



Resurrected pigs, dyed foxes and beloved cows: Religious diversity and nostalgia for socialism in rural Poland[☆]

Agnieszka Pasieka

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Advokatenweg 36, 06114 Halle (Saale), Germany

A B S T R A C T

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The aim of my paper is to discuss the phenomenon of nostalgia for socialism in rural Poland. More precisely, I discuss how experiences of rurality and diverse religious beliefs intertwine with nostalgia. Depicting the memories of socialism, shared with me by the inhabitants of a multi-religious rural commune in Southern Poland, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which day-to-day experiences of rural life as well as religious diversity contribute to shaping people's remembrances. In order to do so, I describe both the present situation and the historical experiences of the inhabitants of the commune. I introduce representatives of different Christian communities – Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Orthodox and Pentecostals – and, by presenting their life stories, I address the issue of how villagers' religious creeds interrelate with the memories and (re)evaluation of the socialist past. My aim here is twofold. Firstly I aim to deconstruct the nostalgia for socialism, showing its complexity and proving that this nostalgia means in fact longing for very concrete experiences of rural life. Secondly, I argue that the study of various religious beliefs and practices is very important for a fuller interpretation of nostalgic discourses and responses to postsocialist transformations.

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1. Introduction

This article discusses how day-to-day experiences of rural life as well as diverse religious experiences and beliefs intertwine with social memories, and in the first instance with one particular form of memory: nostalgia. Describing the memories of socialism, shared with me by the inhabitants of a multi-religious rural commune in Southern Poland, I aim to demonstrate the role of religious diversity in shaping people's remembrances. Likewise, I inquire into the relation between people's experiences of rurality, religious beliefs and nostalgic accounts of the past. Bringing these issues together, I argue for the importance of studying nostalgia through a focus on particular, concrete phenomena, experienced by people in a given context and influenced by their life trajectories.

More specifically, I seek to discuss the issue of nostalgia as a 'counter-narrative', opposed to the mainstream discourse¹ on socialism in Poland which, in the main, portrays the era of the Polish People's Republic in black-and-white colours. In the accounts collected during my one year stay in the countryside there is little place for moral judgments and people do not claim to be on the 'right' or 'wrong' side. Local inhabitants view socialism as a part of the history of their villages, with all the negative and positive happenings it brought into their lives. In the mainstream discourse on socialism such an approach is rarely acknowledged; 'nostalgia for socialism' is refuted, on the basis of generalised assumptions about what both nostalgia and socialism actually mean to people. In this article, I deconstruct the nostalgia for socialism, demonstrating the complexity of this phenomenon and proving that nostalgia for socialism in fact means nostalgia for very concrete experiences. Pursuing this path, I argue that what people long for are some 'by-products' of the socialist period: diverse positive occurrences,

¹ 'Mainstream discourse' is obviously a compound notion, as it is in fact constituted by numerous different discourses. Yet, the elaboration of this problem goes beyond the scope of this article. In short, I understand as 'mainstream discourse' a narrative produced and promoted by politicians, intellectuals, and scholars. Despite the variety of viewpoints among these groups, I argue that it is possible to distinguish some general strands which I discuss in the Section 2.1.

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E-mail addresses: aga.pasieka@gmail.com, pasieka@eth.mpg.de.

institutions and patterns of rural life. Second, I propose to approach nostalgia as a phenomenon that relates to both the past and the present, for it provides people with the means through which they respond to ongoing changes. I argue that such an understanding of nostalgia is crucial in order to accurately interpret the current situation in my multi-religious fieldsite, and vice versa: that people's religious backgrounds need to be taken into account while attempting to understand nostalgia.

Therefore, I describe and interpret nostalgic counter-narratives as *local* and *plural*; paying attention to local context and local discourses, deeply shaped by the experiences of rural life, as well as focusing on polyphonic voices which compose the debate. I highlight different, often contrasting, ways of describing the past and present, as well as the relation between the two. Local discourses about the past are approached not only as nostalgic remembrances of a 'good past' but as a strategy that serves the present. Hence, I discuss some linguistic strategies people adopt in order to deal with their everyday life problems and confront 'today' with the socialist times. Such strategies, I argue, mean drawing on and referring to what is known and familiar: household and domestic animals, neighbourly and family relations, religious and professional experiences, to name but a few.

The article starts with a short introduction on how the memories of socialist times and the dynamics of postsocialist transition in the countryside are depicted in the Polish mainstream and scholarly discourse. What follows is an explication of the notion of nostalgia and a brief presentation of the fieldsite and methodological aspects. Then, the focus moves towards villagers' depictions, interpretations and evaluations of the socialist times. The final section explores the strategies through which people bring the past into the present, using nostalgic accounts while referring to present-day situations. Due to the very heterogeneous religious composition of my fieldsite, I refer here to the accounts of four different religious (Christian) groups: Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Orthodox and Pentecostals. The aim of this polyphonic narrative is, on the one hand, to foreground some common experiences of rural life and, on the other, to demonstrate how different religious backgrounds shape people's ways of experiencing and narrating the past.

2. Theoretical framework: social(ist) memories

Before giving the voice to my informants, I provide a short description of the various frameworks into which the remembrances of the socialist past are put in contemporary Poland. I am referring here to the main features of the official discourse, whilst in the following parts I shall demonstrate a 'commentary' from the periphery. To be clear, I term this commentary 'peripheral' not because of the often marginal position of rural areas, but rather due to the fact that such voices are rarely taken into account (which of course does not mean that they have not constituted a subject of scholarly, in the main anthropological, investigations²). In turn, speaking about the 'official discourse', I refer to Buchowski's (2006) argument about Polish intellectuals' 'nesting orientalism', where he finds that orientalist practices can today be found not (only) between West and East, but also within Eastern European societies, in the process of dividing societies into winners and losers. Similarly, Thompson (2005) speaks about the 'postcolonial mentality' of Polish elites, detectable in their constant discontent with their own

society and simplistic internalization of Western ideas. Drawing on these observations, in the following I present three main features of the mainstream discourse on socialist past.

First is a tendency to divide the society into 'winners' and 'losers' of transformation: those who successfully adapted to new socio-economic conditions and those who failed. Importantly, the latter are seen to bear full responsibility for their own failure. In the sociological literature this lack of success is explained with notions such as 'civilizational incompetence' (Sztompka, 2000) or 'amoral familism' (Tarkowska and Tarkowski, 1991). Some publicists go further and speak about society's lack of obedience to the elites' guidelines (Michnik, 2007). Authors of such claims seem to have a ready-made recipe for the transformation of Polish society, however one which does not take into consideration either the complexity of people's trajectories or the variety of implications that made people experience the changes of 1989 in different ways. Importantly from the perspective of this article, rural areas and rural inhabitants in particular are often stigmatized as 'backward', 'inefficient', bearers of 'bad' social capital, and offensively described as socially 'redundant'. As specialists studying the Polish countryside have cogently proved, numerous politicians and scholars reproduce a view of the Polish countryside, which neither corresponds to the realities of present-day rural contexts nor attempts to understand the dynamics of ongoing changes. In contrast, these scholars demonstrate the civic and organizational potential of rural areas and the importance of agriculture for the country's economy (Bukraba-Rylska, 2009; Mikiewicz and Szafraniec, 2009; Fedyszak-Radziejowska, 2010).

Second is a lack of long *durée* perspective; any negative phenomenon in present-day Poland is explained with reference to 'the communist heritage' and 'the communist mentality'. Corruption, lack of respect for state property, and mistrust in public institution are explained as *residua* of the previous system. Yet, all these phenomena have much deeper roots, and the socialist system with all its dysfunctions only reinforced them. Both Polish and foreign scholars arguing this point, often refer to Kazimierz Wyka's (1992 [1945]) concept of the 'excluded economy' (cf. Wedel, 1992; Szpakowska, 2008). His analysis of the informal economy and strategies of cheating the system under Nazi occupation has been a useful tool for studies of similar practices in the communist period. At the same time, they prove the necessity of a longer analytical perspective which would inquire into the connection between the present-day situation and the country's historical trajectory.

Third is the tendency to ridicule every form of postsocialist nostalgia. Arguably, this tendency results from the fact that in political, intellectual and mass media discourses *'nostalgia for socialism is condemned and transformed into nostalgia for the spirit of patriotic resistance'* and *'a social history of an average citizen of communist Poland remains marginal as a research topic'* (Witeska-Młynarczyk, 2009:44). Consequently, explanations of nostalgia are often very simplistic, arguing that people miss communism because they were young then or they did not understand the value of freedom. Although it may seem that these kinds of arguments could be easily refuted,³ they nonetheless constitute binding explanations of 'postsocialist nostalgia'.⁴ Moreover, saying that people are nostalgic for socialism is also often understood as if people miss the system *per se*. Instead, it is important to emphasize

² Remarkable examples can be found, for example, in the volumes edited by Watson (1994), Berdahl et al. (2000), Pine et al. (2004). However, it is also observable that much of the existing work on postsocialist nostalgia and oppositional narratives has been conducted in urban settings.

³ Comparative studies confirm that a nostalgic approach to socialism is widespread through various strata of population, which differ in terms of age, education, professional background, etc. (cf. Todorova, 2010).

⁴ Such a tendency has been observed in other postcommunist countries (see Berdahl, 1999; Parla, 2009; Todorova, 2010).

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