

LANGUAGES OF THE PERIPHERIES

TOMASZ ZARYCKI, *THE POLISH ELITE AND LANGUAGE SCIENCES: A PERSPECTIVE OF GLOBAL HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY*

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Tomasz Zarycki's *The Polish Elite and Language Sciences: A Perspective of Global Historical Sociology* consists of three mini-monographs linked both by reference to historical facts and by the totemic approaches used to describe the fortunes of the Polish intelligentsia. The opening part focuses on how influential concepts – for instance, world-systems theory – which describe the global history of imperial power, the dominance of the metropolis over the province, and the sway of the centre over the peripheries, have positioned Poland. Part 2 is an account of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Poland, through a reconstruction of the structural conditions behind the intellectual elites, who are regarded as pawns on the map of Europe with regard to the composition of power at the time. Part 3 contains the intellectual biographies of Polish linguists whose careers played out on that map of power. These conditions continue to this day (the book covers the period up to the second decade of the twenty-first century) and invariably place Polish humanists and social scientists as peripheral players trailing in the wake of the distant vanguard of world science.

What binds the three sections – which could otherwise constitute separate publications – is their shared purpose and thesis. The aim is to reconstruct the structural determinants of the system of scientific knowledge

production within the humanities and social sciences in the peripheries of empires, that is, far from the *grandes écoles* or Oxbridge. The main thesis is the uniqueness of the Polish case, which is the justification for undertaking this particular topic. It asks why Poland? Why the intelligentsia? And why language sciences?

Poland is neither an exemplary representation of the global or European peripheries, nor is it just an illustration of how theoretical models that demonstrate the relationships between power and knowledge work in a simple imitative way outside their original context. Zarycki argues that the research value of the Polish case

lies in the challenges it poses for many of the commonly used social science models. This is because Poland, with its complex history and non-obvious status among European states, does not seem to fit well into any of the classical types of states or societies. In other words, Poland defies categorization. (Zarycki 2022: V)

Zarycki later adds that “for most of its history [...] Poland has been *sui generis*” (Zarycki 2022: VI). This is repeatedly put to the test in Zarycki’s study since the task he has undertaken is to write a chapter on Poland’s place in the global history of empires in order to provincialise – to paraphrase Dipesh Chakrabarty’s postulate (2000) in post-colonial theory – a Western analysis of the structural determinants behind the processes of redeveloping elites and scholarly knowledge production.

Zarycki has undertaken this task on a number of previous occasions. He has discussed the hegemony of the intelligentsia in Polish cultural discourse (Zarycki & Warczok 2014), the East–West axis, which is both central to the Polish public sphere and also its ideological make-up (Zarycki 2014), the uniquely Polish intellectual and post-nobility concept of cultural citizenship (Zarycki et al. 2022), the (semi-)peripheral standing of Polish political science (Zarycki & Warczok 2016), and historiography (Zarycki 2021). In his approach, the intelligentsia, in the sense of a cultural and symbolic class, constitutes both a local medium of imperial power and a relatively autonomous carrier and guarantor of collective identity. The Polish intelligentsia in particular, compared to analogous classes in other Central and Eastern European societies, is characterised by the considerable resources of cultural capital on which it bases its symbolic power.

Finally, Zarycki’s selection of the language sciences as a research topic is by no means accidental. As Anna Duszak (1998: 56), a linguist men-

tioned in the final pages of the book, once stated, “global textual patterns are motivated by knowledge of the world, yet are not a simple reflection of it.” In other words, culture, as well as social patterns of interpretation, matter. Theorising about language is also theorising about the cultural identity of its speakers and the generation of social meanings directly within the scientific discourse that legitimises these meanings.

Edward W. Said (1983: 226), an author who was a major point of reference in Zarycki’s earlier work, wrote that, “Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another.” In his latest book, Zarycki himself plays the role of a scholar who puts time and space in motion, thereby bringing the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Immanuel Wallerstein, Stein Rokkan, George Steinmetz, Bob Jessop, and Ngai-Ling Sum to a new realm – one that is strongly subordinated to the intelligentsia’s ethos and Poland’s fate. Being a guide to theories that journey across an uncharted territory is an ambitious task but is necessary for a supranational scientific dialogue to become feasible. However, there are challenges and doubts regarding the direction of this journey, and it is these implications that I will address in the second part of my commentary.

The first issue is the tension between the theory and practice of scientific dialogue. In the introduction to his book Zarycki stipulates that he will not employ an orthodox approach to theoretical models. Nonetheless, his dispute with globally influential scientific theories must be asymmetrical, that is, he is obliged to validate the uniqueness of the Polish case. This uniqueness is interpreted twofold – first, as an atypicality compared to the other regions and states that are classified as peripheries or semi-peripheries, and second, as a buffer component of the distribution of imperial power in Europe. Zarycki declares that he intends to base his study of the structure of the field of power not merely on analyses of the linguistic mechanisms behind the generation of meaning but also on a materialist analysis that centres on the historical and cultural process of the reproduction of class structure. Bourdieu’s concept of homology (1977) is an excellent tool for siting Poland in the semiotic structure of the global field of power. This serves – along with Steinmetz’s (2008) notion of the colonial field of power – as a foundation for the key category of the peripheral field of power, which stems from the “provincialisation” of theories by Bourdieu, Wallerstein, and Steinmetz.

The focus on justifying the uniqueness of the Polish case, and the need to provincialise theories, has its consequences. Namely, that the

linguistic aspects of the peripheral field of power become the layer that Zarycki explores and develops most profoundly, at the expense of attention paid to extralinguistic factors. This statement is by no means an accusation but rather a constatation. Paradoxically, language and names are not only the initial obstacle but also the very first bridge in the intellectual dialogue between the centre and peripheries – for which Zarycki's new book is the best testament. Nevertheless, more analytical effort is involved in trying to embed the case of the Polish intelligentsia in the conceptual matrix of a centre–periphery approach than in demonstrating a structural homology between the field of political power and the field of intellectual power by means of discursive and non-discursive relations between power and the academy.

The second issue is the role of the intelligentsia in the structure of the peripheral field of power. Zarycki summarises the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Poland through the prism of the fortunes of the intellectual elites, their aspirations, and their inferiority complex in connection with being peripheral figures. While cherishing its own cultural heritage, the Polish intelligentsia remains the dominant group within the peripheral field of power, controlling the process of producing and legitimising scientific knowledge. By contrast, in the imperial field of power, this same intelligentsia is not even a subservient group but an utterly marginal one – if Everett V. Stonequist's (1961) concept of the marginal man is referenced. The Polish intellectual was a marginal man as he was locked in limbo, trapped between two disparate and largely antagonistic groups of cultural elites – those of Western Europe and Russia/the Soviet Union. Both enticed him with offers of support and recognition, but expected ideological loyalty in return. Zarycki also emphasises the little-known role of the Russian partitioning power in the redevelopment of Polish elites, and the ambivalent yet productive role played by the communist regime in modernising post-war science.

Zarycki also points to the power elites' continuously growing pressure on the academic intelligentsia to serve the social or national interest. The more those wielding political power restricted the autonomy of academic institutions, the more scholars desired research autonomy, which – in the humanities and social sciences – leads to their self-reliant autonomy within the global field of science. To paraphrase Ewa Thompson (2000), those who resist this trajectory risk becoming, willingly or not, eulogists of one empire or another. This dilemma is clearly evident when Zarycki reconstructs the biographies of such linguists as (among others) Jan Baudouin

de Courtenay, Kazimierz Nitsch, Jerzy Kuryłowicz, Maria Maynowa, and Witold Doroszewski.

Zarycki questions the assumption of the greatness of the Polish intelligentsia on the European and global stage. He even poses a subversive thesis that the “privileged position of the intelligentsia elite in the field of power necessarily corrupts, restricts autonomy of the cultural field, and suppresses its creative forces” (Zarycki 2022: 457). Nevertheless, he perpetuates another assumption – that of the leading role of the intelligentsia in the field of social power in Poland. His picture of the elite is somewhat detached from the social history of Poland, since it does not include the ordinary person. The problem is not that Zarycki has failed to write yet another folk history of Poland but that his otherwise excellent analysis does not address the issue of the common people, who posed a growing challenge to the elites, both within the peripheral and imperial fields of power, and to the intelligentsia in particular. Even though present-day demands to democratise knowledge-production do not necessarily, or by default, predetermine the demise of the intelligentsia’s hegemony, they still challenge the autonomy of the field of knowledge when juxtaposed with the field of social expectations. More emphasis should also be placed on the economic conditions behind the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge in the peripheral field of power, including economic inequalities between the peripheral field and the centre, and the pauperisation of the academic intelligentsia under post-socialist capitalism in Poland.

My final doubt concerns the scientific discipline that is employed to demonstrate the ability to analyse the peripheral field of power. The language sciences certainly deserve this type of analytic approach, and hard though it is to name another discipline that would produce and accumulate intellectual cultural capital to an even greater extent, I would still like to make the case for sociology, of which Tomasz Zarycki is a distinguished representative. Sociology has always had homologous but also turbulent relationships with other fields, especially those of politics and economics, and has aspired to become both a particularistic Polish and transnational voice. Sociology should, therefore, look at itself through the critical lens of relational historical sociology, as this kind of an auto-critique would be an interesting verification of Zarycki’s approach. Tomasz Zarycki has made sociology the subject of a number his articles and publications. However, I still look forward to his compiling a comprehensive monograph on the subject.

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