

Malwina Krajewska (ORCID 0000-0003-1841-2858)

Tracing the impact of *The Polish Peasant...* – from rural sociology to migration studies

Abstract

This paper consists of two sections. Firstly, it will recall the work of William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki and their successors. Thoughts published in this section will attempt to show how their methodological and theoretical heritage contributed to the development of sociology. Furthermore, it will show how their work, with alternate fortune and undeniable fame, inspired researchers for 100 years. Secondly, it will present significance of Thomas and Znaniecki heritage in the development of migration studies in addition to offering an essential overview of the contemporary migration issue. The article deliberates on the validity, topicality and current reception of methodology and theory proposed by Thomas and Znaniecki.

Keywords: Rural sociology, migration studies, biographical method, transnationalism, Florian Znaniecki.

Legacy of The Polish Peasant in Europe and America – its first reception and critics

The recent 100th anniversary of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* created an opportunity to recall and discuss the validity and accuracy of

its sociological legacy¹. Various publications, as well as numerous seminars organised in Poland and abroad, were dedicated to contemporary deliberations on this classic piece of work². This article aims to offer an essential overview of past and present receptions of Thomas and Znaniecki's thought in present-day sociology and migration studies. In addition, it will examine how this pioneering piece of sociological work is still relevant.

Although the detailed description and discussion of this outstanding work seem to be unnecessary due to numerous texts published by various scholars (Abbott, Egloff 2008; Blumer 1979; Denzin 1986; Grodzki 2017; Hałas 2010; Kaleta 2018; Sinatti 2008; Szacki 1986) its essential introduction is required. William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki studied representatives of the peasant class and the lower urban strata who left Poland and settled in Germany or the United States. The pair deliberated on the topic of adaptation and socio-cultural transformation of Polish newcomers who established colonies abroad at the turn of the 20th century. Moreover, the authors of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* highlighted specific contexts of migration, mainly historical, political and economic circumstances. They took into account two perspectives which relayed the context and conditions of this migratory phenomenon by examining both the social situations and societal attitudes of peasants. They observed how immigrants were adapting to a culturally and ethnically distant environment. Polish peasants were representatives of the agricultural cluster with a familiar routine and predictable life narrowed to a single geographical area. They were not accustomed to rapid changes resulting from the new cultural and social reality. Therefore, Thomas and Znaniecki investigated changes connected to various aspects of everyday life, such as economic conditions and treasured values as well as attitudes cultivated in the new environment. They observed the process of social change which occurred under the influence of the host society, which in this case was an

¹ It is worth mentioning that in the Books Ranking of the 20th Century published by the International Sociological Association, *The Polish Peasant* was ranked 99th among approximately 1000 sociological publications.

Source: <https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/history-of-isa/books-of-the-xx-century/ranking-order> [date 01.06.2020].

² Overview of the commemorative papers and events was published in the previous issue of *Eastern European Countryside* (Krajewska 2019).

adaptation to American culture. “The main aim of the two authors was of analysing the ways in which—under the impulse of industrialisation processes in Poland and emigration to the United States—peasants were increasingly becoming economically rational workers and drifting away from traditional modes of social organisation and behaviour” (Sinatti 2008: 1).

Furthermore, apart from the relationship between the immigrants and their new social environment, researchers also considered the influence of peasants on their Polish social institutions and community – in both their place of origin as well as settlement. “Based on the analysis of their letters and diaries, attempts were made to describe the mechanism of the socio-cultural transformations of immigrants and their impact on the life of social environments – both the ones from which they came, as well as new ones to which they emigrated – in order to detect regularities that governed these transformations” (Kaleta 2018: 3).

The research’s outcome was mainly founded on the narration of individuals and personal impressions contained within private documents. The five-volume publication was constructed thoughtfully. A description of the results and numerous examples were preceded by a *Methodological Note*, which explained the practical use of social theory and its application within the study. Furthermore, the introductions prelude each volume contained a thorough overview of specific topics. For example, Thomas and Znaniecki considered aggregate institutions and their impact on social life. They captured and characterised the social change experienced by peasant families along with its influence on society. The first and second volume of the study speaks of the social organisation of peasant society, referring to primer social institutions (e.g. family) and its transformation under the industrial revolution as well as immigration. According to the authors of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, social cohesion and integration of migrants were held together by familial bonds known as ‘mutual help’, which referred to the sense of obligations stemming from such connections. Thomas and Znaniecki noted that these were also an object to change. According to Zaretsky (1996: 23), “the spread of the market and the evolution of what they call a ‘climbing mentality’ changed the family through the ‘growing assertion of the personality.’ While this created familial conflicts, for example, children became harder to control, it also created new possibilities for personal development”. The third volume of the study consists of an autobiography written by a Polish immigrant who

was representative of the lower city strata with peasant origins. Thomas and Znaniecki (VIII) presented this biographical narration as an exemplification of disorganisation tendency, common for individuals who experience *a rapid transition from one type of social organisation to another*. Subsequent volumes, numbers four and five, refer to the organisational transformation, particularly disorganisation of peasant communities originating from Poland, and their adjustment to *the new ground of rational cooperation* (Thomas, Znaniecki: VIII).

Through meaningful use of personal documents such as letters, memoirs, autobiographical accounts, documents or newspaper announcements, this five-volume work was a milestone in the development of qualitative research methods. However, it was not appreciated by everyone. The methodology and study conducted by Thomas and Znaniecki had to confront vast criticism and disagreement stated by many sociologists (Blumer, 1979; Allport, 1942; Gottschalk et al., 1951).

The most well-known and reliable critic was Herbert Blumer, who highlighted various problems with the methodology and faults resulting from concentration on private documents. Blumer (1979: XXXVII) stated

methodological problems remain even though sociologists in the pursuit of new interests are disposed to ignore them. The problems remain because they inevitably arise as soon as one recognises that human beings in either their individual or collective capacity act by confronting and defining the situations in which their action takes place. The recognition forces scholars to bring 'subjective' factors into consideration. Once this is done, the methodological problems have to be faced.

According to him, private documents are inappropriate and do not fulfil the principles of representativeness, reliability and adequateness (Blumer, 1979: 36). Moreover, he highlights the lack of information about how Thomas and Znaniecki selected and acquired the data, particularly letters.

A popular belief among critical voices was that there is a significant disproportion between the rich qualitative records and several pages of the analysis presented by the authors. It was usually accompanied by dissatisfaction concerning the data acquisition method. According to some scholars, it raised ethical doubts and undermined the credibility of collected material: for example, Thomas and Znaniecki appointed the author of the

autobiography included in *The Polish Peasant...* and paid him for his work (Giordano 2018: 9).

Various paths of the impact

Despite the criticism and fluctuating popularity of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*,³ many scholars still use, polemise or extend the solutions proposed by Thomas and Znaniecki.⁴ Therefore, extracts of the narration will be recalled to verify the validity and continued relevance of this sociological publication. This is primarily because the world's migration movements moved forward rapidly. Secondly, the number of theoretical approaches increased as well. Thus, the following paragraphs evoke various thoughts resulting from this classical sociological piece of work.

The first narration is general and refers to a specific shift in perception of the migratory process as spotted by Niels Conzen (1996), who stated that “from Thomas and Znaniecki we have derived a powerful legacy of immigrant-centred analysis of experienced social change”. This nowadays might be treated as an introduction or starting point for further sociological investigations on migration.

The second narration focuses on research techniques. According to Zaretsky (1996: X), “The Polish Peasant in Europe and America – inaugurated the first truly transatlantic approach to European emigration, one that looked both at its European and its United States context”. This multi-local methodology applied by Thomas and Znaniecki helped capture the social change, attitude and values cherished by Polish peasants equally in their host countries (the United States and Germany) and their point of departure.

Furthermore, a methodological approach introduced within *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* became a solid foundation for biographical studies and *is said to have opened the path to the employment of life histories in social research* (Sinatti 2008: 7). The use of individual examples as proof of understanding *that every social phenomenon acquires meaning only within*

³ According to some scholars there was a time when *The Polish Peasant* was given the name of a forgotten classic (Blumer, 1979; LaRossa and Wolf, 1985).

⁴ Some works which take part in this discussion are written by Iosifides and Sporto (2009), Guth, Schrecker (2002), Giordano (2018), Stanley (2010), and many others.

the social and cultural context in which it takes place (Sinatti 2008: 7) was significant and innovative at the time.

Another crucial contribution of this publication resulted in the development of rural sociology, especially the one which developed in Poland (Kaleta, 2018: 6). Undoubtedly, the work of Józef Chałasiński, *The Young Generation of Peasants: Processes and Issues of the Formation of the Peasant Class in Poland*, published in 1938, is considered one of the most significant achievements of Polish sociology.⁵ Corresponding to empiric material used in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, the publication of Chałasiński also consisted of 1,544 autobiographies of young peasants acquired through requests for papers and a competition organised by the Polish Rural Journal. Chałasiński, a student of Znaniecki, followed his theoretical approach and applied the methodological principle formed by his teacher – humanistic coefficient. Moreover, he “disregarded any possibility of statistical interpretation of the collected data and chose instead to analyse in-depth the worldview of the respondents, trying to catch ‘in status nascendi’ what he believed to be a birth of a new social stratum: a self-conscious Polish peasantry that could be an important catalyst of democratisation” (Trencsényi et al. 2018: 149). The text’s shape and organisation correspond with the work of Thomas and Znaniecki, and volumes discussing the gathered data are preceded by a theoretical as well as a methodological introduction.

Thomas and Znaniecki inspired later sociologists to continue and expand the subject of Polish migration to the United States, not only in the area of rural studies but also in various social spheres. For example, Antoni Sulek (2010) considered the topic of scientific Polish-American migrations throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, Marcin Kula (1996) analysed the economic and political motivations which led Polish immigrants to emigrate in the 20th century. Moreover, Thomas and Znaniecki encouraged later sociologists to develop the role of emotions in migration studies. For example, Zlatko Skribs (2009), focused on both transnational families and their feelings of belonging as well as any emotions experienced by the host society. Moreover, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, had an impact

⁵ According to Andrzej Kaleta, *The Young Generation of Peasants...* “was ranked 8th on the list of the most frequently cited works in Poland in the years 1981–1995, which was drawn up on the basis of the four leading Polish sociological periodicals” (Kaleta, 2018: 2).

on sociological and historical studies of families. For example, Nancy Foner (2009) referred to Thomas and Znaniecki closely studying the relationship between parents and children in exile in New York. Meanwhile, Sonia Cancian (2010) explored the life stories, letters and memories of Italian families who settled in Canada following the war.

Conversely, Izabella Bukraba-Rylska (2009) explored Polish rural emigration by forgoing internal factors instead focusing on external equivalents which are of a structural character and derived from Poland's specific situation in the world context.

The identification, exploration and presentation of all publications referring to *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* is impossible to achieve. Therefore, the authors and studies featured in this article are just examples of numerous papers and explorations influenced by this classical publication.

II

The scientific outcome of Thomas and Znaniecki in migration studies

One hundred years after the first publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* were filled with moments of a harsh criticism and positive feedback. Despite its varied reception, the work of Thomas and Znaniecki is still considered a significant study that influenced the development of sociological theory as well as a qualitative methodology (Conzen 1996; Kaleta 2018; Stinatti 2008; Stanley 2010; Szacki 1986). However, what was its impact on the development of migration studies? Is the work of Thomas and Znaniecki still valid in order to explore current migration? A closer look at global changes is required to properly answer this question.

Throughout the last century, circumstances and reasons surrounding migration rapidly expanded. Push and pull factors became increasingly complicated. Resettlement decisions started to depend on many particular aspects, such as local and foreign strategies, social policy, the labour market, national income, access to education, the healthcare system and many others. Moreover, the development of technology, an extension of communication and the reduction of obstacles impending travel and movement, such as difficult transportation and restrictive immigrant policies, created new

opportunities for migration. Movement of people increased to a global scale, with the result being ethnically diverse societies without a single particular pattern. A short overview of the European situation provides a glimpse of the global issue and shows the increase in human flow. According to Eurostat, a “total of 3.9 million people immigrated to one of the EU-27 Member States during 2018, while 2.6 million emigrants were reported to have left an EU-27 Member State.”⁶ Statistics coming from the same source shows that “Germany reported the largest total number of immigrants (893.9 thousand) in 2018, followed by Spain (643.7 thousand), France (386.9 thousand) and Italy (332.3 thousand). Germany also reported the highest number of emigrants in 2018 (540.4 thousand), followed by Spain (309.5 thousand), France (341.4 thousand), Romania (231.7 thousand) and Poland (189.8 thousand). A total of 22 of the EU-27 Member States reported more immigration than emigration in 2018.”⁷

Even though migration is not a new phenomenon, it speeds up the uniting process of globalisation, in turn causing many global challenges or significant political, cultural and social transformations. The rapid expanse of international migration became a controversial subject in political dialogue held in the European Union, North and South America as well as Asia. Therefore, many sociologists, historians, economists and political scientists, in order to generate reliable explanations and trustworthy policies, started to improve their methodological tools and spotted various social areas worth exploring. Consequently, the scientific perception of contemporary migration matured and various theoretical explanations of migratory processes emerged. As Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas and Mark J. Miller expressed in *The age of migration* (2013), migratory processes are accompanied by various theoretical approaches, such as functionalist, historical-structural, network, transnationalism, migration systems or migration transition theories. How did Thomas and Znaniecki contribute

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics#Migration_flows:_Immigration_to_the_EU-27_from_non-member_countries_was_2.4_million_in_2018 [date: 05.06.2020].

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics#Migration_flows:_Immigration_to_the_EU-27_from_non-member_countries_was_2.4_million_in_2018 [date: 05.06.2020].

to their development? The following sections will recall different direct or indirect examples of their impact.

Firstly, important matter refers to the biographical method implemented in migration studies. Even though the first publication of *The Polish Peasant*

in Europe and America initiated interest in qualitative methodologies, it took a few decades to recognise their empirical potential. At first, biographical studies lost their empirical competition with quantitative and statistical approaches. They were not recognised as reliable sources of information about the migrational phenomenon. It was only at the end of the 1960s when social reality began to be based on the understanding that it consists of meaningful actions and interactions, that a certain shift in migration studies was observed. This recognition of individual meanings, interpretations and subjectivity helped increase the importance of social inter-subjectivity and turn it into the centre of social inquiry. Furthermore, the usage of biographical methods in migration studies helped overcome significant limitations, which enabled proper understanding and insight of migration phenomenon. Theodoros Iosifides and Deborah Sporton recognised three highly important groups of change.

The first is related to placing agential intentionality and meaning-making processes at the centre of migration research practice and thus moving away from deterministic and law-like causal explanations. The second is related to paying attention to the importance of 'practical consciousness' along with the unconscious and the discursive, that is paying attention to the ways which agents act in everyday life without reflecting thoroughly or plan upon their actions. Finally, other ways include the detailed investigation of the multiplicity and multi-dimensionality of subjective migration experiences and the attention on the cultural dimension of processes related to migration phenomena (Iosifides and Sporton 2009: 102–103).

In the debate focused on methodological aspects of Thomas and Znaniecki's work, the matter of personal documents should also be recalled. Physical separation of migrants from their loved ones, families and local communities enforced them to establish remote connections, in which, at the beginning of the 20th century, letters played a central role. Along with the rapid growth of technology and the expanse of communication networks,

migrants acquired various tools to maintain long-distance communication. This rapid increase of information and travel networks made the work of migration researchers more complex and challenging. Due to technological developments, researchers who explore separated families have to trace and study various networking systems, which are available thanks to new digital technology. Simple letters, along with personal documents, seem to be replaced⁸ by smartphones and computers. A simple call or making contact using social media or instant messaging apps became a common way to communicate on an international scale. In this way, scholars exploring these digital private networks can generate valuable knowledge about migrations. The exploration of different communication methods can say a lot about unequal access to technologies and social inequalities. According to Terence Wright (2014: 462), “this global and cultural complexity of media systems is further compounded by unequal distribution. While the technology has bypassed some refugees and forced migrants, others have had the opportunity to embrace it”.

Another attention-grabbing contribution of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, can be recognised among network, transnationalism and migration systems theories, all of which are strongly dependent on digital technologies. Due to the variety of motilities, flow and globalisation, modern migration studies tend to perceive migration phenomena from a greater transnational perspective. They study remote ties and networks which emerge between sending and receiving countries. According to Nina Glick Shiller and other anthropologists (1992: 1–2), a transnational phenomenon can be explained

⁸ Exploration of various publications on migration studies provides numerous examples of changes in the use of communication. For example, Karen, a 22-year-old migrant from Chile who lives in Spain, has problems adjusting to the modern social context, meaning she suffers from social exclusion in the host country. “Karen tries to compensate for the social isolation that she suffers through intensive use of information and communication technologies (ICT). She goes to internet cafés, where for little money she maintains contact with her mother and sister, to whom she keeps up a good image of herself (she does not talk to them about the problems she faces), or searches for a job, topics of interest or communities in which she takes part” (Romani et al. 2012: 163). Mohsen, a 22-year-old immigrant from Saudi Arabia who lives in Sweden, uses the internet not only to keep in touch with his friends but also participate in a forum dedicated to Palestinian politics (Romani et al. 2012: 157).

as the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement. Immigrants who built such social spheres are designated 'transmigrants.' Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations – familial, economic, social, organisational, religious and political that span borders. Transmigrants take actions, make decisions and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously.

Even though the concept of transnationalism seems to be a modern phenomenon, it shares some intuitions with those presented in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* at the beginning of the 20th century (Sinatti 2009: 10). Thomas and Znaniecki were already aware of the importance of social ties established by those who settled in America with family members and local communities left in their country of origin. Moreover, as they recognised this cross-border connection interfered with the peasants' process of assimilation, it helped them maintain their cultural values. According to Zaretsky (1996), Polish immigrants did not simply assimilate with American attitudes. Instead, they became Polish-Americans, who mixed their own culture, values, and institutions within a local, American context. Similar recognitions dedicated to other studies of different diasporas highlighted the appearance of a similar phenomenon. Moreover, they are also related to the concepts of *disorganisation* and *reorganisation* described by Thomas and Znaniecki in volume five, which remains present in modern transnationalism discussions. According to them, the idea of relocation and adaptation of migrants to a new social context requires renegotiations of traditional values and life scenarios. Moreover, Strinati (2010: 18) notes that transnationalism scholars' current analyses focus "on the incapacity of traditional group values to regulate individual behaviour and the emergence of new institutions able to reintegrate the individual". Furthermore, Landolt (2001: 220) mentions that "quantitative change results in a qualitative difference in the order of things". The different ways in which migrants of the same origin adjust to various host societies⁹ have become more important and visible in public debates.

⁹ Which was already considered interesting for Thomas and Znaniecki.

Another important impact of Thomas and Znaniecki's work can be recognised in the founding of forced migration studies. The aim of this discipline is to understand the lives and motivations of those who experienced forced migration, whether caused by any forms of violence or economic need. The findings published in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* inspired researchers who addressed the issue of human suffering and migration to carry out further research. Moreover, studies conducted in the 1970s showed that involuntary resettlement did not fit the narrative of Thomas and Znaniecki (Lieber 1977). According to Dawn Chatty (2014: 82–3), that classical work

set out the way migrants used networks, established coherent ethnic communities, and reinforced links to the homeland, bypassing as much as possible contact with formal institutions provided by the host community where they felt powerless to control outcomes. What these new studies were showing was that voluntary migrants adjusted faster and their adjustment to their new physical and social environments was more stable and less conflict-ridden than those forced to move [or stay in one place] and officially relocated and under the control of a resettlement administration.

The approach proposed by Thomas and Znaniecki promoted further migrant centre analysis, which evolved to not only focus on transformations of values, norms or life trajectories but also began to resonate with additional matters related to gender, age, education, income, religion and others. Nowadays, due to globalisation and modern technologies, the exploration of migration seems to be more complicated than it was at the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore, to generate clearer insight, scholars tend to implement additional perspectives. They no longer explore the individual preferences of immigrants and their inner transformation, ways of socialisation and social presentation among the host society. Instead, they tend to narrow perception to a select amount of variables. A book entitled *Women and Migration in Rural Europe. Labour Markets, Representations and Policies*, edited by Karin Wiest and published in 2016, seems to be a perfect example of this tendency. This additional specification of various social phenomena or variables refers to the rapid increase of social diversity and individualisation. Societies become less homogeneous due to technical modernisation, liberalisation, consumption and migration.

Therefore, to generate more specific and reliable knowledge it is required to narrow the subject of investigation. Karin Wiest (2016: 1) justifies the specification of the study by declaring that

since the outcomes of globalisation affect rural areas in many different ways, various social realities are discernible, ranging from: prosperous areas being able to attract people and capital to the countryside, focused on the tourism industry; to remote places characterised by unfavourable accessibility, or areas with persistent infrastructure problems, unable to tackle negative demographic and economic development. In the ‘globalised countryside’ gender and class relations are altering and shaping the new rural realities.

The awareness of rapid transformation forces researchers to reduce the subject of study to properly capture inevitable social changes.

Summary

The impact of Thomas and Znaniecki’s thoughts on the development of social sciences is undeniable. It can be observed in the various sub-disciplines of sociology, history, migration and political science. According to Lis Stanley (2010: 147), the study on Polish peasants not only referred to the subject of immigration to America but it was also “a programmatic work establishing an independent and fully-articulated sociology discipline, with a distinctive social theory symbiotically connected to systematic empirical research, and an equally distinctive methodology linking these to enable defensible generalisations to be made about what it calls ‘social becoming’”. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* provided a deep insight into the concept of migration and social change. It created a solid foundation for further studies on important international issues, such as the concept of transnationalisation, cross-border actions, reorganisation and the adaptation of migrants to the host society. It also made a noteworthy contribution to the development of qualitative methodology, particularly biographical methods and the humanistic approach. Furthermore, many scholars were inspired to expand their capacity of perception, perceive migrations in a bigger, global perspective and “simultaneously pay attention to the micro stories of individual actors and their broader networks of social relations that has also largely informed current transnational theory” (Sinnatý 2008: 18).

There is no simple and clear answer to the question of whether the scientific approach and research results of Thomas and Znaniecki are still applicable and valid. To find a clear answer, there must be an awareness of the changes and transformations accruing in both the modern and scientific worlds. Although contemporary migration and rural studies face increasingly complex and diverse social realities compared with 100 years ago, the work of Florian Znaniecki and Willam Thomas remains accurate. This theoretical and methodological legacy might be used as an open-air compilation of guidelines suitable for scholars and researchers exploring social reality with the use of the qualitative methodology.

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