

## Talking about a Method Which You are not Using: The History of Sociology in the Service of Non-Reading<sup>1</sup>

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The discussion initiated by Julita Pieńkosz and Łukasz M. Dominiak's article in the 2011 issue of *Roczniki Historii Socjologii* [*History of Sociology. Annual Review*] (Pieńkosz & Dominiak 2011) remains unsettled, with a rising number of authors offering input on what the history of sociology can contribute to the scientific life. I have decided to follow in their footsteps—probably tempted by the good company as Ewa Bińczyk, the last person to join the debate (Bińczyk 2015), put it—although with uncertainty if my views will add anything new to this collection of informed opinions, brilliant juxtapositions, and apt criticisms. A truly valuable discussion engaging a number of authors for such a long period is not a frequent occurrence in Polish academia.

In this ongoing debate, one tendency is, however, particularly conspicuous: the authors are becoming increasingly collectively self-referential

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and even intersubjective with each text, which was only to be expected. For instance, Bińczyk's offering is a fully deliberate meta-argumentation in which she "re-interprets the flash points in the discussion by decomposing its characteristic elements anew" (Pieńkosz and Dominiak 2011: 1). As a result of such cognitive and rhetoric operations, common problems most in need of investigation in the history of sociology can be identified in the exchange between individual authors, who often reference each other's statements. Thus, the discussion becomes a nascent research program in its own right, albeit one marked by an essential self-consciousness as well as group thinking syndrome.

The initial piece by Pieńkosz and Dominiak in 2011 left future critics abundant freedom, as the question of positioning the history of sociology in relation to other scientific disciplines was just one of the many issues which they had considered. However, the connection between the sociology of knowledge, history, sociology and the philosophy of science, introduced by Radosław Sojak and Jarosław Kiliński (Sojak 2012; Kiliński 2013), has clearly dominated the entire discussion as a consequence of the interlocutors' interests known from their other works. By the same token, Bińczyk writes that the history of sociology is not as important to her as the history of science in general, which, in turn, is only useful if it facilitates philosophising about science.

The methodological identity of the history of sociology as well as its situation among other sciences are, of course, interesting problems, mainly because they are insoluble. Precisely for that reason, I will not consider these issues. Instead, I argue that examining why we, as sociologists, need the history of sociology and which one is most beneficial is far more worthwhile. Following those who have already voiced their opinions, I will rely on my scientific and literary experience and, in a similar manner, occasionally refer to what has already been stated in my previous work, the majority of which falls into the category of the history of sociology. Therefore, I not only write for myself, but about myself; and to balance this self-bias, I consciously employ irony when discussing my subject.

In every polemic, a reprisal of the adversaries' arguments is in place; and in this case, after a few years' worth of exchange, it is bound to be a voluminous one. Let me begin by summarizing the current state of debate from my perspective. In doing so, I will reach my own programmatic conclusion regarding non-reading as an ultimate *ratio vivendi* of the history of sociology.

### **Why do we need history of sociology?**

Pieńkosz and Dominiak declare it their intention to challenge the conviction that "research on the history of sociology is insignificant"

(Pieńkosz, Dominiak 2011: 9). In my view, their assessment of how this research is conducted in Polish sociology is accurate, although their analysis rests on at least two questionable premises.

First, there is the issue of the basic categories used in their study, such as “history of sociology,” “history of sociological thought,” “classics,” etc. For instance, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is widely recognised in the United States as a classical work in sociology (see: Carreira da Silva and Brito Vieira 2014). However, whether the author himself became a classic of the discipline is problematic because his other works have not enjoyed the same status. If we travelled back in time to 1959 when Du Bois received the International Lenin Peace Prize, his status in the United States—not to mention Europe, where Du Bois’s work has not been deemed significant at all—would have been completely different. In other words, each piece of research about how the history of sociology is done should also operationalise the discipline and contextualise it in time and space alike.

Secondly, the reason why Pieńkosz and Dominiak narrowed down the scope of their study to sociological journals was dictated by their conviction that only sociologists study the history of sociology, or at least only authors who publish in sociological journals. While this may have once been the case, I would argue it is an interdisciplinary area of research, primarily as important sociological figures are also recognised in other fields and *vice versa*. For instance, Norbert Elias’s *Studies on the Germans* mostly reverberated in Poland amongst German philologists. It was not until recently, when Arkadiusz Peisert (2015) published his article on the topic, that sociologists devoted more attention to this work. German philologists’ interest in Elias’s work is attributable to the topic of the publication—Germans—and not its significance for sociology. However, while German philologists did not publish their works on Elias in sociological journals, sociologists often publish in non-sociological journals: at least four of my papers on the classics of Polish and international sociology can be found in interdisciplinary journals which were not covered by Pieńkosz and Dominiak’s study. Lastly, Polish scholars, including historians of sociology, also write for journals published abroad; and the current trend in science management in Poland will surely enhance this tendency, which in turn may result in the need to expand the study and revise selection criteria.

Notwithstanding these objections, the conclusions of Pieńkosz and Dominiak are, in my opinion, just (based only on my intuition and experience). In Polish studies on the history of sociology, the historical, biographical and social backgrounds of late sociologists and their works are infrequently taken into consideration; the question of how the history of sociology should be written is also seldom posed. The authors consider this a flaw, negatively referring to the “presentist

perspective” (Pieńkosz and Dominiak 2011: 12) assumed in Jerzy Szacki’s seminal *History of Sociological Thought*. They call for an increased methodological effort in our field to delineate theoretical and systematic work from the study of the history of sociology, which, according to them, cannot be performed without a level of methodological precision.

The authors justify the necessity of such a delineation with the need to support the independence of the history of sociology. Without researching the past “for itself” (Pieńkosz and Dominiak 2011: 23), we, if I understand them correctly, will be unable to access the knowledge of what the past was like, which was, after all, different from our contemporary perception of it. Without researching the past “for its own sake,” the history of sociology becomes redundant. This “new history of sociology,” borrowing the phrase from Robert A. Jones, postulates “understanding, not judging” (after: Pieńkosz and Dominiak 2011: 23) past knowledge; researching its validity, notwithstanding its contemporary irrational character; analysing the meaning of words and concepts as well as classical thinkers’ ideas, taking into consideration their target audiences and the fact that the contemporary canon is a product of social and historical circumstances. Skinnerian contextualism,<sup>2</sup> with its emphasis on the importance of communication in intellectual life, was supposed to replace Szacki’s methodologically “ambiguous” (Pieńkosz and Dominiak 2011: 12) presentist textuality, and the focus on the historical formation of canon prevailed over the discourse-oriented considerations (on the concept of canon, see Bucholc/Witte 2018). Hence, we know how to study the history of sociology; we are familiar with the alleged errors of how it used to be done and conscious of how we can improve our practice. However, the authors never explain why we should do this in the first place, as if the tasks that Merton and Skinner envisaged for the history of sociology were obvious and the pursuit of collectively self-centred knowledge—“the development of sociological thought as a process of creating self-knowledge of specific social groups” (Włodzimierz Winclawski quoted in: Pieńkosz and Dominiak 2011: 19)—was self-explanatory.

It is thus hardly surprising that this initial article provoked other authors who then pushed the discussion in the direction of the sociology of knowledge, framed by the contextualist programme and, at the same time, fully aware of the threat of futile circularity inherent in their endeavour. Sojak (2012) criticised Pieńkosz and Dominiak’s attempt to separate the history of sociology from sociology, pointing out that the two disciplines are traditionally inseparably interlinked. Sojak’s arguments (2012: 27f. pages from the translated volume) are

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<sup>2</sup> Quentin Skinner was a critic of radical contextualism and radical textuality, and perceived his own stance as a kind of “third way,” leading to “proper understanding of any given literary or philosophical work” (Skinner 1969: 4).

compelling, and I agree with his overall message favouring doing the history of sociology from a presentist perspective. The sociology of scientific knowledge, when paired with the history of sociology, provides the latter with the benefit of criticism which is absent from the contextualist conception, unless what we mean by criticism is very abstract indeed. In the conclusion of his famous paper, Skinner himself stated the following to this effect:

To recognize, moreover, that our own society is no different from any other in having its own local beliefs and arrangements of social and political life is already to have reached a quite different and, I should wish to argue, a very much more salutary point of vantage. A knowledge of the history of such ideas can then serve to show the extent to which those features of our own arrangements which we may be disposed to accept as traditional or even “timeless” truths may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history and social structure. To discover from the history of thought that there are in fact no such timeless concepts, but only the various different concepts which have gone with various different societies, is to discover a general truth not merely about the past but about ourselves as well. Furthermore, it is a commonplace—we are all Marxists to this extent—that our own society places unrecognized constraints upon our imaginations. It deserves, then, to become a commonplace that the historical study of the ideas of other societies should be undertaken as the indispensable and the irreplaceable means of placing limits on those constraints. . . . [H]istory itself provides a lesson in self-knowledge. To demand from the history of thought a solution to our own immediate problems is thus to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error. But to learn from the past and we cannot otherwise learn it at all—the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements, is to learn the key to self-awareness itself. (Skinner 1969: 52–53)

Despite being old-fashioned and critical towards those chasing the “timeless,” Skinner conveys the message that self-reflection is and will always be valuable—likely a true statement. However, becoming aware of the fact that our beliefs are contingent and that the limitations that various determinants of social structure impose on us must be fought does not produce the energy necessary for change or even an impulse in its direction. At the same time, if we interpret the works of classical thinkers from the presentist perspective, such an energy and impulse may emerge. How am I supposed to be concerned with, for example, racism, sexism or Eurocentrism inherent to the perspective of an author who has now been dead for a hundred years if my indignation and arguments are disarmed by putting these ideas in their historical context? Reactions to the “artificially updated” past tend to be more constructive than reflections on the boundaries of necessity and freedom in social life. The merit of Michel Foucault’s works, quoted by Sojak, lies in the fact that he used history to attack contemporary myths instead of faithfully reconstructing the facts.

In the conclusion of his work, Sojak, who opts for employing the “Sociology of Scientific Knowledge” (SSK) in the history of sociology, returns to Pieńkosz and Dominiak’s thesis about the need to support the history of sociology with methodology; he advises that we should seek theoretical models which could help historians in their study of science. He mentions Stephen Fuchs, Karin Knorr-Cetin and Randall Collins as representatives of three various approaches from which historical investigations could benefit, and, at the same time, avoids the trap of textualism and contextualism, and evades an extremely retrospective, uncritical approach of the Cambridge School. The list of recommendable approaches of this sort could be extended: Pierre Bourdieu’s approach is certainly one without which the field of the history of science today would be hard to imagine. I, for my part, found Mieke Bal’s idea of “travelling concepts” as well as Patrick Baert’s positioning theory particularly useful in my historical studies (see Bucholc 2015, 2017, Bucholc 2019). However, these are only tips on where to look for a model which can be applied to the history of sociology so that it can become an independent, productive and significant discipline for sociology. Indeed, Sojak does not question the need for using theoretical models and agrees with the postulate that the history of sociology needs methodological reinforcements.

As it turns out, Kiliias (2013) essentially agrees with this postulate; however, he unmasks Sojak’s arguments as “yet another attempt at pouring new wine into old wineskins—perhaps not as old as our science, but as old as the dream of a new, truly scientific sociology” (Kiliias 2013 [2019]: pages from the translated volume). The possibility that classical thinkers will cease to be a “symbolic keystone of contemporary science” (Kiliias 2013 [2019]: pages from the translated volume), which in 1994 was still only a possibility for Peter Baehr and Mike O’Brien, might have already happened by then, forfeiting the regrets that sociology is incoherent in terms of theory and terminology. The independence of the history of sociology, which Kiliias also has in view, would therefore be an independence of yet another field of research within the discipline, integrated only by institutions and common terminology (cf. Kiliias 2013 [2019]: 183). According to Kiliias, this field’s lack of independence, despite the needs and practices of theoreticians, is the result of the weakness of the history of sociology within sociology.

If I understand Kiliias’s arguments correctly, the competition between historians and theorists forces us to search for some marketing strategy which will enable the position of historians of sociology to be reinforced by showing their uniqueness and, thus, obtaining the right for their own ecological niche in the sociological jungle. The condition for becoming successful involves having “a distinctive type of scientific competence” (Kiliias 2013: 186 pages from the translated volume), and a very moderate one, because, as Kiliias writes:

The history of sociology cannot count on similar interest outside the academia, and it has no chance of becoming an independent institutionalised subdiscipline, not to mention the possibility of its professionalisation. (Kilias 2013: pages from the translated volume)

The ancillary role assigned to the history of sociology appears unsatisfactory to Kilias because historians who “aspire to define their own agenda and research methods” (Kilias 2013: 187) do not have the chance to demonstrate their distinct competences. To do so, having a method is necessary—and in this manner, Kilias is able to reach Sojak’s question of whether it is possible to refer to the study of science’s methodological support. Both authors’ viewpoints are somewhat symmetrical: Sojak attacks Dominiak and Pieńkosz’s original argument from a theoretical angle, and Kilias emphasises the significance of empiricism and idiography, debunking the ideal of theoretical coherence. However, both believe that methodology may lead to emancipation.

I do not share this belief.

### **A good old-fashioned discipline**

If we look at the history of sociology as a practice—whether done by some fringe groups or mainstream scholars such as Robert Nisbet, Wolf Lepenies, Hans Joas, Stephen Turner, or Jerzy Szacki—it becomes strikingly apparent that the establishment of the history of sociology is conducted in an old-fashioned, traditional way. The methodology omnipresent in scientific work is relatively less noticeable here, and I must admit (truth above all else) that each time I have to describe my method when applying for research funding, I have doubts. Indeed, I do use some method in my work; however, I have never voluntarily asked myself what method that would be: I have always considered this question to be redundant in the history of sociology. I must also admit that this relative methodological insensitivity was the reason I chose the history of sociology as my specialisation, and I will always opt for it, defending it not only because it was my choice, but for far more important reasons.

The history of sociology is an inherently textual discipline. Historians of sociology work on and with texts, and write texts about texts or, at best, contexts. This is a fundamental difference between the history of sociology and the sociology of knowledge applied in the history of sociology. Texts provide sociologists with knowledge and information about social circumstances, although they are sometimes only used when other sources of information are unavailable. While texts are not even a subject of study for sociologists of knowledge, they constitute the whole point of investigation for historians of

sociology. It is not an academic conflict for the borders of disciplines or methods, but a difference in perspectives, interests, topics and attitudes. Sociology in Europe was undoubtedly born as a text-based discipline. It did not emerge as the result of a lecture, dialogue, dispute or individual idea, to name the traditional forms. More importantly, it likewise did not emerge as the result of empirical studies, which involve gathering and analysing data using a particular method more or less consciously. In fact, sociology has relied on the circulation of texts for the majority of its existence.

These texts were written by people whose fate naturally influenced the content of their works. However, to historians of sociology, these people are objectively seen as nothing more than the authors of written works or—provided that at the same time they are sociologists of knowledge—as members of a society in which these works were produced. A biographical orientation in the history of sociology, as well as the focus on a specific era, helps satisfy curiosity and incontestably solve some readers' problems with understanding the works of the past. For example, a reading of Max Weber's *Rechtssoziologie* can cast doubt: How did Weber's critical stance *vis-a-vis* Rudolf Stammler lead to him write this book? What is the *Abstraktionsprinzip*, and how does it relate to the social conditions in which civil law develops? Which philosophical tradition does Weber draw upon to create his concept of "applicable standards," and how is it bound to sources of law in Prussia? Thankfully, there are quite a few texts giving us clues to answer these questions and thus erasing many uncertainties that arise while reading.

In this regard, we reach an important point: historians of sociology are allies in someone else's reading and, possibly, hosts of someone else's snobbery (While I do not further reflect upon this non-trivial topic here, I do recommend that readers consider it). Why is such assistance necessary? Let us examine the following reason: sociology does not boast an abundance of iconic figures. Few people in the history of our discipline have gained widespread recognition in the field, and only a handful of extremely fortunate ones, often anthropologists, went beyond "iconic" to become truly significant figures in the scientific world at large. Admittedly, anthropologists were more interesting because burying chickens or taking canoe rides in search of a wife was more entertaining to Western audiences than asking the unemployed for the number of handkerchiefs they had, or investigating the reasons why fighter pilots are dissatisfied with their service conditions. Sociology is not a science of great people and great biographies, but it is a science of great books: after all, Max Weber is primarily the author of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this respect, the 1997 International Sociological Association's idea was symptomatic:



it assumed that the critical assessment of the achievements of sociology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century should be based on... a ranking of books.<sup>3</sup>

Were they really books? Let us look at the first ten items. Apart from the popular and readable ones, such as *The Sociological Imagination*, we see works whose full and continuous reading is either pointless due to their content or composition (*Economy and Society* or *The Civilising Process*), their level of difficulty (*Distinction*) or the amount of requirements they put on their reader in terms of philosophical training (*Theory of Communicative Action*). Do sociologists read books? Books (and other “texts of culture”) are read by literary scholars and culture experts, who are lucky that stereotypes and tradition, and—let’s be honest—the truth of life, are on their side: the texts and biographies of authors they study are far more interesting. It is not about who is more fascinating, be it Émile Durkheim or Ernest Hemingway, but who fascinates more people more often. Few people are fascinated by great sociologists, and even fewer are fascinated by their works. It is likely largely attributable to the fact that sociology does not have a pre-academic and, until recently, non-academic history as is found, for example, in mathematics, chemistry, biology and even philosophy. Academic science is boring.

Sociology is boring because it is an academic discipline which mainly consists in writing and reading texts. The changes in “doing” sociology that are happening today can undoubtedly make sociology fascinating, but only with time. Perhaps then we will we will enumerate leaders of great projects; inventors of scales, indices and data analysis programs; or heads of social implementation programs instead of the authors of great books. Perhaps then a list of literary works in which the protagonist is a sociologist and his or her occupation crucial to the fabula will not be limited to Huxley’s *Eyeless in Gaza*. Maybe we will live to see the plot of *The Pelican Brief* focussing on social welfare centres or *Ally McBeal* depicting the reality of working in a market research agency. For the time being, however, we are stuck with texts. Statistically speaking, reading longer text pieces is unpopular among the general public; and for sociologists, reading is an unwanted necessity. It is thus unsurprising that special subunits have emerged where people do the reading for others. We, historians, are substitute readers. Our task is to facilitate the practice of “non-reading” for other sociologists (our university colleagues, PhD students, students, researchers and journalists).

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/history-of-isa/books-of-the-xx-century> [retrieved on 17.04.2019].

### Why is reading inefficient?

Pierre Bayard, the creator of the notion of “non-reading” (Bayard 2008), drew attention to the manifold benefits coming from the practice he identified: not only does it save time and memory, but the image itself can also be managed. At the same time, the non-reader gains from numerous emotional, political and economic advantages. Non-reading, characterized by Bayard using the librarian from Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* who famously never read any of the books in his custody, is an unavoidable consequence of “[the] encounter with the infinity of available books” (Bayard 2007: 6). Reading leads to resignation and narrows horizons, while non-reading solves the “the problem of how cultural literacy intersects with the infinite” (*ibid.*) in such a way that, instead of knowing the contents of books, we gain insight into the relations between them. Bayard writes:

To me, the wisdom of Musil’s librarian lies in this idea of maintaining perspective. ... [H]e who pokes his nose into a book is abandoning true cultivation, and perhaps even reading itself. For there is necessarily a choice to be made, given the number of books in existence, between the overall view and each individual book, and all reading is a squandering of energy in the difficult and time-consuming attempt to master the whole. (Bayard 2007:8)

Non-reading facilitates control of the whole picture. The latter aspect is connected with the most important of gains from non-reading: creating a discourse community. Bayard points out that non-reading is—as opposed to *not*-reading—a trait of educated people:

To the unpracticed eye, of course, the absence of reading may be almost indistinguishable at times from non-reading; I will concede that nothing more closely resembles one person not reading than a second person not reading either. ... In the first case, the person not reading is not interested in the book, but book is understood here both as content and location. The book’s relationship to others is as much a matter of indifference to him as its subject, and he is not in the least concerned that in taking an interest in one book, he might seem to disdain the rest. (Bayard 2007: 13)

Bayard continues that a non-reader does not read because she or he fears that one book will obscure the whole and deprive her or him of an overall view—and thus of the possibility to refer to the whole in communication with others who know something about it. This specific “respect for the book itself” (Bayard 2008: 22) allows us to “speak about ourselves and not about books, or to speak about ourselves by way of books ...” (Bayard 2008: 136). In this way, by referring oneself to the text and by emphasizing the self rather than the text, an intersubjective order of reality emerges. Science is a part of culture and a form

of creative expression (see: Nisbet 1976). Although the reference to the world and not just to the creative “I” is more important in science than in literature, there is no reason non-reading in science should function differently than in other fields of culture.

Reading, if it were to become universal, would be a threat not only to creative fulfillment and self-expression, but to communication between members of the scientific community. For example, sociologists learn to contrast Weber and Durkheim throughout their lives. They pass exams, give talks and write papers all while keeping the opposition in their heads and occasionally referring to it to keep the article of faith fresh. This approach is largely based on the reader’s past social experiences with other living people, none of which are either Durkheim or Weber, as well as some possible contact with the works of these two authors. This contact could stem from reading excerpts in textbooks *in extenso*, but arises more often from skimming sentences highlighted by someone else, deciphering scribbled notes about these markings or even listening to someone else’s impressions of these notes. Allow me to add that even in this ordering of variants of experience, the contact with a living person gradually takes an upper-hand over the contact with the text of a dead person. In addition, there are lectures, seminars, conference discussions and so on, thus meaning that various sites exist where people can share their books and notes from lectures locally and globally. Excerpts, lectures, discussions and notes experienced live can all be found on the Internet and usually address more or less the same works and fragments, and comment on them in more or less the same way. Everything falls in with all the other things, and the existence in the communicative community is firm and stable.

For a change, let us imagine that every student (or even every professor) of sociology has actually read, say, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* or *The Division of Labour in Society* in its entirety. What are the chances that they will understand these works in the same way, and that they will understand each other when referring to them afterwards? What is the probability that there will be any coherent communication between them if they all read the *Economic Ethic of the World Religions* or even just the chapter on “Basic Concepts in Sociology” in *Economy and Society*?

The likelihood of all scenarios, at least to my mind, is drastically low. But then why not go a step further and abandon not only reading, but also all intertextual references in texts, replacing them with something that could play the same role in community building? Bayard replies that nothing can replace books because they are mutually related and interconnected so as to facilitate the formation of a perspective of the whole. In scientific writing, this feature is even more visible than in fiction, which is due to increased self-referentiality and flourishing intertextuality. Therefore, non-reading is crucial in science. The more

texts there are, the more important the role of non-reading is; and with a rise in people “doing” science, it becomes crucial for non-readers to create a communal discourse enabling everyone to understand each other and not get lost in their reading.

To summarize, the main task of historians of sociology is to facilitate non-reading for others and the occasional (not too often!) reading of texts, especially those that have the greatest potential to create a communication community because hardly anyone currently reads them. Our non-reading is different from the non-reading of our readers, which allows us to become a replacement for them. It is clear that a form of someone else’s non-reading must underpin one’s own in order to produce a set of common references that nest textuality in a sociological community. Each non-reading assumes some (–one else’s) reading. The role of the reader is inherently complementary, and the demand for readers depends on the prestige of a given text and the need to quote it. For this reason, it is in the interest of historians of sociology that sociologists “non-read.” At the same time, however, sociologists should willingly communicate using slogans that historians fill with content. Of course, while institutional dispersion and lack of disciplinary coherence can reduce the demand for this type of communication, but they can also make it grow. They can likewise give clues about where future non-reading material can be found. For example, I have had a feeling that I should thoroughly re-read *Social and Cultural Dynamics* by Sorokin. Something tells me that Sorokin’s non-reading will become important in communication between sociologists—if someone manages to propose a non-reading that is conversationally efficient. My hunch is based on various premises, the majority of which I am unfortunately unaware of. I may be wrong, but I know that somewhere in the textual resources of humanity, the new non-readings of *new classics* are waiting.

Is reading a methodologically regulated activity? If it is, I doubt that regulation is worthwhile. The effectiveness of our efforts lies in the fact that we read in a way that is variable and different, unusual and against the rules. Yet, at the same time, we are in continuous dialogue with other readers and non-readers alike which enables us to offer the greatest number of attractive references from which our non-reading audience can choose for its current creative work, debates and disputes. Of course, if we, as a collective of historians, all began to read in the same fashion, the range of our intellectual power would probably increase due to the consistent direction of the impulse which we would then produce. However, our adaptive potential would decrease. It is, therefore, better to read individually, in one’s own way, without undue rigor; if necessary, methodology can be reconstrued *post factum* as a penance or an act of hypocrisy.

My view of the work of a historian of sociology was influenced by the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas, whose methodical dilemmas, or rather lack of them, I once nostalgically detailed (Bucholc 2012a, 2012b, 2017b). Bronisław Baczko, recalling the beginnings of the School, said:

I do not remember, but I may be wrong, that we were doing methodology in my chair. . . . often, we devoted a whole meeting to discuss new books, both homegrown and foreign ones, which were difficult to get hold of. . . . But I do not recall a seminar devoted only to methodology. Neither do I remember that we had meeting to discuss methodology as such. So those who think that we have a common methodology, have to re-create it themselves. . . . If a common questionnaire emerged—because methodology emerges at the level of questionnaires—it must have done so spontaneously, as a result of discussions, contacts, common language of our generation. (In: Bucholc 2012a)

Baczko's statement fits squarely into Bayard's argument: book reports (read by only a few, and non-read by the rest; those who did read them were often doing so with a dictionary at hand to decipher the language in which they were written) formed the basis for conversations. The need for a method was absent, as it is difficult to ask someone how thoroughly he or she has read a book. This is certainly not an entirely accurate statement. It can be said that someone who reads a book only to find specific references, for example, on women's issues and their position in the society, employs a different method than someone who sees mainly prepositions, adjectives and adverbs describing the location of things. A reading which assumes counting the occurrences of the word "Kant" will be different from a reading that aims to determine the average sentence length or the number of sentences in a paragraph. All these methods of reading can coexist, and all may be equally helpful (or not) in reading. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of reading is to provide for the non-readers.

### **Why it pays to be generous**

Why would anyone want to do just that? This is a basic question. Why should we deal with reading so that others can non-read? In response to this question, Donald N. Levine emphasized the relationship between a discipline's theory and its history. He cited numerous reasons why sociological theories cannot manage without classics, which means that they cannot manage without history (see Levine 2015). Kiliias, however, makes the point that a theorist, if she or he wishes, can read Weber without any help from people who turned reading Weber into a profession or their life's purpose. We do not have a monopoly. So why bother?

The answer is: there is no good reason. Of course, one can assert that books written one or two hundred years ago hide great wisdom, and that our mission should be to reveal it. Upon closer examination, however, it turns out that these books generally contain more idiocy than even meagre wisdom. Upholding the past by non-reading can be turned into a moral merit because, after all, it is nurturing the heritage and richness of humanity's spiritual achievements. From this viewpoint, it would make infinitely more sense to professionally memorize the oral poetic works of the peoples of the Amazon or Siberia, which in fact will soon disappear. In contrast, the books of sociologists will remain, dwelling here forever in the obnoxious e-book format. From this perspective, while it would be morally justified to address the history of Polish, Czech or Romanian sociology since they are linguistically marginal and threatened by academic colonisation, dealing with Durkheim, Marx or Weber (even Alfred Weber) would have to be considered all but morally reprehensible. Finally, there are many purely economic reasons (related to competition on the scientific market), political reasons (related to the legitimising power of history and the classics) and aesthetic reasons (for example, the abundance of old and poorly written books). These will be individual, random and situational explanations that do not necessarily contribute to the sociological understanding of the history of sociology.

Sociologically speaking, the reasons why non-readers depend upon us coincide with the reasons for our existence as a specialised sub-group of the sociological community. I thus disagree with Pieńkosz and Dominiak: the history of sociology is an artificial creation, not in the sense that it should not or cannot be cultivated, but with view to the fact that no one actually does this. Motivations for dealing with the history of sociology in Poland and elsewhere are diverse, as are the styles of different authors. Some styles have to look "pure," oriented only towards the past, free from the impact of current theoretical problems and untouched by the spirit of time. It is no illusion—it is a styling which, like any other, has its own artistic, practical, political, psychological and other various goals. However, I believe that putting an equal sign between the methodological identity of a sociological sub-discipline and its stylistic unity would be an unnecessary act of aesthetic imperialism. The strength of our work dwells in its stylistic pluralism; in methodology; and, above all, in the combination of readers' appetites for books, their ability to cooperate with non-readers, and their sensitivity to both parties' intellectual needs. Let us care more about making ourselves useful, and less about our identity. After all, what use does a vivid and highly professionalized identity hold if no one needs us?

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**Talking about a Method Which You are not Using: The History of Sociology in the Service of Non-Reading**

*Abstract*

The text begins with the reconstruction of the current debate. Then, the author emphasizes the lack of emancipatory potential for methodological debates. In her opinion, the history of sociology is a discipline based primarily on reading, and it engages in textual practices, which also applies to sociology itself. In this somewhat ironic perspective, the historian of sociology supports with his/her own reading the cognitive effort of other sociologists. According to the author, there are strong premises (i.e. the tradition and history of sociology) to consider the activities of historians of sociology as contingent and having no other justification than dealing with (i.e. reading) books that no one else is interested in.

*Keywords:* history of sociology, sociological canon, sociology as reading book.

