

Chapter 12

Coming in from the Cold: My Road from Socialism to Sociology

Piotr Sztompka

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold
—Title of a John LeCarré novel

You've come a long way, baby
—Slogan on a 1970s Virginia Slims cigarettes advertising poster, portraying a beautiful, apparently liberated young woman smoking blissfully



My Pre-Sociological Adolescence

My path to sociology was not unswerving. As a child, the only son of a famous Polish concert pianist, I was naturally destined for a musical career. Indeed, I received an elementary musical education, but soon decided that my many and diverse interests precluded an exclusive focus on practicing piano at which, frankly, I was not too good. My reading of newspapers and spy stories was accompanied by a fascination with politics and sports, as well as astronomy, physics, and geography. I dreamt of

traveling across the world. Lastly, my hobby—which paid off some fifty years later in visual sociology classes—was photography; a Soviet Zorki 4, an ingenious replica of the famous Leica, was my favorite toy.

Poland at that time, in the 1950s, was not an open society, neither in the Popperian sense, nor in the simple geographical sense. However, my father, being an artist, was among the privileged few who were allowed to travel abroad. Returning from each successive concert tour, he would bring home the breath of fresh air the wider world offered: stories of prosperity, freedom, a *joie de vivre*, full stores, and smiling people. There were also stimulating scents and exotic souvenirs—at a time when “exotic” could mean not only Chanel No. 5 for my mother, but also simply oranges, lemons, dried figs, and Colgate toothpaste. He would bring, too, the brochures and timetables of international airlines. How fascinated I was by a miniature model of a Douglas DC7c, the propeller-driven technological marvel of the time, which had taken my father to Rio with only one stopover at Dakar. Old airline tickets and schedules were hoarded and treasured. I fantasized, as many kids do, of becoming a commercial pilot. My collection amassed over the years and was only closed after two decades, in 1972, with my own first transatlantic trip to San Francisco, on board the then recently introduced, first-generation Boeing 747, with no stopover at all, directly from Frankfurt/Main.

I decided quite early on that I had to set myself free of my closed world. No, I was not thinking to emigrate (or “defect”, as it was officially called, with its bad moral taste of treason). I felt at home in my country and was ready to stay there, but wished to escape intellectually (or, as one might say today, virtually). My passport to the world was to be fluent in English. Acquiring this language became a passionate pastime in secondary school. I was soon able to read American newspapers and magazines, which were quite unavailable at that time, censored as ideologically subversive. Yet here some undeserved luck struck again, an inherited “cultural capital” saved me. Due to my father’s position in the artistic and intellectual circles of Krakow, my hometown, he was on the clandestine list of the selected few to whom the American Consulate was hand-delivering fresh copies of the *International Herald Tribune*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. After my father’s early death in 1964 this invaluable service stopped. It was resumed after I had achieved my own academic distinction, ending only with the anti-communist revolution of 1989, at which point these periodicals ceased to be clandestine goods and could be had at any kiosk.

Thus, upon completion of secondary school, I was in possession of at least one key to the world: a good command of a “global language”. Yet I needed another key—a profession which, by its nature, would be international. The obvious choice lay in academia. Even under communism, the scholarly community knew fewer borders than any other. But the question was which field of science should I select? My first choice was science in the strictest sense—a natural science, which would be relatively free of any political or ideological control since the period of “proletarian mathematics” or “bourgeois physics” had come to an ignominious close. Thus I applied to the Department of Physics at the Jagiellonian University of Krakow, the most respected and established of Polish universities and already 600 years old. But even before the academic year had commenced I reconsidered for the same reasons for which I abandoned a pianist’s career: this field was too specialized and

mandated an equally undivided focus and concentration if one were to become a “somebody”. By this time in my life, my interests were even more diverse than in primary school—political, social, cultural, and literary. I could not abandon pursuing them. Thus, as many young people do when faced with a similar predicament, I chose law.

Enter Sociology

At that time, strange as it may seem today, I simply did not know that there existed a discipline called “sociology”. Polish sociology, having formed well-rooted traditions and already well established at universities during the interwar period, was banned by the communist government as a conservative, “bourgeois” science, the enemy of Marxism-Leninism and “scientific communism”. Only after the death of Stalin and a certain thaw in the Soviet empire was it restored in Poland in 1956, significantly earlier than in the rest of the socialist bloc, and much earlier than in the Soviet Union itself. My university education was inaugurated in 1961, just six years after sociology reemerged at the Jagiellonian University; hence I had never heard of it. It was also not popular in the state-controlled media, remaining somewhat suspect. Moreover, for quite different reasons, it could not gain popularity among the broader public due to the close etymological proximity of sociology to socialism! In this situation, how could I possibly learn about its existence? Nevertheless, in a first-year course on elementary jurisprudence, I encountered two professors of law who were fascinated by sociology and smuggled bits of its wisdom into their lectures. One was a distinguished lady, Maria Borucka-Arctowa, who specialized in the sociology of law, and the other was an unruly intellectual, Marek Waldenberg, who included the classics of nineteenth-century sociology in his course on political and social doctrines. Sociology suddenly struck me as very interesting. An added attraction for me lay in a certain peculiarity: the discipline was most developed in the United States and hence most of the literature was in English. Another key to the outside world appeared at hand. Soon afterwards I took up parallel studies in sociology. Completing two degrees, in law and in sociology, my sociological adventure began in earnest.

Coping Strategies (Made in Poland)

Sociology was taught at the universities, but was still under considerable ideological constraints. Polish sociologists had to devise coping strategies that would permit the performance of normal, academic work. During the course of my sociological studies, two books were published, each presenting an alternative stratagem. Both were written by eminent sociologists who later became quite renowned in the West, and I happily adopted them as my earliest “distant” (because they were teaching in Warsaw, and not in Krakow!) role-models. The first book was by Stanislaw Ossowski, a dissident, non-Marxist thinker who took refuge in the abstract realms of general sociological theory and the philosophy of the social sciences. His volume *On the Peculiarities of the Social Sciences* (published in Warsaw in 1962) was the guiding

model for one line of my later work. The second book was by Zygmunt Bauman, a member of the communist party, positioned high in the echelons of power. *An Outline of the Marxist Theory of Society* (1964) was the title, and that was where the Marxism ended. Instead the astute student could find a quite adept discussion of the works of Parsons, Merton, Lundberg, Lazarsfeld, Lasswell, and Mills. All this was adorned by some lip service given to a number of Soviet thinkers, the required dosage of “political correctness” at the time. I have to admit that this strategy was applied quite creatively in my first journal articles: selecting just two Soviet Marxists—Konstantinov and Osipov—I used the same limited pool of quotations from their works without regard for the themes of my arguments. On one occasion I even ventured to fabricate the name of a nonexistent Soviet sage. This nonetheless sufficed, fully satisfying the censors.

By the way, it was only last year, in 2005, that I actually met Professor Osipov, the source of my quotations, in person. Well over eighty now, he is a highly respected member of the Russian Academy of Science. He gave me his new book, *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (published in Moscow in 2004), and spoke at length about the threat of American imperialism. Times change, some people much less so.

In 1970 I submitted my doctoral dissertation on *The Functional Analysis in Sociology and Social Anthropology* (1971). I was following Ossowski’s approach, that is, escaping toward the abstract, methodological aspects of functionalism as a way of explaining social and cultural phenomena, rather than focusing on the more substantive and politically sensitive structural-functionalism of Talcott Parsons. The book was very well received in Poland. Four years later my next work was published, this time on methodological issues, *Theory and Explanation* (1974). There I used the notions of scientific explanation as defined and analyzed by philosophers of science—e.g., Carl Hempel, Ernest Nagel, May Brodbeck, and others—as a tool for theory construction in this discipline. I still believed that sociology could—and should—be as precise, formalized, and empirically grounded as physics; I came to my senses only much later.

Theory and Explanation was to be my last book written in Polish, until the next one, *Sociology: The Analysis of Society* (2002), a full twenty-eight years later. In the meantime my career took a most significant turn: my dream of living in Poland, but being present in the world finally came true. How did this happen?

At the Crossroads

With Ph.D. title in hand, my formal sociological education had come to a close. I was twenty-six and standing at a crossroads. One alternative was to accept an academic position at home, in a country on the periphery of the global sociological community, and strive to become a proverbial big fish in a small pond. Another was to follow my dream of escaping to the world, not satisfying myself with local recognition, and trying to match up to the more cosmopolitan standards of true sociological centers. I chose the latter and decided to dive in as a small fish—but hopefully growing big someday—immediately into a big pond. One necessary step was to win a scholarship to the Mecca of sociology, the US. There were six Fulbright

fellowships available for Polish post-graduates in all branches of academia. In a tight competition I won one.

But then don't forget that I was living in a society that was still locked behind the Iron Curtain. The next step was crucial: to obtain a passport, something not considered a citizen's right but rather a privilege, subject to an entirely arbitrary decision by the authorities. It could be refused for "important social reasons", an exemplary formulation of so-called socialist law. I felt I had no chance of ending up at Berkeley or Harvard (the heavenly places to which my Fulbright grant predestined me) without turning now to the second coping strategy—Bauman's—namely pretending symbolic loyalty and doing your real job. In 1972 I acquired membership in the ruling Polish United Workers' Party, like some two million of my compatriots before me. Among them, there were perhaps fewer true communists than in Paris, Oxford, or New York. I wasn't one either.

Fortunately, this was a time of considerable liberalization: the country was opening to the West. Due to foreign credits there was a visible increase in living standards, and the party became more of a pragmatically oriented club than an ideologically disciplined organization. When questioning me as a candidate for a nominally Marxist-Leninist party, they did not even care about my Catholic faith. I reciprocated in kind by using my party membership entirely opportunistically, as a protective shell, without getting involved in any party activities. This was, of course, a kind of personal compromise, but at the time I felt it could be achieved without losing face and self-respect. However, my opportunism had its limits. Nine years later, in December of 1981, when the regime turned to repression again and just one day after it imposed martial law crushing the "Solidarnosc" movement, I threw away my party card. Stuffing my backpack with warm clothing, I waited for the secret police to knock on my door. Nothing of the sort happened, perhaps because I was not alone in my gesture; some 700,000 party members did likewise. But I am jumping far ahead. Let's get back to 1972.

Landing in the U.S.A.: The Formative Year

After a long flight, my first crossing of the Atlantic and the American continent, I land at San Francisco airport. A Pan Am helicopter—yes, that was a standard service then—takes me across the Bay. I get out on a strip of asphalt next to the freeway. A colorfully dressed, long-haired girl approaches.

"Do you need a taxi?"

"Yes, take me to the International House, please."

We go to the car, a wreck of a stretch executive limousine, all painted in bright yellow sunflowers. A dog, a big Alsatian, is lying on the back seat. I carefully place myself next to the beast. "It won't bite, provided you don't rape me", the girl says cheerfully, and then discusses some business on the CB radio with the dispatcher. I haven't seen a CB radio before; this invention, despite the claims of "convergence

theory”, hasn’t arrived yet in my country. This is my first encounter with America, its civilization, and the Flower People.

The eight months spent at Berkeley were extremely important for my future. To live on a \$500 scholarship per month, without any possibility of bringing my unconvertible Polish money from home, demanded a lot of sacrifices. I rented a small room at what was euphemistically called the Shattuck Hotel, but was, in fact, a retirement home. Sharing the sad and nostalgic life of elderly Americans, often abandoned by families, and feeling equally lonesome, I sat inside for hours typing—on a portable Olivetti Lettera (an investment of \$70, second hand)—the manuscript of my first English-language book. It was an either-or decision: either I leave some sort of mark on American sociology, a hook for future contacts, or I will just return to Poland, perhaps never to be let out again. I decided to put into English an extended and enriched version of my Polish doctoral dissertation. The topic being structural functionalism, I now had access to the immense, earlier unavailable literature, and at least one living classic of the school at hand: Talcott Parsons’ co-author of *Economy and Society* (1956), Neil J. Smelser. For the methodological part of my analysis I could use the advice of Arthur Stinchcombe, then working on his book on strategies of theory construction. Moreover, my theoretical imagination was developing in an informal circle of graduate students, the “Theory Group”, in which I met such future stars of American sociology as Jeffrey C. Alexander and Eric Olin Wright. This was the beginning of long friendships and professional collaborations.

I was also learning American ways, and their enviable informality, so different from customs back home. On Friday evenings I was enjoying the open house of Art Stinchcombe, the chair of the department, with the host working in a bathrobe in his study while graduate students were ransacking his fridge in the kitchen. Or that party at Philip Selznick’s house at which I arrived dressed in my best suit and tie, only to behold the host nonchalantly opening his door in a white t-shirt, shorts, and bare feet. I was consoled a few minutes later when Leo Lowenthal appeared clad in his best Viennese jacket, and a tie even darker than mine. Classes at Berkeley were also teaching me how to teach. Attending the seminars of Herbert Blumer on G.H. Mead’s “theory of the act”, I listened day after day to an incredibly powerful voice coming from a huge and amazingly athletic body (at least for a septuagenarian) as he pounds into our heads this or that wisdom of the Chicago School master. Still, I was not only learning how to teach, I was also learning how to treat one’s students. When Neil Smelser discussed the work of great classic masters in his theory class, he invited me to give the particular lecture on Karl Marx in his place, assuming quite correctly that I had been exposed to more Marx than anybody else in the classroom. My teaching debut in America went fine, there was a good discussion, and I sorted out some of my ideas, using them later in the final chapter of my book comparing Marxism with functionalism. Yet most important was that gift of trust received from a famous professor.

In eight months the manuscript was ready. I showed it to Smelser, who liked it and gave me some advice about potential publishers. Of course my written English was far from perfect, but I could not afford a professional editor who would charge seven dollars per page. And I was in a hurry—desperate to place the manuscript with a publisher before leaving the U.S. Thus I decided to break all customary rules: after

xeroxing the manuscript at the self-service shop on Bancroft Street, I mailed it to twenty American publishers at the same time. Some days later, I received seventeen letters with the usual polite phrases of couched rejection, but three publishers expressed serious interest. Stanley Holwitz, a great social science editor (then head of the sociology and anthropology section at Academic Press, New York, a subsidiary of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), was the first to come with a signed contract. He also soon became a true friend. The volume came out as *System and Function: Toward a Theory of Society* (New York 1974). I returned to Poland, leaving the door open for my return.

Nevertheless, before departing from the sociological paradise of the U.S.A., there were three months more at Harvard, at a time when Talcott Parsons reigned on one floor and George Homans, the chair, on another—reportedly so as not to cross paths in the corridors. Their theories were as equally at odds as their personalities, but, for me, sitting in on the classes of both was another invaluable experience. Parsons was teaching his last seminar before retirement, on the sociology of religion, a naturally fascinating topic for a student coming from deeply Roman Catholic Poland. In turn, Homans, in his class on elementary social behavior, was pushing me down from the heights of functionalist macro-sociology, furthering the earlier efforts of Blumer. Both are certainly responsible for my subsequent interest in micro-sociology and most recent fascination with the sociology of everyday life.

Finding My Master and Mentor

In my first American book I defended the functionalist approach against the current onslaught of radical, leftist criticism. I even ventured to suggest that there are some affinities between the functionalist model of a social system and the Marxist model of socioeconomic formation. Coming from a Polish young scholar, from behind the Iron Curtain, it caused some heads to turn. One of these was Robert K. Merton's. Some time after returning to Poland I received his letter, telling of his interest in my ideas and offering to arrange a series of summer school appointments at Columbia University in order to bring me to New York and discuss my work. One hot and humid summer day, I appeared at Feyerweather Hall at a small departmental reception and met a tall, handsome, slightly gray-haired gentlemen in a tweed jacket and an ascot instead of a tie. The center of attention, surrounded by most people present—including a contingent of beautiful women, his assistants. Yet Merton was at once friendly, open, easy-going, and helpful. What ensued were numerous meetings at his Riverside Drive apartment overflowing with books, manuscripts, all manner of papers on the floor, and a gallery of pictures of great scholars (in sociology but also in the sciences), with whom he collaborated and corresponded. He also took me to meet Paul Lazarsfeld, who had apparently also read my book as I found it on his desk heavily annotated in small, precise handwriting.

Very soon, Merton in typical American fashion started to address me as “Piotr” and requested reciprocation. But my Polish traditional upbringing did not allow for the outrageous familiarity of “Bob”—as most of his friends called him. The most I could make myself utter to my master was “Robert.” He graciously accepted my

reservations, and this remained our own special secret until the end of his days. He always remembered, and all his letters to me are thus signed Robert.

With the passing years, Merton has become for me perhaps the most important influence—intellectual, but also personal. A true “role model”, as he would put it in his theory. I have learned much from him. There has been not only the wealth of ideas, but, perhaps most importantly, a manner and style of doing sociology—truly classic, analytical, precise, balanced, and avoiding dogmatism or extremes. Without becoming another Joseph Conrad, I could never dream of emulating his mastery of the English language. Still, a souvenir he handed me one day, *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1984), bears an encouraging handwritten dedication: “for Piotr to help him on his way to become a stylist in the English language”. I have been trying ever since. I have also tried to learn his perspective on moral, political, and human issues, which he always generously shared—showing true concern also with regards to quite private issues, such as living under martial law at the beginning of the 1980s, or tending to my ninety-six-year-old mother in the 1990s. I had the great fortune of finding my true master and mentor.

My chances to reciprocate for what I have received from him came twice. The first was given to me when Anthony Giddens approached me to write an intellectual biography of Merton for the series he was editing for Macmillan, “Theoretical Traditions in the Social Sciences”. This offer came in the gloomy winter of 1981 when, for some time, Polish dreams of freedom and democracy were suppressed by the communist regime which crushed the “Solidarnosc” movement. The opportunity to escape from the sad realities of the day into the realm of pure ideas was more than welcome. We called such work at that time an “internal exile”. The task mandated reading, at last, all that Merton had ever written, as well as everything that has been written about him. A sizable library it was indeed. This was the most instructive course in social theory that I have ever taken. When the book (*Robert K. Merton: An Intellectual Profile*) came out in 1986, my master was clearly pleased, purchasing thirty copies for his friends and admitting that I had discovered some logical connections among the pieces of his work. This unveiled a coherent theoretical system rather than the merely brilliant mosaic earlier commentators had tended to see. “You plainly understand what I have been up to over the years, and in places more profoundly so than I did at the time of writing—and sometimes since”, he wrote in a letter to me.

The second opportunity came some years later when Merton was receiving his twenty-second in an amazing row of honorary doctoral degrees—this time from my alma mater, the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. I played the part of the *promotor rite constitutus* and remember how proud I was, reading an extensive appraisal of his work in Latin at a solemn ceremony in the mediaeval hall of Collegium Maius. In response he graciously referred to Bronislaw Malinowski and Florian Znaniecki among his own masters, as well as to Stanislaw Ossowski, Stefan Nowak and myself as his longtime Polish friends. He preserved good memories of his visit. Years later he sent me an amusing ad for LOT Polish Airlines clipped from New Yorker Magazine: “Fly to Krakow, the city of Paris cafes without the Parisians.” On yet another occasion, he forwarded a picture of the monument to the Polish

King Ladislaus Jagiello, the founder of my University, raised somewhere in Central Park.

He was famous for his epistolary talents, and I keep and cherish a fat file of correspondence I have received from him over the years. Each letter contains some piece of wisdom phrased in witty and colorful prose as well as meticulous and pedantic form. The first were typed on his IBM Selectric typewriter, and later, after a period of struggle against his writing habits, processed beautifully on an Apple Macintosh. The enthusiasm with which he embraced computer technology at a very late stage in his life became obvious when I started to receive a flow of emails with his most recent papers as attachments. The last email proudly referred to the 2003 Italian edition of his new book, *The Adventures of Serendipity*.

I keep in mind the last occasion when we met. It is at the end of the 1990s, on a sunny but chilly New York day in October. We are walking together along Broadway to his favorite lunch place. Merton strides briskly in a light tweed jacket and small cap, ignoring the wind and cold. Myself, I am freezing in an overcoat. A blue bus stops at sizable distance. "Let's catch it," he says and runs like a youngster, leaping onto the bus steps just in time. He was almost ninety; nothing but cancer could have defeated his body. In 1996 I published a single-volume collection of his most important work (*Robert K. Merton on Social Structure and Science*) through the famous Heritage of Sociology series of the University of Chicago Press, closing a very important chapter of my intellectual development.

Communism Crumbles: Sociological Miracles

The next chapter begins with unexpected, exciting changes in my own country, Poland. At the end of the 1970s the democratic opposition against the communist regime became increasingly visible, articulate, and organized; concurrently, in 1978, the bishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla, was elected Pope John Paul II. In 1979 he made his first pilgrimage to Poland. On a broad green field in Krakow I participate in a mass with around two million other people in attendance. And I witness a true sociological miracle (perhaps worth invoking during the current process of his beatification!). There is an absolute calmness and religious concentration of the crowd during the mass, but the moment the liturgy ends, an outburst of patriotic emotions with thousands of flags and banners appearing out of nowhere. People smile at one another, embrace, shake hands with the hated police officers guarding the parameters of the gathering. The civil society, suppressed for decades by totalitarian rule, is suddenly reborn. People regain dignity and identity. And I discover the crucial social significance of intangibles and imponderables; in the Polish case this means a unique mixture of nationalism and religiosity. A year later one of the biggest social movements of the twentieth century—comparable only to the Civil Rights movement in the U.S.—is born in Poland. "Solidarnosc" starts the avalanche which some years later buries the communist system and changes the world.

But before that, the old regime undertakes one final, convulsive attempt to maintain power. The conflict between the massive democratic movement and entrenched regime grew in strength during the fall of 1981. At the time I was teaching a graduate

seminar on social change at the European center of Johns Hopkins University in Bologna, Italy. With an international group of students we trace and discuss the developments in Poland. On December 12, a sunny winter Saturday, I start by car toward home for Christmas break. Joyful and excited, I go through picturesque snow-blanketed Brenner Pass, then the Bridge of Europe, and the cities of Innsbruck and Salzburg. After a night at a motel in Sankt Valentin, some 200 miles from Vienna, on the morning of Sunday, December 13, I find myself on the main freeway nr. 1, driving toward the Austrian capital. And suddenly on the radio I hear the Polish communist leader, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, declaring martial law, delegating "Solidarnose", arresting dissidents, closing borders, halting all gas sales, and cutting the telephone lines. For five minutes I sit in a car on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, pondering what to do. I have a good job, an apartment, and money in the bank in Bologna. Yet against all logic and reason, I don't turn back. With grim determination I drive through a heavily guarded checkpoint on the Austrian-Czech border. The soldier alerts me: "Do you know there is a war in Poland? You may still turn around. I will not shoot." No, I do not turn back. The checkered gate closes behind me and I wonder if I will ever find myself in the West again. But I must drive on. I have business to settle in Poland; the limits of my opportunistic compromises have been reached. Arriving home by the evening, I hand in my party membership card the next day. My fling with the communist government ends once and for all.

Two months later I am allowed to return to Bologna to complete my classes (the military government is adamant about fulfilling international obligations, feigning "normality"). I remember leaving a grey, sad, poor, and hopeless country still under martial law, passing the barbed wire at the Czech-Austrian border at Mikulov, and arriving in colorful, joyous, and affluent Vienna. And then the idea strikes me: perhaps high time to emigrate. I work at an American institution, I have excellent connections in the U.S., and Reagan's administration, as a gesture of help, is easily granting residence permits for Poles. Again reason clashes with emotions: I am so attached to my homeland, to my town, to my culture, to my university, and to my friends. There are long walks along the beautiful, sun-bathed hills of Tuscany, while hell is burning inside. Yet I decide to test myself to the extreme. The American green card is ready and just waiting for my signature; American colleagues have arranged a job in New York. I travel by train to Rome to make my final decision and sign the papers. For two hours I circle the U.S. Embassy at Via Vittorio Veneto and cannot make myself enter. Then I do what perhaps only a Pole would do: I go to the Vatican, to at least draw nearer my Polish Pope, and sit for several hours in the cold, empty Basilica San Pietro. And then, like an illumination, I know what I must do. No, there was nothing metaphysical about it, just a lost soul finding reconciliation with oneself. I make my way back to Bologna, pack my bags, send a fax to the U.S. ambassador canceling my visa application, and drive back to Poland. I have never regretted this choice. Less than a decade later I became the citizen of a free and democratic country—my own.

Focusing on Social Movements and Social Change

Finding myself back in Poland, I realized I needed to enrich my intellectual tools to understand what was going on in society. Once martial law is lifted, a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies again brings me to the U.S., to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the center for research on social movements. Charles Tilly, its founder and guru, has already left for New York, but I find Meyer Zald, Aldon Morris, and a whole group of younger scholars extremely helpful in studying the theories of social movements. One product of this is an article, “The Social Functions of Defeat”, in which I predict that the Solidarnosc movement will reconsolidate, only made stronger by the experience of repression, and eventually win its struggle for freedom. This “prophecy” comes true during that miraculous autumn of 1989 when communist regimes fall like dominoes in Eastern Europe and, some time later, in the Soviet Union itself. The biggest and strongest empire of the twentieth century lies in ruins, brought down by the mobilization of the common people, and led by an electrician from the Gdansk shipyard, Lech Walesa. I recall the preamble of American Constitution—“We the people ...”—and, from my early sociological education, the phrase by Karl Marx—“People make their own history ...”. This becomes the motto of a book, *Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming* (1991), published by Polity Press in Cambridge a year later. It proposes an abstract theoretical model of social change driven by grassroots, popular movements. A “volcanic model”, if you will, but it is inspired by the very concrete “revolutions” of 1989. Through it I attempt to demonstrate the old wisdom that there is nothing as practical as a theory, and that only a theory is able to provide a map, an orientation in the complex processes of social change.

The year 1989 ends one period in the history of Eastern and Central Europe, but begins another, known as the transition or transformation toward a fully democratic, viable market society of the Western type. This provides a major challenge for a social theorist. To build the foundation for further research I take up thorough studies of the theories of social change, from classical evolutionism and historical materialism, through theories of civilizational cycles, to the current constructivist approaches. As we all know, there is no better way to reach full understanding of ideas than to teach them. I have the chance to test my interpretations and systematizations on Polish, but also American students while teaching UCLA summer sessions for ten years in succession. One day, over lunch at the Faculty Club, Simon Prosser—an editor at Blackwell Publishers fishing for new manuscripts—persuades me to turn my lectures into a book. His skillful arguments and the spell of the place make the project inevitable. *The Sociology of Social Change* comes out in 1993, soon translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, and finally Polish. The Russian edition becomes a standard textbook not only in Russia, but in other post-Soviet republics. At one of the World Congresses of Sociology, a delegate from the Republic of Azerbaijan approached me, glanced at my badge, and exclaimed: “You are Sztompka? You are still alive? We believed you were a classic!” Imagine the peculiar satisfaction of a Polish sociologist in learning that his book has replaced Lenin as obligatory “classic” reading.

Turning toward Intangibles and Imponderables

But general theories of change do not solve all the problems of post-communist transition. The process is historically unique and requires new concepts and new models. Yes, “people make their own history”, but as Marx was ready to add: “... they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (see my *Society in Action*, p. 44). This was exactly the situation of post-communist societies, struggling to transform themselves radically from a centrally planned to a market economy, from authoritarian to democratic rule, and from a censored culture to a free flow of ideas. Nonetheless, which circumstances “given and transmitted from the past” were most decisive in hindering the process, blocking the road toward prosperity and freedom? I recalled my discovery of intangibles and imponderables during the Pope’s first pilgrimage to Krakow. From that moment on, I focused my research on “soft variables”, the cultural and mental legacies of communism that comprised barriers to the quick and complete success of transformation.

I first proposed a concept of “civilizational incompetence” as an acquired and learned syndrome of beliefs, rules, and subconscious reflexes, born under communism and completely incongruent with the demands of a civil and open society. This was the “trained incapacity” of *Homo sovieticus*, as my mentor Robert K. Merton would have it. Then I turned to the study of a single albeit crucial component of this syndrome—the pervasive “distrust culture” (*Trust: A Sociological Theory*, 1999). Eventually, I attempted to diagnose the “post-communist trauma”, understood as the shock of sudden, rapid, comprehensive, and unexpected change. This idea was born over some glasses of California wine at a restaurant in Palo Alto, where I was dining with a group of international friends: Jeff Alexander, my companion from a graduate class at Berkeley and a close friend ever since, Neil Smelser, our teacher there twenty years earlier, plus Ron Eyerman, Bernd Giesen, and Bjorn Wittrock, other friends from Europe. We were to spend together an exciting semester as fellows of the Stanford Center for Advanced Studies and its fruition, some years later, was a co-authored book, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004).

Drawing Lessons from My Tale

By 2004 I was the citizen of not only free and democratic Poland, but also of the European Union. Since 1995 I have been an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and, since 2002, President of the International Sociological Association (ISA), elected at the World Congress in Brisbane, Australia. Returning yet again to the Bay Area where the American chapter of my biography commenced thirty-two years earlier. I was now the invited guest of the American Sociological Association during its annual convention. One afternoon I left my luxurious apartment at the San Francisco Hilton, and took a BART train to Berkeley. There it was: the Shattuck Hotel, and the window of my little room without a bath on the fourth floor, where for eight months I had typed my first book in English.

That old Virginia Slims cigarette advertisement echoed in my mind: “You’ve come a long way, baby”.

Is there a message inherent in this brief autobiographical story? What have been the keys to success? As a theorist I am ever tempted to generalize. Hence, perhaps the following guidelines, my personal Decalogue, may bear more than personal validity.

- The old prescription of Thomas Edison is absolutely fundamental: “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” Disciplined, focused, persistent work—there is no substitute for it. Inspiration comes only to the meticulously prepared mind. It is the reward, the added value to a life of drudgery.
- One should set life goals at the highest, seemingly unrealistic level. As Max Weber reportedly remarked, “If Columbus were not trying to reach India, he would not have discovered America.” Utopias are powerful motivational forces.
- Choosing a career in academia, one must remember that in this field it is one’s professional duty to strive for excellence, to be better today than yourself only yesterday, and always better than other scholars around, past and present. There is no place in scholarship for mediocrity. If you prefer not to stick out from the crowd, choose another profession.
- In initiating a long-range project—e.g., commencing to write a book—imagine how it will look when finished, where it will stand in the library, next to which famous volumes.
- Never succumb to the obsessive feeling, so typical of all creative thinkers—“I will never write anything sensible again!” Sit down and try. Or just leave it for a few days.
- In the early stages of your career, accept any and all offers, invitations, and opportunities that come your way. Never refuse. On the other hand, in the later stages, learn to refuse and focus exclusively on doing things most important to you, taking up themes you would still like to resolve. Otherwise you may lack time.
- Try to get through the first stages of your academic career as quickly as possible. Later the famous “Matthew Principle”—the Mertonian paraphrasing of the Gospel—begins to function: climbing up will become easier and easier the more reputation, credentials, and capital you accumulate.
- The greatest piece of luck is meeting and befriending outstanding people, not only to get tangible help and support from them, but also to have clear role models to emulate. Watch out for such people; assist your good fortune.
- If absolutely necessary, stretch your high principles a little bit: use manipulative, even opportunistic strategies, try to influence those in power, and do not be ashamed of some self-advertising—as long as all this does not harm other people. Moral heroism should be rewarded and heroes put on pedestals. But this cannot be expected of everybody: most people are not made of marble. Some compromises of even the highest principles are sometimes excusable although, of course, I wish everyone a life without such a necessity.
- Remember that there is much more to life than research. Live life to the fullest. You will not get another chance.

Selected Bibliography

- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. 2004. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: California University Press.
- Sztompka, Piotr. 1970. *Analiza funkcjonalna w socjologii i antropologii społecznej* (Functional Analysis in Sociology and Social Anthropology). Krakow: Ossolineum Publishers.
- . 1974a. *Teoria i wyjaśnienie* (Theory and Explanation). Warszawa: Polish Scientific Publishers.
- . 1974b. *System and Function: Toward a Theory of Society*. New York: Academic Press.
- . 1986. *Robert K. Merton: An Intellectual Profile*. London: Macmillan.
- . 1988. "The Social Functions of Defeat." Pp. 183–193 in L. Kriesberg *et al.* (eds), *Social Movements as a Factor of Change in the Contemporary World*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- . 1991. *Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- . 1993. *The Sociology of Social Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1999. *Trust: A Sociological Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2002. *Socjologia: analiza społeczeństwa* (Sociology: The Analysis of Society). Krakow: Znak Publishers.
- Sztompka, Piotr, ed. 1996. *Robert K. Merton on Social Structure and Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.