Stepping stone into the world

A conversation on sociology with Piotr Sztompka.

He is a man of great stature. His self-confidence is obvious and well founded. He has reached the pinnacle of the academic world and expresses the generosity and openness of somebody who is aware of what he has achieved, and stands by what he has done.

And he has sociology to thank for it all.

“Sociology became a platform on which I wanted to drift into the wider world. And eventually it served this function. I succeeded in this regard. I have been able to live and work in Poland, but also able to become internationally active and recognized”, he says in his temporary office at CBEES’ new location on the Flemmingborg campus of Södertörn University.

Looking back at these student years, he can see an underlying logic in his professional life. As a student in secondary school his main interest was natural sciences. But soon he decided this was too narrow. “To become ‘somebody’ in the natural sciences, you had to specialize and maintain an undivided focus.”

The American consulate in his native Kracow, by more or less illicit means, delivered the heralded Tribune. He received the book and turned it back over to his father’s drawer. The son learned about the world and the English language. So he chose law, the natural discipline of public affairs in communist Poland.

“Along the way, I discovered sociology as a secondary theme in the introduction to my legal curriculum. I had not even heard of it before. Sociology had been nonexistent, you had to specialize and maintain an undivided focus.”

Theoretical theme of the work — later to be expanded into Sztompka’s first volume in English, System and Function — also “served the function” of making it possible to uphold an independent line of thinking at the time. Zygmunt Bauman and Stanislaw Ossowski also chose quite esoteric areas of study to stay away from Communist Party concerns. It would have been an entirely different matter to write on social policy or theology.

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A further step to safeguard independence was to join the Party. Party membership helped him get a Fulbright scholarship to the U.S. “When I first applied, he lost out to an academic candidate who was a Party member. Piotr Sztompka learned the lesson, entered the Party, and the next year, 1972, arrived at Berkeley, California, where he joined the community of sociologists, renewed and expanded his Polish dissertation on a portable second-hand ghetto blaster in a dorm room, made 20 xerox copies of his manuscript that he then sent to leading publishers he had identified on the shelves in the Berkeley library, and got published. His international career was off to a start.”

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“American theoretical sociology, though, remains my main area of interest. During a second visit to the U.S. and New York in 1974, he came even closer to the core of functional analysis by getting to know Robert K. Merton, who became a friend and mentor. The master analyst of roles and role sets became his role model. Ten years later, he would be Merton’s biographer. “I was lucky to meet a person like Merton. To have a true master is one of the secrets of success in the academic profession. And he, perhaps the greatest sociologist of the 20th century, gave me the two most important gifts one may get: trust and friendship. Just on the basis of reading my first book he invited me to visit as a professor at Columbia. It was a considerable measure of trust in an unknown young scholar from Eastern Europe, thus creating an obligation in me to match the expectations. He became my role model and master not only in the field of sociology, but also regarding personal problems, always standing by my side during the inevitable moments of personal crisis.”

With his modern American intellectual orientation and a slightly embarrassing Communist Party membership in the background as a purely opportunistic safeguard, one would think that Marxism would exist only at the most distant margins of his interests. Is that any scholarly relevance today?

“On the methodological level, Marx sees society as an asymptotic whole. This is similar to my studies of functional systems. Then there is the idea that by being a scholar you have an effect on the world, you influence politics and social development. When your ideas affect politics and ordinary people, they become praxis rather than remaining academic.”

“On the theoretical level”, Piotr Sztompka continues, “there is the importance of the notion of class. Even with the dramatic changes we have seen in capitalism since Marx’s time, this is still relevant.”

Finally, there is Marx’s belief in grass roots mobilization, that revolutionary mobilization can change the world. The paradigm in this idea was verified in the Solidarity movement in Poland, which showed how the power of the people could achieve change by joining forces in civil society against communist rule.

“Civil society was re-discovered in the ’80s by leaders of the anti-communist opposition in Central Europe as a kind of intellectual tool to generalize their own experience of strong bonds of association that existed outside of the state. Anti-political politics – to use the language of Vladimir Eliaš – stood up on behalf of the public interest. As early as 1987, I had a personal experience at a mass during the first visit to Poland by the Polish Pope John Paul II. Two million people were gathered in a large field. They were ordinary, quite isolated people. After the religious ceremony concluded...”

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ed, hundreds of banners and flags were raised with political slogans. This was a sociological mirage and an articulation of civil society.

Still, when you analyze the political situation in Poland from the 1980s and onwards, you speak of a lack of trust as if there were no bonds of civil society in Polish society. Might there be a contradiction here?

“Before 1989 we had civil society underground, and civil society against the state. Then the underground civil society rose, and there was an immediate change. Civil society stood up for, not against, the new political system. But the old civil society was lost in the mists of the situation. But very soon you saw a tremendous outburst of civil society in three areas: in the economy, there was a lot of entrepreneurial activity from below and in the political arena a sudden outbreak of groups that wanted to change themselves into political parties; at one time at least 100 political parties were registered. A third area was foundations and all sorts of NGOs. In that regard, the beginning seemed very promising. We saw civil society moving from having to disguise itself, to reform, to having a place in normal development.

“However, later came something that was just a kind of trauma. This was due to the social costs of transition and the disillusionment that followed. Necessary but painful reforms that were required. Foundations were full of hope, foundations were optimistic, foundations were former political opposition parties. At that time foundations and NGOs were turning into political parties. There was a change in the whole civil society movement. There was a profound disillusionment at this time.”

The new millennium

“Poles generally have negative views of two larger powers — Germany and Russia. ‘With Germany today’, Piotr Sztompka remarks, ‘we have more faith in the European Union than in Germany’. ‘Europe is of course idealism, and you need utopian ideas to move forward, you need vision.’

“You have to strive in order to get anywhere”, Piotr Sztompka concludes. Eventually, after 40 years, he delivers the first “Södertörn Lecture”, published by the School as SCAS has come a long way since the early 1990s. Now it is ranked with the very best of its kind, on a par with the Wissenschaftkolleg in Berlin or the Center for Advanced Study at Stanford.

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His own image

“Professionally, I am not an area specialist. But I feel very good here.”

To understand Eastern Europe, you must look further”, he reiterates. “To understand Eastern Europe, you must look further”, he reiterates.

“We talk about the three stages of sociology that he perceives. They coincide with the three main periods of the Polish society.”

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His only critical remarks about CBEES are that its concerns, to his taste, are perhaps excessively limited to the Baltic region, and especially to the Baltic republics.

“Real understanding of post-communism requires you to see the diversity”, he emphasizes. “The Baltic republics which were part of the Soviet Union proper are quite different from states that were fairly independent and more different still from Romania and Yugoslavia.”


“I do not want to be arrogant, but you need utopian ideas to move forward, you need vision.”

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The center has a great chance to extend its focus beyond the Baltics and even to the like atmosphere. Piotr Sztompka has been a fellow at SCAS several times and has written some of his more important works there.

His other overriding issues of the day.

“We have now come full circle with his original observations in his doctoral dissertation.”

Anders Melinbourn, on the left, and Piotr Sztompka, on the right, discussing social theory in the newly opened F House at Södertörn University.

Photograph: Monica Strandell

Weber — sometimes called the Marx of the bourgeoisie — was suspicious of the Poles, Marx cheered them on.