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Book Review

Alber, Ina. 2016. *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographietheoretischer und diskursanalytischer Zugang*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS

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On the one hand, watching a particular society through the lens of a “curious” outsider may result in developing a more critical and emotionally distanced perspective than the one of native researchers. On the other hand, the author not ingrained in the local reality may overlook a specific context of internal conflicts and ideological tensions in a given society. This is the case of Ina Alber’s interesting book, *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographietheoretischer und diskursanalytischer Zugang* [Civil Engagement in Poland. Biographical Method and Discourse Analytic Approach], 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 at Georg-August University in Göttingen, 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).

Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographietheoretischer und diskursanalytischer Zugang consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 gives a brief introduction to main theoretical and methodological frames of the study. In Chapter 2, the author presents the

basic guidelines of social phenomenology and sociology of knowledge, as well as phenomenologically-oriented biographical analysis and discourse analysis. Chapter 3 discusses changes in interpretation of civil engagement in Poland from the period of partitions in the 18th century to nowadays. In Chapters 4 and 5, Alber compares two models of civil engagement which were found and reconstructed on the basis of collected empirical data, that is, life histories of acting individuals: 1) engagement as qualification and 2) engagement as empowerment. Finally, Chapter 6 offers concluding remarks aimed at emphasizing the peculiarity of Polish experience with the idea of civil society.

In order to study civil society in doing, Alber proposes a triangulation (Flick 2006; Denzin 2012) of two separately developed methods: biographical method and discourse analysis. The author suggests that the approaches used here are to explore mutual influence between individual experiences and collective phenomena (re)produced in public discourse. This seems to be met only partially, since the latter are not exposed and focused in a detailed way in cases’ analysis.

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 “polishing.” Data collected in other research projects¹ show that in cohorts born in the 1960s and 1970s (i.e., similarly to most narrators in *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographietheoretischer und diskursanalytischer Zugang*) this is not always the case. Consequently, the question arises: Is this typical or even essential feature of civil society involvement? 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 experienced 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 (Paweł 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 response (Thomas 1969). It is even more puzzling, if we take into consideration the constellation of: one’s origin (as we already learned, most of the narrators were brought up in intelligentsia fami-

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 (PNFN 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 coordinated by the University of Lodz.

lies), biographical experiences, often very strongly influenced by severe individual suffering and public discourse. This issue is slightly overlooked in the analysis.

Moreover, we may only guess how the very interview situation in which a German researcher asks a Polish civil society activist to tell the story of her or his life influences the linguistic “production” of one’s life history. Although Alber takes into account historical and cultural context (pp. 92-93 and in introduction to each case), still some doubts remain. The presence of a “foreign listener” may both force the interviewee to be more detailed, if he or she assumes that the context of certain events may be unclear—not “a matter of course,” or, on the contrary, to be more general. It may also have an influence on the argumentative strategies and context descriptions (for instance, when one of the narrators, Wojtek Wejda, shares his family history [p. 185]).

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 example, archive materials, newspaper articles, history textbooks, and scientific literature. Moreover, Alber attempts to empirically show the mutual relationship between individual biography and public discourses.

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

This choice to limit the scope to this one particular 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*, intersubjectivity 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 order of knowledge, is eclectic and to a certain degree incoherent itself because it juxtaposes phenomenological 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, socially-dispersed power of discourse (see: Keller 2005). It seems that Alber takes Keller’s standpoint for granted 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. *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in Polen. Ein biographietheoretischer und diskursanalytischer Zugang* should be perceived as one of the most ambitious attempts in recent years at establishing common ground for biographical method and discourse analysis, and at triangulating these two approaches in one research project (see also: Tuijder 2007; Spies 2009). In the nexus of individual biographical narratives and public or media messages, discourse functions as a resource of collective symbols, values, and meanings

which are imprinted on individual’s self-positioning, patterns of acting, and interpretative schemes, defined by Alber (and by Keller) closely to—accordingly—social practice and typification.

Alber, in an abductive manner, reconstructs Polish discourse of civil engagement on the basis of enunciations present in the print media, academic writings, and new media content (websites, blogs, social media, etc.). However, in the presentation of the study results, discourse analysis is limited to an appendix to the biographical method which plays a major part in this research project. Alber searches out fragments of public discourse on civil society in the narratives of her respondents, but does not offer any holistic and systematic analysis of discursive practices in her research field. In addition, sometimes discourse analytic approach is uncritically juxtaposed with the categories deriving from framing analysis (see, e.g., Snow and Benford 1988). In consequence, it is not clear to what extent the order of knowledge can be reconstructed 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 simultaneously 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 professionaliza-

tion. 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 engagement for the socialist community changed into the engagement for the democratic welfare of the general public" (p. 282).

However, democratization in Poland—like in many other European countries—turned out to be a Janus-faced phenomenon. In recent years, voices favoring traditional, conservative views that critically look at the transformation process and do not see the European Union as a chance to bridge "the civilization gap" and liberal culture as one Poland should integrate with have been revoked. Thus, the question arises, if or to what extent the identified in Alber's research types of engagement are applicable to those civil activists who are of different political views (especially non-liberal or non-leftist). Nowadays, these are the right-wing civil activists and politicians who become more and more visible in the public debate in Poland and who often deliberately use the notion of civil society with the aim of legitimizing their exclusive, populist project of democracy.

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