

Leszek Nowak, a Neglected Thinker

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Abstract: In this short paper, I will describe how I came across Leszek Nowak's ideas and how this influenced my student, Giacomo Borbone, to embark on a similar path. He has made an important contribution to the knowledge a particular school of thought and a philosopher who has often been overlooked in the international epistemological discourse, a particular school of thought and a philosopher who has often been overlooked in the international epistemological discourse, despite the existence of similar concepts within it. I also aim to provide some insights into this neglect, attributing it not to the malice of individuals but to a broader dynamic between the dominant cultural center and intellectual peripheries, as highlighted by Nowak himself in some of his essays.

Keywords: Giacomo Borbone; cultural centre; intellectual peripheries; Leszek Nowak; Poznań School of Methodology.

Let me begin with a few personal considerations, which relate to my experience with a school of thought and a thinker - such as Leszek Nowak - who exerted a decisive impact on my entire intellectual career and my personal life. I will refrain from delving into biographical details about Nowak's life in this paper. For comprehensive information, I recommend

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consulting Krzysztof Brzechczyn's excellent work (2022) where you can find detailed insights.

When I was about to finish writing my first book (Coniglione 1978), I came across the first Italian translation of Nowak's book *La scienza come idealizzazione. I fondamenti della metodologia marxiana* (Nowak 1977). It was a real revelation for me: not only did it give a plausible interpretation of Marxism in line with what contemporary epistemology has elaborated, but it also provided all the conceptual tools to understand Feyerabend's anarchic and anti-methodological drift. I wrote a short article in *Rinascita* (then the theoretical organ of the Italian Communist Party) on this original methodological presentation of Marxism, which I contrasted with the dominant historicist version of Marxian thought in Italy, and I sent it to Nowak. Not long afterwards Nowak's wife, Izabella Nowakowa, replied to me, telling me that her husband had been interned in a prison camp following General Jaruzelski's coup d'état and was therefore unable to reply.

Nowak wrote to me, however, as soon as he was released from the prison camp, inviting me to Poznań. From then on, a continuous relationship was born. It had its most significant moment in my stay of about nine months as a guest of the Poznań university and in annual stays of about one month. I had the opportunity not only to learn the Polish language, but also to understand the cultural depth behind Nowak's theorizing and to get to know the dozens of scholars who were inspired in various ways by what was called the 'Poznań School of Methodology'. Among them there were those who were already known in the West, such as the historian Jerzy Topolski, but also others less known but equally important, such as Jerzy Kmita. Alongside them - who can be considered, together with Nowak, the founders of the school - there are numerous pupils, some of whom are still active, including, first of all, the organizer of this meeting, Krzysztof Brzechczyn. Many other names could be mentioned of intellectuals who, although not strictly speaking pupils of the three initiators of the school, nevertheless came close to it, sharing the same methodological perspectives, such as Jan Such and Władysław Krajewski.

But in addition to this vast and rich group of scholars, my stay in Poznan also enabled me to realize that the Poznan School was not born like a mushroom, isolated in the woods; it had its roots in a rich and extremely

nourishing terrain of philosophical and epistemological studies: that of Polish scientific philosophy, which had been represented mainly by the Lvov-Warsaw School, founded by Kazimierz Twardowski, and had constituted the most important trend in the entire philosophical history of Poland during the 20th century. During my first long stay in Poland and thanks to subsequent visits, I had the opportunity to study all these themes in depth, which then resulted in an extensive study of *Realtà ed astrazione. Scuola polacca ed epistemologia post-positivista*, (Coniglione 1990). To the second edition (revised and corrected) of this study (Coniglione 2010) Giacomo Borbone also had the opportunity to collaborate, not only reading the text and correcting it in several places, but also drawing up a complete list of Leszek Nowak's writings (1963-2009).

I will stop here with the recollection of personal events, which were only meant to reach this point: the birth of Borbone's interest in Nowak, for which I take responsibility. In fact, Borbone graduated in 2006 with a thesis on the Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola, which I directed. He then received his PhD in 2010, again under my supervision, with a dissertation entitled *Questioni di metodo. Idealizzazione e materialismo storico non-marxiano nella figura di Leszek Nowak*. During his doctorate I had introduced him to the circles of the Poznań School, where he went for four months (between 2008 and 2009) as a guest of the Adam Mickiewicz University, under the supervision of Andrzej Klawiter, one of Nowak's best students, then professor of epistemology and cognitive science at the Institute of Psychology in Adam Mickiewicz University. It was at this stage that his interest in the idealizational perspective of science, developed in the Poznań School, was established, and this took shape in the publication of the book *Questioni di metodo. Leszek Nowak e la scienza come idealizzazione* (Borbone 2016), as well as numerous articles published in a variety of journals. The volume we are discussing today is the timely and, I would say, almost necessary English translation of the latter, in substance almost entirely in accordance with the original.

I deemed it necessary and opportune not by chance, because such a translation not only allows the work of a talented scholar to be known outside national borders, but also set another significant stone to contribute to the knowledge of a philosopher and a cultural experience that, in my

opinion, has not received sufficient attention at the international level and especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. And here allow me to be “politically incorrect”, by stating more clearly and distinctly what Borbone cautiously and politely mentions in the first note to his volume (Borbone 2021, 4).

In asking why there is so little awareness not only of the rich Polish epistemological tradition, but especially of what the Poznań School of Methodology has done with its idealizational theory conception of science (ICS), Borbone puts forward several reasons, to one of which I would like to draw my attention. He refers to what Gereon Wolters has called “globalized parochialism”, that is, the particular attitude that makes so-called “minority” and peripheral cultures practically invisible compared to those that have cultural hegemony, especially in some areas, such as the philosophy of science and epistemology, where English-speaking countries dominate. This marginalization should not, however, be understood in a moralistic sense, as if it were the fault of individual scholars, but in the light of a complex and articulated cultural phenomenon where the general relationship between the Centre and the periphery comes into play; a phenomenon that has been well studied in sociological and historical contexts. Among the causes of this “minority” is the imperfect mastering of the hegemonic language (English), which does not allow other cultures to participate with equal dignity and effectiveness in international debates. Wolters uses the example of the Poznań School to illustrate this phenomenon:

(...) I would like to mention the Polish philosopher Leszek Nowak (1943-2009), who has launched the contemporary debate on idealization and has greatly contributed to it. He is nonetheless, rarely quoted, although a substantial part of his work is published in English: He just seems to have had the wrong address: University of Poznań. (Wolters 2013, 10)

Indeed, there is no lack of important scholars who have given due weight and consideration to the ICS in their works, citing and explicitly taking into account what has been done in the Poznań milieu; I would mention only the names of Ilkka Niiniluoto, Craig Dilworth, Nancy Cartwright, Theo A. F. Kuipers, Igor Hanzel, Martti Kuokkanen, Bert Hamminga, Adolfo Garcia de la Sienna. However, many others, while valuing the role of idealization in science and the role of scientific models – especially in the last decades –

seem to ignore the existence of ICS. I will stop here, but countless other cases could be mentioned.

To contribute to this phenomenon there is also, in my opinion, a characteristic of the epistemological tradition of Anglo-American ascendancy, certainly not due to the ill will of individuals and which only in recent years seems to be increasingly questioned: the lack of historical sense in addressing the problems, with the risk of rediscovering the wheel or of falling into forms of disarming philosophical naivety. An example for all: a meagre entry on “Idealization” contained in the *Companion to the Philosophy of Science* (Ben-Mehanem 2000) does not contain the slightest mention (not even in the bibliography) of the elaborations developed in hundreds of articles and dozens of books produced on the subject, both by the Poznań school and by scholars, even Western ones, close to it. This is all the more serious when one considers that it is an encyclopedic entry that, by its nature, should have provided a tendentially complete overview of the main positions on the subject. This is not a question of easy moralizing, because only in a few cases has there been conscious concealment, as in the case of an Italian scholar who takes the ICS theses almost literally, without ever mentioning it, in order to propose his own solution to one of the classic problems of the philosophy of science.

But, beyond these “personal sins” (the world of research is full of conscious and unconscious plagiarism, literal or reformulated as simple paraphrases), we are here dealing with a general problem – sociological rather than moral. This is explicitly and very significantly acknowledged by the exponents of the Poznań School themselves, primarily Nowak. In volume of Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities, entitled *Thinking about Provincialism in Thinking* edited by Krzysztof Brzechczyn and Katarzyna Paprzycka, articles by Nowak and other scholars - including Giacomo Borbone - are published. In particular, in his article Nowak (2012) describes the cowardly mentality of the provincial intellectual, who lacks the courage of his own ideas and believes he can emerge by imitating and repeating those of the cultural metropolis. He then goes on to describe three different types of researcher's personality (creative, correctional and applicational) and then transfers this distinction to the global level, where in a given science there is “the *central sphere* and subsequent,

ever lower, provincial spheres” (Nowak 2012, 63). For instance, “American universities are the centers, followed by the West-European universities, the Central-European ones, and finally universities located even further to the East than our own” [i.e. Poznań University – F.C.] (Nowak 2012, 63). This can be seen simply from the direction of the citations: it is always scholars from the more marginal universities who quote those from the more central universities, never (or rarely) the other way around. Thus:

being from Harvard or Sorbonne means, in a given science, that your work contains theories that other, from Ljubljana or Lublin, can only comment (...) On the other hand, nobody from Harvard or Sorbonne will lower herself to commenting on the work of authors from Ljubljana or Lublin. This is not mere “pathology”. It is the norm! (...) These artificial hierarchies of influence distort real hierarchies of discoveries in different degrees in different sciences. (Nowak 2012, 63-64)

It would be naive not to think that this diagnosis, although supported by solid theoretical arguments and grounded in Nowak’s general conception of science, does not reflect his own personal and painful experience. And I can bear direct witness to this, as we have often talked together about this phenomenon, referring to our two countries, Italy and Poland: both, Nowak used to say, are second-class cultural countries and therefore very difficult to be recognized in the wider context of international debate. And indeed, why should an intellectual from the Centre of the Empire not have the deep-rooted conviction that if something important can be produced in the philosophical field, then surely it will happen in the numerous, rich, well-equipped, and up-to-date American universities? Why should he take the trouble to read Polish or Italian or the occasional article produced in the often-inelegant English of “minority” cultures, when there are hundreds of studies on the same subject produced by his accredited colleagues in an excellent and fluent language?

Fortunately, this is not always the case because, as often happens in science, there are innovators and outsiders who, by dint of insisting, succeed in triggering an avalanche movement that arouses ever greater interest and eventually ends up giving due weight to new ideas, regardless of where they come from. After all, today’s meeting could be a step in this direction, and

Giacomo Borbone's book can be another piece in drawing well-deserved attention to the work of Leszek Nowak and his school. Perhaps the day will come when someone will write a history of the fortunes of such ideas, hopefully with a positive ending.

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