

THE RE(CON)FIGURATION OF KNOWLEDGE

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

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This book aroused my interest for several reasons. As a sociologist of knowledge, the transformation of historical sociology into what the author calls in the introduction a “global historical sociology of knowledge” seemed to me very promising. As a trained sociologist of language, I found it very attractive to read about linguistics in Poland, and as someone socialised in what used to be West Germany, I was eager to learn about Poland and Polish intellectual history. (My personal encounter with Polish sociology as a student had only concerned Włodzimierz Wesolowski in Konstanz, and Andrzej Miller, whose assistant I had been in Switzerland.)

Let me start with the general appraisal that my various interests were fully satisfied. The book certainly makes a number of important contributions. From my perspective, however, the theoretical model seemed the most intriguing part and I will focus on it here.

In fact, Zarycki starts his book on the development of the social sciences in Poland with a quite elaborate theoretical discussion. Here, Wallerstein’s centre, periphery, and semi-periphery model of the world constitutes an important reference. Yet, while this model stresses the political and economic sphere, Zarycki extends it to meaning systems and the symbolic sphere, which includes knowledge, and specifically scientific knowledge –

the very topic of the book. This integration is achieved by linking Wallerstein's model to Bourdieu's concept of a field, and particularly the field of power. The field of power is defined in the book as a meeting ground for dominant agents of economic, political, military, and other fields when they are struggling over the major principles of legitimation, hierarchisation, and the regulation of homologies between its two dimensions. Zarycki inserts into Bourdieu's already bipolar – but in a way, metaphorical – notion of a “field” the spatial binary order of centre and periphery. This binary order is a global model, which has nation states as its basic units. It allows him to identify Poland as what he calls, following Lipset and Rokkan (1967), an “interface periphery” between two poles of the world system. The two poles are the fields of power in the West and the field of power in Russia. In this context, it is key to the field thesis that “the basic structure of oppositions within a semi-peripheral field of power differs from the structure of the field in the core states of the world system.” That is to say that the structure of conflicts in a semi-peripheral field of power, such as Poland, can be seen as reflecting both the external poles in ways which take into account the country's situation within the global field of power. And this holds not only for the dominant field of power in Poland but also for the various subfields, such as the field of science and the social sciences, which are at issue here. Since the symbolic level exhibits homologies, we find similar conflicts and polarisations with respect to semantic oppositions and themes within the sciences. Obviously, the notion of homology here draws explicitly on Bourdieu and the idea that knowledge is correlated to social structure in ways that are guided by the dynamics in and between social fields.

This convincing but abstract model is substantiated in the second chapter: in his “Structural Reading of the Poland's Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History” the author challenges what he calls “dominant Polish-centric narratives and models” and he does so by claiming that Poland's dependence on the East and on the global situation is crucial to understanding the country's social processes. This claim is supported by findings such as that Poles held more professorial positions in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century than they did in the Prussian and Austrian partitions combined. The history recounted cuts across the three separate states of Poland produced by the critical junctures of the Uprisings in 1830–1831 and 1863–1864, the French Invasion of Russia (1812), in which part of the Polish elite participated, the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Soviet State, the Second World War, the Cold War, the Thaw,

perestroika, and the post-1989 period. Poland was thus created by the various phases of the deterritorialisation of its population, so that confessional, family, language, and social-status aspects have contributed to its national identity. As in Germany, language plays an important role, and as in Germany in the nineteenth century, weakness of economic development combined with processes of modernisation led to a strong intellectual class in Poland. During the Cold War, Soviet domination was the major reason for Poland's semi-peripheral situation, while the "post-communist" era yielded another cleavage between the centre and periphery as a result of the dependence on the Western core in the classic world-systemic context. As a consequence, the situation can be characterised as an *inversion* of the Russian situation: in Russia, the political elite is dominant, and both the native economic elite and the cultural elite are subordinate to it. The main division in the field of power runs across specific camps of the state elite, for example, between the military and those institutions that control the country's finances. In Poland, the field of power is divided between those with more internationalised and/or cosmopolitan cultural capital, and those with more local and traditional cultural capital (e.g., strong ties to the Catholic Church).

This structural reading, then, provides the background for Chapter 3. In an enormously rich and dense 200 pages, Zarycki analyses the historical development of the field of linguistics and literary studies in Poland in minute detail. What struck me most was the role of linguists and language in the early construction of national identity, for instance, by Polishising names. We also learn a lot about Polish universities and – what is not the same – universities in Poland, about the role of structuralism, about new-speak, and the specific role of the Catholic Church and John Paul II.

The historical reconstruction is impressive, but I must admit that, faced with such a quantity of authors, texts, and institutions presented along the temporal line, and two disciplines, I lost track of their relation to the theoretical model. It was only in the book's "Conclusion," on the current situation, that I caught up again with the connection to the theoretical frame established at the beginning. Here, the author identifies today's field structure in semi-peripheral Poland. This field structure is defined according to the poles of pro- and anti-centre, as expressed in the opposition of populists and Eurosceptics, on the one hand, and those who idealise the West and are anti-populists on the other. Due to the extension of higher education, a new middle class (or what Fligstein [2008] calls the knowledge class) has taken the role formerly belonging to the intelligentsia. In the field of science, this development has been paralleled since 1989 by an

increasing autonomy. Interestingly, in Poland the autonomisation of the field of science is linked to a decoupling of the Polish field of science from world science. Thus, for instance, the number of Polish Web of Science references decreased after 1989. The polarised oppositions in the national field of power and the field of sciences are mirrored in the field of literary studies, for example, with respect to themes: on one side, religious and patriotic themes dominate, on the other, the topics are regional and national minorities, Jewish issues, and feminist and gender studies (as “academics are involved in the workings of homology by linking their debates to issues and cleavages defined by the field of power,” p. 470).

In summary, there is no doubt that the model is very promising when it comes to relating political and economic developments on a global level to the dynamics of science and, probably, knowledge in general. Nevertheless, the book leaves me with some questions (and it is certainly an advantage of the situation to have been able to pose them to the author).

My first question concerns a detail, that is, the implicit claim that the study concerns the *social sciences*. Although I personally do not have a problem with calling linguistics a social science, I have lived to see the demise of sociolinguistics and the renaissance of formal linguists who would contend that they are social scientists. The same holds true – aside from the very marginal sociology of literature – for most of the many scholars of literature with whom I have been working, who would ascribe themselves to the humanities or *Geisteswissenschaften* rather than the social sciences.

This detail leads me to the more encompassing question of whether we can consider *disciplines as fields*, that is, as “institutionalized sphere[s]” (p. 473), and whether we should assume that these are currently the relevant units when studying science. At least, based on my experience with social research in the US, UK, France, and Germany, we have witnessed a massive interdisciplinisation since the 1970s, and the explosion of transdisciplinarity has led to what some have, somewhat exaggeratedly, called “Mode 2 Science” (Gibbons et al. 1994). In the disciplines concerned, this may be seen in the role of digitalisation for linguistics or the massive extension of media studies in, and at the expense of, literary sciences.

The question as to the disciplines may even be extended to the basic category of the model, that is, the very concept of a “field.” As Bourdieu himself, as early as the 1980s, put forward the thesis that the field of religion (which had been at the origins of his field theory) was dissolving, I wonder if such processes of dissolution also concern other fields and the concept of a field in general. This may also hold for the basic unit of observation in

regard to the global field of power. Although it may seem quite pertinent to consider states relevant, particularly in the case of Poland, one wonders if this country can be viewed as categorically distinct from the West.

The question I want to raise is whether the book's perspective does not represent a form of *methodological nationalism*, essentialising Poland to a categorically bounded unit intellectually and thus almost excluding the possibility that Poland is (politically as well as intellectually) an integrated part of the EU and NATO. If we want to avoid this one-sided perspective, should we not consider both aspects as being present at the same time, that is, as two simultaneous tendencies? On the one hand, there is the transgression of national boundaries – the assumed one-dimensional distinction between the centre, periphery, and semi-periphery (which has been shown in any case to be multidimensional) and the boundaries of the fields of science, social sciences, and the disciplines. On the other hand, there is their continuous reaffirmation. We could call the simultaneity of these two divergent, conflictual, and sometimes even polarising tendencies “movements in space,” and we could call the forms resulting from these tendencies a “refiguration” – a term quite close to the word “reconfiguration,” which the author uses throughout the book but leaves undefined (Knoblauch & Löw 2020).

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