

COMMUNIQUÉS

Standards of Practising Sociology Conference of the Polish Sociological Association and the Committee of Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences. Warsaw, May 31st 2006

The professional role of sociologists is substantially expanding in Poland. They also become vivid in public life. This was clearly seen in last parliamentary elections and the forthcoming self-government elections will certainly be a new proof of sociologists' medial existence. Thus the question of the practising sociology in Poland finds its proper context.

That was the issue of a conference organized in Warsaw on 31st May by the Polish Sociological Association and Committee of Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences. The main theme was reflection on public roles of sociologists. A new area of sociology and the relevant new standards of practising it were another topic.

Piotr Sztompka¹ presented the trend of daily life analyses as a new orientation emerging in sociology. This “third sociology” is different from both, the first, analyzing social reality in systemic categories, and from the second, which does accent the interactive character of reality, but emphasizes unintentional effects of human activities. Now daily life sociology describes social life in terms of people experiencing it in their daily existence. Events and everyday practices are a sphere in which social structures emerge and are recreated.

As important methodological standards of this orientation, Sztompka indicates the contextual and interpersonal character of social phenomena, and not their mass scale. A new research objective is its another constituent element. “Third sociology” is meant to increase comprehension of development and social practices, and particularly reveal things behind the obviousness and routine of everyday life. This objective is attainable not through idealization and conditional rights but by description of typical practices, their sequences, plans hidden within and means of effecting them. Characteristic feature of this orientation is recognition of spontaneous, habitual and ritual character of interaction, with the emphasis on their location and present aspect.

Of interest were the reasons quoted in the speech why the “third sociology” emerged and is expanding today. Multiple changes within societies of late modernity, seen primarily in the sphere of daily life, are the external cause. As for the intra-scientific causes, Piotr Sztompka mentioned for instance the impact of sociology

¹ Jagiellonian University professor, ISA chairman In 2003–2006, a specialist in theoretical sociology and social change sociology.

on postmodernism which—adopting some postulates of postmodernism—also tries to maintain some rigor in science standards. During discussion, doubts were raised whether this concept of “third sociology” really transcends postmodernism limitations and is a sociology in the spirit of the dominant *science* tradition. Attention was also paid to the Polish sociology tradition of research conducted from the daily point of view, like Andrzej Siciński’s analyses of lifestyles. Summing up this part of discussion, Jolanta Kulpińska said that alongside other related social disciplines developing on the periphery of sociology’s macro- and mesostructures, the daily life sociology is becoming increasingly *differentia specifica* of our science, with its standards playing in it an ever more important role.

The principal theme of the conference was, however, the presence of sociologists and sociology in public life and media. Three problems were identified. Experiences gathered by social researchers in contacts with media were discussed. The reasons of Polish sociologists’ considerable popularity and visibility in public life were considered. And, lastly, diverse consequences of this phenomenon were indicated.

Tomasz Żukowski² shared his reflections on contacts with the media, emphasizing a sociologist’s dilemmas. They regard the need for self-limitation and adapting the contents presented to the media specificity. It is a “format dictatorship,” a necessity for far-reaching compromises in both the contents and the language of description adopted. He also indicated the ever more frequent cases of the media manipulating a sociologist and his statements. As a negative outcome of the researchers-media relationship, he mentioned researchers’ dependence syndrome of being in the media, and a relatively new phenomenon: the media attacking—particularly in the manner of tabloid-like sensationalism—a researcher’s image.

In the discussion, Ireneusz Krzemiński³ emphasized the growing danger of sociologist message being manipulated. He even expressed his conviction that there was a need for focusing the sociological milieu’s efforts on defence of a sociologist’s independent position.

The total of experiences gathered by sociology was enriched by Lena Kolarska-Bobinska⁴’s remarks on the need for reconsideration and appraisal of surveys held following the last parliamentary elections, and before incoming self-government elections. The survey outcomes were wrong last time and that information was made public by the media. She emphasized the fact that enquiries function at the converging point of three spheres with different logic: science, politics and media, which is why results of analyses are interpreted differently by each of them. The important conclusion drawn from this experience is the need for extending the workshop and survey techniques. Rapid social change, particularly the fluid political attitudes, call for adoption of more profound analyses and qualitative methods. New means of research are needed in a changing society.

² Sociologist at the Institute of Social Politics of Warsaw University, a frequent commentator of current political events in media.

³ Professor of Warsaw University, dealing with social change sociology, a researcher of anti-Semitism, frequent commentator of events in the media.

⁴ Director of the Institute of Public Affairs.

The reasons of Polish sociologists' conspicuous presence in public life was another question discussed. Various reasons were quoted. Piotr Sztompka emphasized that there was a lack of qualified commentators and social analysts in media themselves on the one hand, and on the other, a lack of other roles for the sociologists to fulfil. Ireneusz Krzemiński emphasized civic traditions of Polish sociology, especially in the period prior to 1989. A researcher's commitment to public affairs has had a long tradition in Polish sociology. This tradition, added Joanna Kulpińska, was based on the belief that unlike official propaganda spread by authorities, analyses made by sociologists furnished sound and credible knowledge of the state of society, usually different from propaganda information.

Speeches by Lena Kolarska-Bobińska and Jarosław Kilias⁵ featured in-depth analyses of this issue. The first analysed extensively the newest history of survey research in Poland. Up to 1989 it was their cognitive role that dominated, which contrary to expectations remained undiminished also later. Till the end of the Polish People's Republic, survey researches were a substitute for a political mechanism, which is why they were expected to be curbed in a new democratic reality. Prospects of politics becoming professionalised and hopes for an emergence of a strong civil society were to contribute to the process. More than a dozen years on, with Polish democracy still imperfect, the role of survey research is still immense, even though slightly different. These imperfections, said Lena Kolarska-Bobińska, are the growing polarity of political discourse, the increasingly bitter fight over social reality definitions and the lack of deep and durable connections between institutions and citizens. New political functions of surveys are: the usefulness of results to political parties following the professionalisation of politics and partial adoption of the task of organisation of public opinion vis a vis a weak civil society. The cognitive functions are still valid, with political attitudes of the Poles becoming more and more unstable and less predictable.

Looking for an explanation of the massive presence of Polish sociologists in public life, i.e. in media and politics, Jarosław Kilias quoted the tradition of building institutional structure of our science. He detected three paths of institutionalisation in its history. First, American sociology, in which the role of politics, especially great politics, was slight, and universities, focused on their didactic function, formed activists-reformers who pursued social politics at a local level. The French way was clearly influenced by politics, with a strong relationship between academic institutions and the state. In this model, an intellectual's public roles form a vital part of his professional role. The path of German sociology emerged latest, in an environment in which academic institutions held a strong and independent position.

Against this background, the early history of Polish sociology was closest to German sociology. Today, however, it is expected to be more and more similar to the American and French model, as didactic function is gaining more significance and the public roles of sociologists are conspicuously growing.

Jarosław Kilias' speech contained an interesting remark on the dynamic role of sociology and sociologists in Polish public life. From 1989 until now, sociology

⁵ Sociologist, Warsaw University.

monopolised its position through the dominant transformation discourse. Now it is beginning to slowly wane. Historiography has recently begun to try and secure this position, as seen in the opening of debate on new historical politics.

The third and last theme of the conference was reflection on the consequences of the growing role of sociologists in public life. Various opinions of this development were heard, some of them emotional in character. Apart from pronouncing this fact as inevitable, most speakers voiced their anxiety over its possibility of negatively influencing the environment and primarily the science itself. Piotr Sztompka admitted that pronouncements on public affairs are part of a sociologist's mission. But in his opinion the only proper way to do it, was for a sociologist to propound and publicise his own conceptions and scientific explanations translating them into a popular language that is easier to understand. He did not approve of a sociologist speaking as a committed citizen who just commands a more extensive knowledge of society. Antoni Sułek⁶ asked the rhetorical question whether the short and simplified statements made by sociologists in the media was sociology at all. He was positive that this extensive public activity of researchers, especially in the media, affects adversely the standards of sociology in Poland. In a similar tenor Jarosław Kiliński warned that sociologists would finally pay dearly for their public commitment; it makes them adjust their analyses to the society's common sense level, and this horizon is not easily crossed in quest for more profound explanations of phenomena described.

Marek Jeżowski's⁷ paper on "creation of new intelligentsia" was the last subject of the conference. The title did not depict the contents fully, as it actually presented the existing practices and paid internet services, offering to write or sell diploma essays in sociology. This topic, of practical interest to sociologists working as teachers and guides in writing papers at different levels, was preliminary exploration of this pathological phenomenon but its actual dimensions has not been yet established. The general conviction was confirmed that preventive measures adopted hitherto had been ineffective.

The new epoch assigns a growing variety of new social roles to sociologists. The roles of a committed adviser and critic as they were before 1989 are being enriched by the role of a commentator of events and new social developments. Of course the original role of a researcher and analyst of social reality still holds its primary position. However, the proliferation of roles and sociologists' growing participation in public life pose the question of the sociologist's duties and standards of their performance. As announced by organisers, the Warsaw conference will be continued next year. There will certainly be no lack of important subjects and discussions necessary for the milieu of Polish sociologists.

Agnieszka Kolasa-Nowak (Ph.D.)
Institute of Sociology, Maria Curie
Sklódowska University, Lublin.
akolasa@hektor.umcs.lublin.pl

⁶ Professor of Sociology, Institute of Sociology, Warsaw University.

⁷ Sociologist from Catholic University of Lublin.