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REVIEW:

Tomasz Zarycki, *Kapitał kulturowy. Inteligencja w Polsce i w Rosji* [Cultural Capital: the Intelligentsia in Poland and in Russia], Warszawa 2008, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 346 pp., appendices, bibl.

Tomasz Zarycki is the author of dozens of articles on political geography and sociology, published in English, Russian or Polish in prestigious periodicals and by European and American publishing houses. Strikingly, the characteristic feature of these scholarly achievements is a close link between theoretical considerations and the matter-of-fact knowledge of the past and present of European countries. The author's evident concern is to make sure that the general categories in which he encapsulates the chaos of events and conditions of a rapidly changing world can prove their analytical practicality. One such example may be the way he uses the popular 'model of centre-peripheral relations', whose application in his works turns out to be especially effective.¹ Zarycki shows the possible relativism and multifaceted character of this model, where Poland and even the whole of Central and Eastern Europe can serve as a periphery of Western Europe just like, e.g. Silesia of central Poland, or the province of

¹ Tomasz Zarycki, 'Interdyscyplinarny model stosunków centro-peryferijnych. Propozycje teoretyczne', *Studia Regionalne i Lokalne*, 1 (2007), 5-26.

Kielce of Warsaw and Cracow.² There is still, perhaps, some research to be done to specify more precisely the concept of periphery and possible aspects of its relations to central areas, however, the abundance of conclusions the author draws from the ostensibly simple system of domination and dependence cannot be overestimated. His description of the attitudes generated by such an unequal system, especially the conduct of the intellectual elites situated either in the (relative) centre, or in the peripheral area, is unparalleled and makes one think of the whole swarm of historical examples, in which the attitudes characterized in this way, often ambivalent, have indeed manifested themselves and are richly documented in literature. The author himself is economical in introducing his examples, nevertheless, his outlines of the Polish attitudes towards the West and Russia, the dialectics of 'victimization' and 'occidentalism' (which he has discussed in a separate study),³ the demonstration of superiority and revealing of the inferiority complex by the intelligentsia of peripheral countries prove that he can be successful in applying theoretical assumptions.

The theoretical concept which has inspired Zarycki especially deeply and for a longer period is the category of 'capitals', the social and cultural ones, competing against the economic one. Pierre Bourdieu is the father of this concept; it was adjusted to the realities of East-Central Europe especially by Ivan Szelenyi,⁴ and modified in a couple of essays by the author discussed here. This very concept has become in its mature shape the basis for the dissertation which is being reviewed now.

The book consists of three parts, clearly distinct yet comprising a logical entity, the conclusion and the appendices. In part one the author presents the already existing definitions and vicissitudes of the concept of the 'cultural capital', its applications, not always fortunate, for the analysis of social transformations in East-Central Europe, and finally his own proposals, linking this concept with the centre-peripheral perspective. This critical part concludes with recognizing a special role the intelligentsia plays in creating and defending the symbolic power of the cultural capital in its different forms.

Part two gives an account, in an interesting and competent way, of the major threads of public disputes in Poland and Russia, concerning the role, status, and further prospects for the intelligentsia, its placing in relation to the holders of the economic capital and the state authority. In this comparative review the author verifies the applicability of the category of 'cultural capital' and its typological bifurcations that he has himself developed, and next emphasizes the main differences between the Polish and Russian situations, resulting in disparate orientations of the two discourses.

The most extensive portion of the book (part three) is an account of the empirical research, i.e. the auditorium questionnaire, completed simultaneously (in autumn 2004) by the students of the 'representative group of Moscow and Warsaw universities'. Certainly, it is not the job of a historian to assess the sampling methods

² *Idem*, 'Cultural capital and the political role of the intelligentsia in Poland', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, xix, 4 (2003).

³ *Idem*, 'Uciemiona forpoczta Zachodu. Wiktyimizacja i okcydentalizacja we współczesnym polskim dyskursie regionalnym', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, XLIX (2005), 115-33.

⁴ See the preface to Ivan Szelenyi, Donald Treiman and Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski (eds.), *Elity w Polsce, w Rosji i na W grzech* (Warszawa, 1995).

and the statistical presentation and interpretation of the results. However, I can ascertain that the questionnaire of the survey (presented in the annex in both — partially different from each other — language versions) is penetrating, and it has interestingly selected indices for the mentality, world views, and cultural interests of the surveyed students: the questions concerning favourite kinds of music, or the choice of a daily newspaper, can serve as a good example. The author of the book is aware that the results of such a survey cannot be referred to the Polish or — accordingly — the Russian intelligentsia and even to the whole group of the students in these two states: he clearly maintains that he is against such an extension of the scale (pp. 261-2). Nevertheless, one can admit that the institutions of higher education in the capital cities of the two countries play a leading role in educating future professional and intellectual elites, and thus the world of values of their students can be at least significant enough to be able to allow one to construct hypotheses regarding the social orientation and ideals of the mutually compared strata of the two neighbouring nations.

Probably, the most important conclusion of this comparison is Zarycki's claim that the communist regime in Russia, far longer lasting and more oppressive than in Poland, shaped there a much less egalitarian and more class denned society, where the actual access to higher and better education became, to an extent greater than in our country, a hereditary privilege of self-reproducing elites. These hypotheses will require, of course, further, more systematic verification.

The methodological aim of the author was to check the analytical potential of the 'capital' categories he applied, in particular with reference to such societies which in Europe can be classified as peripheral (p. 271). In my opinion, the differences, which were detected in the study, between the social viewpoints of the nurseries for the Polish and Russian intelligentsias are interesting enough to justify the conviction of the usefulness of the selected method, and of the accurate composition of the work, which allows one to confront the empirical data with the analysis of the discourse.

One can obviously ask oneself and the author the question if the scholarly approach he tested deserves to be called a theory, or whether it is, perhaps — as often happens in social studies — a language key, a system of categories which allows one to sensibly divide and separate fluid and by nature non-structuralized phenomena and processes. Such a key would, as a matter of fact, become the subject for the assessment of its operational usefulness, yet it is worthwhile to think whether the arguments formulated with its help could be expressed, with no significant losses, in another language code, or even in colloquial language. Reading Zarycki's dissertation, I came to believe that such a translation would be possible, and what is more, that the author sometimes does it himself when he presents one and the same argument, once using the concept of the 'capitals', and immediately after that repeating it without such terms.

For example: the author writes (p. 226) that the internal debate within the Union of Freedom and its successor, the Democratic Party, concerned the question if the party

should have recourse primarily to the traditional intelligentsia ethos with its emphasis on moral values and aid for the disadvantaged, or whether it

should become oriented towards the professionally and economically defined middle class as a new embodiment of the intelligentsia ...

And in the next sentence he expresses the view that these debates 'can be described according to the earlier defined categories of the sub-fields [!] of the cultural capital'. Indeed it can:

On the one hand, it is possible to highlight within the party a stand in favour of defining its identity in terms of the institutionalized cultural capital (closer to the economic capital), on the other hand, in terms of the intelligentsia informal cultural capital of the milieu, which can even be defined in terms of its opposition to the field of the economic capital (pp. 226-7).

The aim of such a translation is, of course, to classify a certain particular historical situation under the category of events that can be placed and characterized within the author's typology, which enables comparisons. It is not difficult, however, to notice within this example (and similar ones are not rare) that a simple sentence, understandable for every educated person, became, after the transformation, an expression with a significantly diminished comprehensibility and quite a pretentious style. Such a loss tends to be, unfortunately, common in social sciences, even though suffering it does not seem to be justified and necessary in every case.

In the author's defence, one can say that he himself uses his terminology in a possibly clear and linguistically correct way. Simultaneously, he is aware of, and draws the attention of his readers to, the fact that ultimately the title expression is nothing but a metaphor, an impressive transfer of the trustworthy and old fairly well-defined concept of 'capital' into the sphere to which it was not previously related. In addition, while the 'cultural capital' in Zarycki's dictionary is a relatively unambiguous concept, the 'social capital' is nebulous in character, bearing explicitly too many meanings, which the author himself attempted to distinguish in a separate work.⁵

At the same time, one should not expect, in my opinion, that much more precision could be gained through some arbitrary definitional regulations, because those usually serve the translation of one expression by others, not necessarily better defined. One should sooner accept the fact that social and historical sciences need to use, within certain limits, terms which are not entirely clarified and 'porous', and that replacing colloquial language with the language created by a scholar does not always increase the exactitude and comprehensibility of his or her expression.

With this general reservation, one has to admit that Tomasz Zarycki's literary strategy produces some interesting results. His characteristics of the ethos of the Russian and Polish intelligentsias, based on the outcome of the above mentioned surveys, but in their interpretation also referring to the dissimilarity of the histories of the two nations and the experience of their strata engaged

⁵ Tomasz Zarycki, 'Kapitał społeczny a trzy polskie drogi do nowoczesności', *Kultura i Społecze stwo*, xlviii, 2 (2004), 45-65.

in creating new ideas, appear to me as convincing, which can make a suitable starting point for further comparative studies in this matter. The concepts of the 'conversion of capitals', their mutual substitution, or compensation of the deficit of any of them, turn out to be instrumentally effective in the model presentation of how the intelligentsia of one or the other country handles their social, cultural, and political heritage, and how this group, in competition with others, utilizes and presents its values.

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