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NCEEER NOTE

This is the third of three Reports from a research project titled "Russian Poland on the Eve of the Great War, 1907-1914," by the same author. Please see also "The Insurrectionary Tradition in Polish Political Culture," distributed by the Council on January 7, 1997, and "Boycott! The Politics of Anti-Semitism in Poland, 1912-1914," distributed by the Council dated on March 30, 1998.

To borrow from the Author's words in his application to the Council, "*... problems related to Poland's emerging civil society at the beginning of the 20th century are considered relevant to the problems of Poland's emerging civil society in the 1980s and 1990s ... many of the complex phenomena which accompanied the birth of modern Poland continue to play themselves out in the present, suggesting long-term processes that are far from complete.*" They have their counterparts in other nations in the area.

MODERNIZATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY POLAND²

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Executive Summary

This paper focuses on the symbiosis between modernization and the emergence of civil society at the turn of the century in Poland, an important focus of contemporary Central and East European research. It argues that the modernization narrative, once stripped of its Western and Eurocentric cultural baggage of "progress" and "civilization," remains a useful tool for analyzing the actual socio-economic transformation of Poland, particularly the evolution toward a modern industrial society and the transition from a social structure of feudal estates to a new one composed of classes defined by market relations. The paper also examines the evolution of civil society in this dynamic context, with an emphasis on the formation of modern political organizations on the one hand, and the small politics of local issues and voluntary associations on the other. The interaction and interdependence between elite responses to the challenges of modernity and the grass-roots organizations emerging out of a new socio-economic environment shaped the contours of civil society in Poland for much of the twentieth century. The paper concludes that while "modern" Polish political culture may appear as a distortion when viewed by Western eyes, in a Central European context Poland's experience with modernization and its political confrontation with modernity was hardly unique.

* * *

The analytical and discursive framework of "modernization" has been called into question in general European studies, and now Polish studies as well. It is true that those of us responsible for reconstructing the history of Poland since the late nineteenth century have used the term a bit too casually and teleologically to encompass and make sense of a bewildering complexity. There is, moreover, no question that the master narrative of modernization has carried within it a great deal of Western and Eurocentric ideological and cultural baggage of "progress," "civilization," "development," and "enlightenment."³ I will argue, however, that once stripped of this baggage, modernization remains a useful and, therefore, convenient tool for analyzing the actual social, economic, political, and cultural transformation of Poland over the last one hundred years or so.

First of all, it is impossible to deny that such a transformation, or transformations, took place. This transformation did not, of course, occur in one "big bang" moment in time, but in several

²The following is based on the author's contribution to a round table discussion of "Poland's Multiple Modernities" at the 29th National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, held in Seattle from November 20-23, 1997.

³For an interesting discussion of how "Western Civilization" was imagined in reference to a largely invented "East European" counterpart already at the end of the eighteenth century, see Larry Wolff, Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment (Stanford, 1994).

moments over time, that is, as a process or series of processes. The conversion of energy by new technologies and its application to industry, the emergence of information systems that placed ever increasing amounts of words and data into the hands of ever increasing numbers of literate people, the appearance of transportation systems that routinely moved large numbers of people and goods at high speeds, the migration from rural areas to ever larger urban agglomerations--all of these things actually happened in Poland. And they were happening in the decades before the Great War--by then electrification and the internal combustion engine had already made their appearance, as had a mass circulation press, the telegraph, and, to a lesser extent, the telephone. Railroads were moving people and goods hundreds, and sometimes thousands of miles, and the proportion of urban to rural residents had increased decade after decade since at least the 1870s.

Why not simply call this process or series of processes industrialization? Why not follow the lead of one of the deans of European social history, Peter Stearns, who in his most recent edition of European Society in Upheaval, has deleted all references to modernization and replaced them with "industrial revolution" or "industrialization?"⁴ Because the industrial revolution was only one part, and indeed, only one stage in this fundamental transformation. Industrialization may have affected, but did not necessarily embrace other dramatic changes in their entirety--in gender relations, family linkages, work habits, ways of dying, care of the sick, let alone political and cultural change. Moreover, industrialization has a decidedly urban connotation and as such does not embrace the truly significant changes which occurred in rural areas. This does not mean that industrialization did not affect rural areas--it most decidedly did--but so too did changes in land tenure, cultivation, and, perhaps even more importantly, changes in the attitude and behavior of rural inhabitants.⁵

Then why not simply refer to these changes as transformations, or as Gale Stokes, Sabrina Ramet and others would have it, the Great Transformation?⁶ Although transformation carries within it the sense of change, even of fundamental change, it doesn't necessarily signify the direction of that

⁴Peter N. Stearns, European Society in Upheaval, 3rd ed. (London, 1991).

⁵Too often the countryside has been ignored in discussions of contemporary social and economic change. Already before the Great War, the transition from a social structure of feudal estates to one composed of classes or strata increasingly defined by market relations had made a major impact on Polish rural life and mentalities. Although it would take several more generations following the mid-nineteenth century emancipations, the traditional peasantry (more accurately those peasants who remained on the land) was gradually transformed into stratified groups of small and medium proprietors on the one hand, and wage laborers on the other. A new self-image of independence also appeared, especially among peasant landowners--quite visibly in family photographs, but also in the perceived need to insure their property, in a measurable increase in savings and investment, in the seizing of opportunities to consolidate holdings, and in the aspiration to educate their children. Some peasants, especially those belonging to village elites increasingly by virtue of their economic success rather than patriarchal status, also began to participate in newly emerging, and especially, populist political organizations.

⁶Gale Stokes, The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe (New York and Oxford, 1993); Sabrina P. Ramet, Social Currents in Eastern Europe: The Sources and Meaning of the Great Transformation (Durham and London, 1991). While Stokes uses the "Great Transformation" in reference to social, economic, demographic, and technological change since the eighteenth century, Ramet applies the term more specifically to her sociological analysis of Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.

change. Modernization, on the other hand, does indicate the direction of the rapid change that has occurred in Poland over the last hundred years, a direction toward contemporary forms. Some may have problems with the telos of modernization, but this has more to do with linear interpretations, and not with modernization per se. When one allows for the zigs and zags, and disuniformity, which I would argue are part and parcel of modernization rather than proof of its non-existence, then it seems to me that modernization remains the most viable tool for analyzing what has happened in Poland over the last century. The fact that what happened in Poland also happened earlier, elsewhere, albeit in different variations of form, in different increments of time, and with somewhat different social, political and cultural impacts, makes an even stronger case for the modernization narrative as it applies to Poland, and not only to Poland, but to all of Central and Eastern Europe.

This brings us to the question of "modernity." Did it really happen in Poland, and more particularly, did it really happen at the turn of the century? Here, I feel less confident as I tread the treacherous ground walked by intellectual historians. Whereas the modernization narrative makes sense to the integrative social historian, "modernity" is more of a cultural, intellectual, and political construction. Yet I would argue that modernity happened in Poland, as had other cultural, intellectual, and political phenomena of the Latin European world, namely, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism. I would agree with the premise that modernity should be pluralized, indeed even more so than the earlier aforementioned phenomena. If the current generation of Renaissance scholars speak of a number of renaissances, the idea of "multiple modernities" is even more apt, because the main distinctive features of modernity are pluralism and diversity. And it was that very pluralism and diversity, seemingly confusing and chaotic, inaccessible and incomprehensible to existing epistemologies, that led to the sense of disruption with the past, to the impression among a wide array of turn of the century artists, intellectuals and politicians that they were living in a fundamentally new age, which they themselves defined as "modern."

How they responded to the reality of pluralism and diversity, or as they saw it, to the requirements of modernity, was necessarily pluralized and diverse. In other words, pluralism and diversity are not the antithesis of "modernity" (or "modernization" for that matter) but stand at its very essence. Indeed, to borrow a colleague's phrase, it is what makes modernity "fungible." This fungibility of modernity, in turn, gave rise to a modern political culture in Poland that was pluralistic and diverse, if not necessarily tolerant, liberal, and democratic. And herein lies the rub.

Historians of Poland have tended to focus on national politics, that is, the politics of competing elites, rather than on the small politics of village assemblies, voluntary associations, shop floors, and educational and cultural organizations. Yet in a modernizing society under foreign rule (especially so in the Russian and German partitions at the turn of the century), this is where the real politics of pluralism and diversity played themselves out--namely the politics of daily life, the politics of popular aspirations and expectations, the politics of culture and education, the politics of economic

development and competing interests, the politics of gender, and the politics of local issues. Moreover, these assemblies, associations, institutions and organizations were, even under Russian and German rule, democratic and self-governing, and as such they were real schools of citizenship and formed the basis at the grass-roots for an emerging civil society.

Whereas the aforementioned small politics reflected pluralism and diversity, if nothing else by the sheer proliferation of their organized forms, elite political formations sought to mobilize and unite the "masses" in opposition to pluralism and diversity. In other words, modern socialism and modern nationalism in Poland, both emerging in the late nineteenth century, while themselves the self-conscious products of modernity, rejected modernity's very essence of pluralism and diversity. The societies that they planned to remake were not to be characterized by pluralism and diversity, but by "unity," "closed ranks", the exclusion of "harmful" or "alien" influences, and the struggle against internal "enemies." Meanwhile, liberalism, which dropped the ball elsewhere in Central Europe--in Germany, Austria, and Hungary--never really had a ball to carry in Poland, due to its lack of a social base and an independent state. Polish liberalism's capitulation to anti-Semitism on the eve of the Great War was a display of not only its own self-negation, but also of its own level of discomfort with modernity's pluralism and diversity.⁷

These two political tendencies--mass, democratic, voluntary, diverse, and pluralistic on the one hand, elitist, conspiratorial, exclusionary, and utopian on the other--were interactive and interdependent. The modern political movements, if they were to compete effectively, required popular support and mass participation. Consequently, they had to make a number of adjustments in their organizations to accommodate grass-roots constituencies and, where possible, to co-opt and control voluntary associations and other organized and institutional forms where small politics played themselves out. At the same time, however, as movements whose reason for existence was to remake society (and in this sense, both the socialist and nationalist movements were revolutionary), they frequently ignored the small politics of daily life and local issues, often to their own peril. The result was mutual disillusionment and mistrust, symbolized by the radical ebb and flow in mass memberships of Polish political movements at various times for most of the twentieth century, not to mention a great deal of political instability.

Consequently, modern civil society assumed forms in Poland that appeared to be distorted when viewed by Western eyes, mass and democratic on the one hand, intolerant, uncompromising, and chaotic on the other. The standard Western baggage of liberalism, progress, and civilization did not seem to apply. However, when viewed in a Central European context, Poland's experience of modernization and its confrontation with modernity appear to be less a distortion, and certainly less unique. And perhaps this is what we, as scholars, need to do--namely, not to reject modernization as

⁷A number of leading Polish liberals supported the Polish nationalist-led boycott of Jews from 1912 to 1914.

an admittedly convenient, but still most convenient, analytical tool, but to rethink the comparative context in which we use it.

When we do so, we see that modernization came to Poland, as elsewhere in much of Central and Eastern Europe, in dramatic bursts and condensed time frames (in Poland's case, the first wave occurred in a twenty-year period at the end of the nineteenth century), which caused major social disruptions and dislocations. Moreover, this first significant wave of modernization, which included the first industrial revolution (marked by the primacy of textiles),⁸ occurred largely without the participation of an ethnically Polish entrepreneurial middle class. Foreign investment and ownership characterized Poland's first industrial revolution, while the more limited participation of native capital was as likely, if not more likely, to be Jewish than Polish. The turn of the century Polish intelligentsia, which served as something of a substitute middle stratum between the traditional landed noble elite and lower class urban and rural inhabitants, was itself a product of social and economic change, but did not have a vested interest in it. To a large extent, therefore, the Polish intelligentsia's initial experience with modernization was one of alienation which found its reflection in the modern political movements which it led. This alienation even affected the weak liberal movement in Poland, which never really could create its own space in the emerging modern political culture. Early in the twentieth century Polish liberalism tied its fate to that of the socialist movement and by 1914 to the nationalist movement, neither of which became more "progressive" as a consequence. Rather the opposite occurred, depriving Polish liberalism of its assumed progressive identity.

The failure of liberalism throughout Central Europe at the dawn of modernity coincided with its ultimate absorption into modern and anti-Semitic national movements, this despite the disparity in the size and economic strength of native middle classes, for example, in Germany and Austria on the one hand, and in Hungary and Poland on the other.⁹ While, at the same time, modern civil societies were beginning to emerge from below in an ever increasing variety of interest groups and in a plurality of voluntary and organizational forms, liberal movements in Central Europe were either unable or, too often, unwilling to channel this emerging reality into larger institutional and political contexts. A comparison of the Polish with the German, Austrian, and Hungarian experience suggests that independent statehood was less important than the ambivalent relationship of liberalism to modernization, for in each case, liberals not only failed to lead and to provide solutions to the

⁸Poland's second industrial revolution, marked by the primacy of steel, was equally dramatic, occurring in a relatively condensed time frame, from 1948 to 1960, and once again without the participation of a native middle class, which was eliminated either by the war (in the case of Jews) or by communist expropriations and social engineering.

⁹The similarities between the Polish and Hungarian experiences in the 19th and 20th century are striking, especially in the visitation of dramatic economic and technological change on a still traditional social structure, as well as in the seeming disharmony between modernization and the development of a Western-style civil society. For more on the Hungarian case, see Andras Gero, Modern Hungarian Society in the Making: The Unfinished Experience (Budapest, 1995).

multiple problems of modernity, but more importantly were led by other movements whose solutions were hardly liberal.

Still, especially in Germany and Austria, socialist movements were partially able to take up the liberal agenda. As legal political formations in independent states where the rule of law was actually respected in practice, German and Austrian social democratic parties took up the cause of direct, universal, and equal suffrage, the primacy of parliamentary government, minority rights, and the legal and political equality of women. The parties comprising the Polish socialist movement, especially in the Russian partition, remained illegal and conspiratorial formations. Forever in revolutionary opposition to the Russian government, Polish socialist parties also found themselves in fundamental opposition to whatever concessions the government made to the emerging civil society. Rather than use the public spaces permitted (which included limited freedoms of the press, assembly, and association) to promote the liberal agenda as in Germany and Austria, the Polish socialists either sought to exploit them as part of a strategy to overthrow Russian rule (as in the case of trade unions) or denounced them as fraudulent. In this sense, liberalism experienced a double failure in early twentieth century Poland, which left the field open to modern nationalism to leave the main stamp on Polish political culture after World War I and the restoration of an independent Polish state.¹⁰

In conclusion, the main issue of Polish politics and society in the first decades of the twentieth century should not be focused on whether or not modernization and "modernity" actually occurred, for in the end that issue is mainly one of labeling, but rather the symbiosis between modernization and the type of political culture that emerged as a consequence. Modernization indeed gave birth to a modern civil society in Poland, but one that largely took on Central rather than West European features. Marked by the politics of alienation, which gave rise to radical and utopian movements of the left and right and consumed liberalism in the process, Poland's experience, if anything, was all too "modern." Only a new dynamic, which began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, would begin to give "Western" contours to Poland's confrontation with on-going social and economic change, a dynamic it shared, moreover, with many of its Central European neighbors.

¹⁰For more on the failure of socialism to achieve a liberal and democratic agenda and to combat effectively modern anti-Semitism, see the collection of articles, "Poles, Jews, Socialists: The Failure of an Ideal," ed. Antony Polonsky, et al., published in Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, IX (London, 1996).