

THE TRANSATLANTIC MIGRATION OF IDEAS: FLORIAN ZNANIECKI IN AMERICA IN THE YEARS 1914–1919

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The books of the sociological canon are an essential element of sociology's contemporary intellectual tradition. They enable the formation, reproduction, and transformation of disciplinary identities, which in turn integrate the academic community. In sociology, which is divided into various sub-disciplines, this communal element – and thus also the history of sociology – is especially important (Carreira da Silva & Brito Vieira 2011). *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* is undoubtedly the kind of book that unites scholarly circles.¹ Its translation into Polish in 1976 contributed to the great growth in popularity of one of its authors in his native country. The accompanying enormous amount of exegetical undertakings (numbering hundreds of publications at the turn of the 1970s to 1980s) is worthy of a separate work.

The task I set myself in the present article is the critical and historical interpretation of the initial value of *The Polish Peasant*, that is, the original, internal sources of its growing popularity. Thus, I will not be considering

¹ *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America: Monograph of an Immigrant Group*, Gorham Press, Boston 1918–1920 (1918 – vol. 1 and 2, 1919 – vol. 3, 1920 – vol. 4–5). Polish edition: *Chłop polski w Europie i Ameryce*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warsaw 1976 (vol. 1–2 – *Organizacja grupy pierwotnej*; vol. 3 – *Pamiętnik imigranta*; vol. 4 – *Dezorganizacja i reorganizacja w Polsce*; vol. 5 – *Organizacja i dezorganizacja w Ameryce*). In the references I give the number of the volume of the Polish edition in Roman numerals. References to the English-language edition concern the publication of 1958, Boston, Gorham Press.

works or events that took place long after 1920, such as the political and scholarly engagement of succeeding generations of scholars (in this case, Florian Znaniecki's students), interest in folk literature in the PPR, or the current hundredth anniversary of the first publication of *The Polish Peasant*. For the most part, these are independent of the context in which the work emerged and the intentions of the authors. I will return to the subject of these external factors of popularity in the conclusion.

An important part of that same discussion is the debate over William I. Thomas's and Florian Znaniecki's share in work on *The Polish Peasant*. The contribution of the former was recently studied very closely and previously unknown sources of the book were discovered, such as English literature, psychiatric life histories, and the medical tradition of didactic casebooks (Abbott & Egloff 2008). Consequently, Znaniecki's supposed role in writing *The Polish Peasant* has been slightly decreased, while his importance as a philosopher and theoretician has been emphasised (Kaczmarczyk 2018).

As I do not wish to join that debate, for the needs of this text I assume that both scholars were simultaneously interested in the same questions and that their individual engagement was similar, although the elder of the two played the deciding role. However, the result of their work, *The Polish Peasant*, requires that Znaniecki's intellectual sources be explained in the same manner as those of Thomas. As Znaniecki's philosophical (Wiley 2007) and theoretical inspirations (Kaczmarczyk 2018) have already been discussed, I will concentrate on his biographical and social background.

The main question is how did it happen that by the time the Polish philosopher returned to Poland, after having left for America at age thirty-two "on the first opportunity, with the intent of becoming the intellectual leader of the American Polish community" (Znaniecki 1978 [1920]: 38), he had written what turned out to be a canonic work of sociology?

In answering, I intend to show that Znaniecki's creativity in writing *The Polish Peasant*, a complex and multi-volume work, consisted in (1) combining many of the diverse motifs of the social sciences of the time, (2) rejecting one of the basic methodological principles of sociology – the explanation of social facts only by other social facts – while simultaneously reconfiguring other current theoretical elements, and (3) making the work eclectic and inconsistent. The mode of proceeding in which a creative individual transforms existing elements by radically changing one of them (Collins 1998: 768) is well known and especially important. In the standard interpretation, Znaniecki's stay in America made him into a sociolo-

gist almost by the very fact of being there. In my opinion, such a view is not justified (see Ciżewska 2013: 12; Szacki 1986: 61ff).

In order to verify the question, I will attempt a separate, non-canonical interpretation of *The Polish Peasant*. First I will present autobiographical elements that could have influenced Znaniecki's work. Then I will proceed to discuss the dynamics of the intellectual network supporting that work. My main materials will be biographical and autobiographical testimonials and information contained in the work itself.

/// Emigration: The Experience of Absence

In the summer of 1912, thirty-year-old Znaniecki conducted an interview with an inhabitant of Edmonton, Jan Komarnicki, who was visiting Warsaw. During a conversation on the possibility of immigrating to Canada and working there, Znaniecki, the editor of *The Polish Emigrant*, suggested to Komarnicki that "For intellectuals and semi-intellectuals it would seem that the prospects are not favourable, as is the case for emigrants everywhere?" Komarnicki, an optimistic Canadian citizen of Polish descent, responded that "Naturally they can't be as favourable as for farmers or craftsmen, but at any rate they're better than in, for instance, the United States. Not knowing the language is a barrier; the emigrant must count on not being able to find any occupation for some half a year" (Znaniecki 1982: 147).

For Znaniecki, knowledge of the language would not be an obstacle, but he would have to take into account that "Canada has enough local intelligentsia, thus the immigration of intellectuals can only be adventitious." Komarnicki was a Canadian bureaucrat; his reply seemed like a form of advertisement for his country, and Znaniecki, in order to investigate the subject, travelled that year to France and England (Dulczewski 1982: 56). He summarised the information he collected at the time as follows:

We became convinced that in order to evaluate the sphere of emigration, neither official sources nor the descriptions of travellers, nor even general works – even the most important ones – of a statistical-economical, geographical, or similar nature are sufficient. Only *the numerous personal experiences* of the emigrants themselves, grouped with that general data, can give an exhaustive and universal picture of the conditions awaiting our future emigrants (Znaniecki 1982: 148–149; italics added).

Znaniecki spent twenty-five years as an emigrant, and thus the majority of his adult life. It is hard to believe, in accord with the general assumption, that by voluntarily and deliberately departing for America in the summer of 1914 he was intending to continue or begin a sociologist's career, if only because at the time there was no set formal or even informal career path for sociologists. In addition, America was not at the time known for its sociology. The global rhythm of development in the discipline at the beginning of the twentieth century was still dependent on the academic life of Germany and France (Collins 1998: 618ff.), as Znaniecki, after studies in France and Switzerland, was very well aware. He described the experience of *émigré* alienation in categories of unsuccessful assimilation. Nevertheless, in spite of the indifference and discrimination with which he met, he had no problem in accepting the role of lonely observer (Znaniecki 1978: 42–43). His cosmopolitan attitude had been shaped much earlier. Therefore, it seems right to assume that emigration to the United States was rather a neutral factor both for his career and his productivity.

Whatever weight may be attached to the biographical concurrency of Znaniecki the author and Znaniecki the migrant, the above-mentioned article on immigrant conditions in Canada contains a forecast of Znaniecki's turning to autobiographical studies as a proper method for collecting data for the study of culture, and a clear research subject: Poles migrating to the United States in the decade before 1914. Obviously, the unforced transatlantic migration of people and ideas was nothing unusual at the beginning of the twentieth century and even before the success of the world fair in St. Louis in 1906 migration became quite popular among wealthy Europeans.

It would be very tempting to explain this thread in the history of Polish sociological tradition by the inspiration of American scholarship in the form of contact with Thomas and the milieu of the early Chicago sociological school. Such an interpretation, in my opinion, is as dubious as the theory of "migration determinism." Although the influences of American pragmatism are clear in Znaniecki's work (see Niżnik 1988), recognising this intellectual trend as a major one would require the artificial procedure of separating the author from his context. In other words, we would have to adopt the unlikely proposition that Znaniecki did not have the opportunity to encounter pragmatism earlier: for instance, in the course of meetings of the Polish Philosophical Society in the years 1910–1914 in Warsaw, or during studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne or Jagiellonian University.

It should be added that the Chicago school in the first two decades of the twentieth century had not yet truly taken shape and did not have

a ready-to-use research programme (Topalov 2004). What Znaniecki encountered in Chicago were new methods of research in the newly created department of the social sciences and a mosaic of personalities, from the preacher Charles Henderson (1848–1915) through the Comte-inspired palaeontologist Lester Ward (1841–1913) to the Christian socialist Albion Small (1854–1926) (Lybeck 2019; Smith 1991).

Thomas, a graduate of the Chicago department with the degree of doctor (1896), who had earlier studied *Völkerpsychologie* in Berlin, was also trying to find a place for himself in this milieu. Thomas's idea of sociology involved shifting the discipline's focus in the direction of issues that were of typical concern for philanthropic organisations. One result was that he began his work even before Znaniecki had had the opportunity to prove his potential value as a co-author.

Elsewhere I have discussed the micro-sociological conditioning of the beginnings of Znaniecki's career, pointing to four sources of his productivity: (1) his early poetic work, (2) his declaration of complete devotion to intellectual work, (3) his brief contact with the international *émigré*-academic milieu in Geneva and Zurich, and (4) intensive work in the network of Warsaw philosophical and psychological societies in the years 1910–1914, where he obtained recognition and an audience for the first time (Dominiak 2017). Aside from his literary work (1), these elements had a continuing influence on his productivity in the second decade of the twentieth century. Below I will describe the elements of *The Polish Peasant* that are new and that constitute the exceptionalness of its creation.

/// The Polish Peasant in Europe and America as Part of the Global Intellectual Network

Znaniecki most probably brought a part of *The Polish Peasant* with him to America, that is, a segment of a report entitled “Seasonal Emigration,” which had been discussed by the Central Agricultural Committee and was addressed to the Russian Ministry of Agriculture. The original of this work has been lost and although it was not printed on account of the outbreak of the war, the supposition can be made that Znaniecki had managed to finish it (Dulczewski 1982: 67–70). A significant part of the introduction to the first volume (the subchapter entitled “Economic Life”: 142–174) is from this text. It would seem that Znaniecki had access to at least a portion of the notes from the work, which was submitted for printing in 1914, and

that he made use of them in describing the general economic conditions of the Polish countryside.

In other questions – those connected with property, religion, magic, or customs – Znaniecki referred to works by the economist and future prime minister Władysław Grabski (1874–1938), the historian and sociologist Franciszek Bujak (1875–1953), and the ethnologist Oskar Kolberg (1814–1890). I mention the fact not in order to undermine the originality of this part of the work but because before 1914 the question of agricultural reform was an especially important issue in Poland and was frequently discussed by Polish intellectuals (Grabski 1904). Znaniecki's contribution, like that of every successful scholar, involved the effective use of earlier results of research for his own argumentation. Creativity is not connected with “genius” or any other uncontrolled phenomenon but with a successful re-configuration of already known elements, including mainly ideas, research programmes, and theoretical premises experienced as significant symbols during reading, reflecting, and writing (Collins 1998: 35–36).

A major source of such symbols was undoubtedly Znaniecki's co-author, the originator of the idea behind *The Polish Peasant*, William I. Thomas (1863–1947), with his specific approach combining race psychology with engaged sociology. Equally importantly, Thomas also had a budget for research: a subsidy of \$50,000 from Helen Culver's (1832–1925) foundation for a study in the area of race psychology. More significant than the sum itself, though, is that Thomas linked Znaniecki with the very dynamic circles at Hull House, a well-known and valued philanthropic organisation with headquarters in Chicago. Hull House had been founded at the end of the nineteenth century by the future Nobel peace prize laureate, Jane Addams, on the model of similar institutions in Great Britain. Its aim, other than supporting reforms and conducting research, was to work closely with the inhabitants of impoverished quarters of Chicago. Thomas and Znaniecki's work to a large degree reflected the programme of progressivism, which involved concern for educational institutions, support for modernisation through the training of social workers, and the use of scientific methods in the debate over improving society. However, Thomas's circle of acquaintance, which was extensive but not stable, should not be overrated and his social and intellectual vagabondage undoubtedly did not foster the potential for establishing creative connections (Abbott & Egloff 2008).

One idea that was significant for *The Polish Peasant* was Wilhelm Wundt's idea of comparative psychology. Both Thomas, through his German teachers, the philologist Heymann Steinthal (1823–1899) and the philos-

opher Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903), as well as Znaniiecki, thanks to the psychologist Gustav Störring (1860–1946), were well acquainted with the achievements of *Völkerpsychologie*, which at that time was a recognised and normal – in the Kuhnian sense – social science. Znaniiecki praised Wundt’s theory as being the most complete theory of culture, free of naturalistic preconceptions, and considered it a merit that he and Thomas were among its first defenders (Znaniiecki 2008 [1934]: 114–120).

In *The Polish Peasant*, Wundt’s influence can be seen above all in solutions of a methodological nature. In this monographic generalisation, laws of development for a multi-million-member social class were derived from evidence of the individual behaviours, attitudes, and statements of a proportionally small community, as the empirical material involved fifty families and around one hundred cases of disorganisation. In regard to the analysis of individual questions, the subtle but significant influences of comparative psychology appeared when Znaniiecki tried to define attitudes as belonging to characteristic types, called “temperaments,” for instance, the *rastaquouère*, or buffoon (II: 344–346), or when he distinguished types of personalities, such as the philistine, the gypsy, or the creative individual (III: 22–28). The use of a typology of characters is a further creative transformation; to it, Znaniiecki added Freudianism, another very popular current of the then social sciences. He probably obtained the idea from Alfred Adler, a student of Zygmut Freud’s, or through the intermediary of Władysław Witwicki’s concept of cratism.² *The Polish Peasant* thus came to contain a fairly idiosyncratic social theory, without a “middle storey,” deriving social institutions directly from the sublimation of elementary psychical-physiological properties of human beings, that is, from desires, attitudes, or reactions. Aside from utilising sociographic, historical, ethnographic, and philanthropic motifs, and elements of *Völkerpsychologie*, Znaniiecki made a major alteration to one of the most important contemporary sociological traditions, that is, to the methodological premises of the Durkheim school.

The “Methodological Note” which begins *The Polish Peasant* contains the typical struggles of the first sociological traditions to separate positive scientific knowledge – in this case “practical sociology” – from common knowledge, that is, “common-sense sociology.” Critique of the latter

² Cratism, which was developed by the Polish philosopher Władysław Witwicki (1878–1948), was an idiogenic concept of emotions derived from the psychological premises of Wundt, Spencer, and Nietzsche. Witwicki considered states of emotion to be individual means in the struggle for existence, while cratism, a sense of elevation or humiliation, was the effect of their sublimation through socialisation and creative participation in culture.

allowed Znaniecki to raise sociology above materialistically oriented psychology, the study of morality, comparative sociology, and economic reductionism. Znaniecki's objections to these unscientific forms of sociological reflection were the typical set of objections directed against common wisdom as subjectivism, unjustified comparisons, or the isolation of the research subject from other phenomena. The "Methodological Note" is an ambitious enterprise consisting in the preparation of an epistemological field through the use of distance in regard to traditionally recognised sub-disciplines such as ethnography or social history. Znaniecki also pointed out that sociology should not be confused with the professional activities of social practitioners such as teachers or lawyers (I: 46–55).

In place of common-sense sociology, Znaniecki proposed combining social psychology, understood as the study of attitudes rather than simple reactions, with a sociology studying only one kind of value: social norms. Sociology in Znaniecki's view was thus only one of several specialised studies of culture. According to him, it should be a theory of social organisation, a pragmatic support for practitioners rather than an independent science. It is worth observing that in the "Methodological Note" Znaniecki treats sociology only as the "field of interest for various investigations," which involve manifestations of norms in behaviours and thus in actions. As a consequence of such a premise, the rest of the book rests on social psychology, which according to the author is a better theory because it can describe and explain both the objective and subjective side of values and attitudes. In addition, it allows attempts to be made to establish rules for the appearance of specific institutions in various "socio-psychological conditions" (I: 61–65).

In the remaining part of the "Note" Znaniecki refers to the methodology of Durkheim, reversing his rigorous principle of explaining social facts only through other social facts.

It may be objected that we have neglected to criticize the conception according to which the cause of social phenomenon is to be sought, not in an individual, but exclusively in another social phenomenon (Durkheim). [But a criticism of this conception is implied in the previous discussion of the data of social theory.] As these data are both values and attitudes, a fact must include both and a succession of values alone cannot constitute a fact. Of course much depends also on what we call a "social" phenomenon. An attitude may be treated as a social phenomenon as opposed

to the “state of consciousness” of individual psychology; but it is individual, even if common to all members of a group, when we oppose it to a value (I: 69; English ed.: 44).

In my opinion, this is a very important part of the work. It leaves the problem of defining a social phenomenon unresolved, which is not an objection, because Znaniecki did not intend to reduce the distance between the individual and society in such a radical manner as Durkheim had done. In Znaniecki’s works, a social fact, or other basic element of society, is the missing part between psychological reactions and their collective manifestations in the form of social values and collective activities. This is by no means a demerit. Znaniecki thus avoided the “Charybdis of theorising” and concentrated on analysing higher order entities, that is, cultural systems. The result is acceptance of the premise that a human being may belong to multiple social groups depending on the qualifications of the other participants. On the one hand, this allowed the dynamic between individuals on the micro-scale to be observed, but on the other it entirely prevented the perception of important macro-structural relations (Ossowski 1983: 50).

Consequently, the “Methodological Note” contains a fairly distinctive theoretical mixture, composed mainly of analytical induction, certain nomothetic ambitions on the model of the natural sciences, and Wundtian comparative psychology. In partially rejecting Durkheim’s psychology in its canonical form, Znaniecki combined various elements of the social sciences of his times. This led to a certain lack of cohesiveness in *The Polish Peasant*, which according to Znaniecki was the cost of a compromise between Thomas’s theory of attitudes and his own concept of values. That the “Note” is in places a bit inconsistent is not necessarily a weakness. A homogenous work would not provoke discussion. Yet Znaniecki and his book continue to provide inspiration, including on account of certain omissions, such as, for example, the observations concerning leadership among migrant groups (Mucha 2019).

The last important element of *The Polish Peasant* is the empirical part, which constitutes more than a third of the work. It is composed of several hundred letters (vol. 1, 2, and 4), the autobiography of Władysław Wiśniewski (vol. 3), court documents, and declarations of Polish immigrant organisations (vol. 5). Placing such a large amount of empirical material in a scholarly work, with only a modest amount of commentary, could be indicative of *The Polish Peasant*’s addressees, who were assumed to be other social workers

and a narrow group of American bureaucrats. The vast amount of data also shifts part of the argumentation to the reader – with the obvious assumption that the reader is already convinced (Smith 1991).

The collected letters were divided into five types: ceremonial, informative, sentimental, literary, and business-related. Even if the contents are commonplace, or unintelligible, they filled the important role of maintaining family ties and replacing direct contact (I: 238–239). Znaniecki's conclusions concerning the role of literacy among the peasantry are interesting and inspiring. Although the contents of the letters are for the most part dull (Gallino 1974), they reveal the growing ability of Polish peasants to communicate and to overcome the isolation of their groups by their own forces. In order to argue that process in accord with the accepted premises of evolutionism, in the second volume a series of letters is arranged in an order showing the intellectual development of peasants, from the primitive forms of writing of the Kanikul family (II: 37–40) to the complex discursive political arguments on the subject of capitalist oppression of the rural teacher Stanislaw Jasiński (II: 392–400). Znaniecki saw in this epistolary material not solely a tool of communication but also the emancipation of the Polish peasants in their literary republic, which arose thanks to emigration.

The Polish Peasant is a work that emerged at the meeting point of numerous intellectual networks of scholars, departments, associations, methods, ideologies, empirical materials, and social circles on both sides of the Atlantic at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century. This unstable but dynamic institutional complex was a point of reference for Znaniecki, who always tried to preserve his independence while operating on the margins of the then centres of ideas. Znaniecki's loose network of connections – ranging from cosmopolitan *émigré* salons in Switzerland, inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche, through Warsaw intelligentsia circles and the Polish Philosophical Society, to the Chicago melting pot of progressive ideas – allowed him to add new elements continually until he finally put them together in the form of the famous five-volume work.

No set of ideas develops in a vacuum, without a social background. The specific path between psychology and philosophy that Znaniecki chose in order to maintain his research independence was doubtless not easy. Autonomy in the social world of intellectuals is often connected with isolation, but fortunately Znaniecki avoided that situation due to the rhythm of events and geopolitical decisions which occurred fairly unexpectedly in the years 1917–1918.

/// Concluding Remarks

In this short study of “early” sociological writing, I have tried to show the historical and source value of *The Polish Peasant*, an undeniably fundamental work, from an angle that differs from the one current in sociological historiography. Although the work has lost its original recipients, after a hundred years it is quite clearly acquiring new meaning through successive interpretations. This is what makes the “vitality” of classic works.³ The difference between their present reading and original meanings is not that large and one of the authors of *The Polish Peasant* made considerable effort to give those meanings a more universal reach (in this case, a humanist one). Thus my critical approach is not a revision but is rather intended to draw attention to less known aspects of *The Polish Peasant*.

Generally speaking, the form and range of *The Polish Peasant* is American: the set of cases of social organisation and disorganisation derives from the medical casebook. However, the content of the work – from its idealistic-romantic conception of culture through its *Völkerpsychologie* – derives from the German intellectual sphere. The picture is completed by a “reversed” Durkheim methodology.

It is also worthwhile, on this occasion, to emphasise the role of errors and chance – elements that are often overlooked in the history of ideas. In the case of Znaniecki, it was a matter primarily of Thomas’s unexpected proposal and Znaniecki’s consequent trip to America, which turned out to have been an escape from war – from a world conflict with consequences that were impossible to predict. These circumstances make it additionally difficult to place Znaniecki in the global intellectual network. His creativity is both exceptional and niche at the same time: in my opinion, due to the lack of a mentor. Not being dependent on one of the then dominant intellectual networks (that is, empiriocriticism, pragmatism, or neo-Kantianism), he remained, as he described himself, a “philosophical re-

³ An interesting example is the inclusion of part of Znaniecki’s output in the Marxist tradition by the sociologists Jan Szczepański and Józef Chalasiński at the beginning of the 1970s. In the 1950s a leading Polish Marxist, Adam Schaff, criticised the biographical method for neglecting economic factors and not paying attention to changes in the class structure. In the introduction to the Polish edition of *The Polish Peasant*, Szczepański “rehabilitated” Znaniecki, officially returning him to Polish sociology, in the following manner: “Currently, however, after several decades of experience in building the socialist system, we have become convinced of the power of those subjective factors and of the weight of the social microsphere in resolving the social problems that socialised means of production have not automatically solved. Thus today we look entirely differently at the use of personal materials in Marxist sociology” (Szczepański 1976: 37–38). The predominant argument was the fact that Frederick Engels, in studying the situation of the working class in England, had long before Znaniecki referred to letters and other personal documents (sic!).

bel” (Znaniiecki 1984), which in his initial period of creativity allowed him to choose freely among various intellectual traditions: both the canonical ones and those that were less well known. This changed from the moment he accepted a position as professor at the University of Poznań, a new national institution, in 1920.

Znaniiecki’s specific intellectual trajectory meant that he approached work on *The Polish Peasant* as a philosopher and he remained one while writing it. Thus his “sociological conversion,” which is frequently postulated, is rather a historiographical effect consisting in a later subordination of his achievement to the Polish sociological tradition.

From the sociological and historical standpoint, several factors in Znaniiecki’s intellectual biography reflect the fascinating movement of knowledge beyond political and geographical borders (see Burke 2020). Above all, a hybridisation of knowledge occurred – a not entirely controlled combination and mixing, as is all too visible in *The Polish Peasant*. Other effects were relative exclusion, detachment in regard to local affairs, and partial Americanisation. These left Znaniiecki in the rather problematic but simultaneously comfortable situation of an uninvolved observer. It was only at the beginning of the 1940s that he no longer had to explain his professional path, as his biography was contained in *Who’s Who in American Education*.

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/// Abstract

This text critiques a classic sociological text, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. The value of the work, which consists in the successful combination of elements from several intellectual traditions, is presented in connection with the biographical and historical background of one of the authors, Florian Znanięcki. In conclusion, the author makes a number of remarks concerning the special situation of migrants in global intellectual networks.

Keywords:

history of ideas, sociological canon, Florian Znanięcki, *The Polish Peasant*

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