

WIESŁAW BANACH

## CULTURAL BARRIERS IN THE MOULDING OF PROSOCIAL ATTITUDES AMONG PARTICIPANTS IN ECONOMIC LIFE IN POLAND

### I. OPENING REMARKS

One of the ideas dominating for over two decades in the social sciences is based on the assumption of culture—as broadly understood—having a significant impact on economic, political and social life. This is not solely an echo of heightened interest in theses proclaimed at the turn of the twentieth century by Max Weber, who made the case for the significance of connections between the economy and religious practices. Neither does the contemporary renaissance of this idea seem to be a manifestation of a fashion or momentary enchantment with a ‘cultural explanation’, but is rather a view, worthy of recognition, according to which *culture is significant*, and even that *culture determines almost everything*. What is more, for many researchers the issue is not ‘whether’ such fields of culture as religion, morality, customs and traditions, or values, norms of conduct and mentality contribute to the success of specific nations, countries or regions, but rather ‘how’ this contribution occurs, and how it is specifically manifested. They believe that a certain kind of ‘equipping’ of individuals, functioning in contemporary social sciences under the concepts of cultural capital or social capital, largely determines success and failure in constructing a civil society. Within the latter in particular one sees an inclination towards prosocial behaviour and attitudes, as well as a republican concern for the so-called common good. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his famous book *Democracy in America* published in 1835, already indicated the non-economic sources of success in the American political and economic system.<sup>1</sup> In his opinion, this success was determined by the Americans’ inclination for the ‘grass-roots’ creation of a number of institutions, organisations and associations that were to become the foundation of democratic and free-market principles. American mentality and cultural adaptation to democracy and the free market constituted America’s specific capital and at the same time its greatest ‘resource’.

One should, however, bear in mind that culture can be both a factor stimulating economic growth, promoting prosocial or republican attitudes, as well

---

\* Translation of the paper into English has been financed by the Minister of Science and Higher Education as part of agreement no. 541/P-DUN/2016. Translated by Jonathan Weber. (Editor's note.)

<sup>1</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *O demokracji w Ameryce [Democracy in America]*, trans. M. Król, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1976.

as a source of various deficits and limitations that constitute a major obstacle to achieving this. Such conclusions were reached by, inter alios, Edward Banfield in his research into the significance of culture for the political, social and economic condition of specific countries.<sup>2</sup> His findings regarding the sources of backwardness and poverty in southern Italy from research conducted after World War II and described in his work *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* constitute for many inspiration and a starting point in the subject of—to use Peter Berger’s definition—the *study of economic culture*.<sup>3</sup>

This explains why the goal of this article is to indicate those elements fitting within broadly-understood culture that might constitute various kinds of hindrance and obstacle to the effective moulding of prosocial attitudes among participants of social and economic life. The examples cited here apply above all to the reality in Poland, and focus on demonstrating that the most constitutive components of domestic mentality shaped in the distant and more recent past constitute today a significant burden for members of a significant portion of our society. The antisocial attitudes—entrenched in history—of egoism, self-interest and acquired passivity, and the lack of motivation and initiative comprise a specific set of behaviours and models of conduct. As such it would seem essential for deliberations over corporate social responsibility to include reflection over the historical and cultural context, as well as the resultant (in Poland’s case at least) significant hindrances or even restrictions in the creating and retaining of principles desirable in social and economic life. By adopting this assumption at the outset, one may posit the thesis that measures within the scope of teaching the principles of business ethics or promoting standards of corporate social responsibility (CSR) will not bring fully satisfactory effects until they consciously take local realities into account. Disregarding the local historical and cultural conditioning must lead such reflection to findings of little significance, as a result of which it will only be possible to formulate incomprehensible demands appealing to a social vacuum.

## II. IN SEARCH OF THE SOURCES OF POLISH MENTALITY

For a dozen years at least now—and both at universities and in the columns of the printed press—there has been lively discussion regarding the components of Polish mentality, components which, to put things as generally as possible, are not conducive to the dissemination of prosocial attitudes in our country. Faced with their absence, it would be hard to talk about looking after the so-called common good, about the developing of republican virtues, or the building of a civil society. As a rule the period of the Polish People’s Republic is blamed with responsibility for various types of Polish deficit, fault and other

<sup>2</sup> E.C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, Illinois: The Free Press Glencoe, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> The reader may find more on the approach described here e.g. in the class work by L.E. Harrison, S.P. Huntington (eds.), *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, New York: Basic Books 2000.

undesirable traits, although many authors argue that one should look back much earlier to find their causes, meaning to the spreading and domination of the type of feudal manor specific to the eastern European socioeconomic system<sup>4</sup> that began in the sixteenth century. To illustrate the reality of the socialist workplace it would be worth citing a little-known work by Krystyna Daszkiewicz, from 1974, entitled *Traktat o złej robocie* [*Treatise on Poor Work*]. In order to reflect the character and disposition of the typical worker of the PPR years, the author uses the concept of the juggler. The juggler's traits include conformism, careerism, hypocrisy, deception, manipulation, cronyism, guardedness, procrastination, shirking responsibility, opportunism and self-interest, but above all an absence not only of concern for the common good, but of any interest in it whatsoever. In her opinion, their attitude is best described as ostensible action. This, as Daszkiewicz argues, is: 'an extremely characteristic element of the juggler's tactics. He practises it alongside his authentic, actual work, or instead of it'<sup>5</sup>. This ostensibility, like the camouflage and passivity of the serf at a 16<sup>th</sup>-century manor, is manifested—among other things—in feigning work, in backing out, avoiding responsibility, and also in the creation of ostensible documentation and reporting.

Life in the reality of the People's Republic provided examples at every step of not only ostensible action, but also numerous other types of absurdity. One could cite here, for example, a fragment of one of the books by Leopold Tyrmand, who in describing how work was then organised wrote with a certain dose of irony that:

there is always an enormous crowd of people in communist offices, the sole task of each being to seal an envelope previously addressed by somebody else who received it from a special messenger from the person who wrote the letter. Of course every one of these employees receives a salary on which it is impossible to survive, [...] consequently they achieve perfect artistry in indifference towards their work, and perform it with admirable carelessness, hence when the said letter, en route from one desk to the next, falls on the floor, nobody bends down to pick it up. This makes it necessary to employ new labour, whose task will be to pick up letters that have fallen to the floor, and if necessary [...] to pass them on – and such a process of multiplying economic forces is called sprouting [...].<sup>6</sup>

Although one could of course give multiple examples of such situations, it is worth emphasising that almost all illustrate the way in which an individual who has come to live in a system of enslavement copes with its reality. For those brought up in conditions of an absence of sovereignty, the only effective method of functioning tolerably is frequently by adopting a streetwise atti-

---

<sup>4</sup> There is of course insufficient room here for even a cursory account of the various positions or arguments given by these authors. However, it is worth mentioning the sociological research conducted in Polish organisations (businesses, offices, places of learning, etc.) by professor Janusz Hryniewicz. In his opinion, the PPR constituted but a manifestation of a kind of renaissance of the feudal manor mentality, while in the realities of the socialist workplace one can quite easily find such manor analogies in the organisational and institutional approaches, habits, behaviours and attitudes typical of it. See J. Hryniewicz, *Polityczny i kulturowy kontekst rozwoju gospodarczego*, Scholar, Warsaw 2004; idem, *Stosunki pracy w polskich organizacjach*, Warsaw: Scholar, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> K. Daszkiewicz, *Traktat o złej robocie*, Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1974: 29–30.

<sup>6</sup> L. Tyrmand, *Cywilizacja komunizmu*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo MG, 2013: 35.

tude. Somebody taking such a stance towards the world around plays a kind of game with the authorities—irrespective of whether this means the rulers of the manor, of the collective farm, of the socialist workplace or rulers of the state: a game of acquiring as many benefits for oneself as possible, while incurring the lowest possible costs. Tatiana Zasławska—a Russian researcher of Soviet and post-Soviet mentality—used to define this anthropological type with the term *cunning slave* (лукавый раб).

The attitudes and behavioural models prevailing in the past that shaped this cunning type of person, as somebody privatising profits and socialising costs, did not disappear when communism collapsed. And this can hardly come as a surprise, considering that in periods of breakthrough or transformation areas of culture (such as traditions, values and customs), and particularly the sphere of mentality, undergo the slowest change.<sup>7</sup> This was also the case with the Polish transformations post 1989. As such, we can talk here about a particular continuity, for the understanding of which the concept of *homo sovieticus* comes in useful. This was introduced in the late 1980s by the Russia logician, philosopher and writer, and at the same time a dissident, Alexander Zinoviev.<sup>8</sup> In his opinion *homo sovieticus* is a cynic with no concern for any higher values whatsoever and caring only about their own—egoistically understood—interest. They have mastered moral rhetoric to perfection, using it instrumentally to justify their immoral misdeeds. This is a person capable of psychological, intellectual and moral pliability and managing to adjust in their flexibility to any situation, to adapt to any conditions. The common good does not exist for them at all, and they only bother with public matters when this might result in some kind of concrete benefit for them. Thus we have here an anthropological type devoid of republican traits, and as such completely useless for building a civil society. This person is characterised by the deficits and faults currently troubling Polish social

<sup>7</sup> It seems legitimate to cite the metaphor of the ‘three clocks’ recalled by Piotr Sztompka, which was once used by Ralf Darhendorf to portray the specifics of the political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe: ‘Darhendorf draws attention to the inevitability of an uneven pace of reform at the different levels of social life. The clock of the lawyers and politicians, who are capable of passing new constitutions and legislation almost in the course of a single night, beats the fastest. That of the economist, who needs more time to lead the manually steered planned economy into the furrows of the free market, beats much slower. The “clock of civil society”, which measures the speed of change in cultural heritage, invisible to the naked eye, beats the slowest’. Cf. P. Sztompka, *Zaufanie*, Kraków: Znak, 2007: 44.

<sup>8</sup> A. Zinoviev, *Homo sovieticus*, trans. S. Deja, Warsaw: Horyzont, 1987. Worth pointing out here is that this term became widespread in Poland a few years later thanks to Jerzy Turowicz and Father Józef Tischner. They were lamenting the attitude of Poles disappointed with the changes in the political system, manifested in the presidential elections in 1990, when they rejected Tadeusz Mazowiecki in favour of Stan Tymiński. These two intellectuals argued then that *homo sovieticus* was somebody who was the product of a totalitarian system, who in their helplessness was unable to find their place and adapt to life in the free market conditions. Such a person is incapacitated, mentally enslaved, devoid of the spirit of initiative and skill of critical thinking. Because of their attitude of entitlement and expectation towards the state, expected to look after their fortunes, they constitute a significant obstacle in the process of the country’s transformation. An article by Jerzy Turowicz may be the most representative of this manner of perceiving *homo sovieticus*: Pamięć i rodowód (*Tygodnik Powszechny* 1993, no. 45).

life; among these, one could mention insufficient concern for and frequently even interest in public affairs, lost community instincts, ubiquitous self-interestedness, ethical relativism and consumptionism. These are only a few examples of the developments that constitute significant components of the post-communist landscape. Despite the undeniable successes of the Polish political transformation and the positive economic and social metamorphoses that occurred as a result, one can hardly not notice numerous elements constituting a legacy of communist mentality.

### III. THE LEGACY OF COMMUNISM AND TEACHING OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In regard to the above findings, the issues of possible utilisation of corporate social responsibility for changing this state of affairs seem quite obvious. Although there is insufficient space here for deliberating on this matter in detail, posing a few questions seems legitimate. Above all, the issue of teaching Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is undoubtedly crucial. Meaning in what manner are its principles to be popularised among participants of business life in order for them to have a chance of bringing about the desired outcome? One should focus here—firstly—on defining ways of communicating the benefits drawn from the ethical and responsible running of business, and—secondly—on reasoning that should be effective and appeal to the largest possible group of people connected with the economy as broadly understood and their circles. One should also resolve how the issue of CSR appears in the light of the assumption adopted here of the crucial significance of culture for the picture of economic, political and social life? To be somewhat more precise, in connection with the findings regarding the necessity of taking the cultural context into account in the social sciences, one should pose the question as to how, within the framework of corporate social responsibility, should one formulate expectations towards participants in economic life—expectations that apply to adherence to the principles and standards of honest and responsible business? Therefore the issue here is what of importance may be contributed by the arguments of authors fitting within the trend in question—known in literature in English under the name *cultural turn*—to reflection regarding business ethics and, in particular, CSR. What, in the context of ‘cultural explanation’ should be taken into account when formulating demands in corporate social responsibility, in order for them to be effective and not just end up in a void?

It would seem that in order for any programmes at all in business ethics or CSR to have a chance of being effective they have to take the historical and cultural context into account. In other words, the condition for their postulates not to constitute nothing but empty words and phrases devoid of meaning—evoking at the most but a shrug or cynical grin—is their elementary conformity with social and economic practice. If they are not to be no more than just a manifestation of ostensible action they must arise from the mentality of the group or community to which they are addressed, or correspond with it. If they

are not to be but a modernised version of the ubiquitous slogans and mottos about socialistic work rivalry and the like so ubiquitous in the years of the Polish People's Republic, then they should take into account the realities of social and economic life. In contemporary Poland this shape—as this paper strives to demonstrate—is a derivative or even consequence of models of economic culture that have formed during the process of our history.

Let us evoke at this moment if only one aspect of this historical and cultural baggage that should be taken into consideration in modern attempts at shaping prosocial attitudes. It so happens that the type of culture dominating in Polish economic life is called, in source literature, anti-developmental. One of its characteristic features is the existence of 'two worlds' within the sphere of values, worlds that in no way are correlated with one another, and which even rule each other out. This is written about by Mariano Grondona in his *A Cultural Typology of Economic Development*:

In development-favorable cultures, there is widespread compliance with laws and norms that are not totally exigent and are therefore realizable. Moral law and social reality virtually coincide. In development-resistant cultures, on the other hand, there are two worlds that are out of touch with each other. One is the exalted world of the highest standards and the other is the real world of furtive immorality and generalized hypocrisy. The law is a remote, utopian ideal that does little more than express what people might in theory prefer, whereas the real world, effectively out of touch with *all* law, operates under the law of the jungle, the law of the cleverest or the strongest, a world of foxes and lions disguised as lambs.<sup>9</sup>

What conclusions can one draw from reading this fragment in regard to promoting prosocial attitudes and the effective teaching of business ethics and social responsibility? An unquestionable conclusion is the necessity for promoting such standards, norms or legislation that can be respected not only in theory, but also executed in the practise of economic life by its ordinary participants. They should be addressed not to moral rigorists or those so saintly they recognise no compromise, but to ordinary mortals limited by numerous deficits and faults. It is precisely in this sense that they cannot be—as Grondona insists—'excessively demanding and, as a result, [un-] enforceable'. In addition moral activities that are promoted cannot condemn anybody to failure or being a victim. After all, one cannot expect people to go against their own better judgment, and in particular against their own interests. It would be hard to demand people to behave honestly but to their own detriment, and to adopt prosocial attitudes against their own beliefs and views. That would not speak well of the ethical system furthering such attitudes, but would also most probably be the cause of its impracticality and ineffectiveness. What is more, it would seem that one should not be afraid of adopting a strategy of telling people about their benefits and that, in the long run, ethical action will quite simply pay off for them. An orientation encouraging people to undertake measures in keeping with the demands of ethics must contain some kind of promise of a reward for them. Those conducting responsible business must

---

<sup>9</sup> M. Grondona, *A cultural typology of economic development*, in: L.E. Harrison, S.P. Huntington (eds.), *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, New York: Basic Books 2000: 48.

see real and practical benefits resulting from such conduct. In other words, it is about the designing of rules to economic life and promoting them in such a way for the people participating to find it worthwhile abiding by these rules, in other words in a moral fashion. The benefit could, for example be the common good, understood as honest and transparent rules to the market game, and adherence to honest standards of business.

#### IV. ENDING

In summarising the issues tacked in this paper, one should point out the following conditions that would seem essential for fulfilling for the effective shaping of prosocial attitudes among participants of economic life in Poland within the framework of teaching business ethics, and above all, corporate social responsibility. Firstly, the historical and cultural context of the economic activity should be taken into account, meaning that it is conducted in the specific reality of a specific place and time. Every activity, and in particular economic activity, is to a certain degree determined by its surroundings, and in particular by the kind of 'climate' that these surroundings create for business. Secondly, the strategy of getting through effectively to people in business as outlined above requires the adoption of a defined position. One should certainly avoid playing the role of a preacher accepting no objections, proclaiming his teachings in a tone of uncompromising sermons, at the same time stigmatising the guilty or pointing out suspects. Dialogue should be the way for getting through to business circles as well as students and future business people, dialogue conducted with them, persuading them consistently of the long-term benefits of co-participation in honest competition. Only during this is it possible to convincingly and thereby effectively indicate the benefits obtained from investing in moral behaviour. Success may be the outcome not so much of grand projects for dramatic transformation and deep reform or moral renewal, but rather of the systematic and gradual referring to the practical aspects of concrete issues or undertakings. To close this paper, it would be worth citing Jacek Sójka, who in indicating the conditions for effective educational measures addressed to people of business writes as follows:

For many years I have been striving to spread the truth that the morality of entrepreneurs is a reflection of the morality of the entire population. As such we have no right to talk of business ethics in such a manner that would suggest that this group of people requires particular stigmatisation or particular control. The task of business ethics is not to stigmatise people of business, and cannot be used for such.<sup>10</sup>

*Wiesław Banach*  
*Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań*  
*banach@amu.edu.pl*

---

<sup>10</sup> J. Sójka, Enron—historia z morałem, in: idem (ed.), *Etyka biznesu „po Enronie”*, Poznań: Humaniora, 2005: 240–241.

CULTURAL BARRIERS IN THE MOULDING OF PROSOCIAL ATTITUDES  
AMONG PARTICIPANTS IN ECONOMIC LIFE IN POLAND

Summary

The aim of the article is to point to those elements of broadly understood culture that may constitute various obstacles and barriers to the effective development of prosocial attitudes among participants of Polish economic life. The author assumes that the satisfactory education of appropriate civic attitudes—among present and future students, staff and managers, and even consumers and customers—cannot be detached from the cultural context. In other words, if the educational activities are to produce the desired result, they cannot abstain from the values, norms, attitudes or behavioural patterns prevailing in a given society. It is important to realise that changes in the sphere of culture are quite limited, and always stretched out in time.

The paper attempts to point to the most characteristic features of Polish mentality, grounded in particular in the last decades, that constitute a burdensome legacy of communism. It was then that the antisocial attitudes of selfishness, self-interest, learned passivity, and a lack of motivation or initiative emerged. The author of the paper emphasises that both as a society and its individual members, we have been unable to break free of this legacy. It seems therefore that modern educational activities will not produce satisfactory results until we get rid of this redundant ballast.