstuffs policy" was another factor which worsened the situation of individual peasants. It meant an artificial preservation of low food prices (both purchasing and selling prices). Thanks to this policy the state could keep wages in the non-agricultural sector at a low level and at the same time exert an influence on the situation of various groups of agricultural producers. When the prices did not meet production costs, the state could subsidise chosen groups of producers (for instance, cooperative and state farms) The peasants who did not want to work in socialised agriculture (that is the majority of the inhabitants of rural areas) were to become a reserve workforce for the developing industry and building work. This process was to be facilitated by a quick development of primary and technical education, which was to prepare rural youth for a career outside agriculture¹¹.

The effects of the state activities were far from what had been expected. Owing to the peasants' strong attachment to individual farming, the cohesion of rural communities and deep attachment to religion, which impeded their

¹¹ Dariusz Jarosz, *Polityka władz komunistycznych w Polsce w latach 1948-1956 a chłopi*, Warszawa 1998.

ideological assimilation to communism, a decisive majority of the peasants put up such strong resistance to collectivisation that in 1955–1956 the state authorities decided not to force through the idea. But the price paid for this abortive experiment was very high. Peasant farms were considerably weakened because they had been selling their products below production costs. What is more, a decisive majority of the younger generation came to the conclusion that a state job, preferably in a town, was much more attractive than a continuation of the family tradition. This meant renunciation of long-term investments into farms. The innovations that were introduced were aimed mainly at easing physical work (purchase of tractors, mechanisation) and not at intensifying agricultural production. All these factors meant that from 1950 peasant agriculture went through a long period of structural crisis which led to technological backwardness and a systematically growing demographic crisis. One of the most important social problems Poland was faced with in the 1970s was the aging of the agricultural population and the lack of persons willing to take over the farms. One of the most serious results of the crisis of individual farming, which affected more than 70 per cent of arable land, was that the increase in agricultural production was far below the needs. The result was that from the end of the 1960s the situation on the food market kept deteriorating. At the end of the 1970s food rationing was introduced in Poland, first of sugar, then of meat and other foodstuffs. The rationing system was kept until 1988. This best illustrates the balance sheet of the post-World War II modernisation processes in Polish agriculture.

The legacy left behind by all these efforts to modernise agriculture is that nearly 40 per cent of Poland's inhabitants live in rural areas and that the country has almost 2 million farms. Only 10 per cent of them supply the market with their products, the others are the old subsistence farms whose owners (old people) live on disability benefits or old age pensions while members of the middle and younger generations work outside agriculture.