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Sociology of Culture

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Stanisław Krawczyk: Professor Griswold – during your doctoral years at Harvard in the late 1970s, you met Harrison C. White, a sociologist famous for his research on social networks. You also came in contact with Richard A. Peterson, a scholar from Vanderbilt University who was developing the production of culture perspective. And the circle of doctoral students at Harvard at the time included other researchers who would become influential figures in sociology – for instance, Paul DiMaggio. How did those relationships influence your career?

Wendy Griswold: At this period cultural sociology was just beginning to take form in its contemporary version. Prior to the 1970s, there was the sociology of culture if you studied art, literature, etc. Not very many people did so but it was possible. However, anything broader was usually associated with Parsons and structural functionalism, with studying the relations of the cultural system to other systems. By the 1970s most Americans were no longer persuaded by that, but the alternative was a sort of Marxian idea: culture is pretty much epiphenomenal and you really want to be looking at structure and material or economic life, and the relations of production, and all that. Neither of those positions gave much independence or autonomy to culture per se.

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It was during the 1970s that there began emerging what became a very robust field where people looked at culture as potentially independent or having complex relationships – not the simple reflection-type relationship – with social structure. And I was lucky enough to be in graduate school when this was happening. One of my professors that you did not mention who was very important to that was Ann Swidler. She was an assistant professor at Harvard when I was there. Richard Peterson was not on the Harvard faculty, but he came there often for summer schools and other things, and I got to know him. Paul [DiMaggio] was a student a year or two years ahead of me. And then Harrison White, who was actually the chair of my dissertation committee.

Harrison White did publish with his wife an important book in the sociology of art, a book on the impressionists,¹ but he is not primarily known as a cultural sociologist. Regardless, I think he has been very influential in the lives of everyone that he touched. He was such a powerful intellectual model, he was interested in everything and had a very intense mind. For instance, in most seminars you have a set of readings, and everybody reads the same book or books. And he would come in to our seminar with a huge pile of books that were all different. He would just throw them onto the table and have everybody take one: a book about Anglo-Saxon law, or another one about the Indian caste system. Totally different books. And Harrison would have everybody read a separate book, then come back and talk about the social organization in that particular work. This was a very unusual way of doing things, and I think he inspired everyone, not because of what that he was particularly teaching, but just because of his quality of mind. I do not think he had a great deal of commitment to sociology of literature or cultural sociology as we understand it, but he inspired intellectual development from everyone. A really remarkable, remarkable person.

We also used to have – as I am sure the students in Poland do – graduate student groups that would get together and just talk. Paul DiMaggio and I, and several other people who were interested in culture, would get together and read Bakhtin and Robert Venturi, and works on postmodern architecture; just the books that had caught our attention, but weren't part of any curriculum. Our groups would get together at 7:30 in the morning, or late in the evening, and talk about these books. Paul was very involved in that.

Do you think all this had any palpable effect on your later work? Or would you rather say that it was a part of the general intellectual atmosphere in which you developed as a scholar?

1 Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

For my individual work, all this gave me inspiration to study what I wanted to study, and do the research that I wanted to do, and not give a lot of thought to what the field was, or what the current job prospects were. It is very competitive, getting a position in the academic world, and so a lot of students in the American system tend to think, "What areas am I likely to find a position in?" Working with people like Harrison, you did not think that way at all. I mean, I did my sociology dissertation on Renaissance plays, and you need to have a certain intellectual self-confidence to do that.

I think that has carried through. For instance, later I did work on Nigerian writers and studied topics that did not obviously fit even into the sociology of culture. That tendency to feel quite free to follow my research inclinations definitely comes from Harrison and the atmosphere at Harvard in the late 1970s. Other than that, I believe I also went along with the discipline, as the field as a whole moved away from the two extremes that you have mentioned.

I imagine that when Polish postgraduate students come across the interview and read about the competition in the late 1970s or the early 1980s in the US, they may think about the current situation in Poland, where there is also a clear shortage of workplaces in academia.

Of course that is true in today's United States as well. But I think the general idea was, "Just figure out what you are interested in because if you follow your inclinations, your passions, and what is really important to you, you will do better work." My research on Renaissance plays represents a rather extreme case of working like that. And if you try to figure out, "there is a growing market in organizational sociology, so I think I will do work in organizational sociology," your work won't be as good. Apart from Harrison, Ann Swidler was also important in that area. She very much encouraged me to choose research topics without worrying where the discipline was, and to just follow my inclinations. I try to do that with students as well.

I am thinking that the book that grew up from your doctoral dissertation² might be one of the most literary books in your career; "literary" in terms of reaching to works by literary scholars, to the whole of Elizabethan scholarship.

I had done my Master's degree in English, and I was pretty familiar with that world. So merging the two and drawing on literary scholarship came

² Wendy Griswold, *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre, 1576-1980* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

quite naturally when I was writing my dissertation. Even though it was strictly in sociology – it wasn't a joint dissertation – that was still pretty familiar to me.

During your later career, did you move away from this kind of literary scholarship? Or were there further points or periods – perhaps the whole timespan of your career – when you did similar things?

The other major study that I did was on the Nigerian novel³ and the problem there was that there was not that much scholarship. So I had to create the data that I then analyzed. It is a whole different thing than when you are working on Shakespeare, when you have got this huge body of work to contend with. When you are working on Nigerian novels or African fiction, you have a very thin body of work and from the sociologist's point of view, you do not know what the data are. I had to put together the population – not a sample, but the population – of Nigerian novels, because nobody had done it. And so, I identified about 500 novels (I was able to actually read about 475 of them).

So it is a whole different story, a different project. I think it was equally literary work in that I spent about half that book talking about the content of the novels, but it was another kind of project just because there wasn't much critical work available. That would be a little different now, but just a little. You know, you have a lot of theoretical work about post-colonialism and so forth, but nothing like the body of work that you would have on the Renaissance, or on more modern European or American literature.

When I still studied Polish language and literature, many of us were aware that so much had been written on the great Romantic poets or playwrights of the Polish tradition, like Adam Mickiewicz... It could have been crippling to students, I suppose.

Oh, sure! And the literary scholars who are not sociologically oriented would say, "You're barely scratching the surface!," and that's definitely true, because as a social scientist you have different objectives. There's a fruitful tension. But when you are studying something that has not been recognized yet, you have different problems: knowing what the data are, knowing what the contours are. On the other hand, you do not have the burden of the past, the heavy weight of critical tradition.

3 Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Does your further work on literary regionalism fall into the same category? Studying literature, but in the fields where there is not as much literary scholarship as in the case of Elizabethan plays?

That's probably true. There's a lot of research on specific regional cultures (say, the literature of the American South as a big case of regionalism), but not that much work on regionalism in general. In the first book that I did in that area, *Regionalism and the Reading Class*,⁴ I wrote on Norway and Italy, and several American cases, and so on. Thinking across different regions and trying to understand what produces and what reproduces a place-space literature – this is probably something that hasn't been done very often.

We have come to the comparative, international – or transnational – aspect of your research. There have certainly been many difficulties to overcome in carrying out studies of Norway, Nigeria, Italy... Would you be able to tell me about some of these difficulties and the solutions you have applied to deal with them?

What I believe – and what I also tell students – is that you should not focus too much on the difficulties if there is something you want to do. You should do it!

Now, that said, there are certain things that you need to attend to. So, for example, I had originally done quite a bit of work on West Indian writers and West Indian novels, Barbadian writers, or Jamaican writers. I wanted to compare that with another social setting where the English novel had been reproduced, and so I was going to work at a place that had been an English colony. In former English colonies, and particularly in Africa, shorter works are sometimes written in African languages, but longer pieces – anything the size of the novel – are almost always written in English. This way I got around the limitations of language, which could have been a difficulty with comparative research. And sometimes you have to work with other people who know more about something than you do. In Norway, I worked with a Norwegian scholar and he was able to translate and understand things in a way that I could not.

So I do not see these things as difficulties. You have to think it through: "What can I do as a researcher, and how can I address the questions that I have, based on what I know and what I have going for me?" Sometimes that may require learning another language or spending a long period of time in another place if you are doing comparative work; sometimes not.

⁴ Wendy Griswold, *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Doing this kind of research probably requires a fairly high degree of comfort with uncertainty, particularly if you are working in a place like Nigeria. Also, a lot of things can come up that are a little scary, and not everybody would be comfortable with this. So you have to know yourself. But I am just very curious about other parts of the world and I like to travel, and I am not too easily intimidated, and so forth.

Still, you have to be realistic. I do not work in Kano in Nigeria. Recently there has been a lot of Boko Haram activity there. And I am not sure I will, as a Western scholar, come back to Kano anytime soon. So I am not just saying, "Throw yourself into anything," but you have to know what you are comfortable with and where you want to go to answer your questions, to do the sort of scholarship that you want to do.

Perhaps the importance of researchers' personalities could be a little more strongly emphasized in teaching.

I think that is true, and I see that with students. For example, I encourage students very often to do work in Africa. I am not an Africanist, but I try to say, "If you are interested in urbanization or gender, or social change, why not look at it in an African setting?" And sometimes that works; I had one student who is now at the University of Notre Dame, very successful, on his way to getting tenure. He studied health messages, specifically AIDS messages, in the United States and in Ghana. And I encouraged him, I said, "You should go to Ghana, you should do this there." But other students just are not comfortable with that.

So yes, I think personality has something to do with the type of research. For example, there are some people that do well in interviews, and others aren't skilled at that – maybe they do better in theoretical work, where they are working with texts.

Another thing about teaching: in 1994 you published a handbook⁵ which Marco Santoro later called "the first, and arguably still most influential, textbook in cultural sociology."⁶ In the acknowledgments to the third edition, you said that you taught yourself a lot by teaching students. Is there something you would like to say to other teachers of cultural sociology, or the sociology of literature?

5 Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in the Changing World* (4th ed.) (California: SAGE Publications, 2013).

6 Marco Santoro, "Culture As (and After) Production," *Cultural Sociology* 4 (2008).

I do not know if I have any particularly useful advice on that. I teach sociology of culture every year and I have done so for thirty years; *Cultures and Societies in the Changing World* basically came from lectures for a course that I taught. It has been revised a few times and I have changed the structure a little bit but not too much. It covers things that I think need to be covered.

The universities that I have taught at – the University of Chicago and Northwestern University – are both quite interdisciplinary. When you are teaching a sociology of culture class, you may well have students from outside of sociology; for instance, you may come upon a student of English who has never read Durkheim and Marx. So I include a fair amount of discussion of those theorists. I suppose every teacher has to think through what their audience is, what backgrounds their students have, and adjust the teaching accordingly. I would say my teaching in the textbook is aimed not strictly for students of sociology but for general students in the arts and sciences.

This may be good news for Polish literary students, including postgraduates. The book might be more approachable to them thanks to that.

Yes, I would hope so! In my program, I am on dissertation committees for students in English, and then French and Italian literature, and communications, political science, as well as sociology. That is very common in the US, though I suppose more unusual in Europe. So when we think of teaching, we think of these doctoral students in a variety of fields that might be interested most generally in the connection between social structures and cultural objects, such as literature, art, religion. I gather that at Polish universities sociology students study sociology in a sociology department and it's less routinely interdisciplinary.

Almost all my teaching is with doctoral students, I teach very little at the undergraduate level. One of the things that I tell my students is: get involved in any kind of editorial work. If there is a journal or an organized blog or whatever, get involved. I think students – and all of us – can learn a tremendous amount from that type of activity and sometimes this is not obvious to students. They are probably well aware that you should present your work at conferences, but I also think writing book reviews is a terrific thing to do, or reviewing for journals, or getting on editorial boards. Sometimes there is a prize for, say, student writing – getting on a committee that awards such prizes is truly useful professional training. This is not just about cultural sociologists, though it may be a little more for them than for other sociologists, because we tend to be more qualitative than quantitative and more on the side of working with words.

Getting back to the sociology of literature: in the late 1980s you co-edited a book about that field. And in the early 1990s, you wrote a paper on its state.⁷ How do you think sociology of literature may have changed since that time?

One of the things that have happened is big data. What used to be called content analysis twenty or thirty years ago has now become big data. Sometimes it is topic modelling, sometimes it's network analysis, sometimes it's the sort of thing that Franco Moretti does... You know, these big digitized datasets and the Google matrix, and so forth. I think that is the big change, the big thing that has happened in what we can call the sociology of literature (even though the category "sociology of literature" itself is not really prominent).

And that worries me a little, because it is a case of the methods being so attractive that they can determine the questions we ask. Some questions are not amenable to that type of research, so it is a little bit of a concern that these rather glamorous new methods may have the surprising effect of narrowing the field of inquiry.

In Poland there has been no real development of this kind, at least so far. For instance, we do not read Franco Moretti, although there has been a translation of one of his works in *Second Texts*.⁸ There is some work in the field of digital humanities, and there is a tradition of stylometry, but neither has ever been a defining part of the academic field. So perhaps it is all still in front of us.

It may come! And I guess what I am saying I would say more generally with digital humanities. In the US, there is a lot of money available for work in this area, it is very glamorous. And there are many questions that can be appropriately addressed with big data, and making things available through digitization has been a wonderful thing – that type of project, I am all for! But I think the humanities as a whole need to be wary of posing questions because of the available methods; that's not the right way to come up with research questions. So that is my concern.

Would you agree with James F. English that the very term "sociology of literature" has been muted over the last quarter century?

7 *Literature and Social Practice*, ed. Philippe Desan, Priscilla P. Ferguson and Wendy Griswold (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Wendy Griswold, "Recent Moves in the Sociology of Literature," *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993).

8 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *Distant Reading* (London – New York: Verso, 2013).

I do not think it was ever real big to begin with, to tell you the truth! There were a few of us who happened to be sociologists and happened to be working on literature, and we continued using what I guess was originally a Marxian term that was associated with György Lukács and people like him. But I do not think that, since the early 1970s, that was ever a very major term. And it is not now! But it does capture an approach in which you're looking at literature (or type of literature: Norwegian novels, Renaissance plays, etc.) as a particular cultural object and you are thinking like a sociologist. And I guess I mean two things by that.

The first thing is that you are looking at sociological variables and influences. That was what the Marxists did – Lucien Goldmann, Lukács, and the people in the 1960s and 1970s. They were looking at class influence and so forth.

But the other thing, the one I would emphasize more, is that you are putting together data in a systematic way. And you are setting up comparisons and hypotheses: if I am right, then I expect to see this, and if we see this pattern, then we can interpret it as this. It is some sort of a balance between an interpretive sociology and one that is related more to the scientific method and more, I say, systematic. My methods article⁹ and my whole way of thinking is very much an attempt to combine these two: the systematic data analysis of the sciences and the interpretive, meaning-centric approach of the humanities. In a sense, the sociology of literature thought of broadly is that impulse: to think sociologically and systematically, but about objects that are conceived of as carrying meaning, as capable of being interpreted by human agents.

In other words, what sociology of literature is about – or one of the things it is about – is research designed with a specific kind of cultural object in mind.

Yes, at least in my view. And again, some methods do not allow for that. This is a sort of caricature, but if you are mindlessly combing through piles of data or throwing stuff into a network machine to see what comes out, that can give you information but it does not allow for much by way of interpretation or understanding, meaning construction at group levels or individual levels, etc. This would be missing a part of what's interesting to me about culture, about cultural works, and literary works in particular.

By the way, I always say there is a difference between cultural sociology and cultural studies. Cultural sociology should be systematic. You should have

⁹ Wendy Griswold, "A Methodological Framework for the Sociology of Culture," *Sociological Methodology* 17 (1987).

a clear research question and a clear set of data, clear definitions, and a hypothesis: if I am right, I expect to see this, and if I am wrong, I won't see that, and what will that mean, and that kind of thing. On the other hand, cultural studies is more theoretically driven, more purely interpretative: powerful theory that is illustrated by some cultural materials. I do think it is an important distinction and since my students are doing cultural sociology, I very much try to encourage them to be systematic about it.

I have been able to locate an early version of your article on cultural geography as a method. This paper may have the strongest methodological component in your articles over the last several years. Has it actually been published?

No, we have not gotten very far with that. I was doing that with a student and then she went off to do a post-doc. We presented the work at one of the events of the American Sociological Association; we might get back to it in the future. I suppose my own research interests then got on the development of place, which is a geographic issue but is not about developing the techniques of mapping the way we had envisioned in that paper.

I suppose everybody has on their desk or in their mind things that are still half-baked, research projects that have not come to a conclusion. Sometimes they never do. I had a wonderful one years ago that we also presented at the ASA, looking at place images on state quarters, and what states adopted which images.

Those two examples, I think, are both great research projects I did with graduate students that have not reached a final stage. Perhaps they never will, and perhaps they will. But I would say to students: "That's good." I actually say it to graduate students all the time. They have their dissertation projects and they have to carry that through, but I think it is good to have a lot of research projects going on all at once. They may not all come to fruition but – this is a Harrison White thing – a lot of things are happening in a lively mind.

When I was in graduate school, I did a piece of research on the impact of the copyright law on the American novel.¹⁰ It had nothing to do with my dissertation, it had nothing to do with any requirements that I had, it was just something I got interested in. And I published it in the *American Journal of Sociology*, it was my first article, and it is probably the reason that I got my job [as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago]. But it was

¹⁰ Wendy Griswold, "American Character and the American Novel: An Expansion of Reflection Theory in the Sociology of Literature," *American Journal of Sociology* 4 (1981).

a study that was off to the side, off my primary focus on Renaissance theater. A second piece of research, which got stalled, was the work that I was doing on a West Indian writer George Lamming. I did that for the first couple of years at graduate school, then didn't do it for my dissertation, it sat unfinished and ten years later I dusted it off, finished it and published it as an article in 1987.

That has been my way and I think that is a good thing. We have a lot of interests, we have a lot of curiosity, so I think it is a good thing to have – even at the student stage, which was certainly my case – several research projects going. One of them will be your dissertation but others will be something else. Maybe they will get published sooner, maybe they will get published later, maybe they'll never get published but they will be intellectually stimulating and influence other work.

So, do not allow yourself to get monopolized by your dissertation topic?

Yes, though probably some professors would shudder to hear that advice. And it goes back to what we've said already: it depends on the individual, depends on the personality. But you know, you work on a dissertation for a few years, and there's a lot of interesting stuff going on in the world aside from what you're working on in your dissertation. Some of it you may want to pursue, collect some data and do a little writing, do a talk at a conference or sketch out an article, work with somebody else, you know, have a lot of balls in the air at once. I think that's one of the pleasures of intellectual life.

Both in Renaissance Revivals and in the aforementioned methodological article, you included some guidelines for cultural sociologists. Do those early formulations still stand?

I am sort of embarrassed to say, yes, they do! Particularly the article. I believe in that approach, I try to do so in my own research. Looking at agents as both producers and receivers, looking at their social locations, looking at the intellectual history, and looking at the social context... With the Nigerian book, for example, I try very much to do that.

In my advanced seminar on methods of cultural analysis, I start with that article and I organize the seminar on that article. And as the years go by, I get a little embarrassed – gee, I really ought to have updated this – but it's what I believe in, I believe it's a fruitful way to understand the interaction between cultural objects and humans as social actors. So I have not changed a lot in that respect. I still try to carry out studies this way, especially in more elaborate, longer pieces of research.

That methodological article also touches on the current concerns of cultural sociology. I am thinking about the work of Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith, and about the so-called cultural turn of the last decade or so. There are some new controversies concerning the relationship between the social and the cultural. Would you be able to address these controversies briefly? Perhaps you might suggest how your cultural diamond heuristic may be useful in addressing them?

I am afraid I am going to disappoint you because I have to say I do not get terribly interested in that type of debate. In the first place, cultural sociology came into its own in the early 1980s. And it came on its own in large part because of this generation that you have already referred to, that of Paul DiMaggio and Ann Swidler, and myself, and Richard Peterson. Peterson's work was earlier, but it was then that his production of culture thinking was applied to a broader set of concerns. There was also Howard Becker and his book *Art Worlds*.¹¹ And the American Sociological Association's section on sociology of culture was formed in the early 1980s and it grew very quickly. So the idea that this is something that happened in the last ten years... I think it is just wrong.

What has happened in the last ten years – and this is to Jeffrey Alexander's credit, but it is also a little bit of a distortion – is that he and his colleagues at Yale have been very concerned with putting together what they called a strong program in cultural sociology. In their enthusiasm for doing that, there has been a certain forgetting of what happened in the 1980s and 1990s. It is as though you're announcing a new thing, but something similar was going on for a long time.

And the debates, subject-object and others... Your chair [Prof. Elżbieta Hałas] writes about Florian Znaniecki and he was writing about some of the same issues: the ideal, the material, and all this. These debates have been around a long, long time. We sometimes think that the current situation of some of these issues is new when it's just a new vocabulary to old, very profound questions that are not going to get answered definitively one way or another.

So I am not terribly interested in some of these debates today. I am more interested in more substantive questions; in looking at certain cultural things and seeing how they work rather than in theoretical debates.

I am reminded of this “explosion of cultural studies in sociology” that you mentioned in the preface to the third edition of your handbook. So, amid

¹¹ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

the fire and smoke of the explosion, we may lose sight of what's been there even before the ignition?

Yes, I think the ground was kind of cleared in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Again, let me take two towering figures in American sociology, Richard Peterson and Howard Becker. Becker was doing interactionism and social psychology, Peterson was doing industrial sociology and systems. And in the late 1970s and early 1980s people from both schools realized these were not incompatible. To get the full picture, you need to understand the nuts and bolts of production and how things work through the system the way Peterson and his people talked about. And you need to understand how a system creates itself in the sort of art worlds in the phenomenological sense that Becker talked about. And once the previous fights about the Marxists on the one side and the structural functionalists on the other died down, there was the sort of recognition that people who were interested in vehicles of meaning – whether it be popular culture, art, or religion, or whatever – were involved in the same type of enterprise. It was just natural that these things came together and then took institutional form in the ASA section.

Once that happened, it became quite legitimate for a student to say: "I am studying sociology of culture." When I was in graduate school, there was not even a term for that. It would not have meant anything. But by the 1980s and even more into the 1990s this became legitimate; the section grew, there were a lot of people interested. I do not know about "explosion," that may be overdramatic, but I think the growth started from this period and in the early mid-1990s it was quite natural and quite dramatic. I think that now the cultural section is the second or third largest section in the ASA. And this growth has taken place over thirty years, so it did not all spring up overnight.

A short while ago you mentioned the name of Znaniecki. Your lecture tomorrow¹² will be taking place as part of the Florian Znaniecki Colloquium.

Yes, I was charmed by that.

Do you think that there is some aspect of what Znaniecki worked on that might be of particular interest to cultural sociologists today?

¹² The interview took place on the eve of Professor Griswold's lecture, "The Future of Reading in the Digital Age," which was organized at the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw, on March 3, 2015.

Well, I have to say that my knowledge of his work is extremely limited, and so anything I say you should take with a grain of salt. But two things. One, I am probably typical of most American sociologists that know his work almost exclusively through *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, the study with William I. Thomas. And because I had the first half of my career at the University of Chicago, that was especially the case. Part of what that book did for American sociology was introduce new methods (the use of life histories, or the use of letters and documents) as a way of trying to construct the life-worlds and the interpretive apparatus of... the Polish peasant in Europe and America! I think it was tremendously important methodologically and in its way of combining empirical and theoretical work, and in not being driven by a narrow view of science where you have to count things or you have to do a statistical analysis. There is some uncertainty, how much was Thomas, how much Znaniecki, who knows, but the work itself was very, very important.

Then the second thing which I know much less about: in my mind, I associate Znaniecki's understanding of culture with Weber's writings on *Verstehen* and other things. In this approach, interpretation is not an ornament to social action, you can not understand the latter without understanding people's interpretation of their situations. That does not mean subjectivism, that does not mean it is all in the mind, there is a real world out there, but it is being mediated through the mind, then the mind acts back on the real world. I think that was both Znaniecki's and Weber's way of thinking and that would certainly be a way of thinking that I agree with. You can get rid of these dualisms about "material life is always the causal actor vs. ideal life in the mind is always the causal actor." You can just understand that the social reality is an interplay between the mind and the physical or material world. I think that is very useful, very important for cultural sociology.

I would repeat, however, that most American sociologists are much less familiar with the theoretical side of Znaniecki's writings, and I admit that I am, too. Most American sociologists would primarily know his work through his study with Thomas.

Of course, Professor Hałas is the expert on that and I have read one of her articles, introducing things that I have not heard of, the humanistic coefficient and things from his writing that seem extremely useful. But I only know them through her article, and so I have a very superficial understanding of his theoretical work. Still, I think – and this gets a little bit to what I said earlier about myself not being terribly attracted to debates that stay on the strictly theoretical level – that when you do something like the multi-volume work on the Polish immigrant experience, that lasts. Nobody is going to describe that in the depth that Thomas and Znaniecki did. And so something like that

is really for the ages, whereas if you read a debate over theory from long ago, it's either been absorbed in this year's version of that old debate, which may well go back to Plato, or it seems very old and dusty and nobody worries about that stuff anymore. Something of the empirical solidity of *The Polish Peasant*, that is going to be on the library shelves (or on the digital library shelves!) two hundred years from now.

We talked earlier about personality. I probably have a rather unsophisticated view of the critical nature of theoretical debates because they do not interest me a whole lot and I would much rather get down to the substantive.

I believe the empirical thrust is apparent in your works from the very start. And after that methodological article from 1987 and perhaps the review articles on the sociology of culture¹³ and the sociology of literature, I think most of your studies have had a very clear empirical component.

In fact, I do not want to be – and I am going to sound semi-humorous, but I am actually serious here – one of the people who do major empirical studies early in their careers, and then spend the rest of their careers pontificating on theories and on how to do things, and on what the current state of debate is. In a sense they're not doing real research anymore. And I have always had a horror of that. I think that as long as you are in academia you should be doing real research and not just glossing over. And a lot of senior people getting late in their career, as I am, spend an awful lot of time doing these vision pieces and so forth. I consider that a waste of brain cells. I think if you are still able to do real research where you can actually come up with some new knowledge, new understanding of how the world works... That is what I want to be doing.

I am wondering if that might not also be related to the scholars' personalities.

It could well be. But I always find it a little bit embarrassing when you look at the vita of the senior person and all of the actual research has come fairly early on, and then it is mostly overviews... And I did some of that myself, as you pointed out, I did that in *The Four Good Reasons (and One Bad One)*, or even in the cultural sociology textbook. But I would not want to shift from a research focus to doing only or mostly that. To me, that is just pontificating, I would not want to do it.

13 Wendy Griswold, "The Sociology of Culture: Four Good Arguments (and One Bad One)," *Acta Sociologica* 35 (1992).

We have not yet talked about what is probably the major focus of your research right now. What do you consider to be the most important tenets of your work on reading?

Well, of course I have always been interested in reading as a practice that involves people and cultural objects. Right now we have a paper coming out in *Poetics* on the One Book programs and how they select the books that readers will read. These programs are very popular in America. For instance, if you have a program “One Book, One Chicago,” there will be a book that everybody in Chicago is encouraged to read, and there will be a lot of activity around that book. And that particular paper shows that the people who select books for One Book programs are not just responding to elite tastes – you know, what gets reviewed in *The New York Times* – but they are also not just responding to popular tastes. They are not going to choose *Fifty Shades of Grey*. So they are not cultural intermediaries – neither the top nor the bottom is telling them what to do; they’re actually quite independent. And in doing what they do, they tend to be very diverse. You will have libraries in states that are largely white that will be selecting books by African Americans, books by Hispanics, this sort of things.

So those people are diverse, they are cosmopolitan in their orientation. But they are also really devoted to the literature of place. They believe that if you’re in Montana, you will be particularly interested in Montana writers, and so they will often include those. That is one of the mechanisms for reproducing place. Then the readers associated with these programs are people who have some commitment to reading collectively and to meeting and interpreting what they have read in group settings. Taken together, all this is an example of the kind of processes that interest me a lot.

Another thing is the question that is just of ongoing subjective curiosity to me: the difference that the digital revolution is going to make for reading. Is print out the window? Do people no longer read? Do people read as much as they ever did but on their phones? What is actually going on there? I have been asking these types of questions in focus groups in about a dozen different countries at this point,¹⁴ and of course so many things are changing, the digital world keeps changing, the availability of both print and digital materials keeps changing, and so on. I am just very curious to keep tabs on the degree to which reading is or is not changing in the twenty-first century. So that is the ongoing research question that has to be provisionally answered on an ongoing basis, and it’s very context-specific.

¹⁴ One focus study led by Professor Griswold was organized in Warsaw on March 2, 2015.

And the last thing I would say about reading is actually my secondary interest right now. I have a book that I just finished that I consider a follow-up to *Regionalism and the Reading Class*, but it is a very American studies type of book. It is about the Federal Writers' Project in the US which was a New Deal program in the 1930s to employ writers. What those writers did was write travel guides, which had a strong cultural influence. This is related to the general question of the relationship between books and place, and the construction of place. I finished the book, I will send it till the end of the summer to the University of Chicago Press. I have just got back the suggestions for revisions, so I got to get that done before they publish it. I think of it as a secondary thing, but this illustrates what I said before: in my view, you should always have a lot of research interests going on!

And there is yet another thing that has nothing to do with literature. It is about looking at images and representations of Saint Jerome and the relationships between the human and the non-human in those representations. So, you know, very different research interests and I am excited about all of them!