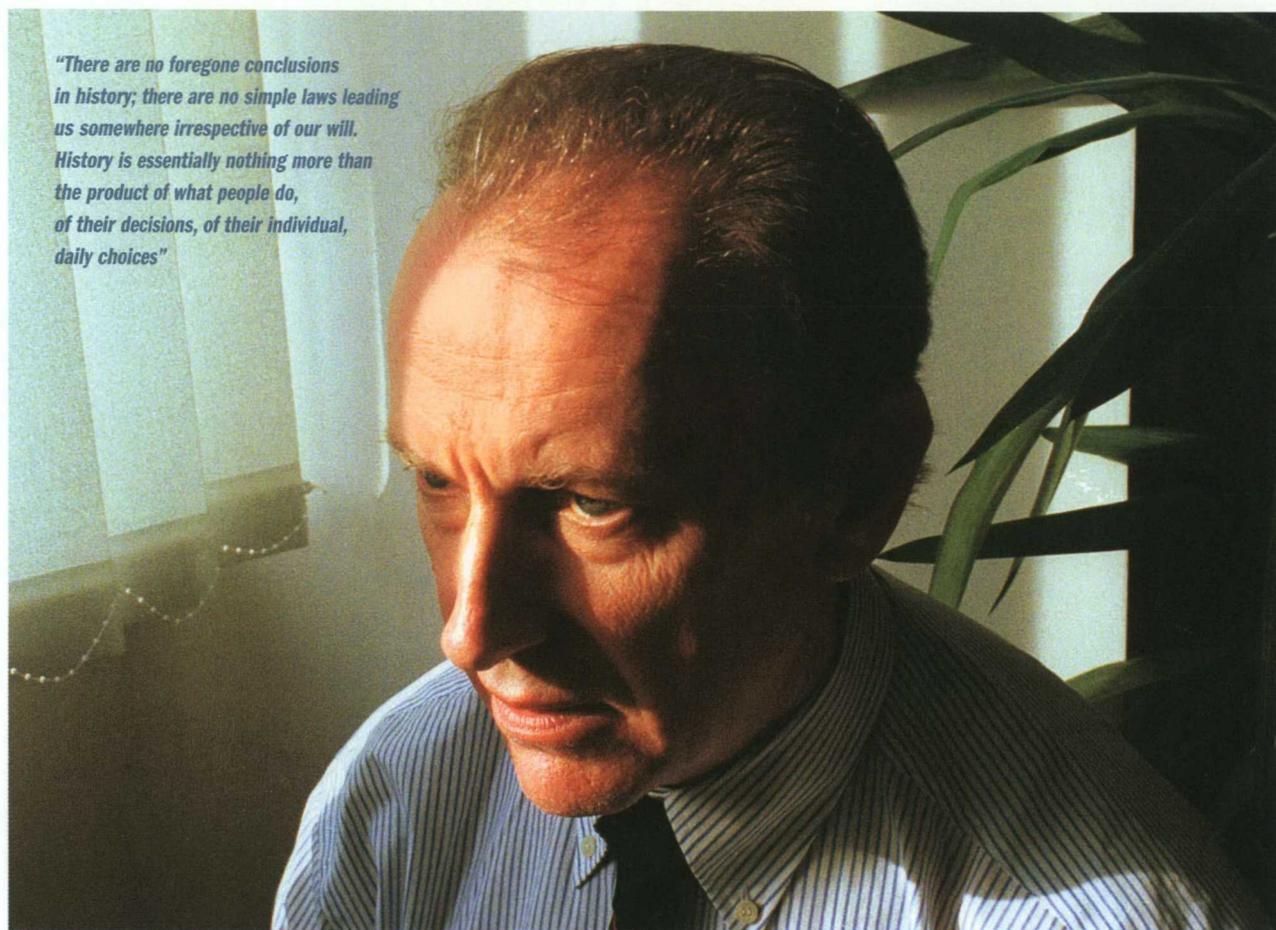


Interview with Prof. Piotr Sztompka

# The Laboratory of Changes

*"There are no foregone conclusions in history; there are no simple laws leading us somewhere irrespective of our will. History is essentially nothing more than the product of what people do, of their decisions, of their individual, daily choices"*



Lukasz Trzcinski/FOTORZEPA

**Academia:** Professor, the field of sociology developed as a response to social change, to the emergence of capitalism and modern society. Nowadays, too, we are witnessing vast changes. How will sociology now respond to them?

**Prof. Piotr Sztompka:** *Indeed, a time of great social change is a magnificent time for sociology. I have to say that as a sociologist, and also as an ordinary citizen, I frequently complain about various problems of Polish society. Yet as a sociologist I consider it to be my professional good fortune to live in a country which has been changing in recent years before my very eyes, in*

*terms of all the important elements of the societal system. Starting with economics and also politics, and continuing through culture and day-to-day life - which is for me where the essence of sociological problems lies. Everything that exists in society takes place in daily life, and it is only certain abstractions, certain products of human activity in daily life, that become grounded in the form of laws, morality, structures, institutions, etc. Now all of this is undergoing radical change and for a sociologist that means a magnificent laboratory for observing change. And not just for Polish sociologists, because sociolo-*

*gists the world over were watching and are still watching our societal changes since 1989 with much interest. Many of them believe that certain inspirations from here also altered the main current of world sociology.*

*As an example, I will cite the idea of civil society. That is a very old notion, deeply rooted in the history of political and social thought, although later it became forgotten. It was only the democratic opposition in Poland that dusted that idea off and developed it as a kind of weapon against the regime. As an idea that showed how the future of society depends more upon ordinary people, on their actions and*

sensibilities, on their ability to mobilize social groups for example, than on the actions of politicians. Civil society is where the fate of societies is truly decided.

**Social changes are currently taking place on a very broad scale?**

Yes, the whole world is changing. These are changes related to globalization or modernization, a clash of civilizations, heading towards a society based more upon information and knowledge than on the production of material objects. Those who study such change adopt various theoretical stances, attempting to capture these changes within some sort of model, within a logic that would explain rather than just describe them. Some researchers employ very old approaches, developed back in the 19th century by the great classical sociologists - particularly what is called the theory of modernization, which is essentially an echo of very old evolutionist views, or the so-called theory of social development. The basic idea is essentially that social progress follows a single track, set a priori by certain rules of a historical nature, and that all societies slowly proceed along the same path towards modernity or even high modernity - or post-modernity as some would have it. But this is in my opinion a very antiquated approach, greatly mistaken, and moreover one that conceals a certain pernicious ideology. Because if history is heading inevitably towards a modern society, people essentially are left with nothing to do but wait and see how things will pan out. In this approach, people are not treated as responsible agents, but merely as pawns in a historical process.

**In terms of Poland, people speak of a "transformation."**

Nowadays there is indeed talk of a transformation, but that in fact represents a step forward, since at the

outset there was talk of a very easy transition. It was thought that, after severing various bonds that had constrained us under real socialism, the only thing to do was to create a democratic, free society of the Western sort by simply catching up with Western societies. By building a new Japan, by copying institutions, with a conviction that once one set up a democratic parliament, a stock exchange, and private corporations, things in Poland would become like in America. This was also a deterministic approach, one which quickly proved unfounded. And then a different notion began to germinate in world sociology as well as in Polish sociology. Namely, that there are no foregone conclusions in history; there are no simple laws leading us somewhere irrespective of our will. And it is not the case that all societies are seemingly standing on an escalator, all riding in the same direction, all traveling the same path, with the only difference being that some are further up, others in the middle, and still others only at the bottom. That is untrue, because history is essentially nothing more than the product of what people do. Of their decisions, of their individual, daily choices.

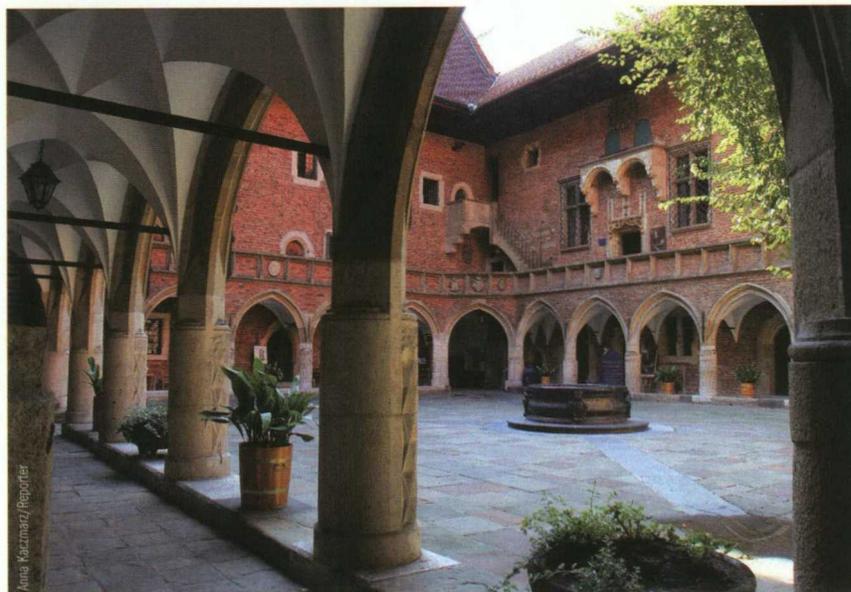
The sum total of those decisions determines the future condition of society. Just like our current condition is nothing more than a consequence of what our predecessors have dealt us, what earlier generations have left behind.

**Is that what your concept of "social becoming" is about?**

Yes, that is my key idea, one which I try to persuade all my students and readers of, that "people have dealt people this fate," as Polish writer Zofia Nałkowska once wrote. It is we who shape the future of our own society, and there are no other causal forces. I do not believe in laws of history, I do not believe in decrees of fate, in providence or divine verdicts. Each future historical stage will be a consequence of what we do, all together and each individually.

**Yet at the same time there is talk that there is not enough civil society in Poland. Whence such reluctance to help create it?**

That stems from a phenomenon which in theoretical terminology I call "social trauma." Such trauma has been with



The Collegium Maius, the oldest building of Jagiellonian University in Kraków, with which Prof. Sztompka has remained affiliated since the outset of his academic career

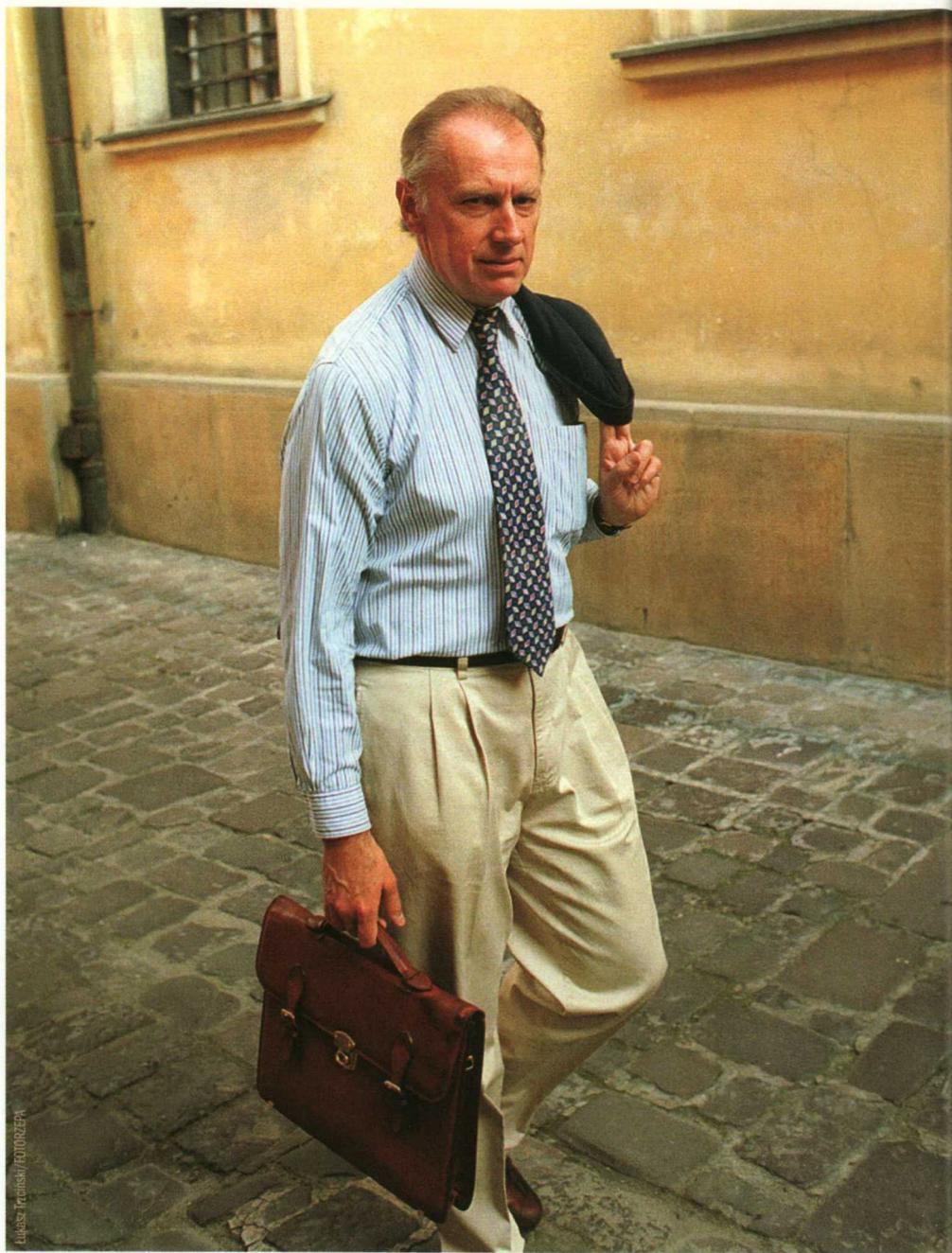
## Interview with Prof. Piotr Sztompka

us since breakdown of communism. Every historical turning point brings a situation in which the customs, mores, habits, ways of thinking and values we profess are suddenly negated. And this new situation requires a complete reversal of our mentality and ways of acting, because the new market-based, capitalist, democratic system, with free thinking and pluralistic media, requires a completely different mentality, completely different attitudes, and completely different reflexes from people who spent decades learning the opposite reflexes. I call this first-degree trauma. A trauma of disorientation in the axiological domain, as well as in the domain of convictions, views, ideology. It is like as if people playing soccer on a field are suddenly, at the blow of a whistle, supposed to start playing rugby.

The trauma of such disorientation is exacerbated by a second trauma, one stemming from the fact that nothing comes for free, that such great and radical regime changes cannot take place without certain costs. This cost is unemployment, whole areas of destitution related to the inefficiency of the former type of economy.

**Are those in government trying to ease these traumas?**

Well, a trauma of the political elite is now emerging – and that is our newest experience in these past few years. Namely, we are coming to the painful discovery, via political scandals and the disclosure of corruption, by peering at what lies under the false bottom of politics, that the political elite – which in a democratic society should be representative of the rest of society – is essentially playing its own game, playing on its own field which is in no way congruous with ours. In normal countries, the government governs. But in our country the government employs various methods to shore up its own position, but is not governing. It is not concerned with society, only engrossed with itself. It is no wonder that



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people are now experiencing the third degree of trauma – disappointment, a certain shock. Disappointment at the fact that democracy is showing its unsightly face.

That is causing a crisis of public confidence in those in power. Many people, especially young people, are leaving Poland.

When people are frustrated, there are two types of reaction. One is called "exit," the other "voice." Voice involves people taking to the streets, throwing stones, writing in to newspapers. In our country, it is the exit option that has recently been adopted. It entails fleeing outward, emigration of the young people. Why is that happening?

I get the impression it is because the process of transformation has created winners and losers. Every revolution has such a twofold outcome; that is most evidently what has occurred in Poland. My colleagues from the PAN Committee on Sociology have just published a book called *Two Polands*, in which they show how opposite segments have formed. For some people the changes have been excellent; for them such things as liberty, the freedom of speech, the absence of censorship, and the ability to travel are important. These are quite elite values, significant to certain groups that are already highly educated. But there is also the other Poland, people for whom being able to read French newspapers is no crucial issue, but the amount of money in their wallet is. And nowadays significant segments of Polish society have experienced degradation in this regard.

#### What might come next?

We have to realize that that hinges upon what is happening today. It depends on three levels that are decisive for the future. And those three levels have to be consistent with one another. The first level is the level of citizens' daily lives and small decisions, their choices, all the actions that contribute to the future outcome.

The second level is the level of collective action. Namely, whether citizens are willing to take self-governance seriously, to take their own initiatives, to try to bring people together from the grass roots, to mobilize them to solve some sort of local problems, as well as broader ones.

The third thing is action by leaders; much depends on them because they generate a certain legal or institutional framework for what other people can accomplish. In my opinion there is no argument in favor of democracy other than the fact that it is a regime that offers opportunities to ordinary people who want to do something for the future. Autocracy or other systems

of that sort only offer such chances to the leader or to a narrow group of people surrounding the leader. It is a pathology of democracy when civil society, mobilization, self-governance, etc., begin to be too tightly straight-jacketed by centralist policies.

#### Do you perceive such a danger in Poland?

We are heading in that direction, although fortunately one of the traits of democracy is that every few years elections check things. Society takes a look and sizes things up. I pin special hopes on one thing that for me represents a great ray of hope for the future: the educational boom we are now experiencing. Young people, unencumbered by the baggage of socialism, are now learning to play in the new field very quickly. And I see hope in the fact that the student population has increased fivefold, and that the university attendance rate is coming up to European averages. That is hopeful because democracy works when it has enlightened citizens. Democracy is for people who are smart. Because if most citizens are enlightened individuals, there is hope that they will one day cry out, quite loudly, and hold leaders to account.

**Professor, I'm pleased to hear you say that, since many pessimistic voices can nowadays be heard.**

*Optimism is my own personal life strategy, which was partly innate and partly learned: when one sets high demands, when one plays the game of life in a disciplined, systematic, rational way, one that remains subject to a certain rational control, subordinate to a clear life strategy that governs actions, there is no way to lose. Fate gives a certain sum total of potential opportunities and possibilities. Perhaps some sort of talents are important, plus some luck, e.g. the place where one is born. A pessimist would say that he was unfortunately born in Poland, rather*

*than in the Netherlands or the US for example. But I say that I was fortunate to be born here, because I could have been born in Nigeria and would stand completely different chances in life. I was born at a given moment and at that moment I wanted to do something. People have a certain sum total of opportunities given to them, but how they play those is up to choice. They have to develop optimism and set the aspirations high.*

Interviewed by:  
**Anna Zawadzka**  
Kraków, 28 October 2006

**Prof. Piotr Sztompka** (b. 1944), one of the most prominent modern Polish sociologists, works with sociological theory and social science methodology. A professor of Jagiellonian University, a full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) and the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (PAU), he has taught at UCLA, Columbia University, John Hopkins University (School of Advanced International Studies - Bologna Center), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, St. Catherine's College Oxford, and Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin - Centre for Advanced Study. In 2001-2006 he chaired the International Sociological Association (ISA). He has written more than a dozen books, mainly published abroad, such as: *Rethinking Progress* (1990), *Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming* (1991), and *Trust: A Sociological Theory* (1999). His book *Sociology of Social Change* (1993), translated into many languages, was published in Polish in 2005 as *Socjologia zmian społecznych*. He won the "Polish Nobel" award in 2006, a prestigious prize awarded for outstanding research achievements.