

*Review*

## **Transforming Worlds of Work. Post-1989 Privatization in Poland through the Eyes of Factory Workers**

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LEYK, Aleksandra – WAWRZYNIAK, Joanna: *Cięcia. Mówiona historia transformacji*. Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej 2020, 503 pages. ISBN 978-83-66586-00-0.

The systemic transformations after 1989/1991 in Central and Eastern Europe are no longer a subject of interest only for sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and economists, who have studied them extensively, but also for historians. Aleksandra Leyk and Joanna Wawrzyniak's book *Cuts. An Oral History of the Transformation*, published in Polish, takes such a historical approach, setting the economic changes of the 1990s in a *long durée* perspective of the changing worlds of labour and the accompanying social practices in the second half of the twentieth century. Focusing on five state-owned Polish manufacturing companies that underwent privatization through foreign direct investment in the 1990s, *Cuts* is a thought-provoking book that offers inspiration to scholars working on systemic transformations also in other national contexts within the former Eastern Bloc.

The authors present a history from below, reconstructing the stories of the selected companies on the basis of extensive oral history interviews with their staff. The monograph is just one of the outputs of the large-scale project "From a socialist factory to an international corporation", conducted at the University of Warsaw between 2010-2018, and the overall corpus includes over 130 in-depth biographical interviews with workers of twelve different companies. In the Czech context, only a few oral history projects of a comparable scale have been conducted, primarily at the Oral History Center at the Institute of Contemporary History

of the Czech Academy of Sciences.<sup>1</sup> Given the breadth of the project on which *Cuts* is based, it is not surprising that the authors chose to narrow down the focus of the book to five case studies.<sup>2</sup>

The transcripts of the interviews form the core of the book. Perhaps also thanks to the fact that the authors did not choose to publish their work with a strictly academic publisher, but rather a publishing house that specializes in non-fiction aimed at the general public, the interviews are skilfully edited for high readability, drawing the reader into the life stories of the narrators. Warsaw's iconic chocolate manufacturer Wedel; the paper processing plant in Świecie in northern Poland, today known as Mondi Świecie; the tire manufacturing plant Stomil Olsztyn, today Michelin Polska; the FSO car manufacturing company in Warsaw; and an anonymized chemical plant. Their histories of transformation from nationalized enterprises operating in a planned economy to foreign-owned corporations competing on the international market are told in the words of manual workers on the lowest rungs of the industrial hierarchy, as well as mid-level management and directors. But the book's aim is more ambitious than simply presenting the history of the selected enterprises. As Leyk and Wawrzyniak write, "*Cuts* is a collection of stories about socialist and capitalist modernization, about privatization and restructuring, as well as about the structuring of the consciousness of these processes and their changing assessment over time" (p. 50).

Aside from the interviews themselves, the book is accompanied by a range of supplementary material. The transcripts are prefaced by a short foreword introducing the project, followed by a longer introductory chapter entitled "The Experience and Memory of Transformation". Here the authors contextualize the changes that industrial production in Poland underwent throughout the socialist period and after 1989 in terms of global economic developments. Particularly crucial for this context, Leyk and Wawrzyniak suggest, are the 1970s. Not only did this decade mark the onset of the global economic paradigm shift that is known as neoliberalism; the 1970s were also a transformative decade in socialist Poland. Under the leadership of Edward Gierek, the Polish economy underwent changes that opened it up to the West and brought an increase in standards of living and a greater availability of consumer goods. By the end of the decade, however, the crisis in the global economy also hit Poland

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<sup>1</sup> These include the following projects supported by the Czech Science Foundation: "An investigation of Czech society of the 'normalization' era: Biographic narrations of workers and intelligentsia" (2006-2008); "Czech Society in the 'Normalisation' and Transformation Era: Biographical Narrations" (2011-2015); and "The student generation of 1989 in longitudinal perspective. Biographical interviews 20 years later" (2017-2019).

<sup>2</sup> Wider outputs of the project, including a full list of publications, can be found on the project website: <http://odfabrykidokorporacji.pl/publikacje/>

through a decline in industrial production. The 1980s were a tumultuous time, with the development of independent trade union activism through *Solidarity*, subsequently quashed by martial law, and later the eventual opening up of the Polish economy to market mechanisms already in the second half of the decade under the influence of perestroika.

The authors also pay attention in their introduction to the way large industrial plants organized the social life of their workers, noting a certain similarity of socialist enterprises to the Fordist model of production. It is this social aspect of their work lives that the narrators commented on much more often than on macroeconomic developments. Factories set up crèches and nurseries, organized holidays in vacation homes owned by the company in the mountains or at the seaside, provided on-site healthcare services and various afterwork leisure clubs for employees. Often, housing was also provided by the enterprise. Altogether, these measures enabled people from often very modest means – as the interviews sometimes reveal in colourful detail – to advance to a comfortable standard of living. These social benefits were among the first to go in the series of cuts that followed the marketization of the economy in the 1990s. The title of the book refers not only to these social cuts, but also cuts to staff: large-scale redundancies were a core feature of the optimization and rationalization processes associated with privatization. Most of the interviewed narrators survived these cuts of the 1990s, yet remember seeing their colleagues and friends go with a certain pain.

In addition, the authors have included a number of appendices comprised of graphs and statistics relating to privatization, a methodological note on the interview process, and a section entitled “The History of Privatization” at the end of the volume. The latter is perhaps a somewhat redundant addition to the materials presented. It offers a factual account of the history of each of the studied enterprises, although this does not necessarily add new information to what readers have already learnt from the interviews (especially since each company is introduced with a short timeline of key events earlier in the volume). Perhaps it would have been more useful to include this section before the interviews themselves, so that readers would have facts and dates to compare with the subjective perspective of the narrators.

Given the above-described structure, it would not be difficult to level criticism at the book for a lack of analytical perspective. In fact, the only part that offers an interpretive framework for engaging with the interviews is a short section in the introductory chapter entitled “The Cracked Memory of Transformation”. Here Leyk and Wawrzyniak suggest that the vernacular memory of the transformation falls into two main categories – a narrative of modernization, which adopts the language of market values of efficiency and optimization; and

a narrative of “moral economy” which speaks to a crisis of norms, values, and ways of functioning in an industrial society, tending towards a nostalgic assessment of the social ties experienced under socialism. Importantly though, these two narrative tropes are not mutually exclusive, but can coalesce in the narratives of individual workers. As the interviews show, memory is formed in interaction with present-day values; while workers may thus have internalized the idea of the necessity of market reform, that does not mean they cannot look back with a certain nostalgia to the times when their workplace was also the centre of their social life.

While the lack of interpretive and analytical chapters is a fair observation, I do not think it calls for criticism. *Cuts* is first and foremost an excellent and fascinating historical source and that in itself is of indisputable value for historians working on the systemic transformations of the 1990s. It does no less than to offer profound insights into the subjective experiences of several key historical processes that have shaped the second half of the twentieth century: it tells the stories (for these stories are necessarily multiple) of industrial modernization and the development and eventual collapse of the Fordist model of production and the lifestyle changes that accompanied them. It provides testimony to how workers adapted to changing economic paradigms and appropriated the new language of capitalism. Furthermore, *Cuts* is also a rich source for studying technological advancement in the twentieth century – many of the narrators dwell on the introduction of new technologies, often imported from the West with much effort. One of the key insights of the book is thus to underscore how technology impacted people’s lives in re-organizing their work and how central a role it played in their valuation of their labour (especially in the case of engineers and other technical staff who took genuine pride in the technological improvements they were able to bring to their company), as well as how prominently it continues to feature in the memory of their lives. *Cuts* will thus be of interest not only to scholars of the economic transformations, but also to labour historians and sociologists, as well as to historians of science and cultural historians interested in changing work cultures, both in the former socialist bloc and beyond.

Although Leyk and Wawrzyniak present *Cuts* as primarily an oral history, by training both scholars are also sociologists and the book should be read within the context of Polish sociology’s rich tradition of studying the transformation (including scholars such as Henryk Domański, Ireneusz Krzemiński, Mirosława Marody, Piotr Sztompka, Maria Jarosz, Juliusz Gardawski, to mention just a few), and the well-established sub-field of the sociology of labour (in particular the work of Adam Mrozowski). In this context, *Cuts* will inevitably be read in

comparison with another recent publication that attempts to capture the experience of the transformation with the use of biographical interviews. *Telling the Great Change*, edited by Kaja Kaźmierska and Katarzyna Waniek (2020), is an ambitious volume produced by the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Łódź, which analyses the experience of the Polish systemic transformation on three generational cohorts: those born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Unlike *Cuts*, its approach is highly analytical and synthetic, and the life stories of individual respondents are embedded within an elaborate conceptual framework. Yet ultimately, taking such different approaches, *Cuts* and *Telling the Great Change* have the same aim of revealing how the simplifying categories of public discourse, which often operates with shortcuts such as the “winners” and “losers” of the transformation, do not apply to the complex life stories of individuals. *Telling the Great Change* hands the reader a set of analytical tools to capture this complexity; *Cuts*, on the other hand, in its narrative approach leaves the analytical labour to the reader. Yet like any well-conducted oral history that seeks to describe historical events from below, it demonstrates that the *emic* categories in which narrators operate are often different from the *etic* categories with which both public and scholarly discourse attempts to make sense of lived experience. The approaches of both books are valid and, read together, they complement each other particularly well.

Another indisputable reading context for *Cuts* is the very topical public discussion in many countries of the former socialist bloc about the mistakes, wrongdoings and immense social costs of the transformation years. Although Leyk and Wawrzyniak avoid current political debates, which guarantees their book a more enduring quality, the volume (and the project on which it is based) was written during a time of intense reassessment of the transformation years in Polish political discourse, coming both from the right and the left. As with any use of memory as a source, it is necessary to keep this in mind when reading these interviews, as the current context will inevitably colour the memories narrators share. Where the book could have used more of an analytical apparatus, it is in a reflection on both the central problem of the retrospective nature of oral history and the specific implications the public reassessment of the transformation has on how narrators chose to frame their biographical narratives.

It might therefore appear somewhat surprising that the narrators ultimately tend to assess the changes brought on by privatization and the marketization of the economy positively. This is, however, an inevitable bias of the project design, since the chosen narrators were mainly those employees who survived the cuts of the 1990s, kept their jobs and could thus bear

witness to the whole privatization process well into the new millennium. At the time of the interviews, most of them were at the end of their working careers or already retired. And there is, of course, a differing level of bitterness among the interviews with the workers of FSO, which did not survive the privatization process and had ceased production at its Warsaw factory by 2011, as opposed to the remaining companies, which have transformed into successful branches of international corporations. Yet the picture painted by the interviews remains varied. If any typology of experiences were to emerge, then manual workers on the lower rungs probably tended to remember the privatization years with more resentment, while management tended to adapt – sometimes with enthusiasm, sometimes grudgingly – to the new internationalized work culture and the demands of the new owners. Such a classification, however, remains a gross oversimplification, which does not do justice to the complicated mix of nostalgia, trauma, resentment, excitement and sense of opportunity, progress and genuine self-realization present in each narrative.

Leyk and Wawrzyniak have produced a book about modernization and the transformation of labour which offers no clear-cut answers, but instead captivates with its exploration of the complexity of lived experience. That is precisely the reason why it can offer avenues for further research for scholars working not only on Poland, but also on the wider postsocialist space.

#### Abstract

*The subject of this review is the monograph *Cięcia. Mówiona historia transformacji (Cuts. An Oral History of the Transformation)* by Aleksandra Leyk and Joanna Wawrzyniak. The review outlines the structure of the book, which is the output of a larger project conducted at the University of Warsaw between 2010-2018. This project gathered the life stories of workers of initially socialist enterprises in Poland, which were then privatized through foreign direct investment in the 1990s. The review argues that although the volume lacks a comprehensive analytical and interpretive framework, the highly readable oral histories that form the core of the book are an invaluable historical source in themselves. The review briefly compares the book to the somewhat similar publication *Telling the Great Change* (eds. Kaja Kaźmierska and Katarzyna Waniek, 2020), which attempts to capture the experience of the post-1989 systemic transformations in Poland on three generational cohorts, using the sociological method of biographical research. While the latter publication offers a robust conceptual framework, *Cuts* leaves the burden of interpretation to the reader. Both approaches, the reviewer suggests, are valid and complement one another. The value of Leyk and Wawrzyniak's monograph lies in creating a rich historical source that does not offer clear-cut answers and demonstrates the complexity of lived experience in an era of rapid modernization, both socialist and capitalist.*

Keywords: Poland; economic transformation; privatization; foreign direct investment; oral history