

How class mobility has been changing in Poland

# Upwards and Downwards



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is a sociologist studying  
the processes of social  
mobility in Poland

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**Poland has been seeing a clear trend towards increased social mobility in the first decade of the 21st century, a result which would indicate that barriers based on family origins are exerting a waning impact upon the life-paths of individuals**

Social mobility, a term that refers to any change of one's social position, is a characteristic of social structure that positively associates with democracy, liberalism, tole-

rance, modernization and economic growth. Analyzing social mobility one can assess the openness of social barriers, especially in recruitments to elites, and in transitions from lower to higher social strata. The problem is as follows: has the systemic change that Poland underwent in 1989 brought about a reduction in the rigidity of social barriers? Has the transition from Communism to democracy and a market economy had an identifiable impact upon social mobility?

## Two decades

In order to show changes in social mobility rates one can compare the percentages of individuals who had changed their position at the beginning and at the end of the analyzed period of time. The 1990s were



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After 1989 the development of market economics was a factor that generated new professions in various service-providing domains, such as banking, marketing, commerce, entertainment, and recreation

a time of intense change in the occupational structure in Poland. The transformation in the socioeconomic system led to a replacement of the political elite and managers at state-run enterprises. At the same time, the development of market economics stimulated expansion of the private sector and generated new occupations in the service sector, such as banking, marketing, commerce, entertainment, and recreation. According to the logic of transformation, shifts in the socio-occupational structure should be stronger than they were before, that is in the 1980s. This assumption applies for intergenerational mobility and for total mobility, including the intra-generational mobility that occurs during the course of individuals' occupational careers.

Our analysis is based on survey data beginning from 1982. Percentages of mobile individuals for each point of time are established in a standard way, namely in mobility tables of fathers by respondents' categories. We distinguished six categories to reflect the basic segments of socio-occupational structure in Poland: intelligentsia and managers, other non-manual categories, owners, skilled manual laborers, unskilled manual laborers, and agricultural categories including peasants and farm laborers (both them referred below to farmers).

Indeed, this shows that intergenerational mobility increased in the 1990s, and this trend has persisted into the first years of the 21st century. In 1982-2002 rates of intergenerational mobility prevailed over intergenerational stability. There were more mobile persons who found themselves in a different category than that of their father in comparison to those who "inherited" membership in them. The overall mobility rate stood at 62.1% in 1982, but amounted to 69-70% in 1999 and 2002, which indicates that mobile individuals were two times more numerous than those who did not change their position.

All in all, there was a clear trend towards increased mobility over the analyzed period of time, although the changes were not great.

### The peasant estate

Let us look at mobility patterns, that is at the intergenerational transitions between the basic segments of socio-occupational structure. At this step we will focus on the



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mobility of intelligentsia, owners, manual laborers, and farmers.

In Poland it is farmers who display the highest intergenerational stability, that is inheritance rates. Let us note that this by no means departs from the universal "rules" of mobility patterns in other societies. In the Polish case, the percentage of farmers whose fathers had also been farmers stood at 88.9% in 1982. Of the only 11.1% who were recruited to farmers from other categories, most came from working class families. In terms of the permeability of social barriers, this low inflow rate portrays farmers as a category that is comparable to an estate or a caste. Nevertheless, self-recruitment amongst farmers should decline with the passage of time, as a kind of natural response to the relative decrease in the percentage of farmers. In 1982-2002 the percentage of farmers within the socio-occupational structure fell by almost half, from 25.3% to 12.9%.

Certainly, mobility does not necessarily have to be consistent with the declining percentage of farmers. Nevertheless, this does actually hold: in 1982-1987 the inheritance rate fell from 88.9% to 77.6%. By 1995 it had risen again to 85.5% but until 2002, self-recruitment of farmers dropped to the level of 78.5%.

### The intelligentsia

While one might assume that the percentage of intelligentsia who inherited their status should be relatively high, this was not the case. In 1982, when our analysis begins, only 10.5% of intelligentsia followed their fathers' footsteps, almost nine times lower

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than the inheritance rate for farmers. A clear majority of intelligentsia were newcomers, recruited from other categories. In 1982, 42.9% originated from agricultural laborers and peasants, 18.1% from skilled workers, and 17.1 from white-collar workers.

There were three important changes that occurred within the intelligentsia by 2002. First, a certain trend towards more inheritance, with the rate of intergenerationally stable members of this category amounting - in 2002 - to 22%. Secondly, a tendency towards decreased inflow to intelligentsia from agricultural categories - from 42.9 in 1982 to 15.6% in 2002. Thirdly, recruitment to intelligentsia from skilled workers increased. In 1982-1987 this inflow rate rose from 18.1% to 24.5% and - by 2002 - intelligentsia coming from skilled workers accounted for 29.1% of the total.

In seeking an explanation of this exceptionally high inflow rate it is instructive to draw a distinction between two kinds of social categories. The first of these are "givers," categories of declining size which supply other categories with individuals, resulting in higher outflow than inflow. Secondly, there are categories referred to as "takers," which undergo steady increase.

Intelligentsia are among the "takers." The increasing size of intelligentsia is enforced by a growing demand for professionals with expert knowledge. Pressure of demand exceeds the supply of intelligentsia offspring, and only inflow from other categories can fill this gap. Let us digress that the typical categories of "givers" in Poland are the working class and peasants.

### The blue collars

Let us now turn to the mobility of manual workers. First of all, it turns out that as far as the self-recruitment rate is concerned, skilled workers are surpassed only by farmers. According to survey data from 2002, nearly half of the skilled workers had fathers belonging to the same category. Intergenerational stability of skilled workers has tended to increase. While the rate of inheritance stood at 25.2% in nearly 1982, it increased to 37.4% in 1987 and remained on the same level through the 1990s, to reach 46.1% in 2002.

The logic of social stratification dictates that the increased self-recruitment rate entails declining inflow of representatives of other categories. This mostly applies to the declining inflow rate from farmers. In 1982,

**Nearly half of the qualified laborers was of the working-class origin in 2002, offering a sign that this social category is closing off within the social structure**



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as many as 55.3% of skilled workers had come from the families of agricultural laborers and peasants, which is tantamount to openness and weak mobility barriers. However, by 2002 this rate declined to 32%. Both the increased self-recruitment and decreasing inflow suggests that skilled workers represent a category that is closing itself.

### New men for new times

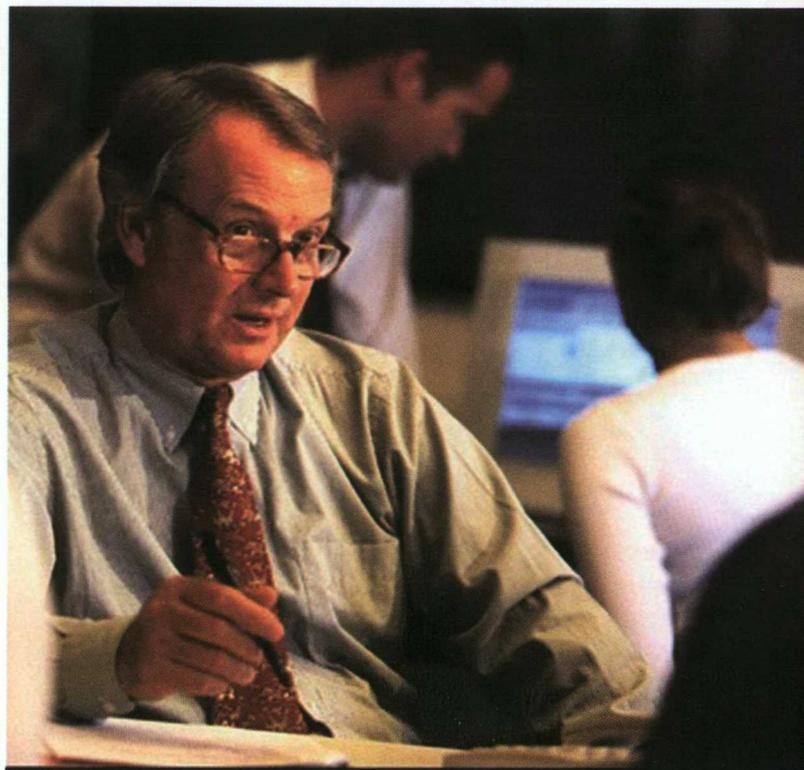
Concerning the mobility of owners, we should begin with a reminder that there is no better symbol of the market economy than the "business class." The downfall of communism swept away the formal barriers of access to this category for everyone who had sufficient capital and was profit-oriented, not to mention such predispositions as a willingness to work on one's own and the courage to take risks.

There is nothing surprising, then, in the fact that the 1990s witnessed an increasing inflow into the category of owners. It is true that even under the Communist system owners were not excessively "closed." Even in 1982 they were mostly recruited from other categories, with the inflow rate standing at 73.1%.

According to the analysis of survey data from 1995, 89.6% of owners originated from other categories. This shows that the demand for business people in the rising market economy came into effect, and the category of owners became a typical "taker." The inflow became even greater by 2002, when it appeared that the percentage of inheritance among owners dropped to 7%.

Analysis of patterns of inflow sheds some light on an important issue of composition of owners in term of social background. In 1982, 42.3% of owners had an agricultural background, while 26.9% came from the families of skilled and unskilled workers. The lower classes appear to constitute the main social base of recruitment to business. Until 1987, the percentage of owners originating from the lower classes declined to 61.2%, with 18.3% of them coming from lower non-manual families and 8.6% from intelligentsia.

These patterns continued in the 1990s. In 1995 the category of owners was still dominated by the offspring of lower classes, which accounted for 62.4% of the social composition of owners - 28.6% were recruited



from category of skilled workers, 11.7% from unskilled workers, and 22.1% from agricultural laborers and peasants. In line with the universal logic of changes in occupational structure, the agricultural category ceased to be the dominant type of family origin, giving way to the working class. In any event, in 1982-2002 there was a slow but consistent inflow to the category of owners from intelligentsia which - from perspective of modernization - is a promising long-term trend. This rate increased from 3.8% to 16.9%, but the most intensive inflow rise occurred in 1995-2002 - from 9.1% to 16.9%.

In the first decade of the 21st century, emerging capitalism in Poland saw the increasing closure of the two basic segments, namely the intelligentsia and skilled workers. At the same time the category of owners became more open. Against this background inequalities in Poland increased and the crystallization of the stratification system took place. ■

**The development of a market economy in Poland has meant an influx in new members of the group company owners demonstrating that there can be no capitalism without businesspeople**

#### Further reading

- Domański, H. (2004) *On Social Mobility in Poland* [in Polish]. Warszawa: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN.  
Mach, B. W. (1989). *Function and Action - The Systemic Concept of Mobility* [in Polish]. Warszawa: PWN.