

COMMUNIQUÉS

Stanisław Ossowski: from the Perspective of Half a Century (The Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw, 15 November 2013)

Every local field of study has its founders and classics: the authors of paradigmatic studies—empirical and theoretical—which gave rise to research programmes, formulating new methodologies, and shaping the social ethos of scholars. One of the key figures in post-war Polish sociology was Stanisław Ossowski (1897–1963). On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his death, on 15 November in Warsaw, a conference was held entitled ‘Ossowski: from the Perspective of Half a Century’. The organizers from the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw posed three questions to the speakers: 1) What was Ossowski’s influence on sociology and the humanities? 2) In what way was Stanisław Ossowski innovative? and 3) What are his achievements from today’s perspective? In this way, the conference’s aim was primarily analytical, and not a matter of reminiscences (Antoni Sułek).

Succeeding papers constituted a commentary on various of Ossowski’s areas of interest: methodology, social axiology, aesthetics, social psychology, considerations about the nation and social structure. The point of departure was a reference to the social science and humanities foundations established by Ossowski: Ontology (Jan Szymczyk, the Catholic University of Lublin), epistemology of social science (Jakub Bazyli Motrenko, University of Warsaw), and aesthetics (Anna Matuchniak-Krassuska, University of Łódź). Next, analysis were conducted of the ways of problematizing structures: Social (Henryk Domański, the Polish Academy of Sciences), national (Michał Łuczewski, University of Warsaw) and psychological (Krystyna Skarżyńska, Polish Academy of Sciences). Finally, the continuation of Ossowski’s work was shown—both by students and readers who, using Ossowski’s own notions, constitute relatively isolated system of events originating with Ossowski himself (Róża Sułek, Antoni Sułek, University of Warsaw), as well as with the social values he postulated (Ireneusz Krzemiński, University of Warsaw). The organizers asked scholars of various generations to prepare talks—including the generation that is just emerging in sociology—in order to see how Ossowski is received by sociologists formed by new social experiences and trends of thought.

Stanisław Ossowski had a major influence on the formation of the first post-war generation of social researchers. Through theoretical, methodological, and empirical work, he set the standards and the language of the discipline for many years. His was a sociology that combined a humanist approach with refined logical and empirical standards. Ossowski was a central figure of Polish sociology at the time, a discipline that was then only in the initial stages of its institutional development. Thanks to en-

gagement in the practical side of academic life (among other matters, he conducted three important post-war Warsaw seminars; until 1953, when sociology as an independent discipline was abolished, he supervised over half of the 83 master's degrees in sociology that were awarded at the University of Warsaw, and 3 out of 5 doctoral degrees). He created a favourable atmosphere for young sociology students and stimulated their intellectual development (Róża Sułek). Aside from Florian Znaniecki, it would seem that Ossowski was the sole Polish sociologist to have had a group of students who were usually described by his name—Ossowski-ites (Antoni Sułek). Ossowski's group crossed the boundaries of disciplines and Warsaw circles (Róża Sułek) and was methodologically varied: some pursued the idea of a positivist sociology, others a humanist one (Antoni Sułek). An understanding of the heritage of this scholar produces a deeper insight into the history of Polish sociology in general.

Although Ossowski's aim was not to create a synthetic theory (as a student and representative of the Lvov-Warsaw School he valued scrupulous analysis over synthesis) he yet had a wide view and understanding of what was occurring in the social sciences of his times. This found expression in his essay style, in which he more than once took refuge, mingling his erudition and his capacity for including multiple motifs. Such a form produced works open to interpretation, where pearls might be found, but not entire necklaces (Łuczewski). Although Ossowski's analyses were sometimes pioneering or were simultaneous discoveries', for the contemporary scholar they often constitute solely the indication of an interesting field for research or an innovative perspective. This may be why Ossowski's work is seldom referred to (Skarżyńska) and such references are often ritual in nature (Łuczewski). Nevertheless, from the papers given, the image of the man and his entire work, which can be reduced to three points, emerges: 1) social reality is a whole, which may and should be investigated in multiple aspects in order to achieve a full picture; 2) in order to research social reality it is necessary to have a kind of scientific method; 3) the picture of social reality sketched by Ossowski is rich, although it omits certain important topics, including those that it avoids for reasons of the political context or expert knowledge involved.

1) **Stanisław Ossowski was a sociologist and humanist** who felt at home in many disciplines of the humanities and sub-disciplines of sociology (Anna Giza). The last fifty years have seen an enormous growth in the number of empirical studies as well as great development in theory and methodology, which necessarily led to an increased division of work and specialization of researchers into narrow cognitive fields. Ossowski's legacy—an example of a successful interdisciplinary approach *avant la lettre* (Mirosława Grabowska)—made sure we were not left with a fragmented image of social reality (Szymczyk). This is the source of the recommendation for the sociologist to understand and interpret social reality at various levels, such as the psychology of individuals, the interaction between individuals and groups, and cultural objectivization (Łuczewski).

The behaviour of individuals deserves particular attention: Firstly, between sociology and anthropology and, secondly, between scientific description and social action. Even though he was characterized by an anti-philosophical or anti-metaphysical attitude that did not always allow him to express certain issues in a direct manner

(Szymczyk), Ossowski maintained a continuity of thought between sociological theory and the anthropological image of Man. The individual, as an existing entity (Szymczyk), is the final element of social reality and is endowed with autonomy (Skarżyńska). Although human nature is dynamic and is shaped in confrontation with social categories and structures, it is made of permanent elements, such as the pursuit of justice, self-esteem, and a need for freedom (Krzemiński). Individuals create cognitive visions (schemas) that guide their actions. For Ossowski, the social category is a real category endowed with structures and consciousness (Antoni Sułek), but not a substantive one (Szymczyk): Society is a whole made of specific interactions and structures shaping historical configurations. Such a vision represents the basis for a processual and dynamic vision of the constitution of society (Szymczyk). In turn, Ossowski's anti-ideological approach—which expressed itself in an auto-critical attitude—seems topical even today (Krzemiński). In keeping with such a vision of science, the social researcher should follow the norms of scholarly pursuit: An awareness of his predecessors, accountability, methodological transparency, and unhampered thinking. At the same time, the sociologist should be guided by a specific social ethos: Sociology, by its very nature, is a civic discipline (Antoni Sułek).

2) **The conviction of the singularity of the social sciences** is expressed in the statement that one can study society using scientific methods that are pure, as opposed to the methods of pure science (Antoni Sułek). When Ossowski spoke of formulating the laws of sociology, he spoke of laws that are particular and that modify the traditional understanding of scientific laws. But they have no sense of necessity: They arise from social action and create new patterns, but they do not guide such action (Motrenko). One of Ossowski's specific research methods was conceptual analysis, conducted on the basis of empirical study but based on introspection and daily observation. Ossowski's subtle analyses of self-observation processes and of individuals' dual nature—whether good or bad—are borne out in detailed empirical studies conducted today (Skarżyńska). His definition analyses concerning the notions of class and social structure remain valid today and are textbook formulations (Domański). Ossowski's conceptual grid in the area of aesthetics can be used with success as the basis for classification in this field of study (Matuchniak-Krasuska).

3) Even when the most outstanding scholars in a given discipline reach beyond the horizons of their contemporaries—and such is the picture of Ossowski that emerges from the lectures delivered here—they nevertheless function in a specific historical reality that conditions their work. Ossowski saw the individual as entangled in a historical reality that hampers his actions (Łuczewski). The key experiences that shaped Ossowski's work were the two world wars and communism.

Inspired by post-war patriotism, the young Ossowski formulated substantive theories of nationhood that took no account of the nation's construction process (Łuczewski). His observations of human behaviour during the Second World War allowed him to formulate a thesis on the duality of human nature (Skarżyńska), while his studies of social structure took the form of a polemic with the then ideologized and highly simplified image of social structure (Domański). The manner in which Ossowski formulated certain problems may seem outdated today: Firstly, the political

context in which he worked meant that, during Ossowski's lifetime, the discussion of certain topics—such as those pertaining to the State (Grabowska)—was barred from official discourse by the authorities. Secondly, the world has changed in a way that makes some of Ossowski's reflections seem outdated—for example, Ossowski made no allowance for the possible disappearance of social classes (Domański). Thirdly, science has changed—for example, the constitution of the social order in primitive societies is seen today as a dynamic process, not one that takes place through inertia (Motrenko).

The Warsaw conference was an important event. Its character was not solely that of a ritual reinforcing the sociological identity of the community. Such a ritual would, in any case, have been of little importance, because few people in the audience were of the younger generation (Piotr Gliński). The conference showed the fundamental value of Ossowski's work, which still makes it possible to build social imagination, to understand the specificity of the subject and the methods of social science, which forms a reservoir of brilliant hypotheses, and which points to the necessity of shaping the sociologist's ethos.

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