

# A Generation of Hope and Risk

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## Eighteen-year-olds from the year 1989 tell their stories – and they are not all joy

For sociology, events are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning. A trajectory is a sequence of transitions, linking a person's different statuses across a certain time span. It stems from a continuous interplay of society and personality; of social constraints imposed by institutions and free choices made by individuals. Radical social changes alter the mix of the two, and produce new trajectories. The best sociological way of interpreting changes, therefore, is to investigate the trajectories they bring about – and the most recent

examples of radical changes are to be found in the post-1989 transformations in East and Central Europe.

### Litmus test of transformation

These transformations have impinged on the trajectories of all age cohorts. But which of the Polish cohorts has been influenced most, and best reflects the nature of our transformation? As we know, history-making events are most likely to affect persons in their late adolescence and early adulthood. Affected by social changes, these cohorts are most likely to become “generations” – groups of people who have not only lived through a particular time period together, but have also developed a shared consciousness and become capable of systematically confronting reality in a new way.

The study entitled “Generation of Historic Hope and Everyday Risk: Social Trajectories of Eighteen-Year-Olds from the Year 1989”, has built on this conceptual framework. It uses nationally representative data on the cohort of Poles born in 1971, who began their transition to adul-



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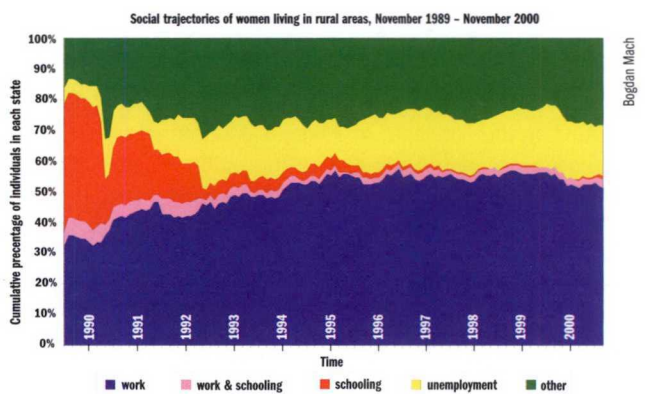
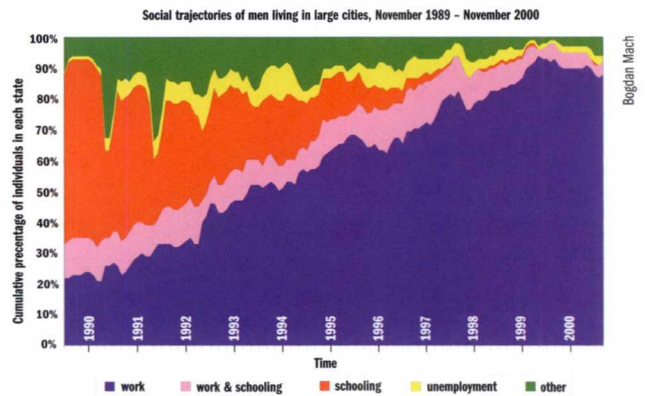
Education plays a very important role in the life of the young generation

thood in tandem with the changes of 1989. The main tenet of the study was that these individuals' trajectories represent the most powerful lens for focusing on the Polish transformation, as it "hit" them while they were entering the most vulnerable, formative phase of their lives. Facing everyday risks and uncertainty, they were at the same time a model generation with a historic hope for freedom, integrity, and prosperity - which the transformation was expected to bring. Fieldwork performed in November 2000 resulted in interviews with 755 such individuals, covering their full education, job, and unemployment trajectories as well as many other domains of life.

### How do young Poles cope?

How hard was the 1971 cohort "hit" by the transformation? How would it react to "when I was your age" talk from older persons? Obviously the reaction would depend on the latter's age. From comparisons done, we know that if the elder individual were of the '71ers' current age (around 29) in the last year of state socialism (1988), a typical response would be "when you were my age you had less education than I, yet your occupational and financial position was better than mine." Confronted with such a painful historical change, has the 1971 cohort evolved through the transformation into a "generation" with shared experiences, a shared consciousness, and a common vision of its role in the ongoing changes?

The answer reported by the study was "no" - and an important part of this answer is the substantial variation discovered among the '71ers with respect to the trajectories they have traveled. Gender and place of residence are the two most important factors differentiating their trajectories. The presented figures illustrate the most dramatic differences among the trajectories of the 1971 cohort, presenting a cumulative distribution of "the state individuals were in" for every month between November 1989 and November 2000, there being five possible states: "work," "work combined with schooling," "schooling," "unemployment," and "not in the labor force." The first figure presents such a distribution for men living in big cities, the second figure for women living in rural areas. There is a huge gap between these two segments of the 1971 cohort, in terms of the volume of work and education available to them throughout the transition years. If we focus on the moment of the study (November 2000) we conclude that only 2% of men in big cities were unemployed, while 92% of them had work (some combining work with schooling). Women in rural areas live in a very different world: throughout the transition period, their employment rate has rarely surpassed 50%, it has been very atypical for them to combine work and schooling, and their unemployment rate has rarely fallen below 20% since the early 90s. As of November 2000, 54% of them were working, 17% were unemployed, and 28% were out of the labor force. In many other instances, this study documents that differen-



ces like those presented in the two figures have a long list of attitudinal and behavioral correlates, which have prevented a "1971 generation" from arising.

### How do their German counterparts cope?

Comparisons of the '71 cohort in Poland and in the former East Germany show that this cohort has not evolved into a "1971 generation" in either case. Such comparisons reveal, however, two basic differences between the trajectories of young Poles and Germans. First, German work trajectories display more job changes but less unemployment. They attest to the more radical character of East German occupational restructuring. Second, the Polish trajectories display more entrepreneurial activity, while the German ones are marked by more prolonged stays in school. Poland and East Germany represent two clearly distinct transformation paths, conditioned by differing national institutional contexts and material resources.

Comparative research undertaken by PAN and the Section „Sociology and the Study of the Life Course” of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin will examine these aspects in greater detail. ■

#### Further reading:

Mayer, Karl-Ulrich (2003). *The Sociology of the Life Course and Life-span Psychology: Diverging or Converging Pathways*. In: *Understanding Human Development: Dialogues with Life-span Psychology* (pp. 463-481). Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.