



Different Times, Different Places, Different Standpoints

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I was born in communist Poland five years after the end of World War II and I grew up in a home with an open-to-the-world, cosmopolitan orientation, untypical for the inward, ethno-particularist orientation prevalent in Poland. My studies at Warsaw University specialized in sociology (history of social ideas, staffed by teachers of the Weberian persuasion with a Durkheimian twist) and history (early modern East European history, under a strong influence of the French *Annales* school). In particular, my participation in the so-called Flying University or the informal seminars conducted in our professors' homes, taught me the different traditions of Western social theory on the one hand and, on the other, an appreciation of the inherent multi-dimensionality and *Zusammenhang* or interlocking of historical processes—approaches that attractively contrasted with the official Marxist doctrine. For the same reason—I should mention here that I was also actively involved in the student dissident movement which we saw as a fight against the intrinsically evil Marxism-Leninism and the oppressive system it created – I was particularly drawn to Florian Znaniecki's view of the social world as "permeated with culture" and always "pulsating with change".

In the mid-1970s I defected to the United States where I asked for and received political asylum. I did my doctoral studies in Boston, specializing in the sociology of immigration and ethnicity and urban studies and, on the side, American social history. In the few years that followed, supported by postdoctoral fellowships, I read intensely in several disciplines at once- sociology, cultural anthropology, and social history -American and European, especially French and British. Particularly important for my then (re-)developing intellectual orientation and research agenda - I investigated modes of integration into the receiver, American society of the immigrants who occupied the lowest echelons in its socio-economic and civic-political systems—was the social theorizing of David Lockwood, appealingly eclectic and nicely grounded in empirical evidence; John Goldthorpe's insightful analyses of class schema; and the brilliant cultural-historical studies of E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams. Somewhat ironically considering where I came from (but how we hated official Marxism!), the works of Western neo-Marxist and *marxisant* thinkers have gradually turned me, a committed culturalist with an idealist bent upon arrival, into a resolute structuralist-culturalist, with a keen eye on social structures.

In 1984, I obtained an academic position in Philadelphia - a cross-departmental appointment in Sociology and History at the University of Pennsylvania—where I remained for the next twenty years . My teaching and research focused primarily on comparative-historical sociology of international migration, ethnicity and race in America, and to a lesser extent –a reflection, I guess, of my enduring if uneasy ties to my native part of the world - on East European societies under and after Soviet-communist domination. My new concern with the structural determinants of social life intertwined with two other developments. One of them was my growing interest in social theory and, specifically in the structuration model as reformulated by American sociologists such as William Sewell (1992) and Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998), which despite its loopholes well accommodated my interest in both action and structure. The related development was a growing recognition of the continued significance of the important parts of Marx's assessment of capitalism—an outcome of my research on the ethnically and racially "othered" working class in America as well as my own experience in that country.

In 2004 I accepted a position in the Sociology Department at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. Although America was by then my home, I felt more and more alienated by the relentlessly accelerating pace of life fuelled by the internet revolution and the unquestioned American principle that anything newer and quicker must be better than the existing arrangements. My return to Europe was to be a return to a slower-pace, more reflective, and, as I defined it, more humane lifestyle. The Bush administration's imperial adventures provided an additional incentive to leave. A move to Britain was particularly tempting because of the English language, of course, and a broader cultural affinity of that country with its offspring the United States ; and also because of its reputation for a more effectively working multiculturalism than in other European countries, and, in my two disciplines, its renown in the fields of social and cultural history, and sociological theory.

Life in Britain is certainly slower and so is the pace of its academe, and I enjoy this slower flow. I now receive about fifty email messages per day instead of the hundred-odd that came in America. Calming, too, is a breath-taking beauty of the East Anglian countryside and its villages I regularly travel through with their well-preserved crooked old houses. (These sights, for that matter, challenged the taken-for-granted premise I learned in my history studies at Warsaw University that "the measure of development" was the cities: the appearance of the countryside, I now realize, is as important a standard of the civilizational progress as are the urban centres.) I also enjoy the intellectual climate of the Essex department and its interdisciplinary composition.

My two early disappointments both involved the university. Unlike the University of Pennsylvania and American campuses in general where multiculturalism "on the ground" is represented by a great diversity of in-grown, American-born students and staff from different ethnic and racial groups, the University of Essex I saw had many different faces, for sure, but most of them were foreign-born students or visiting scholars—the native population was, to my surprise, solidly white. The other unpleasant surprise was what from my American perspective I perceived as a suffocating bureaucratization-and-centralization of the university: those endless meetings (no American academic would put up with three-hour-long departmental gatherings), huge piles of paperwork to fill out for every new course (in America it was enough to email the HoD convincingly justifying a new seminar), instructions to overhaul, and overhaul again, our just-revised degree programmes continuously trickling in from upstairs (the American departments, at private universities such as Penn anyway, have the autonomy to decide what and how they teach). What at the beginning I found equally surprising was the tacit acquiescence of my colleagues to such, as I saw it, obvious violations of the departmental autonomy and the misuse of the academics' qualifications. For the first three or four years at Essex I was quite bothered by these annoyances, but I have since—yet another unexpected development related to my relocation to Britain—resurrected my long-since buried *homo sovieticus* coping strategy of beating-the-system by going around the rules, and I now more or less manage the situation. (I have come to believe that my acquiescent colleagues, feeling overpowered by the machine, are doing just the same, but we only occasionally exchange hints to this effect.)

With my transplantation to Britain, the focus of my research—I have continued to work on international migration-related issues – has changed from across-time to across-space analyses as I now comparatively assess theoretical and empirical research agendas in the study of international migration in Europe vs. America and East vs. West Europe, as well as the forms and "contents" of glocalization effects of present-day immigrants' presence on different sender and receiver countries. Inspired by my departmental colleague Rob Stones and by the invitation to join the Oxford workshop devoted to elaborating the mechanisms of international migration within the morphogenesis theoretical framework, I have also been trying to fill in the gaps in the structuration model that has informed my sociological thinking and empirical research and, especially, to clarify what I believe are reconcilable differences between these two approaches. My five-and-a-half-year-long engagement with British sociology outside of the Essex department has by and large confirmed what I find rewarding about the latter: its plural-mindedness, multi-disciplinarity, openness to different ideas (but without the American- or consumer capitalism-style nervous readiness to discard the currently used things in exchange for new ones), and friendly tolerance of intellectual idiosyncrasies. I also appreciate here a closer integration than in America of empirical research with social theory; in the United States these two are pursued parallel to rather than in a relationship with each other, and the label "theorist" commonly implies a superfluous addendum to the "real" sociology focused on counting measurable aspects of social life.

All this is a genuine joy. And yet, there is something distinctly parochial, I find, about the British sociology's foci and debates that does not seem to agree with its above-noted features and has no parallel in its American counterpart. I dutifully attended two consecutive BSA annual meetings after I settled in Britain after which I gave them up because of what I felt both times was a self-absorbed complacency of sorts permeating the presentations and discussions. In the exchanges about good and better conceptual frameworks to account for specific problems related to international migration carried in British journals and workshops, the relevant propositions formulated outside of the country are seldom or only superficially noted as if, not ours, they were by that token unworthy attention. The continued criticisms of the structuration model by British theorists focus exclusively on Giddens's ancient formulations thereof as if the more recent work in this field by non-British, North American sociologists was either viewed as irrelevant by or even unfamiliar to the debaters. Might it be – I am not sure how to explain what I see – a reflection of some (post-)imperial mentality unselfconsciously shared by British sociologists most of whom, their different class backgrounds and political views notwithstanding, are still solidly native-born and predominantly white as compared with their American counterparts?

It is beginning to feel like home here and I will soon become a British citizen. Although I still have a long road ahead learning the ropes of my new habitat, considering all the pros and cons as I see them now I have not regretted either my decision to leave the United States or to settle in Britain.

References

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