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Historical Sociology in Poland

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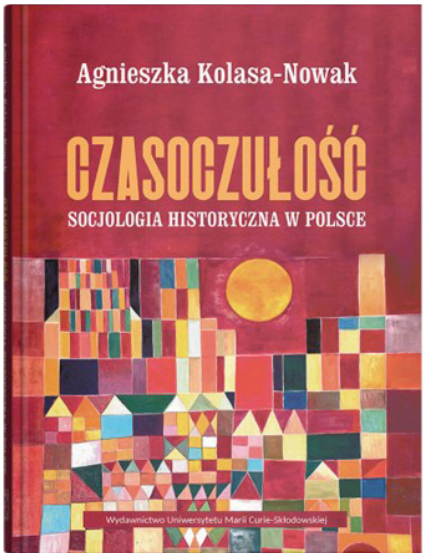
Abstract. Review of book: Kolasa-Nowak, Agnieszka. 2026. *Czasoczułość. Socjologia historyczna w Polsce [Time-sensitivity. Historical Sociology in Poland]*. Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press. 284 p. ISBN 978-83-227-9993-2.

Istorinė sociologija Lenkijoje

Santrauka. Knygos recenzija: Kolasa-Nowak, Agnieszka. 2026. *Czasoczułość. Socjologia historyczna w Polsce.* Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press. 284 p. ISBN 978-83-227-9993-2.



On the eve of the latest European Sociological Association (ESA) conference, held in Warsaw on 25–28 August, the ESA Executive Committee approved five new research networks (RNs), including RN39: Historical Sociology. In their programme, the network's founders promise to bring together scholars interested in historically informed approaches to social processes and transformations, to promote a broad and interdisciplinary understanding of historical sociology by encouraging dialogue with history, cultural studies, and related fields, and to strengthen collaboration across different European contexts and generations of researchers.[1] As

[1] https://www.europeansociology.org/research-networks/rn39-historical-sociology

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a participant in the founding meeting, I can attest that Polish sociologists were the initiators of the new RN and continue to predominate among its members. This review therefore has a dual purpose: not only to assess the book, but also to help explain how and why historical sociology in Poland has attained such a strong position and is emerging as one of the leading centres of historical sociology in Europe.

Given the historical entanglement of our two countries, Poland and Lithuania, as well as their geographical proximity, Polish sociologists are natural collaborators for their Lithuanian counterparts, even if the potential for such collaboration remains underused. I therefore believe that familiarity with the state of historical sociology in Poland may be of considerable value to Lithuanian sociologists, especially those of the younger generation who are still looking for promising niches in the sociological landscape.

For this purpose, the book by Agnieszka Kolasa-Nowak, Professor at the Institute of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, may be almost ideal reading. At present, however, the book is available only in Polish, although it certainly deserves an English translation. The purpose of this review, therefore, cannot be merely to encourage readers to read (or even buy) the book. Unfortunately, the book is currently available only in print, which also makes it difficult to use AI-based translation tools. I therefore devote most of the review to a chapter-by-chapter account of the book (Section I), before briefly discussing its few shortcomings, as the conventions of the review genre require, in Section II. I write in English in the hope of making the review useful to a broader international audience, including potential collaborators within the newly established RN39.

I. Exposition

Kolasa-Nowak's monograph addresses a question that has quietly shadowed Polish sociology since its inception: what should the discipline do with the past? Taking her title from Zygmunt Bauman's notion of *czasoczułość* (time-sensitivity)—the peculiar attentiveness of peripheral societies to tempo, transition, and unfinished trajectories—the author sets out to map how, why, and to what effect Polish sociologists have turned to history over the past three decades. The result is less a conventional history of a subfield than a study in the sociology of knowledge of an emergent and still uncertain specialization: "historical sociology" as practiced, contested, and institutionally negotiated in Poland today.

The book consists of eight chapters, along with an introduction, conclusion, list of interviews, and bibliography. The author employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a historical reconstruction of disciplinary developments and an analysis of key research currents with a survey of sociologists and qualitative interviews with sociologists and historians conducted between 2020 and 2023.

The book opens with Chapter 1, *Socjologia o przeszłości, zmianie i czasie* (Sociology on the Past, Change, and Time), which offers a comparative survey of historical sociology's development internationally: its American "golden age" from the 1960s to the 1980s (Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Barrington Moore Jr.), its more continuous but insti-

tutionally weaker German and French variants, and its subsequent fragmentation into cultural, narrative, and postcolonial strands. The author notes the growing influence of Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias as theoretical resources for historically oriented sociology and identifies a tension between nomothetic ambitions (modeling and theory-building) and idiographic sensitivity (context, contingency, and uniqueness) that has animated the field since its inception.

In Chapter 2, *Socjologia i historia w Polsce* (Sociology and History in Poland), the author reconstructs the rich pre-war tradition of Polish sociology's engagement with history, highlighting Stefan Czarnowski as the first Polish historical sociologist and a precursor of memory studies (the "Polish Halbwachs"), Kazimierz Dobrowolski and his concept of the "historical substrate" (*podłoże historyczne*), and other important contributions. She then documents the "ahistorical" period of the Polish People's Republic, when Marxist historicism became ritualized and the past was largely reduced to a foil against which socialist progress was demonstrated. She notes important exceptions, particularly rural sociology and the study of historical consciousness initiated by Nina Assorodobraj-Kula and continued by Barbara Szacka. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the post-1989 transformation period, when sociology focused primarily on the present and the future, treating the past largely as a source of obstacles to modernization (the *homo sovieticus* syndrome and the "folwark" mentality). The author shows how this perspective began to shift in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the emergence of path-dependency, *longue durée*, and center-periphery perspectives.

Chapters 3 to 6 survey some of the most significant developments in Polish sociology since the 1990s that, taken together, may be described as the making of historical sociology. In Chapter 3, *Różnice regionalne i tożsamości lokalne* (Regional Differences and Local Identities), the author examines the "regional turn" in Polish sociology, showing how history became both a constitutive factor in regional identities and a resource for image-building and place marketing. The discussion covers the Silesian and Kashubian cases, the "post-migratory" identity of Warmia and Mazury, and the symbolic construction of regions. A particularly valuable contribution is the analysis of "historical macroregions" as explanatory frameworks in contemporary political sociology (Tomasz Zarycki, Jerzy Bartkowski). These macroregions correspond to territories that were under Austrian, Russian, or Prussian rule between 1815 and 1921 (with Prussia becoming part of the German Empire in 1871), as well as formerly German territories incorporated into Poland after World War II.

In Chapter 4, *Studia nad pamięcią społeczną* (Social Memory Studies), the author traces the development of memory studies in Poland from pre-war and socialist-era research on historical consciousness to the contemporary "memory boom." The chapter offers rich analyses of the politics of memory and the "mnemonic wars" in Poland; the memory of World War II, particularly the Warsaw Uprising; and the "counter-memory" (*przeciw-pamięć*) of the transformation period, which gives voice to the "losers" of systemic change. The author identifies a key distinction between historical and sociological approaches to memory: while historians focus primarily on reconstructing what happened, sociologists examine the processes through which the past is selected, preserved, interpreted, and put to use in the present.

Chapter 5, *Zwrot ludowy* (The Folk Turn), may be of particular interest to Lithuanian readers, since no comparable development has taken place in Lithuanian sociology. The chapter examines the recent "folk turn" in the Polish humanities and social sciences, focusing on popular histories of peasants and the working class. The author analyzes works by Adam Leszczyński, Kacper Pobłocki, Michał Rauszer, and others, characterizing them as "engaged, leftist, and critical" interventions in public memory. She shows how the "folk turn" has challenged the dominant intelligentsia-centered narrative of Polish history and contributed to a reevaluation of the socialist period as a time of genuine emancipation for the lower classes.

The survey of the state of the art in Polish historical sociology concludes in Chapter 6, *Odkrycie Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* (The Discovery of Central and Eastern Europe), with an examination of the post-EU-accession reorientation of Polish sociology toward the category of "Central and Eastern Europe" and the framework of center-periphery relations. The author focuses on the work of Tomasz Zarycki, whose "critical historical sociology" integrates Bourdieu's field theory, postcolonial theory, and Wallerstein's world-systems analysis. She provides a thorough reconstruction of Zarycki's project, from his early work on political geography and regional identity to his later analyses of the intelligentsia as a "post-szlachta" formation and of the "cultural capital" of the Polish elite. From this account, Zarycki emerges as the most comprehensive and original Polish contributor to historical sociology.

The book's most distinctive contribution, however, lies in its final two empirical chapters: Chapter 7, *Po co socjologom przeszłość?* (Why Do Sociologists Need the Past?), and Chapter 8, *Perspektywa historyków* (The Historians' Perspective). The former presents the results of the author's empirical research: a survey of 81 sociologists and in-depth interviews with 24 sociologists. The latter presents the results of 21 interviews with historians. In these chapters, Kolasa-Nowak explores how practitioners understand their own recourse to the past, how they negotiate disciplinary boundaries, and how career incentives—including internationalization, publication regimes, and the appeal of public intellectual visibility—shape their choices. This reflexive, practice-oriented turn distinguishes the book from a purely historiographical account and gives it a distinctly sociological perspective on the production of knowledge.

The book concludes with *Jaka socjologia historyczna?* (What Kind of Historical Sociology?). Here, the author reflects on the varieties of historically oriented sociology in Poland, mapping them onto Burawoy's typology of professional, critical, public, and policy sociology. She argues that the future of historical sociology in Poland lies in its ability to contribute to the "global visibility" of Polish sociology while retaining its critical edge and local specificity.

II. Assessment

The author demonstrates an impressive command of both classical and contemporary social theory. Her integration of Bourdieu, Elias, Wallerstein, and postcolonial theory is handled with nuance and critical awareness. One of the book's principal strengths is its methodological triangulation: theoretical and historiographical synthesis, close readings of major texts (Leder's

Prześniona rewolucja, Sowa's *Fantomowe ciało króla*, Leszczyński's *Ludowa historia Polski*, and Zarycki's body of work on peripherality), and original interview data. The systematic comparisons between sociologists and historians, as well as between Polish and international developments, add considerable analytical value. Kolasa-Nowak does not merely describe the works she analyzes but also evaluates them, offering constructive criticism and identifying gaps in the literature.

The author is consistently reflexive about her own positionality and the limitations of her approach. She acknowledges the non-representativeness of her interview samples and the interpretive nature of her findings. Nevertheless, these limitations remain consequential. The samples are self-selected and skewed toward scholars already sympathetic to historical approaches. The book's claims about generational change and broader disciplinary trends should therefore be treated as suggestive rather than firmly established. Similarly, the absence of anthropologists, cultural studies scholars, and literary scholars from the interview pool—despite their evident importance to the "folk turn," as the book itself demonstrates—leaves a gap in an otherwise thorough account of interdisciplinary exchange.

The book focuses primarily on Poland, with only brief references to developments in other Central and Eastern European countries. A more systematic regional comparison would have strengthened the argument. The extensive bibliography, comprising more than 400 items, demonstrates the depth of the author's scholarship. However, the analysis could also have benefited from a more systematic quantitative mapping of historical themes in Polish sociological publications, drawing on bibliometric data. The account of the "folk turn" is particularly interesting, but the book pays relatively little attention to the reception of "folk turn" literature and its impact on public opinion and political discourse.

Despite these limitations, which provide opportunities for further research rather than diminishing the book's overall value, the monograph makes a valuable contribution to the sociology of Polish sociology and, more broadly, to debates about how peripheral and semi-peripheral national scholarly fields negotiate their relationship both to global disciplinary paradigms and to their own national pasts. Its combination of intellectual history, close textual analysis, and original interview research will be of interest to historians of the social sciences, scholars of memory and historical culture in Central and Eastern Europe, and sociologists concerned with disciplinary boundary-work and academic careers under conditions of intensified internationalization.