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**The Visions of Society in *The Secret Agent* by Conrad and *The Devils* by Dostoevsky**

Wizja społeczeństwa w *Tajnym agencie* Conrada i *Biesach* Dostojewskiego

*The Secret Agent*<sup>1</sup> by Conrad and *The Devils*<sup>2</sup> by Dostoevsky reveal the two writers views on politics, the function of ideologies in society and present their diagnosis of the erosion of both English and Russian societies. The views of both writers are very complex, full of sometimes contradictory statements but it is possible to detect certain strands which keep recurring in their declarations. These prevailing ideological tendencies which are organicism for Conrad and slavophilism for Dostoevsky can be subsumed under conservatism. The term "conservatism" denotes "an attitude that attaches greater importance to the preservation and care for the traditional... than to innovation and change. The typical conservative fears and resists revolution and accepts progress only as a gradual development from the existing political system".<sup>3</sup> The organicist strand within the conservative ideology manifests itself in the form of the emphasis laid on the primacy of the collectivity over an individual whose participation in the life of the closely knit society safeguards his security and freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Conrad's thought situates him within the conservative movement mainly due to his commitment to organic values present in his thinking which was

<sup>1</sup> J. Conrad: *The Secret Agent*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (dalej O.U.P.), 1983, all quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> F. Dostoevsky: *The Devils*, World's Classics, Oxford: O.U.P., 1992, all quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. P. Wiener, New York: Charles Scribener's Sons, 1968, vol. 1, p. 477.

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954, vol. 14, pp. 138-140.

shaped by his Polish experiences and evolved under the influence of Polish romantic traditions inspired by German idealist philosophy and, later, the influence of the 19th century British thinkers and writers.<sup>5</sup> Conrad's views were also moulded by his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski who embraced positivist ideas such as respect for work and the pursuit of national independence through economic development.<sup>6</sup> These early influences gave rise to his work ethic which overlaps with the views of organicist thinkers. Conrad and organicist thinkers share the conviction that an individual's self-realization is possible only within the community.<sup>7</sup> For both moral law evolves as a result of an individual's existence in the community and his consequent commitment to others.<sup>8</sup> Conrad insists on ideals of human solidarity and fidelity, and the ideal of service as basic to the human existence.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, he dismisses individualism which puts stress on "the independence of the self"<sup>10</sup>, which disrupts the bonds formed between man and the community and makes man more disposed to "succumb to the forces of nature or to evil without a struggle".<sup>11</sup> Men are by nature solitary, confined within their consciousness and unable to penetrate others' minds, their solitude being compounded with the emptiness of the cosmos.<sup>12</sup> An individual's integration with the community counteracts the immersion in loneliness destructive for a personality and restores one's identity.<sup>13</sup> Work constitutes one of the means of realizing these ideals, grants man the status of a full-fledged member of the community and, thus, engenders in him a sense of allegiance to something more permanent<sup>14</sup>: "[...] man is worth neither more nor less than the work he accomplishes...".<sup>15</sup>

Dostoevsky's social, political and philosophical views echo slavophilism, a conservative ideology developed in Russia and distinct in the issues it raises from the western versions of conservatism, but preserving some fea-

<sup>5</sup> A. Fleishman: *Conrad's Politics. Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1967, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> R. Jabłkowska: *Joseph Conrad*, Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1961, p. 10, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Fleishman: *op. cit.*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> J. Berthoud: *Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp. 14–16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> A. Gillon: *Conrad and Shakespeare and Other Essays*, New York: Astra Books, 1976, p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> T. Pettersson: *Consciousness and Time. A Study in the Philosophy and Narrative Technique of Joseph Conrad*, Abo: Abo Academy, 1982, pp. 29–30.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>14</sup> Fleishman: *op. cit.*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Marguerite Poradowska, *CL*, I, 113–114.

tures which relate it to the conservative ideology, especially that pursued by German thinkers.<sup>16</sup> Slavophiles focus their attention on the problem of Russia's attitude towards Europe and censure the European civilisation for its rationalism, egotism and the isolation of an individual. The Western capitalist society is based on social contract, i.e. a rational bond of mutual profit instead of the organic community which arose in Russia and which is not corrupted by the Roman heritage, the source of the Western civilisation.<sup>17</sup>

Also Dostoevsky indicts capitalism and moral attitudes it fosters, especially its emphasis on individual freedom which, in fact, is a negative value leading to the prevalence of money in the relationships between people and, consequently, to their isolation.<sup>18</sup> Dostoevsky portrays the Russian society as undergoing the deep crisis due to its division into the intelligentsia and the masses. This rift came about as a result of the contact of Russia with Europe in the times of Peter the Great.<sup>19</sup> Dostoevsky does not deny the importance of European influence for it alerted Russia to her uniqueness and, also, backwardness<sup>20</sup>, but he fears that Russia could be enticed by the Western values and ideas such as the supremacy of the political organization of society over the brotherhood of people and nations.<sup>21</sup> Messianism, the belief in the unification of all slavic nations under the leadership of Russia, thus ushering in a new epoch in the history of the world, is much more strongly articulated than in the case of slavophiles. The Russian nation, destined to pursue the reconciliation of all peoples, will accomplish ultimate universal harmony. However, to achieve that, the organic character of the Russian society has to be restored by healing the rupture between the masses and the intelligentsia which was widening, along with europeanization, since the times of Peter.<sup>22</sup> Dostoevsky shares with slavophiles an appreciation for old Russian traditions of the peasant commune which constitutes the only force able to resist the complete europeanization of Russia and to advance her to a higher phase of the social organization based on ancient traditions.<sup>23</sup> Dostoevsky's insistence on Russian traditions and the restoration of ancient institutions such as classless peasant communes, his assault on capitalism

<sup>16</sup> A. Walicki: *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii*, Warszawa: PWN, 1964, pp. 12–13, 15.

<sup>17</sup> A. Walicki: *Rosyjska filozofia i myśl społeczna od Oświecenia do marksizmu*, Warszawa: PWN, 1973, pp. 143–148.

<sup>18</sup> Walicki: *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii*, p. 441.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 445.

<sup>21</sup> G. Kabat: *Ideology and Imagination*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Walicki: *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii*, pp. 445–446, 448.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 444, 446.

place him among conservatives whereas his appeal for universal harmony between peoples and classes, the emphasis on the development of moral bonds between individuals and the communal form of society allows us to identify organicist strand in his views.

These social views form the background to the presentation of the society in *The Secret Agent* and *The Devils*. In these novels Conrad and Dostoevsky offer insight into the structures of the English and the Russian societies, the values these societies cherish and obstacles to the emergence of an ideal, organic society.

In *The Secret Agent* conservative along with organic ideals underlie social and political life, as well as provide people with rules to adhere to. Conservative tenets may be detected in the attitudes of Sir Ethelred, his secretary Toodles, Chief Inspector Heat or the Verlocs. The claim, typical of the conservative ideology, that "prudent change is the means of social preservation"<sup>24</sup> motivates Sir Ethelred's political initiatives which are calculated to modify the social system but, at the same time, to keep reforms within the bounds of this system and to obviate the need for radical changes. Sir Ethelred embodies the conservative ideal of a man of high social origin: "[...] the unbroken record of that man's descent surpassed [...] the age of the oldest oak in the country" (136), which predestines him to exercise power.<sup>25</sup> Also Heat's way of thinking reveals conservative and organic colouring in that he cherishes the professional values such as "working by routine", "sanity", "respect for constituted authorities" (93) and in that the organic model of society converges with his image of the English society where both the so-called decent citizens and those who do not conform to moral standards set up by society turn out to be equally necessary, interdependent on one another to maintain balance and render the system workable. Among conservative tenets the respect for property plays a primary role "in the pursuit of personal liberty and defence of the social order".<sup>26</sup> At the political level the prominence of property is manifested in the conflict between Sir Ethelred and his opponents about the nationalization of fisheries. At the personal level the respect for property, in a distorted form, motivates Verloc and Winnie. Verloc who assumes the role of the "protector of society" identifies himself with the class of proprietors and endorses the existence of this class, of such a social system as a guarantee for his shady business. Winnie perceives human relationships,

<sup>24</sup> R. Kirk: *The Conservative Mind*, South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1978, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 1, p. 480.

<sup>26</sup> *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. D. L. Sills, New York: The Macmillan Company and the Free Press, 1968, vol. 3, p. 293.

eg. her marriage, in purely commercial terms as a kind of contract, thus reducing herself to Verloc's property and, consequently, when Verloc fails to fulfil the conditions of the contract, she feels no longer bound by it and requires all debts to be settled. Her respect for property, carried to the point of absurdity, is undermined as a value.

In *The Devils* the situation of the society is different from that depicted in *The Secret Agent* as it is dominated by disruptive revolutionary socialism and liberalism and has not worked out a positive, unifying ideology influential enough to neutralize revolutionaries appeal. The ideological void is reflected in the presentation of the authorities, i.e. the governor of the town von Lembke and his wife. Lembke's German origin explains his incompetence in handling tensions among the Russians as he is detached from the people and unable to understand them. His promotion to the post of a governor fuels dissensions between society and the authorities whose Russian identity gets blurred, which in the light of Dostoevsky's nationalistic views is the first step towards social disintegration.

What separates the English and the Russian societies is that the former has strong political and social foundations. However, both societies share inner anxiety and corrosion which perhaps cannot shake the foundations of the English society, but can be destructive for the Russian society torn between various ideologies and whose political consciousness is in the process of emerging.

In *The Secret Agent* this inner corrosion takes the form of egoism and secrecy which taint such people as Heat and the Assistant Commissioner appointed to protect the system.<sup>27</sup> Heat seeks to achieve a promotion in his job and, consequently, his actions are aimed at satisfying the expectations of his superiors, rather than working honestly.<sup>28</sup> As a results, he tries to shift the blame for the attempt at blowing up the Greenwich Observatory onto Michaelis, to cover up Verloc's involvement in the affair and his own use of immoral methods.<sup>29</sup> His conviction that the end justifies the means equates him with the Professor.<sup>30</sup> Also the Assistant Commissioner is involved in the tangle of egoistic interests: from equally personal motives he protects Michaelis.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the proper tackling of the affair which could

<sup>27</sup> Berthoud: *op. cit.*, s. 144; H. Daleski: *Joseph Conrad. The Way of Dispossession*, London: Faber and Faber, 1977, pp. 168–169.

<sup>28</sup> D. Schwarz: *Conrad*, Ithaca N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 164.

<sup>29</sup> Berthoud: *op. cit.*, s. 144. F. Leavis: *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962, p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> Daleski: *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>31</sup> Berthoud: *op. cit.*, s. 144.



have affected Britain's relations with other countries turns out to depend on the concurrence of egoistic interests.

Within the social structure of the English society as portrayed by Conrad, there are people overtly opposed to the system, wishing to subvert it. These are anarchists — the counterpart of revolutionary socialists in the Russian society, but, contrary to the, anarchists function on the fringes of the English society.<sup>32</sup> Both anarchists and revolutionary socialists embrace violence as a means of annihilating society. The Professor dreams of an ideal bomb to blow up the whole mankind, his intention corresponding to Shigalyov's who forms plans to kill nine-tenths of all people so that the rest could create a paradise on earth. However, the English society resists the upsurge of anarchism in the social life, ignores the movement which is shown as being at odds with its deeply rooted traditions whereas the Russian society welcomes the socialist ideology which, as Dostoevsky seeks to demonstrate, shatters the moral code, a foundation of the social system and which, because of its atheistic nature, leads to murder, suicide and madness, as in the case of Shigalyov, Kirillov, Petr Verkhovensky or Lyamshin.<sup>33</sup>

The overt disintegration of the Russian society and some disintegrative tendencies within the English one find expression in the fate and the shape of personality of Stavrogin and Verloc, the characters who are the focal points of the events and the binding elements of various strands within the structures of the two novels.

Both Verloc and Stavrogin do not subscribe to any ideology. Verloc confines his intellectual activity to working out a set of slogans which echo conservative principles, e.g. "his mission in life is the protection of the social mechanisms" (15), but which are exploited by him to justify his involvement with a foreign embassy. Otherwise, he does not feel compelled to identify himself with any idea and in that respect he is distinct from Stavrogin who takes interest in different ideologies and who tries out various ways of life before concluding that none of them can prompt his spiritual rebirth. Stavrogin never openly declares for or against any ideology but he captivates such people as Kirillov, Shatov, Verkhovensky who perceive him as their ideological master. Within the Russian society caught in the conflict between opposing ideologies, Stavrogin is bound to fail in his search for the absolute values. His exploration of different ideologies which leaves

<sup>32</sup> W. Krajka: *Izolacja i etos. Studium o twórczości Conrada*, Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1988, p. 282.

<sup>33</sup> These problems are dealt with in detail in my article "The Social Axiology of *The Secret Agent* by Conrad and *The Devils* by Dostoevsky" (to be published).

him cold and empty parallels the quest of the whole society for values, also likely to be unsuccessful. Verloc, living in the margin of the English society, filters conservatism through his perceptions into the narrow-minded private outlook which is the closest he ever comes to the identification with conservatism. Verloc demonstrates possible dangerous distortion of conservatism whereas Stavrogin embodies the void of the society deprived of any ideology which could offer guidelines for development.

The differences between Stavrogin and Verloc are related to the ideological differences between Conrad and Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky portrays Stavrogin as a man who, detached from the Russian nation, accepts citizenship in Switzerland, and, consequently, severs emotional and moral bonds with his country and condemns himself to a meaningless existence. He says in his letter to Dasha: "I am not attached to anything in Russia [...]" (753). Stavrogin does not believe in God, and as adherence to the Orthodox faith is a litmus test of one's attitude towards Russia, of the full identification with the Russian heritage, his atheism clearly accounts for the detachment from the nation and consequent moral nihilism.<sup>34</sup> Shatov discerns the connections between atheism and the renunciation of nationality and brands Stavrogin as an uprooted aristocrat.

Verloc's attitudes contradict all those social values considered by Conrad the touchstone of man's worth such as solidarity, commitment to one's duties, work which integrate man into the community.<sup>35</sup> He opts out of the community life, unwilling to conform to its requirements and desires to indulge his idleness: "He had been guided [...] by an instinctive leaning towards shady transactions, where money is picked up easily" (54). Because of his profession he fails to identify himself with any social group or social role even that of the husband which he seems to cherish most. His marriage falls apart due to the lack of communication with his wife, triggered off by both Verloc's and Winnie's egoistic motivation.<sup>36</sup> Both in professional and personal life Verloc overlooks the importance of belonging to the group and, thus, does not live out the human fate just like Stavrogin whose rejection of national and religious values marks him out as a tragic but still a condemned man according to Dostoevsky's anthropology.

Verloc and Stavrogin represent two kinds of disintegrated personality. Verloc is an embodiment of mediocrity, a man without any inner conflicts, any impulse to change himself. His life is confined to the problem of survival

<sup>34</sup> Walicki: *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii*, p. 445, D. Kułakowska: *Dostojewski*, Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1981, p. 124.

<sup>35</sup> Fleishman: *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> J. Baines: *Joseph Conrad*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960, p. 337.

and of securing a comfortable existence. Stavrogin has risen to a higher level of self-consciousness in being able to perceive his own entanglement in the evil, his consequent disintegration and, as a result, he experiences all the time an emotional agony which would be alien to Verloc. This inner anguish, which is not a simple fear of being thrown from the rut of an easy life as in the case of Verloc, signals Stavrogin's actual disintegration. An inability to commit oneself to others leads to the emergence of a distorted personality although in *The Devils* Dostoevsky stresses the role of the rejection of God in the process of personality disintegration whereas in *The Secret Agent* the community is the source of values which bind one's personality together. Thus, when Verloc drifts away from the community, he condemns himself to spiritual death.<sup>37</sup>

Verloc and Stavrogin exemplify negative tendencies within their societies. Verloc personifies such latent negative forces within the English society as egoism and self-isolation, which are kept under control by the effective, firmly established social system. Verloc's illicit cooperation with Heat, the reaction of such people as Sir Ethelred or the Assistant Commissioner provoked by the abortive outrage and their methods of handling the situation are indicative of the drift towards egoism and secrecy among the respectable members of society, the drift subverting social stability. Still, he seems less representative of the English society than Stavrogin of the Russian one because of his job, of his contacts with the anarchists, the police and a foreign embassy, which pushes him to the margin of normal life. Stavrogin is portrayed as an embodiment of the intelligentsia detached from the Russian people. Under the influence of his teacher, Stepan Verkhovensky, a liberal westerner, he develops distrust of Christian values and contempt for the Russian nation. Stavrogin who has lost faith and is finally driven to suicide, typifies the political and moral chaos of the Russian society unleashed by the spreading of atheism and socialism — the most destructive Western ideologies, as Dostoevsky claims. Shatov calls him the nobleman's son to point to Stavrogin's inability, as a member of the higher classes, to return to the people, to overcome isolation and division of his personality brought about by his loss of faith.

In both *The Secret Agent* and *The Devils*, the two writers assess their contemporary societies from the point of view of their social conceptions and of their affirmation of the organic society as an ideal to be pursued. In *The Secret Agent* the society conforms to conservative principles but

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<sup>37</sup> These problems are dealt with in detail in my article "Verloc and Stavrogin: Two Versions of Personality Disintegration" (to be published).



it has not attained the organic unity which is undermined by its secrecy, egoism of both its protectors and adversaries such as anarchists. Still, the moral code of "the protectors of society" bears the stamp of Conrad's work ethic. Thus, Heats beliefs parallel the organicist perception of man as an inseparable, indispensable element within the community which is the only power able to render his life meaningful: "[...] a man must identify himself with something more tangible than his own personality" (117). The Assistant Commissioner's nocturnal escapade reveals the dependence of one's identity on the community: "In this immoral atmosphere the Assistant Commissioner [...] seemed to lose some more of his identity" (148-149). Also the life of Winnie and Verloc illustrates the dangers of yielding to excessive individualism and of severing ties with the community. All this remains in accordance with the organicist indictment of egoistic struggle for one's own advantage and the conviction about the key role of the community in one's development.

Dostoevsky adopts slavophilism as a criterion in evaluating the society presented in *The Devils*, the society which is in the state of disintegration. He lays emphasis on the separation of the intelligentsia from the Russian people, as well as the departure of the former from the Orthodox faith. His negative assessment of these disintegrative tendencies can be discerned in the presentation of intelligentsia members: Stepan Verkhovensky, his son Petr, Kirillov, Stavrogin, Karmazinov, Shatov to some extent, Shigalyov and their followers. They are either ridiculed or morally discredited, their attempts to oust religion from the social life provoke disaster. On the whole the Russian society in *The Devils* succumbs to disintegrative tendencies, however, the final pilgrimage of Stepan Verkhovensky which culminates in his conversion to the Orthodox faith inspires optimism. He censures himself, his son and all other adherents of socialism or liberalism who abandoned faith and compares them to the devils whom Jesus drove off from a madman and who entered the herd of swine: "[...] they are [...] all the demons who have accumulated in our great, out dear, sick Russia [...] But a great idea and a great will protect her from on high [...] the sick man will be healed and will sit at the feet of Jesus" (732).

The presentation of both the English and the Russian societies is related to Dostoevsky's and Conrad's conservative and organicist views. Conrad's conservatism and organicism are grounded in his conviction of the necessity of man's growth within the community which enhances the sense of solidarity between its members and, thus, counteracts alienation. Dostoevsky's views on society bear great resemblance to the conservative and organicist ideas of Conrad, both these writers disapproving of liberalism, utilitarianism,

individualism and radicalism which surfaced and prevailed throughout the 19th century.<sup>38</sup> Both of them raise objections to social atomizing, triggered off by liberalism which looks approvingly on individuals egoistic pursuit of their interests as beneficial to society. Conrad denounces such a vision of society subverted by individualism which entails isolation and disintegration of social and personal bonds. Dostoevsky is critical of the bourgeoisie which he holds responsible for perpetuating egoism, the law of the strongest and the prevalence of money in the social and personal relationships, all that reinforcing absolute freedom so much feared by the writer. The characters of *The Devils* and also of *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karamazov* strive to assert their absolute freedom which, according to Dostoevsky, they misinterpret as a repudiation of all the rules and values. Conrad's heroes are, similarly, "object lessons in the failure of individualism".<sup>39</sup>

Some basic differences between the views of the two writers have to be registered. Whereas Conrad embraces the ideal of man's identification with the community, Dostoevsky insists on faith as the sole remedy for all evil. And he means the Orthodox faith exclusively, the only one preserving the true message of Christ<sup>40</sup>, in contrast to catholicism which took over the idea of a universal empire, of the earthly political power.<sup>41</sup> Thus, if Conrad's vision of an organic society remains within the limits of the natural, Dostoevsky develops the idea of the society modelled on the Orthodox Church.<sup>42</sup> These differences reflect the different traditions they inherit, the Russian conception of society with "a divinely shaped destiny" and the English one of humanly created community.<sup>43</sup>

The moral and political insights of both Conrad and Dostoevsky have lost none of their interest to the modern reader. Both writers are almost prophetic in predicting the course of development of contemporary societies, in anticipating problems afflicting the modern man such as isolation, an escape from freedom, the sense of the absurdity of life. They point to irrationalism in the sphere of politics and the dangers of social utopias affecting the lives of the whole societies. Whereas Dostoevsky's originality stems from the kind of issues he raises, Conrad's profundity of insight derives from his ethic of solidarity, a remedy for a social disintegration and moral crises in the world deprived of God.

<sup>38</sup> Fleishman: *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> R. Przybylski: *Dostojewski i przekłete problemy*, Warszawa: PIW, 1964, p. 241.

<sup>41</sup> Kabat: *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Walicki: *Rosyjska filozofia i myśl społeczna*, p. 467.

<sup>43</sup> Fleishman: *op. cit.*, p. 224.

## STRESZCZENIE

Poglądy Conrada i Dostojewskiego, choć złożone i często niejednoznaczne, można wpisać w szeroko pojęty nurt myśli konserwatywnej. Organiczna wizja społeczeństwa u Conrada i słowianofilska u Dostojewskiego znajdują odzwierciedlenie w powieściach *Tajny agent* i *Biesy*. Społeczeństwo przedstawione w *Tajnym agencie* uznaje system wartości konserwatywnych, dzięki czemu może zachować stabilność i przeciwstawić się takim ideologiom dążącym do zburzenia porządku społecznego i politycznego, jak anarchizm. Natomiast w społeczeństwie rosyjskim ukazanym w *Biesach* żadna ideologia nie zajmuje dominującej pozycji. Autorytaryzm władz nie potrafi zapełnić pustki ideologicznej, co wykorzystuje Wierchowieński do szerzenia socjalizmu rewolucyjnego. Społeczeństwo to odwraca się od tradycyjnych, według Dostojewskiego, rosyjskich wartości, jak wiara, wspólnota, jedność społeczna, ku ideologii rewolucyjnej. W rezultacie ulega stopniowej dezintegracji, która przejawia się w zerwaniu więzi między jednostkami i między całymi grupami społecznymi. Centralne postacie obu powieści, Verloc i Stavrogin, stanowią odbicie tendencji występujących w społeczeństwie angielskim i rosyjskim. Stavrogin, który jest niezdolny do odróżnienia dobra od zła i który pragnąc wolności absolutnej odnajduje tylko pustkę duchową, uosabia sytuację narodu rosyjskiego. Verloc, mniej typowy dla społeczeństwa w *Tajnym agencie*, jako że łączy status przedstawiciela klasy średniej z profesją szpiega i anarchisty, akceptuje jednak system wartości konserwatywnych, a jego postawa ilustruje opór społeczeństwa angielskiego wobec ideologii sprzecznych z konserwatyzmem.

