

Agata Zysiak, *Punkty za pochodzenie. Powojenna modernizacja i uniwersytet w robotniczym mieście* [Extra Points in Recognition of Background. Post-war Modernisation and University in Working-class-dominated Town], Zakład Wydawniczy 'Nomos', Kraków, 2016, 342 pp., bibliog., indices, ill., Summary in English

Agata Zysiak is a cultural sociologist employed as associate professor with the University of Łódź. Her scholarly interests encompass a broadly defined historical sociology and biographical research. In spite of her young age, Zysiak boasts considerable scholarly experience gained at the CEU in Budapest, with the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and the Free University in Berlin. She has recently pursued comparative studies, at the University of Warsaw, focused on transition of the working class in post-industrial urban areas in the United States and Poland.

The study under review, being a reedited doctoral thesis originally compiled at the Łódź University, is Zysiak's debut book. Importantly in this context, she had co-authored (with Kaja Kazimierska and Katarzyna Waniek) a volume entitled *Opowiedzieć uniwersytet. Łódź akademicka w biografjach wpisanych w losy Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego* [Telling a university-story. Łódź the academic city viewed through biographies associated with the University of Łódź] (Łódź, 2015), which offers an interesting regard on the history of the Łódź academy in light of the autobiographical interviews collected by the three authors.

The existing studies on the history of the Łódź University have predominantly been anniversary-related/commemorative studies, such as the one by Jarosław Kita and Stefan Pytlas (*Uniwersytet Łódzki w latach 1945–1995* [Łódź, 1996]). The history of the University penned by its former Rector Wiesław Puś (*Zarys historii Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego 1945–2015* [Łódź, 2015]) proposes an even deeper approach. Yet, a comparative perspective rarely tends to occur in these studies – be it countrywide or global. Seen against this background, Zysiak's book proposes a definitely original concept, carried out to a high methodological standard, which is based on perceiving the University's history as part of the modernisation of tertiary education in post-war Poland and, more broadly, in the international progress of modernity.

The list of references at the study's end is not quite on a par with what is customary with historiographic texts: there is no categorisation into historic

sources and scholarly literature; a part of the source material is not identified at all. This is true for the press, among other items. However, the impression remains that the author has carried out a thorough query encompassing a variety of source testimonies and made use of considerable literature, including foreign (predominantly, in English). Her eruditeness based on historiographic literature calls for a special mention.

The study under review has a problem-oriented structure and is composed of six mutually correspondent chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. A reference reading list, a set of tables, a subject index and an index of personal names (both useful) are appended.

The first chapter, entitled 'Modernisation, pre-war years and a revolution', is introductory as it outlines the terminological and historical background for further considerations. The democratisation of access to higher-level education is approached as a trend within the global modernisation process, the post-war Poland being seen as one of the possible exemplifications of the process. The author proposes essential methodological declarations at this point: referring to the categorisations known from the Western Sovietology, she rejects the totalitarian model to the benefit of a revisionist concept. Following Pierre Bourdieu's approach, she takes a critical stance toward the model of a "trammelled or captive academy which is subjected to the pressure of the political field" – the thread we will refer to below.

Chapter Two analyses three models of university whose implementation was attempted in the University of Łódź after 1945. The first of the models analysed, described as liberal, followed to an extent the interwar-period tradition, its exponent having been the philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbiński, the University's first rector. The 'socialised university' model, which was pushed forth by his opponent, sociologist Józef Chałasiński, rooted in the experience of the Free Polish University [Wolna Wszechnica Polska]. The third, socialist model, was matter-of-factly introduced in the Stalinist time, under Chałasiński's term-of-office as Rector.

Chapter Three attempts to reconstruct the soci(et)al *imaginarium* that accompanied the reform of the tertiary education system and the implantation of the idea of university in a working-class-dominated city. The argument is mainly based in this section upon the regional press and preserved memoirs records. The question is addressed of how a 'socialist university' was meant to function and to what an extent was the idea internalised by the young generation of the time.

Chapter Four focuses on effects of the modernisation and democratisation of the Łódź academy, shown through a reconstruction of the world of the local students (not only of the tertiary level). In her evaluation of the social effects of the reform of science and implementation of the socialist university model, the author explicitly opts for the marginalised classes which in the realities of post-war Poland were given the opportunity for social advancement.

Zysiak seeks to highlight the true heroes of the modernisation of the higher education: namely, the peasant and working-class youth.

The sixth, and crowning, chapter, entitled 'The academic model of career', traces the career paths of some of the University employees in an attempt to describe the ways in which the democratisation influenced the staff, modifying their careers and personal profiles of those who were to become research workers. Of key importance to the argument at this point are the limits of democratisation of the tertiary education and how the process was impacted by two contradictory forces – namely, the 'old academy' model (under reproduction then) rooted in the two interwar decades and the political and legal changes related to the socialist modernisation project.

The conclusions the author comes to basically boil down to the following. First, the modernisation project under analysis ended up in a failure. In spite of repeated efforts of the authorities, the University, although it faced an opportunity to become an "egalitarian tertiary school, open to the working classes", actually joined the "process of reproduction of a traditional academy" (p. 291). This was predominantly determined by the resistance offered by the University's habitus against political pressure and reforms enforced by the authorities. Thus, no democratisation actually occurred: what did happen was that university-level education was popularised, but in statistical terms it was a far cry from the target set by the authorities (it was assumed that, resulting from the revolutionary transition, 80 per cent of the people from each year of birth would complete tertiary education, whilst the actual rate never exceeded 10 per cent before the People's Republic came to an end).

Second, universities as institutions – and the University of Łódź in particular – never actually became the site of social change, a breeding ground for young human resources. Rather than that, they became a space where "divisions and hierarchies were transmitted, providing the framework for cultural conversion rather than emancipation" (p. 301). As is conclusively attested by the autobiographies of selected Łódź-based scholars analysed in the book, the young people setting out on the path of university career soon turned into defenders of conservative values, cherished an idealised vision of science and the traditional master-student relationship.

The author argues, thirdly, that the concept of a new socialist university "never became a ready-to-apply solution imported from the USSR: it was a model that was taking shape locally in the course of debates and institutional clashes" (p. 298). Moreover, the idea of a new university was emerging in confrontation with the central authorities who expected implementation of the tasks set from above.

The book undoubtedly provokes reflection and encourages to rethink some of the established concepts; yet, it also triggers doubts and inspires a number of questions. A considerable value of this study lies in that it criticises the totalitarian paradigm that has been predominant in the research

on post-war communist Poland, shows a new research perspective anchored in the sociological inspiration (Bourdieu, Charles Taylor), one that proposes a different distribution of focus in the authority vs. society relationship.

Let me now point out a few issues that, as I believe, deserve being discussed in more detail<sup>1</sup> – beginning with a comparison between the aforesaid totalitarian and revisionist models. The assumptions behind them undoubtedly create, as it were, two mutually competitive visions of the past. Within the former, what we encounter is history seen from the above, with political occurrences taking the predominant role. This concept emphasises the role of ideologies superimposed by the state, as constitutive for the category of totalitarianism, where the past is often imbued with an explicitly heroic purport. Such a vision concentrates on a ‘centre’, recognised in terms of power/authority (for instance), neglecting a ‘periphery’ (local structures).

The revisionist model creates a completely different version of history: namely, the past as seen in a bottom-up perspective, with an emphasis on social history which refers to the role of social classes rather than outstanding individuals. In this version, history privileges the locality, shedding light on its complicated relations with the centre.

The author’s apparent adherence to the revisionist model makes one doubt whether the totalitarian model has nothing more on offer and ought to be referred back to the completely outdated Foucaultian toolbox? Zysiak would offer us no clear reply to this. While she vows that the purpose behind her book is basically to “complement the narrative of ‘enthralled post-war academy’ and the young generation seduced by the [communist] system” (p. 17), the general purport of her study is, clearly, a vote for ‘de-totalitarianisation’ of studies in the phenomenon labelled ‘People’s Republic of Poland’.

There are more questions that appear consequently: Is it not the case that the author’s choice of a neutral and quite general descriptive language, characteristic basically of historical sociology, renounces the ambience of the period 1945–56 with its peculiar climate of terror, overwhelming fear and state violence? Is it not so that the focus on theoretical categories such as social change, socialist modernisation, progress, building of a socialist welfare state, makes it difficult to adequately describe the assumptions behind, and the self-destructiveness, of the socialist utopia? And, lastly, can one analyse the post-war change in the tertiary education system apart from the ideological context that accompanied the communist doctrine?

The horror and awe of those years, which is evident in the period records (diaries, letters, newspapers), cannot be sensed while reading the Zysiak book;

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<sup>1</sup> In this part of my review, I refer to the opinions voiced by the participants (namely, Agata Zysiak, Joanna Wawrzyniak, Andrzej Rostocki, and the under-signed) of a meeting promoting the book which was held on 7 June 2017 at the Museum of Art in Łódź.

what is more, the dramatic or tragic entanglements of the people concerned appear not quite comprehensible. Referring to the “lonesome Kotarbiński”, the author seems not to quite appreciate the fact that the former rector paid a personal price for his attempt to defend the idea of liberty for science, whereas the failure of the vision of the university he pushed forward was set in a broader, undoubtedly ideology-laden, context. Similarly challengeable is the proposed interpretation of the achievements of Kotarbiński’s adversary, Józef Chałasiński: his reform of the higher-education system was, in Zysiak’s view, “not an attempt at opportunistically attuning to the prevalent transition: rather than that, it expressed the hopes related to the potential behind the radical reforms combined with the desire for secured independence of universities in the new political conditions” (p. 70).

There is probably no coincidence in the fact that the revisionist paradigm applied in this study demeans the aforementioned issues related to violence (symbolic and not only), repression or persecution. The author evidently neglects the propagandist campaign unleashed by Chałasiński and his associates against Kotarbiński, with the notorious book by Bronisław Baczko on the latter’s philosophical and socio-political views (*O poglądach filozoficznych i społeczno-politycznych Tadeusza Kotarbińskiego* [Warszawa, 1951]) as its climax. She acquits the whole story with a not-quite-convincing extenuation of a noted sociologist and a single quote from the Baczko book (pp. 88–9). Also, we are told nothing about the fates of the persecuted scholars, one of them being Rajmund Gostkowski, an archaeologist who was expelled from the University and imprisoned in the Stalinist period. The events that essentially informed the mass-scale processes and the university life – the year 1948, the October 1956 breakthrough, or the occurrences of March 1968 – are virtually absent in the book.

Doubts – of a different kind, though – arise also because of the way in which the author approaches the language of the sources, as particularly visible in the chapter on the social imaginarius. Zysiak reconstructs them mainly based on the local press but treats these testimonies all too seriously, to my mind, believing that the information given in the press has reflected the essential fragments of the realities of the time. While this is certainly true in regard of everyday life of the students, is it so with respect to mentality as well? Rather unconsciously, the author remains entrapped in the neutral language that prevents her from grasping the mass phenomenon of linguistic manipulation typical of the Stalinist time. She seems to overlook that the totalitarian language contradicted its very basic function: instead of describing the reality, it created a reality. In the 1980s, Jacek Fedorowicz coined the concept describing the adjective ‘socialist(ic)’ as a levelling or neutralising adjective. Seen from such a perspective, a socialist democracy, socialist justice, socialist progress, and so on, had not much to do with their respective real counterparts. A similar ambivalence is characteristic of the other terms

and notions used in the study. To give an example, the ‘extra points’ given in recognition of one’s background offered a chance for some to get a higher education whilst taking such a chance away from others – the fact which Zysiak seems to ignore. The right to work, guaranteed by the Constitution of the People’s Republic, frequently implied coerced labour in the Stalinist period; and so on, and so forth.

Essentially revisionist, the study in question certainly deserves attention as it offers a new voice in the debate on communist Poland, one that rejects the clichés and courageously criticises the findings previously made by authors of established repute. The modernisation perspective applied in describing the history of the forty-five post-war years has long been marginalised – and this for a variety of reasons, including (but not limited to) those enumerated by Zysiak: a sentimental vision of individuals being communist party members; an effect of unconscious indoctrination; or, young people having been seduced by the totalitarian propaganda. While the modernisation was a failure or was ostensible, such an approach is fully legitimate and certainly conforms to scholarly standards, as the book under review proves. There is no coincidence in the fact that the attempt has been made by a member of the young generation. There are serious indications that the reception of the findings of the Łódź-based sociologist is heavily informed by the actual biographical experience of the readers. Those who can remember the communist time, having had their school and university-level education and employment with a tertiary school will not be much enthusiastic about a number of arguments proposed in the book: some of the statements may even cause thorough objection. Which is good, actually: disputes between generations is a natural thing; the book by Zyziak once more attests to the observation that every generation writes its own history.

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