

The Polish Peasant after One Hundred Years: An Approach from the History of Sociology

Martin Bulmer

How to cite

Bulmer, M. (2020). *The Polish Peasant after One Hundred Years: An Approach from the History of Sociology*. [Italian Sociological Review, 10 (2S), 531-534]

Retrieved from [<http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v10i2S.362>]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v10i2S.362]

1. Author information

Martin Bulmer

University of Surrey, UK

2. Author e-mail address

Martin Bulmer

E-mail: m.bulmer@surrey.ac.uk

3. Article accepted for publication

Date: April 2020

Additional information about

Italian Sociological Review

can be found at:

About ISR-Editorial Board-Manuscript submission

The Polish Peasant *after One Hundred Years: An Approach from the History of Sociology*

Martin Bulmer*

Corresponding author:
Martin Bulmer
E-mail: m.bulmer@surrey.ac.uk

Abstract

Sociology as we know it began in the twentieth century. *The Polish Peasant* was the first great work of empirical sociology. It was pioneering, it was unique and it involved the collaboration of an established American figure and his young Polish collaborator. It was a notable achievement of the Chicago School but it was unlike many of the classic Chicago urban and criminological studies. The authors did not collaborate again after 1918 for reasons which I will explain.

Keywords: Chicago School, Thomas, Znaniecki collaboration, divergence.

1. Claims of the work to fame

It helped to establish a distinctive new field for sociological study – international migration, which together with other distinctive studies of race and ethnicity, many of them associated with Robert Park, carved out distinctive fields of inquiry which justified the coming into being and growth of sociology as a distinctive academic field.

The work addressed major theoretical concerns about social change and social disorganization

Its Methodological Note played a path breaking role in opening up the field of method in sociology, something which distinguishes the subject to this day. *The Polish Peasant* was selected in 1939 by the US SSRC for special study as a

* University of Surrey, UK.

landmark piece of research which had had most impact in the preceding twenty years. Herbert Blumer of Berkeley wrote the report.

2. The collaboration of Thomas and Znaniecki

William Isaac Thomas (1863-1947) was one of the first American sociologists to develop an empirical interest in the structure of American society, and was a key figure in the development of the Chicago School of Sociology. Born in Russell County, Virginia, his father was a farmer and part-time preacher. Thomas studied languages and classics as an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee starting in 1880, and stayed there to complete his first PhD. After graduate work in Germany, he began teaching at Tennessee, prior to moving to a position at Oberlin College in Ohio, teaching English, whence he moved in 1893 to the University of Chicago, where he began studying the embryo social sciences as one of the first research students in the department, and undertook further research in Germany. He obtained his second PhD in sociology entitled “On a difference in the metabolism of the sexes” [1897]. Much of his early work was on the social significance of sexual and racial differences, culminating in his *Source Book on Social Origins* [1908]. He was promoted to full professor in 1910.

From 1908 to 1919 Thomas was in charge of the Helen Culver Fund for Race Psychology, which was very well endowed, and enabled him to travel in Europe developing the program which became the monograph *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, which he wrote with Florian Znaniecki. Chicago was the largest Polish city in the world after Warsaw and a magnet for migration. Thomas spent much time collecting material in Poland, where he met his co-author in 1913. Znaniecki travelled to Chicago in 1914 on his own volition and turned up at Thomas’s house. Thomas employed him on the project, and with the outbreak of war, Znaniecki could not return home until 1919.

Thomas developed theories of social disorganization and motivation which formed the core of the monograph while Znaniecki, who was trained in philosophy, elaborated the methodological underpinnings of the study. Thomas was the older and more experienced of the two authors, but their collaboration was a productive one and each complemented the other. A central proposition of the study was the aim of basing it upon personal documents and life histories which revealed the social processes being observed. The study aimed to reveal the point of view of the actor, later encapsulated in Thomas’s formulation of “the definition of the situation”. The first two volumes of *The Polish Peasant* were published by the University of Chicago Press in 1918. Then in April 1918 Thomas was arrested by the FBI and charged with false hotel registration. The charges were thrown out in court, but the President of the University of

Chicago with the support of the Trustees dismissed Thomas to protect the university against criticism in the local press. There was no effective protest against this action, which ended Thomas's academic career. The Press terminated its contract for the book, and the further three volumes were taken over by the publisher Richard Badger of Boston and appeared in 1918-1920.

Later works completed by Thomas included *Old World Traits Transplanted* (1920, published under the names of Robert Park and H A Miller), (ed) *The Unconscious* (1928) and (with D Thomas, 1928) *The Child in America*. Thomas was elected president of the American Sociological Association in 1927. In 1934 he divorced his first wife and married Dorothy Swaine Thomas. They lived in Berkeley, California from 1936 to 1947, where Thomas died at the age of 84. His mainstream academic career ended with his dismissal from Chicago in 1918.

The Polish Peasant was the first great work of empirical sociology in America, blending conceptual and theoretical acuity with skillful use of empirical materials. It made the study of immigration and settlement the key focus of early American sociology. At over 2,200 pages, the five volumes of the work laid a solid foundation. The monograph shaped the generation who were trained in the 1920s.

Thomas was the older and more senior figure, while Znaniecki the younger man with philosophical interests, belief in the importance of methodology, and knowledge of the Polish background. Not useful to argue about who contributed most to the joint work. Differences in interpretation in the US and Poland. Truth is that both contributed to the work, and if either had carried out the study on their own, it would have been a lesser study. Evidence that Znaniecki wrote substantial parts of the book, such as the Methodological Note, which rebuts the suggestion that his was the lesser role.

Each had distinctive part to bring to the study. Thomas worked on the Concept of Attitude [cf Donald Fleming]; underlying ideas of "definition of the situation"; theory of social disorganization. Znaniecki has had a different interest of Thomas. He worked on the methodology; use of personal documents: letters, life history. Importance of the subjective in constructing social explanations.

3. Divergence after 1918

Thomas dismissed by the University of Chicago in 1918, following his arrest on a morals charge. The details are obscure but the President of the University dismissed him without much protest from the faculty. University of Chicago Press discontinued the publication of the book, which was completed by Richard Badger of Boston. American universities of this period were intolerant of deviant behavior. Thorstein Veblen, J B Watson the behaviorist

psychologist, had suffered a similar fate, a president of the University of Chicago in the 1920s had to resign when he divorced.

Znaniecki in 1919 at the end of the war in Europe returned to Poland seeking an academic appointment to aid in Reconstruction in the second Polish Republic established in November 1918. Both subsequently became Presidents of the American Sociological Association, Thomas as an independent scholar in 1927, Znaniecki in 1954 having returned permanently to the US in 1939.

4. The Polish Peasant as a product of the Chicago School

The Polish Peasant was a unique study and a one-off product. It stands alone as a collaboration between an American and a Polish scholar. Not the only such study of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, for which Park's [black] student Charles S Johnson was the research director. The book was not a quintessentially Chicago school product, in the way that monographs with a preface by Park tended to be. No integration with the Park-Burgess studies of the city. The Polish Peasant as a beacon in the establishment of an autonomous sociology. Established the social as a distinct area of inquiry. Rejection of biological theories of racial and ethnic difference. Focus on cultural level of social development and providing theoretical concepts in terms of which this would be done. Putting migration centre-stage as the subject of study. Using a variety of new methodological tools – letters, a life history, use of institutional documents – to gather new social data. Understanding a new area of social life from the point of view of the subjective understanding of the social actors involved.

5. For Conclusion: the longer-term significance of the Polish Peasant in Europe and America

The first major empirical study of a subject of major sociological interest.

Early study carried out with external financial support. Productive collaboration between two scholars of different nationalities and complementary intellectual interests. Thomas was a leader in social psychology and in the theory of social disorganization, Znaniecki a pioneer of sociological theory whose early formulations rivalled those of Talcott Parsons.

Study blazed the way forward for the group of scholars who studied urban Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s.