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# Interpretations

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Agata Zborowska

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## **"It Belongs to Us!" Narratives of Property Relations at a Time of Post-war Land Reform in Poland**

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DOI:10.18318/td.2025.en.1.9 | ORCID: 0000-0001-5919-4274

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**P**ostwar representations of the land reform announced on July 22, 1944 by the new government in the Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation – the PKWN Manifesto (Manifest Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego) – are characterized by rich “material imagery.” According to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who coined this notion, images that grow out of matter project deeper, fuller, and more lasting experiences. And although “the eye assigns them names [...] only the hand truly knows them.”<sup>1</sup> The post-war ownership changes presupposed a radical transformation in property relations, which was associated with strong emotions in fact fueled by the authorities themselves. Material objects owned by the landed gentry played an important role in both the historical process and the narrative of removing and expropriating this social class and parceling out their areas of land.

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1 Gaston Bachelard, “Introduction: Imagination and Matter,” in *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Ann Arbor: Pegasus Foundation, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1983), 1.

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**Agata Zborowska** – a cultural historian with a background in cultural studies. Her research interests lie in the intersection of material and visual cultures, property relations, cultural history, and critical archival studies. She is an assistant professor at the University of Warsaw and a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Action Fellow at the University of Chicago and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Her project “Critical Archives of Ordinarity: Vernacular Moving Image Practices and Migrant Identity in Polish Chicago” investigates home movies and related oral histories of Polish Chicago before the digital era.

In this article, I focus on Poland's immediate post-war ownership changes from the perspective of material culture. I am particularly interested in how objects participate in these processes or, to put it another way, how they are used in narratives about these ongoing events by various social actors. Material objects are entangled in the history of radical sociopolitical changes that make us rethink the relationship between humans and non-humans' tangled networks. I follow the concept of material objects as "critical cultural archives" suggested by Elaine Freedgood, who argued that "the knowledge that is stockpiled in these things bears on the grisly specifics of conflicts and conquests that a culture can neither regularly acknowledge nor permanently destroy if it is going to be able to count on its own history to know itself and realize a future."<sup>2</sup> Starting from material objects in the broadest sense, I look at the historical "production of specific narratives"<sup>3</sup> represented in various materials that have not been read together so far. By taking such an approach, we can see the "uneven power in the production of sources, archives and narratives," which not infrequently, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes, contributes to silencing the past.

To introduce different narrators of the ownership changes, I use various sources – official materials produced by the new authorities, newspapers, published memoirs of members of the landed gentry, as well as memoirs submitted by members of rural communities to the postwar "Opis mojej wsi" [Description of my village] contest announced in 1948 and organized by Czytelnik Publishing House, as well as the "Nowe pamiętniki chłopów" [New peasants' diaries] competition organized in 1955 by the magazine *Gromada Rolnik Polski*, Polish Radio and the Wiedza i Książka publishing house.<sup>4</sup>

The main storyline of the "extensive land reform" in the newly liberated areas announced in the PKWN Manifesto – "in order to speed up the reconstruction of the country and satisfy the age-old urge of the Polish peasantry for land" – will receive only cursory treatment here. The Decree of the Polish Committee of National Liberation from September 6, 1944 on the implementation of land

2 Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

3 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015 [1995]), 25.

4 I use primarily, but not exclusively, the materials published in the volumes: *Wies polska 1939–1948. Materiały konkursowe* [Polish countryside 1939–1948. Competition materials], ed. Krystyna Kersten and Tomasz Szarota (Warszawa: PWN, 1967–1971); *Nowe pamiętniki chłopów* [New peasant diaries], ed. Halina Ruskiewicz and Bożena Wiloch (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1962). If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article.

reform (Dekret Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego z dnia 6 września 1944 roku o przeprowadzeniu reform rolnej)<sup>5</sup> explained the tenets of the reform. It announced in the very first article that the reform was to be carried out with the participation of the "social element." The reform was intended to ensure the subsistence of existing farms under five hectares of agricultural land and create new independent farms for landless laborers, farm workers, and small leaseholders. Landed property owned by German citizens or Polish citizens of German nationality and persons convicted of treason and providing assistance to the German occupants was subject to the reform. What is particularly important here is that it also applied to real estate jointly or wholly owned by individual or legal persons exceeding 100 hectares in general size or 50 hectares in an agricultural area, and in Poznań, Pomerania and Silesia provinces with 100 hectares in general size, regardless of the amount of agricultural land utilized within that area. The confiscated property passed in its entirety to the state without any compensation. Before turning to how these ownership changes were lived and experienced, I will begin by reconstructing the atmosphere in which the revolution was to take place.

### Collective Affects

But, although the atmosphere in which we live, weighs upon every one with a 20,000 lb. force, do you feel it? No more than European society before 1848 felt the revolutionary atmosphere enveloping and pressing it from all sides.<sup>6</sup>

Karl Marx

Film footage from November 3, 1944, documenting land reform, shows Edward Osóbka-Morawski, who, in an elegant three-piece suit, stands on a makeshift wooden balcony holding a hammer and chisel in his hands.<sup>7</sup> At first gently, as if shyly, but finally, not without effort, he forges the crest cartouche of the Potocki family from Łańcut Castle. He hangs the Polish emblem over the damaged symbol. The then-head of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reform at the Polish Committee of National Liberation is shown alternately in two

5 Dekret Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego z dnia 6 września 1944 r. o przeprowadzeniu reformy rolnej [Decree of the Polish Committee of National Liberation of September 6, 1944 on the implementation of agrarian reform], *Dziennik Ustaw* 4, poz. 17 (1944), accessed February 2, 2024, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19440040017>.

6 Karl Marx, "Speech at the Anniversary of the *People's Paper*," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (London: Norton, 1978 [1856]), 577.

7 Reforma rolna, MF.0467, Archiwum Filmoteki Narodowej. See also "Wielkie święto ludowe w Łańcutcie," *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*, November 7, 1944.

shots. In the first, the camera leans out of an adjacent window and portrays Osóbka-Morawski from the side – at first, it is difficult to discern exactly what he is working on. Any doubts vanish in the second shot, which clearly shows the entire scene from the perspective of a group of peasants and farm workers standing under the balcony. The gathered onlookers applaud and cheer. We can only guess at the latter, as the film is silent. However, from the expressive gestures, body movements, smiles, and silent shouts, it is not difficult to read approval and perhaps even joy.<sup>8</sup>

Although this film documentation of the event was ultimately not used in the *Polska Kronika Filmowa* [Polish film chronicle],<sup>9</sup> images of the takeover of the castle and the emptiness of its former residents circulated in other media. The event was reported in detail by the *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper.<sup>10</sup> According to its account, a crowd of thousands gathered in front of the castle, and more than a thousand peasants were given land. Then hundreds of people arrived at the castle – the Museum of the Polish Nation<sup>11</sup> – for a people’s party “in the first district of the Republic free of landowners.” Among the highlights of the evening, the newspaper, in addition to the removal of the coat of arms of the Counts of Potocki, announced dinner and dancing in the ballroom.<sup>12</sup>

For the first time, hard peasant footsteps sounded on the stone floors and parquet of the palace. More than 500 people gathered in the palace’s great hall, where Osóbka-Morawski [sic] handed out land grant certificates to the peasants. One can see the emotions on the faces of those receiving them, with tears sometimes glistening in their eyes. [...] There are new hosts roaming around the palace. Here, next to the Great Hall – the magnate’s private theater. A deep two-story stage, on the proscenium, there is room for an orchestra of a dozen people, and in the

8 The archival footage is silent; it is likely that it never had a soundtrack (according to information provided by an employee of the National Film Archive).

9 The Polish Chronicle lasted about 10 minutes and was shown before the screenings of the main movie. It usually consisted of information on current affairs and the latest events at home and abroad related to economics, entertainment, and daily life.

10 “Łańcut stał się własnością narodu” [Łańcut became the property of the nation], *Rzeczpospolita. Organ Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego*, November 9, 1944.

11 “Zamek w Łańcucie zamieniony na Muzeum Narodu Polskiego” [The castle in Łańcut turned into the Museum of the Polish Nation], *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, September 12, 1944.

12 A printout of the invitation is in the collection of the Castle Museum in the Łańcut archive. See also Inga Sapetowa “Dzieje Muzeum – Zamku w Łańcucie. 1944–1984” [The history of the Museum – Castle in Łańcut. 1944–1984], in *Szkice z dziejów Łańcuta i okolic*, vol. 1, ed. Inga Sapetowa (Rzeszów: Towarzystwo Naukowe w Rzeszowie na zlec. Stowarzyszenia Przyjaciół Ziemi Łańcuckiej w Łańcucie, 1987), 101.

audience, there are seats for... twenty-eight to thirty people. Above the auditorium is a film projection booth with modern equipment that few first-class sound cinemas could boast before the war. And all this for a minimal number of people. An orchestra has now been placed in the theater to play to new guests. Guests whose blood and sweat created the splendor of this palace. Guests who, from now on, are the hosts here.<sup>13</sup>

The vast building is bursting at the seams. Descriptions of the crowd of peasants who literally occupy the estate – crossing the castle's threshold and leaving their material footprints on the rich parquet floors – are juxtaposed with descriptions of the few aristocrats who have hitherto held these luxurious possessions exclusively. "And here I'm sitting in this gentleman's chair, and I can see it's quite good to sit on it. The lords knew how to make a comfortable life for themselves with our blood money, and now it will come in handy for us,"<sup>14</sup> loudly comments one of the gathered peasants, a land reform attorney. The crowd bursts into laughter.

In *Rzeczpospolita's* reportage on the Łańcut takeover, the change in property relations is shown through a change in the logic of use. The film projector discovered in the palace intended for a small aristocratic group has limited utility and seems virtually useless socially. At the same time, after the war, it can serve hundreds of peasants and workers. Restricted access to private property is contrasted with open access to common property, the hosts of which become new guests previously absent from the palace.<sup>15</sup>

The landed estate becomes a symbol of post-war ownership changes and, more literally, the central stage on which these changes take place. Inside the estate, the ceremonial act of transferring land to the peasants and farm workers (*formale*) takes place, sealing the beginning of land reform. In Żurawica, the estate of Andrzej Józef Sapieha, the parceling out of land is deliberately moved from the manor garden to the estate itself to emphasize the importance and momentousness of this act. Indoors, the new land division is delineated with the participation of peasants and farm workers in front of the (former) owner. "Sapieha's pupils quickly rolled up the carpets in the table room so that the peasants' feet wouldn't trample them,"<sup>16</sup> reported a correspondent of *Biuletyn*

13 "Łańcut stał się własnością narodu," *Rzeczpospolita*.

14 "Wielkie święto ludowe w Łańcucie," *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*, November 7, 1944.

15 Landowner buildings after the war became museums, schools, day care centers, and temporarily also seats of local authorities or agricultural training centers.

16 Stach z powiatu przemyskiego, "jak dzielono ziemię w powiecie przemyskim" [How land was divided in the Przemyśl district], *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*, October 18, 1944.

*Reformy Rolnej* [Land reform bulletin], noting, on the one hand, the dizzying pace of the changes, and on the other, the contempt with which the peasants' presence in the building was reacted to. However, the owner's presence usually acts as a deterrent and, in most cases, makes it difficult to change the existing ownership relationships. Whereas, the *Bulletin* reported, "in Gibisk and Czudec [villages – A. Z.], where the peasants felt terrorized in the beginning, they were afraid to enter the manor, and made meetings somewhere in the corners and barns... Now they already feel they are the hosts here and are making their division plans in the landlords' rooms that it's so nice to look at."<sup>17</sup> The process of gradually overcoming the peasants' and workers' fear or reluctance is confirmed by postwar memoirs, in which the landed estate is most often depicted as an inaccessible space, separate from the experience of the rural community.<sup>18</sup> "In the manor, [...] there were village children not even [allowed – A. Z.], [...] when there was a harvest festival, you could walk up to the palace,"<sup>19</sup> recalled a resident of the village of Bieganów. This space remains extremely unfamiliar even when the mansion becomes a place of daily work. A resident of another village, Staromieście, Aniela Gniewek, described her experience in 1944: "I worked from early morning until late at night in the stable. Later, I was transferred to serve in the landlord's rooms. Here, it was even worse. In the stable, I was among the animals that had to be cared for – in the rooms, I was treated alone, pushed around like an animal."<sup>20</sup>

17 Stanisław Sykus, "Obdzielić wszystkie grupy chłopskie" [Divide all peasant groups], *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*, October 31, 1944.

18 See e.g. Włodzimierz Mędrzecki "Hrabia to naprawdę było coś. Problem stosunków wieś-dwór w pracach studentów Instytutu Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego" [The count was really something special. The problem of village-manor relations in the works of students of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Warsaw], in *Dwór a społeczności lokalne na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, ed. Wiesław Caban, Mieczysław Bolesław Markowski and Marek Przeniosło (Kielce: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Humanistyczno-Przyrodniczego Jana Kochanowskiego, 2008), 357–365. See also Ewelina Szpak, *Mentalność ludności wiejskiej w PRL. Studium zmian* [Mentality of the rural population in the Polish People's Republic. Change study] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2013).

19 Interview conducted and recorded by Anna Wylegała as part of her research project "Wokół reformy rolnej 1944–1948: doświadczenie i pamięć społeczna" [Around the land reform 1944–1948: Experience and social memory], sygn. RR\_01\_Bieganow\_01, Archiwum Danych Jakościowych Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN.

20 Aniela Gniewek, "Będę żyła i pracowała dla społeczeństwa które dało mi ziemię" [I will live and work for the society that gave me this land], *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*, November 11, 1944.

The seizure of large magnate estates was intended to create "the right atmosphere,"<sup>21</sup> as Edward Bertold, then deputy head of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reform of the PKWN, admitted in his memoirs. The landed estate provided a material and symbolic basis for the authorities to create an atmosphere of momentousness for the class and property transformations taking place. This experience of momentousness was thus to be directly linked to the space, as well as to the objects that act as tuning media for the postwar events. As Tim Flohr Sørensen pointed out, we should not understand the atmosphere as limited only to the subject or object, but as a phenomenon arising at the intersection of the body and the affective properties of the material environment.<sup>22</sup> This experience concerns, on the one hand, the very act of crossing a threshold and entering a building space previously accessible to few. On the other hand, it entails directly participating in the expropriation or, certainly more commonly, adopting the position of observer and witness to the seizure of property, which is sometimes arranged in manor interiors. According to accounts, people from neighboring villages or even from other counties come to watch the land reform to see for themselves whether the land was actually being distributed. "People from the surrounding area would go to watch how they were dividing up the landlords' land, how they were giving it to those who either didn't have any at all or had next to nothing,"<sup>23</sup> reported the son of a smallholder farmer from the village of Majdan Sopocki in eastern Poland.

Karl Marx described the material nature of the revolutionary atmosphere, which surrounds like air but exerts pressure above all, in a speech delivered in London at the anniversary celebration of *The People's Paper*.<sup>24</sup> The collective experience of the atmosphere is due to its spatial nature and ability to spread. It is an impersonal phenomenon because it belongs to collective situations, yet it can be experienced as very personal.<sup>25</sup> As noted by Ben Anderson, the incompleteness or indeterminacy of the atmosphere is related to the fact that

21 Edward Bertold, "Lubelska reforma rolna: ze wspomnień zastępcy kierownika Resortu Rolnictwa i Reform Rolnych PKWN" [Lublin agrarian reform: from the memories of the deputy head of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform of the Polish Committee of National Liberation], *Rocznik Lubelski* 2 (1959).

22 Tim Flohr Sørensen, "More Than a Feeling: Towards the Archeology of the Atmosphere," *Emotion, Space and Society* 15 (2017): 2.

23 "Pamiętnik nr 58" [Diary No. 58], in *Nowe pamiętniki chłopów*, 388.

24 Marx, "Speech at the Anniversary of the *People's Paper*," 577.

25 Ben Anderson, "Affective Atmosphere," *Emotion, Space and Society* 15 (2017): 80.

it is felt in and through experience.<sup>26</sup> Although it can be sensed, it is difficult to measure whether the atmosphere “works” and, above all, “how it works” on others. Despite the sensual feeling of pressure, “equal to twenty thousand pounds [...] do we feel it?”<sup>27</sup> Marx asked.

Statements by participants in the ownership transition show the complexity of the experience and awareness of its radical dimension. Henryk Słabek described this atmosphere of crisis, fear and hope as follows:

Faced with the decision, whether already, in front of everyone, to reach out for someone else’s property, fear and pity were intertwined in peasant feelings towards the heir. After all, not only in fiction books, but even rural radicals infrequently lost their animus before the palace thresholds. And indeed, this was the case, as plenipotentiaries and activists reported with amazement. At the same time, there was something peculiar in the mentality of the rural people, which in the changed situation told them to forget and forgive. More often than not, the landed families who were transported on peasant carts were accompanied not by hatred and contempt but by ordinary human compassion. [...] The assumption accompanying the provisions of the PKWN Manifesto that the countryside would not support too harsh measures and too ruthless expropriations was now confirmed throughout.<sup>28</sup>

Both male and female memoir authors often write about disbelief and fear or self-doubt accompanying their involvement in carrying out land reform. At the same time, they feel excitement, joy and euphoria. The ambivalence in describing the experience stems from the scale of the goals set and the radicalism of the following changes. “The peasants were looking forward to it, and there was a lot of talk about it – they would go down to their neighbors in the evenings and advise them on how they would farm,” as one author wrote. “However, not all peasants believed in what they themselves had accomplished with the help of the workers – they did not believe in consolidating people’s power.”<sup>29</sup> The processes and accompanying practices taking place at

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, “Speech at the Anniversary of the *People’s Paper*,” 577.

<sup>28</sup> Henryk Słabek, *Historia społeczna Polski Ludowej 1944–1970* [Social history of the People’s Republic of Poland 1944–1970] (Warszawa: Akademia Nauk Społecznych, 1988), 76–75. Andrzej Leder writes about the fear of participating in the postwar changes in his book *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> “Pamiętnik nr 395” [Diary No. 395], in *Nowe pamiętniki chłopów*, 335.

the time show that the postwar revolution was not "carried out [...] by the Others, without the most subjective parts of the nation identifying themselves with the decisions, actions and responsibility for what happened," as Andrzej Leder writes in his influential book on "dreamed revolution."<sup>30</sup> Post-war dispossessions are received with ambivalent feelings, often in conflict with each other precisely because these events are experienced and lived in an active way, with the subjective participation of the rural community. As such, they are evidence of emotional agency, far from the dreaming described by Leder.

### Fate of Objects

The *Land Reform Bulletin*, which emerged in October 1944 from the previous *Biuletyn Informacyjny* [Information bulletin], played an important role in creating the atmosphere around postwar events. This four-page pamphlet, which could be read as a chronicle of the parceling out of landed estates, was a source of information and a guide on how to expropriate, aimed at villagers. It published technical tips on how to divide land and seize landed estates and answered questions and legal doubts. The *Bulletin* was intended not only to describe events but also, to a large extent, to mobilize action. We may suspect the pamphlet was written in response to Stalin's criticism of the new authorities' insufficiently revolutionary working methods. As Bolesław Bierut wrote, recounting the meeting in Moscow, "Comrade Stalin said that if the task before us is the removal of the entire social class [...], the breaking of the landowners – then it is no longer a reform, but a land revolution [...]. Comrade Stalin criticized us for being soft, for being slack, for not knowing how to come forward boldly enough."<sup>31</sup> The bold methods of those in power were to be followed by the bold steps of the peasantry.

The *Bulletin* was based on reports from county land reform plenipotentiaries and participants in the workers' and surveyors' brigades. In addition, it documented on an ongoing basis the first impressions and emotions

<sup>30</sup> Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Protokół posiedzenia KC PPR 9 października 1944 roku [Minutes of the meeting of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party on October 9, 1944], in *Protokoły posiedzeń Biura Politycznego KC PPR 1944–1945*, ed. Aleksander Kochański (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 1992), 18, as cited in Longina Jakubowska, "Między ideologią i praktyką reformy rolnej: pamięć ziemiaństwa," *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i materiały* 4 (Instytut Historii PAN, 1999), 22. See also Marcin Markiewicz, "Przekształcenia własnościowe w polskim rolnictwie (1944–1956)" [Ownership transformations in Polish agriculture (1944–1956)], in *"Rewolucja społeczna" czy "dzika przebudowa"? Społeczne skutki przekształceń własnościowych w Polsce (1944–1956)*, ed. Tomasz Osiński (Lublin: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2016), 187.

surrounding land reform. The “Peasants Speak” column comprised letters to the editor. As Irena Pancerz-Celejowa, editor of the *Bulletin*, recalled years later, among the reports were those collected directly in the field, which “were brought to me from the countryside by a student [...]. He would go with the workers’ brigades to the countryside, talk to the peasants, give them paper and a pen to write with, or if they didn’t know how to write, he would write himself under their dictation.”<sup>32</sup>

The pamphlet was also intended to serve as a “reservoir of concepts” (*zawsobnik pojęć*)<sup>33</sup> through which peasants and farm workers could make sense of the revolutionary events. Articles often began with an apostrophe to the peasantry and formulated new tasks for them in the new social reality – in this way, the pamphlet singled out a separate group that was not identical to the authors and writers of the texts. To describe the new social and political situation, language referring to social classes was used, based on clear divisions, as master and peasant, exploiter and exploited. This language was intended to shape the perception of events and peasants as active executors of land reform. The political language vividly defined the place of individual subjects and constructed class identities. If Łańcut was meant to be a material symbol of the revolutionary changes in ownership relations after the war, then the Łańcut castle owner, Alfred Potocki, “served as a materialized image of an aristocrat-traitor of the nation [...] who transported collections (‘national goods’) from the palace by railroad cars to Western Europe with the help of the Germans,”<sup>34</sup> as Longina Jakubowska noted.

Inciting hostility or even hatred towards landowners was an essential element of the texts published in the *Bulletin*. Insulting the lord and removing him was a condition for land reform to run smoothly.<sup>35</sup> The authors of the texts devote a lot of space to manorial property, calling for its immediate seizure. This is because landowners not only remove valuable items from the estate, which, according to the new regulations, no longer belong to them. They also give

32 Irena Pancerz-Celejowa, “Redagowałam *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*” [I edited the Agrarian Reform Bulletin], in *Materiały z sesji popularnonaukowej poświęconej zagadnieniom kształtowania się władzy ludowej na Rzeszowszczyźnie* (Rzeszów: Komitet Wojewódzki PZPR w Rzeszowie. Referat Historii Partii, 1966).

33 On the role of ephemeral prints as a “reservoir of concepts” during the revolutionary changes of the early twentieth century, see Wiktor Marzec, *Rebelia i reakcja. Rewolucja 1905 roku i plebejskie doświadczenie polityczne* [Rebellion and reaction. The revolution of 1905 and plebeian political experience] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Universitas, 2016), 127–193.

34 Jakubowska, “Między ideologią i praktyką reformy rolnej: pamięć ziemiaństwa,” 21.

35 “Położyć kres rozkradaniu majątków,” *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*, October 18, 1944.

or donate items, animals, and machinery to trusted persons for safekeeping, hoping they will someday return for them. Also among the trusted persons are peasants and farm workers, who had, until recently, worked on the confiscated property. "Farm committees do not allow relatives and various acquaintances of landowners to drive away from them with full panniers," prompted the *Bulletin*. "Put your heavy, work-worn hand on these treasures and ask: where are you going to, gentlemen? – We are sorry, but it belongs to us." The author of one of the texts stages an imaginary exchange between the peasants and the landowner. The text alternates between directly addressing the peasants, encouraging them to act, and then addressing the last estate owner on their behalf.

Peasants! Are you unable to find this livestock? In Zalesie [manor – A. Z.], the owner of the estate [Roman – A. Z.] Gumiński saves the remains of the livestock for himself, distributing them to his friends. Hey, Mr. Gumiński! The peasant will not give his [property]! He will claim what is rightfully his!<sup>36</sup>

The proclamations published in the *Bulletin* were designed to build a new bond between peasants, farm workers, and manor property by excluding their previous owners. At the same time, the authors note that material objects were beginning to divide the rural community instead of uniting it – for among the "acquaintances of the estate owners" are also trusted farm workers and peasants. Objects are thus used to merge identification and express class identity in the language of manor-peasant antagonism. In these vivid descriptions, an abrupt change in property relations takes place. The transformation of relations with material objects begins in the pages of these ephemeral prints even before land reform is completed and manor property physically changes hands. "Manor property" in the *Bulletin* changes status to "peasant property," looted by landowners. This sudden revolution in language also takes place in official documents: "unless the objects mentioned above [works of art] have previously been looted by the owner [emphasis A. Z.], it is imperative that they be separated from everyday objects and gathered in a separate room,"<sup>37</sup> the Department of Culture and Art in Rzeszów appealed to all county

36 "Jak długo będziecie hulać panowie?" [How long will you party, gentlemen?], *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*, October 18, 1944.

37 [Pismo] WKiSz UW w Rzeszowie do PRN z dn. 26 października 1944 roku nr o-2/45, k. 3, sygn. 2109, k. 1 zespół 36, Urząd Wojewódzki w Rzeszowie, Wydział Kultury i Sztuki, Archiwum Państwowe w Rzeszowie, as cited in Artur Wiktor, "Losy ruchomych dóbr kultury ziemiaństwa w woj. rzeszowskim po zakończeniu II wojny światowej w latach 1944–1947" (PhD diss., Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, 2008), 105.

national councils. According to a decree of the minister of agriculture and land reform, as part of the reform, some of the movable property of the landed gentry was not subject to seizure for state ownership. Excluded from the state takeover were material objects that were not directly related to the running of the farm, i.e., clothing, kitchen tools, bedding, jewelry, furniture, or memorabilia, provided they did not have artistic, scientific, or museum value.

### ***No Longer Kissing the Paws of Thieving Masters*<sup>38</sup>**

The authors devote little space to the landlord and his property in their memoirs on land reform. More frequent mention is made of the land distribution process itself and the differing attitudes of the community that accompanied it. Most often, the palpably tense atmosphere – a mixture of uncertainty, fear, and excitement – is emphasized. Usually beyond description are the incidents of property entry, seizure, or destruction – both of their own practices and those of their neighbors – known from other documents. Even years later, according to Anna Wylegała's research on the peasant experience of land reform and the memory of it, interviewees rarely mention it.<sup>39</sup> In the context of the limited number of accounts, the scholar argues that “apparently there is a self-censorship at work here that makes them consider such actions as nevertheless condemnable.”<sup>40</sup> Such a perspective calls for nuance, as it leaves aside a whole range of emotions that do not fit into the guilt and shame associated with looting and the belief that these actions are immoral in nature.

The immediate postwar period of revolutionary changes produces an extensive group of “nobody’s” property.<sup>41</sup> The status of the manor possessions

38 Statement by the head of the Provincial Department of Self-Government Stanisław Rejminiak, “Chłopi – wzmacniają władzę demokratyczną” [Peasants – strengthen democratic power], *Biuletyn Reformy Rolnej*, November 2, 1944.

39 Anna Wylegała, “O perspektywach badania chłopskiego doświadczenia reformy rolnej. Z warsztatu badawczego” [On the prospects for studying the peasant experience of land reform. From the research workshop], *Rocznik Antropologii Historii* 10 (2017): 273–305. See also Anna Wylegała, “Nowi właściciele dworów i pałaców ziemiańskich: próba portretu zbiorowego” [New owners of landed estates’ manors and palaces: an attempt at a collective portrait], *Studia Socjologiczne* 2 (2020): 163–192. On the silence surrounding the looting of the manor in the context of ownership changes in Transylvania, see Emanuela Grama, “A Deconstruction Story: Property, Memory, and Temporality in a Transylvanian Village,” *History and Anthropology* 31 (5) (2020): 618–642.

40 Wylegała, “O perspektywach badania chłopskiego doświadczenia reformy rolnej,” 285.

41 See Agata Zborowska, *Życie rzeczy w powojennej Polsce* [The life of things in post-war Poland] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2019).

was unclear because they were not always legally regulated by official decrees.<sup>42</sup> Given the rhetoric the authorities built around manorial estates, it can be argued that looting was somewhat permitted. Personal belongings left behind by the previous owner of the estate were of little interest to the authorities if they did not represent a particular value. While there may have been some connivance in the looting of specific items from the estate, the division between items permitted to be taken and those forbidden blurred in everyday practice. According to first-hand accounts, the authorities did not always even keep up with taking inventory of the items left behind and securing the property. "It was only later, in 1945, that the Związek Samopomocy Chłopskiej [Peasant self-help association], at the behest of the district authorities, began to pursue and record the dismantled equipment, but even then, little could be found,"<sup>43</sup> wrote the author of one memoir. However, the lost items were not only sought by the state administration, but the (previous) owners returning to their estates also tried to find them. The former landowners' desire to reclaim their objects forces them to cross the threshold of a space hitherto left out of the manor's interest. The son of a farm worker in the village of Osnowo noted contemptuously the former owner's greed, which ultimately prompted her to directly confront the workers' deplorable living conditions:

In the very first days of her stay at the estate, her ladyship [*wielmożna pani*] deigned to visit our stinking apartments, something she had never done before the war. The heiress wanted to pull the wool over the eyes of the ordinary laborer so that she was seemingly not disgusted by the pigsty in which he lived. During these visits, the heiress would recognize in people [from the village – A. Z.] things brought from the palace and have them returned to the field house or gardener. In this way, when she circled the entire village, she had almost all the furniture back.<sup>44</sup>

The looting of the manor involves a large part of the rural community and is both a collective and an anonymous practice, and therefore, it must be based on mutual trust between its members. It can be seen as part of the "hidden transcript" created in power relations by subordinate groups. James C. Scott defines it as a "backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken [or

42 See e.g. "Dekret z dnia 2 marca 1945 roku o majątkach opuszczonych i porzuconych" [Decree of March 2, 1945 on abandoned properties], *Dziennik Ustaw* 9, poz. 45 (1945), accessed December 20, 2023, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU1945090045/O/19450045.pdf>.

43 "Pamiętnik nr 369" [Diary no. 369], in *Nowe pamiętniki chłopów*, 38.

44 *Ibid.*, 413–414.

done – A. Z.] in the face of power,” and which, as such, is created in the face of hegemonic “public conduct.”<sup>45</sup> Public conduct includes behavior expected and accepted by the dominant. An example is the empathetic gestures toward the until recently ruling social class by peasants and farm workers, common in the memories of landowners, including helping to store property from which the owners were dispossessed. The expressions of compassion may have had a sincere basis, especially in the case of good relations with the manor. Nevertheless, the depictions of the landowners do not show what the peasants and farm workers really thought about them.<sup>46</sup> Material objects were indeed accepted for safekeeping to help save them from confiscation, but not always with the obligation to return them. As Piotr Turnau, son of the Mikulice estate owner, reported: “in 1947, my sisters traveled to Mikulice from Rzeszów to retrieve a closet given for safekeeping along with other items at the home of former cook Mania Głowata, but she did not recognize the ladies and did not let them into the house.”<sup>47</sup> We do not know the woman’s account or the details of this event. However, it is possible that she initially acted in accordance with the expectations of the former owner and, as the property was being parceled out, agreed to store his possessions, thus enacting a performance of obedience and empathy.<sup>48</sup> After the war, it was difficult to determine the sustainability of the rapid changes. Such expected assistance was part of the public conduct and may have been “an attempt to secure the favor of the owners of the parceled estates in the event of a possible change in the political situation in the country.”<sup>49</sup> When the situation stabilized, it was no longer necessary to uphold public protocol toward former property owners.

45 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xii.

46 I am paraphrasing the words of Michał Rauszer, who wrote about how the nobility imagined the peasants’ perception of them. See Michał Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych* [The power of the subordinated] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021), 66.

47 “Relacja Piotra Turnaua – syna Stefana właściciela majątku w Mikulicach z czerwca 2007 r.” [Report by Piotr Turnau – son of Stefan, the owner of the estate in Mikulice, from June 2007], as cited in Wiktor, “Losy ruchomych dóbr kultury ziemiaństwa,” 100.

48 Rauszer discusses other examples of the dynamics between public conduct and hidden transcript, see Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych*.

49 Grzegorz Miernik, “Ewolucja poglądów chłopów na kwestię własności pod wpływem polityki społeczno-gospodarczej władz (1944–1956)” [Evolution of peasants’ views on the issue of property under the influence of the authorities’ socio-economic policy (1944–1956)], in *Dwór a społeczności lokalne na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, 315.

As Vicky Osterweil notes in her book *In Defense of Looting*, looting can be seen as a practical activity focused on the immediate and direct redistribution of goods to which one has not previously had access. It is a pragmatic effort to improve living conditions.<sup>50</sup> However, the author emphasizes that looting harbors the revolutionary potential of undermining property rights, often based on relations of power and domination, supported by ideology and violence. Instead of seeing these practices as apolitical and chaotic actions, she suggests regarding them as significant moments in the course of radical social change. This political dimension of radical ownership changes was pointed out by the author of one memoir:

One had to first understand for oneself that nothing falls easily into one's hands. Brotherly blood was poured, but not in vain. It slowly washed away the mold built up on the psyche of the peasant. And no wonder that, when taking the lord's land, he went to pound the tiled stoves in the palaces and tear up the parquet floors in the rooms. This was not a reflex of savagery but a desire for revenge for the wrongs suffered and a path to self-liberation. I write this because this is how I found myself at the time. And there were many [like me – A. Z.]...<sup>51</sup>

In the landowners' narratives, the descriptions of irrational and barbaric acts of inexplicable destruction of landed property assume the political ignorance of those acting. Contrary to this view, however, the diarist emphasizes the full awareness of the oppressed community carrying out the attack. He describes it as a transformative experience of the participants, who liberate themselves from their previous relations of subordination. The looting may be a means of replenishing resources. Still, it is also an undermining of previous power and a form of revenge for wrongs, especially since it is often not seen in terms of guilt but as a reclamation of what one has "worked out on one's own" for generations, which was then seized. However, as the memoirs show, looting as a form of struggle is also directed against the new power. Expected and unwanted collectivization of farms triggers anonymous resistance practices: "the looted parts of livestock and dead stock and the demolition of manor farm buildings were considered a good solution by our local agrarians, claiming that there would now be no opportunity

<sup>50</sup> Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Wacław Daruk, "W poszukiwaniu prawdy" [In search of truth], in *Gotuj broń! Wspomnienia chłopów z lat 1939–1948*, ed. Wanda Chodorowska, Zdzisław Lubowicz and Mieczysław Róg-Świostek (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1969), 335–336.

conducive to the establishment of “kolkhozes,”<sup>52</sup> wrote one diarist ironically. These practical measures against the expected actions of the new authorities are carried out with the knowledge of the entire community, although not always with the approval of all its members. Something that could not be expressed in the form of a complaint becomes a covert protest to prevent the implementation of changes in property relations not consulted with the community and often not approved by it.

### Misuse and Dislocation

In landowner accounts and memoirs, looting is described as barbarism, uncivilized behavior resulting from a lack of familiarity with valuable objects and a lack of respect for private property. This behavior is accompanied by chaos, an outburst of unrestrained instincts that leads to the destruction of valuable objects. As Tadeusz Czaplicki noted with disdain in his memoirs:

When I leave the manor, I see a peculiar scene, when some backward crone knocked over a beautiful inlaid afternoon table with the top on the snow, and between the carved legs, having put on pillows, quilts and other bedding, she pulls along a quasi-sled by a string tied to one of these carved legs.<sup>53</sup>

The rural community members give manorial objects new meanings to suit their own needs, thus discovering the objects’ “misuse value,” to use Bill Brown’s term. The misuse value “captures the effectiveness of broken routine (the interruption of habit) as an unanticipated mode of apprehending the object world anew.”<sup>54</sup> This applies not only to the afternoon table, used as a handy means of transporting more necessary and useful bed linen, as well as other not-so-ordinary things. As former landowner Ludomir Wolski lamented in his memoirs, “My sister Kleczewska, while in the village of Siennów a few months after being evicted from the manor, saw a Korzec porcelain salad bowl from the manor, so an object of museum value, from which the chickens had pecked the offal and bran.”<sup>55</sup> His deliberate

52 “Pamiętnik nr 369,” in *Nowe pamiętniki chłopów*, 38.

53 Tadeusz Czaplicki, *Wspomnienia*, as cited in Jakubowska, “Między ideologią i praktyką reformy rolnej,” 17.

54 Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 373.

55 Ludomir Kościeszka Wolski, “O tym i owym. Wspomnienia z przemyskiego z I poł. XX w.” [About this and that. Memories from Przemyśl in the first half of twentieth century], *Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich we Wrocławiu, Biblioteka Rękopisów*, rkps. 13540/11, as cited in: Wiktor, “Losy ruchomych dóbr kultury ziemiaństwa,” 102.

distancing from the usefulness of objects – their everyday, most ordinary use – serves to show the new owners' lack of competence. In the landowner narratives, peasants and farm workers are unfamiliar with manorial objects – they do not know how to take care of them or how to use them. They have no relationship with these material objects because objects from the manor do not belong to peasants' and workers' social worlds. The misuse value shows the possible other-than-assumed uses of objects by people from different social classes than those for which they are intended. In this way, it reveals not only the potentiality inherent in material objects, but also the inventiveness of their new users.

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Representations of land reform in the official media, as well as the descriptions of peculiar "looting spectacles" repeated in landowners' memoirs, are powerful images in which material objects play a crucial role. Used in the narrative of the new authorities, they were intended to help create an affective atmosphere and thus involve the rural community itself in the expropriation process. The narrative was meant to simultaneously identify the "rightful" owners – not the landed gentry, but the hitherto exploited peasants and farm workers, who could reclaim the fruits of their labor. In this way, the new authorities try to expose the class conflict, covered on the other hand by narratives of landowners psychologizing the looting of manors, in which a mindless mob participates. Minority narratives nuance this picture by showing the less apparent moments of these post-war ownership changes. The ambivalent, often contradictory emotions surrounding land reform – initial resistance or indecision associated with disbelief in the face of the situation, sympathy for dispossessed landowners, and, at the same time, excitement and a sense of justice from the changes taking place – reveal the complexity of the experience of the actors directly involved in these events. The narratives of peasants and farm workers show the places of active resistance to property relations – both the existing ones and those introduced by the new authorities. One example is looting as an activity not accepted in public conduct but present in a hidden transcript. This way of redistributing material objects allows us to reconstruct other ways of experiencing and understanding radical social changes. These lesser-known narratives point not so much to ethical readings of looting and destruction of landed property, as to possible political ones seeing them as undermining a property order entangled in relations of power and domination.

## Abstract

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**Agata Zborowska**

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

*"It Belongs to Us!" Narratives of Property Relations at a Time of Post-war Land Reform in Poland*

The article deals with the property transformations that accompanied land reform in Poland after Second World War. Zborowska begins by reconstructing the authorities' top-down narrative, focused on the property of the landed gentry (palace, manor). Its aim was to create an atmosphere that would help mobilise rural communities to participate in expropriation and the redistribution of land. She then analyses the looting of (post) manor property on the basis of post-war memoirs and accounts by members of rural communities. The fact that only few such accounts exists, she argues, is not solely due to a sense of guilt. Alternative explanations for the practice of looting are presented.

## Keywords

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land reform, post-war era, potential history, expropriation, looting, misuse value