

Interview with Professor Jadwiga Staniszkis

Taking Responsibility



Tatiana Jachyra

Professor Staniszkis is present on the academic as well as a public scene

Academia: Professor Staniszkis, this issue of our magazine is devoted to the city in its various aspects. We know that you are very active in your local community, the Warsaw suburb of Podkowa Leśna. What changes associated with globalization do you perceive on the local level?

Professor Jadwiga Staniszkis: Podkowa Leśna was founded in the 1930s as a kind of place that is a community. A whole range of institutions were established here from the outset, and in terms of its urban planning the locality was laid out so as to provide for public space as well. It constitutes a model that

is increasingly needed and current in our ever more global world. The concept of citizen, after all, is changing in connection with globalization. The role of the citizen manifested exclusively through political rights is diminishing, since the role of politics and the state is undergoing rapid transformation. Politics and the state are just two of many dimensions that have an impact upon our society. On the other hand, the significance of citizenship as it was understood in the conservative German Enlightenment (different than the French Enlightenment) is increasing. Namely, a citizen is someone who, among other things, is

able to take concrete responsibility for people in his or her surroundings, and who manifests this citizenship in a constant oscillation between subjugation and dignity. And who finally understands what divided sovereignty means, i.e. loyalty to one's community and loyalty to many other communities that develop upwards.

What role can be played by the sociologist, by the scientist, on the higher level of politics? You played a part in the formation of Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS), a party that formed a government in the 1990s with Jerzy Buzek as prime minister.

With hindsight, how do you evaluate your activity on the high political level?

I still recall to this day how I received a call from the Strike Committee in August 1980, requesting me to come. My first reaction was: "No, I don't want to go, because I am writing about this just now." I didn't want to be too close. I went and stayed there two weeks, taking part in the negotiations. I was there until the end, until the strikers signed an agreement with the government. Next I was active in Solidarity's *Wszechnice*, or underground lectures. Then, in the 90s I became the so-called "godmother" of the AWS - I was one of those who persuaded trade union activists to get involved in politics. I believed that this would contribute a necessary corporative element to the difficult Polish transformation. I felt that this would be a mechanism that would extend the time horizon of the decisions that employers and employees make, building their mutual confidence. This was not successful. This was a mistake. Because people from Solidarity did bring corporative methods - negotiations, secrecy, and vested interests - but they brought them to politics directly, without forming the necessary structures between politics and the economy. This was a bad experience. I felt guilty. And it seems to me now that the most important thing really is educational activity, which can be done by the sociologist. Especially since transformation is a process, and this post-Communist transformation violated something that is called post-Communist anthropological rationality; it violated the feeling that what individual people are doing, including towards building capitalism, makes sense. Capitalism is not coming into being here as it did in the western world. There the process proceeded gradually; small entrepreneurs first operated, then the scale of the market expanded, and new institutions arose. And all of this made sense on the micro scale. For us, things are the

reverse. It is as if the post-Communist space has had institutions "injected" into it that frequently come from a completely different stage of capitalism. The sequence of liberalization proved to be wrong. Financial markets were dealt with first, while the realm of production was over-regulated - because the European Union is over-regulated - and this disrupted the feeling that things made sense. And it seems to me that the lack of understanding of where the country is headed is just as burdensome, because it gives people an incredible feeling of risk, uncertainty, powerlessness, which is also equally burdensome. What sociologists or social psychologists can do today is to help rebuild this feeling that things make sense.

Do you perceive then some sort of special role for scientists, sociologists, in post-Communist countries as opposed to their colleagues from Western Europe?

I think that a heritage of intelligentsia - which is different than being an intellectual or a professional - is still present in Poland, or in Central Europe generally, as well as in Russia, Belarus. Intellectuality entailed a kind of being knowledgeable about everything, albeit in perhaps a somewhat amateur way, as well as a kind

of social obligation. Educated people in countries that oftentimes did not have their own state for centuries had an encoded internal obligation that one must abide by certain cultural standards and standards of collective life. And this was accepted by society. My generation, and people a bit younger, still function within this ethos. People significantly younger already simply want to be experts, professionals.

Seeing as the ethos of the intelligentsia and of abiding by such standards is perishing, what role can young, educated people play in Poland, in your opinion? What impact can they have on Poland's modernization?

Poland faces challenges that are perhaps more fascinating and difficult than finishing off Communism, which was at that time like a kind of house of cards - since the first decisions and discussions in Moscow about withdrawing military forces from Poland came in 1983-84. And so this was a house of cards, practically without the support of the Warsaw Pact, and toppling it was not all that difficult. But joining the world system with such arrears, with such a gap, including an intellectual gap - this is a big challenge. We in Central Europe have essentially never experienced a nomina-



Lech Wałęsa after having signed the August 1980 accords. One of the most important points of the agreement was the government's consent to allow independent trade unions to be established

Stanisław Składanowski

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list intellectual revolution. Central Europe, especially Catholic, agrarian countries like Poland, remained within the circle of inconclusive Thomism, suspended somewhere between Platonism and Aristotelianism. Something that today does not allow us to understand the diktat of form, or another principle of representation that is present in European politics. There, the social entity manifests itself via procedural games, not via the political entity. And I think that there is a great gap here, which could be filled (in terms of making it transparent) by university graduates of social science faculties. After graduating in sociology, or also history or philosophy, young people could return to their own communities in order to work in local bodies of authority or administration, in local government or educational institutions. This is needed very much.

Do your students, who belong to a very individualistically oriented generation, want to get involved in political activity?

They are much more willing to get involved in public activity, not political activity. Public activity that is carried out on the level of regions, local governments, various sorts of public institutions. Young people take a very critical view of party politics, and so they do not want to take part in it. During the course of the transformation, a formula emerged whereby political capital is converted into personal economic benefits. We observe that every party that won elections has politicized the state to an essentially outrageous extent, to the detriment of effective action. There is also corruption in Poland, some sort of unheard-of "mafia-ization" of politics; the phenomenon of oligarchization exists. As a result of all of this, young people are very clearly inclined towards public activity, towards helping society organize itself, and do not enter into politics as it is traditionally understood.

Can some sort of generational change now be seen in Polish humanities? Is

there a young generation of people who want to engage in pure science?

There are not many of them. For economic reasons, first off. Let's bear in mind that the number of university students has doubled, while spending on science has gone down. Furthermore, the local conditions, libraries, and university infrastructure are not appropriate. Besides this, salaries are low in the field of science. But the chief problem at this point is the process of renewing the young cadre. As a result of economic difficulties, universities have practically ceased to have full-time junior lecturer positions, and classes are being taught by Ph.D students. Doctoral candidates are selected in terms of whether they are "all-around brains," whether they are able to teach classes in very different places, faculties, etc. These are no longer the sort of people who are fixed upon a certain issue, closed off from the world, or oriented towards pure science. This has a negative impact on the quality of science. And in my opinion we generally have a feeling that when the people who are now about 50 years old are no longer here, they will essentially have no successors in a great many fields and issues. Whole fields of sociology are not being renewed.

Does the educational boom that we are observing in Poland and the quality of Poles' education subsequently translate into better opportunities on the labor market?

Private consulting companies seek out people who have the ability to think in systemic terms. For example, many consulting companies that deal with economic or institutional issues employ electronics, cybernetics, and systems engineers. And I think that if the social sciences do not undergo a revolution in a certain sense, they will face stagnation. A revolution in the sense that the social sciences become less interested in traditional methods of researching opinions, and

move over to analyzing structures or what limits people, taking a very innovative approach to the issue of culture – viewed not as a system of values, but rather as cognitive structures. Based on my research, what is decisive is this: what assumptions underlie the way the world exists, and the ways it is perceived. This, for example, is something that distinguishes between institutional strategies in Asia and Central Europe in post-Communist countries. I think that Polish sociology is changing too slowly. It took a giant leap during the times of Solidarity, because this was a challenge. But it is changing too little with respect to the second challenge, i.e. bringing the post-Communist peripheries into the global world.

Interviewed by
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works at the PAN Institute of Political Studies and at Warsaw University. She deals with the sociology of politics, Soviet studies, and the sociology of organizations. One of the leaders of the student protests at Warsaw University in 1968, she was arrested and accused of organizing the rally. She was thrown out of the University, but returned to it in 1981. In August 1980, at the invitation of the Gdańsk Shipyard Strike Committee, she participated in negotiations with the government authorities. She is the author of many books, including: *Patologie struktur organizacyjnych (Pathologies of Organizational Structures)* (1983), *Poland: Self-Limiting Revolution* (1985), *The Ontology of Socialism* (1992), *Post-Communism: The Emerging Enigma* (2000), and *Postcommunism: próba opisu (Post-Communism: An Attempt at Description)* (2001). And the most recent book: *The Power of Globalization*.