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The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. Some Remarks after One Hundred Years

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Abstract

This paper presents how, one hundred years after its publication, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 1918-1920 still has relevance and specificity, providing food for discussion among social scientists, while providing insight for interpreting social phenomena. This paper will examine two aspects the methodological approach and the presence of women in migratory social phenomena and family.

Keywords: methods, life histories, migration, women.

1. Thomas and Znaniecki at One Hundred

Let us look back at the first great empirical research in American sociology a century after its birth. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* is a work whose actuality and precise effort provides evidence of a theory and research that embraces a variety of disciplinary fields; from sociology to the history of sociology, from the sociology of migration to the methodology of research. It reaches the analysis of ethnic groups and the crisis of identity through an ethnographic lens with an undoubted anthropological influence with the adaptation, from its origins, of that question. That research also provides evidence of the apparently ancient, representations of daily life, its substance and actualization in the sociological investigation. In fact, some categories proposed by our authors, consider the 'definition of the situation', and require that each time it be traced back to a referent historical framework, in a path that proposes methods and categories related to our daily analysis of reality.

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Two men, two researchers, with different backgrounds Thomas and Znaniecki, expressions of two different worlds managed to cement a common work. Thomas, a southern man, extroverted in his modernity and a great theorist but also a bon vivant of the metropolis as described by Morris Janowitz (Janowitz, 1966: XIII); and Znaniecki, from an even poorer land, an attentive researcher and generous colleague whose background reveals him as a student with autonomous analytical ability and a conflictual disposition, compared to the structured order that asked him for 'normality' and better conservation (Bierstedt, 1969, p:1). Znaniecki remembered with dignity and affection, his relationship with Thomas:

Our collaboration was very harmonious personally and intellectually ... Our divergent intellectual interests never conflicted... To... him however, theories were mere intellectual instruments, valuable in so far they helped discover, analyze, and interpret socio psychological phenomena. This is why in the course of his life he used several different research approaches (Znaniecki, 1948: 766),

having addressed another great compliment to his collaborator shortly before in the same text: "The famous statement of Terence, "I am a man and nothing human seems alien to me" expresses an ideal which few men have ever realized as fully as Thomas' (Znaniecki, 1948: 765).

Our conference considered the complex of theories and methods connected to *The Polish Peasant*, while not rigorously binding the participants to an exegesis of their work. It would be reductive in relation to the complex of analytical cues that the work offers, and it is multiplicity of themes, which have been structured over time starting from that text. This is why it was an 'open' invitation. Each guest was called to modulate his contribution in relation to the heterogeneity of the overall contributions of Thomas and Znaniecki without delimiting the perimeters of possible reflection. This does not mean that my introductory speech could illuminate all those points or structure a path that echoes the complex of what will be elaborated. Precisely in relation to what I considered the 'open' spirit of the Conference, I limited myself to discussing two points of Thomas' and Znaniecki's reflections, connected with my most recent work, thus referring to the respective insights that each contributor brought to this celebration – an anniversary – but also an opportunity to resume, reconsider and update some analytical ideas, based on the research of Thomas and Znaniecki.

In 1928, in response to Robert Park who asked him about the methodology used in the Polish study, Thomas replied with a letter. The question was taken

up again in a discussion on *The Polish Peasant* presented in 1939 by the Social Science Research Council with a foreword by Herbert Blumer.

It is my experience that formal methodological studies are relatively unprofitable. They have tended to represent the standpoint developed in philosophy and in the history of philosophy. It is my impression that progress in method is made from point to point by setting up the objectives, employing certain techniques, then resetting the problem with the introduction of still other objectives and the modification of techniques. ... It is only in fact, so far as sociology is concerned, since we abandoned the search for standardized methods based largely on the work of dead men, that we have made the beginnings which I have indicated (Thomas, 1949: 166-167).

It is worth mentioning and assessing Thomas' further contributions, and important to discuss the efforts made by Blumer that the Council will find 'a highly illuminating analysis of a most important publication.' What followed was 'a rejoinder, written in admirable spirit, which throws further light upon the condition under which the study of the "Polish Peasant" was made, and the purposes the study was designed to serve' (Day, 1949: XII). Blumer's 'qualitative' effort is further evident in this case with respect to the unprecedented diffusion of quantitative methods, which is important to underline, but does not resolve all of the inherent problems we find today with respect to that method.

In relation to Thomas' critical idea, which tends to overcome formal sociology and the narrowness of its results, we want to remember the positive contribution offered to research methodology through the use of personal life stories, a practice which is substantially active in all respects to our qualitative research methodology and our presence in the field. This is also an occasion to remember that the use of letters in research, as well as Vladek's biography, represented powerful pushes in this direction, indicating traces through which to gather forms of interaction in absolute respect for the identities and values of subjects, but also by marking the stages of a journey, with the awareness that 'it is almost the rule that a promising initial undertaking is incorrect and incomplete at points but may open the way to the participation and corrective contributions of a considerable interest-group, as in the case of *The Polish Peasant*' (Thomas, 1949a: 83). Emerging from the references cited are scattered traits of an interactionist model, premised on the triangulation of free will – definition of the situation – behavior, and this is linked to a relational process in which there can be a dimension of adaptation present, as in the consideration of migration processes and insertion of immigrants into American society.

The life story method, 'invented' by William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, and widely used in the collection of letters in Vladek's autobiography, combines the subjective experience in the immediate definition of the situation, and is therefore central to the cognitive process of self-narration. This can be based on written documents, stories, letters, autobiographies, diaries or journalistic reports, and the researcher himself will determine the methodological path and interpretative approach deemed most useful for a specific study. This is a theme that would have been taken up in the methodological construction subsequently carried out by the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago – with the only de facto methodology text recognized by the Department – in which the life story method is particularly effective in gaining knowledge of foreign populations and immigrant cultures, where the relationship between research methodology and the cognitive process of reality is of the utmost importance.

In the field of sociology, where the personal equation of the investigator is even more complex and where the methods and the techniques used are less standardized, it is even more important that the investigator put his observation in the form of a full, permanent record, so that other may follow step by step his procedure and his findings (Palmer, 1928: 165).

It is therefore important that social scientists 'Put themselves in the position of the subject who tries to find his way in this world [remembering] that the environment by which he is influenced and to which he adapts himself is his world, not the objective world of science' (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918: 148). Because, as it has been repeated over time, Thomas and Znaniecki, in their Introduction to Vladek's Autobiography declare that life-histories 'constitute the perfect type of sociological material' (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918, III: 6). In reality, the life story method is useful for understanding the experiences of migrants, women and men, as well as any other changing universe under investigation. It allows a subjective interpretation, and for the social scientist, whose aim is to understand how objective social conditions become subjective experiences, it can reveal individual and cultural relationships, agency and structure. The specific heuristic value of the method is its focus on the life course, which makes it particularly suitable for studies on migration, women and disease because it captures the transformation processes. More than the immediate data provided by most quantitative studies, surveys and interviews, life history is, by its nature, a data set aimed at examining the experience lived over time, taking into account behavioral patterns and processes and merging them as opposed to viewing a single isolated action alone. This 'reveals the sequences of experience, the total patterning of behavior, motivation, and

change' (Blumer, 1939: 134). On the other hand, we should not think that just because a research method proves to be valid over time, that it cannot be abandoned for a period and become less relevant. Nor does it escape the reflection on those research methods prepared over the years in the Chicago Department and the dynamics of which qualitative methodology was the object.

Analyses of individual life records, such as those prepared by Clifford Shaw in the late 1920s and early 1930s, became increasingly rare in the 1930s and 1940s. The personal document approach to social research was being superseded, in part by participant observation, but more importantly by the community-surveying techniques refined by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Samuel Stouffer, which promised objectivity and precision in the formation and verification of generalizations. Recently a renewal of interest in personal document research has become evident, as it is once again recognized as a promising approach to the study of the subjective meaning of concrete social life. (Bogdan, Taylor, 1975: 1sgg.).

In his preface to the most recent edition of the 1939 discussion, Blumer highlights how sociology has developed a new set of 'theories, claims and tastes' that have no longer evaluated subjective experience or respected life history data (Blumer, 1979). This position was also taken by Ken Plummer, who took up the theme and update it with respect to reality and to the contemporary methodological discussion (Plummer, 1990, but also 1983 and 2001). Thomas and Znaniecki observed the transformation of an old social order. The topicality of the method they used, can be taken up again in the context of the great transformations underway today, to examine how people live and give meaning to their lives in a new period of intense social change. It is the ontological narrative in the life history of a particular subject who finds himself experiencing a particular condition that provides a coherent story of the self, despite social transformations and biographical transitions. As Thomas and Znaniecki have noted, it is not people who are disorganized and reorganized, but social circumstances.

Continuing to look at *The Polish Peasant* through the positions of the 1939 discussion, Thomas highlights another central condition of the research linked to its progressiveness with respect to its starting point which certainly cannot be conclusive, but instead is subject to the changes that the various actors in its path of the investigation will make it necessary (Thomas, 1939: 83). Although Blumer has criticized of *The Polish Peasant* because the methods employed in it did not meet the 'criteria of a scientific instrument', that is, they were not representative, reliable, or validatable, however, he attested to the value of their data. He argued their data did illustrate some of their theoretical assertions and helped to explain the social phenomena they were trying to explain (i.e., the

migration experience of the Polish peasant). In agreement, the sociologists gathered together for a critical discussion of *The Polish Peasant* maintained that while human documents were not generalizable, nor reliable, they nonetheless helped illustrate theory and explicate the human experience (Blumer, 1939).

The value of this methodology, repeated several times in their complex and articulated reflection on the qualitative research of Denzin and Lincoln, is recalled by several authors and is the basis of further transformations that qualitative research – taking advantage of the criticisms that from time to time they have been moved – has lived in its path of continuous renewal up to the use of mixed-methods.

The method William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki used to conduct the research was 'life stories', which consists of the collection of documents, be they indirect, such as letters, or direct, such as constructed biographies. The autobiographical method has established itself over the years in numerous fields of social ethnography. For example, consider the use of the storytelling method to analyze media consumption through the examination of life stories, or again as told (Gröppel-Wegener, Kidd, 2019: 7).

This however always had as a basis 'that critical qualitative inquiry inspired by a sociological imagination can make the world a better place' (Denzin, Lincoln, 2018: X-XI). This discussion marks the long debate that qualitative research has carried out and continues to carry out within it, although the relationship with quantitative approaches has probably changed and today postulates the need to take new paths (Flyvbjerg, 2011). In fact, Thomas also encounters the problem of method in relation to a scientific director. In 1923, already outside the University of Chicago, where in the Department of Sociology Nels Anderson opens the path of research developed by Robert Park with his *The Hobo*, he highlights the premise of the interpretative approach.

But science is superior to common sense in its methods of experimentation... But science is always eventually constructive. A large number of specialists working in many fields, upon detached and often apparently trivial problems..., establish a body of facts and relationships the social meaning of which they do not themselves suspect at the time, but which eventually find an application in practical life. Science accumulates facts and principles which could never be determined by the common sense of the individual or community, and of so great a variety and generality that some of them are constantly passing over into practical life. The old farmer has learned the value of soil analysis, though with reluctance and suspicion, and he has learned to spray his orchards to preserve them from pests (Thomas, 1923: 226-227).

So the method of analysis is a substantial, important factor in any study; from life stories to interviews, to photographs, such as the field, the field that between experience and definition of the situation proposes its centrality, which would have been remembered over time, even by the Florian Znaniecki's methodological work.

When I wish to ascertain at first hand what a certain activity is, just as when I wish to obtain first hand information about a certain object. I try to experience it. There is only one way of experiencing an object: it is to observe it personally. There is also only one way of experiencing an activity: it is to perform it personally. Practical men insist on this: they will tell you that you cannot fully realize what they are doing until you do it yourself (Znaniecki, 1934: 49).

The second point to which I would like to refer briefly, is linked to the attention that I have devoted in my work to the location, roles, powers and perspectives of the women present in Thomas' studies. These subjects exist between 1897 and 1908 in fifteen articles published in *The American Journal of Sociology*. Thomas had been on the scientific board since shortly after its establishment, along with *The American Magazine*, a magazine founded by three muckrakers and internal to reporting journalism. It is a theme that neither Edmund Volkart nor Morris Janowitz, accustomed to neglecting the female presence and its roles, take into account, or much less consider to be part of or mentioned in their anthologies. It is as if Thomas' activity began with the *Source Books of Social Origins* (1909) almost without considering the 1907 text (Thomas, 1907) moving directly to research that prepares the publication of *The Polish Peasant*. One of the errors in this analysis is that it does not recognize how much the analyzes and interventions prior to *The Polish Peasant* contributed to its premise. It is in fact, a multidisciplinary, analytical and training path, a substantial root.

The research indicated above, highlights a transformation in Thomas' approach which shows a cultural and non-mechanistic maturation evidenced by his consideration of society and also the transition from an undoubtedly biological and theoretical domain to a historical and cultural approach through interpretation of the conditions and daily reality of those women and of the cumulative experiences which, context by context, is their expression and existential substance.

It is Thomas who, in his training and analysis explores anthropology, especially the historical anthropology of Franz Boas. It is this discipline that also constitutes his first voluntary link in the Chicago Department. He was drawn

to those ethnological studies, as he was towards biology at that time, and he most likely perceived both as highly relatable to lived experience. He is also intrigued by Spencer's evolutionism and Francis Galton's genetics, but at the basis of this there is, as it might seem, a curious common sense. Within these studies lies a belief in the complementary nature of disciplines such as anthropology, social psychology and sociology: their synergy being the premise for the accuracy and exhaustiveness of the analysis. In Germany he studied crowd psychology, and this played part in his construction of social psychology, ethnology, and cultural reality along with Heymann Stenthal. He explored the physiology and psychology of subjects with Moritz Lazarus, who was Simmel's master in Berlin, and psychology and physiology again with Wilhelm Wundt, as well as Greek culture with Ulrich von-Wilamowitz. With these premises, the possibility and necessity of a correct interpretation of the experiences is clearly increased highlighting the need for further analytical maturations.

His sensitivity is enhanced and enriched by these studies, as well as his attention to the female reality. His monitoring of the transformation of female roles, and his perception of a centrality that that gender proposes, was explored independently and perhaps despite the economic-social organization which was chauvinistic in this period. The relationship he had with women of the Hull-House had already began, and this reminds us of just how far the real substance of the female experience, its potential and its social interpretation remain distant from the male perceptions which historically define it.

The centrality of women therefore crosses time and place, Thomas was aware of this, and with a determining role in social reproduction and the determination of morality for which we must somehow restructure the perception that we have of the family. 'The first social unit is not the family but the mother and her group of children, and the tribe is primarily an aggregation of those related by blood to a group of females. Both social feeling and social organization are thus primarily feminine in origin – functions of the anabolism of woman' (Thomas, 1897: 61).

He perfects this reflection by recalling what was claimed by Edward Westermarck, the most famous representative of the English anthropological school and a scholar of sexual, matrimonial and moral customs.

As Westermarck recalled in his marriage history, children are not the result of marriage, as common sense might suggest, but, on the contrary, marriage is the result of the presence of children, and the desecrated perception of love between subjects, to the fundamental perception of the immanence of conflict in social relationships, of the sense that it succeeds in giving to others, almost anticipation of the functions of adventure as the perception that it is

almost impossible to try to develop human life in the slums (Cersosimo, 2019: 208).

It is evident that the women who are part of these articles, European and American, are also part of the story in which Thomas will base himself in his later work – hand in hand with the writing of these texts – in particular the last ones. He has long had a relationship with the Helen Culver Fund, the philanthropic group to whom *The Polish Peasant* will be dedicated, and that which funded his research in Europe, while he continued to actively participate in social and intellectual life in Chicago (Janowitz, 1966: XIII). I believe that these are the premises, for example, of his studies in the Borkowski series,

a particularly interesting example of a situation in which the marriage-group has almost ceased to be a part of the family and is no longer kept together by the familial organization, while the personal connection of husband and wife is not yet strong enough to make the group consistent (Thomas, Znaniecki 1918, II: 343),

but more generally the premise of all his substantially unpublished reflections within the academy on the female social presence.

2. Final remarks

The awareness that today's reality has an insoluble relationship with the past, is one of the great moral commitments that sociologists bring to their work and their life path. It is also the premise for the continuous updating of his sociological imagination, and also one of the factors behind our commitment. Our review of the body of work by Thomas and Znaniecki is certainly further evidence of this. Moreover, we often think that in our daily lives, we cannot fully express some orientations, beliefs or points of no return. We feel the need to call on others, men or women who, as they say, have 'shown us the way'. Vidich and Lyman, in the introduction to one of the best existing studies on American sociology, seem to consolidate our reference to this sociological tradition: 'We believe that sociologists cannot return to the proper study of society unless they understand the philosophical and historical origins of their own past. A science that forgets its past cannot learn the wisdom of precursors and sufferers the hubris of vanity' (Vidich, Lyman, 1985: XII).

3. Acknowledgments

At the end of my introductory remarks, let me speak to the organization of our conference, which I addressed in the opening section, and about the texts we are publishing. I am proud to remember our southern hospitality, and the way it informs how we welcome our guests. I believe we set the stage for high level scientific discourse – in particular to our foreign colleagues – as well as an open and productive dialogue among friends. Many of our guests were here for the first time, but it will surely not be the last time they are on our campus. The quantity and quality of participants enriched and enlarged our debate, and for this we are very grateful. My thanks also go to our partners who provided support and patronage for this meeting, *The Italian National Sociological Association* and two its divisions: one devoted to *Theories and Social Transformations*, the other devoted to the study of *Methodology*. I would further like to thank *The Fulbright Commission* whose long work has been the premise for many of Italian scholars to study and deepen foreign sociology and sociologists.

I would finally like to thank professor Paola Di Nicola who accepted my proposal to publish the papers from this international conference: *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America 1918-1920* and *Thomas and Znaniecki's Research: Development and Future Perspectives for Sociology*, in a collection selected and approved from the *Scientific Committee of the International Conference*.

Thank you.

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