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Znaniecki's Key Insight: The Merger of Pragmatism and Neo-Kantianism*

Abstract: Znaniecki is difficult to classify theoretically, which may be why his ideas and writings have been neglected. He is a central and perhaps the central figure in American sociological theory. This is because he clarified the sense in which the social is symbolic. In addition his pioneering analysis of ethnic prejudice and racism makes him a central figure in the American reform tradition. The key to understanding his theoretical power is in his having fused or merged neo-Kantianism and pragmatism. This paper explains how Znaniecki achieved this highly creative feat and what consequences it led to.

Keywords: Florian Znaniecki, William I. Thomas, neo-Kantianism, pragmatism, symbol, ethnicity, race

This will be an attempt to characterize Florian Znaniecki's major theoretical presuppositions and their consequences. This is not easy, because he changed his ideas at times, particularly as he moved from philosophy to sociology. And he did not usually cite his major sources in a clear and unambiguous manner. Rather he often cited many sources and did not weight or prioritize them.

Nevertheless if one goes the internal route, looking at Znaniecki's work as a whole, his main ideas, the points he kept returning to, his logic in use and the underlying premises that run through his work, it seems reasonable to say his two major sources were neo-Kantianism and pragmatism. More specifically he took the neo-Kantian idea of the two kinds of science, natural and cultural, and he combined this with the pragmatist theory of meaning. In other words he accepted Windelband's dichotomy of the sciences (Windelband 1980), but instead of using such neo-Kantians as Windelband, Rickert and Weber for the corresponding theory of meaning, he substituted that of pragmatism. This was a hybrid and a novelty at the time. But it came to define the theory of *The Polish Peasant*, and in large part that of the Chicago school, symbolic interaction and American sociology in general—in its interpretive, if not its positivist, variety. When Gerth and Mills (1961) synthesized Weber and Mead they were unwittingly re-calibrating what Znaniecki had done several decades earlier.

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* Thanks are due to Hans Bakker, Clark McPhail and Guy Oakes for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

I will pursue this thesis by showing its ramifications in several aspects of American sociology: how pragmatism's theory of meaning worked better than that of neo-Kantianism, how Znaniecki applied theoretical pragmatism to the social sciences, how Znaniecki's ideas organized *The Polish Peasant* monograph, how Znaniecki clarified the first paradigm of American sociology, how Znaniecki's notion of culture reinforced the emerging theory of the anthropologists and how the social sciences in general and Znaniecki's ideas in particular were useful for the universalization of civil rights in American democracy.

But before discussing these sociological themes I will present the argument concerning Znaniecki's two major influences. In an early statement he singled out two sources.

The primary source of the views on which I am trying to build lies in Polish historical idealism. Of all my later debts none is greater than the one I owe to pragmatism, of which, in fact, I am inclined to consider myself almost a disciple (1919: xli–xlii).

As Coser points out, Znaniecki's humanistic interpretation of Polish idealism "places him directly in the German idealistic tradition and its offshoots in Dilthey's and Neo-Kantian thought (1977: 547)." In addition Znaniecki frequently cited Windelband, Dilthey and Rickert, the key neo-Kantians for the social sciences, in his 1909, University of Cracow, Ph.D. dissertation (Znaniecki 1910).

In particular Znaniecki's use of the term "values" as his central concept placed him squarely in the neo-Kantian tradition. His dissertation explicated his theory of values, and he kept this central concept, despite periodic modifications, throughout his career. As Hałas says,

Adopting values as a basis of his philosophy of culturalism, Znaniecki undoubtedly refers to the conceptions of Dilthey, Windelband and Rickert who used this notion to deal with general philosophical issues (Hałas 2001: 3).

Pragmatism's Theory of Meaning

In regard to the cultural sciences, i.e. those of the humanities and the social sciences, the neo-Kantians had a theory of meaning which was drawn loosely from Kantian concepts. In particular Rickert's notion of "value relevance" implied that we select from an infinite number of features those aspects of an object to which we ascribe some value and which we will include in our conception of it. Any cultural object has an innumerable number of facets under which we could view it. We select a small number of these, and we do so on the basis of what we want—i.e. our values and interests. This selection determines our view of the significance or meaning of an object. What cognitive features are selected, however, will vary from culture to culture, and also to some extent from individual to individual. For all practical purposes selection is the same as imposition or social construction. We determine, to some extent, what is "out there" whether we select or construct.

In other words the neo-Kantians relativized the Kantian categories.¹ For them the categories, though “selected,” are in effect imposed on some unknowable external reality or thing-in-itself. In addition the content of the categories varies from culture to culture, and even from person to person. Note that the definition of some aspect of reality as a cultural object is the constitution of this aspect of an object by reference to our values. So the definition of the object is not simply “in the thing.” These then are the neo-Kantians’ version of the Kantian categories, now chosen by people in a culture, and also relative to each culture. Znaniecki’s early paper (1915) on the relativity of values, drawn from his dissertation, seems straight out of Rickert.

In contrast to this heavily-baggage epistemology,² pragmatism had a new and simple one. For Peirce, to mention the key pragmatist, meaning was in the consequences, especially as expressed in our responses to the object being defined. Meaning is the consequences for us. Definition is no longer simply in the thing. It is partly in the thing and partly in our responses to the thing. And the consequences are obviously relative to any given culture. Hindus worship cows and Europeans eat them.

Znaniecki had made the switch to pragmatism in *The Polish Peasant*, where attitudes and values were defined. I am assuming, as most do, that Znaniecki wrote the methodological note and was responsible for the theoretical infrastructure of *The Polish Peasant*.

By a social value we understand any datum having an empirical content accessible to the members of some social group and a meaning with regard to which it is or may be an object of activity (1918: 21).

By attitude we understand a process of individual consciousness which determines real or possible activity of the individual in the social world (1918: 22).

These definitions presuppose an epistemology different from that of Rickert and the neo-Kantians. Although value relevance is indirectly the product of action, the key idea in the definition of meaning is now *activity as such*. Value relevance is no longer emphasized, although it is implicit in what activities are selected. And the categories, which supplied meaning in the neo-Kantian tradition, are no longer built from aspects or facets of things. Now they are formed by our actions. Remembering that we are talking about socio-cultural objects such as money, law, language and religion, the main qualities of the object are formed by how we act or what we do with the object. Religions, for example, are how we respond to sacred objects.

A major difference between the two approaches to meaning was in what John Dewey called the “spectator theory of knowledge.” Kantianism and neo-Kantianism, despite their novelty, were like other epistemologies in maintaining a representational or resemblance theory of knowledge. The concept’s function was to represent or copy the object of which it is a concept. The exact mode of representation in Kantianism was new, but the general relation of representation was in the Western philosophical

¹ Durkheim made a broadly similar relativization of the Kantian categories in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912, pp. 8–18.

² Rickert called his book (1986) *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science*, and both he and Weber thought of it as a study in methodology. But at this point methodology crosses paths with epistemology, so I will use the latter term.

tradition. Pragmatism broke with that tradition by instituting an activist epistemology. Peirce's consequences were in the things we do, and these gradually congealed into a set of habits. The pragmatist concept, then, was a habit, not a picture.

Still both neo-Kantianism and pragmatism could explain cultural variation. "Selecting from an indefinite number of cognitive features" and "response to an object" are both ways in which people construct their social environment and institutions. Znaniecki was able to maintain his epistemological relativism as he shifted from neo-Kantianism to pragmatism. For, both epistemologies are varieties of relativism. But despite this similarity, the constructed quality of the world is much more easily grasped as activity than as selection from a manifold. You can see activity. It is in front of you in a thousand ways. Selection too can be perceived but it is an inferential process and less amenable to observation

Activity is a much more useful concept, particularly for the social sciences, than selection is. Max Weber was able to do brilliant work with a neo-Kantian epistemology, but few others have been able to. Weber had built tools, such as *verstehen* and the ideal type, which worked best in his hands and his alone. But pragmatism's epistemology is simpler and closer to or more iconic with the observable social world.

What Znaniecki did then was to retain the neo-Kantian dualism of the sciences into the natural and cultural. This implied that the cultural world consisted of meanings, and that we had put them there in the first place. But then he switched the definition of meaning from selection to activity. This simplified the meta-theory of the social sciences and made it a much more appealing and usable basis for research. It also hitched the social sciences to the engine of pragmatism. Or, as I will explain later, it applied theoretical pragmatism to the empirical social sciences.

To put it succinctly, Znaniecki combined pragmatism's *epistemology* with neo-Kantian *ontology*, or the "how we know" with the "what we know."³ Many American sociologists had made a lengthy educational sojourn in Germany, and the planting of a pragmatist epistemology into neo-Kantian soil may have been an idea whose time had come. But the person who actually made the synthesis was Znaniecki.

The Polish Peasant Project

The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1918–20) was the first major treatise in American sociology, particularly one which tested theory with empirical data. And, given its pathbreaking refutation of racism, it may still be the most important work.⁴ Philosophically it is squarely in the cultural or neo-Kantian camp, defining the data of sociology as cultural meaning. Earlier American sociology had worked with an unanalyzed blend of positivism and interpretive cultural theory. *The Polish Peasant*

³ Technically the neo-Kantians' ontology is an implication of their epistemology, for they did not have an independent ontology. In other words their two kinds of knowledge implied two corresponding kinds of reality.

⁴ In a previous paper (Wiley, 1986) I analyzed the work at length. Here I will draw on that earlier analysis and focus the present paper on the particular way I am now looking at Znaniecki.

was the first reasonably clean break from positivism and statement of the interpretive or meaning-based alternative. These ideas are still central to sociology's interpretive wing, and they were recently deepened in John Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995)

The authors of *The Polish Peasant* were explicit about their contrast with Durkheim, whose theory was both positivist and "sociologistic." The latter implied that a social phenomenon or fact was always caused by another social phenomenon or fact. The social was caused by the social, never by the individual. This was Durkheim's attempt to tidy up the field for a simplified methodology, comparable to the sealed off quality that Saussure would later attribute to language and linguistics.

W. I. Thomas, however, was a pioneer in social psychology, which implied causal influence between the individual and social levels. And Znaniecki's notion of the "cultural" was better understood as the significant or symbolic, which sprawled across the individual, social and cultural levels. Both theorists then disagreed with Durkheim's hermetically closed social world and recognized the interplay of the individual and the social.

The interpretive epistemology and the social psychology of these authors were both important for the political message this book would produce. The main point of this complex book, though implied more than announced, was that all American ethnic groups were equal, and that this equality should be recognized in law and society. In other words *The Polish Peasant* was a radically democratic book, implying that the Poles were as good as anyone else. What else would one expect from a Polish scholar who was also a fierce Polish nationalist. In addition the book implied that all other ethnic, racial or sub-cultural groups, including all minorities, were also as good as anyone else—and should be so treated.

It was primarily the pragmatist theory of meaning which produced this politics. This theory of meaning made meaning relativistic, that is, it was relative to the historical and social circumstances within which it was formed. Polish-American culture was primarily relative to the European Polish community in which it had been constructed and from which it had been brought to the United States. In addition the American Poles had adopted new cultural elements, both American and semi-American, with which they were responding to the migration to the United States.

But this whole ethnic culture, mixed as it was, was a system of meanings that had been constructed by the Poles themselves. In particular it was not something in their blood, from their genes or in their "race," as most powerful Americans of the early 20th century had been saying. Ethnicity, the authors claimed, was not biological but culturological.

To put it another way the customs and practices of ethnic groups were their assessment of the environment or their definition of the situation. Ethnic groups used their emotions and cognitions to appraise and respond to their surroundings. These definitions formed the responsive activities, which in turn formed the meanings of this group's sub-culture. These meanings, though relative and decidedly non-biological, were the working reality of this group. If a group thinks it is true, it is true for them. Or as W. I. and Dorothy Thomas would later say, "if men define things as real, they

are real in their consequences,” (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 41). Cultures then are self fulfilling prophecies, true because they are so defined.⁵

In addition ethnic groups have the resources to change their definitions of the situation, or in this case to strike a reasonable accomodation to American life. They would gradually come to speak English and become American. For this to happen the individuals in the ethnic group had to exert a causal influence on their ethnic sub-societies and sub-cultures. In other words Thomas and Znaniecki *had* to say Durkheim was wrong, if they were to make their egalitarian argument. Otherwise, lacking the processes of social psychology, the Poles would be unable to Americanize their still decidedly Polish customs and ways.

The theoretical energy behind *The Polish Peasant*, which gave it the power to refute racism, was in the concept of the “symbol.” This concept had been important in philosophy, especially in Peirce and Mead, for a long time, but it was new to the social sciences as such. It had also been slowly entering cultural anthropology where it was eroding the idea of cultural hierarchies. But it was new to the analysis of sub-cultures within the United States. If anything this country was becoming more racist around the turn of the century as evidenced in Jim Crow laws and the backlash against the Catholics and Jews.

W. I. Thomas had learned the concept of the symbol from Mead, but Znaniecki had a stronger version in his philosophical notion of value. For Thomas as for Mead, the symbol came from below in the gradual evolution of animals to language and culture. For Znaniecki it came from above, as the analysis of purely cultural symbols was transferred or lowered to the study of social organization, interaction and the self. The sociological concept of the symbol crystallized when Thomas’s attitude merged

⁵ Thomas and Thomas stated this important principle in 1928, but it was implicit in Znaniecki’s paper on relativism (1915) and his book on culture (1919). And it was explicit in his *The Laws of Social Psychology*, where he says

for the social psychologist it is the point of view of the acting subject, not that of the outside observer which matters in studying social action... The stability of the expected result from the beginning to the end of the action is *real just because, and in so far as, it is real to the subject...* (1925: 87, emphasis added).

This principle is commonly known as the “Thomas theorem,” but it would be more accurate to call it the “Znaniecki theorem.”

This theorem as well as Znaniecki’s more general presupposition is a form of relativism, an idea that is often said to be self-refuting. For if everything is relative, so too is the statement that everything is relative. But there are two versions of relativism that are not self-refuting, and I think Znaniecki’s relativism partakes of both.

One is descriptive relativism, which merely says epistemological standards vary from community to community and culture to culture. In contrast normative relativism, which is self-defeating, says no epistemological standards are better than any others. Susan Haack (1996) refers to these two positions as shallow and deep relativism, respectively.

The second acceptable relativism is one that does not include all possible beliefs, i.e. one that is “local” rather than “global” (McGrew, 1994). Skepticism is global, for it includes all beliefs as well as itself as a belief. This makes it self-contradictory (in a similar way to how logical positivism was discredited as self-contradictory). In contrast if one claims only that some statements are relative, e.g. those of history, aesthetics or, like Znaniecki, of the socio-cultural sphere, this relativism is not self contradictory. This is because the exclusion of some epistemological space permits the speaker to make a “meta” statement concerning the relativity of the local category. This relativity does not feed back to the defining maxim itself because the maxim has another epistemological location.

with Znaniecki's value. The result was the introduction of a new theoretical paradigm in the social sciences as a whole. And for American public life it brought a new moral paradigm in which the lofty egalitarianism of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg address was applied to everyday life.

Pragmatism and the Social Sciences

In *Cultural Reality* (1919) Znaniecki had declared himself "almost a disciple of pragmatism." But he never got very specific about which pragmatists or pragmatist ideas he felt attracted to. By the time he came to America in the mid-1910s all the major pragmatists had already published, i.e. Peirce, James, Dewey and, to some extent, Mead. And in England F.S.C. Schiller, who Znaniecki was familiar with quite early (Coser 1977: 549) had major publications. What Znaniecki does not supply is reference to particular pragmatists with some clarification of what he might have gotten from them. His definition of knowledge and meaning as activity shows he was drawn to one idea that, starting with Peirce, was shared by all the pragmatists. And we can assume he was influenced by the ideas of W. I. Thomas, who was himself a pragmatist and a student of George Herbert Mead. In fact the merger of Thomas's concept of attitude and Znaniecki's concept of value in *The Polish Peasant* was itself a good example of how Znaniecki articulated with pragmatism. But more specific references to the writings of the major pragmatists we have very little of.

So It appears to me that Znaniecki worked with his own ideas of pragmatism. These were influenced by the major pragmatists all right, but they were still the product of his own creativity. In other words he seems to have been a legitimate member, not a follower, of the pragmatist school as such. He was somewhat peripheral as W. I. Thomas and Charles Horton Cooley were, but they all nevertheless had their own contributions to pragmatism and were free-standing members of that school.⁶

The particular contribution Znaniecki made to pragmatism, however, seems to have been in the application of pragmatist ideas to the theory of sociology. He had already synthesized pragmatism's theory of meaning with the neo-Kantians' notion of the cultural sciences—the epistemology-ontology linkage I mentioned earlier. But American sociology was one of the cultural sciences. So the theoretical linkage led quickly to a working bridge between pragmatism and sociology.

I already alluded to this connection in my earlier discussion of the definition of the situation. I will now describe, somewhat more formally, how Znaniecki applied pragmatism to sociology and thereby to the social sciences generally.

There was already "in the air" an interface between pragmatism and the social sciences. Peirce had argued at length, in his critique of Descartes, that there was

⁶ E. Garty Jaco (1983) points out that Znaniecki's concept of the act and its stages was quite similar to, and also preceded, Mead's theory of the act. When Jaco asked Znaniecki about this resemblance Znaniecki said he had had no contact with Mead, even though they were both at the University of Chicago for the same years. David Miller (1983) was also struck by the resemblance between Znaniecki's and Mead ideas. These resemblances seem to have been a case of independent invention from within the same broad, pragmatist perspective. And they again show Znaniecki was a self styled and somewhat self taught pragmatist.

no intuitive or self-evident knowledge. Instead all knowledge was mediated by signs, giving it an approximate and interpretive character. This was Peirce's famous doctrine of semiotics, which I have argued (Wiley 2006a) is substantially the same as Franz Boas's idea of culture.

Peirce also had reconstructed the idea of the dialogical self, which had lain more or less dormant since Plato (Theaetetus 189e–190a and Sophist 263e). Peirce's internal conversation had a family resemblance to the similar ideas of William James and George Herbert Mead. And this pragmatist model of the internally communicative self became a major similarity among the pragmatists, perhaps just as defining as the consequence-based theory of meaning (Wiley 2006b).

Both Peirce's semiotics and his dialogical self highlighted the plasticity of the human being. Humans have indefinite reaches of potential; they can go in a wide variety of different directions. It is largely their social environments that shape these directions. And the power of the semiotic system and the dialogical self is that these directions can be formed by the human beings themselves. Again, blood, genes and race are not the explanation. Peirce did not emphasize or perhaps even see these consequences of his ideas, but others did, and the ideas gradually cast a new moral light on American life.

It was Thomas and Znaniecki who took the power of Peirce's insights, focusing them on the theory of meaning and applying them to the critique of racism. Znaniecki in particular brought pragmatism into the social sciences by making pragmatist ideas the foundation of *The Polish Peasant* project.

This innovation combined with the work Franz Boas had been doing, also in the United States, to organize anthropology around the concept of culture (Stocking, 1968). Boas had led a long-term fight against the physical wing of anthropology, which explained human variation biologically and in a racist manner, rather than culturally. Boas and his students gradually out-argued this wing and also, in the American Anthropological Association, out-voted them. Thomas and Znaniecki did a similar thing in sociology. Boas used primitive societies for his data, Thomas and Znaniecki used a disparaged ethnic group, the American Poles, for their data. But both showed that the ways and customs of societies were not based on internal biological scripts. Instead they were based on the symbolically creative potential of the human self. On symbols, signs and culture.

I have been using the term "constructive" to mean that humans create and shape their social environments. And Znaniecki bridged Peirce's social construction, probably unknowingly, into the concepts and research of sociology. But there was a second socially constructive vein in pragmatism, and this was James's "will to believe." James had interpreted Peirce's "consequence" theory of meaning very liberally to include psychological consequences in the person maintaining the meaning. If, for example, one believed in God and one of the consequences was peace of mind, then James thought these consequences made the belief true. James thought he himself had "willed" several of his personal dilemmas into truth. These were the beliefs in God, in the after life and in free will. This free-wheeling interpretation of pragmatism bothered Peirce so much he changed the name of his philosophy from pragmatism to

“pragmatism,” saying he hoped this name was so ugly, no one, even James, would want to steal it.

But what Znaniecki had done in the Methodological Note of *The Polish Peasant* was to tease out a more plausible version of James's will to believe. James's believer had been acting alone, in the short term and with deliberate intentions. It is questionable how firm a conviction one might create with this skimpy weapon. But Znaniecki knew from his own life as a Pole that this sub-culture was firm. It would not change with the wave of a wand. The process of change, particularly self-engineered change, would have to be more long term. Instant cultural change was a contradiction in terms. And it would have to be widely social to have the power to stick. If everyone in one's world believes something, even something somewhat newly believed, then it is more likely to seem naturally true than if one adopts it as an isolated individual. Truth is largely a consensus rather than a correspondance relationship. If everyone in one's emotional world believes something, then the “suspension of disbelief” comes naturally, and one simply and effortlessly believes. It is also better if the new belief is not “chosen” but somehow seems manifestly true. James's almost cynical engineering of his own beliefs seems artificial, whereas a less deliberate move on the part of a whole community seems like nature herself.

These modifications of James's will to believe are part of *The Polish Peasant's* argument. This idea is a form of social constructionism, just as Peirce's semiotic and dialogical self were socially constructive. But in James's hands the idea was too easy, as though we could change ourselves and our societies at the drop of a hat. Znaniecki modified James's theory at the points where it was needed, and the result was a version of social construction that combined with Peirce's somewhat similar idea. Together these ideas functioned as a bridge whereby pragmatism could enter the social sciences.

Conclusion

Znaniecki's ideas then went a long way toward forming the paradigms of the Chicago school and American sociology generally. Robert Park had his own model of sociology, which applied Windelband's scientific dualism in a different way (Park 1915). Park had said sociology partakes of both sciences, being partly causal and partly meaningful (Park 1915; Matthews 1977: 132–134) Somewhat like Weber, he saw Windelband's two categories of science synthesizing into one within sociology. Park's dualism of the ecological and the communal was the official paradigm of the Chicago school. But Znaniecki had interpreted Windelband to mean sociology as such is an interpretive discipline. Like Park, Znaniecki tried to find room for all varieties of research within sociology, but his key idea of the “humanistic coefficient” (Lopata, 1970) implied that all research would have to be based on a verstehen-like insight.

The Chicago school always wobbled between Park's and Znaniecki's epistemologies. But Znaniecki's model, even if viewed as an element within Park's, had an enduring power. At the present time Znaniecki's ideas seems to be the key ones in symbolic interactionism (Hałas 1986) as well as in interpretive sociology generally.

In this paper I have argued that the juncture of neo-Kantianism and pragmatism was at the basis of Znaniecki's genius. Znaniecki was very emotional about all this. But his hurt feelings as an aristocratic Pole, based on the Russian persecution in Poland and the anti-Polish atmosphere in Chicago, seem to have fed into his creativity. These ideas were hard-won, but his shift to pragmatism was immensely fruitful. In particular Znaniecki used novel ideas to explain how and why the Poles should be given their due freedoms, their "Magna Charta," in the United States. He did this by showing that ethnic cultures are social constructions, not biological emanations.

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