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Property Relations and Social Identity in Rural Poland¹

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Abstract

Dziekanowice is a village in Wielkopolska (Poznań) in Poland that has undergone several changes caused by the introduction of free market principles affecting interconnected social, labour and property relations. The latter have become one of the major anthropological topics studied by western anthropologists in the region after 1989. However, in the case of Poland this issue has been rarely explored. Also, relatively few scholars have closely and clearly put the three mentioned aspects together. In Dziekanowice under communism, state and private agricultural land coexisted. The dissolution of the local state farm has opened a possibility for a much more intense flow of capital within agriculture, especially with respect to land property. New means of class differentiation have opened and former class distinctions have acquired new meanings. Alongside property, one of the factors that has redefined social relationships and helped to conceptualise them is 'work'. By using combined criteria of economic, social and cultural capitals, all organised around property, social transformations in Poland, based on the example of this countryside community, are rendered.

¹ I was able to conduct intermittent fieldwork in Dziekanowice thanks to the ongoing support of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Poznań. This essay was finally drafted while I was a guest at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale in February and March 2006. My thanks go to Frances Pine, Chris Hann and Deema Kaneff for their critical and valuable comments on this paper that I at least partly tried to integrate.

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Introduction

Property, privatisation and reprivatisation have undoubtedly become one of the most debated topics in the Central European postsocialist context. For politicians, changing property relations has been one of the landmarks for gauging the system from an authoritarian to a democratic one and bringing back the ‘proper’ ownership order has turned out to be the acid test for those who claimed their entry into the western sphere of politics. For neo-liberals, private ownership has functioned as a cornerstone of the only feasible and efficient socio-economic system. For the local and international audience, the process of changing property relations has served as a sort of magical formula for transforming the deviant East into the ‘proper’ West, for converting it from a communist mess into a capitalist regime, and for bringing it back on the correct track of civilisational progress. For many local actors privatisation has opened a space for quick and easy enrichment. Finally, the issue of ownership relations has grown to be one of the major topics of ethnographic investigations in the region. It seems that anthropologists have also been swayed by the dominant western image that situates cultural order in economics. In any case, from the blossoming literature on postsocialism one may gain an impression that privatisation, modes of production, labour relations and other topics connected to economy have mainly preoccupied experts in the field of study that is rather commonly associated with culture and society³. Conjoining this interest in economy with concentration on culture, one may perhaps claim that anthropologists have confirmed Marshall Sahlins’ statement whereby in “bourgeois society, material production is the dominant locus of symbolic production” (1976: 212). Below, I trace these steps by scrutinising the Polish case, which, like any other, is particular, but which in one major aspect is unique for the whole former communist bloc. Most of the Polish agriculture was never collectivised and this has had a corollary in postsocialist transformation that, at least to my knowledge, has not as such been studied by western anthropologists⁴ mostly preoccupied with radical consequences of de-collectivisation in Romania (Kideckel 1993; von Hirschhausen 1997; Verdery 1996, 1998, 2003), Bulgaria (Creed 1998, Kaneff 2004), Slovakia (Danglová 2003), Hungary (Lampland 1995; 2001), Russia (Humphrey 1998) or as a phenomenon seen

³ Of course, it does not mean that other topics have not been addressed by western anthropologists in postsocialist countries. Nationalism, civil society and religion appear to be next on the research priority list. For a concise review of the anthropological research agenda in postsocialist countries see Hann 2000.

⁴ As Chris Hann, in his introduction to the volume that summarises the work done on postsocialist property relations in Eurasia by the group of scholars in the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, writes: “Regrettably, we have had no project on Poland, where mass collectivisation was abandoned after a political crisis in 1956 and private family farming remained dominant. This is precisely what makes the Polish case so interesting” (2003: 17). With respect to the postsocialist period the issue of property only Pine’s (2003a) article focusing on southern Poland addresses this issue.

from a more comparative perspective (Kideckel 1993 Abrahams 1996; Maurel 1994 Leonard and Kaneff 2002; Hann et al. 2003; Verdery and Humphrey 2004). Of course, there are scholars preoccupied with the Polish rural communities (Nagengast 1991; 2001; Pine 1994, 1998; Zbierski-Salameh 1999; Conte 2001), but they have not directly addressed the issue of property relations. My case is grounded in the ethnography of a rural community that illustrates social relations and the cultural order with much wider implications. Global changes, state policy and nationwide processes constitute a structural framework in which people at a grass-roots level operate, which they interpret within their own symbolic systems, and which they co-produce in everyday practice. I am interested in the way the order of things, particularly land, relates to the order of people and their identities, and how these two are related to and are legitimised by existing cultural values. Both the structural framework and collective and individual practices exercised have historical underpinnings.

The article serves the dual purpose of being informative and interpretative. With respect to the first, I would like to provide some data on the Polish privatisation processes in agriculture. It will also provide a background for the second, in which I offer some anthropological insights into these processes that go beyond statistics and the 'raw' data. The essay starts with an outline of the historical setting that has conditioned the direction of economic reforms after 1989 with regard to agriculture. Nationwide changes in property relations comprise a part of this story. Here, I restrict my interest in property relations to *land ownership*. Then, I present an extremely concise outline of the social history of the locality I studied as well as the scope and character of transformations in property relations. Past socialist relationships have conspicuously affected current transformations in the property order and social hierarchy. In this way I would like to intertwine local and national perspectives that are obviously linked and can only be appropriately understood when studied in conjunction.

Historical Background

The privatisation of services, industry, finance and agriculture is well advanced in Poland and in this respect it does not differ significantly from other countries in the region, especially those that have already joined the European Union. Privatisation has taken various forms, ranging from buying out of state companies by a single foreign or local investor to the selling of shares to collectives and individuals via the stock market (including Employee Stock Ownership Plans)⁵. It sounds paradox, however, that among postsocialist states the country

⁵ For a summary of the various forms of and the process of privatisation in Poland see Hunter and Ryan 2004. They distinguish seven different models of privatisation of state enterprises (pp. 929-933). Their article does not make any direct reference to the situation in the agricultural sector. For an anthropological account of the privatisation processes in the industrial sector see the brilliant work of Elizabeth Dunn (2004).

that started regional changes with global repercussions called ‘transition from socialism to capitalism’, remains unique in comparison with its neighbours with respect to reprivatisation and, particularly, the reprivatisation of land. According to the opponents of this act, it does not make sense in Poland, because land had mostly remained private during the socialist period anyhow, meeting reprivatisation demands could harm fragile rural ownership relations and endanger the balancing of the state budget. Moreover, giving land back to the interwar owners or their descendants is practically impossible, since post-war Poland was established as a ‘new’ country with radically changed borders⁶. As in any other political debate, arguments presented as ‘objective reasons’ against reprivatisation are, in fact, discursive arguments ironically at odds with a prevailing democratic and neoliberal devotion to the ‘proper’ and lawful rules of individual ownership. These world-view discussions and (re-)privatisation practices mirror, on the one hand, social relations associated with the property regime and, on the other hand, political stands of various interest groups. Altogether, they exemplify how property relations are embedded in social relationships and cultural values (cf. Hann 1998).

The successful transformation of land ownership is usually presented as a post-communist breakthrough. However, as I mentioned, Poland, alongside the former Yugoslavia, did not fit the pattern. In Poland, rural property relations evolved together with the transformation of socialism itself.⁷ The current transition is just a drop in the ocean of history and it results in changes that are not revolutionary at all, especially when compared to the ‘proletarian revolution’ following the decree to nationalise land issued in 1944 and implemented soon thereafter.

Thus, the proportion of land owned privately and by the state fluctuated according to the changing agricultural policies of the authorities. I suggest that under communism at least five periods can be distinguished:

(1) 1944 – 48: Characterised mainly by nationalisation and redistribution of the land to peasants, connected with the creation of state farms mostly in ‘Regained (Western) Territories’. Following the 1944 ‘July Manifesto’ promulgated by the communist Lublin ‘government’ led by Bolesław Bierut and installed by the Soviets, holdings in excess of 50 ha (100 ha in the western provinces) were expropriated in a decree dated 15 August 1944

⁶ As one of the major ‘winners’ of the anti-German coalition (4th largest military force and six million victims) Poland was shifted westward by ca. 200-300 km and reduced in size by almost a quarter (from 388 to 312 thousand square km). This created a problem for people resettled from the interwar eastern territories ceded to the Soviet Union (today in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine) and who lost their property there. Despite international agreements, they have not been compensated for their losses until today. This makes their situation fundamentally different from the Germans expelled from Central Europe.

⁷ A process of parcelling land in Poland as well as in the greater region started in the interwar period (see Roszkowski 1995, particularly Table 10, p. 131).

(Roszkowski 1992: 133; 141). More than 13 000 estates were thus confiscated by the State Land Property Office (*Państwowe Nieruchomości Ziemskie*) and largely redistributed to peasants (Kersten 1990: 147). As a result, a class of landed gentry was eliminated and this goal was later written into the constitution of 1952, which declared that the Polish People's Republic "contains, expulses and eliminates social classes that live on the exploitation of workers and peasants" (*Konstytucja 1967*: Ch. 1, art. 3, p.4).

(2) 1949 – 56: Characterised mainly by attempts at collectivisation. The number of co-operatives rose from 243 in 1949 to 9800 in 1955, but this process was relatively slow; in 1956 only 9% of arable land was administered by co-operatives (Roszkowski 1992: 215).

(3) 1956 – 1970: Collectivised farms were largely disbanded and the area owned by the co-operatives diminished from 1.9 million ha in 1955 to 260 000 ha in 1957; at the same time, the proportion of privately owned farms rose from 78% to 85% (Roszkowski 1992: 250-251).

(4) 1970 – 1983: Can be described as 'oppressive tolerance' (Gorlach and Seręga 1991) towards farmers during the so-called Gierek period⁸. In 1972, the policy of 'compulsory deliveries' was abandoned, but the leadership's deep belief in central planning reinforced collectivisation in the guise of agricultural modernisation. Ageing smallholders were strongly encouraged, under laws passed between 1974 and 1979, to cede their deeds to the state in return for a pension withheld from landowners: accepting this offer implied excluding one's children from the 'peasantry'. The State Land Fund (*Państwowy Fundusz Ziemi*) prohibited the sale of land to individual farmers. Consequently, between 1976 and 1980 alone, the proportion of arable land in private hands fell from 71% to 68% (Roszkowski 1992: 319; 340). However, this 'awkward class', considered by many communists as a 'ball and chain', proved to be more efficient than the state sector. Gierek's policy led to a drop of overall agricultural production by 8% during the late 1970s and caused shortages of meat and other agricultural products. This mismanagement was one of the major factors which sparking off strikes and the establishment of 'Solidarity' in 1980.

(5) 1983–1989: Only in 1983, during the extreme political crisis of martial law and under the pressure of the Polish Peasant Party, a formal ally of the Polish United Worker's Party (Communist Party), was 'family farming' officially recognised as equal to 'socialist forms of agricultural production'. In order to increase food supplies the authorities supported the agricultural sector with cheap loans and by offering decent prices for agricultural products. Thanks to this relatively favourable policy, the proportion of arable land in private hands increased from 68% to 76%.

⁸ Edward Gierek was the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers Party between December 1970 (after workers' strikes) and August 1980 (again, after workers' strikes and the rise of 'Solidarity').

This brief review not only demonstrates that in contrast to other Central European countries, agricultural land was largely privately owned in post-war Poland, but also shows how socialist agricultural policy as well as property rules and relations fluctuated. In 1990, at the end of socialist period, 76% of agricultural land was private, 18.7% of land was tilled in state farms, 3.7% of it was in the hands of co-operatives, and 1.6% was in possession of 'agricultural circles' (cf. Pilichowski 1994: 165-166; Maurel 1994: 99). This means that just less than one quarter of the major agricultural means of production, i.e. land, could be classified as 'socialist agriculture'. Changes in property relations intertwined with communist policies towards agriculture were assisted by huge social shifts. First, as a result of rapid socialist industrialisation, the proportion of people working in agriculture dropped steadily from 66% in 1946 to 26.6% by 1990 (Rocznik 1997: XXXV) – that makes on average a drop of 1% a year. However, the number of farms decreased only slightly whereas the birth rate in the countryside remained high and almost compensated for migration to the towns. In the meantime, urban population increased almost threefold, from 8 million in 1946 to 23.6 in 1990. In the countryside it only dropped in total numbers from 16.1 million to 14.6 million, while in percentage this was from 68.2% to 38% (Eberhardt 1993: 34). This means that it was the peasantry that provided the human resources for urbanisation.

The purportedly systemic transformation of the 1990s has not solved the age-old 'peasant problem'. Today farmers and agricultural workers still compose a quarter of Poland's population. Actually, the percentage of the population working in agriculture had already started to drop in the 1980s, falling by 4% over the course of the decade (from 30.6% in 1980 to 26.6% in 1990). Paradoxically, and contrary to the mystified image of the 'Great Transformation', this percentage stabilised during the 1990s and amounted to 26.8% in 2002 in the common category of 'agriculture, hunting and forestry' while an estimated 16.1% of the labour force worked on private farms alone (Rocznik 2004: 41). The number of farms, i.e. households with property holdings larger than one hectare, actually dropped from 2.138 million in 1990 to 1.85 million in 2003. Related to this trend is the steady increase in the average total farm area, 7.6 ha in 1995 to 8.2 ha in 2003 (Rocznik 2004: 457). Also, the number of farms larger than 15 ha rose from 164,000 in 1995 to 183,000 in 2003, making up more than 44% of agricultural land that year. These changes are in line with the 'modernisation' policy of Polish and EU authorities who aim to reduce the number of farms to levels between 600,000 and 800,000. These statistics indicate a steady but moderate decrease in the number of holdings, but this process is neither 'revolutionary' nor new and it was initiated as long ago as in the 1920s. As a consequence, even under capitalism-reborn,

small farmers still appear as an ‘awkward class’ that again has to be reduced and remains recalcitrant to ‘rationalisation’.

Neo-liberal rationalisation and the consolidation of land have been combined with the privatisation of state enterprises. On 1 January 1992, the Agricultural Property Agency of the State Treasury was created⁹ and was recently renamed the Agricultural Real Estate Agency or *Agencja Nieruchomości Rolnych* (hereafter ‘the Agency’). Its task has been to administer and restructure state-owned agricultural assets. Altogether, since 1992, the Agency has acquired 1,666 state enterprises comprising 332,000 apartments and flats and hundreds of thousands of agricultural workers (even in official reports their number varies between 192,000 and 434,000) and 4.7 million ha of land.¹⁰

The process of privatisation proved to be much more complicated than many assumed. Disbanded state farms created reservoirs of jobless people. In the agricultural regions of Mazuria (former Eastern Prussia) and Western Pomerania, official unemployment rates oscillate between 25 and 30 percent. Mostly uneducated people have been trapped in cages of worn-out concrete apartment blocs and of structural unemployment. Despite official declarations by the Agency that it helps these people to adapt to the new context, they have mostly been granted early retirement or remain redundant; very few continue to work on ‘restructured’ farms run either by the Agency or leased to or owned by private entrepreneurs.

Many factors restrict the Agency’s activities. Legal regulations limit possible buyers to Polish citizens¹¹ who, especially among those involved in the agricultural sector, often lack money for investment. Due to competitive markets, not all farmers are interested in the expansion of their farms. State-owned agricultural land is for the most part located in the regions where a ‘hunger for land’ does not exist (west, north-west and north-east Poland)

⁹ Following legislation initiated by the government, the parliament adopted on 19 October 1991 the Act on the Management of Agricultural Property of the State Treasury (complete text in the Journal of Laws, No.57, Item 299 with subsequent amendments). The Act entrusted restructuring and privatisation in the state-run sector of agriculture to the Agricultural Property Agency of the State Treasury. The property entrusted to the Agency forms the Agricultural Property Stock (APS) of the State Treasury. Almost 80% of APS land comes from liquidated state farms.

¹⁰ All data about the Agency and its activities comes from materials published by it. Most of them can be found on the website (see: *Agencja Nieruchomości Rolnych*; <http://www.anr.gov.pl>). See particularly links to ‘Wyniki działalności’: <http://www.anr.gov.pl/pl/section/wd> (viewed: 15.05.2005).

¹¹ Poland is the only country amongst those which have entered the EU in May 2004 that negotiated a twelve-year moratorium that strictly restricts the free flow of capital with respect to the sale of land (in all other postsocialist countries the grace period will last for seven years). The discussion on land acquisition in Poland has been mired in nationalist arguments (“Germans will buy Polish soil in which our ancestors’ blood is soaked...”). Let me outline my own reading of this allegedly patriotic problem. The lack of a reprivatisation bill reflects power relations between, on the one hand, a politically weak interest group of interwar landowners and their heirs and, on the other hand, a strong lobby of agricultural entrepreneurs, many among them former members of the *nomenklatura*, and rich farmers. The Agency leases and gradually sells land to the latter at relatively low prices. Expected price increases when the market opens in 2016 will quickly enrich new landowners. Thus, fear of foreigners coincides with a mystified economic interest of those who ‘defend the Polish soil’.

since most people lack the financial means to acquire it and the land is inaccessible to former state farm workers. In south-east, south and central Poland farmers who would like to expand their acreage cannot obtain any. The Agency itself is a huge public employer and, according to the logic of self-perpetuating bureaucracy, its ‘human resources’ are not interested in concluding its operation. The conundrum with respect to reprivatisation of course works to the benefit of the Agency’s employees. Although it is not a written law, in some regions land claimed by the pre-war owners or their heirs cannot be sold to anybody else without the claimant’s official consent and an unofficial financial compensation¹². All in all, by the end of 2004, after thirteen years of the Agency’s existence, less than one third of the land has been sold (31.4%, i.e. 1.479 million ha) and most of it is leased (49.1%, i.e. 2.311 million ha). The remaining land has been disposed of differently (returned to owners, to the Church, to communities, to the State Forests Enterprise) or remains to be allocated (479,000 ha). Anti-foreign sentiment and legislation is reflected in the minuscule proportion of land sold by the Agency to foreign citizens (only 925 ha) or leased to them (114,971 ha).

Property Relations in Dziekanowice

Dziekanowice is a small village in Wielkopolska, a historical region and administrative province (*województwo*) called Greater Poland or Poznań in English. It is located in the Łubowo commune (*gmina*), about 35 km north-east of Poznań on the way to Gniezno, the capital of the district (*powiat*). The region entered the capitalist transformation at the end of the 19th century under Prussian rule and, contrary to the east-southern part of Poland then controlled by Austria, farms could not be divided into parts smaller than 17 ha (known as politics of undivided estates – *geschlossene Höfe*). Land estates were commonplace and German *Junker*, supported by the government in Berlin, rivalled for land with the long settled Polish gentry. At that time, soil had a vital national quality. Prussian rule resulted in a land structure that differentiates Wielkopolska’s rural areas from other parts of the country until today. Sizeable farms and former land estates, converted mostly into state farms under communism, alongside high productivity, have been among the most conspicuous features. Also during the socialist period, farmers were producers and often interested in keeping their farms for commercial production. The further commercialisation of agriculture after 1989 has caused great interest in land in most parts of the region and, in contrast to territories

¹² Currently the unofficial price for such a ‘favour’ is ca. 1,000 zlotys (250 euros) per hectare, which is approximately 40% of an average monthly salary in Poland (the source of this information is not only based on an interview with the employee of the regional office of the Agency in Bydgoszcz, but also on participant observation in such a deal). This is of course in addition to the official cost of any land on which there are legal claims (in Wielkopolska it is on average 7,000 zł/ha).

transferred to Poland from Germany after 1945, growing numbers of rural entrepreneurs compete for this scarce good.¹³

Several of these processes can be read in Dziekanowice's history and ethnography. A village map cadastre from 1820, with corrections from 1835,¹⁴ shows three family names still present in the village who occupy more or less the same land as their ancestors. There are some hints that the first families established themselves in the village by 1780 and one of my informants claims that his family has resided in Dziekanowice for at least eight generations. Furthermore, according to parish registers, there are five other families which came to the village in the 19th century. A number of families took up residence in Dziekanowice in the first two decades of the 20th century and several others since the interwar period. It was also at that time that some rural proletarians' families still present in the community today settled there. During World War II many people were evicted from their farms and sent either to the German-occupied part of Poland¹⁵ or to Germany to work as forced labourers, but most returned home after 1945.

Existing records also show that farm ownership changed as a result of purchases, marriages and the continuing arrival of new settlers. However, despite these transfers, changes in state sovereignty and political systems, there is a continuity of settlement stretching over several decades and in some cases almost two centuries¹⁶. Peasants/farmers constitute the most durable social component since there was a large ebb and flow among the agricultural workers. The ownership of the largest estate in Dziekanowice¹⁷ has had a complex track record having changed both in size and owners. It was forcefully taken over by the Prussian state from the Roman-Catholic Church and during the interwar period, besides the ca. 160 ha that fell back into Church hands, the estate was owned by the Polish state and leased to a relatively rich, although not gentrified, family. In 1939, the family was evicted by the Nazis and a Baltic German (*Baltendeutscher*) from Estonia managed the manor and land. When Polish communists seized power, the estate shared the fate as many similar agricultural entities in the country. Immediately after World War II, the holding was distributed among fifteen rural working families whose farms ranged between 7 and 12 hectares. In the early

¹³ On patterns in land structure in Poland see Głębocki 2000.

¹⁴ Landratura Gniezno 20. Measurements were done in 1820 by an individual named Smul; copied in 1835 by Demmler.

¹⁵ When Germany and the Soviet Union divided Poland in 1939, Polish pre-war territory occupied by the Nazis was divided into a part annexed by the Third Reich (Wielkopolska, then called *Warthegau*, Danzig-Eastern Pomerania, Upper Silesia, and the Suwałki District) and the occupied territory of *Generalgouvernement*, which included such cities as Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin, Radom and, after 1941, Lvov (cf. Conte and Essner 1995: 267).

¹⁶ It does not mean that this kind of continuity is universal in the region. For example, in neighbouring Lednogóra, in which many German settlers used to live, many people arrived in the last 50 years.

¹⁷ The name of the village has religious and economic connotations that reveal what institution owned it in the past. In the Catholic Church a *Dziekan* (Dean) is a priest who heads a cathedral chapter, in this case the cathedral is in Gniezno. The ending *-wice* is very common in Polish topography.

fifties, it was collectivised along with some – although not all – long-established peasants' farms, and then, after the 1956 'October Thaw'¹⁸, decollectivised. At the end of the 1950s the state farm was established. Its property consisted of the remaining local state property in Dziekanowice and its vicinity, including those lands partly confiscated from the Church, as well as the land of eleven beneficiaries of the Nationalisation Act who relinquished their assets to the state for almost nothing. It functioned for the next quarter of a century. Only one person out of all who gave up farming found employment in the new enterprise while the others left the village. In the 1960s farming was a difficult occupation and fulfilling the mandatory deliveries to the state was a demanding chore. Land ownership was no longer highly valued. Settling in towns or even joining state farms as manual workers was regarded as a more comfortable life than farming. Nevertheless, four former rural proletarian families stayed on the land they received in 1945 and live there to this day. Radical socialist agricultural reforms left their mark in local property relations and a number of former rural workers became farmers.

By the end of the 1980s the state farm enterprise in Dziekanowice worked 379 ha of land, of which 211 ha were within the village itself. Of the latter, the Agency took over 212 ha (including one hectare from the State Land Fund). However, only 25 ha (11.8%) of it have been sold. The biggest local beneficiary of the systemic transformation is the Roman-Catholic Church to which 151 ha (71.2% of all land acquired by the Agency) were returned. Eleven ha (5.2%) have been given to previous owners, 22 ha are being leased (10.4%) and 3 ha managed by the Agency lay fallow.¹⁹ This data is not very representative for the commune or region, not to mention the entire country. In Dziekanowice the proportion of Church property is exceptionally high and it mirrors the historical development of this locality since medieval times. Prussian confiscation and communist nationalisation caused substantial reversals of fortune, but the latter turned out to be merely a whimsical episode. Nationwide, the state has given the Church close to 71,000 ha, which comprises only 1.5% of the whole land taken over by the Agency.²⁰ In the commune's borders, for example, the proportion of land returned to the Church amounts to 28.3%. Farmers in Dziekanowice have not had great prospects for

¹⁸ The end of the Stalinist period was marked in Poland by a workers' uprising in Poznań in June 1956, followed by political relaxation in October of that year, signified by a change of Party leadership until 1970 to Władysław Gomułka, who declared 'the Polish road to socialism'. The latter implied also the end of the policy of forced collectivisation of agriculture.

¹⁹ These data were valid on the 28.02.2005. I received them from the Poznań Branch of the Agricultural Real Estates Agency. Special thanks to Mr. Paweł Andrzejczak, head of the analysis department.

²⁰ In 1989 the Parliament (*Sejm*) accepted a bill thanks to which the Church was granted confiscated rural lands back. Besides, each newly established parish in the countryside has had a right to be granted 15 ha from the state. Together with land the Church had kept during the communist period, it now owns approximately one hundred thousand hectares, which makes it the second largest, after the State, owner in the country. The Church usually rents its land out to farmers or institutions (cf. Sowula and Katka 2005: 4).

buying land. They can rent it from the local parish – that alone owns more than 100 ha – or buy it in the surrounding area. By the end of 2001, very little of the land comprising the previous state farm in Dziekanowice has fallen into individual farmers' hands. This, in a drastic way, illustrates the scarcity of good land in this region. In the communities where the majority of the population are farmers – in the Łubowo commune agriculture is a main source of income for 80% of its inhabitants – farm expansion is only possible by reducing the number of farms, i.e. some farms swallowing others. The concentration of farmers and the interest in land in Wielkopolska have made the price of land among the highest in the country: one hectare costs the equivalent of two thousand euros. This hunger for land shows that the value attributed to land is high among farmers in Dziekanowice. Recently this tendency has been strengthened by a general foreign interest in land, especially near the German border, city-dwellers interests in buying small plots for building their houses, and last but not least, EU subsidies to agriculture calculated on the basis of acreage cultivated by a household.

Nevertheless, private owners prevail in Dziekanowice. Coordinating the Agency and the Commune's Office data is difficult.²¹ In any case, out of the ca. 879 ha documented in the office register for the Dziekanowice area in 2001, farmers alone owned 611 ha (68%), other private proprietors 10 ha (1%), the commune 16 ha (2%), the Church 100 ha (12%) and the state, in the form of its legal institutions (e.g. Museum of the First Piasts in Lednica²²), 61 ha (7%). The Agency itself, as a representative of the state, still possessed 90 ha (10%) that was mostly worked by its commercial farm establishment in Łubowo, but apparently, in the last three years, it returned about ten hectares to the Church and sold some pieces into private hands²³. One can therefore say that at that time public property (the state and the commune combined) comprised 19% of land in Dziekanowice, while the rest was in private hands. Today this proportion is even more in favour of the private owners. The dissolution of the state farm has also caused the emergence of a whole new group of 'owners'. Former state farm workers, in total 30 families, were given 0.05 ha pieces of land each for free (altogether 1.5 ha), which they used as garden plots during communism. Moreover, the flats they live in

²¹ All statistical data about Dziekanowice was gathered in the Commune's Office in Łubowo. I would like to thank the staff of this administrative centre, particularly the commune's leader Mr. Andrzej Łozowski, for their help.

²² The Museum was established in the 1970s and includes an archaeological section that preserves historical sites considered to be the cradle of the Polish Christian state, an open-air museum and the Lednica Landscape Reserve. The administration of the Museum is now located in the administrative building of the former state farm.

²³ These are my own calculations based on the data I received in the Commune's Office in February 2001. Measurements are not always compatible with each other and depend on the purposes they are designed for. This does not mean that registers are imprecise, but statistical figures may vary according to the purpose. . Even the data I received from the Agency office in 2001 and 2005 are not congruent. I have to emphasise that today, both people and local bureaucrats are unwilling to share knowledge and data about ownership relations. In the first case, it seems to be considered a private issue, while in the second the law protecting individuals' data is always kept in mind.

were sold to them on very favourable terms. Their market value is not very high, although recently one family from outside moved into the flat left by deceased kindred. Beyond farmers and former state farm workers, a group of rural settlers also live in Dziekanowice. Most of them either have worked for the Museum or in the non-agricultural enterprises in the vicinity. They often own small plots of land (between 0.18 and 0.89 ha) and small houses. Recently, some of them have sold parts of their plots (13 parcels covering 4.3 ha altogether) to newcomers, representatives of independent professions from the surrounding cities, who build their new houses in the village. One among them is an Italian who married a Pole and runs a business in the immediate area.

This concludes my description of property relations in the tangible sense. The detailed account above was meant to provide evidence of several points. First, if we look at the development of property relations from the perspective of structures of the *long durée*, some features become visible. Since the Prussian confiscation of Church property, four major players on the real estate market have been present: the state, the Church and private proprietors that can be divided into peasants/farmers and landowners. The latter effectively disappeared after communist nationalisation. However, one of the farmers in Dziekanowice has recently substantially increased the size of his enterprise and in 2001 he paid taxes on 236 ha of land. This estate is definitely not an average farm²⁴ and there are other farmers who are also making efforts to increase their acreage. Second, the nationalisation of big land estates carried out in 1945 left its mark on property relations and transformed some rural proletarians into small farmers. Nevertheless, in the case of Dziekanowice, the outcome of nationalisation has been very limited and less than one in ten farms today is owned by the descendants of the beneficiaries of land reform who work only a small amount of the total village farmland. Third, the socialist state tried to dominate the stage, but it failed. An attempt to eliminate the Church as an important title-holder (during the socialist period the authorities left the parish in Dziekanowice 10 ha) turned out to be unsuccessful and today the Church, especially in this area around such an important religious centre as Gniezno,²⁵ is again a large landowner that mostly leases its agricultural land. Fourth, private ownership has for decades, if not centuries, dominated property relations. Fifth, the neo-liberal fixation on individual ownership is not a new idea for the people in Dziekanowice. Especially for farmers, it simply confirms their ‘natural’ right to hold the land they till. Sixth, the state has accepted this philosophy and is

²⁴ A legal regulation states that “a person counts as an individual farmer if s/he owns or leases agricultural land of a combined acreage not exceeding 300 ha...” However, the biggest individual landowner in Poland, Senator Henryk Stokłosa from Wielkopolska, owns 16 000 ha (Sowul and Katka 2005: 4). The latter equals to the acreage of six average former state farms (cf. Verdery 2003: 86, Table 2.2).

²⁵ It has been the region where Christianity was accepted in the 10th century, the cradle of the Polish state and since year 1000, the seat of the archbishop and of the primate of the Polish Roman Catholic Church.

gradually withdrawing from land ownership, although this process is not as rapid and as conspicuous as in other Central and Eastern European countries. It was perpetuated during the communist period, although it was not always ideologically accepted by the authorities (see my points about the stages of the state policy above). Today it is being implemented vigorously and five acres of land have been given to all former state farm workers.

Land Ownership, Labour and Identity

In the community of around 400 inhabitants four major social groups can be distinguished and this structure is still conspicuous after sixteen years of free market reforms and changes in property relations. I am not defining the position of these groups simply by the individuals' relations to material goods, particularly land. Rather, my categories derive from a much more complex analysis that takes into account Bourdieu's notions of power, knowledge and control of means of production, forms of economic, symbolic and social capital as well as subjective identity (see Buchowski 1997: 15-24). These social classes can be distinguished by looking at everyday practices of people that have a certain relationship to means of production, marriage patterns, inheritance practices, work ethos, by comparing their education, modes of adaptation to structural changes, to changing lifestyles and political attitudes. Using these criteria, I distinguish four such social categories that are implicit in social life of Dziekanowice's community: farmers, village proletarians, agricultural workers and white collar workers.

For our immediate concern with property relations, *farmers* appear as the most significant group. Due to their time of settlement, they identify with village affairs and dominate public life. For example, post-war village leaders (*soltys*) have always been farmers and the village representatives to the Commune's Council are virtually all farmers. Their social status and identification is emphasised by their shared ethos of industriousness and appropriateness of behaviour in public and private life, their political views and, last but not least, ownership of land. For generations they owned land ranging in size and quality, causing them to be perceived as a unified class although you can divide them into several factions. It is not easy to determine their actual farm size, since many farmers from Dziekanowice own or also rent land beyond its limits. In any case, 46 households registered there pay agricultural tax, *podatek rolny*. The size of land owned and taxed in Dziekanowice itself for individual owners of land ranges between 0.11 ha and 236 ha. The size of landholding does not have to coincide with prosperity, although it has become a pattern that those who were rich in the past have become even richer today. Some have expanded their acreage significantly, while others preferred to find economic success in focusing on niche production.

Second, there are *agricultural workers*. In 1994 all employees of the former state farm were taken over by the Museum. In this way, the twenty men and women who were workers of the state farm switched to do manual work for another state institution. At present, only four of them still work there while most have either retired or passed away. Some of their descendants have found permanent jobs in the Museum or are employed seasonally there. Privatisation in 1994 has made these families owners of the flats they lived in and of their tiny garden plots. This enfranchisement has not changed their lives a lot, because under the new guise it perpetuates an old state of affairs and the market value of these assets is close to nil. They were also inactive at the moment when a possibility to form a workers' company in 1993 appeared. They preferred to be 'taken over' by the Museum. None of these people ever thought to buy land, for two combined reasons: lack of funds for purchase of land and lack of farming competence. Thus, they missed an opportunity to work on their own land.

Third, there are members of the *village proletariat* who were not employees of the state farm, but worked in various companies in the vicinity and usually held some small pieces of land. Those who lived in the commune's apartments were also enfranchised for symbolic payment. Some seized the opportunity and sold parts of their land to new settlers as parcels for new houses. None among them acquired new land.

Fourth, there are *white collar workers* who either work for the Museum or settled here in the recent past. They are considered outsiders, even after living in Dziekanowice for a quarter of a century. This is not only because of their different social status, but also for the reason that they do not socialise with local people belonging to other groups. Taking property as the differentiating factor, white collars (or 'intelligentsia') should be divided into newcomers who bought parcels or houses and those who do not strive to own any property since they reside in the Museum's company apartments, which satisfy their needs. Among those, thirteen families altogether, is the above mentioned foreigner.

At first sight Dziekanowice inhabitants appear as a unified community that shares many cultural features, such as language, religion, basic education; comprise a group of people using the same infrastructure, attending the same primary schools and church masses; constitute a collective adhering to the same nation and congregation. People also participate in similar public discourses, have and exchange views about political debates and often watch the same TV-programmes and mass events (among which the death of the 'Polish Pope' at the beginning of April 2005 was a spectacularly unifying, although ephemeral, experience). However, as I indicated above and elsewhere (Buchowski 1995; 2003) they are divided in many ways and by many qualities. Property is only one among various discriminating factors. Social relations generate divergent identities that surface in the least expected circumstances.

For instance, everybody declares that love is decisive when people get married. However, it is not surprising that mutual love bonds develop between partners of the same social class. But social distinctions are not usually so easily perceptible. Patterns entrenched in culture condition (which does not mean determine) behaviour reproduced within the framework of social practice and this explains why proletarians who have relied on the socialist state for years exploit the existing social security system today without hesitation. This raises objections by ‘real peasants’ (*prawdziwy gospodarz* is an indigenous term that means literally ‘real landlord’) for whom the attitudes of proletarians would not be appropriate. Such silent barriers are created by every fraction. White collar workers from the museum are considered ‘relics’ who do not really belong to the local community. They consider proletarians ‘aborigines’ and uneducated ‘simpletons’. Agricultural workers are perceived by village proletarians and others as the lowest class, being deprived of moral values and a dignified ethos. Farmers typically perceive proletarians as ‘lazy jerks’. For agricultural workers, farmers are hicks, *bambry*. From the point of view of mutual perceptions, Dziekanowice looks like an ever-lasting and slowly altering huge hall of mirrors.

Property seems to be the most tangible distinguishing factor between these groups, but it does not mean that it is decisive in establishing social hierarchy. White collar workers do not feel ‘lower’ in relation to even the most affluent farmers. Proletarians have no desire to buy land and become farmers. This attitude results from both cultural patterns and constraints already indicated: it is beyond their aptitude and financial possibilities. Most agricultural workers actually look down at farmers for their devotion to toil that does not pay off adequately. Nevertheless, as Katherine Verdery writes: “Property is about social relations. These include both relations among persons and the power relations in which people act” (1998: 180). Therefore property serves as a window through which we can see local culture and society, especially since it is “simultaneously a cultural system, a set of social relations, and an organisation of power” (Verdery 2003: 19), or “a relation among persons with respect to values” (ibid.: 172).

Even if farming is not considered the best mode of subsistence, possession of a piece of land is desired. If one considers the fact that even agricultural proletarians now officially also own land, there are virtually no totally landless families (with the exception of several white collars) in this community. Rural proletarians, both former state farm workers and village proletarians, value garden plots since they contribute to their often meagre incomes in the form of food products. In the case of the latter, who own larger plots, it can comprise a considerable contribution to their household budgets. Unemployed and retired persons spend time working there and cultivating them is a subject of daily conversations among them.

Vegetable and fruits raised on one's own plot are considered better than purchased ones²⁶. Actually, most families tend to be self-sufficient in this respect and canning and preserving is not only a question of livelihood, but also of pride and demeanour. One can say, paraphrasing Bronisław Malinowski, that these soil gardens have their magic. Gardens are an appreciated source of foodstuff that, by virtue of being natural and self-grown, improves the quality of life of their immediate consumers. The market or monetary value of these plots is not impressive. However, these gardens acquire additional value assigned to them by owners, who cherish them as economic assets as well as culturally defined symbols of rural identity and, at least partial, independence.

For farmers, land possesses a much more complex meaning. In their eyes, it divides people into haves and have-nots and the size of land owned counts. Being a farmer means being a holder of a piece of land that enables the family to survive and thrive. Farms smaller than seven to ten hectares, are considered today to be merely a supplementary source of income. There is only one family with a relatively small amount of land that is considered a fully-fledged farming family. It specialises successfully in commercial gardening and a large part of its now eight hectares of land is covered by a greenhouse and foil greenhouses. A usual comment of 'real farmers' about smallholders is that "what do they have there?! *le, co oni tam mają?!*" Garden plots owned by village proletarians, particularly former state farm workers, are not seen as assets at all and therefore farmers view them as destitute and despised, simply *burki*²⁷. Land for farmers is a traditional and primary means of production. It is also a symbol of their wealth and a part of their identity. In the community of growers settled in Dziekanowice over generations, land has attained the additional meaning of having the quality of patrimony, customarily inherited until recently according to the ultimogeniture principle. From this perspective, it represents a sentimental value well beyond its market value. Farmers that happen to do really badly – usually also alcohol-abusers – and sell their land, are very few, but definitely disrespected. "Why does he behave that way?", was a comment I heard about one of the farmers coming from the proletarian family that benefited from the land reform in the 1940s, from another man of similar family history, but successful in his farming. As if intending to reinforce this opinion, the person concerned committed suicide not long ago.

Value assigned to land by most farmers is thus socially and culturally imbued. The sentimental surplus attached to land goes beyond its market value and it is particularly significant for those who remember collectivisation attempts. It seems to be linked with

²⁶ This observation confirms attitudes also found by Frances Pine (2001; 2003) and Andre Czegledy (2002).

²⁷ *Burka* is a common name for dogs.

family status and local memory. Peasant families established in the community for several generations show their pride of being there while beneficiaries of the post-war land reform are apparently less attached to land they own and treat it rather as a means of survival. The political significance of their resistance is clearly remembered by the older, now outgoing generation. In some contexts it functioned as a factor that divided farmers themselves, and persons active in this project were openly scorned in conversations that I held a decade ago. At present, all former campaigners for collectivisation are gone, so it is becoming a scarcely remembered episode of history for farmers operating today. For farmers, it has long been extremely important that they owned land, that they have been on their own, autonomous and self-governed. Relentless sweat and toil have been unable to depress the intimate and elevating feeling that one's labour is not appropriated by somebody else, at least in a tangible, straightforward way. On the ideological level, neo-liberal principles with respect to self-reliance and private ownership of agricultural land, or, means of production, in fact coincide with those they have held 'forever'. However, the actual introduction of free market principles and prioritising private ownership has had several effects. One of these was that land started to acquire first and foremost an economic value. Its sentimental meaning started to wane, although it is still persistent. In the first half of the 1990s, price fluctuation made many farmers cautious and reluctant to invest. This was definitely the reverse side of the neo-liberal coin that the majority of farmers abhorred. Wait and see, was their officially declared policy. However, there was a group of farmers who took risks and invested both in land and in the specialisation of production (note that risk is another important notion in the glossary of economic liberalism). This group today entails at least five farmers among whom two are visible and commonly recognised rural entrepreneurs, capital makers and job creators. One is the above-mentioned couple of garden growers who produce vegetables, strawberries and flowers; he is a second generation farmer, a son of a beneficiary of communist land reform, and she is from an urban intelligentsia family.. At the peak of the growing season they employ more than thirty people from Dziekanowice and the surrounding area. The other, a representative of a farmer family present in Dziekanowice since the interwar period, is the owner of a chicken farm, which grew in the last decade from raising 35,000 to raising 120,000 broilers on more than 200 hectares of land. He employs several people, some of them from the village.

For both economic and symbolic reasons, land is a scarce good in Dziekanowice. In daily discourse at a grass-root level its ownership appears non-ideological, at least in the sense that it is expressed overtly on the national level and perceived by the public. People have some abstract 'fears' about foreigners buying 'Polish soil', but at the same time nobody denies the

right of the Italian man to have property in the community and he is fully accepted. (“He is a nice man who doesn’t bother anybody. He attends mass each Sunday”.) However, as mentioned above, land has its symbolic power in creating social distinctions.²⁸ Economic power, individual aspirations and political control translate into property relations that are realised within the framework of existing possibilities. The distribution of property is necessarily a function of the overall political organisation. Power relations are implicated into it, and those richer can afford more and gain more thanks to their economic capital and influence that are partly rooted in historically configured relations based on ownership titles. By no means is this the only factor that shapes property relations. Local political relations can turn out to be equally important. There was a case of a land auction in which, according to common opinion, ‘connections’ (*znajomości*) played a role. In 1994, a large piece of land from the former state farm was taken over by the Museum that outbid, among others, the chicken farm owner. The first auction resulted in an extraordinarily high price and was soon annulled. Another public auction was arranged in which the Museum bought the land for a ‘reasonable’ price. Regional politicians, both administrators and the Agency’s managers, openly manipulated the tender in such a way so that their plans with regard to the development of this cultural institution could be carried out. This kind of personal experience of social actors creates images about power relations related to property. For farmers this boils down to an age old opinion that they, the ordinary people, can always be manoeuvred and overruled by the tricky and powerful authorities.

For most farmers cultivating land is practically their only option, although their adult children often work outside agriculture. “Where should I go now? *A gdzie ja teraz pójdę?*” is a typical reaction to my question about leaving agriculture and starting something new. A self created by work in one place seems unable to imagine other life-options. Despite constant complaining about production circumstances (and there were several reasons to complain [cf. Zbierski-Salameh 1999]) this was their inherited livelihood and part of their personality. In the communist past the acreage allowed was limited, big farms discouraged and farm-size not so important for a person’s status in the community. The free market and privatisation policy opened fields (in both the literal and metaphoric sense) for competition and caused shifts in social relations. Particularly in western and central Poland, land for farmers has not been definitely devalued as has happened in some other postsocialist regions (cf. Verdery 2003). Those rich and resolute enough started to expand and this makes them distinct and proud.

²⁸ Of course, by no means is quantity of land the only factor that contributes to social distinctions. For example, differences between families established as farmers in the community for generations and traditionally relatively rich and families of former proletarians who got land in the 1940s, education capital of adults and their children, personal skills and aptness, and position in the network of administrative power also contribute to an overall picture of the field of power and authority.

They not only work on their own, some of them also perform managerial work. In economic terms this makes them not only direct and simultaneously independent producers, self-exploiting peasants in Chayanov's sense, but persons appropriating part of the value of somebody else's labour, i.e. exploiters. The latter differentiates them from other peer-farmers who only work themselves, and at the same time engenders relatively new relationships with several other community members.

The latter issue brings us to the issue of labour²⁹. Rural entrepreneurs were able to enlarge their acreage and output, but it involves the employment of people from the community. In the recent past, all people in Dziekanowice worked physically either on their own farms or for the state enterprises, mainly the local state farm and the Museum. White collar workers were an exception with regard to the character of their trade, but they also belonged to a group of hired workers employed by the state in the same fashion as many manual labourers. Today a group of entrepreneurs encounter new relationships with their fellow-residents that have not in fact been seen in the Polish countryside since World War II. This new context raises several problems. Agricultural workers, pejoratively called *burki* by farmers, mentally oppose working for *bambry*, i.e. farmers. Instead of working for the abstract state, people in the community now work for a tangible employer. Working for a real person that used to be on par with them appears as degradation and runs afoul of their image of equality. Work in state institutions is still highly valued, at least among non-farmers. *Nie ma jak to państwowa robota*, or, "nothing compares to a state job". However, the dissolution of the state farm has led to a shortage of state-sponsored jobs for village proletarians in the community and vicinity. The Museum, the major state institution in the commune, has limited possibilities for employing local people. Competition for positions there is close. Most of those who cannot find a job there have to consider other options and now dozens of them are destined to work for farmers, especially the two entrepreneurs already mentioned. In this straightforward way, property relations translate into social relations that significantly affect the perception of individuals' and groups' statuses.

In the socialist past, private ownership existed alongside state property. This situation created two parallel worlds of people who worked physically and, although differentiated, were not dependant on each other. This status quo reinforced a sense of equality among proletarians, particularly agricultural ones, who traditionally were perceived as 'the wretched of the Polish earth.' State employment was steady and appreciated by them. The appropriation of wealth and value of their work, like that of the farmers, was concealed. It was the state that

²⁹ I have discussed this in detail elsewhere (cf. Buchowski 2004), so here I will refer only to questions relevant to my current concerns.

regulated prices, wages and channelled profits into its own pockets that it later redistributed in the name of 'social justice'. Appropriation was obscured, while generous reallocation of means was made visible. Such obscurity made the state an abstract employer and exploiter. It was perceptible at the local level merely in the form of agents (managers) hired by the state and regulated by a set of practices, in which ordinary people participated. Now this situation has changed radically. An owner, an employer and an appropriator, all in one, is visible and tangible. Moreover, s/he comes from the same community. Entrenched egalitarianism results in mental resistance that makes proletarians reluctant to take up jobs on farms. They prefer all other alternatives, including unemployment with its meagre benefits. Forced to work for rural entrepreneurs and rich farmers, proletarians are subjected to immediate inequality, which they perceive as humiliation and participate in a hierarchical employment relationship they sense as exploitation. Workers see that their labour contributes to the wealth of their neighbours, formerly perceived by them as equals in the local society. Individual identities in the community have been unsettled.

At the core of these transformations are changes in ownership relations. Their new regime has created a situation in which the property has started to matter. Its importance is proportional to its size and value. Through the systematic withdrawal from an agricultural sector and the distribution of land to private economic actors, the state has also devolved responsibility towards many of its citizens. This point is appallingly valid with regard to the former state farm workers. Hundreds of thousands of them lost their job overnight and no real assistance, except unemployment benefits and early retirement, was offered to them and their offspring. Therefore, former state farms are considered today to be sites of emerging permanent poverty (cf. Tarkowska 1997). In Dziekanowice this was not exactly the case, because the Museum functioned as a 'social cushion' in the process of privatisation of agriculture. Nevertheless, the disappearance of the state farm has coerced several people to work for private owners to whom new possibilities of expansion and enrichment opened. In turn, this has created a spate of social conversion and cultural conundrums. Both identities, those imposed by others and self-identities, have changed. The identification process has been privatised. Individuals construct their personalities by relating to, or being related to, the other members in the community. Furthermore, the central and moderating role of the state, represented locally by a state-run institution, has significantly diminished. One can also say that by pulling out from local property relations and affairs, the state also privatised social relations and thereby legitimated inequality. Group identities and differences have been redefined according to diversifying prosperity based on private ownership. Rich, usually industrious farmers are becoming even richer, while, devoid of property and safe state jobs,

workers are becoming relatively poorer and dependant on the former. This dependence individualises daily relationships. Employers prefer people who work diligently and in this way personal qualities determine an individual's success on the job market and in life. This, in consequence, leads to the commoditisation of labour by which people are gauged. During socialism such measurement was restricted to the farmers' ethos alone. Now it is becoming more universal, but at the same time privatised. It seems evident that seemingly tangible property relations have many less tangible or almost intangible social and cultural consequences.

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