

ACADEMIC LEADERS OF THE PRESENT AND THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FUTURE*

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Florian Znaniecki laid the groundwork for the field of academic leadership. His pioneering research encompassed worldwide comparative studies, extensive empirical research on academic leaders, and a theoretical framework presented in his two classic books: *The Man of the Present and the Civilization of the Future* (Znaniecki [1934] 2001, *Ludzie terażniejsi i cywilizacja przyszłości*) and *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge* (Znaniecki 1940). Between 1931 and 1933, he embarked on a grand project titled “Education and Social Change” for Teachers College of Columbia University. He aimed to surpass the scope of his monumental work, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918–1920), and the project involved the analysis of over 1,300 biographies, with an additional 60 case studies of educational institutions. Znaniecki (1998) envisioned this new project as the foundation for his proposed “school of leaders” at Columbia University – the first of its kind in the US and potentially worldwide. Although his project remained unfinished, Znaniecki’s work defined the essence of the field of academic leadership, which grapples with the crucial polarity between leadership theory and leadership practice (see Johnson 2020).

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/// Znaniecki and Integral Leadership

Throughout his long career, which spanned disciplines, continents, and eras in twentieth-century scholarship, Florian Znaniecki stressed the vital role of academic leaders, especially sociologists, in whose hands – he thought – lay the fate not only of the universities of the future but also of civilisation itself. In *The Man of the Present and the Civilization of the Future*, he invited the reader to

imagine a university professor who aspires to go beyond the limitations of personal research and its dissemination. This professor envisions establishing a permanent creative group with several dozen colleagues. Let's assume that the professor wants this group to stop disseminating minor "contributions" intended to demonstrate the scientific rigour of their work and break free from the sterile "pedagogical" practice of presenting students with textbook excerpts of "certain," "predetermined" knowledge. Let's assume that, instead of merely checking if students have assimilated this pre-digested information, the professor wants to mobilise this group to tackle a grand and unexplored scientific endeavour together. This task would have unforeseen results and demand years of creative collaboration, free from external constraints and material concerns. The professor wants to fulfil the pedagogical function by involving students in this project, nurturing their creative aspirations and scientific ideals. (Znaniecki [1934] 2001: 292, own trans.)

Znaniecki was certainly such a professor. However, he contended that transformational academic leadership of this type was (almost) impossible within the context of contemporary societies, as peer and societal pressures would stifle academic freedom and creativity. Constrained by the power of the systems they operate within, visionary professors could not possibly realise their aspirations:

A normal society doesn't even need to defend itself against such possibilities. It understands that normal people "in positions of authority" wouldn't even consider such ideas. At most, they might voice them out loud or in writing, perhaps wishing for someone to somehow bring them to life. Society knows that even if a supernormal deviant in office took these ideas seriously, they would find no

active assistance while surrounded by normal people. They might receive symbolic support at best, but this too would disappear if they lost their position, as their supporters would be intimidated by the threat of a similar fate. Finally, even if, by an extraordinary stroke of luck, the deviant found active help and began to realize their idea, the project would become a travesty of the initial intention. Surrounded by normal people in positions of authority and within a normal environment, the creative current would dissipate, swallowed by the sand. (Znaniński [1934] 2001: 294)

Znaniński saw the only possibility for transformational academic leadership that could herald a new civilisation among “deviants with an unconventional course of life who know how to assemble a team of not quite normal supporters.” He claimed that only they could “bring essentially new and significant creative ideas to life, on a larger or smaller scale, and with varying degrees of success” (Znaniński [1934] 2001: 294).

This issue of *State of Affairs* stems from the largest project on academic leadership undertaken in Poland since 1989, which was inspired by Znaniński’s work. The bulk of our research was conducted in 2023 and 2024, thanks to the generous support of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the Łukasiewicz Research Network. Our goal was to identify academic leaders of the kind Znaniński envisioned and to articulate their struggles and wisdom, polarisations and polarities. Drawing on the autobiographical method originated and developed by Znaniński, and sharing his contention that personal documents are the royal path to understanding people (as we can see reality through their perspective, i.e., with the humanistic coefficient), we conducted 36 in-depth biographical interviews with Polish academic leaders and international experts. This material was then supplemented by three biographies of scholars, written at our invitation, as well as four focus group interviews (FGIs). Among the distinguished scholars and professors who wrote the personal documents we collected, Znaniński would certainly find those “deviants with an unconventional course of life who know how to assemble a team of not quite normal supporters.”

Our research on leadership was translated into a series of intensive leadership trainings. During the course of the project, we trained 25 leadership groups from 10 top Polish universities (around 20 people per group) for a total of 10 days (8 days for the Academic Leadership Development Programme; 2 days for the Polarity Management Programme). We in-

cluded a very diverse group of participants from mainstream universities (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, the University of Gdańsk, Jagiellonian University), art schools (Łódź Film School), medical universities (the Medical University of Lublin), private universities (SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw), technology universities (AGH University of Kraków), life sciences universities (Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences), religious universities (the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków), and military universities (the Polish Naval Academy in Gdynia). This makes the project both the largest action research in Poland, as well as the most significant single bottom-up intervention in the Polish academic system.

To conclude the project, in June 2024 we conducted a final FGI. The participants, representing leadership groups we had trained, reflected on their experience during the trainings. The novelty of the of the leadership training was that the participants were representatives of three groups – administration, management, and teachers/researchers – that seldom have an opportunity to get to know and understand one another’s outlooks. As one of the participants recalled,

we created a balanced team. It was the first time in the history of this department that when talking about all our troubles, we heard the same desires in the thoughts and statements of other members, which made us understand each other better. [...] The energy that has been generated in our group has been truly inspiring. (WR)

As we wanted to move beyond intellectual considerations, we asked the participants to use their power of imagination and to compare academia to the four elements of nature. The most pessimistic interviewee observed, “Due to the changes happening and the nature of our work at the university, I put out fires and handle the dirty work that no one else wants to do” (RC). However, the rest were a bit more optimistic: “I don’t see any fire hazard for now” (RZ). Another participant compared academia to water: “Fire is an element that unequivocally signifies destruction. It’s true that many things regenerate afterwards. However, despite water’s potential for destruction, we don’t perceive it as being as destructive as fire” (ZA). Yet another mentioned earth, which – he worried – together with water makes for “a swamp” (JK). Ultimately, the vision of the university of the present was far from optimistic. However, this negative perspective called for a new generation of leaders of the future who could master the fire, water,

earth, and air of the university. Ultimately, a leader was described as someone who can leverage these crucial polarities: “Being a leader means being flexible in pursuit of your goals. It’s like being in the flow, which conveys a sense of being fluid and adaptable” (JK).

Importantly, Znaniecki offered a holistic theory of academic leadership to guide “supernormal deviants.” As a sociologist, he reconstructed the field in which leaders operate (i.e., groups, organisations, societies, civilisations); as a (social) psychologist, he addressed the social roles of leaders; and as a philosopher of values, he asked the question, “What is leadership for?” Through this approach, he developed a theory of leadership, which (a) addresses all three fundamental facets of leadership – the scene of leadership (where), the person of the leader (who), and the purpose of leadership (why; see Anderson & Adams 2015; Forman & Ross 2013; Putz & Raynor 2005) – (b) is informed by particular scholarly traditions and empirical research (see also Graves 1974; Beck 2006), and (c) draws on spiritual and ethical sources (Znaniecki 1998, [1934] 2001; see also Ross et al. 2005; John Paul II 1987; Benedict XVI 2009; Francis 2015). In contrast to partial theories of leadership, Znaniecki offered what can be called an integral theory of leadership. The goal of this issue of *State of Affairs* is to present and develop such a theory. In the first and second sections, which are devoted to the scene of leadership, we focus on Ukraine and Poland, respectively. The third section contains biographies of scholar-practitioners who embody in their own ways extreme polarities of leadership. Last but not least, the fourth section describes the values that contemporary universities need.

/// Academic Leadership in Central Eastern Europe

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which began on 24 February 2022, has garnered global attention. In the first section, Anna Abram, head of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology at Cambridge University, offers an analysis of spiritual leadership, using Volodymyr Zelensky as a case study. Another distinguished author, Mykhailo Dymyd, a spiritual leader engaged in the Ukrainian fight for independence and one of the founders of the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, shares a meditation on the death of his son: Artemii, a 27-year-old volunteer soldier, was killed by a Russian mortar near Kherson in June 2022. Both contributions combine intellectual and spiritual perspectives on the war in Ukraine. The leadership scene is often a scene of drama (Bennis & Thomas 2002).

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the question of spirituality and leadership appears only in the time of war. In our final FGI, EL pointed out that initially her training group expected a focus on technical skills (communication tools, problem-solving, team-building), but eventually the training turned out to be a transformative exercise:

We were not ready to open up. It was difficult. We worked in teams with people we didn't know. The difficulty for us was also that these trainings were every two weeks for two days. In fact, a formula where we would get together in one place for a week or a few days would be much, much more effective. [...] However, it was really informative, and we came out with the feeling that everyone got something new for themselves as a human being and a leader, not just a training participant who came, listened, took notes, and left. What is happening right now [...] is that we created bonds, professional relationships that are underpinned by a bit of an emotional relationship. [...] This daily contact is simpler; communication is easier.

In the final instance, EL affirmed that, although her training group was not prepared for a deep experience, “the training led to spiritual development.” Similarly, AG opined, “this training was a transformative, developmental programme. It simply touched such layers of the human being that even so-called soft skills training could not touch.”

In the second section, we address the problem of polarisations in Polish academic leadership, which – as in Znaniecki's times – make leadership almost impossible. Three waves of changes in the Polish academic system form the context for Michał Łuczewski's and Piotr Czekierda's articles on the challenges of academic leadership in Poland (see also Fingas et al. 2024; Giza 2019, 2021; Kwiek 2016):

1. **The educational boom (1989–2007):** This long phase involved an ever-increasing access to higher education and a rising overall level of education, often accompanied by commercialisation.
2. **The Barbara Kudrycka reform (2007–2017):** This reform aimed to bridge the gap between higher education and labour market needs.
3. **The Jarosław Gowin reform (2018–present):** This reform emphasised academic excellence and aimed to integrate Polish universities into the global scientific race.

However, each reform introduced new challenges and prioritised different values, criteria, and measures, which impacted resource allocation (both human and financial). As one of our interviewees pointed out, there's a constant "wind" of change in universities: "Governments come and change everything; one administration after another comes and changes everything; rectors come and change everything. They win support for their vision, not continuing the vision of their predecessors" (RZ).

As a consequence, universities grapple with the tension between adhering to these new metrics and fulfilling their traditional mission of nurturing the academy's ethos (see Cardona & Rey 2008). This tension relates to the conflict between material infrastructure and spirituality (Giza 2019: 151–170), or between a manager, on the one hand, and a priest/artist on the other (Hatch et al. 2009). In academia, the managerial approach focuses on administrative efficiency and effectiveness – that is, service, process, and resource management – to ensure conditions for achieving the university's goals. Conversely, spiritually informed leadership emphasises recognising the university's vocation – its unique, irreplaceable mission – and caring for the university's values and the people who share these values. Leveraging the tension between these approaches requires conscious effort.

This tension between material infrastructure and spirituality refers to other fundamental polarities, such as the tension between contemplation and action, or being and becoming. These tensions will be exacerbated, as further reforms seem inevitable for Polish higher education systems, given the need of universities to adapt to the evolving local socio-economic context and global academic landscape. As an example of the growing awareness of the need for academic leadership in Central Eastern Europe, the recent Strategy of the University of Warsaw (UW) for 2023–2032 employs the term "leader" extensively. The goal is to be a "leader of good practices," a "leader of didactic innovation," and a "city, regional, and national leader." The document emphasises developing leadership competencies among university employees to achieve these goals (see Kwiek 2016; Fingas et al. 2024; Senat Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2023: 52).

/// How To Be a (Global) Academic Leader

Inspired by Znaniecki's (1920, [1934] 2001) emphasis on the importance of biographical documents to understand academic leadership (see also Suny & Kennedy 2001), the third section delves into the inner lives of academic leaders. We believe that a close examination of their biographies

and the moments when their leadership qualities emerged holds significant value for understanding how leaders develop. We present three case studies of global academic leaders with ties to Central Eastern Europe:

- Michael D. Kennedy, a leading American sociologist specialising in cultural sociology with a special focus on Poland and the region.
- Marc Gopin, a co-founder of the field of peace and conflict studies with family roots in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
- Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, who, through his students and followers, has heavily influenced the field of psychology in Poland.

These authors are globally recognised scholar-practitioners. As a counterpart to these established voices, we present a group discussion by young researchers from the University of Warsaw and Heidelberg University. Active beyond academia, they all exemplify the diversity of leadership styles and life-orientations (see Atkins 1982; Katcher & Pasternak 2003). This section addresses the reflexivity of scholar-practitioners, as we discovered that it was the crucial element of academic leadership. In our final FGI, one of the interviewees articulated the essence of reflexivity (BCh), focusing on four leadership components:

First, the energy to take action. In my opinion, a leader without energy simply cannot function effectively. Second, a vision to move in a specific direction. A clear vision prevents aimless wandering and provides direction. Third, the courage to carry out these actions. The courage to make decisions and take action is crucial. Fourth, sincerity and authenticity. Genuine transparency and authenticity are essential at all levels of personality. [...] However, I believe that these four qualities that I'm identifying here, and building them up with competence, are extremely important. Because what good is it if I'm brave but I can't communicate effectively? What good is it if I'm authentic but I can't convey my sincere messages to my team in the right way? What good is it if I have a lot of energy but I don't have the competence to manage it in a way that prevents burnout? Or so that I don't push my team too hard or not hard enough. And again, what good is it if I have a vision but it's disconnected from reality, if it's not in any way aligned with the current situation, if it's not based on research, evidence, and knowledge?

To explore the inner lives of the scholars, we adopted a multifaceted approach. For Marc Gopin, the process began with an autobiographical piece. This was then subjected to peer review before receiving additional commentary from Tory Baucum. Following a similar trajectory, Michael D. Kennedy's autobiographical work underwent review and further discussion with Warsaw and Heidelberg students. With Martin Seligman, the existence of an autobiographical book (Seligman 2018) provided a springboard for our interview, which was further enriched by commentary from Marc Gopin. Last but not least, young scholars: Jakub Szydelski, Marcin Mochocki, Filip Dankiewicz, Szymon Chlebowicz (Warsaw) and Anna-Larisa Hoffmann (Heidelberg), could build their reflections in engagement with Kennedy, as well as Gopin and Seligman. It is in this way that we facilitated "creative interchange" – a concept championed by Henry Nelson Wieman (1946, 1958; Palmgren 2008) – between texts and authors. Wieman, a distinguished American thinker whose work was the subject of Martin Luther King Jr.'s doctoral dissertation, argued that "only by creative interchange is it possible for the individual to become self-critical and self-esteeming because in this way he learns what others think of him and thus becomes conscious of himself" (Wieman 1958: 26).

The motif of self-reflection and creativity is evident in the authors' contributions. These contributions also serve as powerful testimonies to their personal and intellectual transformations. Similar to "novelistic conversion" experienced by great novelists (Girard 1965), these scholars experienced what can be called "scholarly conversion." In famous passages from *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard described the conversion as "a reconciliation between the individual and the world, between man and the sacred. The multiple universe of passion decomposes and returns to simplicity. Novelistic conversion calls to mind the *analysis* [unravelling] of the Greeks and the Christian rebirth" (Girard 1965: 308). It doesn't have to be a religious conversion, though. This is how Girard described the effects of conversion on the level of individual experience:

Deception gives way to truth, anguish to remembrance, agitation to repose, hatred to love, humiliation to humility, mediated desire to autonomy, deviated transcendency to vertical transcendency. [...] The hero triumphs in defeat; he triumphs because he is at the end of his resources; for the first time he has to look his despair and his nothingness in the face. But this look which he has dreaded, which is the death of pride, is his salvation. The conclusions of all

the novels are reminiscent of an oriental tale in which the hero is clinging by his finger-tips to the edge of a cliff; exhausted, the hero finally lets himself fall into the abyss. He expects to smash against the rocks below but instead he is supported by the air: the law of gravity is annulled. (Girard 1965: 294)

We can find elements of such a conversion in the accounts of scholar-practitioners. For instance, Marc Gopin found solace and healing from war trauma through intellectual exploration and the power of compassionate reasoning. Similarly, Kennedy's journey took him from social activism to a focus on the sociology (or even the theology) of the body, incorporating elements of mindfulness. Seligman's path was one of transformation, emerging from depression to become a champion of optimism. Among young researchers, Hoffmann was somewhat hesitant to call her transformation a "spiritual journey," yet she resonated deeply with Kennedy's, Gopin's, and Seligman's experiences of "novelistic conversion" (Girard 1965), which reminded her of the profound "personal change" she is undergoing. They all could draw strength and wisdom from life's trials and polarities. These challenges, which were often associated with suffering, were like a fire that purified and strengthened metal (Bennis & Thomas 2002: 18).

Diverse backgrounds, career stages, and disciplines notwithstanding, these scholars share a common thread of resilience and hope. Remarkably, while Martin Seligman echoes Julian of Norwich's reassuring words, "Thou shalt not be overcome," one of the young scholars invokes the empowering spirit of the civil rights movement with the motto "We shall overcome," a phrase popularised by Martin Luther King Jr. from a gospel song. For her part, Hoffmann's notion of being "in a state of personal change" is reminiscent of the Christian concept of living *in statu conversionis* and *in statu viatoris*. This convergence aligns with René Girard's observation that even secular novelists, like Marcel Proust, turn to religious motifs to convey a sense of "vertical transcendency," offering solace against the spectre of mortality and the promise of renewal. Girard contends that such symbolism, often dismissed as decorative or apologetic, serves as a profound indicator of conversion (Girard 1965: 305–311).

A final element of the authors' scholarly conversion is that it consists of two parallel movements, conveyed by the Greek terms *metanoia* and *epistrophe*. *Metanoia* implies moving forward, changing direction, transformation, and rebirth, while *epistrophe* suggests a return to oneself and to one's sources. Accordingly, in conversations with students, Michael D. Kennedy

situates his newfound contemplative disposition in his Catholic roots; in a dialogue with Michał Łuczewski and Piotr Czekierda, Martin Seligman acknowledges that the project of prospective sciences is indebted to biblical prophets; and in response to Seligman, Marc Gopin traces his notion of compassionate reasoning – based on the latest advancements in neuroscience – back to Judaism. In this way, their transformations embody both forward movement and a return to their roots, creating a spiral of conversion – progressing while continually revisiting and deepening their foundational beliefs. To elucidate the process of scholarly conversion, we can draw on Girard’s concept of psychic elements as internalised models we have imitated. This view of the human psyche aligns with sociological perspectives on diverse social roles (Znaniecki 1940) and psychological notions of parts, sub-minds or subpersonalities as developed by Internal Family Systems model (Schwartz & Falconer 2017; Schwartz & Sweezy 2019). Each part has a propensity for extremes, transforming strengths into weaknesses (Katcher & Pasternak 2003: 24). For instance, a supportive leader might neglect their values, an adaptable leader might become manipulative, a controlling leader might become overly domineering, and a prudent leader might resist innovation (Atkins 1982; Katcher and Pasternak 2003).

In harmony with traditions of spiritual wisdom, the Internal Family Systems model posits that the psyche is not merely a collection of parts but is centred around a core Self. When parts lack connection to the Self, they engage in power struggles and veer off course (Schwartz & Sweezy 2019: 43). The Self is the wellspring of creativity, confidence, courage, clarity, curiosity, compassion, calm, and connectedness, embodying what Edwin Friedman (2017) terms “non-anxious presence.” From this vantage point, conversion entails shifting from being guided by extreme parts to being led by the Self. Only by transitioning from part-driven to Self-led can leaders move from depression, burnout, and survival mode to well-being, flourishing, and a higher purpose (Briggs & Reiss 2021; Seligman 2011). Our authors’ work consistently demonstrates this shift as a fusion of intellectual, therapeutic, and spiritual dimensions.

/// What Is Academic Leadership For?

The fourth, concluding section focuses on the future of academia through the contributions of scholars who navigate between local and global perspectives. Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera, leveraging their extensive international experience in management scholarship, present

a vision for universities that transcends narrow metrics and bureaucratic paradigms. For her part, Elżbieta Ciżewska-Martyńska, a philosopher and sociologist, envisions universities rooted in the virtue of hope. Finally, Jonathan Dronsfield, an artist-philosopher from the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, concludes the section by emphasising responsibility as a guiding principle for future academia. These scholars thus move beyond mere academic management to good academic management and indeed integral academic leadership (see Adair 2005). They do not aim at nostalgic contemplation of the traditional ethos of the university. Rather, they aim to make use of the polarity between traditional and modern ethos.

The traditional university ethos prioritises values such as hope, goodness, truth, faith, love, and charity. It emphasises trust and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge through relationships between mentors and students. From this perspective, the leader's inner life is more important than advanced project management skills. The critics of the modern academic ethos fear universities are becoming corporations focused solely on churning out quick, cheap specialists for the job market. The new university model threatens massification, a loss of prestige, and a capitulation to economic pressures (Rembierz 2019).

Each university and each academic leader must make a value-based choice of which model they want to serve and also decide whether they can creatively manage the tension between these two ethos. If it is not possible to combine tradition with modernity, then the university will be in danger of falling into the shadow of both. Tradition deprived of modern standards will slip into incoherency, and universities will again be characterised by elitism, exclusivity, and closure to diversity. Without reference to market mechanisms, the university's financial stability will be threatened, and employees will lose an important criterion for judging the quality of their work. On the other hand, modern standards deprived of the old ethos will quickly lead to soulless relationships at the university, egoism, a shortened time perspective (focus on the here and now), and an instrumental approach to employees. The university needs to combine the best elements of both the traditional and modern ethos (Fingas et al. 2024). In this vein, Florian Znaniecki (1963) defined leadership as the creative reorganisation of systems that navigates the chasm between rigid conservatism and reckless radicalism, fostering dynamic organisations grounded in "new shared values, novel cultural action patterns, and fresh relationships of functional interdependence." Znaniecki highlighted the collaborative essence of this endeavour, necessitating the concerted efforts of "active leaders and grow-

ing circles of their followers” (Znaniecki 1963: 359–360). He concluded that in-depth case studies of creative reorganisation are paramount for comprehending the evolution of culture as such (Znaniecki 1963: 371).

The spiritual concept of scholarly conversion and the sociological notion of creative reorganisation find their most apt expression in Wieman’s (1948: 58) concept of creative interchange, encompassing four core elements. Aligned with this framework, this issue aimed to cultivate (a) authentic interaction among authors and commentators, (b) appreciative understanding, that is, valuing and affirming others’ viewpoints, (c) creative integration of others’ ideas into the broader perspective of integral leadership, and (d) ongoing transformation, personal change, and indeed (scholarly) conversion. Both project participants and our authors experienced the fruits of creative interchange as manifested in joy and awe (Gopin), optimism and hope (Seligman), friendship and human connection (Baucum), gratitude and love (Kennedy), or appreciation and authenticity (Hoffmann). By embracing these values, leaders can maintain their course and unearth the profound fulfilment derived from contributing to something “greater than themselves,” as Kociatkiewicz and Kostera aptly phrase it.

We aspire for our readers to likewise encounter the transformative power of creative interchange, joining the “growing circles” of active academic leaders assembled for this issue. If Znaniecki’s assertion that academic leadership underpins leadership more broadly holds true, then the implications of this work are far-reaching. By exemplifying rather than merely theorising about academic leadership, we aim to contribute to a new sociology of leadership.

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