

Ad Vocem: “You’re Probably Wondering Why I’m Here? And So am I”¹

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Roczniki Historii Socjologii (History of Sociology. Annual Review) is a special journal not only due to its scope of interest. What is extraordinary in Poland is that despite its long publication process, it publishes an ongoing lively discussion initiated by Julita Pieńkosz and Łukasz Dominiak’s article (2011) “The History of Sociology in Poland. Assessing the Current State of Affairs” to which Radosław Sojak (2012) responded in his text “Benefits of Sociology of Knowledge to the History of Sociology.” A year after that, I referred to the latter in my paper “The History of Sociology, Sociological Theory, and the Social Studies of Science: Mutual Uses and Misuses.” Recently, Ewa Bińczyk (2014) also responded to it with her article “Szczere obawy, czy projekcje własnych życzeń?” (*Genuine Concerns or Projections of Wishes?*). Although the discussion seems interesting, I am not entirely sure whether its participants really know what they are debating about. On the other hand, maybe it is just me who does not understand the matter of the dispute?

¹ The Mothers of Invention, *You’re Probably Wondering Why I’m Here, Freak Out!* (Frank Zappa), Verve Records 1967.

Taking into consideration the subject, time and place of the publication, I assumed that the text of Julita Pieńkosz and Łukasz Dominiak had a programmatic character. It was dear to me as far as the problems, not necessarily the methodological ones, of the history of sociology were concerned. Generally speaking, these problems result from the variety of ways in which a few selected figures (rather than their works and ideas) from the sociology's past are present in contemporary science, serving mostly as symbols legitimatising the contemporary theoretical perspectives or research areas (cf. Alexander 1989). Certainly, it does not have much to do with the study of the past of this social science branch, and reading the classics—if they are indeed read and not only cited—resembles the way in which a contemporary Christian reads the Bible: we take them only as a set of symbols. It makes the main difference between the significant works of the remarkable classics and the other, in most cases deservedly forgotten authors, whose works are interpreted literally (more about this topic in: Baehr, O'Brien 1994, Kiliias 2012). Somewhat as a consequence, “the history of sociology” is done mostly by amateurs, who are sometimes interested in and sensitive to the historical matter (I would like to be classified as such), but more often it is explored by complete laymen, searching for symbolic legitimacy of their research ideas and theories, or intending to worship the institutions, masters or schools of thought that they belong to. As a result, false social expectations related neither to the nature of studies nor to its subject are part of this discipline. Robert K. Merton (1948), quoted by Pieńkosz and Dominiak, was the first to notice this problem seven decades ago. Robert Alun Jones's idea of the “new history of sociology” (1983), which the authors refer to, emerged from the hopes resulting from the development of more professional insights into the history of the discipline and as the idea for a solution to the problem mentioned above. Today, the works of both scholars are slightly anachronistic—the first one would require reformulation due to the development and permanent dominance of ahistorical “classical sociology,” while the second one would have to incorporate the outcomes of the revolution in the science studies, which started in the early 1970s.

It is the very status of the studies on the past of sociology that is problematic. The possible solution would be some kind of independence and professionalisation of the field, and perhaps the shift from peripheries of sociology to the area of the history of science, which I advocated myself.² However, this solution is highly improbable in the face of the confusion regarding the nature of such research and due to a limited demand for its results. As a matter of fact, it is a subject of continuing complaints or, in a few rare cases, a pleasant surprise

² Which itself shows the nature of the problem—I am a sociologist and my career plans are related to this discipline.

for historians of sociology, when one of us manages to obtain funds for research project or publication of their results. Nonetheless, the very existence of this yearbook shows that their situation in Poland has been relatively comfortable.

In my opinion this defines the topic and the leading idea of the text which opened the discussion, which I also commented upon. However, Radosław Sojak, another voice in the debate, referred to it only partially, critically and accurately pointing out the vagueness of the programme proposed by the initiators of the debate. Sojak's presents mostly the outline of the theoretical programme of sociology as a practical science, which should be complemented by the historical research of applied sociology. It seems to be not only an interesting idea, but also another theoretical utopia which is, if not to redeem, to finally make sociology a science. Of course, the millenarian rhetorics is much more a usual feature of theoretical argumentation, with which historians of sociological theory are well-familiar, than the effect of believing in the power of the programme. When it comes to the vision of the history of sociology, probably unintentionally presented by its author, it is nothing more than another incarnation of historiography (?) as a means to collect the symbols which are to legitimatise the programme of applied sociology. Hence, the positive part of Sojak's paper does not refer to the problems which Dominiak and Pieńkosz would like to overcome, but it actually constitutes evidence for their existence.

As for my voice, I analysed the working conditions of the historians of the branch and intended to set guidelines on how to deal with them, using the outcomes of the revolution which took place in the science studies.

A response to our texts was made by Ewa Bińczyk in her article. Her paper is an interesting reflection on the contemporary interdisciplinary studies of science. However, considering the ideas on the history of sociology, she rejected the very objective sketched by Pieńkosz and Dominiak, accusing them (and me?) of surrendering to the illusion of objectivism. It is difficult to understand this allegation, which probably results from the lack of a proper sensitivity to the fact that history and social sciences have different methodological traditions, where even the term "positivism" has different meanings. As historians of sociology, we function in between these two disciplines. There is nothing illusory in the intention to study the past to determine what it was like. It is not necessarily about discovering and describing "what it really was like" (Ranke 1885), but rather about adopting it as one's own the ideal of the study of history, which aims at reaching to the past—the past which can be reconstructed from texts and archives available, or one that was witnessed by its contemporaries... There are many possibilities, but what they all have in common is the interest in the things of the past, rather than using the past as the source of moral principles or the material to build contemporary sociological theory. The reason why the author does not understand

this distinction seems simple: she is neither engaged nor interested in the history of sociology. In her work, she does not refer to any literature on that subject! Therefore, the trouble with Ewa Bińczyk's text is that although her opinion may not be, unlike Sojak's text, a reflection of the problems of the history of sociology, it nevertheless remains completely irrelevant to them.

I do not deal here with Ewa Bińczyk's article as a short methodological guide to contemporary—sociological, ethnographical and historical—studies of science. Undoubtedly, she was right criticising my simplification of Latour's concept of "translation," which I conflated with a play of social interests. That simplification worried me, yet I was not engaged in any theoretical argument within the field of social studies of science—the discipline in which I only looked for research tools and instruments to solve just one, particular problem! And the interests which a historian of sociology deals with are purely human, individual and institutional.

The original problem, indicated in Julita Pieńkosz and Łukasz Dominiak's text "The History of Sociology in Poland," seems to be important in Poland, but is not entirely clear what the discussion they started is about. The paper offered a ground for its opponents to express their opinions about metatheory and sociological theory (Radosław Sojak), methodologies of contemporary science studies (Ewa Bińczyk), but what about the history of sociology? The nature of the debate shows that the problem exists. It does not, however, suggest any solution to it, not to mention the ideas how to achieve it. Indeed, what is proved once again is the problematic nature of the history of sociology, which is a branch studied and understood by few, and one which is inherently "impractical."

Some time ago, at the meeting of the History of Sociology Section of the Polish Sociological Association the following question was asked: "What kind of history of sociology do we need?" The answer to such a question depends on who asks. If it is the general sociological audience, occasionally interested in the publications such as *Yearbooks of the History of Sociology*, then the conclusion of the discussion is: the same as it always used to be—amorphous, with a scope of interest that is conceptually vague and that is not clearly defined.

Translated by Paulina Habas.

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Abstract

The statement points out to that the threads of the discussion lack coordination, which in itself but mirrors the indicated problems with no chance of solving them. With little demand for knowledge about the past of sociology, this leads to a pessimistic conclusion about the problematic and impractical nature of the history of sociology.

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