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# The Polish Peasant Revisited

## Thomas and Znaniecki's Classic in the Light of Contemporary Transnational Migration Theory

by Giulia Sinatti

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### 1. The Polish Peasant in Context

*The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, co-authored by William I. Thomas and Florian W. Znaniecki, is an extensive study of the transformations occurring in Polish society in the home country and among its emigrants in the United States. The five volumes that make up this classic study were published at different times between 1918 and 1920.

The main aim of the two authors was of analysing the ways in which – under the impulse of industrialisation processes in Poland and emigration to the United States – peasants were increasingly becoming economically rational workers and drifting away from traditional modes of social organisation and behaviour. Thomas and Znaniecki were specifically concerned with individuals' adaptation to the new mode in relation to broader social groups to which they belonged, namely the family and the community. The analytical picture provided by the two authors is enriched with illustrative evidence provided by personal narratives and experiences. In the preface to their work, Thomas and Znaniecki sketch the lines along which their extensive analysis develops across the various volumes of the publication: from the investigation of primary groups (i.e. family and community) of Polish peasants and their evolution as a result of industrialisation and emigration (vols. 1 and 2), to a biographical case study showing the impact of the transition from one society to the other on the individual (vol. 3), to the development of new rational cooperation principles within

Polish society (vol. 4), to the de-structuring and reorganisation of social forms in the context of immigration in America (vol. 5).

The publication of *The Polish Peasant* had an immediate huge influence on American sociology of the time and in the two following decades the book generated enormous enthusiasm. So great was its impact, in fact, that over the years the Social Science Research Council promoted three critiques of *The Polish Peasant* [Blumer 1939; Allport 1942; Gottshalk *et al.* 1951], the most well known of which remains the earliest, by Blumer. At the time, the book was chosen by the Social Science Research Council alongside with other five studies as having an outstanding repute within its field and therefore being worthy of assessment. Blumer's critique was so substantial that it was followed by a large symposium that was held in 1938. A year later the critique, together with a rejoinder written by Thomas and further comments by Znaniecki, as well as the conference digest, were published under the title *Appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. This publication framed what is considered to be a milestone discussion around the interpretation of social phenomena, as issues were addressed that still remain central in contemporary sociological thought. In the introduction to a later edition of the same volume, Blumer recalls some of the reasons that have made *The Polish Peasant* such an important reference. The book is "an extensive piece of sociological research (...); one devoted to the study and analysis of the central theoretical problems of change taking place in modern society; one operating with a comprehensive and carefully thought-out theoretical framework; one gathering and using a body of empirical data that in size and careful selection towers over what is usually presented in sociological research; and one that enjoyed unrivalled acclaim of sociologists of its period" [Blumer 1979, vii].

Despite the enthusiasm it generated at the time of its first appearance and despite Blumer's later comments, the book has lived through alternating periods of oblivion as well as of fortune. Over the years, in fact, a number of scholars have denounced the fact that *The Polish Peasant* has become a forgotten classic, in particular within sociological theory [Blumer 1979; Gallino 1968; LaRossa and Wolf 1985]. Its memory, instead, has been more often kept alive in the work of historians [Wiley 1986; Zaretsky 1996]. In accordance with the thought of these scholars, this article wishes to argue in favour of a continued relevance of this classic piece of sociological work. In particular, I shall attempt to illustrate that some of its theoretical and methodological contributions remain significant in the light of recent developments within the field of contemporary migration studies.

Before further venturing into this discussion, however, in the next paragraphs I shall set the context and provide the reader with further information on the authors and on the historical setting in which this sociological masterpiece was written.

Further insight into some of the innovative features of the book is also provided. In the second paragraph I will introduce the recent transnational paradigm for the understanding of migrations, while also underlying some of the commonalities and differences that characterise migrations in Thomas and Znaniecki's and in contemporary times. The remainder of this article attempts to draw parallels between the approaches of Thomas and Znaniecki and of today's migration scholars, showing that some of the innovations currently introduced by transnational theory had been largely anticipated almost one hundred years ago by the authors of *The Polish Peasant*.

### 1.1. *The Authors*

William Isaac Thomas (1863-1947) is considered as being an illustrious member of the first generation of American sociologists. Born in Virginia, he came from a rural and Methodist background and had studied first at the University of Tennessee, then in Berlin and Göttingen in Germany, before joining the Chicago School in 1893, where he completed his second doctorate. Thomas stayed on at the University of Chicago, where he taught sociology and contributed with his colleagues to the establishment of the most important centre for sociological study of the time. In 1918, shortly after the publication of the first two volumes of the book, Thomas lost his job at the Chicago School after being arrested by the FBI for reasons that still do not remain totally clear. Following this personal scandal, the department also blocked all publication agreements, so that the last three volumes of the book were published two years later by a small publisher in Boston. The rest of Thomas's academic career was punctuated by a long series of temporary lectureships and research grants in various American and European universities.

Florian Witold Znaniecki (1882-1958) was born in Poland from a wealthy family of land owners. His involvement as an active Polish nationalist made his relationship with the Polish higher education system difficult, so that he carried out part of his studies in Switzerland, France and Italy before managing to complete a PhD in Krakow in 1909. Still finding it hard to pursue an academic career in Poland because of his political views, he became director of the Emigrant's Protective Association. It was in this position that he first met Thomas in 1913. Shortly after, when Poland was invaded by Germany, Znaniecki fled to the United States. Here, he obtained a position as a researcher at the University of Chicago and was able to continue his collaboration with Thomas. Shortly after the publication of the first two volumes of the book and following the proclamation of the Polish republic, Znaniecki returned

to Poland. He spent the rest of his life in an academic career alternating periods of work in Poland and in the United States.

The effective contribution made by both scholars to the final book has been object of long discussions and for many years Thomas was considered to be the main author. In recent times, however, a certain agreement has been reached that although he was formally only a research assistant, Znaniecki's role was in fact quite influential [Gubert and Tomasi 1993]. Indeed, Thomas "spent much time wandering around Chicago's neighbourhoods, learned Polish, and between 1908 and 1913 spent eight months every year in Europe, where he collected materials, visited important towns, immersed himself in local history, and mingled with peasants" [Burawoy 2000, 7]. However, the parts of the book on the life of Polish peasants, on the class system and economic life, on religious, magic and aesthetic attitudes, on social disorganisation and reorganisation in Poland and America could not have been written by an external observer and are thought to be, instead, the product of detailed insider knowledge [Gallino 1968, xiv-xv]. The two authors, moreover, were characterised by very different sociological approaches. In his works, Thomas had a tendency of letting the evidence and documents collected speak for themselves, showing a scarce inclination towards systemic interpretations. Znaniecki, on the contrary, favoured the understanding of reality through complex and elaborate interpretative frames, as proved by much of his later publications [Halas 2006; Gallino 1968]. Rich in unelaborated supporting evidence headed by systematic interpretative introductions to each volume, *The Polish Peasant* can truly be said to be a combination of the personalities and working styles of both authors.

### 1.2. *The Historical Setting: Industrialisation and Polish Migration*

Thomas and Znaniecki's work has the merit of situating the transformation of Polish peasant families within the broader framework of economic transformations that were characterising Poland at the time. Although they never refer to this broader framework explicitly, in fact, the crisis of traditional solidarity systems, the formation of a new social conscience and the search for alternative forms of rational social cooperation analysed in the book can be considered the outcome of Poland's emergence as an important European industrial pole at the end of the 1800s. At the time, in fact, the country had become a centre of Russian industrial development and cities such as Warsaw and Lodz were important nodes of exchange and industrial production [Zaretzky 1996]. The book "begins with a vision of the Polish peasant (prior to 1850), living within an array of rural primary groups of which the exten-

ded family was the most important. It ends with the institutions and mores of Polish American society in Chicago” [Burawoy 2000, 7]. The analysis offered by Thomas and Znaniecki, therefore, is also deeply rooted in the relevant historical background and the transformations occurring at the time of their observations are compared to an ideal and original peasant community.

It was in the historical and economic climate I have just described that the Poles began emigrating. As portrayed by Zaretsky in an introduction to a recent reprint of selected portions of this classic, “the number of immigrants who came to America in this period was enormous: in many cities a majority of the population were either immigrants or the children of immigrants. Some native-born Americans felt that the cultural, religious, and racial identity of their country was threatened. The immigrants were in large part industrial workers” [Zaretsky 1996, ix-x]. Moreover in Chicago, where Thomas and Znaniecki were observing the receiving end of the migratory flow, the Poles constituted the most numerous and socially visible group of European immigrants [Gallino 1968].

### 1.3. *The Book’s Theoretical and Methodological Impact*

Born in the historical setting described above, Thomas and Znaniecki’s *The Polish Peasant* is listed today among the classic sociological works, for the relevance that it has preserved and its capacity to influence and shape the categories with which we currently understand similar phenomena, despite the distance from us in terms of contents, techniques and language utilised [Gallino 1968]. This five volume work is frequently cited for its methodological value and for its exemplary use of personal documents. The relevance of *The Polish Peasant* from a theoretical point of view, instead, is more often underestimated. Nonetheless, the book marks a significant contribution to social theory, for the understanding it offers of the relation between human behaviour and the broader situation in which it is set as well as for its interpretation of social change. I shall therefore next briefly review some of the main methodological and theoretical innovations of the book.

It is mostly the methodological novelties introduced by *The Polish Peasant* that have given it fame as a milestone in the history of the social sciences and the book has been largely acclaimed as the first study that persuaded sociologists of the value of qualitative research [Allport 1942; Blumer 1939 and 1979; Gottschalk *et al.* 1951; Madge 1962].

Making substantial use of personal documents such as letters and autobiographies, this work is largely accounted today for having introduced the use of life histories

as sources of knowledge. Thomas and Znaniecki's book, in fact, relies on the thorough analysis of a large variety of data sources: correspondence exchanged between Polish migrants and their families, life histories and autobiographical accounts, letters written to local newspapers, documents of associations, church parishes and court records that migrants dealt with in various ways across Poland and America. No one before these two authors had ever utilised such a rich and extensive bulk of life histories for research purposes. Such "human documents" offer the advantage of being largely natural and spontaneous accounts given by their authors, thus escaping the possible influence played by the researcher.

The use made by Thomas and Znaniecki of the data sources they chose, however, was not only a source of praise. The human documents, in fact, were also subject to strong criticism on the basis of their validity as a scientific source of knowledge. Blumer's critique, for instance, argued that human documents failed in meeting the four main criteria of representativeness, adequateness, reliability and testability. *The Polish Peasant* was also accused of containing little dialogue between the rich and extensive ethnographic data that form the most voluminous part of the book and the few pages of analysis offered by the authors. Even more importantly, it was noted that the documents presented in the book appeared never to contradict the authors' interpretations, therefore suggesting that the chosen sampling mode had in some way flawed statistical representativeness [Blumer 1939]. Having opened the debate on this last issue, Blumer's critique would have played an important part in shaping future developments in the social sciences and, in particular, it formed the foundation for the later development of "grounded theory" within the ethnographic tradition of research [Burawoy 2000].

Although some of their methodological choices undoubtedly remain criticisable, it must be acknowledged that Thomas and Znaniecki were the first to introduce the use of similar documents as data sources in the social sciences. Their example of biographical approach, in fact, would later be followed by many others and is said to have opened the path to the employment of life histories in social research. *The Polish Peasant*, in fact, "invented what was at that point a new method of social investigation – the life study method" [Zaretsky 1996, x]. Blumer himself also recognises that despite pointing out Thomas and Znaniecki's failure in meeting the requirements for human documents to be considered valid scientific instruments, however "the documents yielded data of unquestionably great value for the analysis of the life of the Polish peasants. (...) In short, it was evident that there was an extensive and fruitful interaction between empirical data and theoretical propositions, an interaction that yielded an analysis of Polish peasant life that was truly monumental in both merit and extent" [Blumer 1979, xxix-xxx].

The use of a biographical approach supported by human documents is at the basis also of a further recognition. According to Norbert Wiley [1986], in fact, the value of *The Polish Peasant* within sociology is far more than simply methodological. Thanks to some of the innovations it introduced, in fact, the book played an important part in founding the actual discipline by expounding the intellectual space within which it operates and differentiating it from the domain of other sciences, thus providing an essential “meta-theoretical” contribution to the legitimisation of sociological research.

The undoubted methodological and meta-theoretical innovations introduced by *The Polish Peasant* have often led to under evaluate the importance of some of the more theoretical aspects of the book. The substantial use made by Thomas and Znaniecki of individual cases as illustrative examples, instead, is rooted in their belief that every social phenomenon acquires meaning only within the social and cultural context in which it takes place.

Far from being obvious at the time, the assumption just illustrated proves that Thomas and Znaniecki’s work marked an important turning point in the development of a theory of social action. In the book, in fact, the two authors show that every concrete action derives from the transformations produced by a given structural and cultural situation on people’s attitudes [Gallino 1968]. “Thomas and Znaniecki saw human social action as consisting of how people who are guided or impelled by subjective dispositions meet and handle the social situations in which they are placed” [Blumer 1979, xv]. In their view, largely expressed in the *Methodological Notes* of their work, the understanding of social actions relies upon the situation in which that action takes place and the actors’ attitude is understood as the product of a process of acculturation, deriving from previous social and cultural experience. In the introduction to the autobiography of the Polish migrant Wlodek Wiszniewski, furthermore, Thomas and Znaniecki express the idea of mutual interdependence between social actors’ personality or attitudes and the situation in which they act, recognising that both elements simultaneously produce and are produced by one another. In their view, the structure and the culture within which social action takes place are not the main focus of analysis, which falls instead on social action itself. Thomas and Znaniecki, in fact, actively wished to differentiate their work from a tendency, that they believed to characterise some of their contemporaries, to compare institutions, norms and customs out of the societal context of which they are a part [Gallino 1968].

Thomas and Znaniecki are not only concerned with studying the individual in relation to the broader social context in which (s)he is placed, but they also have a strong interest for the aggregate institutions of social life. *The Polish Peasant*, for instance, has been credited with the merit of having introduced the notion of families



as social groups, i.e. “the idea that families are socially constructed realities, that they exist through social interaction” [LaRossa and Wolf 1985, 532]. The insight they offer into some of the mechanisms governing family relations is astounding. According to Zaretsky, moreover, “Thomas and Znaniecki’s viewpoint was that traditional Polish community life was held together by familial ties termed ‘mutual help,’ meaning obligations that individuals felt toward one another by virtue of family position. (...) The spread of the market and the evolution of what they call a ‘climbing mentality’ changed the family through the ‘growing assertion of the personality.’ While this created familial conflicts, for example, children became harder to control, it also created new possibilities for personal development” [Zaretsky 1996, 23].

Beyond the dimension of the family, furthermore, Thomas and Znaniecki also touch upon some of the larger forms of social organisation. In the words of the authors themselves, their interest should be located at the aggregate level of “primary groups,” which they further define as corresponding to the family, but also to the broader community.<sup>1</sup> Despite this interest for individuals within their social context, however, one criticism that has been moved against Thomas and Znaniecki’s work lies in its blindness as regards some of the even broader social institutions that could have been taken into account. The strong focus placed by the two authors on individuals and their families, in fact, largely ignores the part played in the transformations of a society by social institutions such as social class, national government and its administrative apparatus, intelligentsia, etc. [Gallino 1968, xxx]. This shortcoming is particularly severe if one considers the importance of Thomas and Znaniecki’s contribution towards the development of a theory of social change. According to the interpretation offered by Madge, the “starting point of their thinking is that the study of social reality involves a concentration on social change. They assert from the start that any conceptual scheme that is concerned only with the static condition of society at a given time will be of little value (...), so that any approach that neglects the dynamic of social change is radically incomplete” [Madge 1962, 63].

Alongside its contributions towards a theoretical understanding of the mechanisms governing society and its members, *The Polish Peasant* can also be considered a classic within the subfield of sociology of migrations [Pollini 2002].

Although it historically preceded the development of a veritable migration theory, which would be dominated for many years by the assimilation paradigm and the idea of melting pot, in its own time *The Polish Peasant* offered important sugges-

<sup>1</sup> Hence their use, alongside letters exchanged between family members and autobiographies, of documents testifying the associative dimension of social life (letters sent to newspapers, documents of associations and church parishes, court records).

tions for the understanding of the phenomenon. Some of Thomas and Znaniecki's intuitions, however, would be largely ignored even within the Chicago School that developed a strong tradition of research in the migration field after the publication of the book. Not only would future migration studies focus exclusively on the receiving side, but in doing so they would also fail in taking into account some of the features of incorporation processes in the new society that Thomas and Znaniecki, instead, had been aware of. The two authors "implicitly rejected the assumption that assimilation is a linear process leading to an undifferentiated American norm. Polish American institutions simultaneously promoted ethnicization as Polish Americans, incorporation into the U.S. economy and polity, and support for the 'national liberation' movement in Poland" [Fitzgerald 2006, 17]. In the context of immigration, moreover, Thomas and Znaniecki were interested in showing that the Poles were not merely being assimilated, but that they carried their own cultural values with them. The "Poles were not simply becoming 'American' but were becoming something different and unique: Polish-Americans, with their own culture, values, and institutions. The Poles do not simply 'repeat' the culture they shared in Poland, according to Thomas and Znaniecki, but change it so that it becomes serviceable in the American context" [Zaretsky 1996, 105].

## **2. Different Migration Eras: Polish Peasants Yesterday, Transnational Migrants Today**

Since the migratory experiences of Polish peasants described by Thomas and Znaniecki and the interpretations these authors offered of the phenomenon much, of course, has changed. Approximately one century after *The Polish Peasant*, migrations have assumed an increasingly global scale and our frameworks for their understanding have largely matured. In particular, I wish to focus here on the recently established transnational perspective to migration studies, as I believe that it shares some of the intuitions that Thomas and Znaniecki had anticipated in their own time. In the following pages, therefore, after having briefly introduced the transnational paradigm, I shall illustrate some of the main features that differentiate migrations at the time of *The Polish Peasant* and in the contemporary era, to then review some of the similarities in the frameworks for interpretation offered by Thomas and Znaniecki and by today's transnationalists in the last section of this article.

## 2.1. *The Transnational Paradigm*

The origins of the transnational approach to migration studies date back to the publication of a book by Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc in 1992. Inspired by broader developments within the social sciences and a growing interest for themes such as globalisation, mobilities, connections and flows, in this innovative work the authors first put forward the idea that contemporary migrations should more appropriately be understood as “transmigrations.” Rather than permanently settling in a host society and cutting off their ties with the places they have departed from, in fact, current migrants increasingly tend to engage simultaneously in home and host countries, maintaining and developing social relations across distant locations. The publication of this book was soon followed by a veritable burst of enthusiasm and it has since been recognised that we are truly witnessing a “new age of migration” [Castles and Miller 1998].

In its broadest definition, the term transnational refers to “occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation” [Portes *et al.* 1999, 219]. In the case of migrants, in particular, transnationalism can be conceptualised as having a concern for the less visible forms of globalisation on behalf of the disconnected, the excluded or the losers [Portes 1997]. “Transnational,” in this sense, is opposed to “global,” inasmuch as the latter indicates the movements benefiting those who can better avail themselves of new technologies [Burawoy 2000; Portes 1997; Smith 2001]. Transnational activities, therefore, are largely acknowledged to occur “from below” rather than “from above” [Portes 1997; Guarnizo and Smith 1998]. Scarcely institutionalised and largely relying upon social capital, transnational migrant communities develop bottom up, from grassroots level.

The transnational perspective to the study of migrations owes the rapid success it has gained to its ability to reveal many uncovered aspects of migration that are particularly relevant in today’s world. The statement that contemporary migrations are qualitatively different from former ones, however, has been a largely debated issue. Some accuse transnationalism of not being truly innovative, as it simply applies a new terminology to phenomena that have been known for a long time. Others, instead, argue that the nature of today’s migrations has radically changed and therefore justifies resorting to a new interpretative paradigm.

## 2.2. *Old and New Migration Trends*

Transnational phenomena as such are certainly not new. As far back as 1916, Bourne's article "Transnational America" suggested that even at that time immigrants to the United States engaged in transborder relations [Glick Schiller 2003]. Similarly, other distant literature has focused on migrants' maintenance of social ties with the region of origin. Thomas and Znaniecki's study is only one of the possible examples. Many of the works conducted by members of the Manchester School in Rhodesia, in fact, also focused on lives lived across peasant or tribal societies of origin and the urban environment of the Copperbelt industry.<sup>2</sup> All of the studies just mentioned, nonetheless, considered border-crossing practices simply as a stage of early adjustment to the new immigration contexts. In a similar vein, one of the main major criticisms moved against the transnational approach to migration suggests that strong ties with the homeland are typically maintained by newly established migration flows in the early stages and that current transnational traits are deemed to fade away with time and the alternation of generations. What makes contemporary transnational migration distinctive, instead, is that through regular and long-term contacts its networks quickly become institutionalised, therefore allowing the transfer of resources across nation-states within what have been defined as transnational social fields [Faist 2000]. Transnational cross-border activities, therefore, should be defined as such when they are sustainable over time. It is the temporal dimension of transnationalism, therefore, that constitutes a major difference from past migratory trends.

It is largely the recent developments in communication and transport technologies and their growing accessibility also on behalf of ordinary people that are responsible for the changes that are taking place in contemporary migration practices. Migrants today, in fact, are increasingly able to uphold significant social ties (of familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political nature) in the countries of immigration as well as in their countries of departure. This setting has an impact not only on the ways in which individuals live and organise their migratory experiences, but it has also favoured the establishment of broader transnational networks that cross national and continental borders [Vertovec and Cohen 1999]. It is these emerging characters of contemporary population movements that the transnational perspective to the understanding of migration attempts to capture. This approach, in fact, recognises the emergence of social processes in which migrants develop social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders and that become established over time and

<sup>2</sup> On the similarities between these works and contemporary transnationalism see Basch *et al.* 1994; Burawoy 2000; Portes *et al.* 1999.

across generations. In turn, such transnational social fields allow migrants to maintain social ties that cross national boundaries with intensity, modes of transaction and multiplication of activities that are today substantially different. In other words, while past “activities of immigrants and refugees across national borders reinforced bonds between the respective communities, they lacked the elements of regularity, routine involvement, and critical mass characterizing contemporary examples of transnationalism” [Portes *et al.* 1999, 225]. As Landolt effectively and simply puts it: “A quantitative change results in a qualitative difference in the order of things” [Landolt 2001, 220], so that transnational migration is a substantially new phenomenon.

Although lacking the critical mass of contemporary transnational migration, Thomas and Znaniecki’s book offers us an account of how relations across large geographic distances were maintained before current technological innovations.

Despite the undoubted quantitative as well as qualitative differences in migrations at the time of *The Polish Peasant* and today, it can still be argued that some of the features of the context in which Thomas and Znaniecki were studying Polish migration can be extended to the contemporary era. Current migrants largely move within the economic conjuncture that characterises the global age, thus departing from the peripheral nations of the global South and heading towards the central North. As a result, contemporary migrants often bring with them significant cultural differences that are increasingly raising issues of cohabitation in the context of immigration. Similarly, it should be pointed out that immigration in the United States at the time of Thomas and Znaniecki marked a significant difference compared to previous immigration trends. As opposed to immigrants coming from Central Europe, in fact, new immigrants (Polish, but also Italian and Jewish) came from the peripheral areas of Eastern and Southern Europe and, for the very first time, they brought with them also cultural difference. When they entered the United States, they did so “with their own, semifeudal stratification systems, requiring a slow, internal re-stratification as part of their adaptation to American life” [Wiley 1986, 28]. The “approximately two million Poles who immigrated to America between 1880 and 1910” [Zaretsky 1996, xi] and who were studied by Thomas and Znaniecki particularly fit this model. Seen from the viewpoint of Poland, moreover, the authors focused on a particular group of Poles, i.e. those who were emigrating from Russian or Congress Poland. As opposed to tendencies in other parts of Poland (Austrian or Prussian), where emigrants tended to leave with their families, the emigrants studied by Thomas and Znaniecki largely departed as single male labourers. Leaving their families behind, rather than taking them with them, enhanced the cross border practices that people engaged in, adding a further commonality between the people studied by Thomas and Znaniecki and the lives of many contemporary transnational migrants.

### 3. Interpretative Paradigms: Shifting Views or Continuities?

It is not so much the changes in the *phenomenon* of contemporary migrations that I wish to discuss here, but rather the shifts in our understanding and *interpretation* of migrations that the advent of the transnational approach has brought with it. A strong argument in favour of the transnational paradigm, in fact, is based on the firm belief that it leads to new insight into the phenomenon of contemporary migrations. As I will show in the following pages, however, Thomas and Znaniecki had in fact already anticipated some of these innovations with their work.

#### 3.1. *Understanding migration in a broader perspective*

Relying on a broader perspective that collapses the sending and receiving end of the migration trail into the same analytical framework, transnational theory overcomes some of the limitations of previous approaches to migration and has been defined as representing a third generation of migration scholarship [Faist 2000]. Within the transnational perspective, migration becomes a total social fact that can be simultaneously read as emigration from a country of origin and immigration in a host country. Similarly, *The Polish Peasant* recognises that becoming an immigrant requires a break away from the sending country, which is followed by a process of re-adaptation to a new context. Long before this intuition was claimed by transnational scholars, Thomas and Znaniecki had also acknowledged that migrants are not simply uprooted and cut off from their sending contexts. Instead, they maintain networks, cultures and belongings that on the one hand shape their adaptation to the new context, on the other shape transformations taking place also in the context of departure. One may say that “*The Polish Peasant* was, therefore, *global ethnography without a theory of globalization*” [Burawoy 2000, 10]. The potential offered by Thomas and Znaniecki’s insight, however, was not captured by scholars of the time. After Thomas left the University of Chicago and Park took the lead, in fact, urban sociology turned to a more restricted interest for phenomena taking place exclusively at the receiving end.

A number of transnational scholars have openly cited the intuitions contained in *The Polish Peasant* as an inspiration for their own insights [Faist 2000; Burawoy 2000; Fitzgerald 2006]. What transnationalists have added and was lacking in the work of Thomas and Znaniecki, however, is recognition that by adopting a broader perspective the trajectories of migration become less linear and increasingly varied: return migration, circular migration, onward migration, intermittent migration all become possible shades of the migratory process. Of course conditions at the time of

*The Polish Peasant* also meant that many of these mobility options were less practicable than today. Current transnationalists, moreover, prove an extraordinary ability to focus on the broader picture and therefore capture the global contingencies that frame transnational movement of people. In their own time, Thomas and Znaniecki were instead largely unable to explain why Polish people should shift from seasonal migration patterns in Germany to intercontinental emigration to the United States. Their awareness of processes of relative impoverishment in sending communities, in fact, focuses exclusively on the push factors encouraging people to depart. Their analysis, instead, fails in taking into account also some of the pull factors that undoubtedly existed at the time, such as the increasing labour demand that characterised the economic climate in Chicago.

### 3.2. *Migration as a Multi-Local Phenomenon*

Transnationalists share with Thomas and Znaniecki an interest for the processes following which societies reorganise themselves as a result of geographic movement and dispersal. In this respect, one of the most distinctive features of *The Polish Peasant* is that its analysis covers transformations taking place in sending as well as receiving societies. The book, in fact, “inaugurated the first truly transatlantic approach to European emigration, one that looked both at its European and its United States context” [Zaretsky 1996, x]. At the time, Thomas and Znaniecki did not openly address their choice of studying the phenomena they were enquiring in multiple locations. For transnational theorists, instead, the issue of multi-local fieldwork has been very much debated [Hannerz 1998; Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995; Marcus 1999]. Because of its declared aim of collapsing sending and receiving contexts in the same analytical framework, in fact, the transnational approach questions traditional notions of the adequate setting for social research. It challenges the “methodological nationalism” that had previously characterised migration research, i.e. the implicit assumption that nation-States (and more often the receiving ones) are the appropriate location for research [Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002]. In the work of transnational scholars, in fact, the field of enquiry is not so much a geographic space delimited by national boundaries, but rather a conceptual space the borders of which are blurred and defined by migrants’ transnational practices as well as by the researcher’s interpretation of them.

As it might be expected, theorisation about multi-sited research on behalf of today’s transnational scholars makes it a far more complex exercise than the practice first adopted by Thomas and Znaniecki. Transnational research on migration, in fact,

may not necessarily imply a parallel and equally deep engagement in fieldwork in sending and receiving contexts. As has been summarised by Fitzgerald [2006], in fact, there are many alternative ways for transnational research to be multi-sited: it may comprise multiple destinations in the same country for migrants of a same nationality, it may stretch its outlook to various countries of destination, it may or may not include the home-country in the final picture. Thomas and Znaniecki, however, provide a classic example of how multi-local research may be grounded in the home and host countries of a migrant group and how this methodological practice allows to unravel broader processes of social change. *The Polish Peasant*, in fact, offers an analysis of social transformations taking place in Poland and the United States that is mutually informed. Given the historical and structural settings of the time, in fact, it looks at how transformations in both countries are reciprocally interrelated. Thomas and Znaniecki are not only interested in offering an analysis of immigrants' adaptation to the new context in the United States, but they are equally driven towards exploring social change taking place in the sending side as a result of industrialisation processes in Poland and of engagement in intercontinental emigration. Their respondents, in fact, had lived through processes of social transformation in Poland prior to emigration and many of them had had migratory experiences in European cities before reaching the United States. The letters exchanged across the Atlantic between family members, moreover, offer a vivid picture of the transformations taking place in the families left behind as a result of out-migration. Thomas and Znaniecki's work, therefore, offers simultaneous insight into processes of social change taking place in home and host countries, into the tensions emerging from such transformations, and into the struggle to adapt to the new context without loss of one's cultural identity.

### 3.3. *Individuals, Groups and the Flows between Them*

Thomas and Znaniecki's main focus was on the ways in which Polish peasants turned into economically rational social actors in Poland and in the United States. In investigating this issue "they stressed that individuals changed by adapting to social groups to which they were connected, groups that were themselves changing" [Zaretsky 1996, xiii]. The specific use that the two authors made of personal documents allowed them to provide a rich account of the broader social and institutional settings in which migration should be understood.

In the first volume of their work, in particular, the private correspondence between migrants and their relatives in Poland offers a detailed picture of the transformations taking place in needy families when one or more of their members are



forced to emigrate to a foreign country [Gallino 1968, xviii]. The existence of the letters in itself (correspondence exchanged within fifty families is collected in the book) proves that long before current technological developments allowing transnational linkages to develop, migrants made an active effort to keep their families together, despite the effects of geographic as well as cultural distance seeping into interpersonal relationships [Zaretsky 1996]. In the letters, women “stranded with their children in Poland describe a life of destitution as they beg for remittances, while emigrants are concerned about the fate of their relatives, the burial of their parents, the employment of a brother, the marriage of a sister. (...) Besides an exchange of money, there was a continual movement of people, with emigrants sponsoring friends and relatives, who would bring the latest news and gossip from the village” [Burawoy 2000, 9]. Likewise, authors researching current migrations in a transnational perspective place migrants within a broader picture, collapsing those who move and those who do not move into the same framework on the basis of a system of shared relations. Moreover, the use of correspondence also testifies that “global imaginations fed upon the *global connections* of immigrants and those left behind” [*ibidem*]. Similarly, one of the most innovative features of the transnational perspective to migrations lies in its focus on the circulation not exclusively of people (and economic resources), but also of more immaterial objects such as ideas, attitudes and imaginations.

In the second volume of *The Polish Peasant*, the analysis of more varied material shifts the interest from interpersonal or family relations to the more collective dimension of associations in Poland and America. In such a sense, by analysing the life histories of individuals Thomas and Znaniecki also highlighted the development of larger social formations. As has been pointed out also within transnational theory, in fact, the establishment of similar social institutions becomes a shared resource that facilitates the costs associated with migration. When migrant networks occur, in fact, “it becomes easier to travel abroad, to find work and housing, to get adjusted to new types of work, to change jobs, to find child care, to keep in touch with the country of origin, and to consummate communal and spiritual needs” [Faist 2000, 96]. It is therefore essential for researchers to lift the analysis from the level of individuals to a higher meso-level of attention, focusing on the broader social groups within which individuals take decisions: the family, kinship clusters and larger migrant networks that become institutionalised over time.

In this same respect, Thomas and Znaniecki not only recognise that individuals act within different types of primary groups (family and community), but their “conceptualization of the ‘supra-territorial’ organization of Poland to include Polonia – the community of American Poles – explicitly recognized a rupture of territorial residence and cultural/ political belonging” [Fitzgerald 2006, 17]. As it has been high-

lighted by Burawoy, “Thomas and Znaniecki describe the ‘super-territorial organization of Polish American society,’ or what today we call the ‘deterritorialization’ of the nation state. Religious, cultural, and political associations linked communities in the United States to Poland. Indeed, Polish America became the ‘fourth province of Poland’” [Burawoy 2000, 9]. Strong parallels can be drawn between the position expressed by Thomas and Znaniecki and transnational scholars concerned with issues of belonging and identification. A number of contemporary authors, in fact, have developed notions similar to those expressed in *The Polish Peasant*, suggesting concepts such as “nations unbound” [Basch *et al.* 1994], “long-distance nationalism” [Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001], or “flexible citizenship” [Ong 1999] to describe the abstract community of peers that current transnational migrants tend to identify with.

Despite the commonalities just outlined, the ultimate focus of analysis in Thomas and Znaniecki’s work remains social action, whereas in transnational theory observation of the individual and his closest relations is put at the service of an understanding of the meso-level of social infrastructures and networks. The latter, in fact, derive from the aggregation of individual actions and practices. Despite this mismatch in the ultimate focus of sociological analysis, Zaretsky still underlines that “stress on the group runs through *The Polish Peasant*. (...) When they [people] emigrate, they emigrate as groups, not as individuals, and they retain their connections to the native land” [Zaretsky 1996, xiii]. Wiley, however, also recognises that the little dialogue between data and theory in Thomas and Znaniecki’s book means that the two authors missed an opportunity to capture “the organizational history and make-up of the Polish-American community», as the «community institutions, particularly the parishes and the voluntary associations, were the location and carrier of the Polish-American, hybrid culture” [Wiley 1986, 36].

### 3.4. *Alternatives to the Assimilation Paradigm*

I have already mentioned that *The Polish Peasant* can be considered an alternative approach to the one that was to be later developed by assimilation theorists.<sup>3</sup> Before concluding this comparative review of the interpretations offered of migration in *The Polish Peasant* and by contemporary transnational theorists, I wish to briefly return to this point.

In its attempt to both “appreciate the potential contribution of the immigrants to American culture» and «to understand the immigrants’ culture in its own terms” [Zaretsky 1996, x], Thomas and Znaniecki’s work is enriched by their analysis of

<sup>3</sup> See end of par. 1.3.

engagement not only in the context of immigration, but also in the home country. Here, they investigate issues such as migrants' management of relations with distant family members, but also their continued investment in political movements. "Years before the current transnationalism debate erupted, Thomas and Znaniecki showed that assimilation to a pluralist, rather than melting pot, vision of American society is compatible with intensive cross-border social ties and long-distance nationalism" [Fitzgerald 2006, 17-18].

In its analysis of the American context, moreover, *The Polish Peasant* focuses "on the shock to the immigrant accustomed to the stability of rural life; on the weakness of new institutions of social control (church, parish, mutual benefit society, shops, and press); and on the corrosive effects of the individualizing welfare agencies" [Burawoy 2000, 9-10]. Similarly the attention of transnationalists focuses on migrants' capacity to develop original patterns of adaptation between sending context and receiving societies. Relocation, in the work of transnational scholars, requires renegotiation, which closely resembles the processes of *disorganisation* and *reorganisation* at the centre of Thomas and Znaniecki's concern. Their analysis, in fact, is centred on the incapacity of traditional group values to regulate individual behaviour and the emergence of new institutions able to reintegrate the individual [Burawoy 2000].

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Polish Peasant* is more often cited for its capacity of anticipating later developments in methodological trends in the social sciences. This article, instead, has shown that the value of this classic in sociological thought as regards its innovative outlook on the issue of migration should not be underestimated. Largely anticipating some of the most innovative features of the contemporary transnational approach to migration studies, Thomas and Znaniecki's masterpiece proves to have been published largely ahead of its time. Many of the intuitions of the authors, in fact, were not taken up by later scholars. Time, of course, needed to take its course as the novelties introduced by the transnational perspective to migration could only have developed within the setting of globalisation and would have been out of place in the epoch of Thomas and Znaniecki. After almost a century, however, *The Polish Peasant's* capacity to read migrations in a global perspective, collapsing sending and receiving contexts into a common framework has been revitalised. Furthermore, the book also proves a groundbreaking capacity to simultaneously pay attention to the micro stories of individual actors and their broader networks of social relations that has largely informed also current transnational theory.

One last innovative feature of *The Polish Peasant* should be mentioned before hoping to have instilled in the reader a desire to pick up again this long forgotten classic. Often listed among the publications of the founders of sociology, the book however proves itself a strongly interdisciplinary reference. Thomas and Znaniecki's choice of sites for fieldwork, in fact, challenges what would have become a line of demarcation between the respective areas of investigation of sociologists and anthropologists. Whereas the first became concerned with phenomena taking place on their doorstep, the others had traditionally ventured into the investigation of distant realities. In the geographic location of their interests, Thomas and Znaniecki challenged this distinction. In a similar vein, the body of today's transnational studies not only renovates the questioning of this distinction, but it has always been characterised by a strong interdisciplinary disposition. Sociologists, anthropologists, but also geographers and political scientists have engaged in transnational theorisation and research, making the approach one to which many disciplines contribute. In this respect, Thomas and Znaniecki once again prove themselves as powerful anticipators of contemporary trends.

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## **The Polish Peasant Revisited**

### Thomas and Znaniecki's Classic in the Light of Contemporary Transnational Migration Theory

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Abstract: This article wishes to offer a contemporary reading of a classic piece of work within the field of migration studies. Although Thomas and Znaniecki's book *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* was published almost a century ago, between 1918 and 1920, it offers a model of research that is exemplary and it addresses a number of issues that have acquired new relevance today. After having lived through periods of alternate fortune and oblivion, this article argues in favour of a newly acquired centrality for this book. Although it is more often cited for its methodological innovations, I argue that *The Polish Peasant* should also be valued for the theoretical contributions it made to the understanding of migrations. In the wake of the current global era, in fact, Thomas and Znaniecki's work should be of inspiration for researchers attempting to come to terms today with the increasingly transnational nature of contemporary migration flows.

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*Keywords: migration, transnationalism, assimilation theory, multi-sited research.*

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