

In the spring of 2008, Piotr Sztompka was a visiting researcher at Södertörn University.

# Stepping stone into the world

## A conversation on sociology with Piotr Sztompka.

**H**e 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 was able to become internationally active and recognized", he says in his temporary office at CBEES' new location on the Flemingsberg 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 Krakow, by more or less illicit means, delivered the *Herald Tribune* and *Newsweek* to his pianist father's doorstep. 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,** he discovered sociology as a secondary theme in the introductory law curriculum. He had not even heard of it before. Sociology had been non-existent in Stalinist times but was reintroduced in Poland starting in 1956. The first sociology book he got a hold of was a meta-theoretical work on the peculiarities of the social sciences. It was not about Polish society at all.

The young man was still a natural scientist by inclination:

"What drove me first was a fascination with abstract theory. I even went into the philosophy of sciences, looking at the question of how sociology could be a scientific field."

"But there was a second undercurrent. Law is national, it has the perspective

A well-dressed and engaged academic lecturer, a native of Krakow.



of one country. My main ambition was to get away from the provincialism of one place. I wanted to live in Poland but also to exist in the world. Sociology was a very international discipline. My knowledge of English became an advantage."

At this time, in the early 1960s, Piotr Sztompka saw no political constraints. His advisor was supportive even if he probably neither read nor understood everything of the dissertation on "functional analysis" that he was supervising.

The 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 about social policy or theology.

**A further step** to safeguard independence was to join the Party! Party membership helped him get a Fulbright scholarship to the U.S. When he first applied, he lost out to a lackluster 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, rewrote and expanded his Polish dissertation on a portable second-hand Olivetti in a drab hotel 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.

"Jerzy Waitr, Zygmunt Bauman, Kolakowski, Michnik... There were times when 90% of all prominent social scientists were Party members. This did not mean that they wanted to have anything to do with communism. We did not ask for favors or privileges but simply to be free and to be able to travel."

This was a time when there were probably more communists in New York or London than in the Polish workers' party. Still, it is absurd that the most theoretical, "bourgeois" social science turns out to be the safest venue for independent thinking in communist society, and that Party membership creates the greatest possibility for freedom, for getting out and traveling to the U.S. But there are contemporary parallels of course, in China: Today, Chinese social scientists are allowed to read and write anything and travel widely, as long as they do not challenge the supremacy of the Party.

"This was one of the rare opportunistic things I did", Piotr Sztompka confesses. "But this way, you could stay in a normal environment and do 'normal' things."

But maybe there is a sensitive issue here:

**Stalinists and sociologists didn't fit together. A Polish sociologist almost needed to reason like a natural scientist.**



PHOTO: MONICA STRANDELL

“I was never a Communist”, he emphasizes.

And his exit from the Party smells of heroism.

“When I joined the Party, I said to myself that I will leave when they start shooting at people again.”

In December 1981, Piotr Sztompka was teaching at the Johns Hopkins Center in Bologna. When martial law was declared in Poland on December 13, he immediately returned to hand in his Party membership card. The borders were closed behind him. But the military leaders were worried about their international reputation, and Professor Sztompka returned to Italy. There was a green card to America waiting and a position in New York. Emigration was a viable option. But even with his international orientation and the tempting opportunities in the U.S., he did not want to leave permanently. Even today, he never stays away from Krakow for more than six months a year.

**American theoretical** sociology, though, remains his 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 at 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 Marxism of any scholarly relevance today?

“On the metatheoretical level, Marx sees society as an asymmetric 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 developments. 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 paradox is that 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.

“It is ironic”, he smiles, “that the proletariat fought against the communist state. Intellectuals were helpful but this was a mass movement against the workers’ state.”

**So, we proceed in the discussion, from the relevance of Marxism to the relevance of civil society in the 1980s and today.**

“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 Vaclav Havel – stood up on behalf of the public interest. As early as 1979, 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 end-

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

**Still, when you analyze the political situation in Poland from the 1990s 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 won, 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 newness of the situation. But very soon you had a tremendous outbreak 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 developments.”

“However, later came things that I see as a kind of trauma. This was due to the social costs of transition and the disillusionment that followed. Necessary but painful reforms undermined optimism, trust, and a feeling of empowerment. Then, for a long time we had constant changes of government, with the pendulum swinging back and forth between the right and the left. This paralyzed civil society for quite some time.”

**The new millennium** has been very problematic, with a lasting crisis in civil society. Here Piotr Sztompka gets highly personal in his criticism of the populist and autocratic rule of the Kaczynski twins whom he publicly attacked during the election campaign in the fall of 2007, his first direct political intervention since he had handed in his Party card 25 years earlier.

“The twins totally neglected civil society with rule from above. Everything was directed and controlled from Warsaw. This was terribly destructive. Civil society must exist for real democracy to operate.”

But once again we see his optimistic smile when he turns to developments in Poland since late 2007:

“Democracy has its mechanisms; young people in particular got involved, won the last elections and kicked the provincial party out of power. Now we are again in a period when civil society has better opportunities to operate. There is optimism, trust, and a feeling of power present in people.”

Piotr Sztompka is full of enthusiasm when he cites recent polls in Poland where social trust is on the rise; 88% say they have trust in Europe and 65% in government (compared to as little as 7% for the previous government).

**Will we also see better chances now to improve the problematic relations with neighbors and historical enemies like Germany and Russia?**

“Poles generally have negative views of two larger powers – Germany and Russia – and positive views of two others – France and the United States. And we have our reasons.”

“With Germany today”, Piotr Sztompka remarks, “we have more faith in the German political system than in Germans as a people, in particular Germans of a certain age. There is also a particular uneasiness with East Germans. With Russia it is the other way around: We are positive towards Russian people – maybe there is a Slavic solidarity relating to culture – but see Russian power negatively, whether it is Czarist, Soviet, or the kind of power that Putin wields.”

Three sociological classics:  
Karl Marx, Max Weber,  
and Piotr Sztompka's  
mentor Robert K. Merton.

## “Poles generally have negative views of two larger powers – and positive views of two others.”

**But how about the relatively recent postwar Polish territorial losses in the east to Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine?**

“There are no notions of revenge, but rather more of a wish for more, closer cooperation. Poles, for example, insist that Ukraine should be admitted to the

EU. But with older people there are of course strong nostalgic feelings and the wish to visit places of symbolic importance like Polish cemeteries.”

Given its history, it is quite logical for Poland to seek security with the U.S. and with NATO. NATO relieves Polish anxiety and suspicions, more so than the European Union. Other advantages with relationship to the U.S. are the bonds created by emigration to America and the signals of liberty from Radio Free Europe and the like during the Cold War. With France there are roots in the emigration during the years of Polish partition in the 19th century and romantic feelings connected to similar styles.

Not all old historic patterns are relevant. Some historical grievances are forgotten. The Swedish imperial past that played itself out partly on Polish soil is not at all reflected in relations today. When Piotr Sztompka talks about Polish images of Sweden they are quite familiar – a model involving a capitalism tamed by wise social policy.

**His own image** of Sweden is more based on personal relations than the pursuit of social role models. As a teenager, he was able to make his first journey abroad to Uppsala and a Swedish family there. He came back to Uppsala as a sociologist in the 1970s when the university hosted the world congress of the International Sociological Association (to which he would be elected chairman thirty years later). Today he has two Swedish coordinates – CBEES and the graduate school of Baltic studies at Södertörn University, and SCAS, the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Uppsala.

His visits to Södertörn have stimulated his interest in empirical sociology. In May 2007, he delivered the first “Södertörn Lecture”, published by the school as *The Ambivalence of Social Change in Post-Communist Societies*. He has taught a course on social and cultural change in post-communist societies, quite different from his regular theoretical focus when at home in Krakow.

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

“My visits to Södertörn meet part of my professional ambitions, to experience the pleasures and joys connected with teaching, the chance to pass on understanding and knowledge, also to those with very limited knowledge.”

Piotr Sztompka recalls the fascination of teaching a course to first-year students, Sociology 1, as a guest professor in the U.S.

“Here I teach graduate students, of course. But I teach about Eastern Europe, about which knowledge is quite fragmented. It is most rewarding to meet the students here and get their responses.”

**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.

“The center has a great chance to extend its focus beyond the Baltics and even Poland, to the Balkans for example.”

“Real understanding of post-communism requires you to see the diversity”, he emphasizes. “The Baltic republics which were part of the Soviet Union proper



**Weber – sometimes called the Marx of the bourgeoisie – was suspicious of the Poles. Marx cheered them on.**



PHOTO: MONICA STRANDELL

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

are quite different from states that were fairly independent and more different still from Romania and Yugoslavia.”

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

At SCAS in Uppsala he is back to the roots of his theoretical interest in sociology. SCAS is one of the illustrious groups of international Centers for Advanced Study, to which prominent scholars are invited to live and write in a collegial, almost family-like atmosphere. Piotr Sztompka has been a fellow at SCAS several times and has written some of his more important works there.

”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 Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin or the Center for Advanced Study at Stanford.”

And Piotr Sztompka wants to be one of the best. He represents a generation of European scholars who do not blush when they talk about their dreams and ambitions.

”I do not want to be arrogant, but you need utopian ideas to move forward, you need to have unrealistic goals to be able to soar high.”

So now he shares the eternal dream of all social scientists – from Marx, Weber, and onward – to be able to formulate a complete theory of social action. His next book will be entitled *Social Existence*. Together with his previous work, *Social Becoming*, from the early 1990s, it could be the foundation for such a general theory.

We talk about the three stages of sociology that he perceives. They coincide with his own stages of sociological interest. It all began with systems and Parsons.

”I started out macro, with systemic analysis at some level above the behavior of individuals.”

**Marxism is of course** also a little like that. You see individuals only as actors in a system.

Then, in the 1980s, he reached the second stage with another visit to the U.S.

With fresh memories of the growing Solidarity movement at home, he came to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 1984 and met with the late Charles Tilly, Ted Gurr, and the other great students of social movements at the time. He rediscovered popular mass movements and the merits of a focus on people.

”This is the level where history is made”, he says with growing enthusiasm.

”From below, force is produced, maintained, and re-produced by individuals and people. When you look at the center, you see it is driven by people.”

Today, he talks about the ”third” sociology and ”everyday life” where he expresses an interest in the most mundane aspects of human life and behavior.

With the eye of an anthropologist, he looks at the components of the spheres of private life. Since boyhood he has been an avid photographer and now he analyses photographic objects, pictures, to gain insights into globalization, poverty, and other overriding issues of the day.

”This has given me a new window on old problems and an extended sociological imagination.”

We have now come full circle with his original observations in his doctoral dissertation of 40 years ago. There he argued that Parsons and the system theories had important roots in early 20th century social anthropology. But ”everyday life” analysis is not anthropology:

”Early social and cultural anthropology was mostly descriptive. Theory was only marginal, then. I think that my focus on ’everyday life’ may add to theory.”

Eventually, after *Social Becoming* and *Social Existence*, he wants to add a volume on the theoretical understanding of everyday life. With that achieved, his grand social theory may be in place.

”You have to strive in order to get anywhere”, Piotr Sztompka concludes.

So far, he has gone quite far indeed. ❌

**anders mellbourn**