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Victor Karady\*

## ‘The class that would not perish’

Polish nobility and the conversion of capital in modern times

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Longina Jakubowska, *Patrons of History. Nobility, Capital and Political Transitions in Poland* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 248 p., ill.).

This is an exceptionally rich report and in-depth socio-anthropological analysis of an exceptional historic process: the fairly successful preservation and/or conversion since the pre-partition period in the eighteenth century up to the post-Communist transition of historically established forms of collective capital, that with which the Polish nobility has been endowed. Capital is understood here in Bourdieu’s sense. Jakubowska subtly resorts to Bourdieu’s theoretical scheme to show that a measure of survival of the prestige, the authority and to some extent the public influence if not always the power and even less the economic possessions of the nobility across various regimes of partial (started in the inter-war years) or complete forceful *déclassement* (under Nazi occupation and Communism) depended on a number of collective givens. These are liable to be interpreted in terms of social capital (international networks, inter-class or noble kinship relations), cultural capital (linguistic competences, managerial skills, manners, ‘proprieties’, artistic ‘taste’), educational capital (certified ‘good’ schooling, agricultural training, particular knowhow for raising horses or hunting) or purely symbolical capital (official rank in noble hierarchies, surnames carrying reference to former power positions of family members or to achievements of ancestors). To the latter one can add the historic association of the nobility with the Catholic Church, representing (at least since the nineteenth century) the central institutional agency of Polish nationhood, as well as its well established record in maintaining the state before the partition and fighting for the independence of the country afterwards.

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\* Central European University, Budapest – karadyv@ceu.hu.

As to the probably unique nature of the study object, one has to remember that the Polish nobility (together with their counterparts in Hungary and Croatia) has been in demographic terms by far the largest feudal and post-feudal landed ruling class on the European continent. Part of its historic impact and eventual success may derive from its mere size. This is perhaps a decisive reason why it could carry almost alone, with occasional allies of intellectual commoners, urban patricians, including some ethnic aliens (in the absence of sizeable peasant participation) the burden of national insurrections, movements and activities against occupying powers throughout the partition period. All this can contribute to explain that while elsewhere even after effective restoration following revolutionary periods (like in France) or else in East Central Europe after the passage of Communism, members of the nobility could by no means regain or maintain their earlier social leverage, this appears not quite so in Poland. The significant public weight and in some circumstances even the political clout of the nobility has to a degree proven to resist brutal expropriations implemented first by the German and Soviet occupiers after 1939 as well as the devastating vicissitudes of the ensuing Communist reign of nearly half a century. In several post-Communist regimes aristocratic or even princely names surface in new government circles, but unlike in Poland one cannot capitalise on such resources as a rule to make a career in politics or civil service. Nor do gentry clusters attempt to reconstruct, like in contemporary Poland, exclusive forms of institutional separateness from the rank and file populace, independently from their ideological orientation or political options proper, as presented in the last chapter of the book. The 'endurance of prestige' could be ascribed to patterns of privately managed transmission of gentry values and self-perceptions, the latter enjoying continued wide range recognition in public opinion. This is explained, among other things, by the less totalitarian nature of Polish Communism, at least after 1956, which has thus apparently proved to be less destructive of the private sphere than other Sovietised societies.

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In a substantial first chapter carrying an expressive title ('The class that would not perish'), the author offers a preliminary summary of her fundamental theses. A set of cautiously chosen pieces of circumstantial evidence is offered about reasons why and how the gentry could maintain its uncontested domination on Polish society till the end of the old regime, with repercussions much beyond, up to the present. In the absence of an ethnic Polish bourgeoisie, the project of the nation state was formulated and represented by the nobility. Hence the historicised myth of gentry patriotism could serve as a special form of collective capital. This could be converted progressively into new types of economic and cultural assets securing continued political leadership positions for the gentry. The underlying values, practices, beliefs and attitudes – the 'shared meanings' – the author focuses upon are best amenable to the ethnographic method, resorting essentially to the life stories of gentry descendants as recorded in oral interviews. Not less than 30 of these are listed in the annexe. They were facilitated by the subsistence of dense gentry networks and the persistence of a 'deep genealogical memory', a particular cultural property of the class. The author accounts at length how critically her oral material as a source of information must have been exploited, less for writing the history of the gentry over subsequent changes of political regimes, but more for the study of continuities in its habitus and its conversion strategies under historical duress.

The historically accumulated assets of the class are presented in the second chapter. This is the place to report on the historiography of facts related to the collective strength of the *szlachta* (the legally privileged noble class) as against the weak royal power in pre-partition times, the process of relative disempowering in the nineteenth century, especially following the insurrections against tsarist Russia, the patterns of economic and educational mobility modifying gentry life strategies while preserving class boundaries against social others (be they Jews or middle class commoners) as well as many cultural markers and aspects of lifestyle, centred in the manor. In spite of a modest land reform in 1925 the gentry could keep in inter-war society most of its landed properties, very strong positions in the political elite (cc. 50%) as well as a large share in the professional intelligentsia (cc. 35%).

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The presentation of narratives of 'the rift of the second world war' fills most of the third chapter. It accounts of the contrasting style of the occupying powers with the stereotypical opposition, set in stone in the memory of victimised families, of the by far more 'civilised' behaviour of the *Wehrmacht* and the anarchical indiscipline of the Soviets, Bolshevik indoctrination notwithstanding. While the former appeared to be much more efficiently murderous with their well organised procedures, the gentry would often be treated by their *Junker* equivalents of the German officer corps in a quasi gentlemanly fashion, the soldiers of the Red Army were fixed in gentry memory as an Asian mob proper. Their actions were typified in rape, plunder and the irrational destruction of castles and mansions of the 'class enemy'. Among Germans honourable partners and Hitlerite savages remained separated, while the Soviets were rather unanimously conceptualised as an army rabble. War memories, an extensive part of the interviews, polarised the East-West opposition which became dominant in the following decades. It was coupled with the ideological antagonism between Communism, regularly associated with ethnic aliens (above all Jews) and the national middle class, as represented by the gentry with its self-image of the uttermost patriotic victims and martyrs of both the occupation and the new regime.

The veritable civil war in the years that followed the victory of the Red Army and the ensuing radical land reform, dismantling the economic basis of the gentry (presented in chapter 4), could only confirm this self-image. Eviction of the gentry was more brutal in the eastern territories where an ethnically non-Polish peasantry was facing gentry landlords condemned to expropriation. In the newly recovered (in fact occupied) former German territories on the contrary, vacated by the native population, members of the gentry, like other settlers arriving in masses, could more easily find means of living. All the more because the families of expropriated landlords were not entitled to live in the county of their earlier estates. But survival strategies mostly implied various forms of radical professional reconversion. First 'living out of suitcases' meant the acceptance of petty jobs, among them transportation and trade, a historically derogatory occupation for the gentry. Reconversion was objectively facilitated by the severe lack of competent managerial staff in all branches of the economy, the professions and the administration, due to the horrendous losses registered in the whole educated middle class, much exceeding even that of the whole population (some 20-25 %). Thanks to its agricultural and otherwise professional expertise, members of the gentry could be inserted rather easily in the transitory framework of the new sovietised

state. The need for the reconstruction of the country from the horrible war damages gave this integration a patriotic legitimacy. All the more so since the new regime itself capitalised heavily on a refurbished nationalist discourse even at the expense of official Marxism in the first years of its establishment. Emigration remained of course another option, adopted by many from the gentry, especially those having family members or other connections with already established Polish circles in the West.

The political trial of the gentry (chapter 5) opened in most concrete terms immediately after the transition years, ending in 1947. Its explicit aim was to disparage and bring discredit upon the gentry with accusations of collaboration with the Nazi occupant. The indictment sometimes misfired on account of manipulated evidence. It was regularly accompanied by other forms of social proscription and debasement together with the public stigmatisation of the nobility orchestrated by Party organs. The Stalinist educational policy comprised in every sovietised society affirmative actions to promote lower class recruitment of university clientele and staff at the expense of the former ruling strata. In Poland however, this did not involve barring gentry offspring from advanced studies, in spite of officially claimed and effectively implemented discriminatory practices of student selection.

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In the ensuing decades of 'real socialism', in the course of the destalinisation process, accelerated after 1956 (target of the important chapter 6), survivors of the nobility even succeeded to develop private strategies of individual self-assertion. Not only did the cultural capital of the class continue to be instrumental in allowing its competent sons and daughters to fill the gaps in the management of the socialist economy and administration in times of severe shortage of reliable leadership staff. The potency of the image of the aristocracy, conveyed by mere family names, exerted its magic to exploit dissimulated forms of socialist snobbery for the promotion of those holding historic surnames. While bad 'class origins' were officially harmful for incumbents of public positions, administrative repression and harshness against the earlier ruling class could be dodged by various schemes (like the slight 'de-gentrification' of surnames). In socialist Poland – another local exception in the 'socialist camp' – there also existed niches of relative exemption from state control in academe, institutions of the Catholic Church or even in not fully nationalised industries. Collective distinction could also be expressed and cultivated in lifestyle, manners and social togetherness, appreciated and indeed sometimes even taken over (like hunting) by members of the *nomenklatura*. If the former internal hierarchies of the gentry tended to disappear under state socialism, class boundaries against outsiders were efficiently conserved. The self-perception of the gentry as carrier of the national heritage could be preserved and persecutions suffered under Communism reinterpreted as proofs of patriotic sacrifice. Eventually, as the author stresses in her conclusion, the 'gentry model' of public behaviour and historical memory not only persisted across Communism, but came to be adopted by the new ruling strata emerging from the lower classes and the party bureaucracy.

This has led, as exemplified in the last chapter of the book, to the ultimate 'endurance of gentry prestige', due above all to the fairly significant reassemblage of capital that the Communist regime had dismantled. Though descendants of the nobility had to accept, facing consensual refusal, that reprivatization after 1989 would not comprise full scale restitution of immobile properties (except for the Church and surviving Jews), they rather chose

to shift their demand for the compensation of losses to the entitlement to less material sorts of satisfaction. The social magic of aristocratic names could henceforth be freely and largely capitalised upon. The trust in the patriotic commitment of the gentry helped several descendents of the class to occupy major public positions in politics or the administration. The gathering of remnants of the class in exclusive institutional networks, associations or lobbies help to enforce elements of its distinguished self-perception connected to the cult of the family, life cycle rituals, balls, the publicity of its proclaimed ethos of public service, philanthropy, charity and mutual aid. Apparently, the old type cultural capital could thus be successfully revitalised in renovated cultural assets still vested in surnames, distinctive education and the reformulation of the discourse on the gentry as representative of the national heritage.

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The book is a major achievement and a demonstration of how social anthropology can clarify intricacies of large scale societal transformations as related to a historical collective over several global regime changes. The study is full of fine tuned analyses of individual and local examples, cases and events, exemplifying the main thesis of the author about the exceptionality of the Polish nobility as a class capable of keeping up – however differently – the status of ‘patrons of history’ in their national community in utterly different times.

Still, a number of problematic issues can be raised about the ‘grand narrative’ deriving from the study. Though the author takes pains to formulate her thesis with much caution, it is doubtful whether it can be plainly sustained that ‘members of the nobility reconverted their inherited symbolic capital into active economic and cultural capital’ as initially announced in the project (p. 5). The trouble is that the presented analyses concern selected individuals only and there are no data on the class as a whole (based, for example, on prosopographical listings and analyses). This possibly indicts the limitations of a purely anthropological approach. It does not seem by any means that the gentry as such would have been re-empowered as a ruling class in post-Communist Poland. The conversion of symbolic into cultural capital is also not demonstrated in general terms. There is no information whatsoever cited on gentry enrolment into higher educational institutions before (when relevant sources could have been easily tapped), during or after Communism. (Hungarian data on similar issues show patterns of extreme conservatism and indeed a relative deficit of the nobility’s educational investments, as compared for example with those of local ethnic aliens, above all Jews and Germans.) If attention is occasionally paid in the study to gentry class boundaries, notably as to the peasantry and – more rarely – to Jews, involving the stress on the association with Catholicism, notably with its most conservative versions, no serious exploration of its historical implications is attempted. Though instances of the expression of gentry judeophobia are mentioned, this remains (not quite exceptionally) like a black spot in the book. An ambiguous footnote on Jan Gross’s book (who ‘*claimed that Polish peasants participated in the extermination of Jews*’ – my italics) apropos the Jedwabne massacre (p. 91) does not alleviate misgivings in this respect. The survival or reconstruction of the patriotic image of the nobility under Communism fails to be convincing, given the absence of concrete references to the gentry’s attitudes and share in crucial post-1945 junctures of national history. It would have been important to offer a minimum of information of the gentry’s (probably high level) participation in the anti-Communist hostilities during the military power strug-

gle after the war (1945-1947) – involving among other things numerous acts of anti-Jewish terror, like the murderous Kielce pogrom. No allusion is made, except a doubtful general observation related to the gentry's political passivity, to the behaviour of descendents of the nobility in the 1956 social movements, in the formation of the ultra-nationalist 'partisan' faction of the party under general Moczar leading to the judeophobic drive of 1968, indeed in support of Solidarnosc in the 1980s (except for a short note on general Jaruzelsky, an offspring of the landed gentry turned Communist). There again one is probably faced here with the limits of the ethnographic method employed.

The study is worded in highly elaborate, elegant scholarly English. The bibliography is rich with mostly Polish and English references, but French ones (and one Italian) are equally listed, covering largely the problem area of the fate of the nobility in neighbouring and other countries in the twentieth century (though no reference can be found on Hungary or Croatia, the most important counter-examples in this respect). The total lack of Germanic sources is all the more notable. This is indeed a somewhat puzzling deficiency from a scholar academically active in the Netherlands and making a point of the contribution of the post-war colonisation of formerly German historic territories (close to one third of the country after 1945) to the socio-professional reconversion of her target group. Important pieces of topical bibliography are obviously missing here. The same can apply, maybe, to the absence of Russian, Bielorrussian and Ukrainian sources.

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I have found only one seriously misspelt title (Bourdieu's *The State Nobility*) in the bibliography, while – maybe coincidentally – the thematically essential work of the late master's closest collaborator, Monique de Saint Martin, appears awkwardly hidden behind and properly mixed up with another title. For that matter, the not less important and relatively recent collection of studies on contemporary European nobilities due to the same authorities is absent from the bibliography.<sup>1</sup> Also in this context, given the sound methodological preoccupation of the author with her autobiographical sources, I would have liked to see references to Bourdieu's seminal remarks about the 'biographical illusion'.<sup>2</sup>

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1 M. de Saint Martin (ed.), *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties de 1880 à nos jours* (Parijs, 2007).

2 *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, LXII-LXIII (1986) 69-72.



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