

Who is to Blame? Explaining the Inequalities of Development in Socialist Poland

Research report

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1. The aims of the research

The main aim of my research was twofold. Firstly, it attempted to investigate the potential linkages in conceptualizations of the growing inequalities and the new phase of development that socialist Poland was entering in the 1960s-1970s. I was primarily interested in the extent to which the idea of building an advanced socialist society based on scientific and technical progress was perceived as requiring the reshaping of social structure. Secondly, I was curious about how those linkages were evaluated in relation to capitalism's normative framework. This required investigating both clippings from the Polish press and the Radio Free Europe (RFE) reports. The overarching question, in this case, was to what extent the supposed convergence and the emergent dependency structures were noticed at that time. There was also a meta-question posed in this vein. I intended to reflect on whether the OSA as a counter-archive could provide some interesting insight into the self-awareness of the employees of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute (RFE RI). This was particularly interesting to me, as it could possibly put into perspective the intellectual-ideological relations across the so-called "iron curtain".

2. Conceptual framework

The main conceptual framework stemmed from the inspiration of various dependency perspectives, primarily the world-systems analysis. While it was sometimes argued that this specific research perspective failed to interpret the Cold War era and, especially, the fall of the Soviet bloc¹, it nevertheless constitutes an important referential set of methodological principles that allow questioning the traditional historiographical schemes, most importantly regarding the (re-)integration of the socialist regions into the capitalist world-economy.

There has been a vivid debate on the temporality and the character of this integration among world-systems scholars. The world-systemic "orthodox" such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Christopher Chase-Dunn maintained that the Soviet bloc constituted an integral part of the capitalist economy due to its participation in the global division of labor and functional subordination of the socialist

¹ Stephen K. Sanderson, "World-Systems Analysis after Thirty Years: Should It Rest in Peace?," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 46, no. 3 (June 2005): 179–213, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715205058606>.

economies to the main principles of the capitalist accumulation². Here, the most important feature of the economic organization is the production of the markets. The “revisionists”, in turn, argued that Soviet Russia managed to “delink” from the capitalist economy and maintained autonomy vis-à-vis the world system till the 1970s thanks to, among others, its ideological particularity. The specific ideology allegedly prevented the socialist states from succumbing to the pressure of the capitalist logic of accounting and the distribution of resources based on rent-seeking³.

This debate has clearly marked the spheres that require further research. To better understand the integration of the Soviet bloc into the world system, it is necessary to inquire into the role those interactions with the outside play in the socio-economic development of the socialist countries. In particular, it is crucial to determine the stimulants for the innovations seeking in socialist development policies that usually create the demand for reforms and adaptation to the global principles of rationality.

3. Methodological remarks

Open Society Archives as a counter-archive

The Open Society Archives including the collection produced by RFE RI is a valid example of a counter-archive. First of all, the RFE aimed at providing a narrative alternative to that of socialist parties and governments of the Soviet bloc. This parallel interpretation of the ongoing processes was considered necessary to understand them in the situation of radical polarization of the world and the deficiency of reliable information stemming from the authoritarian rule in the socialist countries. This was achieved by diligent studying of the available material (and at times gathering of the material from independent sources) and their autonomous categorization and evaluation. Because of the specific procedures of collecting and processing the data, mostly from the official

² Christopher Chase-Dunn, “Socialist States in the Capitalist World-Economy,” in *Socialist States in the World System*, ed. Christopher Chase-Dunn (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982); Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, no. 4 (1974): 387–415; Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³ Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*, trans. Michael Wolfers (London: Zed Books, 1990); Samir Amin, *Russia and the Long Transition from Capitalism to Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016); Boris Kagarlitsky, *Empire of the Periphery: Russia and the World System*, First Printing edition (London ; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007).

media, the RFE RI archives provide an interesting system of information on particular spheres of socialist reality reflected by the folder organization of the collection.

The theoretical perspective outlined above provokes some important methodological concerns, especially with regard to ideology. The necessity to re-evaluate the truth-seeking practices is still one of the most pressuring issues in studying the Cold War. Therefore, treating the RFE RI collection as a counter-archive implies certain difficulties, but more importantly, opens interesting lines of investigation. First of all, it poses a question of how to approach the material produced by an institution involved in transnational ideological struggle. The still-prevailing impression of the RFE/RL as primarily (counter-)propaganda may lead to overlooking its important knowledge-producing and evaluative functions. A closer look at the background reports produced by the RFE/RL Research Institute reveals the attempts of its employees to create reliable knowledge of the analyzed countries. Diligent evaluation of the political and economic situation in Poland demonstrates the efforts to understand and project the directions of reforms in state-socialist Poland, their dynamics, and implementation processes. It is therefore crucial not to give in to the ideological schemes of confrontation prevalent in both the majority of discourses of the Cold War and historiography. Diligent evaluation of the political situation in Poland. Economic policies and their implementation. In an attempt to understand the dynamics of reform in state-socialist Poland.

The structure of the material

The aforementioned structure of the RFE RI collection allows easy access to the selected material, thanks to the organization in folders according to the content's main theme. For my research, several categories were interesting (listed below). During the research, some of them proved to be more relevant than the others, sometimes contrary to the initial expectations. For instance, material related to development policy has become the main source of material for this particular research stage, while the promising folders on the scientific-technical development have eventually been less useful for the mainline of the investigation, as they provided too detailed information on the specific investments, inventions, and scientific events. However, they constitute an important background in my work and can be used in its further stages, too (see parts 4 and 5).

List of most important folder investigated:

Development Policy: 300-2-6-39/1 to 300-2-6-39/5; 300-2-6-40/1 to 300-2-6-40/2

Economic policy: 300-2-6-40/3 to 300-2-6-40/5

Technology: 300-2/4-6-105/5, 300-2-6-105/6, 300-2-6-106/1

Scientific cooperation: 300-50-1:1067/3, 300-50-1:1067/4; 300-50-1:1068/1 to 300-50-1:1068/4; 300-50-1:1069/1 to 300-50-1:1069/4; 300-50-1:1070/1 to 300-50-1:1070/5; 300-50-1:1071/1 to 300-50-1:1071/5

Scientific progress: 300-50-1:1076/1 to 300-50-1:1076/5; 300-50-1:1077/1 to 300-50-1:1077/4; 300-50-1:1078/1 to 300-50-1:1078/5; 300-50-1:1079/1 to 300-50-1:1079/5; 300-50-1:1080/1 to 300-50-1:1080/4

Caders policies, social conditions: 300-50-1:1424/1 to 300-50-1:1424/4; 300-50-1:1425/1 to 300-50-1:1425/5

Firms management: 300-50-1:1217/1 to 300-50-1:1217/4; 300-50-1:1218/1 to 300-50-1:1218/5; 300-50-1:1219/1 to 300-50-1:1219/2

Economic war East-West: 300-50-1:1711/5; 300-50-1:1712/1 to 300-50-1:1712/5

In the next part, I focus on only one area of my research, which is development policy. During my stay, however, I have gathered much broader material that still requires analysis and is scheduled for further stages of my work on the doctoral dissertation. In retrospect, I consider the abundance of well-structured data very beneficial for the research process as it presents an important heuristic value.

As illustratively demonstrated by Andrzej Paczkowski, one of the most substantial problems in researching the history of the 20th century onwards is the over-abundance of data. Therefore, he argues, the most important tool for historians becomes a sieve⁴. RFE RI could be considered as such a sieve since it provides easy access to the microcosmos of the socialist reality through data

⁴ Andrzej Paczkowski, *Wojna Polsko-Jaruzelska: Stan Wojenny w Polsce 13 XII 1981 - 22 VII 1983* (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2006), 9.

categorized in a sensible and usually very clear manner. Understandably, this requires careful attention, primarily with regard to the relationship of the so constructed image to the whole. Nevertheless, if treated with enough reserve, the collection provides wonderful material for heuristic analysis that could precede further and more detailed studies.

4. Confronting the material

The complexity of the research aims and the quantity of the material available required a much more focused approach to the RFE RI collection. Therefore for the purposes of this report, I decided to demonstrate my work on the example of the doctrine of so-called selective development popular not only in the Soviet bloc but also in Latin America and parts of Asia from the 1960s onward. On this particular issue, I demonstrate the interconnectedness of the various themes of my research as well as provide initial findings. In short, I point to the relationship between the doctrine of selective development, the aspirations to further integration into the global division of labor, foreign trade, the ideological shifts, and the calls for reshaping of the social structure. This relationship includes also emergent inequalities, however, it was not possible to extract the actual links between the phenomena in question.

Due to the decreasing growth potential in Poland and elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, the main theme in the socioeconomic considerations of the late 1960s and the 1970s became the problem of intensive economy. Social scientists and party leaders were preoccupied with the question of conditions for entering a new phase of growth based on intensive accumulation. According to Wiesław Rydygier, a member of the Editorial Board of “*Życie Gospodarcze*”, the most influential economic weekly in socialist Poland, the strive toward intensification of the economy occurred firstly in the area of foreign trade and as soon as 1965⁵. In 1970 the government has enforced new regulations on foreign trade, introducing a unitary mechanism of foreign trade accounting, which was considered a *sine-qua-none* of the selective development and, consequently, further integration into the structures of the international division of labor.

The dynamics of the integration with the capitalist economies demonstrated the importance of the contextualization of the developmental efforts of the Polish leadership. The idea of selective

⁵ Wiesław Rydygier, *Za nami, przed nami*, „*Życie Gospodarcze*” (6.12.1970), p. 24 in: HU OSA 300-2-6-39-2.

development implied determining the potentially competitive branches of industry development which would not only help to balance Poland's foreign trade, but also stimulate the scientific-technical progress and consequently reduce the technological gap between the country and the most advanced economies of the world. Therefore Kazimierz Secomski, one of the leading experts on economic planning and development, pointed out a sort of globalization of the policymaking, arguing that the division of external and internal development factors is increasingly blurring⁶.

The selective development doctrine in the absence of true market mechanisms required systemic selection of the investment-worthy enterprises. In order to determine which branches to support the overall production were categorized according to different criteria (e.g. by ascribing every product to specific category A, B, or C reflecting their novelty or obsolescence). Moreover, a set of 7 negative criteria was created to simplify the selection procedure of enterprises prioritized for investments: 1) obsolescence of the produced products; 2) high production costs; 3) lack of possibility to export to capitalist countries; 4) low productivity; 5) lack of development strategies; 6) low productivity of capital assets; 7) lack of technological concepts of production. An enterprise that would score two or more of these negative criteria would not be considered for further investments. This strategy, however, proved to be impossible to sustain⁷. However, what this example shows is the very tight links between the innovation potential and the capitalist market.

In this vein, the relation between the development of innovative branches of industry was conceived as correlating with the general intensive growth and the criterion of the potential stimulation of scientific-technological progress was appreciated. It was important in evaluating the top-down division of labor within the Comecon structures. The importance of certain branches (e.g. motorization, electronics, chemistry, pharmaceuticals) was considered scientifically strategic and therefore not to be subjected to the Comecon specialization⁸.

As Bolesław Lubas, an important planning economist claimed, there were three crucial areas to consider regarding the stimulation of scientific-technological progress: foreign trade, reorganization of the relationship between science and the economy, and growth of consumption,

⁶ Kazimierz. Secomski, *Nowoczesne przemiany strukturalne w gospodarce*, „Nowe Drogi” 10 (1970), p. 22, in: HU OSA 300-2-6-39-2.

⁷ Andrzej. Bober, *Błędna selekcja?*, „Życie Warszawy” (15-16.03.1970), p. 3, in: HU OSA 300-2-6-39-2 (Selective economic program must be flexible, p. 1).

⁸ Bolesław Lubas in „Życie Gospodarcze” (14.11.1971, pp. 1, 4-5), transl. RFE RI: *Primary Objectives of Economic Development Strategy in 1970-1980*, pp. 44-53, in: HU OSA 300-2-6-39-3.

the first being the most important, partially because it could enable access to the technology licenses, partially because it provided external economic impulses. He also argued that for those scientific disciplines located very close to the economy a certain commodification of research was required: “it is necessary to gradually introduce a system in which the scientific ‘product’ will become transferable merchandise on both the domestic and foreign market”⁹. Similarly, he questioned the role of national industry monopoly for consumption goods, arguing that competition with foreign producers should stimulate the modernization of production. This, in turn, created the need for a separate field of expertise and qualified personnel to coordinate the management and development of enterprises: “There is a specific need for socialist businessman”¹⁰.

This call for specialization was only one aspect of the rise of meritocratic discourse in Poland. Most often this discourse would reveal itself in the context of material incentives for workers but more importantly for specialized cadres and management, or – in other words – so-called “technical intelligentsia”. Long debates on the loosening of social structure both in social sciences and in the discourse of the PUWP. The desperate need for highly qualified cadres fueled the calls for socialist managerialism and technocracy of sorts. This tendency is often associated with the socialist principle “to each according to his work”. However, the formulation “to each according to their contribution” seems more suitable here, as the work was to be assessed on a hierarchic basis, leading to the growth in acceptance of so-called meritocratic inequalities.

Apart from the inequalities on the global and societal level, there also emerged concern with those on the regional level: selective development meant discontinuation of investment in many sectors that were also geographically concentrated. Therefore, a distinction came to being between “Poland A” and less advanced economically “Poland B” (this rhetoric is to this day present in the Polish political discourse)¹¹. As a counterweight to those negative results of selective development, the issue of deglomeration was highly promoted and in the 1970s the discussion on the strategy for the regional development gained its own place. There was an apparent tendency for a holistic approach to socioeconomic growth that included not only production but also relations among

⁹ Ibid. p. 52.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jerzy Redlich, “Awans kraju czy awans regionu?”, *Życie Warszawy* (27.04.1971), pp. 12-13. In: HU OSA 300-2-6-39-2.

production and different spheres of economy, as well as social conditions for intensive development such as housing problems, health, environment, and general social welfare. Within the next years, the idea of balanced or harmonious development was becoming even more important, as the malfunctioning of the economic coordination revealed its disastrous impact on the economy¹².

The Oil Shock of 1973 and the diagnosed economic and food crises made the problem of harmonized development and the global inequalities even more central. Apparent became the difficulties stemming from the global recession and the worsening in the terms of trade (unfavorable price structure). At the same time, however, we can witness the increased calls for broader integration into the global division of labor and tightening of economic relations with the international markets, as the increase in export was supposed to mitigate the negative consequences of structural price changes¹³.

Many of the processes described above were reflected in the reports of the RFE RI. Relatively less attention was paid to the issues of scientific-technical progress in terms of the organization of science and its implementation into the economy. One of the main areas of interest was, in turn, the strive for economic efficiency through the introduction of the objectifying measures into economic accounting and planning. This was followed by the diagnoses to resolve structural problems, primarily through the strengthening of the technocratic leadership¹⁴ as well as fighting overemployment¹⁵. Also the interconnectedness of the economies: recession in the West was noticed and so was the related shift towards traditional raw materials and foodstuff export patterns¹⁶. In this context, the discourse accusing the West of protectionism hindering the development of the Polish economy was observed.¹⁷ At times, the reports resemble even a sort of policy evaluation and advising to the PUWP leadership, as in, for instance, a report “Meat Production and Foreign Trade”¹⁸. In this report, Roman Stefanowski criticized the “balanced-book

¹² E.g.: Bolesław Winiarski in *Gospodarka Planowa* 10 (1972) – translated by the RFE RI: “Territorial Development Plan and Regional Development Strategy Assessed” in: HU OSA 300-2-6-39-3; Mieczysław Nasilowski in *Gospodarka Planowa* 8 (1974), translated by the RFE RI in HU OSA 300-2-6-39-3.

¹³ Józef Pajestka in *Trybuna Ludu*, (23.09.1975) translated by the RFE RI: “Economic Development Strategy Outlined” in: OSA 300-2-6-40-1.

¹⁴ RFE Background Report: Economic Reforms in Poland (24.02.1965).

¹⁵ RFE Background Report: Employment Control in Poland (22.09.1969)

¹⁶ RFE Background Report: Poland's Indebtedness in the West (1976-10-19)

¹⁷ RFE Background Report: Poland Complains of Western Protectionism (13.03.1978).

¹⁸ RFE Background Report: Meat Production and Foreign Trade (11.08.1976)

policy” of the Gomułka era that required meat production to rest on relatively low levels in order to avoid heavy dependence on imported grain feed. The reports admit the emergent balance of payment problems stemming from importing grain, as well as meat supply shortages on the domestic market resulting from the meat export imperative. However, it concludes by stressing the necessity of further development of this import-export mechanism, claiming the important role that these transactions play in the development of Polish agriculture. It is noteworthy that the similar export pressure was one of the main sources of the social unrest of the late 1970s through the 1980s.

5. Summary and perspectives

The initial plan turned out to be overly ambitious. The quantity of the reliable material available in the archives exceeded my expectation. The realization of the proclaimed goals would require much more detailed studies. During the research, I was overflowed by the number of sub-questions that arose. However, even the partial realization of the project has, in my opinion, provided satisfactory results.

It is justified to claim that different sorts of emerging or potential inequalities were noticed by the Polish leadership and commentators. Some of them were perceived as desired, while others were labeled as threats to be overcome. Most importantly, the analyzed material provides an interesting insight into how the emerging global dependencies were conceived by the PUWP leaders and influential commentators. The examination of the RFE background reports has, in turn, confirmed that the RFE Research Institute would provide quality insight into the operations of the socialist regime in Poland. The workings of the Institute cannot be reduced merely to the counter-propaganda agenda but represent an interesting example of quasi-historical research that became the task of its analysts.

Last but not least, during my stay in the OSA I have gathered a large number of documents and press clippings that provide valuable insights for my doctoral project and – hopefully – for my further research on state socialism in Poland and beyond. This is what I have termed the heuristic function of a counter-archive. This material should guide me through the vast lands of archival and press sources in the ongoing research.