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RATIONALITY, AND
HISTORY:
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REPRIVATIZATION IN
POLAND**

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MORALITY, RATIONALITY, AND HISTORY: Dilemmas of Land Reprivatization in Poland

Longina Jakubowska¹

Introduction

In spite of reprivatization being embraced by consecutive post-1989 governments in Poland, if compared with other countries in the former Eastern block, it proceeds at a rather slow pace. So far, there is no comprehensive legislation with regard to what should be privatized, or re-privatized and how it should be done. Consequently, decisions are made piece meal, *ad hoc* and, on appeal, are often reversed.

I suggest that the reasons for such a state of affairs are: 1) *conflicting claims* to property itself, 2) *conflicting criteria* for making such claims, and 3) *conflicting discourses*, which various groups use in pressing their property rights.

Not all claims for the return of property are controversial. Property that was formerly owned by the Catholic Church, for example, which included real estate as well as land, was returned with little objection, causing only slight social and economic discomfort.² On the other hand, Jewish, German, and property of the gentry produces far greater controversy, played out both in the social and the political arena. Throughout these disputes, it is not the notion of private property itself that is questioned, but of claims of particular agents to it.

To the surprise of many, the Polish gentry - who had largely disappeared from the public arena after World War Two – exploded on the public scene after 1989. Previously, they were largely invisible because of the silencing practices of the socialist state, which defined them as “the enemy of the people” and “the class other”, but also due to the split between private and public domains so prevalent in Polish society, a feature sociologists diagnosed as “social dimorphism”. This phenomenon refers to behaviours

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² This does not mean that the Church is entitled to receive all the property it had owned but only a fraction: each parish is allowed 15 hectares, and a seminary or diocese 50 hectares.

which are compartmentalized, allowing a variety of life styles, practices, and beliefs to function under an appearance of social uniformity.

In the year following the watershed of 1989, the gentry experienced a surge of popularity. With each consecutive visit to Poland, I found more books about them on the market, some even written by the gentry themselves. They multiplied with a daunting speed: sepia colour photographic albums, gentry registries, genealogies, histories of noble houses, 'who's who' in the past and the present, and above all, memoirs. It seemed that everyone was engaged in the business of reminiscing, imagining a kind of retrospective utopia. The press was undaunted in the pursuit of stories about an aristocracy which it had just discovered still existed. At that time, public fascination with everything noble was seemingly insatiable. The gentry themselves were almost giddy with delight. Put back on the public stage, they resurrected relics of their former lifestyle. There were noble balls, St. Hubert's Day foxhunts, glamorous weddings, their splendor equaling royal ceremonies in Western Europe. Newspapers advertised group pilgrimages to the territories incorporated into the Soviet Union and family re-unions were attended by hundreds of members from Poland and abroad. Obituaries began to specify titles and former possessions. The Order of Malta enrolled new members. Within a few years, no fewer than four journals appeared on the market, all explicitly catering to gentry audience. And finally, the Society of Landed Gentry – which had existed for over a hundred years before being suspended following the Second World War – was restored. It sprang to life again in 1991 gathering over 2,000 members in its first year and growing steadily since.

Relying heavily on the discourse of victimization favoured after 1989, the Society advocated the resurrection of the gentry in the public sphere, recognition of injustices inflicted upon its members and, most importantly, a revision of the 1944 land reform, which it proclaimed an unlawful act. Their request came at a seemingly opportune moment when discussions over reprivatization of nationalized property and privatization of collective property were, in general, at the peak of the government's agenda. The gentry bluntly demanded the return of all property seized in the process of the 1944 land reform. A barrage of articles in the press and public debates followed. To the surprise and annoyance of many in the gentry, and in spite of being an object of intense curiosity

akin to royalty elsewhere, the public did not support their appeal. Peasants and the parties that represented them were particularly vocal in their outrage over the proposal. In an effort to manage the overwhelming negative response, representatives of the gentry were quick to restate the issue: their requests concerned not all the property nationalized in the course of the land reform, and certainly not the land but what, in land reform parlance, was known as “residuarities” (Polish *resztówki*), mainly manors and parks which surround them. Since many of these, however, had been in the course of time converted into recreational, scientific, or housing facilities, this request put their former owners in direct conflict with those agencies and the local populations currently utilizing them. In a way, the issue of gentry property articulates the crux of the problem besetting reprivatization in Poland and exemplifies the concurrent dilemmas over solutions to conflicting interests, contested representations, different positionalities and ideological claims.

This paper examines the discourses surrounding the controversy over the returning of property to the gentry and contends that reprivatization is problematic because issues of various orders, those of morality, rationality, and history are irrevocably entwined.

The historical legacy of the landed gentry in Poland

The identity of the Polish gentry was grounded in a historically privileged class position acquired through the possession of land. Its strength depended on the fortuitous conjunction of several factors: powerful historical legends in combination with a presumed biological endowment, messianic elements blended with a cherished nationalist ideology.

While sharing many of the characteristics of their western counterparts, the Polish gentry, *szlachta*, is in numerous respects exceptional. Like other European nobilities, their origins are in the practice of receiving land in exchange for military service to the king. However, unlike other aristocratic orders, *szlachta* were able to convert these grants of land into inalienable hereditary possessions in both male and female lines. They gradually established economic and political hegemony forming a state which, in the course of the 16th century, became known as the “republic of the gentry”. Their economic power was based primarily on their monopoly of landownership and complete

jurisdiction over the serfs. Indeed, while serfdom was declining to the west of the Elbe, it was asserting itself to the east of the river. Compulsory labor dues were systematically increased so that by 1520 corvee labor of six days a week was allowed by law. Fortunately this coincided with a period of economic boom in Western Europe. Population growth and price rises made Polish grain extremely profitable. The gentry responded by directing their entire manorial system towards export production, actions which were, in turn, to lead towards the decline of the cities and undermine the internal markets.

The economic power of the gentry was fortified by its control over the political system. To start with, the king was reduced to the status of *primus inter pares*. The *nihil novi* decree (1505) forbade him to legislate on matters concerning the gentry or introduce reforms without their consent. The system of electoral monarchy, instituted in 1572, additionally weakened the power of the king. Repeatedly kept short of cash by the parliament, elected monarchs, were often forced to use royal domains as collateral against loans from magnates. Similarly, the loyalty of the gentry was continually sought through the grant of crown lands. For the upper nobility revenues from these royal holdings became important sources of income. In the process though, the system of central government was effectively paralyzed, the kingship weak or contested, while the power of the gentry was undisputed. All these factors made the Polish state vulnerable to the expansionist policies of its neighbors. At the end of the 18th century, Poland disappeared from the map, being kept alive in the form of memory, a nationalist program, and a set of administrative subdivisions of the enlarged adjacent empires: Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

The extent of the power and privileges of the Polish gentry encouraged the invention of a myth of separate origins. The myth alleged that the gentry derived from the ancient Sarmatian tribe of the Black sea. These Steppe warriors had resisted incorporation into the Roman Empire, conquered indigenous people, becoming masters over the subservient masses. They were supposed to be of a different “race”, their Sarmatian identity embodied in distinct features, practices, dress, even weapons. This myth of origin even took on messianic overtones. Having had nobility bestowed upon them by God, the gentry believed themselves to be bound by a sacred covenant to defend

the frontiers of Christianity. Through a series of conflicts with orthodox Russia, protestant Sweden and the Muslim Ottoman Empire, Sarmatian ideology eventually fused with Catholicism. The coronation of Holy Mary as the Queen of Poland in the 17th century is perhaps the best illustration of religious mysticism converging with national ambition.

What gave the Sarmatian ideology much of its potency was the size of the gentry. Constituting ten percent of the total population, the Polish gentry far outnumbered the nobility in other parts of Europe.³ Their egalitarian ethos was equally distinctive. The canon of equality was so absolute that *szlachta* firmly resisted all attempts to introduce titles and orders, instead situating their power in the autonomy of their landed estates. As the saying went, ‘A gentryman upon his patch is any magnate’s match’. However, practice still contradicted ideology. While magnates maintained their own courts and private armies, the grandeur of which sometimes astonished western aristocrats, the poorest of the gentry could hardly make a living and some had no land at all. The ethos of equality masked the tremendous economic differentiation among the gentry, providing a convincing justification for political unity. The ideology of equality and brotherhood could exacerbate as well as naturalize class division. Whether rich or poor, *szlachta* were brothers with a religious mission and a sense of national destiny. This gave them the moral conviction and political determination to resist central authority and maintain autonomy.

Whatever their economic situation, all gentry shared the explicit understanding that their class constitutes the nation and that the state, existing as it did to serve them, must be subservient and, finally, that they were the embodiment of Poland. In practice, the state was divided into clearly defined classes: the gentry, who were the nation and had all the rights, and the peasants, who were the serfs and had no rights. “The nation was Polish, the peasants were peasants”.⁴

The patriotic discourse that was born during the various Partitions of the country (1794-1918) gave a new character to the anti-centralism, democracy and freedom which

³ While in Western Europe there were on average 1 to 2 nobles per 100 inhabitants, in Poland that proportion was about 1 in 10. (Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492-1992*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993).

⁴ Narkiewicz, O., *The Green Flag: Polish Populist Politics, 1867-1970*. London: Croom Helm, 1976:9

the gentry espoused. The nobility became viewed as the repository of the state tradition, and, indeed, played the leading role in resistance movements and insurrections. The great nobles families, which often accepted aristocratic titles from foreign monarchs, did not always support these reforms or conspiracies. With kinship ties to noble houses elsewhere in Europe, they were not always so convinced of the virtue of nationalism nor did their immediate interests lie in changes to the economic and political structures. For the most part, the rebels were middle and lesser gentry who regarded themselves as the conscience, the directing force of the nation, responsible for its liberation and for preserving Polish culture. All their insurrections (1830, 1848, and 1863) failed, mostly due to the reluctance of their leaders to appeal to peasants. With serfdom still intact, the latter had little motivation to join what they perceived was a gentry's cause. The rebels paid with their lives, personal freedom, and property.

It is at this point in history that the land of the country becomes enshrined in patriotic mythology. Since it was at once material and symbolic, the punishments meted out to the rebels included the confiscation or the compulsory sale of their estates. As the policy of the occupying powers was to diminish the numbers of landholdings in Polish hands, Poles were restricted from purchasing land. In practice, this meant that if one Pole sold his land, another Pole could not buy it back. The Polish gentry quickly lost land to the Prussian colonists and Russian landowners. In Prussia, to take one example, a special fund (the Prussian Colonization Commission) was established in 1886 with the sole purpose of buying failing Polish estates and settling them with German colonists. Combined with the emancipation of peasantry which followed shortly⁵, these land policies made the gentry estates economically vulnerable. Advancing capitalism and the ensuing agricultural crisis in Europe did the rest. While, for example, the Polish gentry in Wielkopolska owned 78% of agricultural land in 1832, in 1899 they owned only 32%.⁶ Perhaps because of these difficulties, maintaining a landed estate in this era became elevated to the level of a patriotic duty. Since every field was but a fraction of the national soil, owning a piece of land was perceived as being equivalent to owning a part of the fatherland.

⁵ Serfdom was abolished in Prussia in 1807, in Austria in 1848, and in Russia in 1864.

⁶ Irena Rychlikowa, "Ziemiaństwo polskie (1772-1944): dzieje degradacji klasy", in: *Roczniki Dziejow Ruchu Ludowego*, no.26, 1986, p.26-46

Whether because of political repression or economic failure, in the second half of the 19th century, dispossessed or impoverished gentry migrated to cities, entering professions and joining the growing ranks of the urban intelligentsia. New labels signaled the change. Henceforth the estate owning gentry were known as *ziemianie*, literally ‘the landed ones’, the word deriving from the stem *ziemia* or land, while the term *szlachta* was reserved for earlier epochs. Landed citizen, landed gentry, landowner (in Polish *obywatel ziemski*, *ziemianin*, *wlasciciel ziemski*) all implied gentry origins and identified them as property owners. While the gentry diversified their occupations, the ideological-symbolic value of owning an estate increased in line with the actual difficulty of realizing this ideal. The identity of the gentry, whether they were urbanized or remained on the estate, continued to be located in the landed estate.

The manor (Polish *Dwor*) is a core image in Polish gentry culture. Situated amidst an idyll of self-sufficiency and peaceful country life, it is consistently represented as a repository of moral and social virtues and patriotic values. The more endangered the life of the inhabitants, the more mystified and shrouded in romantic iconography the manor became. Described in literature and depicted in paintings, the image of the Polish manor became frozen in time even giving rise to a specific architectural style which has been copied ever since. In the midst of radically changed social reality and geographic landscape, the ‘Polish manor’ style remains fashionable. *Dwor* signified an indigenous national tradition, a material embodiment of Polishness. Hence it was no coincidence that manors were offered as the nation’s gift to its heroes and distinguished personae. In 1902, the manor in Ogleborek was given to the writer Henryk Sienkiewicz; in 1903, the manor in Zarnowiec to the poet Maria Konopnicka; in 1923, Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, the leader of the independent Poland, received from his former comrades in arms the manor in Sulejowek. As a core symbol of a national past, defined in terms of the attributes of the gentry, *dwor* disappeared during Communist rule only to return in an explosion of popularity after the regime fell. It is presently the most common style of a single-family housing in Poland now, possibly an expression of a postmodern desire for continuity.

The creed of the gentry held that the mansion was an island surrounded by a sea of peasants who were barbarians in need of culture. The gentry deeply believed in their civilizing mission, convinced that their estates were the centers of culture, springs of

knowledge and the source of enlightenment. Many landlords were indeed active in charitable organizations, taught village children, funded orphanages, and endowed churches. They led prayers, tended to the sick, dispensed medicine and even dressed wounds. When hunger struck, they distributed food. Such were the patriarchal duties resting on their shoulders. Still, philanthropic endeavours separated more than they united. Charity did not mean empathy. Making necessity a virtue developed into a hypocritical morality where nobles were praised for assisting the very destitute who they had created in the first place.

The various failed attempts at securing sovereignty made the gentry realize that their group could no longer pretend to be the only valid political and cultural representation of the nation. When Poland became independent in 1918, the state was restructured in line with the democratic reforms sweeping Europe. The hegemonic power of the gentry declined, but their privileged position was not completely eroded. Although they lost the entitlement to be the sole legislator, many nobles came to occupy seats in the new Parliament forming the largely conservative power elite. Polish society was more differentiated but its fundamental structural and cultural duality remained intact, certain to influence personal life trajectories. Both as individuals and as a social category, the gentry continued to dominate intellectual, cultural, and bureaucratic domains setting the standard against which all else should be measured.

Ambiguous morality and contested legitimacy of the land reform

The politics of World War Two left Poland in the Soviet sphere of influence. The Polish Communist Party had never a large following and, from the outset, the Soviet-backed government installed in 1944 lacked popular legitimacy. In an effort clearly aimed at securing the support of the majority of the population, i.e. the peasants, one of its first actions was to introduce a radical land reform programme.

Large landed estates were nationalized and subsequently turned over to landless and poor peasants or else used to form state agricultural farms. A special ordinance called for the instantaneous eviction of landowners. Any lingering presence was suspected of inhibiting the peasants from participating in the redistribution of the land. In all, 9,707 estates were expropriated, covering a surface area of approximately 3,3 million hectares.

One-third of this land was divided among poor and landless peasants, mainly in eastern and central Poland where land hunger was the greatest.⁷ A considerable portion of the territories incorporated to Poland from Germany was left intact in the hands of the State Land Fund, and soon (1948) gave rise to the state collective farming system.

The land reform successfully removed the gentry from the countryside – its traditional stronghold, locus of power, sentiment and identity. Manors were converted into schools, orphanages, workers' housing or simply left to deteriorate. Empty and unguarded, many were taken apart by peasants themselves: one needed tiles for a leaking roof, another bricks for a stable. Decades later only the ruins in a cluster of old trees give any indication of their existence. Their inhabitants migrated to urban centers where they forged new lives, established new careers, and chartered new ways of holding to the vestiges of their old status. Literate and educated in a largely illiterate country, most gentry swiftly converted their skills into professions. Education set them apart as an intellectual elite, just as their incomes from landed property had previously set them apart from those obliged to earn their living in wages. The gentry became politically invisible and socially marginal but, although they were for some time barred from prominent positions, their cultural resources allowed them to maintain a higher standard of living than the majority of the population.

Subsequently, the state and the gentry each produced their own representation of the past, here representation connoting a specific form of reference in which a sign at once reveals and conceals a reality beneath it. Although each claimed to give a true account of historical facts, their contested versions illuminate not so much the past as ideological construction of it, each illustrated by a different set of historical myths.⁸

⁷ The land reform Decree proclaimed by the Interim government on September 6, 1944 called for the nationalization of all landed estates larger than 50 hectares with the exception of the territories incorporated to Poland from Germany where estates of 100 hectares or more were expropriated. In practice, however, all gentry' estates were, in the course of time, nationalized. Yet, mindful to cultivate its image as indigenously Polish, the government went to great lengths to claim and protect national icons, extending special treatment to some people.. For instance, in recognition of his "patriotic activity" of resisting Germanization of Polish estates in Eastern Prussia, Kazimierz Dominirski was allowed to stay on his estate and even entrusted with a post in the regional government (Tadeusz Chwalibog, *Moje Wspomnienia i Refleksje*. BN akc 12222).

⁸ Jakubowska, Longina, "Images and Counter Images: the Remaking of the Gentry in post-war Poland 1944-1995", in: *Focaal* nr 33, 1999:75-86, and "Cultural Resources of Elite Identity: the Vicissitudes of the Polish Gentry", in: Henk Driessen and Ton Otto, eds., *Perplexities of Identification: Anthropological Studies in Cultural Differentiation and the use of Resources*, Aarhus University Press, 2000:218-232

Gentry recollections of expulsion, eviction, and expropriation reverberate with disillusionment, pain, and a deep sense of injustice:

This was Wednesday, January 31, 1945, about 9 o'clock in the morning, when we saw the emissaries of the Peoples' Poland walking down the park lane towards the manor. They called a meeting of all employees. Tactfully, the farm hands did not parade in front of our windows but approached the house from the side, coming in small quiet groups. Somebody was sent to fetch me. I quickly took a few drops of Valeriana to calm my nerves.

The local deputies, the estate workers, and some landless peasants gathered in the salon. Two land surveyors, the members of Expropriation Committee, and the assistant to the county secretary were already seated at the table. They rose to greet me. I forestalled the workers' greetings by saying in a firm voice that there was no need for commotion. I sat on the chair they offered. Marcinkowski, the chairman, began his official speech. He spoke of the Land Reform Decree issued in Lublin, "historic justice", "Peoples' Poland" and such other things. The estate workers stood there silently herded together in a tight group. Their support for the new regime was being bought by the magical word "land". Marcinkowski asked whether they had any grievances against the owner. I looked at them. They denied having any. Only Julian, old and decrepit, already in my father's employ, spoke up. He demanded three quintals of grain, which he should have received during the German occupations. 'Be quiet, those were the German overseers not her Ladyship who should have done it' – the fellow workers whispered to him. Marcinkowski tried to explain to him as well that this was the responsibility of the Germans, not mine, but the old man was only getting confused. He believed that 'her Ladyship' should be held responsible for everything.

Marcinkowski decided to bring the meeting to an end. 'Because there are no grievances against Lady Walewska' – he resumed – 'we grant her two weeks to depart from the estate. Do you agree?' 'We agree' – responded the workers in unison. Marcinkowski instructed me that we are not allowed to live on the estate grounds, nor in the neighboring village and not even in the same county; that we may take all furniture and personal belongings; that we are entitled to use estate carriages for transport. Finally, he politely asked me to hand over the keys to all estate buildings. I put on the table a bunch of keys tied together with a leather strap – the symbol of rule over the estate. 'I believe your presence is no longer required' – said Marcinkowski. I rose and left. They stayed in my house.

I was raised in a class which, for generations believed itself to be solely responsible for all actions of social and national significance. I was deeply hurt not only by my estate taken away from me but also by being treated as enemy, by being discarded, made irrelevant, by not being able to voice my protest against the land reform, which was acted as a political weapon with no concern for the well-being of Polish agriculture.⁹

The narrative of Maria Walewska makes her sentiments, and that of dozens of others like her, perfectly clear. Yet the present day Polish gentry, even if embittered and disheartened, hardly question the necessity of the land reform itself. They fully realize that the poverty in the countryside was rampant, that the agricultural system in Poland was inadequate for the times and that agrarian reform was inevitable.¹⁰ What they object to is the vindictive character of the reform and the manner in which it was conducted. All estates were subject to expropriation without regard for their individual productivity or the competence and personal merit of their owners. The gentry were vilified and banned from the vicinity of their estates without monetary or other compensation for their lost livelihoods and with no concern for their future.¹¹ In the words of the political officer of

⁹ Maria Walewska, *W cieniu reformy rolnej*, unpublished manuscript.

¹⁰ The gentry are probably the last social group to acknowledge the miserable conditions of many parts in rural Poland before WWII. Amidst recent retrospective mystification of the gentry's past appear also voices of witnesses who testify to the essential truth of the Communist propaganda. Janusz Tazbir, an eminent historian, wrote this note in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (28 May, 1995), a Catholic daily known for its anti-Communist stand: "in the recent climate of uncritical gentry *apologia*, reminding about the poverty and humiliation in the village, which contrasted so much with 'the white mansions' sounds almost as a *faux pas*. As it happened, during the war I spent two years on an estate in Podlasie (the estate was taken over by the Germans but administered by a Polish staff). I did not imagine that people could live in the conditions I saw the estate's laborers were living. No wonder that it was about the only group, which did not condemn the Soviet occupation of 1939-41. When I visited the same estate in 1970's, I found a row of nice prosperous houses. Fortunately, there was not even a trace of the former workers' quarters (Polish *czworaki*). I am sure that their past inhabitants are not remembering the owners with nostalgia and that they would not only vote for PSL -Polish Peasant Party- but for the devil himself so the 'white mansions' would never return."

¹¹ In fact, the Land Reform Decree of September 6, 1944 stipulated compensation entitling the disenfranchised gentry to 5 hectares of land (i.e. on par with a landless peasant family) providing that the parcel is allocated not in the county of their former estate and preferably in the Western Territories. It is doubtful whether the state intended to follow this through and no gentry came to collect on the promise. It is probably for the sake of appearance, or an expression of fastidious record-keeping, that the protocol of the Political Bureau KC PPR contains the following entry: "concerning Habsburg, the former archduke of Zywiec, whose estate was nationalized, it is decided to grant him, in compliance with the Decree, a pension in the amount of the 6th grade pay scale and five hectares of land" (AAN, sygn. 295/V/3). No Habsburg came to collect. Generally the gentry declined compensation for reasons of pride, decorum, and economic feasibility judging it impossible to survive on yields from a 5 hectare parcel. The Article 17 of the Decree also granted a pension to the expropriated landlords. In practice, it was of little conse-

the Polish Peoples' Army charged with overseeing the reform, "making revolution is like walking through fields with a scythe – one does not distinguish weeds from grain"¹². Yet despite the poverty and inequality of the countryside the reform lacked revolutionary zeal, especially on the part of its immediate beneficiaries. Peasants hesitated to accept land parcels; some initially refused it, or sought advice from their landlords about how to proceed, even offering to pay for the land. Like the gentry, they were suspicious of the legitimacy of the new government being not quite convinced that the givers had the right to give and them the right to take. In the minds of both groups private property was sacred and so deeply embedded in the peasant consciousness that after the dust settled and the government attempted to collectivize agriculture its efforts were, for the most part, unsuccessful. Polish agriculture remained largely in the private ownership of small landholders with the exception of the Western Territories where expropriated lands formed the core of the state farming system.

In the eyes of many, the 1944 land reform was imposed from above by a government lacking in legitimacy and with questionable motivations. In consequence, it did not engender hostility between the landlords and the peasants who received land parcels. Relations between them endured; it was not uncommon to enlist the help of former landlords in dealing with bureaucratic matters such as securing an old age pension or other work-related benefits. Paradoxically, the state obliterated the gentry/peasant system and yet continued to rely on those relationships it denounced. Remnants of the patriarchal relations characteristic of the manorial system lived on in the shortages of the socialist economy. Peasants delivered agricultural products to the city-dwelling gentry, while the latter assisted in and mediated with the state bureaucracy, be it in pursuit of medical care, university admission or in search for records in population registries.

This ambiguity that characterises relations between the peasants and the gentry is reflected in the current debate over reprivatization. On the individual case-by-case level, peasants acknowledge that many gentry lords were unjustly treated. However in their collective consciousness, this personalized position is subordinate to the memory of exploitation and a fear of a return to dependency and servitude. The comment of an

quence. Only those in a dire need of financial assistance and with no capabilities of earning an income ever claimed the pension. Hence compensation does not figure in the collective memory of the gentry.

¹² Jan Gorecki, interview

employee of one farm which, in a twist of fortune changed from being a gentry estate to a collective farm to an gentry estate once more, indicates the emotions stirred by such a development: “before -in the collective- there would be a meeting, the foremen would report on harvest yields, on yearly profits, discuss how should they be divided among various units. These were the good times. A man was a worker. One was respected. Now I am in service, a hired hand.”¹³

Fundamentally, the peasants do not wish to relinquish property rights to the land acquired in the course of the land reform and which they have held in continuous use for half a century. This desire to maintain the status quo of a particular property appears to conflict with a more general moral understanding of private property rights and is further complicated by the perception of social justice. Since rights to ownership of land are overlapping, contested, or ambiguous, the solution to the problem requires establishing a hierarchy of rights, an issue which the government has, as yet, been unable to tackle.

Rational management of property

Reprivatization claims concern the land itself, manors and parks that surround them, small manorial industry, and objects of art. Partially for the reasons pointed out earlier, the issue of land is particularly sensitive. The gentry deride the politicization of land management in socialist Poland, accusing past governments of political and social expediency in the administration of agriculture. It was their irrational policy of land fragmentation, dividing expropriated estates into parcels too small to be viable production units, which made Polish agriculture inefficient in the first place. In the eyes of the gentry, this was the reason farming became unattractive to the younger generations of peasants causing, in turn, their exodus to the urban areas. Indeed, statistics show that over half of the two million farms in Poland are smaller than five hectares and the average size is not greater than eight hectares. In contrast, the historically grounded and genuine concern of the gentry for the well-being of agriculture sets them apart from the socialist policy-makers and legitimates their claims to the reinstatement of their landed property.

¹³ Jacek Hugo-Bader, “Obszarnicy”, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 23, 1994

The Ministry of Privatization has so far received over 16,000 petitions concerning the return of one-and-a-half million hectares allegedly unlawfully seized in the course of the land reform and its aftermath. Even if the current government was to consider the request of the gentry to the return of their expropriated landed estates, the manner in which the land was redistributed effectively prohibits it from doing so. Most estates *were* divided among peasants becoming their inalienable possession; indeed, foreseeing a possible challenge, the first post-war government quickly issued property deeds to all peasant beneficiaries. Hence, returning land to the gentry would create an immediate and direct conflict between the previous and the current owners, making it a dangerously explosive social issue. Although both the gentry and the peasants strongly approve of private property, in general they are divided about what constitutes social justice.

Collectivized land, that is land which can be reprivatized, was expropriated from the Germans. Considering that there is a strong popular opposition to the selling of land to foreigners and to German nationals in particular, actively invoking the patriotic discourse born at the end of the 19th century, this land is unlikely to be returned to their original owners. If a compensation plan was devised, 'German land' could possibly be offered to the gentry. The gentry, however, refuse to consider land other than that previously owned, clearly attempting to reinstate the nexus between the estate and the family broken through the land reform. This demonstrates the importance of attachment to the land for their self-identification. Although land is increasingly commodified, in the case of the gentry's former land, it is clearly more than just another commodity.

In view of the intricacies of contested land ownership and the general hesitance, even ideological resistance, towards *returning* land, all parties agreed that land distributed to the peasants would not be taken away. Subsequently, the gentry's discourse shifted towards seeking "a moral satisfaction, requesting an official statement in public and in history books, that the Land Reform was a political weapon to eliminate Polish landed gentry"¹⁴.

With the issue of what constitutes the greater social good resolved, the government still faces the dilemma over how to redress erroneous policies without committing new

¹⁴ Statement by Ludwik Karnkowski, one of the initiators of the Society of Landed Gentry, "Dwór nie chce straszyc", *Sztandar Młodych*, 13 September, 1990.

wrongs. In a reversal of the strategy guiding agricultural politics for the last 50 years, land is now open to market forces. About one million hectares of decollectivised lands are to be sold or leased to large-scale entrepreneurs to form income-producing agricultural businesses. They are not meant to enlarge the existing small individual farms, which are expected to produce for domestic consumption only.¹⁵ Consequently, the people who will control agricultural production will most likely neither come from among the marginalized peasants nor from among the urbanized gentry.

As for the gentry, the government offered them a priority in buying back fractions of their estates if such were to come on the market or, alternatively, compensation in the form of government bonds. In view of the obvious paradox of buying what they consider their lawful property, the gentry rejected the first proposition. Arguably this solution also introduces new injustices since not all estates will become available for sale and not all of those dispossessed will have enough disposable income to buy 'their land'. In the gentry's eyes, the second proposition advanced by the government is equally unacceptable because it does not resolve the primary issue of the right to a particular piece of land. In both cases, the gentry lobby shifts discursive fields from historical and national-patriotic arguments to legal and moral ones. The president of one chapter of the Society of Landed Gentry admonished the State:

The Polish gentry, who were for ages the defenders of Polishness and Polish culture, who paid with blood for their patriotism, and fifty percent of whom died from the hands of the Nazis and the Communists, are denied the return of estates of which they were robbed. While this decision is based on the invocation of the unlawful Land Reform Decree of September 1944, people who came to wealth at the expense of the society, and even foreigners are offered land at miniscule prices and for surface areas larger than an average gentry estate. How could the State disgrace itself by becoming a dealer trading in stolen homes, estates, and private possessions? The fact that passed wrongs are not rectified and the plundered property not returned is a testimony to the absence of social justice and a progressive moral decay, which are bound to have grave repercussions for the whole society.¹⁶

¹⁵ Information provided by Agencja Wlasnosci Rolnej Skarbu Panstwa.

¹⁶ Jan Langowski, "Występki przynosza korzysc", *Wolne Slowo*, 8 May, 1997

The gentry aspire to a presence in the countryside claiming to be its historical voice, the engine of progress in rural Poland, and the source of enlightenment. Their vision embraces a paradigm of the past imbuing it with the idea of rural renewal. “Peasants do not know how to manage land”¹⁷, they claim. In view of the gentry’s record, the government, not to mention the peasants and the parties that represent them, find the self-proclaimed mission of saving Polish agriculture from collapse preposterous. Looking beyond their historical attachment to land, there is doubt whether they still possess the skills necessary to practice agriculture¹⁸ although it did become clear that in spite of the socialist government’s reservations about allowing the link to land continue, many in the gentry were actively involved in agriculture whether out of sentimental, ideological or cultural reasons, or the quite pragmatic desire to salvage remnants of their landed property. Circumventing the government policy, quite a few gentry obtained agricultural training, or at least a diploma, which entitled them to own/manage landed property and allowed to salvage remnants of the family property.¹⁹

One would expect the eldest gentry to be the generation, which is emotionally the most attached to and identifies itself the strongest with the system of family estates. The same, however, holds for generations that follow. At one meeting of the Society of Landed Gentry, I witnessed an emotional outburst of a young man who proclaimed to “walk on his knees if it got him to his family estate”. Indeed, it is precisely the younger gentry generations, whether they do or do not have experience in working in agriculture, that possess the social position, networks, and knowledge necessary to obtain information, loans, and licenses to “recover” their family belongings.

The manors present yet another problem. There are about 20,000 of them scattered throughout the territory of Poland, many of historical and architectural value, others quite unremarkable. The grandest of them became converted into museums, art collections and scientific institutions, conference centers or government retreats; the more modest manors are used by the local authorities variously as workers’ quarters, schools, local

¹⁷ Jacek Hugo-Bader, *ibid.*

¹⁸ In the first years following expropriation, the gentry were massively employed in the management of the nationalized lands, in particular in the Western Territories. They were gradually dismissed from positions of management following consolidation of power by the Communist Party in 1948.

¹⁹ Contrary to the collective representation, not all estates were expropriated. Some were too small, forgotten in bureaucratic chaos, or spared for reasons unknown. Paradoxically, the poorer the gentry were, the more likely they were to keep their property.

cultural centers and other public purpose buildings, having changed their function as the need arose.

In comparison to land, manors are more manageable because in their case there is no necessity to tackle the problem of the rights of the third party, that is, of the new owners. Palaces, manors, and all estate buildings seized under the authority of the Land Reform Decree are in possession of local county governments and are used for communal purposes. Yet, there are still problems. To whom should they belong to? Are they to be treated as national heritage or as private relics? What could be returned and on what conditions? Many mansions suffer from years of neglect and face an imminent ruin, some are already reduced to rubble, while the approximate 1,500 manors which have been given the status of a historical monument, were rather well taken care of by the socialist state. This produces another dilemma. Would it be just to the former owners to return manors in a different state of preservation? Should the prospective old/new owners of the well preserved and restored structures be required to compensate the state for safeguarding them? Does the legal right to property supersede the value of the object's social significance or one's conduct in the times of crisis? What should be the grounds of the decision about the request of Count Trojanowski "who resides in London and did not suffer the fate of the Nation in Stalinist Poland, but who wants to get his palace back, which he found in a 'quite reasonable state', or about the Czaplickis from Jarantowice who want the return of their paintings, which are in the possession of the museum in Wloclawek"²⁰?

In practice, county governments wish for a decision about how to dispose of the palaces and mansions, with which they have been burdened. In many instances, the maintenance and preservation of historical or just old buildings is beyond financial capacities of impoverished communities, which struggle with the decline of agricultural industry and growing rural unemployment. In recognition of the moral obligations towards the previous occupants and dodging cumbersome financial obligations at the same time, they attempt to reach a compromise between the conflicting perspectives on property ownership: the gentry owners can *buy* their family manor/palace for a *symbolic*

²⁰ *Zycie Warszawy*, 1990 (nr 199)

amount, or 1 *zloty*. Such was the case with the Lubomirski palace in Kruszyna and the Horodynski manor in Zbydniów.

Concluding remarks

Manors, parks, and 'residual' lands are a good example of the conflicting interests, claims and discourses surrounding the issue of property nationalized after World War Two. Whether they are recovered by the gentry, utilized by others, or abandoned by all, they still have to be saved from social forgetting as well as from physical collapse. The other problem is how to reconcile private sentiments with historical, architectural, and symbolic significance, given the shortage of investment capital. The resulting dilemmas over the conflicting interests of national economy, just distribution of resources, recognition of individual property rights, and revindication of the past, are played out at every level of the corporate body.

All parties in these disputes about the future of property relations engage in discursive shifts, from history to morality and social justice and to rational economic behaviour. In voicing the competing ethical justifications for landed property, the legitimizing system is historical, or sentimental, or it makes reference to the moral order of property relations. Whatever arguments each side advances, the resistance of the government and the insistence of the gentry on the ways and forms of reprivatization are a reflection of the disparity of perspectives on property ownership and their respective ideological positions.