

The 50th Anniversary of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology Polish Academy of Sciences

A debate concerning the role of philosophy and sociology in the 21st century was organised to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. The panel discussion on sociology was moderated by Joanna Kurczewska.

The participants invited to the panel were: Jerzy Szacki, Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński, Paweł Śpiewak, Hanna Palska and Andrzej Rychard.

In her opening speech Joanna Kurczewska presented several questions: What is sociology? What could sociology be? And what should it be? Professor Kurczewska was also wondering if we still were able to claim similarly to August Comte that sociology is the queen of sciences or we should rather pension it off?

Three the most important topics of the presentations and the following discussion should be mentioned. First, the problem of definition of sociology, second, the sociological education—both in terms of education at universities and in terms of education of the whole society. Last but not least the problem of relation between sociology and (political) power. This subject triggered a heated discussion.

Jerzy Szacki an outstanding historian of sociological thought was in his presentation mainly interested in the limits of sociology and its relations with other social sciences. Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński, sociologist and politologist gave very detailed description of contemporary state of sociology. He did not pay as much attention to the relation of sociology to the political power as did Paweł Śpiewak, who is historian of ideas and also a member of Polish parliament. Paweł Śpiewak was speaking rather about the past of sociology than about its future. Hanna Palska sociologist of culture, described the challenges of the sociological education which had been recently changing. Andrzej Rychard, sociologist of politics referred in his speech to the Gouldner's conception of the reflexive sociology and stated that there is a need of defending the integrity of sociology endangered mainly by its connections with politics.

The limits of sociology were by Jerzy Szacki described as blurred. It is not possible to answer the question: 'what is sociology?' Finding an answer is even harder than a hundred years ago. Practically a sociologist is able to deal with every phenomena. Stanisław Ossowski's definition of sociology, who said that sociology was simply what sociologists did, was recalled several times. In the opinion of some of the speakers contemporary sociology was an assemblage of various scientific schools, different theoretical approaches and institutional networks. The only link that unites sociologists

is the corporation solidarity, which should be fostered. The paradoxical situation was pointed that sociology is closing as a discipline but still needs other social sciences to be agitated by them.

Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński enumerated functions of sociology. Within the most important function of sociology—applied science—Wnuk-Lipiński distinguished three sub-functions: the function of expertise, the function of social engineering and the function of polling. He sees the threat that the function of expertise might be confused with scientific pluralism. He is also worried that sociologists might lose their independence and write recommendations or reports helpful for their donors. In today's Poland social engineering is a tool of manipulation, it helps to legitimise and de-legitimise policies of governments.

The educational function of sociology played a very important role in the 80's. In the opinion of Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński the sociological knowledge will become part of the general knowledge of the well educated people as it has already happened in the USA. He believes that a possibility exists that sociology will help in creating some kind of a new utopia, which might be desired in the axiological vacuum of the fragmented society.

In the following discussion it was stated that there is a need to emphasise the educational function of sociology. Modern sociology should educate the society about global dangers. Both Polish as well as the global society are hedonistically oriented. Hedonistic life-style is the cause of resource depletion and in consequence it might become a cause of a global catastrophe. Educating the society was recognized by disputants as one of still very important missions of the discipline.

Education of future sociologists was also debated. From the point of view of the favourably recalled Ossowski's definition of sociology, saying that sociology is what sociologists do, the future condition of sociology depends on the profile of students educated by academic teachers. The need for strong philosophical, methodological and statistical basis of this education was mentioned. The way in which contemporary students of sociology are being taught will define future institutional boundaries of the discipline. It was also mentioned that the graduates of sociology departments work in business marketing and provide services for politics. The community of academic teachers was said to be responsible for creating humanistic attitudes of the career oriented students. The problem of educating students of sociology is also very important because of sheer numbers. Since 1989 the general number of university students in Poland has been growing rapidly and sociology has become one of the most popular faculties chosen by high school graduates. The prestige of sociology in Poland was recognised as one of the reasons of such popularity of sociological studies. And the prestige itself, many disputants believed, was due to the relation between sociology and power.

One of the most dedicated defenders of the idea that sociology is nowadays the most influential academic discipline in Poland was Paweł Śpiewak. In his opinion, sociology has gained power over public opinion. This is an effect of the enormous role opinion polls play in Polish politics. Śpiewak also presented other factors of the power of sociology. One cannot imagine collective self-consciousness not articulated

in a sociological language. He also stressed that Polish sociologists gathered enormous knowledge in several fields of the Polish social reality. The third important factor is that sociology is “experiencing the culture,” it is still an intellectual not a technocratic field of activity—sociologists read classical texts, which helps them in observing today’s reality. He also stressed that sociology is very popular among young people starting their University studies. The success of sociology in Poland is a result of interest taken by sociologists in the life of today and the lack of strict concepts. He said with emphasis that sociology in Poland has the ability to feel the heart of society.

These statements were hotly debated by other participants of the meeting. Several other explanations of the privileged position of sociology in Poland were given. One of the arguments was that sociology in Poland did not gain the control. The control was gained by the polling industry, which often can be called ‘pseudo-sociology’. The institutional separation of sociology and polling industry was also stressed. Another explanation was that the power of sociology originates from the presence of sociologists in mass media, which are powerful indeed. A hypothesis was presented that presence of sociologists in mass media might decrease the prestige of the discipline. The theoretical basis of this hypothesis is the conception of Pierre Bourdieu that prestige of an academic discipline is correlated with its esotericism. The esotericism of Polish sociology is decreasing because of the sociologists’ presence in mass media and also because of the increasing numbers of sociology students.

Some of the disputants strongly disagreed with the statement that the language of public debate in Poland was defined by sociology. In their opinion sociologists are specifying the divisions in the debate created by the politicians. One of the best examples of such specifying is the term “czwarta rzeczpospolita” (The Fourth Republic) invented by sociologists.

The relation of sociology to power might be even danger for it. Two central dilemmas of sociology were pointed out. First, how to explain the world in a rational way without rationalising it? And second, how to critically analyse without assuming a political attitude? There is a need for defending the integrity of sociology endangered mainly by its connections with politics. The commemoration of the 50th anniversary of establishing the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology is also an example of such defence.

Joanna Kurczewska summarized the discussion by saying that quite recently sociologists in Poland were discussing sociology harming the ones in power and now they are discussing power harming the sociology.

Challenges before Polish sociology defined in the discussion consist mainly of two elements: the relation of the sociology to power and the question of sociological education in the era of the decline of the Humboldtian model of university. It seems that sociology in Poland will have to cope with the consequences of its popularity, which might prove harmful.