



## POLISH SOCIOLOGY IN A MIRROR

Book Review of Antoni Sulek. *A Mirror on the High Road. Chapters from the History of Social Research in Poland*. Peter Lang, Series: Eastern European Culture, Politics and Societies, 2019.

Polish literature on the sociology of sociology or the historiography of sociology is relatively rich, although primarily available only in Polish. While this is obviously not a highly sought-after topic and Polish studies seems to be shrinking, much insight into the subject is not available to an English-speaking audience. A reader interested in Polish sociology has a few options to investigate this national circulation: a brief and relatively new guidebook in the Palgrave series by Marta Bucholc (Bucholc 2016), for example, as well as older publications like Piotr Sztompka's overview of the most well-known Polish sociologists (Sztompka 1984). In the case of journal articles and contributions to edited volumes, a variety of work offers a much broader perspective. However, this important material is scattered and difficult to find among numerous journals and incoherent keywords. The discussed volume, *A Mirror on the High Road. Chapters from the History of Social Research in Poland* by Antoni Sulek, gathers his contributions on Polish sociology from last three decades. It is a collection of ten essays printed mainly in academic journals, which together offer insight into over 130 years of Polish sociology and consequently Polish society. Academia, its networks, authors and their work are the primary scope of interest.

Sulek's speciality is research methods and social sciences' methodology, which is easily visible throughout the volume. A few chapters also focus on intellectual exchange, transnational contexts, flows of theoretical and methodological inspirations, and mutual recognition of intellectuals and organizations from different national contexts. As one can read in the introduction: "Sociology as a scholarly discipline emerged from social reflection and analysis and came to be grounded, intellectually and institutionally, in Western Europe and America." (p. 11). The volume is organized in a chronical manner, offering short essays that can be read separately according to readers' interests.

The book starts with papers on the very first sociological works from the turn of 19th and 20th century before guiding the reader through the interwar period and sociological research of Great Depression. It subsequently highlights the post-war developments of institutional sociology, which were continued after World War II, and covers the turbulent revolution of Solidarity and the discipline's role during this transition period. The last part shifts attention towards survey sociology, particularly its public role and reliability. In the background, one gains insight into not only the development of Polish sociology as an academic discipline and its research methods, but also the Polish society itself, with its social struggles and political problems – the book's title refers to Stendhal's "mirror carried along a high road," where Polish society parades.

Antoni Sułek, a sociologist himself, has taught at the University of Warsaw's Institute of Sociology and just a quick glimpse at his list of publications leaves no doubt that he is an expert on the topics covered in the volume (for example, Sułek 2012). Considering that, I have hoped that *A Mirror on the High Road* could be a more general synthesis on Polish sociology, or would cover even a slightly more narrow scope of interest like empirical sociology in Poland or institutional and theoretical links with American sociology in a more systematic manner. The volume's goals, however, are much more modest, as *A Mirror on the High Road* is a collection of reprinted journal articles with all their pros and cons. As the author explains:

Almost all the essays were written first as papers for conferences organized by various universities and scholarly societies (...) All were later reworked for the purpose of publication in national and international sociological journals. These works were composed in my head and on paper over the course of many years. In this volume they appear in their original form; updating them would undoubtedly have ended in their manipulation. (p. 16)

Almost all the articles were published under the same titles over the past decades, and one of them was published in co-authorship. Additionally, there is a Polish version of the book, which differs slightly, although the majority of content is similar (Sułek 2011). On the one hand, it is a valuable initiative that gathers scattered papers of a well-known scholar, witness and participant of changes in the field in last 50 years as well as an expert on Polish sociology. A reprint of collected essays is not a rare practice. On the other hand, we can only hope that this might be a prelude into yet another work by Antoni Sułek on Polish sociology. I would also hope for some more "manipulation" proposed by the author, as some fragments are redundant or require more explanation and context for readers less familiar with Polish history.

The first chapter, titled "Tracing de Tocqueville: Ludwik Krzywicki's 1893 Journey to 'Modern' America" – originally (Sułek 2013) – takes us back to the

19<sup>th</sup> century and early origins of sociology. Sułek introduces Krzywicki and his intellectual profile before describing his journey to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the Folk-Lore Congress, as well as its results. This founding father of social sciences in Poland also belonged to the first wave of European scholars travelling to the United States. He noted his impressions in *Beyond the Atlantic* in 1895, which gathers his observations on American modernity, agricultural developments, education and ways of life. Krzywicki was searching for inspiration for Europe. He even managed to focus on Polish immigrants in Chicago – treading ground for later research by Thomas and Znaniecki. Especially interesting is the fact that Krzywicki also clears the path for fieldwork research; against an armchair ethnology of his times, he focuses on contemporary modern society which, at that time, made his research more sociological than anthropological.

The next study, “Le Suicide in Poland: Analysis of the Spread and Reception of a Sociological Classic” – originally (Sułek 2009a) – examines the reception of Emile Durkheim’s classic book *Le Suicide* over more than half a century. Although a Polish translation was first published in 2006, this classic work has been widely known among Polish intellectual circles and inspired sociologists for decades. This paradoxical, but not so rare situation shows how classical sociological work is so well-known that it delays its translation. Sułek traces how *Le Suicide* reached Poland as well as how it was accepted, rejected or incorporated into further research there. If someone were to trace international circulations of ideas by gathering data on translation, this case would not be helpful at all, and Sułek manages to reconstruct Durkheim’s impact in a careful and knowledgeable manner. This contribution defends a qualitative and sensitive approach – one which cannot provide quick and spectacular results but remains closer to the complicated social reality.

The third chapter follows this path by examining the well-known research by Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisel on Marienthal and goes beyond only tracing its reception by describing forgotten works on unemployment in Poland during the Great Depression of the 1930s. “The Marienthal 1931/1932 Study and Contemporary Studies on Unemployment in Poland” – originally (Sułek 2007) – not only presents an overview of research initiatives in interwar Poland, but also describes the living conditions, social life and psychological well-being of the unemployed during this period. On a general level, it both reveals how sociography was maturing into sociology and offers a detailed overview of the young discipline’s methodological struggles and institutional context. Various methods and data – including statistics, diaries, memoirs or family interviews – illustrate how Polish specificity was built through dialogue with European and American scholars. Likewise noteworthy was the number of female sociologists engaged in the research – most of whom were killed during

World War II and are fairly unknown today. Even if sociology developments stopped dramatically during World War II, the interwar period still managed to build fundamentals strong enough to shape post-war Polish sociology.

The subsequent part transports readers into the post-war period, although it only minimally examines the time after the Polish Thaw in 1956 with occasional references to the Stalinist period (1948–1953/56) or post-war reconstruction (1945–1948). “‘To America!’ Polish Sociologists in the United States after 1956 and the Development of Empirical Sociology in Poland” – originally (Sułek 2010) – focuses on Polish-American exchanges, mostly through the activities of the Ford Foundation. Polish sociologists’ travels to the United States, as well as to England and France, contributed to a profound development of empirical social research – which will also be discussed in forthcoming chapters. Sułek presents a few case studies by Polish scholars from various political backgrounds, their itineraries in the United States and later bilateral exchange. With Krzywicki’s aforementioned travels or Florian Znaniecki and William I. Thomas’ well-known cooperation in the interwar period, the United States undoubtedly played a special role in the sociological intellectual landscape. However, post-war exchange is relatively poorly researched compared to that of the interwar. It is surprising how strong the post-war influence was, but at the same time how equal this exchange often seemed to be.

To strengthen the thesis about the developments of an empirical school inspired by American exchanges, the fifth chapter examines a series of pioneering survey research conducted at the University of Warsaw by Stefan Nowak and Stanisław Ossowski’s circle. Therefore, the chapter – originally (Sułek 1998) – discusses Nowak’s 1958 ground-breaking study on students in Warsaw. This study not only influenced research practices for years to come, but also served as an important barometer of social change in Poland. From 1958 to 1961 alone, five other large-scale studies on social attitudes were conducted at the University of Warsaw; it was just a prelude to many other projects in future. In this chapter, readers can trace how those were constructed, conducted and analyzed – how Polish society was diagnosed. Furthermore, the case of Ossowski’s circle shows how changes in the Communist Party’s policy toward scholarship shaped sociologists’ interests and the scope of possible research. At the same time, from this chapter on, the examined themes concentrate mostly on intellectual circles in Warsaw, particularly at the University of Warsaw. It is true that this was the largest and most hegemonic intellectual environment, but perspectives from other strong sociological centers like Łódź, Poznań as well as smaller towns like Toruń or Lublin are absent.

In the second half of the book, Sułek focuses on alterations in Polish sociology in relation to the great social transformation of the 1980s. Specifically, he looks at the first Solidarity, Martial Law and slow changes that inched towards

a general shift from state socialism to democracy and open markets. While the former essays were based on strictly historical materials, the following set of contributions is also based on author's direct observations. While his personal background and academic path undoubtedly shaped previous chapters, his role as an eye-witness is even more striking in this context.

The sixth chapter, "The Rise and Decline of Survey Sociology in Poland" – originally co-authored (Sułek and Młynarz-Pomorska 1992) – shows how the survey method became the scientific method, by which they became the dominant and academically legitimated way for obtaining knowledge about society. Survey hegemony marginalized other methods like examining personal documents (once the Polish speciality) and even blocked the development of other qualitative approaches. Sułek goes as far as to state that Polish sociology became survey sociology, which to some extent may be a Warsaw specificity rather than a nationwide phenomenon. To be sure, surveys were a dominant method in 1960s, especially convenient in times of political pressure: simultaneously resistant and prone to interpretation. However, at the very same time, surveys faced a wave of criticism in the 1960s and again in the following decade. Although this kind of criticism was a transnational trend, Poland had its own traditions of humanistic sociology during the interwar period which fuelled this later dispute. The tipping point was also subsequent sociologists' inability to predict the social protest in Poland in 1980/81 (also Sułek 2009b). Closing the chapter, the authors suggest that surveys' hegemony was never fully dethroned, but rather that the method was revisited and adapted, whereby its moderate critical position seemed to become much healthier for the whole discipline.

In the context of public opinion, the seventh chapter entitled "Serving Society or the Authorities? Public Opinion Research in the Last Decade of Communism" is devoted to the last turbulent decade of People's Republic of Poland – a time when public opinion was by no means a synonym for social opinion. The latter was seen by the authorities as wider and more egalitarian in contrast to public one, which was limited to those who had the ability and resources to make their voices heard. Surveys and polls were seen as a highly needed tool for the Communist Party, which while supporting social research also aimed to control it. The Center for Public Opinion Research (Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej, OBOP) was established after the Thaw in 1956 as relatively independent institution. During 1970s, a movement towards establishing an alternative public opinion center began and resulted in the Center for Social Opinion Research (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS) during the martial law period. The CBOS as a case study is not at all a black-and-white story of a totalitarian takeover of hegemony in social research. Here, Sułek traces the difficult and complicated relations of social research and political power as

well as methodological developments of sociology – both as a discipline and as a part of a public sphere.

The next part, the “Systemic Transformation and the Reliability of Survey Research: Evidence from Poland” – originally (Sulek 1994) – continues with this theme. As this essay was originally written in the early 1990s, it therefore also offers insight into how sociologists conceptualized the change *ad hoc*. It also provides more historical details about the political transition. Sulek presents research tracing society’s tendency to report membership in the first Solidarity in relation to the reliability of survey research. The analysis is based on data from public opinion research conducted between 1979 and 1983. The author argues that a systemic change in Poland led to an increased credibility of survey findings, and, in general, tries to prove that democracy favors the reliability of social research. The analytical part is dense and detailed, yet the short conclusion that “democracy is the best environment for opinion surveys” (p. 170) very general.

The ninth chapter “On the Unpredictability of Revolutions: Why did Polish Sociology Fail to Forecast Solidarity?” – originally (Sulek 2009b) – continues to explore the methodology of survey research in a social context. One troubling question surfaces: Why was Polish sociology unable to predict the 1989-1981 Solidarity Revolution? All the main actors, including the political authorities, democratic opposition and sociologists, were taken by surprise. Readers can trace the state of knowledge, or rather predictions in late 1970s; however, they are not always documented and instead simply listed as quotes (like on p. 172). Sulek argues that sociologists’ failure lies in the fact that the birth of Solidarity was revolutionary, and therefore naturally unpredictable. At the same time, the author shows that the failure was fruitful and stimulated reflection which led to a deeper “understanding of social process and the nature of prediction in sociology” (p. 183).

All three parts address the last decade of state socialism and the transition to a democratic system and liberal economy. Political and social contexts are explained in all three, albeit with a different focus and amount of detail, which might be annoying for those who wish to read book chapter by chapter. This is one of the downsides of a volume that only reprints gathered articles without editing or updating.

The last essay in the volume, “A Sociology Engaged on Behalf of Polish Society” – originally (Sulek 2014) – is likely the most general piece. It focuses on a concept of “engaged sociology” in Poland. Inspired by the famous example of Max Weber’s *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Sulek reflects on how sociologists in Poland can or should be present in public discourse, influence society, and involve in political changes in their research, theorizing, and public presence. This is a voice supporting public, yet “par excellence scientific”, engagement.

In summary, essays concerning the earliest period – that is the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and the interwar era – provide detailed insight into Polish sociology's international contacts, including American, French and German influences. Cooperation with the United States is also examined during the post-war period. Subsequent essays concentrate primarily on the Warsaw school of quantitative sociology, namely the Stefan Nowak school, survey method and public/social opinion research institutions. The book's detail and insightfulness constitute both its strengths and weaknesses. In other words, the volume's constructions illustrate a monographic clarity of narrow case studies, but often fail to provide a wider picture. This is not necessarily a demand that a volume of reprints needs to meet, but adding a more extensive introduction or summary to tie together all discussed plots would allow readers to better follow developments in Polish sociology. As for now, we might only wait for Antoni Sułek's next book.

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