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Józef Chałasiński — a Classic of Polish Sociology

Józef Chałasiński was one of the most outstanding Polish sociologists of the second half of the XXth century. He was a student of Florian Znaniecki and cultivated his master's ideas. In his works we find the message "Methodological Note", whereas in his masterpiece *Młode pokolenie chłopów* (The Young Generation of Peasants) (1938), a topic undertaken by William I. Thomas and Znaniecki in "The Polish Peasant". This book is considered to be one of the most original achievements of Polish sociology. "The Young Generation of Peasants" was 8th on the list of most quoted works in the years 1981-1995, compiled on the basis of four leading Polish sociological periodicals. It found its way on to that list as one of two books, alongside *Socjologia wychowania* (The Sociology of Behaviour) by Znaniecki (10th on the list) which were published before 1939 (B. M. Webster, 2000, pp. 398 – 399).

Chałasiński lived from 1904 to 1979, during times which were filled with turbulent events in Polish history. As a young, secondary school pupil he reacted fervently to the events of the Ist World War and then in autumn 1918 he experienced the euphoria of Poland's regained independence after almost 150 years without statehood. In 1920, at the age of 17, he joined the army as a volunteer to defend his country against the Bolshevik army. He experienced the successes and failures of his country which was aiming to organise itself according to democratic principles. This took place in very difficult economic (two great economic crises) and political conditions (Poland's neighbours were two totalitarian states – Germany and Russia). In the autumn of 1939 after the invasion by Hitler's Germany and then Stalin's Russia, he was badly affected by Poland's fall after 20 years of independence.

He was born in the countryside near Lublin, in a rural civil servant's family. He grew up in a family which cultivated a landed gentry-intelligentsia life style

but he was also surrounded by rural contemporaries from peasant families. He soon became aware of the existence of two worlds which did not merge: 'the lordly' and 'the peasant'. These experiences were significant in shaping his later social attitudes and academic interest. In 1923 he started studying at the university of Poznań where he attended Florian Znaniecki's sociology seminar. In 1927 he completed his doctorate on the basis of his work *Wychowanie w domu obcym jako instytucja społeczna* (Raised in a Strange Home as a Social Institution), published in 1928. In 1931 he published his next book *Drogi awansu społecznego robotnika* (A Worker's Ways of Social Advancement) which was the basis for his post-doctoral thesis (1931). Immediately after that he went to the USA for 2 years on a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship and there he took part in the work of Ernest W. Burgess's team in a sociology centre in Chicago. After returning to Poland he published a monograph *Szkoła w społeczeństwie amerykańskim* (The School in American Society) in 1936 and reports from field research on the social life of a Polish workers' colony in south Chicago.

He lived in Warsaw from 1935 to 1939 and worked at Warsaw University. From autumn 1936 he ran the State Institute of Rural Culture, an outside university sociology research unit. That was where he prepared and published the four-volume "Young Generation of Peasants". At that time he was the most active researcher in the milieu of Polish sociologists – he became the top student in Znaniecki's school, enriching its achievements with excellent monographs; he thereby contributed to the integration of sociology on a national scale, bringing the Poznań and Warsaw milieus closer together which led to speeding up the processes of institutionalisation of sociology in Poland. He was soon to be labelled "the Napoleon of Polish sociology" (E. Markley Znaniecki, 1945, p. 707).

This excellent and rewarding activity was interrupted by the outbreak of war. He was 35 and had not achieved his ambitious academic plans. He took on the reconstruction of Polish sociology from the ashes of post-war Poland. He had to realise this task in particularly unfavourable conditions during the expansion of the communist regime. He used political realism as a tactic. Although he frequently rebelled against the system he also tolerated non-confrontational behaviour, justifying it: "acting through the habit of activity (...) a habit of working in any rite" (J. Chałasiński, 1964 p. 79). This meant that young sociologists would not be lost. Due to his stance, in Łódź where he worked at the university after the war, sociology could be practised but under a changed aegis[1].

[1] "He allowed his assistants to take their doctorates on the basis of works in the field of sociology (...). He allowed his students on seminars and lectures to get to know (...) the

He worked and published incessantly within the limits permitted by censorship. He always used any opportunity to openly criticise the limitations imposed on freedom in learning, particularly in the social sciences. After publishing his text "Sociology and Social Mythology in Post-War Poland" in the materials of the World Sociological Congress inn Stresa (1959), where he showed the destructive influence of Stalinism on sociology, he was deprived of the right to lecture at the university and to edit the new sociological periodical he had founded in 1957 *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* (Culture and Society).

He never declared his intention of joining Marxism. He consistently aimed at consolidating the identity of sociology as a science mainly deriving from Znaniecki's school. This placed him in the background of the politically and bureaucratised system of learning in communist Poland[2]. His attitude to Znaniecki's sociology, filled with a powerful emotional tinge, while also being the expression of resistance towards ideological pressure meant that he was hardly susceptible to innovations in sociology, something which was imperceptible to him. When, in the sixties, a new style of empirical sociology was taking shape in Poland, marked by narrow empiricism and domination of questionnaire research[3], he categorically cut himself away from these tendencies, thereby condemning himself to marginalisation in the sociological milieu[4]. He was surrounded by a small group of enthusiasts of the autobiographical method, developing the memoir writing movement, clearly neglecting methodological reflection and theory. This clearly led him to a loss of creative expansion. He was stopping to act as an intellectual and scholar. Collections of memoirs of post-war rural youth, under his auspices, were evaluated by Maria Dąbrowska in 1964 as not being very thorough, biased and therefore falsifying reality

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enlightened Declaration of Human Rights which stated that if the government violates the rights of the people, civic disobedience is the holiest of rights and the first duty of those people" (A. Kłoskowska, *Bunty*, p. 12) Among his numerous PhD students, two – Antonia Kłoskowska and Jan Lutyński – were among the leaders of Polish sociology in the 2nd half of the XXth century.

[2] According to the authorities "his works bring unclear suggestions which contradict the development of socialism looking for other solutions". S. Żółkiewski, *Aktualna sytuacja w humanistyce polskiej* (The Current Situation in Polish Humanities). *Nauka Polska* 1961, no. 1, pp. 17-42.

[3] "Research is undertaken without reflection" – he noted in his diary in 1961. Unpublished material, belonging to the author.

[4] The young generation of Polish sociologists welcomed the patterns of neo-positivist American sociology, because it liberated them from the arduous dependence on Marx and Lenin.

(clearly apologetic) and she described the text of his foreword as being very boring[5]. He retired in 1974 and died five years later.

During the proceedings of the 2nd Reunion of Sociologists in Warsaw (1935), Znaniecki presented the *Projekt zbiorowych badań socjologicznyuch nad społeczeństwem państwowym polskim jako całością* (A Project of Collective Sociological Research on Polish Society as a Whole)[6]. The reunion report said that the materials collected to date and published monographs were "simply the first steps to getting to know the processes and social changes of modern Polish society, there is therefore, an urgent need to organise collective research on modern Polish society with particular emphasis on the problems of the Polish countryside" (J. Chałasiński: Society, 1935 pp. 1–2). Research was begun according to the theoretical-methodological convention of the Poznań school of sociology. This was made possible due to the creation of institutional principles - the President of the Polish Republic set up the National Institute of Rural Culture (PIKW) by the decree of 30 September 1936 and appointed Józef Chałasiński as director[7]. The institute carried out sociological research on the Polish countryside, aiming at a multifaceted, comprehensive description of the peasant social stratum, representing slightly over 60% of Poland's population at the time, its position in the social structure of Polish society and its role in the creation of national culture. The collection of autobiographical materials was begun immediately, announcing a competition addressed at the rural youth, entitled "A Description of My Life, Work, Thoughts and Aspirations" in January 1937[8]. At the beginning of 1937 an extensive questionnaire was sent out to the alumni of people's universities[9] and a wide range of monographic rural

[5] M. Dąbrowska *Dzienniki powojenne 1960-1965* (Post-war Diaries 1960-1965), Warszawa 1996 vol. 4 pp. 297–298.

[6] Unfortunately the text of that presentation was not published, nor was the manuscript saved.

[7] The Official Journal of the Republic (1936), no. 75, position 532. Juliusz Poniatowski, the then Minister of Agriculture was personally involved in setting up the Institute.

[8] The competition which was closed on 31 March 1937 brought abundant results – 1544 curricula vitae of rural youth. The collected materials were the basis for Józef Chałasiński's *The Young Generation of Peasants*.

[9] 3165 questionnaires were sent to all the alumni of people's universities (functioning between 1921 sand 1937). There was a 25% response, of which 10% of the questionnaires were enriched with the curricula vitae of the researched. The campaign was led by Dr. Józef Obrębski who managed to announce the preliminary results before the outbreak of war – *Wychowankowie uniwersytetów ludowych w życiu wsi* (The alumni of people's universities in village life) [in:] Wiejskie uniwersytety ludowe w Polsce. Warszawa 1939, pp. 49–89.

research was planned, where the "emphasis was placed on the analysis of those processes which are in the forefront, i.e. those such as the disintegration of the family and neighbourhood organisation, the process of urbanisation, the outflow of the rural population to towns, the layered rural system and its changes, the transformation of rural settlements into villages, the role of small towns in rural areas etc." (Państwowy, 1937, p. 257). The success of the undertaking was to be guaranteed by both the academic footing of the Poznań school which was implemented by their alumnus who stood at the head of the Institute (Znaniecki sat on the academic council of the institute) and also the young age of the members of the team appointed by the director of the (PIKW) institute[10]. The outbreak of war interrupted the research and the existence of that 3-year-old institution. That happened when most of the works were underway and some of them were finished and had gone to press[11]. The manuscripts and proofs were destroyed by war and occupation. The few which survived could not be published after 1945, in the new political environment. However, it was possible to publish a work about the peasant stratum, characterised against the background of Polish society as a whole. That was a four-volume work "The Young Generation of Peasants" by Józef Chałasiński, which did not have, according to Znaniecki, "an equivalent in world literature, based on equally rich autobiographical material" (1938, p. IX) a work, lets add, being in effect the answer to Znaniecki's challenge to "research Polish society as a whole".

The short time measured out by historic events prevented undertaking an academic discussion on Chałasiński's work (it was less than a year from the moment of publication to the war). First reviews appeared in newspapers and weeklies which turned out to be the last. Periodicals with a longer publication cycle, mainly academic, did not have enough time for printing opinions, whereas post-war political changes did not encourage discussion about Chałasiński's book[12]. However, "The Young Generation of Peasants" became

[10] Most people who were employed by Chałasiński and worked for the Institute were graduates and students of Poznań University and the recently appointed Warsaw University sociological studies. Two people in that team finished their studies in London under the direction of Bronisław Malinowski. The director who was the eldest in the team was 32 when the institution was appointed, the average age of the rest of the team being 25 on the day they were employed.

[11] "From the first days of August [1939] I was called to return [from holiday] to Warsaw. The first brochures arrived from Mitręga printing house in Cieszyn and the texts had to be proofread in a hurry. I was busy from morning till night" (W. Rydel, 1966, p. 336).

[12] In the first half of the fifties an attack was made on the contents of the work from

a political event – its influence went far beyond academic circles. Journalists and politicians reviewing the work[13] mainly noticed that "those four powerful volumes reflect not only Polish reality [...] but they compel serious reflection about our entire future" (M. Bliziński, 1939 p. 2). As a result, they concentrated on the ideological expression of the work which itself encouraged that kind of analysis. Chałasiński sought the possibility of creating a future Poland, characterised by dynamic development aimed at modernity, in rural emancipation and later "by basing the entire organisation of the nation on the peasant stratum as a fundamental social group", whose young generation "enters national culture with its own shape of life, its own historical mission of socio-cultural reconstruction of the nation" (Młode, 1938 vol. 4 pp. 551, 553). In "The Young Generation of Peasants" Chałasiński created a social myth which in his opinion, manifested itself in the fact that only leading values presented by the countryside (the respect for work, including physical effort, responsibility, attachment to the patrimony, the stability of human relations) can enrich the life of the whole of Polish society (1983 Cz. Robotycki...., p. 4), that it is in rural society where lies the unique, on a national scale, powerful energy and will to act (1990, K. Gorlach, p. 211). The socio-political ideas of the work were welcomed with enthusiasm in rural youth circles[14], it legitimised many ideological theses of the Polish peasant movement (W. Piątkowski, 1989). "The Young Generation of Peasants", "regardless of its theoretical contribution to sociology", which Znaniecki wrote about at length in the "Foreword" and Jan Szczepański continued years later (1983), is a very personal work. It includes a clearly defined ideological aspect. It was written by a young man who was very concerned about the situation of his own country in the late 1930s. He raised the question about whether Polish society which had such difficulty raising itself from backwardness, whose traditional social structure and social mentality did not undergo sufficient change, which was experiencing more intensively than ever the consequences of world economic crises, which from left

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the point of view of ideology and vulgar Marxism (Cf. e.g. publications in *Myśl Filozoficzna* [Philosophical Thought] and *Wieś* [Countryside]). An abbreviated migr version of *The Young Generation of Peasants* appeared in Rome in 1946.

[13] Among the critics there were three scholars only writing for the press, one of whom, a historian, M.Handelsman pointed to biographies being a valuable source in researching the past, the two others, sociologists, J. Obrębski and J. Szczepański, only reviewed the contents of the work.

[14] Cf. Reflections of the rural youth after reading *The Young Generation of Peasants* (Nation, 1983, pp. 51–56, pp. 79–81, pp. 123–126, pp. 315–319, pp. 419–423, pp. 425–427, pp. 471–485, pp. 503–510).

and right was surrounded by enemy totalitarian nations, which, finally, has a conflicting political elite, is capable of summoning the strength to overcome the deadlock, lead the country onto the way of progress, join the democratic, thriving developing European countries.

Józef Chałasiński was – as is emphasised by the author who knows him and his works very well "not only an academic sociologist but also a man of action and his work had specific practical goals [...] – he was active and engagé (J. Szczepański, 1996, pp. 11–12). The mythification of the peasantry in the ideology of "The Young Generation of Peasants" is a dramatically hasty search for ways of getting out of an unusually difficult international and internal situation which Polish society found itself in towards the end of the 1930s by a person foreseeing an imminent tragedy. The researcher's emotional engagement here led to his overstepping the narrow border between learning and ideology. In his fervent search for a recipe for the rebirth of his country the author created a picture in monochromatic shades. His work fulfilled a double role – a purely academic one, towards which he made his way and an ideological one, which was by no means planned by him. After leaving the printing press an academic work begins an independent life of its own. The fate of "The Young Generation of Peasants" was not kind to him. The work which is generally considered as "not having an equal elsewhere in the world" (J. Szczepański, 1996 p. 11) has not received a reliable academic analysis until this day because historical circumstances were unfavourable and its ideological aspect remained in a vacuum, also created by history. Looking at those ideological works from today's perspective, one could accuse the author of naivety deriving from the hope placed in the peasant youth, from which the Polish nation had to draw strength. But we do not and will never know the real ideological role that could be played by the work, if the peasant youth were not pushed aside towards the margins of society at a particular historical moment. After all, "that young generation which speaks from the pages of Chałasiński's work was dislocated, deprived, expelled from the process of thinking and acting, which it had worked out for itself" (J. Szczepański, 1996 p. 12). In that sense the work suffered defeat, it failed in its social mission which it no doubt had the opportunity to fulfil.

"The Young Generation of Peasants" became part of the framework of the Poznań school of sociology, both from the point of view of the realisation of the demand of inductive research and the concrete research method (autobiographies) as well as the conscious concentration of the researcher on problems

considered socially important. In this case the author realised the demand included in the "Methodological Note", the observation of the process of society going "from old forms of social organisation, which functioned with minor changes for many decades to the modern way of life" (p. 89). Chałasiński analysed this process not as one taking place as a consequence of the processes of mobility of emigrants but following the creation of a modern nation which was hardly mentioned in "The Polish Peasant". He consciously referred to the eighty-year-old tradition of Polish sociology which emerged as a reaction to the formation of a national society, which was different in western sociology where sociology took shape as a response to the emergence of industrial society. Presenting the issue in such a way introduced a certain novelty to the Poznań school[15]. That was, however, a point of view which was presented in a very personal way, it was an emotional act of disclosing "faith in the nation"[16], expressing the author's ideological stance (an apologia for the peasantry), which did not bring inspiring theoretical propositions as regards problems of the nation[17].

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[15] Perceiving social reality in categories of the nation was not strange to Znaniecki who after a few minor monographs published in Poland before 1939, undertook this issue in the book "Modern Nationalities: a Sociological Study" (1952).

[16] In Chałasiński's post-war writing this abounded in bright sociological essays, studies on the formation of the American nation, the nations of Africa and national processes in post-war Poland.

[17] Chałasiński "did not show any wish to create a theory of the nation" which was justified by his polemic temperament, which prevented him from being systematic, and his conscious avoidance of theorising, which was a general characteristic of his work. "The Young Generation of Peasants" is paradoxically still waiting for an in-depth analysis of its theoretical qualities. Antonia Kłoskowska detected them sporadically, pointing to the similarity of the issue of reactions of groups dominated in the process of their disinheritance in Chałasiński's and Bourdieu's work or a phenomenon of "school-like cultural shock".

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