

STANISŁAW KRAWCZYK  
University of Warsaw

## **Life-World, Intersubjectivity and Culture. Contemporary Dilemmas. In Memoriam Richard Grathoff**

*Abstract:* The late Richard Grathoff has exerted a strong influence on the development of Polish interpretive sociology. The essay briefly describes his ties with Poland and proceeds to report on the problems raised at a recent symposium held in Warsaw in his memory. The major topics discussed at the symposium include life-worlds, social inconsistencies, the role of symbols, and the attributes of contemporary society.

*Keywords:* Grathoff Richard, interpretive sociology, life-worlds, Polish sociology, social inconsistencies, social phenomenology.

It is now more than a year since the passing of Richard Grathoff (1934–2013), a distinguished German social phenomenologist and sociologist of culture and an honorary member of the Polish Sociological Association. His international academic career has been described in three commemorative pieces available in Polish (Hałas and Szawiel 2013, Hałas 2014, Włodarek 2014). Grathoff finished his doctoral studies in the New School for Social Research in New York. After returning to Germany he worked at the sociology department of the University of Bielefeld. His interests included the concepts of life-world and milieu, the qualitative methods of sociological research, the creativity of human action, and the ontology of social systems.

In the 1980s and 1990s Richard Grathoff assisted Polish sociologists in developing precious international contacts. Apart from co-founding the Copernicus-Kreis scholarship, he invited numerous Polish researchers to conferences and other scientific meetings in Germany. Grathoff also participated in several academic events in Poland, conducted large research projects on neighboring cultures with Antonina Kłoskowska (see Grathoff, Kłoskowska, 1994), and submitted a few pieces for books edited by Polish scholars (e.g., Grathoff, 1990, 2000). In the 1980s he received funding in Germany for an extensive study and popularization of Znaniecki's oeuvre. A number of academics from Poland were involved in this important project, which led to establishing the Florian Znaniecki Archive at the University of Bielefeld. A copy of the archive is currently located in Poznań, where the Florian Znaniecki Foundation has operated since 1990. Grathoff was a member of the foundation and coedited a book containing little-known texts by Znaniecki (1994).

An international sociological symposium was held in Richard Grathoff's memory at the University Library of Warsaw on 25 and 26 September 2014. The event brought

together a number of invited academics with intellectual and social ties to him and to his work, including fourteen speakers. Ruth Grathoff and Philip Grathoff—Richard's wife and son—came as well, and the proceedings were open to any interested attendees.

The overall purpose of the symposium was to provide a forum for discussion on interpretive sociology and its role in addressing contemporary cultural change. Social phenomenology and sociological studies of culture were also significant as research fields to be debated. The symposium drew from Richard Grathoff's role in the intellectual ferment of the 1960s and 1970s, underscoring the significance of his interest both in the life-world and in broader matters of culture and civilization.

The event was divided into five sessions, three on Thursday (with eight talks in total) and two on Friday (with six talks). While no specific topics were officially announced for particular sessions, the following account is an attempt to reconstruct the general themes of the symposium: life-worlds, social inconsistencies, the role of symbols, and the attributes of contemporary society. Information on the event is available at the following address: <http://www.is.uw.edu.pl/pl/badania-i-konferencje/konferencje/2014-2/life-world-intersubjectivity-and-culture-contemporary-dilemmas-in-memoriam-richard-grathoff/>.

### Life-worlds

Zdzisław Krasnodębski applied the concept of life-world in a loose way to tell the audience about Grathoff himself. Stressing the latter's passion about scholars' private and academic lives seen as a background of scientific careers, Krasnodębski suggested looking at Grathoff's own work in the same vein. A recurring thread of the talk concerned the theoretical and social turmoil of the 1970s as the context of Richard Grathoff's involvement in the phenomenological movement in the sociology of that time.

A more systematic methodological issue was raised by Thomas Eberle, who set out to analyze the relationship between phenomenological life-world analysis and interpretive sociology. He demarcated three conceptualizations of this relationship:

1. The dominant German reading, stemming largely from Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*, introduces a sharp analytical division between phenomenology as a philosophical enterprise and sociology as an empirical one.
2. To the contrary, phenomenological sociology is feasible in the typical Anglo-Saxon interpretation, represented perhaps preeminently by George Psathas. The task here is to account empirically for other people's experiences of their life-worlds.
3. The third standpoint, the social phenomenological one, may be found in the work of Richard Grathoff. In this case a new focus is placed on milieux, which can serve as a source of knowledge about life-worlds.

In another methodological move Tadeusz Szawiel delineated two ways of treating life-worlds. The first possibility is to perceive the life-world as a theoretical object to be analyzed. This path was taken by Husserl who wished to discover the general

structures of life-worlds. The second option is to treat the life-world in terms of a life-horizon, thus refusing to objectify it. In this case the concept of “life-world” is seen as analogous to “form of life,” “ethos,” Heidegger’s “thing,” and Gadamer’s “conversation” or “game.”

### **Social Consistencies and Inconsistencies**

Dennis Smith focused on the social phenomenon of humiliation, which is identified differently by the two kinds of involved parties. Whereas perpetrators see it as removal of an inconsistency existing in society, victims feel that humiliation actually creates an inconsistency. Smith applied this understanding to the situations of four famous prisoners who had all had to deal with forced social displacement. The paper was presented as a part of larger research designed to analyze—among other things—the milieus and life-worlds of various social actors.

Fritz Schütze dealt with a similar topic, studying the phenomenology of typifications (e.g., “Western capitalist consumers vs. socialist idealists”) imposed by the state in real socialism. He put forward three general theses: (1) artificial typifications impaired the normally smooth workings of the everyday-world classification system; (2) the superimposed system shaped elementary schematizations and changed the use of moral interaction postulates and social idealizations; (3) state typifications damaged the capacity for personal biographical work.

In another paper Tilman Allert spoke about his work on the social order of hotel business. He offered certain ways to employ the phenomenological concept of *Sässigkeit* (positionalization) in sociological analysis. This talk, together with Smith’s and Schütze’s, demonstrates that phenomenological or interpretive work can concern itself with durable social hierarchies and not only with the fluidity of micro-level interactions.

A theoretical basis of the concept of inconsistencies was analyzed in more detail by Gallina Tasheva. She claimed that mainstream sociology is interested in individuals only insofar as they are a part of what is common. Moreover, the common itself is solely studied in its consistency. This is different from the perspective of Richard Grathoff, which assumes social inconsistencies to be an essential part of theoretical reasoning in sociology. However, Richard Grathoff’s formulation was also presented as problematic because of its inability to overcome the excessively subjective—ego-logical—view on the foundations of intersubjectivity.

### **The Role of Symbols**

Steven Vaitkus read into the work of Schütz and Jaspers to disentangle and clarify their standpoints on symbols and symbolic transcendence. Treating the latter notion as a crucial theoretical juncture, Vaitkus went on to explore its relevance for his own analysis of culture and intersubjectivity. The analysis regarded such con-

temporary matters as digital money, new democracies, and religious fundamentalism.

Religion—a highly symbolic sphere—has an entire subfield of sociology dedicated to studying it. This subdomain was analyzed by Sławomir Mandes, who showed several ways in which phenomenology had influenced the sociology of religion. He discussed the contributions of Gerardus van der Leeuw and Joachim Wach (inspired by Edmund Husserl) as well as those of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (building on Alfred Schütz). Mandes concluded that there had been a marked and diverse influence—stronger, indeed, than that of any other philosophical school—which made for very fruitful empirical research programs. In spite of this, the impact of phenomenology decreased after time.

Elżbieta Hałas inspected a key debate that had taken place in Poland in December 1989. Members of the Polish parliament had disputed the proper symbolic ways to represent the meaning of the systemic transformation and the fall of communism. Those ways would include altering the country's name and modifying the national emblem. One significant point of the paper was that the temporal dimension had been extraordinarily important: symbolic politics of the time had had to consider the lack of chronological synchronization between actual changes in national symbolism and the introduction of the new constitution.

### Contemporary Society

Hubert Knoblauch reflected on the rise of communicative constructivism as part of the interpretive movement in social theory. Building on the assumption that social action is always related to communication, the talk emphasized the role of technological objects as parts and parcels of communicative action. The current degree of dissemination of such objects, as well as the proliferation of functional communicative subsystems and popular forms of communication, allowed Knoblauch to supplement the concept of communication culture with that of communication society.

Marek Czyżewski began with mentioning different readings of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in the social sciences, foremostly with Schütz' interpretation and Grathoff's commentary. On this basis Czyżewski claimed that phenomenological analysis may reveal certain quixotic elements contained within the knowledge-based society. Furthermore, he proposed the idea that such an analysis needs to be supplemented by—and confronted with—other research positions, especially that of the post-Foucauldian studies in governmentality.

Rafał Wierchosławski also drew from Schütz (as well as from Znaniecki and Grathoff) to frame the study of experts in terms of life-worlds and milieux. A particular goal of Wierchosławski's social phenomenological analysis was to look at the changing relations between experts and the general public. He also discerned five types of experts: scientist, theologian, hobby-horse or cook-book expert, and two kinds of expert with a cause (acting on the public stage or from behind the public stage).

Ulf Matthiesen turned to the study of cities, arguing for the adoption of the life-world/milieu paradigm—or for the urbanist turn in phenomenological milieu analyses. He posited that focus ought to be put on reconstructing the intrinsic specificities of cities instead of carrying out post-Fordist research which invariably culminates in the ready-made type of the post-Fordist city. As in other symposium papers, the phenomenological angle here does not mean that scholars need only be interested in micro-scale interactions; structural constraints imposed by subjectivity-transcending institutions should be considered, too.

### Conclusions

The proceedings may be summarized by listing some key questions to be considered by interpretive sociologists. A few of these questions may be treated as general methodological issues. For instance, in what ways can social inconsistencies and superimposed typifications be conceptualized and explored empirically? How can symbols be studied with a view to accruing sociological knowledge? And how should sociologists guard themselves against objectifying the concept of life-world, if indeed such objectification is deemed to be a risk?

A number of other problems concern the sociological uses of phenomenology. To give some examples: how should we look at the relations between phenomenological and sociological analysis? What can phenomenological approaches tell us about the ways people are dynamically positioned in the social order? What is there to say about the crucial features of today's society in social phenomenological terms? Moreover, how did phenomenology itself impact on the development of sociological subdisciplines, such as the sociology of religion?

This list—undoubtedly incomplete—seems to show that there is much still to be done in interpretive sociology. It is to be hoped that the symposium will serve as a stepping stone for further international cooperation of Polish, German and other academics. This is likely to be more feasible thanks to a volume containing all presented and submitted papers, which is planned for the year 2015.

### References

- Grathoff, Richard. 1990. Niektóre motywy fenomenologiczne we wczesnej socjologii Floriana Znanieckiego [Some Phenomenological Motives in the Early Sociology of Florian Znaniecki; translated from English by Nina Nowakowska], in: Jan Włodarek, Marek Ziółkowski (eds.), *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii* [The Biographical Method in Sociology]. Warszawa–Poznań: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 149–58.
- Grathoff, Richard. 2000. From Cultural Reality to the Cultural Sciences. Chicago–Poznan–Champaign: The Trajectory of a Sociologist at Work, in: E. Hałas (ed.), *Florian Znaniecki's Sociological Theory and the Challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, pp. 13–30.
- Grathoff, Richard and Kłoskowska, Antonina (eds.). 1994. *The Neighborhood of Cultures*. Warsaw: Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.
- Hałas, Elżbieta. 2014. Richard Helmut Grathoff, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* [Culture and Society] 58, 1: 197–202.

- Hałas, Elżbieta and Szawiel, Tadeusz. 2013. Pożegnanie Profesora Richarda Grathoffa [A Farewell to Professor Richard Grathoff]. Accessed online on 16 October 2014: <http://www.is.uw.edu.pl/pl/instytut/uroczystosci/pozegnanie-profesora-richarda-grathoffa/>.
- Włodarek, Jan. 2014. Profesor Dr Richard Grathoff (1934–2013), *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny* [Journal of Law, Economics and Sociology], 76, 1.
- Znaniecki, Florian. 1994. *What Are Sociological Problems? A Selection of Papers*, edited by Z. Dulczewski, R. Grathoff, and J. Włodarek. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nakom.

*Biographical Note:* Stanisław Krawczyk, Ph.D. candidate, Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw.

E-mail: [krawczykstanislaw@gmail.com](mailto:krawczykstanislaw@gmail.com)