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Professional Biographies in Transition. Comparing Experiences of Workers and Business People in Post-Communist Poland

In the paper, we will present the consequences of post-communist transition in Poland for biographies of the representatives of two social milieus – workers and business people. If the former ones are often perceived as “defeated class”, marginalized, and fragmented in the course of transformation (cf. Gilejko, 2001), the latter ones are those who, in new conditions, managed to raise their individual social position associated with prestige and incomes. In our presentation, we will focus on comparing the experiences of changes in the sphere of work, which have been encountered by the two groups. Drawing attention on that sphere, comes from the conviction that work has a great importance for social differentiation of people, as well as for the persistence and transformation of their individual and group identities, both before and after 1989 (cf. Hughes, 1958). The theoretical assumption, crucial for our paper, says that the changes in the sphere of work were double-track. On the one hand, there has been a change of structural frames and institutional “game rules” on the labour market and on the level of reconstructed, privatized and newborn companies (cf. Drozdowski, 2002). On the other hand, the new action strategies of social actors have been developed, which combine the experiences from the period of state socialism with the experiences of new capitalist social reality (cf. Mach, 1998). In the paper, two levels of change will be analyzed – their reciprocal relations and their consequences for the course of institutional changes in Poland after the fall of socialist system.

In the first part of our presentation, on the basis of comparative analysis of workers’ and business people’s life stories, we will define crucial analytical categories describing and explaining similarities and differences in work experiences during the socialist period and after 1989. We will demonstrate that these experiences contain both universal elements, typical of both investigated social milieus, and elements specific for each of them. We will also point at the diversity in individuals’ perception of changes in regard to selected characteristic of their work place, their professional

position within the organizational hierarchy and their professional career (cf. Hughes, 1997); as well as the amount and character of the social, economic and cultural resources they possess (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). In the second part of the paper there will be discussion of the consequences of the transformed work experience on everyday life of workers and business people. In conclusion we will try to define potential consequences of the changes in perception and individual actions undertaken in the sphere of work after 1989, on the course of system transformation on macrostructural level.

The empirical basis of the paper is the analysis of 200 biographical interviews made with workers and business people in Silesia, Poland, during two independent doctoral research projects¹. The methodological frames of both projects are made by grounded theory procedures (cf. Glaser, Strauss, 1967; Glaser 1978), biographical method and narrative interview by Fritz Schuetze (cf. Schuetze, 1983, 1984) and his collaborators (cf. Hermanns, 1987).

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¹ Markieta Domecka, "Business Milieu in Post Communist Poland. Biographies, Capital and Habitus of the People Forming Business Milieu in Silesia, Poland".

Adam Mrozowski, "Workers Strategies of Adaptation in the Course of Systemic Change. An Empirical Study on Working-Class Milieus in Silesia Region (in Poland)". Both PhD projects are prepared at Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) and University of Wrocław (Poland).