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**QUESTIONS ON A HUMAN BEING POSED ON THE GROUNDS
OF GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT
OF SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION**

Abstract: in the paper I present the changes in geographical education in context of political, economic and social transitions during the period of transformation. Teachers, who experienced consequences of those transitions, bring some elements of postcommunist past to their ways of thinking and acting in neoliberal present times. Coexistence of two axio-normative systems implies uncertainty and tension in teachers' didactic and educational work, as well as force them to take up the difficult decisions. From the moral perspective those decisions focus on choosing between the ideal of perfection and rightness or the personality perfection. The teachers bear the long-term responsibility in front of themselves and their students for the choices they made on the field of teaching geography.

Key words: "the shining through" in the geographical education, axio-normative systems in teaching geography, teacher's responsibility

INTRODUCTION

School geography per se would be helpless if it were not for the activity pursued on its grounds undertaken by interested students, teachers, methodology councillors, instructors, educational decision-makers and other people. On the one hand, with their conduct they determine the shape and quality of geographical education, yet, on the other hand, they themselves fall subject to its influence and to the diktat of the surrounding world, with personal development being only seldom initiated by them. At school, the multiplicity of impulses for change are most strongly implied by systems reforms, and in a lesser degree and extent – by didactic innovations. Nonetheless, they both can be (and

in fact are) a source of commands to a specific manner of teaching and upbringing. However, these commands on many occasions prove contrary and mutually exclusive, as a result of which teachers cooperating with students are forced to select some forms of conduct and to reject others. What rationale do they follow when making their choices? What kind of quandaries do they experience with regard to those choices?

The search for answers to these questions has been supported by the grounded theory based on the premises of symbolic interactionism (Charmaz 2009; Pilch, Bauman 2001). Its application makes it possible to derive a (mid-range) theory grounded on empiricism, which is created as a result of recognising categories, their properties and discovering interconnections between them (Glaser, Strauss 2009; Kostera 2003). In the study presented here, this method was used with a view to recognising tensions experienced by students and teachers (including methodology councillors, school headmasters) when teaching-and/or-learning geography, of which they spoke throughout in-depth interviews. An analysis of their statements made it possible (along the lines of the grounded theory) to: (a) describe some of these experiences, (b) indicate the reasons for their occurrence, (c) delineate consequences of quandaries experienced throughout teaching- and/or upbringing-related work conducted on the grounds of geographical education considered in the context of systems transformation (Konecki 2000).

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGES

The current nature of geographical education has been most strongly affected by the reform of the educational system performed in 1989. Not insignificant for the ways and effects of experiencing it, particularly by teachers, was the fact that it had been preceded by the communist system being overthrown and the political arena being changed, and the economic reform having been conducted. In Poland the transformation was progressing in a peculiar way, that is “in portions”, which consisted in the fact that over many years its subsequent stages of dramatic change were separated from each other by periods of relative stability (Szkudlarek 2004). That finally led to a surprisingly smooth change of the political system, symbolised by the debate at the Round Table. Then, a compromise had been possible to be reached, which made it possible for both sides to accept the rules of democratisation of the social system and rebuilding of the state’s economic system.

That smoothly progressing process of transformation, which was continuing without the communist past being spectacularly broken with, was received by

teachers and construed as legitimisation of coexistence of “old” and “new” values and principles, which might drive their conduct in their daily lives. Accordingly, to the set of formerly internalised life qualities they added new ones, which, apart from benefits, brought some previously unknown threats, such as: (a) the shaking of the certainty of employment till the retirement age; (b) an increasingly common multiplicity of cultures at schools and its acceptance found hard by everyone; (c) a dynamic diversification of life conditions of students’ families leading to them becoming polarised, (d) a relative degradation of prestige of some environments, e.g. that of teachers, and the resulting difficulties in solving upbringing problems; (e) a review of events from the past consisting not only in settling accounts with it, but also in the new way of interpreting it (Sztompka 2002). The political, economic and social changes were shortly accompanied by educational changes generated by the reform of educational system. It introduced new values and norms, but not new individuals; thus the same teachers remained, whilst their inertia caused particular consequences for the teaching and upbringing (described in greater detail below). One of them is a diversified and – in the reformers’ opinion – markedly slow pace of implementing changes in the sphere of teaching-studying. This makes today’s lessons of geography differ only slightly from those than before the reform. It is, therefore, considered that there is a need for a change of generation. This, however, progresses very slowly. There is, thus, a need for time.

The time is a social one and it is subject to different rules from the physical time, as it is created by individuals from the society, who can manage and shape it according to their needs (Koczanowicz 2009). In the nineties of the last century one such need of educational decision-makers as well as of teachers was to introduce into education such reforms that at the same time would preserve everything they had been attached to and has regarded as the most valuable qualities of the teaching and upbringing that was passing away into the past. As a result, there occurred at schools and has been operating till today a peculiar dualism of two co-existing cultures: “the old” post-communist one and “the new” liberal culture. Consequently, on many different strata of education the past is entwined with the liberal present which cannot release it of the post-communist element (Koczanowicz 2009). Co-existing on many levels, they create a number of oppositions. Poised between them, students and teachers experience contradictions, tensions and dilemmas, which are implied by the simultaneous functioning within two axio-normative systems: the seemingly foregone communism and the present neoliberalism, from behind which there still shine through deeply rooted values and norms of the times passed (Hessen 1997). This “shining through” is revealed particularly in their attitudes to ministerial decrees pertaining to geographical education, in their approach to students and the methods of working with them. Their existence can thus be defined as “being between”:

between the culture supposedly outdated but still living in the people's personalities and the present culture, one after the reform which – despite being closed formally – in the minds and actions still appears incomplete.

SYMPTOMS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE COEXISTENCE OF TWO AXIO-NORMATIVE SYSTEMS IN GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION

“The shining through” of the rules typical of the seemingly passed period is reflected in a varying degree of actions undertaken by geography teachers. Among them, there are those that profess the past and cannot accept the educational realities after the reform. One of them is referred to in the following way by a lyceum student: *He is an elderly sir, well truly elderly as he should now be long retired, but he is pulling through his last year. I think he shouldn't be a teacher altogether. He can't conduct a lesson, has his own defined "truths", that is when some topic is being done, he has his own opinion on the matter. And he won't change it and runs lesson according to his own considerations. And it is all that matters to him. We're not using textbooks, because what basically counts is what he thinks about things.*

A group that is far larger than the last one is created by the so-called “teachers falling between two stools”, i.e. those that try to combine in their instruction and education the old values and norms with the ones imposed nowadays. Their approach to change is reflected by the following statement of a (LO and G¹) teacher: *All of it [that is the reform, ministerial regulations, guidelines from the regional school boards] is happening on a live body and one needs to cope with it. We're no longer concerned by this. Further trials and ideas of the ministry and the regional and central examination boards do not even work any more. We're doing our job and life will check out on what the minister says, 'cause what he says is later transformed and differently executed. Besides, everything may change, including the new minister, and this is also possible. The instability of authorities causes constant quakes.*

The presentation of teachers' working styles is closed by the following description of a young woman teacher formulated by a (LO) student: *She is very young, a sort of byte-like. We don't do anything at lessons. It doesn't help us in our maturity exams. Those who pass go under the desk and she does tasks with them, so a few of them sit together at a lesson, whilst we sit and do nothing. We tell her that we're tired after a PE lesson and won't manage to do them. We make*

¹ The abbreviations stand for the following: LO – lyceum; G – gimnasium (junior high school).

up all kinds of things. Then she says she'll work with the "matura"-oriented ones and solves with them some exercises and similar things, trial tests, and what they need for the maturity exam. And we do nothing, just keep chatting; not loud, but you can hear a slight whisper in the classroom; not loud, because not far from us there's a lesson going on. It can be concluded from this statement (and this presumption is supported by observation and in-depth interview) that the times of the 1989 turn are foreign to both of them, they a part of history, and that is why they are driven by didactic values of the present day such as a high grade on the maturity exam and the resulting promise of later benefits: comfortable life, high social status etc. With the hope to attain these benefits in the future, only those students study geography today that choose it as their maturity exam subject, whereas the other students, who choose to sit a maturity exam in history, social science ("WOS") or other subjects, are not interested in geography. They claim that it does not pay to learn what they will not be examined in. As it can be seen, their conduct is met with teachers' understanding.

The contemporary young generation has no difficulty accepting the neoliberal reality. Most frequently, these people have not experienced communism directly, whilst the picture conveyed to them by people that witnessed those times is one created in their minds as essentially negative, one of the reality built on the hypocrisy of authorities, central rule of the party, mendacious propaganda. In their view, people led their sad and monotonous lives in two different "worlds": one of them was formed by equally grey, dirty and neglected districts made of block of flats, and the other one – the showy production establishments and monumental public-use facilities (Mularczyk, Angiel 2010). The more repulsive the past appears to them, the more willingly they open up to the "blessings" of the present day; whilst teachers, particularly those that hold a longer record of a school teacher's work, are incapable of freeing themselves from memories of the past, primarily because they memorised it as a period of modest existence, but one that warranted employment, predictability of events, certainty of tomorrow. Their memories are full of nostalgia, whilst the present day they see as its complete opposition, one that they fear. Their perception of contemporary education and the reality surrounding it differs from the way this reality is experienced by their pupils. As a consequence, there appears a dangerous – because destructive for interpersonal relationships – division between "us" and "them". It is articulated in lack of understanding for rationale presented, in intolerance of otherness, in mutual distrust and in disorientation experienced particularly by educators. Their confusion and uncertainty with regard to issues underlying education are deepened by ministerial decrees, which are either inconsistent or, on other occasions, compliant with the idea of education supporting students in their all-embracing development. The ambiguities contained in these regulations are later reflected by everyday work of

teachers and learners, in their approach to each other, as well as their attitude to the subject. The said inconsistencies, frequently observed in practice, grow commonplace in the course of time. If not recognised, they evade critical diagnosis, and so can keep functioning safely, or even continue to develop. The examples quoted below do not constitute a complete set of elements which coexist and characterise neoliberalism and post-communism.

And so, first of all, there is a clear tendency derived from the communist past to centralise education, where the “decision-making centre” is the minister of education, which the regional school boards, beasted at a lower level and managing schools, remain subject to. The aim of centralised management of educational establishments is unification of education, which can be achieved by virtue of a universally binding core curriculum containing specific curriculum requirements compliant with examination requirements. The authority-and-knowledge dominance of the decision-making centre is strengthened by the centrally managed system of external assessment, which by means of examinations controls the compliance of the education really conducted at schools with requirements imposed from outside. And despite the vision of civic state being displayed (according to the ideology of neoliberalism) to teachers and students, and despite promises being made with regard to freedom in the choice of curriculum in the geographical domain as well as the choice of a textbook, in practice these pledges prove only seeming. The myth on delusive freedom is finally dispersed by standards of educational requirements, a type of pseudo-norm deforming the teaching and learning of geography, which acquires the form of educating “for the sake of” an exam or “through” a test. They are described by a *gimnazjum* headmaster in the following way: *As for us, this year we are having a system of monthly mock exams. Besides, month after month the students of junior high school and of the primary school too, write at one or two lessons. Everyone sits tests. The series of texts are prepared by an internal school commission for issues relating to examination. And, there is also a positive ascending tendency, the results grow better every next month. This test is identical as the one during the exam. There are even answer sheets. At the beginning of school year we have a real mock examination, along with the whole procedure, in a gym, everyone dressed up, with an examination board. This is meant as preparation for the exam, and then every month students write tests.*

Secondly, the attempts at unification are followed by efforts to fulfil populist promises of educational egalitarianism (“heritage” of the communism), an example of which is the maturity exam regarded as passed at the level of only thirty per cent. Despite such a low threshold, it is treated as a pass to college. However, this fact of higher education establishments becoming universally open to everyone, which is a symptom of implementing the idea of social equality into life, also bears negative implications such as the lowering of educa-

tion level and diploma inflation. Moreover, the averaging and equating of chances leads to the loss of “pearl-like high school and university students”, that is of those that in the “averaged” educational system stand no chance to develop their talents and knowledge accordingly to their needs and capabilities (Melosik 2008). This situation is reflected in the following statement of one student: *The worst thing is that in lyceum the students’ level is diversified and the first six months are spent equating their level, as some are at a higher lever, whilst others are not. So the former develop little or do not develop at all, as the teachers try to catch up so that everyone represents similar level. This happens at the expense of good students who unlearn to learn.* In L. Witkowski’s opinion (2008), currently in higher education there occurs “tumbling down on an inclined plane of the degradation of knowledge seen as redundant and not valuable enough in the spectacular society of consumerism”. But consumerism is a property of neoliberalism which coexists along with the efforts taken to attain socially desirable goods. In the event of demand for them exceeding supply – which is the case of diplomas of higher studies completion, there occurs rivalry in the attempts undertaken in order to obtain them. With regard to this, meritocratic rules of providing youth with equal educational prospects are introduced, with a stipulation that this equality holds only at the onset, as throughout the education their fate should be determined by themselves, by their “personal attributes”: intelligence, talents, gifts, motivation and “hard work”, which will inevitably lead to social diversification.

Despite teachers’ efforts with regard to solid preparation of students for examinations, that is for a test, and despite belief that standards should warrant the level of students’ education not being worse than that predicted by the norm (Niemierko 2002), examinations diversify children and youngsters. Starting with their early childhood, examinations indicate the development trajectory defined by the score obtained in a test; a well written test taken at the end of the sixth form is tantamount to the possibility of continuing education in a “good” *gimnazjum* from outside the region, an examination passed on its completion implies being admitted to a “good” lyceum, which is concluded with a maturity exam, which, in turn, constitutes a pass to “good” line of studies. *The examination outcome is particularly important for students from little towns and villages – says a (LO and G) geography teacher – because these students can only count on their learning. Only thanks to their studies they can spring up, stand out. They keep learning, run to private lessons, even those who cause problems to do with instruction and upbringing change during their last year. In large cities students have different prospects after they’ve completed secondary education, if they don’t go to that school or another, they’ll still go to a different one. So, a lot depends on how parents go about their position. And, if children from small localities don’t set off well, they’ll collapse.* As a result, they massively

attend private lessons, which are viewed as the primary source of knowledge by at least fifty per cent of students below 18 year olds; it is estimated that in large cities the percentage of students attending private lessons amounts to as much as 80–90 per cent (Rabij, Olwert 2008). Besides, there is a common belief – and it is strengthened and popularised by media – that school itself “is not sufficient to the solid preparation for examinations, [...] as the educational system in Poland is overloaded with information and there is no time left for instructing learners on how to put this knowledge into practice [...] An effective course then gives students what is missing at school – practice in what may come up at their examination and what examiners are sensitive about” (Rabij, Olwert 2008). Neither should parents and students then trust didactic abilities of their teachers, nor should they expect to be well prepared for the examination by them.

Thirdly, in the education colonised (in the spirit of neoliberalism) by the economics of education, the priorities are profitability and effectiveness of education. All those involved in subject themselves to these priorities and no-one poses the question as to why education should be economically profitable. The everyday school life is presented by a geography and natural science teacher in the following way: *The priority that is now imposed by authorities and that we need to settle [...] is the effectiveness of education. If it is a well perceived environment, that means that it works well, there is no other measure. And as for now, what is considered is the effectiveness in education reflected in examination results. It is very hard, however, to compare one school with another despite these outcomes. And yet they are compared, which favours competition among schools in their efforts to obtain a possibly high position on the ranking list. Information of the position of school proves particularly essential for students: As we were choosing the school after gymnasium, we looked for a good one. A good one was such that had good reputation among students, good results in the maturity-exam-oriented instruction, and how many students were admitted to colleges – says one lyceum female learner. And another one adds to this: The headmistress says: now keep on learning so that the school comes out well in the ranking list. Do your best to pass the maturity exam so that I don't need to be ashamed of you, so that we're not on the last position, but slightly higher [...] The higher the school is in a ranking list, the more pressure she puts on the students. The higher the level, the more is demanded and the teachers reiterate that we are to study, we must learn. In these schools teachers and students exert so much influence on each other that it is hard to bear, as they keep competing so hard. There is competition going on between everyone. When contending, they let themselves be driven and accept modification of their own needs, views, behaviours, accordingly to the intentions of manipulators (the times of communism are known to have been marked by lots of manipulation). As a result, there occur unethical forms of conduct, such as violence, deceit, prevarication*

(Ostrowska 2007). What is essential is that children and the youth do not only fall subject to manipulation, by they also reach for some inventive forms of manipulation, and they run games aimed at obtaining benefits – quickly, without effort, although not without a risk of defeat. Manipulation also manifests itself in the way of granting employment to teachers, since – as noted by a lyceum headmaster – *teachers who are placed on a higher position in the hierarchy of professional promotion are perceived negatively, because they are more costly to establishments running the education. It is, unfortunately, stark truth that when we are to employ a trainee teacher or, say, contractual one, such a teacher is taken on more willingly than a certified or nominated teacher.*

TEACHERS IN THE FACE OF MORAL DILEMMAS

When experiencing in instruction and upbringing the alternate influence of neoliberalism and postcommunism, teachers are forced to search for the answer to questions like: How to proceed? Should one's actions be driven by the idea of perfection or rather the idea of rightness (Herbart 2007). Teachers' attempts at personal perfection are important as the undertaking of morally proper actions (regardless of whether due to the moral rights or to people's happiness) is only possible when they are working on their moral character and strive to be decent (Chyrowicz 2008). They exercise virtues, which according to L. Kołakowski (1999a) are those "abilities that are morally valuable and that make an individual person better, as well as they make better relationships between people". The acquisition of virtues is taking place not through studies of moral values, but rather through imitation and socialisation, and references to role models (Audi 2004). That is why it is essential in education that it is conducted not only with reference to curriculum requirements or examination standards, but also, most importantly, to moral norms presented daily by teachers, who by their own personalities and their conduct attest that in life they follow moral values. Thanks to them, it becomes possible to rest geography on universal values, which M. Z. Pulinowa reminded of (1996). Such teachers appear in the following statement made by a lyceum student: *My teachers at lyceum are really fine. I enjoy listening to some of them presenting subject matter. Whether the teacher is passionate about his or her subject you can see in the way he addresses students. Most frequently they hold extensive knowledge, even if it does not encompass the whole range, it is huge in some issues in the subject. Even if working with students does not progress well, such teachers don't lose their enthusiasm. And they're able to stay in the class after the lesson and explain things to us. They are very good models of teachers. But not all of them are like this. They are not because in everyday school life both learners and teachers generally*

proceed along established patterns, according to imposed or negotiated rules, often thoughtlessly as the monotony of stable, predictable and safe everyday life does not call for any reflection on it or on oneself. They prefer to avoid situations calling for matters being settled, not to recognise tough problems, which according to J. Kostkiewicz (2008) “gives rise to the danger of all the structure of moral influences in education crumbling [...] [*and is related to*] along with the higher value becoming relative, in the context of which the questioning of the possibility of learning the truth has the basic significance”. Whereas the moral obligation is not to avoid difficult tasks pertaining to instruction, but to face them on a few strata simultaneously: (1) the private stratum encompassing moral choices; (2) the social stratum, requiring consideration of norms valid in the society and determined by them; (3) political stratum, as the sphere of obligations imposed by formal and legal systems (Koczanowicz 2009).

It is the teacher that bears responsibility for his or her decisions: its structure shows that “someone” is responsible “for something”, “in front of someone else”, “on the basis of something”. (Perkowska 2001). Although responsibility secures morality, nowadays it is understood by teachers in the following way: *Responsibility for effective preparation of students for the examination. It is important since parents, when looking for a school for their children, look at the examination results* (methodology advisor). As early as in the socialist part, responsibility for education was deformed; unfortunately, it has remained in the same form till today. Hence, despite it being widely spoken of, in practice teachers renounce it and leave it to the “norm-giver”, which, according to L. Kołakowski (1999b) is anonymous, impersonal and remote like stars. Now the responsibility for the fate of a young man partaking in education and upbringing may disperse with impunity in the cosmic boundlessness of institutional responsibility for education. The less supported by universal values this education, in turn, proves to be, the more open it becomes to utilitarianism with its characteristic weighing up of actions considered in terms of benefits, with the actions being aimed at a success, at grades and at accountability. Self-interestedness in learning is reflected in statements made by teenagers: *In the case of subjects that we chose for the maturity exam in lyceum, it was learning for the sake of a grade* (second year college student). *These subjects which after gimnasium are not taken into account in lyceum are treated by pupils lightly* (LO student). *It's bad that I only learn for the sake of a grade, in order to have peace, and I think it is disregarding a subject. For me, this could be even fine, because I study what for some reason is important to me. So, it is good for me, but bad for the teacher, as he can see that I'm not bothered by his remarks, I disregard them* (student).

Living constantly in the face of dilemmas relating to the need of making uncertain choices causes teachers to be disoriented, fatigued and professionally burnt out. Their job, which till not long ago had been their passion, turns

into a source of failure: *Now I'm retiring [deferred retirement] and I'm happy because I can work but I don't have to. First of all, I don't have to take part in these political games, which are still going on. [...]. Now that I'm leaving, I realise that everything that's there [in the classroom-lab] I created myself [...]. This is the way things go. But it's hard to say farewell – if everything I created from the scratch, all the sets I brought into the school on my own back* (LO-teacher). A markedly larger group is formed by teachers who stay at school and remain at the level of non-critical acceptance of educational everyday life, determined by the supremacy of economic aspects over self-examination, by proceedings driven by one's own benefits rather than the hierarchy of moral values. To them, society, citizenship and the common good do not matter, but it is the opposite: one's own interest, its proliferation and the victory in the ruthless struggle for survival. Pleasure is derived from consumption and to such a teacher it is the aim of existence (Potulicka 2010).

Finally, there arises one more question: the one concerning the future of geographical education. It will be shaped by today's pupils, so it will be the way they form it. However, in the way they will go about it there will shine over traces of the education and upbringing that are now conducted at schools and universities. This is why for the measures undertaken now in the domain of geographical education all the people involved bear responsibility.

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