

The social system in present-day Poland

# Class Counts in Poland



Joanna Ethel

## PRZEMYSŁAW SADURA

Faculty of Sociology, University of Warsaw  
sadurap@gmail.com

Dr. Przemysław Sadura is a sociologist, assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw, and staff member at *Krytyka Polityczna* magazine. He has been conducting social studies for non-governmental organizations and public administration bodies for the last decade. Together with Maciej Gdula he has published a book on class lifestyles in Poland.

**Academia:** Together with Dr. Maciej Gdula you are carrying out an analysis of Polish society in terms of class categories. To what extent is this justified?

**Przemysław Sadura:** *Scientifically speaking, very much so. The issues of class divisions have been exorcised from public debate after 1989 for political reasons, and to some extent this is understandable. After the Second World War, the political system in our country was based on Marxist ideologies. As the old order was on the wane, people's antipathy towards Communism became so widespread that it was reflected in all theories based on the concept of social classes. And yet social processes observed in the new Poland are very much supportive of the theory that the class system is alive and well; after all, social inequalities have only been widening since 1989, however we measure them. As such, our research invokes the concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu, who borrows some elements from Marxism while not being Marxist per se: his ideas are not based on economic determinism, and instead he posits that different classes are rooted in certain lifestyles.*

**So what classes does Bourdieu distinguish?**

*A dominant upper class, a middle class and a popular class. The latter mainly includes people with peasant and laborer origins. The middle class comprises office workers in public administration or employed by private companies. The upper classes are entrepreneurs and company owners, bosses and managers, and freelancers. Bourdieu assigns individuals to certain classes mainly on the basis of the total capital at their disposal, extending the*

*idea beyond simple economics to categories of social and cultural capital. Economic capital comprises all assets including property, savings, and wages. But the other categories also play an important role: cultural capital can either have an organized nature, such as formal education, or it can be less institutionalized, existing as a general cultural awareness. Finally, social capital comprises networks of contacts and acquaintances. These three types of capital are constantly at play. We are able to cash in on our education by exchanging cultural for economic capital. In turn, social capital provides us with opportunities to earn more. This ability to exchange one type of capital for another is, according to Bourdieu, an element of our habitus – structures of dispositions and predispositions we grow up with that define our goals. We develop them to later reproduce and transmit them when we have our own families.*

**What role is played by schools?**

*Intentionally or not, schools play a role in perpetuating social inequalities. However, in doing so they may weaken the influence of family factors that result simply from inequalities in economic, social and cultural capital in family structures. Data tends to show that at the moment the effect is one of magnifying the original inequality. To a large degree, this results from limited access to preschools. If we divide society by education, the popular class scores the poorest in this respect – children of farmers, laborers or people who are unemployed. Over 60 percent of three-year-olds from families with higher education are enrolled in preschools, while the figure is just 2 percent for families with elementary education. That's a 30-fold difference!*

**Do these differences translate into access to higher education?**

*Of course! We have encountered this during research presented in the book "Style życia i porządek klasowy w Polsce" ["Lifestyles and the Class System in Poland"]. During a seminar held at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw, we asked students to recruit participants in interviews using the snowball effect through their networks of contacts. While they had no*



Since 1989, social inequalities have become more widespread and deeply rooted

problems finding interviewees from the middle and upper classes, they encountered serious difficulty in recruiting participants from the popular class. There are simply no people from these circles at universities.

#### How did the upper class form in Poland?

Well, it's not as though there have been no social inequalities in post-war Poland. It's just that they had been countered or concealed, so they appeared to be more subtle. Since these measures were abandoned in 1989, we have been witness to an explosion of inequality. A "nouveau riche" class quickly became prominent: enfranchised nomenklatura, company directors, intelligentsia transforming universities into corporations have come together to form the kernel of the upper classes. The second group comprises people who accumulated economic capital during the transformation by means that may or may not have been entirely aboveboard; they are now investing these funds in the cultural capital of their children, building families following the capitalist Western model. That's how the class system was rebuilt.

#### Is that good or bad?

I'd say it's bad, but that's a matter of opinion. I would add, though, that even people who don't share my outlook and visions of how public policy should be shaped agree on at least one point: inequality has widened, and disparities are becoming more widespread and deeply rooted.

#### What are the connections between different classes and lifestyles?

Our research defines lifestyles somewhat differently to Bourdieu. His view presents a certain hierarchy; the lifestyles of the upper classes tend to be universal, and centered around pleasure, freedom and selflessness. It shows a way of participating in culture and social life where one's own role is not overplayed – for example, a scientist writing a book out of passion rather than for money. According to Bourdieu, lifestyles of other classes should be assessed through the prism of the upper classes, which presents a certain unattainable ideal. The lifestyle of the popular class is a choice forced by necessity. Due to its low economic capital, this class is largely condemned to economic determinism and chooses it to the exclusion of everything else. Meanwhile the middle class tries to emulate the upper class lifestyle even though it cannot attain it, not least because of insufficient cultural capital and habitus. As such it remains torn between the class it aspires to be and that whence it originates – the popular class.

#### Does today's urban middle class largely consist of migrants from the countryside to cities?

My students and I were discussing this sort of thing. I think that there are two groups at play here: people who have relocated fairly recently with the hope of increasing their capital and move up socially (this group is colloquially and pejoratively known as "jars" in Poland because of the traditional food that they are believed to bring regularly to the city from their family homes

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located mainly in rural territories of Poland), and those who once started off that way but who have now become successful (known as “lemmings” in Poland because of the herd instinct and conformity that are projected onto this social group essentially consisting of corporate employees). The first group is a lower-middle class, while the second has aspirations to join the upper class. And sometimes it even seems to them that they are almost there.

**You talked about having a concept of lifestyles that doesn't follow Bourdieu's. What is the situation in Poland?**

Our research does not conclude that the upper classes have a monopoly on cultural legitimacy. Instead, we found that each social class has its own vision of the social world based on some key values. For the upper classes, these values correspond to those described by Bourdieu. For example, we asked people about bicycles – for instance, the reasons they use them, how they use them, and the brands and models. Interviewees from the upper class mainly talked about the sensory experiences that go with riding bikes.

**“I ride for fun, so it doesn't matter what I'm riding”?**

That's right; they weren't conscious of the brand of bike they have. “I ride the way it's convenient for me. If there's a path, I take it. If there's just the pavement, I ride on the pavement, but I take care not to hurt anyone”...

The middle class doesn't agree or try to emulate this. Or, rather, by copying certain practices (such

as the trend for riding bikes), it gives them a new meaning. For these people, safety and order are key. So for bicycles, the most important parameter turns out to be urban traffic rules: roads are for cars, paths are for bikes, and pavements are for pedestrians.

Meeting these core values can, in certain cases, hinder dialogue between classes and even lead to conflict.

**In what kinds of situations?**

For example, let's look at the job market. The discourse that surrounds it is dominated by values typical of the middle classes: the cult of meritocracy, development of competencies, and the belief that jobs are filled following competitive recruitment processes resulting in the selection of the best candidate. The upper class mainly allows this to be the case because it is able to conduct its own affairs regardless of the rules and values that are actually in place. When we asked its representatives about the ways in which they look for work, they replied that it's something they never do because work finds them. And they describe their lives as a series of opportunities and chances. This means that we are talking about a situation in which the upper class allows the middle class to seemingly dominate the job market, whereas it simply makes the most of the mechanisms of domination in order to control it.

Another example is higher education. We have been talking about dropping standards for many years, and to a certain degree this is tied to the growing number of people entering higher education...

...the current figure is around 50 percent.

Which is a four to five-fold increase on the early 1990s. This means that universities have had a mass influx of middle-class students. Until then, academia had largely been dominated by the upper class, which imposed its own rules and if it allowed in representatives of other classes at all, it was only on its own terms. This has changed, and the middle class is now dominant; this means that academic education which had previously been a tool of emancipation and self-development now focuses on improving students' chances of finding well-paid jobs.

Another battlefield is people's attitude to the state as an entity. The upper class generally believes that individuals should be responsible for themselves; conversely, popular classes tend

When talking about riding bikes, interviewees from the upper classes focus on the pleasure they get out of the experience



to support state intervention in all spheres, since they feel it is in their interest. And, once again, the middle class is torn: it is willing to agree with state intervention but only when individuals see personal advantages. As such, they support an extensive state benefit system, providing it funds education or healthcare, because they are aware that this is paid for from their taxes.

**If you were to advise Poland's authorities and administration, what model would you suggest?**  
Over the last twenty years, we have largely believed that the free market will solve all our problems. However, it is now clear that this is not enough, and we need a strong state that would intervene when the market cannot manage by itself. And there are more and more such areas. At the same time there is no return to the state as it existed 30, 40 or 50 years ago, regardless whether we are talking about socialism or Western democracy, since these were powerful structures which knew what their citizens needed better than the citizens themselves. At the same time, in certain social spheres we have reached a level of emancipation, and it is impossible for new identities that have blossomed to be parceled up according to former stereotypes. On the other hand, we must create certain instruments of public policy, because without them we are condemned to further collapse of social ties. Following our experiences of socialism and twenty years of wild capitalism, the time has come to rebuild them. This begs the question - where do we start?

**Do you know the answer?**

I believe that we must start by raising the level of social capital, which is desperately low - that is, bringing Poles out of extreme individualism. Without this we will not be able to put into place any processes leading to improved innovativeness and creativity.

The political and economic transformations have brought us a certain level of development; however, Poland doesn't have sufficient social capital resources, so it seems as though we have reached a glass ceiling. In order to break through it, we must put in real investment in education, in schools. But this is a particular political and social choice. We would need genuinely bold political teams, and even that wouldn't be enough. It seems to me that what we need more than anything is to bring back social cohesion, and bring back meaning to



the word "solidarity" - it has become an empty slogan.

The education system is something that different social groups are very likely to want to contribute to. It's easy to demonstrate that changing it is something that benefits as all, because if nothing is done, the entire system will soon lie in ruin. We can already see that representatives of the upper classes are increasingly frequently sending their children to study abroad. In turn, the middle classes are flocking away from public schools to private and community ones. This means that individuals who might be able to enforce certain changes are deserting. It is understandable on an individual level, but once you put all these personal decisions into context, you see that we are dealing with a social pitfall. What's left behind is the public system used only by the poorest members of society, and of course services for the poorest are services of the poorest quality. No one is going to invest in education which mainly serves people with the lowest social and cultural capital. That's why I think that unless we introduce mechanisms improving social cohesion into education today, tomorrow Poland's entire society will start creaking at the seams. ■

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Interview by **Anna Zawadzka**  
Photos **Jakub Ostałowski**