

Social Problems and Academic Education in Poland

To begin, let us quote the following classical definition of social problems which well reflects a popular, general point of view in this respect:

“Social problems can be defined as general patterns of human behavior or social conditions that are perceived to be threats to society by significant numbers of the population, powerful groups, or charismatic individuals and that could be resolved or remedied” (Ronald W. Maris, *Social Problems*, Chicago: The Dorsey Press 1988, p. 6).

This is the first and last detail of conceptual definition in the present paper. Let us treat it as a starting point for some working consideration of corresponding disciplines in Polish higher education.

We may begin by observing that the tradition involved in social problems is at least of triple nature.

First, it is the tradition related to the development of modern social thought, including in particular sociological thought. We are accustomed to the view that the great classical theoretical orientations in sociology in the 19th and 20th centuries focused especially on identification of qualities of the social world and explanation of its regularities. In other words, the “founding fathers” of 19th-century sociology in particular, but also those who proposed and detailed conceptions in the following century, were primarily theorists in the common sense of the term. We might add here that sociology had from the start had its reverse side, an aspect not unknown to the founders. There can be little doubt that C.H. de Saint-Simon in building his vision of industrial society was inspired by a practical hope to overcome the harshness of the reality surrounding him and to build a better world. Nor should it be questioned that A. Comte, in his sociological positivism, was not limited to theory, but he equally diligently aimed at study and explanation that would serve practical application. Let us pause briefly to consider the figure and work of K. Marx. Can we think of someone who would be more oriented at cognition and explanation while simultaneously convinced of a need to change objectionable realities? Finally, there is the ever thought-provoking figure of E. Durkheim pursuing subtle theoretical solutions and at the same time originating

a specialized empirical field research program and distinguishing respective problematic phenomena among which suicide is the first to come to mind. Midway, there is half-forgotten F. Le Play, who took a concrete, insightful interest in the realities of everyday life, again, or primarily, in connection with practical assumptions. There is no need here to judge those passions and attempts of theirs. Suffice it to say that those were the origins of what still remains social/sociological reflection on social problems.

The next dimension in the above tradition is the shaping, development, and functioning of this peculiar research and educational subdiscipline called sociology of social problems. The process we are discussing continued virtually throughout the 20th century and today, as the 21st century begins, sociology is almost inconceivable without this particular subdiscipline. Let us name two of its general properties.

One is the observable connection with sociological theories and their explanatory aspects. With little risk of error, we can say that almost all major theoretical orientations in sociology, at any rate their large majority, have been and continue to be the basis of thinking about social problems. A sampling of points of view will include exchange theory, structuralism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism and labeling, functionalism, concepts of deviance, sociobiology. Let us use as an example just the first of these positions. In accordance with it, we could repeat that social problems stem from the fact that certain social patterns cease to be meaningful, rewarding, valuable; actual social exchanges are unprofitable or imbalanced. If so, then, in simplest terms, to attempt a solution to so understood problems is to keep people interacting with one another; reduce imbalanced sets. Needless to add, this is the shortest, simple interpretation which, like practically all the others, has its weak points that can be identified.

Another characteristic quality of sociology of social problems is a desire for the empirically concrete, a search for and precision in empirical designates reflecting such general ideas as, for example, disorganization or disintegration. Again to use the single chosen example, we may note that the special focal area where specific problems have been sought and identified are big cities. There are, say, at least five types of urban phenomena (more in reality) that we could designate as potential problem areas which include: city governance and characteristic qualities of institutions specialized in it; political processes and power distribution in the city that could lead to the exclusion of certain groups; housing market, its resulting differentiation (not to say drastic inequality); transportation infrastructure; and finally an aspect that is the most social-wide, i.e. relations between “old” residents in a city and immigrants. As

it happens, urban problems excellently reflect and document a certain additional feature of social problems at large. On the one hand, they are universal and global; on the other, in respective locations they assume peculiar, unique forms. Similar statements can be made of an entire range of problems to which we can attribute synthetic, generalized properties but which nevertheless recur in varying forms and call for renewed empirical research.

Finally, the third dimension of tradition related to social problems – a relatively most recent dimension – is a tendency for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary identification of what we consider problems and of qualities we associate with them.

If we used urban realities as an example, we might add that this example perfectly confirms the third tendency. Just as specialized urban sociology began in the last decades of the previous century to transform into more interdisciplinary urban studies, so sociology of social problems can be said to be more readily opening, at least in some variants, to combinations including factors derived from other disciplines. In general terms, this tendency can be said to produce the result of a greater theoretical eclecticism, lesser emphasis on rigorous theoretical and methodological procedures proper for a single discipline, and concentration on the empirical properties of observed phenomena together with their attributable applicational solutions that could possibly help overcome such problems.

For the sake of consistence, let us remain on urban turf. It could be stated with conviction that its richness surpasses all boundaries of any classical discipline of learning or practice, being described by such attributes as geographic, architectural-urbanistic, legal, anthropological, cultural, even theological to some extent, considering for example the crucial importance of their cathedrals in the development of medieval cities. Thus urban space, its material development and equipment, its mounting and increasingly complex formal rules defining collective life, its ways and styles of life, its multitude of other factors can, of course, be addressed from many points of view. As a result, if we are consistent, it may mean that something that is perfectly acceptable or even desirable from one perspective may be defined as a problem requiring solution from another. Who has not heard the philosophies of NIMBY (Not in my back yard) or BANANA (Build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything) or does not imagine their practical consequences? Life experience will suggest many essentially similar examples.

I do not feel an urge to offer here a judgmental opinion in this respect. All three aspects of tradition have been and remain valid and usable. Yet this

causes certain consequences in research attitudes as much as in academic educational realities, to the latter of which I will now proceed.

May I stress that the past of Polish interest in social problems largely reflects the generalized history outlined above. The course of events followed the vicissitudes of Polish sociology and its prevailing trends.

In Polish academic circles, sociology made a first precursory appearance relatively early, at the beginning of the 20th century. On its entry, it distinguished potential problem areas such as multiethnicity in local communities. A decisive factor was Poland's regained independence at the close of World War I, a time of redoubled academic effort backed by wide public support. Those first steps and efforts we owe most notably to Florian Znaniecki, who had just then forged the concept of autonomous sociology studies in our country.

Those beginnings were distinctly pervaded with a general intellectual posture, intertwined with philosophical thought, and influenced by a general social theory such as, naturally enough, the humanistic and understanding orientation favored by Znaniecki. Consequently, that general theoretical disposition rigidly bound the then prevalent points of view on social matters and emerging problems.

At the same time, social scholars of the day were very sensitive to specific social challenges. Perhaps the most characteristic example of that was the peasant question: the fate, life, and prospects of farmers who made up a majority of the Polish society, including the young generation of village dwellers. Equally important was the situation of workers' and unemployed communities. It was then that admirable and perhaps world-unique efforts were made to collect memoirs and other personal documents and thus to obtain qualitative knowledge on those respective communities, their ways of life, fears, but also hopes for the future, etc. "Stepping outside" and field research began to be taken for granted. We may therefore say that, developing along such lines, theory and methodology became a main bridge linking the generally intellectual base of social sciences and the newly specializing sociology, including sociology of social problems, with appropriate educational activity.

Without going to great lengths about the complex and difficult history of Polish sociology, suffice it to mention that since the mid-1950's, both research and academic teaching have been pursued with greater-than-ever vigor. To illustrate the latter, let us consider some selected working examples from the educational realities of the Institute of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University.

To quote the course catalog for the last academic year 2004/2005, two of the general, theoretical courses offered are described as having the following characteristics.

“Introduction to sociology.” The purpose of the course is to introduce students to the discipline they have chosen as their major. The lecture presents sociology as an academic discipline and a field of study, the scope of problems sociology deals with and concepts it uses, research approaches in sociology, orientations and prevailing theoretical thought, as well as chief methods used is social investigation. Discussed publications include those on the nature, functions, and ways of pursuing sociological study, and those presenting theories and sociological research into many aspects of the social reality.

The course titled “Contemporary sociological theories” is announced as follows. The purpose of the course is to familiarize students with the newest trends in sociological thought. Concepts are presented on the main dilemmas of sociological theory: social action and social system, determinism and indeterminism of social development, rational choice, and social order in the most recent sociological thought. Particular emphasis is placed on changing paradigms in sociological theories with reference to problems of contemporary societies.

In a more empirical vein, here are two of a range of application-oriented courses. The prospectus has this to say about the course titled “Sociology of local communities.”

The purpose of the course is to present to students theoretical and methodological assumptions to facilitate analysis of social change on a local level. The scope of the course includes the traditions in local community research with particular emphasis on a renaissance of localism in an age of progressing globalization processes; main theoretical and methodological orientations in studies on local communities; differentiation of types of social order on a local level. The theoretical aspects of local development are discussed in the light of such concepts as community development, resource mobilization, and others. Against a backdrop of theoretical analysis, discussed topics include organization of collective action, social participation and mobilization, leadership, power and politics in local communities, and questions of regional identity with prospects for social and political regionalism.

The course titled “Urban sociology” is described as follows. The course is designed to present and discuss urban topics in theories, research, and application in sociology. Topics covered include especially concepts of ecological school (Chicago school), studies on urban local communities, “new”

concepts in urban sociology. Attention is paid to the interdisciplinary character of urban problems. Questions are asked of components of the urban reality, its modes of functioning, solutions to urban problems, and optimizing ways of life in the city.

Finally, two courses specifically designed to cover social problems and their respective types.

The first of these is titled "Introduction to social problems" and outlined in the prospectus in the following way. The course may be treated as an independent teaching unit or an introduction to a block of detailed subjects in social work. Discussion embraces theoretical problems (defining social problems, analyzing causes of contemporary problems), as well as issues in practical applications of sociological knowledge. As complementary content, selected elements of social work are presented as institutionalized response to social problems. Participants become familiar with major social issues in the contemporary Polish society (alcoholism, violence in the family, drug abuse, poverty, mental deviations, etc.) and with the functioning of communities and institutions attempting to solve such issues.

The other dedicated course is called "Sociology of crime and deviation." It is summarized as follows. The basic purpose of the course is to address and discuss the theoretical, empirical, and practical aspects of those social phenomena we call deviation, disorganization, and social pathology. Presented topics also include a systematic discussion of the theory of deviant behavior and monographic treatment of respective types of "social pathology" typical for the Polish society and characteristic for the city of Cracow – prostitution, drug abuse, youth subcultures, organized crime, etc. Students learn the basic concepts in criminology, criminalistics, and victimology.

To offer a brief summary of the information in the course prospectus, I will conclude by making three generalized remarks.

First, the sense and purpose of this activity is to maintain and develop the specific scholarly discipline of sociology together with its increasingly advanced theoretical and methodological points of view. Thus, sociological thought constitutes a starting point and it is assumed that, with reference to societies' empirical qualities and to problems that occur in them, this thought is especially valid and prolific.

Secondly, sociology can and should be practiced in two overlapping variants: one general consideration and analysis, mostly theoretical in nature, and the other considering respective empirical components and characteristics of societies. Consequently, we can and should speak of general sociology and detailed sociologies.

Thirdly, with all its “exclusive” nature, sociology may be and is interconnected with other disciplines dealing with broadly understood social matters. The meeting points are to be found on the conceptual level and (perhaps especially) on the level of definite problems and proposed solutions. The aspect to which we in Cracow attach particular attention is the scope and characteristic features of social work. Leaving more detailed description for another occasion, I will just mention that our undergraduates have a right to choose (many do) social work as a minor in their sociology education.

We assume that while studying sociology, undergraduates not only attain intellectual maturity, but also acquire a certain confidence “in confrontation” with other people and with problems arising in the social world. Moreover, they are expected to acquire an optimistic outlook, a conviction that such matters are worth studying and questions are worth asking about how such issues could and should be solved. Many Cracow undergraduates – especially those studying sociology and social work – become, we hope, critical observers of society and promoters of social change in their proper area. After leaving the university, they go on to work in state and local administration, in numerous and varied social welfare institutions, in the media, in private business, in a multitude of other places (also abroad, including, we know, in Germany). There they undergo a final verification of what they learned in courses such as I have outlined.