

Norms and dilemmas of semi-peripheries

Zbigniew Rykiel

socialspacejournal@gmail.com

In 2010, a three-volume work was published, edited by Michael Burawoy and his associates, devoted to the challenges for world sociology which inequality presents (Burawoy et al., 2010). The work was met with criticism of Piotr Sztompka (2011), which was subsequently responded to by Michael Burawoy (2011). The discussion is not only interesting but also instructive, for it highlights an underrepresented phenomenon in the Polish scientific literature of acute but purely factual clashes of scientific views. Even more interestingly, however, the discussion indicates the impact of the discussants' embeddedness in social space in shaping their views and aspirations, if not complexes. Even though both discussants could undoubtedly be included in the world sociology, M. Burawoy represents the core of the world social system and P. Sztompka its semi-peripheries.

P. Sztompka begins his critique M. Burawoy and associates' work with astonishment that the main criterion for the arrangement of the texts in the volume was geographical. In this way, P. Sztompka expresses the attitude typical of the mainstream of Polish sociology, in which categories related to geography, and more exactly to its understanding by Polish sociologists, seem scientifically suspect in the context of social sciences. The biggest surprise of P. Sztompka arises from the omission of North America in the reviewed work on world sociology. The reviewer interprets this procedure in terms of an alleged intercontinental coalition of sociologists

rejecting American sociology, which would mean a revolutionary change in the paradigm of sociology.

According to P. Sztompka, the possible new paradigm is based on three analytical and normative theorems. The first of them says that the domination of world sociology by Euro-American scholars is detrimental to the discipline. The second theorem indicates that highly meaningful alternative local initiatives are marginalised, if not ignored, by American and European sociologists. The third theorem postulates that to make sociology an intrinsically global discipline American and European sociologists should be dispensed with. This would result in an equal participation of scientific centres from different countries in the renewed sociological enterprise and thus to the equality of different perspectives.

P. Sztompka bases the critique of the potential new paradigm on the conviction that only one sociology exists, in which perfection is more important than balance (cf. Patel 2010). By indicating that in the reviewed volumes the adjectives *northern*, *western*, *developed* and *central* are opposed to *southern*, *eastern*, *backward* and *peripheral*, P. Sztompka identifies the opposed terms as aspects of the domination of America and Europe or, at least, of the actual inequality of the core and peripheral countries, even though they are not categorised in this way in the review. In so far as the reviewer assesses the aspiration to diminish the inequalities on the global scale as a praiseworthy and 'noble ambition', he expresses his far-reaching scepticism about the possibility of sociologists doing that. Most of them belong to a 'powerless elite'.

To the astonishment of the reader, P. Sztompka is surprised by the fact that the authors of the texts in the reviewed volumes deal not with a sociology of backwardness but with a sociology of sociology. The reviewer compares this latter area to a snake eating its own tail, adding that the analysis of the tendencies in sociology in the corners of the globe that are distant from the core, as well as zooming to the core from the peripheral research institutions, scientific journals and local scholars is a waste of intellectual energy simply because the achievements of those in the periphery 'are not interesting to anybody'. It is hard to resist the impression, however, that the qualifier 'anybody' refers to the strict core of world sociology, if not to the reviewer himself.

The surprise of the reader increases immeasurably when he encounters P. Sztompka's suggestion that the sociology of sociology is an ideological field because it includes evaluative accounts and normative statements, which P. Sztompka equates with ideological. The reviewer notes disapprovingly the use in the reviewed book of terms and categories that have been accepted for decades in the sociology of science and science studies: scientific dependence, intellectual imperialism, intellectual colonialism, dominance of the metropolis, the theory of the metropolis, the hegemony of the West, the perspective of the North masked as universalism, the superimposition of concepts and theories by the mainstream of American and European sociology, and the dominance of the English language. P. Sztompka is, however, willing to treat these terms and categories as symptoms of 'the slang of anti-Occidentalism'. Generally acknowledging the existence of macro-social inequalities on the global scale, and even the entanglement of science and scientists in the system of inequalities, P. Sztompka assumes that as scientists we are unable either to prevent the system or to overcome it because – having no control over institutions – we are powerless against social reality. It is difficult, however, not to notice an anti-activist attitude in this assumption, and this attitude in a sociologist must elicit surprise.

Further reading assures the reader, however, that anti-activism is not the only point but also the belief in no significant entanglement of science in macro-social relations. It is so because P. Sztompka states that, in its substantive form, sociology was born in nineteenth-century Europe, 'brought to life by white bearded men, mostly of the Jewish stock' while the discipline was reinvigorated at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States. The reviewer states that the spread of this paradigm of sociology, in result the spread of the intellectual virtues of European and American standards, did not constitute 'imperial ambitions' or academic propaganda stimulated by usurpation comparable with colonialism (apparently not understanding the relation between the cultural context of the acting researchers and their worldview, including scientific). In this way P. Sztompka denies himself by ignoring his own argument regarding the powerlessness of the elite, including sociological, when it comes to macro-structural conditions. Apparently he does not see a contradiction with his own appeal to the critical analysis of individual models, theories,

concepts and procedures by implying that critical sociology – according to the definition of M. Burawoy (2005) – should not go beyond the dominant paradigm. Following P. Sztompka's inconsistencies leads us to an absurd point: that those deserving of recognition in sociological activity should be limited not only to the intellectual labours of white men but also necessarily bearded, and preferably of the Jewish stock. These excessive requirements could neither be met by either P. Sztompka himself or his works.

According to P. Sztompka, arguments about intellectual colonialism could possibly be applied to the compulsory evangelisation of non-Christian peoples, but in no case, however, to sociology. Sociology is a science rather than a religion and thus it is to search for truth rather than the proclamation of faith. The problem, however, is that the proclamation of faith, not only religious, is very often associated with a sincere belief that the truth is sought, because the practical – in contrast to the theoretical – definition of truth in science can be reduced to the statement that true is what deep and justified convictions are nourished by. It is this very conviction that the concept of the paradigm is based upon.

The reader, however, is rubbing their eyes in disbelief while reading P. Sztompka's declaration that, 'we cannot deny that in some respects sociology is similar to the natural sciences'. From this statement P. Sztompka derives the conclusion that scientific universalism should not be abandoned for sociological relativism; he apparently does not notice that, in this sentence, he opposes sociology of science and, by doing this, he contradicts his declared extreme positivism.

P. Sztompka asks the reader to enjoy the benefits of the globalisation of one language – English – which he says allows for global scientific achievements, including all of the important books read in any epoch, despite the fact that it is not certain if those outside of Euro-American cultural circles think this way. Still, P. Sztompka criticises those supporting the idea that this language functions as a tool of domination, exclusion and oppression. P. Sztompka believes that the sooner sociologists in peripheral countries begin to write and publish in English, the better it will be for them and for sociology. The Polish reader sees in this belief an astonishing parallel with the way of thinking of the ex-Minister of Science and Higher Education who

urged that the cut off from national culture would have been the way to an easy, fast and undeniable union with the core of world science, while in fact it becomes only a tool of treatment for the complexes of unfulfilled scientists and clumsy bureaucrats, contributing to their falling into more absurd states and Polish science into deeper and deeper peripheralisation.

P. Sztompka refers to R. Merton's (1972) methodological postulate that social reality cannot be investigated from the inside. This, however, seems to merely say that sociologists cannot abstract, and perhaps even release themselves from the socio-cultural context which they have been enculturated and socialised into. R. Merton's view should thus be understood as a clear manifesto of anti-positivism. P. Sztompka, however, seems to misunderstand R. Merton's methodological directive by claiming that sociologists from the peripheries should not confine themselves to the investigation of local societies because, in doing this, they will cease to be true sociologists. This is because sociological knowledge expands only when, based on local data, general conclusions are formulated that contribute to the discussion of universal social mechanisms. Ignoring the contradiction with his previous sentence, P. Sztompka expects factual observations from sociologists from outside Europe and America, which would allow them to verify and develop *already existing* Euro-American theories, even though R. Merton (1949) thought that different theories and methods should be tailored to the issues being explored.

In opposition to some authors of the texts in the reviewed volumes, P. Sztompka believes that the process of the globalisation of sociology as a science has been completed because science is global = universal per se. Moreover, it had been global from the beginning of the existence of the human community because it is aimed at the search for universal truth, i.e. regularities of and mechanisms for the functioning of the reality. As can therefore be seen, P. Sztompka not only misidentifies here the notions of globality and universality but also makes some other errors of inference. Secondly, his opinion about the completed process of the globalisation of sociological science implies not only a conviction that no sociology exists on the peripheries, but it also undermines his view that common people are non-professionalised sociologists (Sztompka 2005a). P. Sztompka seems to overlook here

the fact that a hierarchy of sociologists exists – global, national, regional and local – who have different forms. Thirdly, P. Sztompka suggests the inseparability of the human community and sociology as a science, which seems to be a very daring view. Fourthly, assigning the pursuit of universal truth to the human community (always and everywhere?) seems to confuse the human community with the community of scholars.

P. Sztompka rather sceptically, if not ironically, refers to M. Burawoy's postulate of the bottom-up creation of an alternative global sociology as a challenge for mainstream sociology, which includes superimposed Euro-American ideas and methods. P. Sztompka's raises a proposal to develop a sociology which reflects civil society. P. Sztompka's abovementioned irony is contained in a paraphrase of the thesis of the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party': *Sociologists of all countries unite, you have nothing to lose apart from your scientific status!* This paraphrase is admittedly accurate polemically but misguided essentially simply because it implies the identity of scientific status with the current paradigm, together with the related system of interests and domination.

Moreover, as referred to in this context by P. Sztompka, R. Merton paraphrased the same quote very differently: 'Supporters of interiority and externality, unite. You have nothing to lose except your theses. You can gain a real view of reality instead' (Merton 1973: 136). In this way R. Merton – unlike P. Sztompka – distanced himself from elitism.

The main theses of Piotr Sztompka's polemic are worth comparing with the arguments of his polemicist, Michael Burawoy. The latter states that P. Sztompka attempts to revive the nineteenth-century conception of science in which a uniform, universal canon modelled on natural sciences and applicable on a global scale is assigned to sociology. Any non-universalistic ideas are therefore to be manifestations of anti-scientific obscurantism. In this context sociology is to be an elitist science by its very nature, led by 'great scientists' from 'leading universities'. The positivist concepts of A. Comte lead P. Sztompka to mix natural with social sciences, the global

with universal context, and even reality with fantasy. Trying to recall the pluperfect reality and declaring worship of perfectionism, P. Sztompka does not even approach – according to the present author – the precision of expression characteristic of neo-positivists.

M. Burawoy notes that P. Sztompka, while criticising the modest representation of North America in the reviewed publication, overlooks the ubiquity of the influences of American sociology elsewhere, what P. Sztompka – it should be added here – apparently treats as normative self-evidence, as mentioned above.

By arguing with P. Sztompka's surprise at the division of the reviewed work in chapters following geographical criterion, M. Burawoy criticises the universalistic structure of sociological investigations, devoid therefore of context, location and geographical aspects of sociology, as well as the belief that sociology is only the work of great scholars. However, the sociological views of P. Sztompka himself are obviously related to the country of his origin, and that is why they make an essential contribution to the sociology of knowledge. In fact, according to M. Burawoy, national systems of sociology are an essential element of global empirical sociology. This directs the reader's thought to the concept of glocalisation (Robertson 1992). Moreover, the process of scientific analysis is clearly related to social phenomena, it is not external to society. This applies to social sciences and to natural sciences. T. Kuhn's (1962) view that social sciences represent the pre-scientific phase of development does not withstand criticism; rather it is the natural sciences that represent the pre-social phase of development (Harvey 1973). For the modern understanding of science, sociology of science, including that of sociology, it is thus fundamental, which apparently P. Sztompka does not understand, simply because it shows how science is a product of society.

According to Max Weber's methodological directive (1949) social scientists should thus include self-awareness of the surveyed communities rather than – as P. Sztompka does – treating the community of sociologists as poorly known scientists whose achievements are not interesting to anybody. P. Sztompka includes the Polish sociological milieu in the latter category, without adding, however, whether or not he is in it. More interestingly, however, P. Sztompka – referring to the anti-positivist

work of M. Weber who indicates that the evaluative attitude is the fundamental element of social sciences – takes an extremely positivist position. Since research programmes are based on values, M. Burawoy rightly points out that there can be no uniform, universal sociology, for which P. Sztopka opts, unless it is imposed either by force – a fact that the latter author seems not to understand – or by propaganda and indoctrination, what he seems to do by calling the opposite attitude ideologisation.

M. Burawoy clearly shows what P. Sztopka apparently does not notice, i.e. that ‘global sociology’ is in fact American sociology, describing local case studies from the United States, presented as universal, a fact elsewhere referred to the *America all inclusive* attitude (Best 2011). In this alleged universalism lies local specifics, while global sociology is in fact a term for what M. Burawoy aptly calls ‘cosmopolitan intellectualism’ devoid of in-depth analysis.

M. Burawoy argues against the thesis about globality by indicating that national sociological organisations only exist in 55 countries, i.e. 29% of the United Nations’ member states, while local associations exist in a few others. In many cases sociology is practiced within other disciplines and the organisational structure of sociology is highly diversified even within the core countries. From the different historical experience the magnitude of the differences result even despite the hegemony of the core performed by grants, scholarships, educational programmes, issues of scientific journals and the content of academic textbooks. Globalisation appears therefore not as an homogenising process but rather one causing different reactions and empowering local diversities (Robertson 1992). Local sociologies have, however, according to M. Burawoy, the potential to develop universal sociology, which cannot be established top down, as P. Sztopka would wish.

The question of language, which P. Sztopka underestimates, turns out to be a dilemma for sociologists who wish to present the results of their research in international fora. It is not only a question of the different intellectual effort required by English native speakers vis-à-vis those culturalised in other languages, but also a question of translations, which are almost always related to the loss, at least potential, of the full meaning of texts simply because the meanings are culturally typified

and words have thus different semantic fields in individual languages. International debate in English may thus result in ignoring local issues from outside of the core. Such a model of making sociology makes only a gesture towards universality while in fact having very little to do with the global context.

Globalisation, which, according to P. Sztompka, allows sociologists to move between countries, is a strictly class phenomenon, for contemporary globalisation is related to the neo-liberal model of the economy and society, which results in an unprecedented polarisation between the core and peripheries. The above-mentioned 'easy' movement is therefore unavailable to the majority of the world's sociologists, as is easily demonstrated by the representation of individual countries at international sociological congresses.

P. Sztompka's belief that real sociologists do not confine themselves to the study of local society entangles this author in a contradiction with the infatuation with universality of American sociology, if not its complex, as well as – as was already mentioned – with his thesis that common people are non-professionalised sociologists (Sztompka 2005a). As M. Burawoy indicates, the major part of American sociologists, while dealing with applied sociology, conduct local research, and this fact would exclude them from the group of 'real sociologist'. The system of domination of the core over the peripheries in the world capitalist system leads to researchers tracking from the periphery the situation in the core, while this regularity does not work in the opposite direction. For this reason M. Burawoy is likely to admit that sociology in the peripheries, due to its inferiority, has a better insight into global society than sociology in the core, which is unaware of its dominance. It might be added here, that the best insight is from sociology in the semi-peripheries because of its much better contact with the core than is the case of the peripheries. Paradoxically, P. Sztompka seems to be quite an example of this regularity, even though it is not certain whether or not he is aware of this.

According to M. Burawoy, there are two ways to approach postulated global sociology. The first one, postulated by P. Sztompka, is to select one or more local systems of sociology as universal canons on the global scale, by which other centres will be limited to the role of subsidiaries, involved in data collection. The other way, pos-

tulated by M. Burawoy, is to slowly build a common global platform by compromise, with the acceptance of the existence of separate systems of sociology.

It is difficult not to notice that the P. Sztompka's vision is based on the model of modernisation perceived as an inevitable process implemented – more or less consciously – by Americanisation. According to M. Burawoy, this has created a boastful narration by American sociologists, including the mythology of the end of ideology and of the virtues of liberal democracy and economic freedom. Indeed, the domination of American sociology grew on this basis. This was, however, questioned by the social movements of the 1960s, which revealed the United States as the mainstay of racism and imperialism, undermining the ideology of American messianism. Therefore a new sociological perspective appeared, breaking the current conventions and stereotypes, as well as indicating the poverty of positivist sociology – uniform, universalistic and West-centric, which P. Sztompka pays homage.

In the opinion of M. Burawoy, the review by P. Sztompka is a desperate attempt to reverse the trends indicated above. The hopelessness is evident in attributing his opponents the simultaneous promoting of ideology and utopia, even though, according to Karl Mannheim's (1992) definitions, they are antitheses. Ideology is a conservative vision of the world aimed at maintaining the *status quo* or a return to the *status quo ante* while utopia is a dream about a new, better world. As an ideologist, P. Sztompka attempts – according to M. Burawoy – to revitalise the mythical past of the forgotten world by the establishment of universalism which ignores the empirical reality. As a utopian, he postulates global sociology that cannot be, however, achieved in the conditions of not only durable but also deepening inequalities between countries and systems of sociology.

P. Sztompka seems not to notice that sociology developed together with civil society, its nature is therefore to advocate for this society and to foster public debate. That is why sociology was prohibited in totalitarian systems. According to M. Burawoy, a challenge for civil society is commercialisation, which, at the present stage of its development, only global civil society can properly oppose. Therefore attempts at the bottom-up creation of global sociology are essential. This means abandoning the positivists belief in value free social sciences.

The above-referred polemics encourage reflection on the relationship between social position in the structure of the world social system and ideologies, ideas, frustrations and complexes. The domination of the core over the peripheries also includes these elements. The nature of the position of the core of the world social system is the criticism of various weaknesses and wickedness at the core. The nature of the peripheral position is the subordination to the core, manifesting itself, among other things, in delight over its magnificence (cf. Sztompka 2005b), while the summit of courage is the allegation that the ex-king was, perhaps, not completely dressed. Praising the splendour of the mythical West in this context is ridiculous and sometimes even embarrassing. Fortunately, the semi-peripheral position allows enough good knowledge of the realities of the core that it enables a balanced assessment of its advantages and disadvantages.

Representing the semi-peripheral position, our journal *Przestrzeń Społeczna* (*Social Space*) is open to any serious factual discussion and criticism that meets scientific standards.

References

- Best U., 2011: *Centres and peripheries: a critique of the critique as a starting point of a critical geography of (Polish) geography*. "Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)", 2, 153-160.
- Burawoy M., 2005: *2004 American Sociological Association Presidential Address: For Public Sociology*. „The British Journal of Sociology”, 56, 259-294.
- Buravoy M., 2011: *The Last Positivist*. "Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews", 40, 396-404.
- Burawoy M., Chang M., Fei-yu H. M. (eds), 2010: *Facing an Unequal World: Challenges for a Global Sociology*; vol. 1: *Introduction, Latin America and Africa*; vol. 2: *Asia*; vol. 3: *Europe and Concluding Reflexions*. Taipei: Institute of Sociology at Academia Sinica; Council of National Associations of the International Sociological Association, Academia Sinica.

- Harvey D., 1973: *Social justice and the city*. London: Arnold.
- Kuhn T., 1962: *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mannheim K., 1992: *Ideologia i utopia*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Test.
- Merton R. K., 1949: *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press.
- Merton R. K., 1972: *Insiders and Outsiders*. „The American Journal of Sociology”, 78, 9-47.
- Merton R. K., 1973: *The Perspectives of Insiders and Outsiders*; w: Robert Merton: *The Sociology of Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 99-136.
- Patel S. (red.), 2010: *ISA Handbook of Diverse Sociological Traditions*. London: Sage Publications.
- Robertson R., 1992: *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage Publications.
- Sztompka P., 2005a: *Socjologia. Nauka o społeczeństwie*. Kraków: Znak.
- Sztompka P., 2005b: *American Hegemony Looks Different from Eastern Europe*. „Contexts”, 4, 31-33.
- Sztompka P., 2011: *Another Sociological Utopia*. “Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews”, 40: 388-396.
- Weber M., 1949: *Methodology of the Social Sciences*. New York: Free Press.