

## **Re-placing Work: Economic Transformations and the Shape of a Community in Post-Socialist Poland**

Under socialism in east central Europe, labour and the workplace were two of the most important institutions in the shaping of social life, yet in the last decade, work, workplaces and labour markets have been radically transformed. This paper explores the costs and consequences of these transformations in the town of Nowa Huta, Poland and pays particular attention to these experiences at the scale of the community.

Until very recently, Poland was described as “one of Eastern Europe’s biggest success stories” (Slay, 2000, p.51). The economy has grown rapidly; exports have been restructured and oriented towards the European Union; inflation has fallen to single figures; foreign direct investment levels are amongst the highest in the region and the private sector has become “the engine of Poland’s economic growth” (ibid.). The radical transformations within the Polish economy can not be denied, yet the unmitigated stories of success are hard to sustain. It is widely accepted that the policies and processes of the last ten years have had differential impacts in Poland, both socially and spatially. The historical contrasts between western and eastern Poland (Poland ‘A’ and ‘B’ respectively) and between urban and rural areas persist (see, for example Gorzelak, 1996). These geographies are interwoven with social fragmentations which see women, young people and the vocationally-educated experience the worst of the negative consequences of reform. Images of success are thrown into question still further by Poland’s economic performance in recent years which has seen GDP growth fall to a projected 1.5-2 per cent and unemployment rise to over 16 per cent.

Contrary to the implicit arguments of many writers, these transformations have taken place not at some abstract level, but *in and through* existing places and through the lives of people. The processes of marketisation and democratisation are processes which radically restructure people’s daily lives and lived experiences in a hundred and one ways. Yet as Joanna Regulaska argues, “... the preoccupation with economic restructuring (understood as the need for liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation) and political transformation (defined predominantly in terms of national and party politics) [has] resulted in the omission of a local dimension in transition debates” (Regulaska, 1998, p.310) which might allow for the consideration of the role and experiences of people and institutions at the local level in the transformation of social and economic systems and the building of new practices.

The processes of transformation, as I have suggested, are translated into people’s lives through a plethora of spheres. My focus here is on the restructuring of work and the impact of the shifting nature of work on the lives of communities, in particular, on the life of one community previously centred on work. In this paper, I outline some of the ‘personal consequences’ of ‘new’ work (Sennett, 1998) highlighted by recent writing on the topic and link these discussions to earlier academic work on the relationship between work, its decline and the life of communities. I then go on to explore empirically the transformation of work in Poland, focusing on its changing nature and geographies, and its growing absence. In the latter sections of the paper, I consider the resonance of these issues in the town of Nowa Huta, basing my analyses on archival and interview research in the community. Nowa Huta, meaning ‘new steelworks’ is a town founded in 1949 and centred on Poland’s first integrated steelworks (latterly Huta Lenina, now Huta Sendzimira) (Stenning, 2000).

Much has been written in recent years (see, for example, Sennett, 1998; Beck, 2000; Bauman, 1998) on the changing nature of work, and the consequences of these changes for other spheres

of life. A number of tendencies have been identified which point to both a loss of linearity and clarity of (occupational and social) progression and a loss of security. Ulrich Beck (2000, p.7) records the end of work's place at the centre "holding things together". He explains:

"[f]or a society without work, so it seems, is a society without a centre, a society lacking in basic coordinates in matters both large and small, in everyday life as in politics, economics, the law and so on." (Beck, 2000, p.10)

Beck, with Sennett and Bauman, draws attention to the rising short-termism both within and beyond work, which demands flexibility and mobility. The physical expression of such new, flexible lifestyles and work lives results in a diminishment of community - "no one ... becomes a long-term witness to another person's life" (Sennett, 1998, p.21; see also Gallie, Kostova and Kuchar, 2001). People can no longer build life stories around work and the workplace and new sources of identity are sought. The short-term and non-technical nature of many new jobs means that many workers have only a superficial understanding of their work, their identity as a worker is 'light' (Sennett, 1998, p.74). Flexible and part-time work does not provide the markers and handles (both nominal and material) of 'jobs for life'; instead it suggests a demand for flexible, partial and ever-changing identities which are not "too tough and stuff to be revoked if need be" (Bauman, 1998, p.28). There are clear echoes here with the growing literature on economic identities in regions characterised by forms of 'old work' where adaptable, resilient networks are replaced by 'ties that bind too tight'. Work is no longer the central life activity (Grint, 1991) and there is thus an increasing need for identities beyond work. Bauman notes how the older type of society was a 'producer society' which "engaged its members primarily as producers" (Bauman, 1998, p.24), a role around which we constructed our identities. Now we are seen primarily as *consumers* and it is the ability and willingness with which we play the role of consumer that defines us and our relations with others. Bauman stresses that this is not a radical abandonment or one identity for the other, rather a shift in emphasis, but "that shift of emphasis does make an enormous difference to virtually every aspect of society, culture and individual life" (ibid.).

An earlier body of work (for example, Schofield and Noble, 1993, Hudson and Sadler, 1986) draws attention to the ways in which the restructuring (and loss) of work is experienced both individually and collectively. The shape of a community is altered by both the accumulation of individual experiences and a set of wider spatial outcomes. We can identify the loss of the workplace as source of community identity and solidarity; the restructuring of frameworks of personal and community reference; reduced funding for workplace/community facilities; a reduction in the community's social fabric; a concentration of high number of poor consumers and a consequent contraction of commercial and public services; altered patterns of everyday life and a wearing away of community codes, institutions, bonds.

Under socialism, the work/community relationship took on a particular form; there were certainly echoes of the relationships in western 'company towns', but the all-encompassing and extremely ideological place of work in communities took western tendencies to the extreme. Not only was "the workplace was turned into the main axis of organization of social life ..." (Ciechocińska, 1993, p.32) but "the company became an important element of [the resident's] sense of place" (Domański, 1992, p.357). In both material and ideological frames, work and the workplace shaped lives and the lives of communities. In Nowa Huta, sociological work from the 1960s and 70s stresses quite how important work was. Most of the town's residents were attracted to Nowa Huta in search of stability and work; employment under communism was largely secure and offered security of livelihood; the workplace and other labour institutions (Stenning, forthcoming) shaped not only work, but also lives beyond work, at home and in the town through their involvement in the fields of leisure, health care, education, consumption etc.; in Nowa Huta work as central, socially and financially.

The nature of work in Poland is very different today. The transformations since 1989 have radically restructured labour markets and employment conditions. At the most basic level, we have seen rising job loss and unemployment. It is estimated that six million jobs have been lost in east central Europe since the start of reforms (Akkoyunlu, 2001); two million of these lost jobs were Polish (Sztanderska and Piotrowski, 1999). As a result, unemployment in Poland has risen, after a decline in the mid 1990s, to 17.8%. This picture is worsened by the growing levels of long-term unemployment, that is unemployment stagnation. In 1995 37.5% of the unemployed had been out of work for over 12 months, by the year 2000 that had risen to 44.6%. Amongst women, 52.1% of the unemployed women have had no work for over 12 months. The impact of these unemployment levels is exacerbated by the loss of benefits. In 1990 79% of the registered unemployed had rights to benefit; this figure fell to just 20% in 2000. There is not only a gendering of unemployment, but also a generational issue. Across Poland, unemployment amongst 15-24 year olds stands at 34.1% (Behrens, 2001) and in some regions it exceeds 50%. Alongside this increase in unemployment, we have seen other forms of deactivation in the workforce, especially amongst women. This has taken the form of early retirement (there has been an increase of 1.2 million retirees between 1990 and 2000); a rise in disability pensioners (from 2.6m in 1990 to 3.5m in 1999); and a dramatic 'return to the home' amongst women.

For those left in the workforce, there have been qualitative shifts. We have seen rising private sector employment (1989 44% of total employment; 1997 68.2%; 2000 72.5%); the growth of service sector employment and decline of manufacturing (loss of 500,000 manufacturing jobs; 50% of mass lay-offs); an increase in part-time work (13.6% of total employment; 18.9% amongst women [Akkoyunlu, 2001]); a rapid spread in plural working (i.e. more and more people are doing more than one job); the loss of the social wage (i.e. the other benefits earned by workers under socialism) and new working conditions (including new management models, flexible working, industrial relations etc. [Hardy and Stenning, 2002]).

In what ways then has this reshaped the lives of Nowa Huta's residents?

In the experience of my interviewees, in earlier times work was readily available. Every workplace was actively recruiting and it was possible not only to move jobs as and when you wanted, but also to choose between a range of opportunities. Even at the local scale, especially in a locality developing as rapidly as Nowa Huta the range of opportunities was immense; moving jobs certainly didn't imply a relocation. Within the community, familial, social and institutional connections made job mobility even easier. There was a series of structured steps from school, to technical college to an apprenticeship in the steelworks, or other related workplace. Each of these institutions was supported by the steelworks to shape the path of occupational progression. Everyone had to work, and there was work for everyone. Once at work, most were guaranteed particularly good working conditions which spilled over into their home lives. Work in Nowa Huta gave 'the possibility of a start in life', homes, access to a network of social and cultural facilities and wages high enough to provide for a family.

Such stories contrast markedly with the experience of today. Now even those with qualifications and experience have difficulty finding work; competition for each vacancy is extraordinary and the promises of new opportunities rarely pay off. Current job offers demand different skills to those required of earlier generations - often IT and languages - and in contrast to earlier times when new workers were trained up in new professions, few employers will take on anyone needing retraining. The retraining schemes offered by government programmes and by former employers don't deliver what they promise. The demands of adaptation are often

beyond older people and those with lower levels of education, the very groups hit hardest by redundancy and unemployment. Few employees want to take on older workers. There's a clear feeling that labour resources and skills are simply being wasted, that the professional experience people do have is being denigrated.

The situation hardly seems any better for young people. All my older interviewees, who had been trained and started their careers under socialism, bemoaned the opportunities available for young Poles today, contrasting the lack of opportunity today with the breadth of possibilities before. Just one or two of the younger people interviewed felt they had any chance of finding the kind of work they wanted and were qualified for.

For those in work too, life doesn't seem to be as good as it was. This is especially the case for steelworkers, who benefited from the particular generosity of the socialist regime. Things are even worse in many of new developing sectors of the economy (see also Hardy and Stenning, 2002) where wages barely allow for supporting a family. Managing to keep hold of work is also becoming more difficult. Many stressed that they never felt insecure in their work previously. A considerable number of my interviewees had all worked in their jobs for more than 20 years, some of them for still longer before they recently retired. Despite the wealth of opportunities available, most were happy to stay where they were once they had founded work which suited.

This security of employment contrasts markedly with experiences today. When asked if they felt secure in their jobs, most interviewees replied that they did not, and many went on to stress that as far as they knew, few people felt secure. There were concerns about the seemingly endless restructuring of workplaces, even in the few cases when individuals expressed security. Others explained how the novelty of their jobs, since they'd had to re-train in new occupations recently, caused them to feel uncertain about their ability to hold on to their jobs. The immediate and constant feelings of insecurity, day by day, hour by hour, were common themes in interviews.

Others drew attention to the more general situation, to the worsening position of the wider economy, both regionally and nationally. The wider contexts of employment insecurity linked through to wider implications. As the discussion above highlighted, employment is not simply something which keeps people busy eight hours a day and pays a personal wage. Employment insecurity signifies a wider economic and social insecurity which touches not only individuals, but their families and communities.

In a community like Nowa Huta, founded on a single workplace, constructed with the workplace and developed with the expansion of the steelworks (Stenning, 2000), the connections between social lives and work lives are tight. Many of my interviewees, especially those from older generations, explicitly discussed how interpersonal relations had changed as a result of the ongoing restructuring. Younger people also identified a shift, related not only to the specific conditions of a particular workplace, but more generally to the changing nature, and demands, of work. The pressures of work haven't simply worn away wider social lives, but have also worked to the detriment of family relations.

There are a number of related issues here. We can see the growing pressure of time and the perceived necessity to commit, quantitatively, more and more of your life to work, in order to keep hold of your job and fight off the competition. The time and effort committed to work reduces the time available to maintain lives outside work, in the home and with friends. But in addition to this quantitative domination of life by work, we can see that growing insecurity is impacting negatively on the quality of social relationships. Trust is being broken down as

people become more protective of their jobs and, in the face of redundancy, workers feel they have to compete for the remaining jobs. These frailties extend beyond the workplace, into friendships built up at work, and also into other relationships. Interviewees argued that people were more sociable before, and that it's rising poverty which leads people to live more isolated lives. Not only can people rarely afford to go out to pubs or the cinema, for example, but more and more people are ashamed of their poverty (raising questions about their ability to construct new identities on the basis of consumption).

It's often noted that under communism lives and life choices were shaped almost entirely by a person's, or community's, employment status. After communism, work still seems to dominate lives but in different ways.

The consequences of job loss for the community, as I have already suggested, relate to an accumulation of individual experiences and a set of wider set of spatial outcomes. In Nowa Huta, interviewees drew attention to rising crime and declining personal safety, a loss of direction and listlessness amongst the younger generation, evident signs of poverty, an ever growing population without the means for family survival, increased alcoholism, a more general demoralisation within the community and a marked withdrawal to private spheres, away from activity and action in the public sphere. The loss of access to subsidised social and cultural facilities and to housing has consequent impacts on the attractiveness of the community and its perceptions from outside. Positive impacts, such as wider consumer choice, were largely experience individually, rather than communally.

More generally there is a despondency about the course of restructuring. A number of interviewees recognised that the intention had been to improve people's standards of living, to renew Nowa Huta's (and Poland's) social and economic fabric, and wanted to believe that this was possible. But few could see positive examples of renewal. Few of the positive impacts of labour market change seemed to be experienced in Nowa Huta.