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An Innovative Approach to European Policy Studies
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The Editors and Authors of the collected volume (that is an outcome of the international workshop “Realist biography and European policy”) assume that integration of the tradition of biographical research and critical realism (as proposed by Margaret Archer) “is not only possible, but it can be also beneficial for the exploration of newly emerging research filled at the European level.” (p. 13). This declaration, however, should be reconsidered in many points (some of them will be discussed below). The idea of the book is very interesting and thought-provoking. It is worth the attention of scholars in social sciences and policy makers.

The volume consist of 8 chapters organized into 3 main sections. It begins with 2 theoretical chapters on the key ideas of critical realism. The next part (chapters 3–5) offers an overview of three European projects (Sostris, Euroidentities and ENRI-EAST) that aimed to understand “ordinary citizens” of Europe and their problems, attitudes, meaning systems, orientation horizons and frames of references and knowledge horizons from their own perspective. This “bottom-up” perspective sometimes disregarded by European policy makers seems to be of crucial importance for the creation of Europe (a sense of being European). Finally, the last sections (chapters 6–8) of the book concentrate on various aspects of sphere of work that are intertwined with the process of “becoming Europe/an.”

Before discussing selected chapters covering different topics, I would like to address briefly three issues: 1) running the risk of oversimplification while trying to integrate (allegedly) similar theoretical concepts and methods of empirical data analysis; 2) recent “perception” of biographical methods that have become very popular and are perceived as homogenous and 3) ‘night’ (chaotic and inevitably coupled with processes of severe suffering) side of social reality.

1) Any attempt to combine different theoretical and methodological approaches may imply danger of (over)simplification of the research problem as well as unconscious overlooking or / and wilful overpassing of crucial differences. In this volume the Authors endeavour not only to put together critical realism with biographical

methods, but also try to “bring to a common denominator” various concepts (i.e. “reflexivity” and “biographical work”) as well as refer and apply various approaches to biographical analysis (mainly: Biographic-Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM) as developed by Prue Chamberlayne and Tom Wengraf, Daniel Bertaux’s life history method and autobiographical narrative interview method by Fritz Schütze). Although, many of these ideas are intriguing and promising, some others, raise many doubts and questions. Therefore, this task seems to be risky in itself.

2) ‘Biographical methods’ are sometimes seen as being very similar (with national variants) as well as effortless and facile. Consequently, many researchers treat them as an easy way of collecting and analysing data. Some others claim that the results of such attempts to understand social reality are unreliable or of no significance. To the contrary: biographical methods draw on different theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. As a matter of fact, they present diverse standpoints on the epistemic power of autobiographical story telling that may reveal biographical and social processes, on the extent to which informants are able to present their preferable face (see: p. 26–27 in the volume) and on what might be reflected in their extempore rendering. In short, what can be really reconstructed from the told story of one’s life. Moreover, analysis of any biography is usually very time-consuming and demanding. They require solid sociological, linguistic and socio-psychological knowledge. Regrettably, many of the researchers do not follow very detailed and complex guidelines of the method technique and analytical procedure. This usually depletes, weakens or even debases the research outcomes (Cf. [Czyżewski 2013](#)).

3) In her works Margaret Archer explores the interplay between structure and agency (still, advocating to treat them separately for analytical reasons). The latter concept (agency) refers to active and reasonable agents who—via “internal conversations” are capable of dealing with, managing and making use of social reality. Thus, in her approach and theoretical considerations individuals are perceived as rational, logical, autonomous, resourceful, self-conscious and planning (i.e., being able to manage one’s life course and logically define their aims, and organize action) and being able to make sense out of their everyday life “active agents” (in Archer’s vocabulary). The approach, thus, neglects the ‘night’ side of the social reality and “disorderly social processes and processes of suffering” ([Riemann and Schütze 1991](#)) when a person can only passively react to overwhelming outer events and becomes strange to her or himself ([Schütze 2008a: 11](#))—losses “sense of self” and cannot start any “internal conversation” to use Archer’s terms again.

Both theoretical chapters: Chapter 1: Introduction: the Need for Realist Biography in European Policy Studies written by Adam Mrozowicki, Jeffrey D. Turk and Markieta Domecka and Chapter 2: Realism and Social Research: A Morphogenetic Approach written by Bob Carter widely refer to the concept of “reflexivity” in order to explicate the Archer’s understanding of the relationship between structure and agency. It is seen here as “intrinsic property of human beings (...)—the exercise of mental ability shared by all people to consider themselves in relation to their social context and vice versa (Mrozowicki et.al., p. 31 after Archer 2007: 4); the means by which people make their way through the world (op. cit., p. 31 after Archer 2007: 5).

This means that individuals are treated here as circumspect actors who make rational decisions (“have the properties of self-consciousness,” Carter p. 41) regarding their life course and who “develop and define their ultimate concerns, elaborate projects and attempt to accomplish them in order to advance or protect what they care about most” (Mrozowicki et. all. p. 31, after Archer 2007). Yet, this is not always the case. Under certain socio-historical and socio-biographical conditions people do not act intentionally, but are driven by powerful, usually unpredictable, outer forces and circumstances. They (i.e. afflicted persons) usually surrender to unfavourable fate guided by its own logic. Consequently, their ability to act in a rational manner may be weakened or even lost for some time. If we take into account that both the Editors and the Authors direct their efforts towards supporting European policy with solid and trustworthy knowledge concerning experiences of “individuals at risk” (e.g. people at risk of losing their jobs, immigrants, minority members) (see: Chapter 3: Biography-using Research (BNIM), Sostris, Institutional Regimes, and Critical Psycho-Societal Realism by Tom Wengraf and Prue Chamberlayne p. 65), those exposed to cultural otherness because of sharing one’s world of everyday existence with a foreign spouse or partner that usually implies transnational experiences (see: Chapter 4: Biographical Costs of Transnational Mobility in the European Space by: Antonella Spanò, Elisabetta Persone and Markieta Domecka), or those who belong to ethnic minorities and therefore their belonging to “we”-community and allegiance is constantly questioned or undermined (see: Chapter 5: Biographical Approach in the Study of Identities of Ethnic Minorities in Eastern Europe by Ludmila Nurse) a central point of reference is their “reflexivity” and not their “inability” to act intentionally, not their self-alienation, and not their “conditional state of mind” (see: Riemann, Schütze 1991). However, it is important to note that Archer is aware that those “to whom things simply happen” (so called “passive agents”) are also the part of our reality (Archer 2007).

In Chapter 3: Biography-using Research (BNIM), Sostris, Institutional Regimes, and Critical Psycho-Societal Realism Tom Wengraf and Prue Chamberlayne discuss the outcomes of the “Sostris” project that used biographical studies (of individuals at risk) for policy-related research. This appealing attempt to see the social reality from the “bottom-up” perspective raises, however, many questions. The one that seems to be the most intriguing is in fact put in the Introduction the volume (p. 26): “what is the relationship between life-accounts (told stories) and subject’s experiences (lived lives)?” Wengraf and Chamberlayne apply “twin-track prequel prior to synthetic whole-case sequel” in order to reconstruct the course of life of a person and the “real world” one lives in (“the objective context”). However, sequential organization of events in one’s life as it was told is still subjected to verification and still does not reflect the inner identity development of an informant.

Another interesting issue is discussed in Chapter 4: Biographical Costs of Transnational Mobility in the European Space by: Antonella Spanò, Elisabetta Persone and Markieta Domecka. The presented analysis is based on empirical data gathered within another European Committee FP7 project: “EuroIdentities.” Through a careful analysis of a very rich body of empirical data the Authors gain insight into the dynamics of individual experiences. They show that although nowadays the openness of Europe

(and of European borders) is taken for granted and seen as trouble-free—transnational mobility still may imply high biographical costs. While taking into account various motives behind going abroad they examine autobiographical narrative interviews with individuals who “are not able to formulate any biographical projects and consistent scheme of action” (p. 95) or / and “feel forced to leave certain family dynamics” (op. cit., see also: [Kaźmierska et. all 2011](#)). Analysing the life courses of mobile people they pay attention that ordinary those who are able to look at their place of origin from some distance, compare two or even more cultural patterns start biographical work that implies the process of “reconciliation with the past” (p. 109, see also: [Kaźmierska op. cit.](#)).

Ludmila Nurse discusses Biographical Approach in the Study of Identities of Ethnic Minorities in Eastern Europe (Chapter 5). She draws on the study carried out within the ENRI-EAST EC FP7 project that asked “What did it mean for ethnic minorities to belong to a nation or region, or to be European?” The Author discusses interviews with the Polish and Russian ethnic groups in Vilnius and suggests that individuals decide whether they are “absorbed” into, “blend with” or “resist” the dominant society, but still their choice is influenced by “a unique combination of historical circumstances (global and local)” (p. 120). I would rather say that these are biographical, political, historical and social circumstances. Moreover, it is a pity that Nurse does refer to the classical studies of the Chicago School of Sociology and concepts developed by R.E. Park such as “accommodation” and “assimilation” ([Park 1930](#)). But first and foremost, it is open to doubt which method is used (most biographical approaches—very different as stated above—are enumerated here) and how the emergent data can be evaluated. Another disputable issue is whether the Author interpretations are grounded in the empirical data. For instance, Artiom (one of informants whose life history is analyzed in the chapter) says “(...) I am as if of mixed blood, I have Lithuanian blood, Polish blood and Russians blood. But on the whole we speak Russians... And we consider ourselves to be rather Russians in Lithuania (p. 125). Further, Nurse adds that later on he comes to a conclusion that after all he is European. This “at face-value” statement is supported by the thesis that “he can converse in many European languages.” Yet, the question remains, whether “being European” solves his very complex national identification, attachment, sense of belonging and loyalty and really relieves his suffering? This issue is analysed for instance by [Bärbel Treichel \(2004\)](#) in her very illuminating article “Suffering from one’s Multilingualism. Biographical Processes of Suffering and their Linguistic Expression in Narrative Interviews with Welsh Speakers of Welsh and English.”

The next three chapters take the perspective of “men at work” in different context, settings and coming from various backgrounds.

In Chapter 6 Social Dialog as a European Social Field: Setting up a “Critical Realist” Explanatory Framework of the Practices of the European Works Councils in Multinationals in Europe Valerina Pulginano and Norbert Kluge explore the concept of employee involvement being aware that the issue is discussed differently depending on the discipline and that nowadays it is very much entangled with “Europeanization.” They provide us with the empirical data coming from “ordinary people” ([Schütz](#)

1970) (“social agents” in Archer’s term) who “contribute to the development of a social process of Europeanization” (p. 145) and show diversity of the process. The Authors pay our attention to the fact that cross-national and “European” involvement of employee representatives is still very limited (although EU directives aim at its widening and intensification) since it is “deeply rooted in national legislation and national settings and experiences.” Their bottom-up approach that also takes into account the interplay between the European-macro level and the cross-national level) is very interesting especially in the times of the EU economic and trust crisis, still my doubt remains—if conceptualizing social actors as only active and rational “agents” (...) capable to use different institutional national and supra-national systems as potential resources for action” (see: p. 146) exhaust all possibilities and answers the main question: what might support transnational cooperation, reflection and communication of employee representatives? Fortunately, the Authors leave some space for discussion and further research.

Another absorbing issue is discussed by Tatiana Bajuk Sencar and Jefferey David Turk in Chapter 7: Biographies and the Drafting of EU Environmental Policy in an Autobiographical Framework. The Authors report their ethnographic study on particular group of social actors—Slovenian Eurocrats. They collected 50 life stories (using the BNIM approach both for data gathering and analysis) with people coming from small, peripheral European country who worked in the EU institutions during the preparation and the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and were immediately entrusted with the very serious and important task of negotiating the Climate-Energy legislative package. The researchers attempt to reconstruct the stages of their socialization into European institution and “European pattern of conduct” by which they understand “the accumulation of experience, perspective and skills” (p. 177) that entails “acquisition of a broader perspective on the operation of the EU institutions and their legislative process (p. 180). There are two points that I would like to address here. Firstly, I believe that the term “trajectory” or “trajectory of experiences” should be used in a more attentive and circumspect way in this book, since the whole volume widely refers to the works of Fritz Schütze and his understanding of “trajectory” is different to that presented by the Authors (their understanding seems to be much closer to what Erving Goffman calls “moral career”, Goffman 1991). Secondly, the Authors claim that their interviewees recount their European stories (p. 176). This and many other comments in this chapters suggest that they were cast the role that might lead to some sort of “identity transformation” in Anselm Strauss’ sense (Strauss 1969 [1959]) and were not “ordinary citizens” anymore. Taking this into account it would be also worth analysing if and how their renderings are influenced by (European, political, institutional) public discourse and vice versa.

In the last chapter, Linking Structural and Agential Powers: A realist approach to Biographies, Careers and Reflexivity, Markieta Domecka and Adam Mrozowicki look at the interplay of structures and agency in shaping occupational careers patterns of Polish workers and business people. On the basis of empirical data (autobiographical narrative interviews) and taking into account different types of reflexivity (commu-

nicative and autonomous) they identified four types of careers patterns: anchor (based on inter-personal relations in informants' social milieus), dead-end (resulting from long-term incapacity to plan one's life in the sphere of work), construction (that means constant move between different posts, organizations, changing qualifications and lots of turning-points) and, finally, patchwork (that illustrates situations in which one has to change jobs often, is unemployed for some time and must look for a job due to inability to deal with market requirements, (acquired) lack of resourcefulness and/or a bad coincidence). The Authors explain which of these patterns and why some of them predominate in life histories of manual workers and other in career paths of managers and entrepreneurs. They also explain how occupational counselling based on biographical methods can be successfully used in cases of those who are outside the labour market and / or need some sort of "re-adaptation" of their careers (p. 209). Still, it is rather precarious to place informants' experiences in the taken-for-granted (by the very researchers) times of "late" and "fluid" modernity. The question is, if they (narrators/ informants) define and experience their world of everyday existence in this way?

Moreover, what seems to be questionable is the Authors' stubborn search for "common denominator" of the analytical concepts as those of "biographical work" (developed by Anselm Strauss and then by Fritz Schütze) and "reflexivity" (elaborated by Margaret Archer). They claim that "both biographical work and reflexivity denote an inner activity of mind constituted by conversation with significant others and oneself" (p. 194). However, it must be taken into account that Archer tends to treat "reflexivity" as "immanent property" of the human "nature." This means that for instance in times of uncertainty and chaos individuals left alone without "clear social guidelines" (see: p. 195) as if automatically "engage in reflexive deliberation" (op. cit.). Again, I would rather say that these are situations in which individuals may lose their capacity to act deliberately and intentionally, in which they ordinary lose control over their everyday lives and feel self-alienated. There is (almost) no room left for "reflectivity" while a person crosses the border from an intentional to a conditional state of mind and "a conditional state of mind in experiencing events and organizing personal activities becomes the dominant orientational principle for the person's life organization" (Schütze 1991: 349). Yet, Strauss and Schütze claim that "biographical work" might be the consequence of certain (usually traumatic) experiences in one's life, but it cannot be traced in all individual biographies.

Still another disputable issue are career patterns which are called "conditioned" in respect to individual choices. Yet, I would claim that it is rather "institutional expectation pattern" that dominates in these biographies than "trajectory of suffering." Paraphrasing Archers' words "things simply happen" to those people who because of many various socio-biographical conditions are not able to find their own, autonomous way and rather "drifters" than "passive agents." This may result, but does not have to, in severe biographical suffering.

To sum up, I find the book very interesting and thought-provoking especially for those who would like to look at the process of European integration from the "bottom-up" perspective of ordinary citizens and those personally involved in negotiation of

“European matters” and their everyday life experiences. It would be surely inspiring for those who appreciate “peripheral” but constitutive voices of those who are not “main players.” But the book is also an interesting way of showing the meaning of individual life stories for the construction of European policies. I highly recommend the book but the caveat that it should be read in a critical and reflexive way.

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