

# **POLISH SOCIAL SCIENCES IN GLOBAL ACADEMIA**

## **TOMASZ ZARYCKI, *THE POLISH ELITE AND LANGUAGE SCIENCES: A PERSPECTIVE OF GLOBAL HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY***

Agnieszka Kolasa-Nowak  
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin

In his new book, Tomasz Zarycki (2022) brings the global context of knowledge production to bear on the history of Poland's social sciences. *The Polish Elite and Language Sciences* is written from the perspective of historical sociology, which means that the past is used to help understand the contemporary state of the social sciences in Poland. Local historical determinants are placed in the broader model of relations between the centre and periphery. Thus, the book provides many new and interesting insights into the production of knowledge in the East European semi-periphery, and it also sheds light on the social sciences in the global core. It should be emphasised that the author's goal was to take part in global theoretical discussions and to make his own contribution to the sociology of science. In my opinion, this goal has been achieved. But there is another valuable effect of his analysis. Namely, it provides an inspiring conceptualisation of the main historical processes that have occurred in Polish society. Special place has been given to the role of elites. Zarycki's analysis starts from the end of the nineteenth century and covers all the main turning points of modern Polish history: the creation of an independent state in 1918 after a long period of subordination to three European empires, the post-war project of a socialist state

under Soviet control, the fall of the People's Republic and the constitution of a new social order in neoliberal circumstances. The contemporary stage has been marked by Poland's joining the global system and integrating with EU structures. Polish history has been reinterpreted as part of global history. The author has replaced the descriptive mode usually used in recounting Polish history with an explanatory tone. Both the historical aspect of the book and its theoretical dimension are very dense and rich, with inspiring threads. In my short commentary, I will limit myself to two remarks directly related to the social sciences.

Tomasz Zarycki views science as a social practice governed by power relations. For him, the case of Poland is a fascinating laboratory for studying the relations between the literary and language sciences and the field of power. He treats those disciplines as examples of practices of meaning production, and thus he recognises that their social functioning goes far beyond the purely cognitive dimension. Language sciences, as well as history, are linked to the formation of collective imaginations. As a result, they have limited autonomy from the field of power.

Translating Poland's specific East European historical experience into the concepts and models produced in the West is a hard task. Zarycki starts with theorising about the mechanisms of meaning production in the global peripheries, using the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Bob Jessop, Immanuel Wallerstein, Stein Rokkan, and George Steinmetz. He pays attention to the role of the state in these processes and elaborates on the notions of the field of power and homology to fit the semi-peripheral situation of Poland.

One of the important points of the book is the observation that "the dominance of the core over the peripheries and semi-peripheries is homologically reflected in the global field of social sciences, in which non-core theorising is usually marginalised with no chance of becoming universal" (Zarycki 2022: 81). The opportunity for Polish scholars to join global discussions and get a certain level of international recognition will increase only if they are able to provide substantial contributions of a kind that, being based on a universal theory, can be widely recognised. But, unfortunately, there have very rarely been favourable conditions for such contributions. In a detailed analysis of the history of Polish literary and language sciences the author traces the strong homology with the field of power. In the past there have only been a few moments of relative weakening of the homology, and these usually resulted in international recognition for Polish scholars. Most of the time, however, the Polish language sciences have been characterised by normative use of theories: for instance, with the

creation of the theory of newspeak in the 1970s, due to the public involvement of scholars in the growing conflict between the emerging opposition and the communist authorities.

To inscribe the Polish case in a theoretical frame, Zarycki reaches for Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsend's (2001) model of inverted hierarchies of three types of capital in post-communist countries. The novelty of this interpretation of the Bourdieu theory is its contextualisation, which is based on the assumption that in certain conditions a political or cultural elite may assume dominance over the economic one. This means that what is considered a compensatory type of capital can be different depending on the context (Zarycki 2022: 62). The Polish intelligentsia is a bearer of cultural capital, which has proven to be the dominant elite resource in the Polish historical context. Zarycki shows the dominant position of the cultural elite in the field of power. This structural fact greatly shapes the trajectories of Polish intellectuals, especially in disciplines such as language and literature. In coping with meaning production these scholars are supposed to play an important role in domestic intellectual debates and political disputes. They are involved in the process of creating collective imaginaries, which are directed at strengthening national identity. The humanities and literary sciences can also be seen as "tools for defending the autonomy of the national fields of power in a global context" (Zarycki 2022: 473). This situation results in social scientists having a particular dichotomy of orientation. There are two separate arenas in which they can receive recognition. One is international academia, but the other, which is equally or even more important, is the national field of power. In consequence, internationally recognised academic discoveries are not a priority for peripheral scholars. This multi-positioning is typical for intellectual elites in Poland. In their academic trajectories they have to combine the duties of a scholar with those of a public figure with moral obligations in regard to the national community. According to the author, this prevents them from taking fully autonomous and critical standpoints and can lead to poor and non-innovative scholarship.

This reconstruction of the main themes of the book inclines me to two observations: one in regard to the general level and one in regard to Poland. The first concerns the meta-reflection about scholarly production. Specific entanglements of the social sciences with the field of power probably occur everywhere, including at the very core of global academia. This is significant, because globally dominant discourses are being reproduced there. They set the universal standards for what is understood as true scholarly achievement. Thanks to Zarycki's book, the question of the limited au-

tonomy of disciplines so closely connected with the production of meaning and social imaginations can be addressed. While admitting the existence of profound differences between peripheries and centres, it is still interesting to investigate the dynamics of the homology between these academic fields and the global field of power.

My second observation concerns the Polish social sciences. I read Zarycki's book as an analysis of the structural constraints built into the historical development of the discipline. He concludes that social scientists in Poland always have to respond to dual challenges and thus fulfil the non-cognitive functions of their role as important players in the field of power. This is a local, negative factor that reduces our chances of academic recognition in an increasingly globalising science. This can lead to pessimistic conclusions about the internal limitations of the Polish social sciences in their pursuit of international recognition. Nevertheless, Zarycki himself shows that there is a possibility of overcoming this structural fate by creating a theory on the periphery that describes our uniqueness in a universally attractive way.

Today the growing impact of global academia on the Polish social sciences is changing the individual trajectories of Polish scholars. We are increasingly striving for international recognition. We are looking for ways to contribute to global discussions in the social sciences. Zarycki's book proves that the best way to achieve this goal is to contextualise and rewrite local history into universal theories. Therefore, for Polish readers, it is an excellent incentive to practise historical sociology. This perspective makes it possible to integrate the Polish experience into global processes and to make interesting conceptualisations of the peripheral societies of the Global East. This important book for Polish sociology was written in English. I am afraid that to some extent this may reduce its influence in the Polish scholarly field. However, if Polish scholars are actually trying to be included in the global circulation of knowledge, Zarycki's book may help to create a theoretical platform that will make this task easier.

#### Bibliography:

/// Eyal G., Szelenyi I., Townsley E.R. 2001. *Making Capitalism without Capitalists: The New Ruling Elites in Eastern Europe*, Verso.

/// Zarycki T. 2022. *The Polish Elite and Language Sciences: A Perspective of Global Historical Sociology*, Palgrave Macmillan.

/// **Agnieszka Kolasa-Nowak** – sociologist and historian. Professor at the Institute of Sociology of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University. Her research interests include historical sociology, sociology of science, and the presence of the past in Polish sociology. She has recently published “Od idei *homo sovieticus* do *mentalności folwarczanej Polaków*. O używaniu przeszłości w dyskursie socjologicznym i publicznym” (2018), “Znaczenie historii w studiach regionalnych. Rola przeszłości w polskiej socjologii regionu po 1989 r.” (2019), “Sprawczość i przeszłość w analizach socjologicznych polskiego społeczeństwa” (2020), and “Historical Sociology in Poland: Transformations of the Uses of the Past” (with Marta Bucholc, 2023).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5318-5171>

E-mail: [agnieszka.kolasa-nowak@mail.umcs.pl](mailto:agnieszka.kolasa-nowak@mail.umcs.pl)