Ina Alber's interesting book, *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in Polen*. Ein biographietheoretischer und diskursanalytischer Zugang*, published in 2016 in the series *Theorie und Praxis der Diskursforschung [Theory and Praxis of Discourse Studies]* edited by Reiner Keller. Alber, who currently works at the Institute of Sociology Faculty of Economics and Sociology University of Lodz, Poland, has been investigating into Polish civil society for a decade, and the discussed book is based on her PhD dissertation. The main objective of her research is to study how the concept of civil society is being constantly constructed through interpretation and negotiation of meaning in the public discourse, and especially in the individual biographical narratives in the context of post-socialist Poland. The crucial research question reads as follows: "How do the activists succeed in updating, adapting, and transforming their interpretative schemes and action patterns learned in the process of socialization in order to create their engagement in civil society?" (p. 21).

The corpus of empirical data consists of 13 biographical-narrative interviews with people who define themselves as civil society activists in the field of human rights or in supporting the development of democratic society. The analytical procedure applied in Alber’s research project is framed by the grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and detailed case reconstruction is aimed at exploring sequences of events in the life course that lead to civil engagement in times of transformation in Poland.

The interviews are gathered and analyzed in reference to the biographical method rooted in Gabriele Rosenthal’s approach (2002, 2010). As a result, two types of interpretations of doing civil engagement were identified by the author, that is, the qualification type (people who believe that each society must be based on knowledge and expertise, and they are those who “carry the torch of education” in order to make a difference; see: Chapter 4) and the empowerment type (people who consider fight for the rights of excluded individuals and want to strengthen their ability to participate in social life; see: Chapter 5). Subchapters are titled here after masked names of the interviewees and argumentative principles organizing their attitude towards their civil engagement. Thus, in Chapter 4, we find, for instance, the following statements: “democracy needs qualified civil society experts” or “My passion became my profession.” In Chapter 5, the following proclamations—“We must be able to change something,” “I am a civil society,” or “There are only a few people like me in Poland”—outline the content. It must be stressed, however, that most of the informants are left-liberal descendants of Polish intelligentsia socialized and educated in the People’s Republic of Poland (there are only two exceptions in this collection of people born in the 1980s last century). Their biographical experiences are rooted in the everyday reality of the state-socialist society that is described with all its limitations and restrictions concerning free movement of people, freedom of thought, freedom of assembly, et cetera. It is interesting, however, that these issues are taken into account by the narrators and usually discussed as a negative part...
of a contrast set. Its second part consists of new
democratic vision of society being built in Poland
after 1989—a “better world” which only needs “pol-
ishing.” Data collected in other research projects
show that in cohorts born in the 1960s and 1970s
(i.e., similarly to most narrators in Zivilgesellschaft-
lisches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographie-theoretischer und
diskursanalytischer Zugang) this is not always
the case. Consequently, the question arises: Is this
typical or even essential feature of civil society in-
volvement? But, it also begs the question, then, what
is the role of individual suffering in “provoking”
and propelling civil engagement?

For it is puzzling that most of the interviewees ex-
perienced some sort of exclusion or stigmatization
at the very early stages of their life, either because
of living among antagonistic ethnic groups (the
case of Wojtek Wejda and Aleksander Trochowski),
or because of being a child of an alcoholic (the case
of Krystyna Pietrzak), or because of severe illness
(Pawel Tomaski). Their involvement in civil society
organizations seems to serve as an “empowering”
mechanism not only for those whom they help but
also (if not in the first place) for themselves. Civil
engagement seems to give them both recognition
and resigns from exploring discourse analysis
any further.

Nonetheless, the focus on dialectic relation between
public discourse and individual narratives of social
actors constitutes a substantial research field. Zivilge-
sellschaftliches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographie-theoretischer und
diskursanalytischer Zugang should by
perceived as one of the most ambitious attempts in
research field. In addition, sometimes discourse analytic approach is
uncritically juxtaposed with the categories deriv-
ing from framing analysis (see, e.g., Snow and Ben-
ford 1988). In consequence, it is not clear to what
extent the order of knowledge can be reconstruc-
ted on the basis of discursive practices, or to what
degree these are the social actors’ interpretative
schemes that produce the legitimated knowledge
on civil society engagement.

Following Jürgen Kocka’s (2004) reading of this
central concept, Alber focuses on dimensions of
action patterns and social spheres within the civil
society, but distinguishes also a utopian layer in the
modes of social engagement designed for shaping
“a better world.” For Alber, civil society means si-
multaneously a kind of discourse constructed by
social actors and which constructs social reality, as
well as particular action patterns oriented towards

1 “The People’s Republic of Poland and the German Democratic
Republic in Memory and Biographical Experiences of People
Born between 1945-55. Sociological Comparison Based on
Biographical Comparison” founded by Polish-German
Scientific Foundation (PNF, 2012-13) or “Experience of the
Process of Transformation in Poland. Sociological Comparative
Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective” founded by the
National Science Centre in Poland (NCN, OPUS V), both co-
ordinated by the University of Lodz.

This choice to limit the scope to this one particu-
lar approach is probably dictated by the author’s
intention to deliver a consistent link between the
tradition of phenomenologically-oriented sociology
of knowledge and discourse studies. Keller’s SKAD
adopts Alfred Schütz’s, Peter Berger’s, and Thomas
Luckmann’s understanding of Lebenswelt, intersub-
jectivity and interdependence of common sense,
scientific and tacit knowledge. However, Keller’s
concept of discourse as a social praxis of ascribing
the meaning to people, objects, and situations, and
at the same time of reconstructing the collective or-
der of knowledge, is eclectic and to a certain degree
incoherent itself because it juxtaposes phenome-
nological premises with Foucauldian inspiration
without a critical reflection on the contradictions
between the evoked approaches—first of all, on the
clash of individual’s agency and impersonal, social-
ly-dispersed power of discourse (see: Keller 2005).
It seems that Alber takes Keller’s standpoint for grant-
ed and resigns from exploring discourse analysis
any further.

It should be emphasized, however, that theoretical
generalizations presented in the book are drawn from
detailed case reconstructions that take into
consideration not only the biographical narrative
interview texts but also further sources like, for ex-
ample, archive materials, newspaper articles, his-
tory textbooks, and scientific literature. Moreover,
Alber attempts to empirically show the mutual rela-
tionship between individual biography and public
discourses.

The methodology of discourse analysis applied by
Alber refers basically only to Reiner Keller’s Sociol-
ygy of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD,
German Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse [WDA]).

This choice to limit the scope to this one particu-
lar approach is probably dictated by the author’s
intention to deliver a consistent link between the
tradition of phenomenologically-oriented sociology
of knowledge and discourse studies. Keller’s SKAD
adopts Alfred Schütz’s, Peter Berger’s, and Thomas
Luckmann’s understanding of Lebenswelt, intersub-
jectivity and interdependence of common sense,
scientific and tacit knowledge. However, Keller’s
concept of discourse as a social praxis of ascribing
the meaning to people, objects, and situations, and
at the same time of reconstructing the collective or-
der of knowledge, is eclectic and to a certain degree
incoherent itself because it juxtaposes phenome-
nological premises with Foucauldian inspiration
without a critical reflection on the contradictions
between the evoked approaches—first of all, on the
clash of individual’s agency and impersonal, social-
ly-dispersed power of discourse (see: Keller 2005).
It seems that Alber takes Keller’s standpoint for grant-
ed and resigns from exploring discourse analysis
any further.

Nonetheless, the focus on dialectic relation between
public discourse and individual narratives of social
actors constitutes a substantial research field. Zivilge-
sellschaftliches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographie-theoretischer und
diskursanalytischer Zugang should by
perceived as one of the most ambitious attempts in
research field. In addition, sometimes discourse analytic approach is
uncritically juxtaposed with the categories deriv-
ing from framing analysis (see, e.g., Snow and Ben-
ford 1988). In consequence, it is not clear to what
extent the order of knowledge can be reconstruc-
ted on the basis of discursive practices, or to what
degree these are the social actors’ interpretative
schemes that produce the legitimated knowledge
on civil society engagement.

Following Jürgen Kocka’s (2004) reading of this
central concept, Alber focuses on dimensions of
action patterns and social spheres within the civil
society, but distinguishes also a utopian layer in the
modes of social engagement designed for shaping
“a better world.” For Alber, civil society means si-
multaneously a kind of discourse constructed by
social actors and which constructs social reality, as
well as particular action patterns oriented towards
common good. In the case of the Polish society, the author claims that the origins of civil society date back to the period of the Nobles’ Democracy and the Constitution of 3rd May 1791 adopted by the Great Sejm. Interestingly, among Alber’s respondents there are descendants of the members of the Great Sejm. Though, it is the Solidarność Movement in the 1980s which serves as the most common reference in the discourse and biographical narratives on civil engagement. In *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographietheoretischer und diskursanalytischer Zugang*, the times of Polish People’s Republic are depicted in contrastive colors as a non-democratic epoch when, however, many collective activities flourished in opposition to the authoritarian policy of the then regime. Taking into account this socio-historical context, the author points out that in post-transition Poland the discourse of civil society could have been implemented quite efficiently, but only within the logic of a mimicry of Western liberal democracies. Alber argues that in the Polish case, the notion of civil society was introduced not until ten years ago, and she highlights Paweł Załęski’s remark that “Civil society discourse started from considerations of Western academics on political opposition in Poland, and not from the activities of the opposition itself” (Załęski 2013:4).

Though Alber wrote a well-argued book, the socio-political situation in Poland changes nowadays so dynamically that her analysis seems to be already partly outdated in the moment of its publication. The author is obviously right when she points out that the transformation triggered the birth of civil society institutions, like NGOs and non-profit associations, and led to their gradual professionalization. However, Alber focuses only on the left-liberal social activists and NGOs (with stress put on the leftist think-tank and publishing house “Krytyka Polityczna”), which advocate the empowerment and inclusion of oppressed social groups or minorities, and can be perceived as implementing to some extent the Habermasian model of public communication. What is more, the majority of the respondents has a particular family background—they belong to intelligentsia, which makes them unrepresentative of the Polish society as a whole (but, Alber presents also facts and figures which give a more nuanced insight into the condition of civil society in Poland).

The author claims that “after 1989 the significance of legitimizing their exclusive, populist project of democracy.

References


