

SOCIO-ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY IN THE FACE OF THE SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION IN POLAND

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Poland has been going through the process of a fundamental systemic transformation initiated in 1989 after the collapse of the Communist regime. Since that time the state has regained its sovereignty, the political, government and self-government systems have been made democratic, a market economy has started to develop, and society has been reasserting its rights. A new order, political, economic and social, is being shaped. There have also been changes in Poland's international environment and geopolitical situation as a result of the disintegration of the USSR into several new states and the unification of Germany.

New chances have arisen, but old threats have remained and new ones have appeared. The old ones are principally civilisation and technological backwardness and the ecological threat (Chojnicki 1990). The new ones at home include the growing dissatisfaction of the populace led to expect a rapid fulfilment of their material aspirations, rising unemployment, and social pathologies; abroad, a new threat is the lack of stabilisation of the neighbouring countries of Eastern Europe. I disregard global threats here, like the demographic explosion, for instance.

Thus, Poland faces old and new challenges: the heritage of civilisation lag and environmental threats to be overcome, the shaping of an efficiently operating state and economy, and full stabilisation. These are conditions of ensuring society national security and welfare, as well as making it possible for Poland to join the European Community (Chojnicki, Czyż, Parysek 1995).

The transformation of Poland's political and economic systems as well as social changes entailed by it cause science to face new challenges and

look for solutions of several crucial problems (Sadowski 1991, Kukliński 1993). Socio-economic geography must contribute its share as well.

The aim of this paper is to present the possibilities and tasks of socio-economic geography in solving problems generated by the processes of change. I hope that this will contribute to a better understanding of the character and role of Polish socio-economic geography. This does not mean that the issues of socio-economic geography are solely determined by 'social needs'. As any science, it has 'an internal development logic' of its own defined by cognitive needs and theoretical-methodological progress in geography itself and in the closest related sciences. So, before we reflect on what tasks face socio-economic geography in connection with the changes taking place in Poland recently, let us briefly discuss its character, situation and methodological model.

The changes occurring in Poland make the country come closer to the Western capitalist model of the economy and the democratic system. In this situation it is worth considering development tendencies prevailing in geography in highly advanced countries as possible guidelines for the reconstruction of socio-economic geography in Poland. Its development cannot take place in isolation from world geography.

1. THE CHARACTER, SITUATION AND METHODOLOGICAL MODEL OF POLISH SOCIO-ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

Socio-economic geography is concerned with a broadly understood social sphere, i.e. with economic, political, cultural, demographic and settlement phenomena in a spatial, a regional and an ecological approach. Along with physical geography, it is the leading geographical discipline in Poland. Although the division into socio-economic and physical geography is fundamental, because it is underlain by the irreconcilable differences between the natural and the social sphere, Polish geographers treat their science as a whole. Its organisational unity is reflected in the existence of institutes or faculties of geography at universities, academic schools and the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Polish socio-economic geography has a considerable research potential. Out of 800 scientists working in geography, 220 of whom are professors, about 40% are socio-economic geographers.

The approach to socio-economic reality in Polish socio-economic geography is predominantly a spatial-structural one, with a focus on locational, regional and local, and to a lesser degree ecological, factors as they change

over time. In recent years, however, the systems approach has been gaining prominence, which makes it possible to integrate various socio-economic phenomena, distinguish different levels of socio-systemic complexity, and more fully account for the developmental aspect.

In turn, the dominant methodological model in Polish socio-economic geography is one based on scientific rigour that has formed in empirical sciences, heavily relying on the principles of the objectivisation of results as well as on modelling and quantitative methods. While drawing criticism, especially for its focus on technique, this way of pursuing socio-economic geography protected it against Marxist dogmatism in the postwar period (Chojnicki 1989).

Thus, socio-economic geography has developed largely as a scientific discipline supplying solid knowledge of a descriptive-interpretive kind and socially engaged in the sense that its results can provide a basis for practical solutions. To what extent these results have been used correctly, e.g. in long-term national and local planning, is another matter.

Some influence on Polish socio-economic geography is exerted by humanistic conceptions. Especially significant are those aspects which concern the normative-evaluating perspective and social consciousness. In turn, the impact of the so-called radical direction has been negligible in terms of results, because it mostly relies on Marxist assumptions which are rejected, especially in their dogmatic version.

As to the influence of postmodernism, the direction in Anglo-American geography that is so fashionable today, the interest of Polish socio-economic geography has been limited to a preliminary analysis of post-Fordist conceptions. I believe the idea is not, to account for postmodernism as a philosophical direction in geography, but to understand the nature of changes occurring in the modern world. They may well turn out to be fundamental (Chojnicki 1995).

These issues, however, are not considered in any depth, especially in their philosophical aspects, unlike in Anglo-Saxon geography where various conceptions of understanding and pursuing this discipline are constantly under discussion.

It seems that socio-economic geography in Poland should undergo problem changes rather than philosophical-methodological ones. The uncritical adoption of some fashionable directions, e.g. radicalism or postmodernism, as the basis of scientific activity may lead to geographical inquiry being reduced to reflections of a moralist-reformer, may deprive it of its

cognitive-informative value, and may give socio-economic geography the character, not so much of a discipline that studies reality, but one that interprets it on the basis of ideological preferences, as is partly the case in sociology.

Let us now pass on to the presentation of problems and tasks facing Polish socio-economic geography in connection with the changes occurring in Poland. We shall distinguish four groups of problems corresponding to the main sections of socio-economic geography: (1) economic geography, (2) political geography, (3) social geography, and (4) population and settlement geography. This sequence reflects the force of their response to the changes.

2. PROBLEMS OF ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

In the postwar period, when a centrally controlled, command economy called a socialist economy was being developed in Poland, programmes of the development of geography gave prominence to economic issues. Attempts were even made to reduce the whole of human geography to them and to subordinate it to problems of economic planning and the building of socialism. This programme, however, has never been implemented.

Without going into details of the evolution of economic geography in Poland, let us observe that, unlike in the USSR and other Communist countries, economic-geographical research was not based on dogmatic Marxism, and made use of and developed theoretical conceptions of world geography (Chojnicki 1991). Neither was it subordinate to the principles and goals of economic policy set by central planners. It relied on its own assumptions and expressed a critical attitude towards some directions of economic development and location policy. This often made the results of studies and experts' opinions be disregarded in decision-making processes.

The socio-economic research conducted in the field of spatial planning at the national and regional levels focused mainly on: (1) the state of spatial development as well as conditions and factors of its change, (2) forecasts of spatial patterns, (3) the evaluation of spatial development targets and projects, and (4) the revision of spatial and regional development plans.

In the 1970s and 1980s studies of the greatest cognitive and practical importance in the field of economic geography were those concerning:

- (1) the structure and level of regional development, regional dependences, and the typology of economic regions;

- (2) the spatial distribution of the processes of industrialisation and changes that took place under their influence in the country's spatial structure, especially in poorly developed regions. Especially relevant was the issue of the means of equalising disparities in the development of backward regions;
- (3) the spatial structure of agricultural land uses and the efficiency of agricultural land management based on a spatial typology of farming; and
- (4) the spatial diversification of the process of the tertiary sector development and its role in activating the economy.

Less attention was given to the problems of transport and communication geography (Chojnicki 1980).

However, as the socio-economic crisis started to grow from the mid-1970s onwards, economic geography became a helpless record-keeper of negative phenomena. This caused interest in its problems to ebb and flow to social matters, and hence to social geography.

The systemic changes initiated in 1989 and the introduction of a market economy have given a new impetus to economic geography, opened up new possibilities and set new tasks. The key problem of the transformation has become the effective shaping of conditions for economic development and the restructuring of the economy. As a result, the following changes can be observed to have occurred recently:

- (1) There are more studies of the transformation of the economy and more wide-ranging analyses of the state of manufacturing and services, both at the regional and local levels.
- (2) Dominant in those studies, however, are descriptive reports or at most diagnoses of the state of the economy in specific time periods. There is no deeper reflection on the mechanisms and directions of change, and a scarcity of attempts at formulating theoretical concepts concerning the nature and spatial consequences of the transformation. An exception is the theory of the spatial self-organisation of the economy.
- (3) There is also a predominance of studies covering the country as a whole by voivodeships and based largely on the available statistical data (e.g., numerous analyses of privatisation, the influx of foreign capital, or firms established by Poles living abroad); what is missing are in-depth analyses of the transformation of concrete regions that might be of practical significance.

(4) There is a transition from the study of visible structures to that of invisible ones.

Economic geography, however, can play a much more important role in solving problems of determinants of economic development and the transformation of the economy. Its research can reveal: 1) the actual state of the processes of transformation in the particular sectors of the economy (industry, agriculture, transport and services) in the spatial aspect, and 2) those determinants of change that have not been considered in the programmes of reforms, either because of their regional or extra-economic (social, ecological, etc.) character.

Economic geography does not aspire to formulate programmes of economic development and restructuring, but its inquiry can help revise and correct them to fit actual regional and local conditions and limitations.

What are, then, the tasks of economic geography in the processes of change occurring in Poland? We should focus on the following problems:

1. To the fore come studies of spatial differences in, and the regional character and results of, the restructuring of industrial and agricultural production. The pertinent issues include:
 - (a) the character, depth and regional and local consequences of the crisis of the traditional industries (especially the machine-building and armaments industries) and agriculture (especially state farms);
 - (b) regional differences in the adaptation of various industries to the operation of the market economy and the change of foreign markets;
 - (c) spatial differences in the transformation of the forms of ownership, especially in the privatisation of state-run industry and farms;
 - (d) changes in the size structure of manufacturing enterprises and the formation of industrial corporations; and
 - (e) the emergence of new forms of the spatial organisation of economic activity (industrial networks, technological parks, strategic alliances, etc.).
2. A second important research field embraces factors activating economic development at the regional and local levels, namely:
 - (a) spatial differences in the technological, social and institutional environments in which enterprises operate, as well as their business environments;

- (b) the spatial diffusion of technological innovations and the impact of new technology and telecommunications on spatial differences in economic development;
 - (c) the regional structure of domestic and foreign investments; and
 - (d) the attractiveness of towns for investment.
3. A third group of problems includes the formation of the capital market and the impact of the financial system on the spatial structure of the economy.
 4. Finally, awaiting researchers' attention are new economic links, especially with the neighbouring countries, the economic performance of frontier regions, as well as the consequences of the international division of labour and the place of Poland and its regions within it.

Naturally, this set of problems is far from exhaustive, but it shows the new tendencies. When solving these problems we should consider and make use of the new conceptions of socio-economic processes and structures that have developed recently in the societies and economies of advanced countries. They include the post-Fordist model of flexible manufacturing connected with the concept of postmodernisation, the theories of regulation, of product life cycle, of industrial metabolism, and several other.

3. PROBLEMS OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

Political geography used to develop fairly independently from economic geography, although recently political, economic and social issues often meet.

Political geography is concerned with the spatial aspects of political activity, especially with the operation of the state in its internal and external, or international, aspects. The state is perceived here as a concrete territorial political system, and not merely as a legal entity.

In the postwar period Poland's Communist rulers propagated, and tried to impose on political geography, an ideological conception of its research scope in an orthodox Marxist approach. This direction, flourishing mainly in the USSR and those countries in which the Marxist orthodoxy dominated, used the Marxist doctrine to analyse the place and role of the state in the political structure of the world in terms of the development and change of the so-called capitalist and socialist formations. Attention focused mainly on changes on the political map of the world and those activities which helped expand 'the socialist camp' and its political power, apologetically hailing

those changes as progressive. Political geography pursued in the Western countries was exposed as representing imperialist interests. The low analytical level and the excessive use of the propaganda idiom made its informative, cognitive and especially explanatory functions negligible.

This was the reason why Polish geographers tended to avoid political-geographic issues, particularly in their international aspect. They did not want to conduct research and publish works which would not present an objective picture of the world and promote Poland's true interests. With the emergence of the new political conditions, political-geographic inquiry should be taken up anew; both in its internal and external aspects.

Studies carried out in the domain of political geography in the recent years have concentrated on the internal rather than international aspect. They embraced:

- (1) the structure and territorial-administrative division of Poland, especially in the context of the anticipated reform of the division;
- (2) electoral geography, i.e. analyses of the results of national and local elections and attempts at their interpretation; and
- (3) ethnic minorities and their political importance.

In the external aspect, the research only covered the creation of Euroregions, political changes in East-Central Europe, as well as border changes and ethnic transformations.

A further effective development of political geography in Poland requires both, the continuation of studies taken up in the recent years and the tackling of new problems involving external, international aspects. Studies could cover the following topics:

- (1) the international political system and its change, as well as its state and regional structures;
- (2) political conflicts at the world and European scales over economic, ethnic and religious issues;
- (3) the formation of supra- and international political bodies and organisations, in particular the European Union;
- (4) the political role of supra-national corporations;
- (5) the role and place of Poland and its European links, in particular its links with the European Community; and
- (6) selected countries of special interest to Poland, especially its neighbours.

4. PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

Problems of social geography are more difficult to distinguish than those of economic geography, because it has no clearly defined research field. It is a subject of much debate, also in Polish geography. It covers the study of relations among, and structure and behaviour of, social groups, as well as the study of the social environment of human activity and cultural products in a spatial approach.

The subject matter of social geography is not a uniform set of problems. It is not easy to distinguish it sharply from sociological and cultural issues. The specificity of geographical inquiry consists in approaching social phenomena in terms of spatial differences, or at a regional or local scale. This domain started to arouse interest in the 1970s, and it has been growing steadily ever since in the Western countries, especially the USA. This may be connected with the appearance or intensification of such phenomena as sharp social and ethnic conflicts in big cities, rising unemployment, the women's movement, social pathology, AIDS, and other.

This was also the time when Polish geographers engaged in social geography by taking into account social aspects of population studies and urban ecology. A discussion was also begun about the conception and scope of social geography.

The close of the 1970s in Poland was a period of social unrest, strikes and anti-government action. Apart from their political aspect, they were the society's response to clearly deteriorating living conditions, living standards, and health status (a decline in life expectancy). This brought about an upsurge of interest in social geography, especially in such matters as:

- (1) the study of the standards and conditions of living at a variety of spatial scales,
- (2) the study of regional differences in the health status and health service,
- (3) the study of the rate and factors of crime in the pattern of cities and regions, and
- (4) the study of changes in social consciousness.

Social problems have taken on even more importance in the conditions of reconstruction and the formation of the new socio-economic system in Poland, but their effective solution in terms of geography requires a further elaboration of their theoretical and methodological foundations.

With the transformation of the social system there have appeared positive phenomena, like an increase in the level of social self-organisation (self-

government, many social organisations taking care of old and poor people), but negative phenomena have not disappeared. Among the 'old' ones are a further decline in the society's health status and a crisis in the state health service, as well as an increase in the level of social pathology, in particular crime and drug-taking. Among 'new' ones the primary one is unemployment, which is clearly connected with the change of the economic system and with the economic crisis.

Thus, the following problems should be investigated within the existing directions of inquiry:

- (1) within the standard-of-living studies, differences in the incomes of various social groups in a regional approach, and the structure of needs and expenditure in a regional approach;
- (2) within the health-status studies, the diffusion of civilisation diseases;
- (3) within the social-pathology studies, the influence of the opening of the boundaries and population movements on the crime rate and the organisational efficiency of state institutions in a regional approach; and
- (4) within the regional-consciousness studies, preferences and evaluations of democratisation processes and the economic reform in a regional approach.

New directions include:

- (1) the study of unemployment and the labour market in Poland in a regional and a local approach as well as factors creating and reducing them; the study of the impact of unemployment on the formation of a new attitude towards work and on strikes;
- (2) the study of change in the cultural level of society and in the system of social values in a regional approach; and
- (3) the study of the role of local communities and their organisations in the grass-roots creation of socio-economic development.

Little interest is aroused by the problems of gender geography and feminism, which are hot issues with American geographers.

Problems of the geography of culture are of little interest in Poland, too. An exception is the issue of cultural space as well as places of religious cult and pilgrimages. This situation should change; there are such important matters waiting to be dealt with as, e.g., cultural differences at a regional and local scale, and how they are affected by education, mass media and other factors.

5. PROBLEMS OF POPULATION AND SETTLEMENT GEOGRAPHY

Population and settlement geography is the most traditional component of human geography, and in its classic version also one with the most stable subject matter. It is also one that has seen the greatest theoretical progress in the form of Christaller's central place theory, economic base theory and city-forming functions, settlement net theory, and others.

While relying heavily on the theoretical and methodological concepts of world geography, Polish population and settlement geography could record its own original achievements, which were used in the study and practice of spatial planning. They helped restrict the arbitrary approach to planning and played a major part in the formation of theoretical and empirical assumptions of settlement net planning in Poland.

Modern issues in population and settlement geography are largely the continuation of the old, classical ones: urbanisation, the spatial structure of towns, urban systems, and the population and migration structure. The development of issues of population and settlement geography has

The development of issues of population and settlement geography has always paralleled the research carried out in European and American population studies concentrated on the spatial distribution of the population geography, with perhaps a slight delay caused by the adaptation of methods of mathematical modelling.

Population studies concentrated on the spatial distribution of the population. Settlement studies were mainly concerned with:

- (1) the processes of urbanisation and spatial-functional transformations of towns;

Settlement studies were mainly concerned with:

- (1) the processes of urbanisation and spatial-functional transformations of towns;
- (2) the character and formation of large urban-industrial agglomerations;
- (3) the internal spatial and functional structure of towns, also in an ecological approach, and housing;
- (4) the origin and evolution of rural settlement and its morphology; and
- (5) the character and model of Poland's settlement net and settlement system.

There was a far-reaching interdependence between the studies of spatial population patterns and changes in the settlement system. They were also fairly closely connected with spatial and regional planning.

In its further development, this field of enquiry should continue the above directions of study, and show more resistance to the pressure of transformations occurring in Poland than is displayed by either economic or political geography.

However, the economic crisis, especially the crisis in many branches of industrial production as well as the lack of new industrial investments creating job opportunities at a substantial scale, has severely restricted population mobility, in particular the rural-urban migration, and frozen the settlement system in Poland. What it has activated, in turn, are spontaneous population and structural-settlement processes which require studies of their spatial distribution and regional factors responsible for them, such as:

- (1) growing demographic problems connected with the change in economic conditions and technological progress, especially the advancing process of the ageing of the population;
- (2) the formation of 'the new proletariat', urban and rural, as a result of changes in the class structure and the impoverishment of workers of some industries;
- (3) the increasingly anarchic processes of urbanisation;
- (4) the development of the tertiary sector in big cities associated with the collapse of some industries;
- (5) de-industrialisation of small and medium-sized towns and an increase in their central functions;
- (6) the breakdown of housing and the housing market; and
- (7) migration and population movement from the former USSR area.

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Socio-economic geography in Poland has not been restricted to cognitive studies; it has also sought to solve practical problems, especially in spatial and regional planning. At present, when a new socio-economic order is emerging, it faces new tasks and problems. We hope that working them out will not only help understand the changes, but also make corrections in them and formulate alternative solutions.

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