

On Historical Context of Leszek Nowak's Idealizational Conception of Science


Rafał Paweł Wierzchosławski*

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Abstract: The famous saying *Habent sua fata libeli*, can (at least sometimes) also apply to (philosophical) ideas, especially the most abstract ones. As it seems, the invocation of this maxim may also have some application in interpreting the concept of idealization of the concept of science, for the understanding of which it is useful to pay attention to the historical, social and political context. I argue that the analytical Marxism of the Poznan School of the 1970s and 1980s was a philosophical reflection of certain modernization processes of the real socialist system (the managerial revolution and the technocratic modernization of the Gierek era), which was an attempt to “escape forward” from the dysfunctional “manual control” of the system during the period of minor stabilization of the 1960s. At the same time, this period ended the ideological (quasi-religious) functions of Marxist philosophy (March 1968) by introducing an expert dimension that emphasized the use (adaptation) of contemporary currents of thought present in the thought of Western countries. The idealizing interpretation of Marx as an insightful methodologist, whose legacy makes it possible to overcome methodological dilemmas in modern philosophy of science, was also aimed at finding such an aspect (idealizing models) that made it possible to defend against

* Adam Mickiewicz University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0460-1669>

 Liberal Arts and Sciences, Collegium Historicum, Adam Mickiewicz University, ul. Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego 7, 61-614 Poznań, Poland..

 rafalpawelwie@gmail.com

factual charges directed against the Marxist system in the social sciences (apologetic function). A refined conceptual scheme was supposed to give the nimbus of being scientific (logical analysis). However, the sophistication of the late scholasticism of analytical Marxism did not save this construction in its empirical verification (the problem of predicting social phenomena) and led the author to create a non-Marxist Historical Materialism as a separate theory, which was to focus on the structural-functional analysis of the historical process, which involved putting aside the study of idealization “to the side.”

Keywords: Idealization; Leszek Nowak; modernization; non-Marxian historical materialism; social systems; Poznań School of Methodology.

I came into personal contact with Leszek Nowak as a philosophy student at the Catholic University of Lublin, when, in 1983, I invited him on behalf of the Philosophy Students' Club to the annual Philosophy Week conference. It should be noted that this was the first Week after martial law, and its theme was focused on the philosophy of history. The choice of this topic was for the organizers an obvious example of an attempt to grasp the moment (significance) of the historical events of that time. They succeeded in inviting several prominent speakers from Poland. Leszek Nowak accepted the invitation and, in a University auditorium packed with students, presented the fundamental issues of non-Marxian Historical Materialism in the context of predicting future historical events, i.e. the possible collapse of the triple rule system of domination: ideological, economic, and political. In the evening he and another distinguished guest of the week, Professor Jerzy Szacki [an eminent historian of social thought from Warsaw University], had long discussions with students who invited him to a private meeting. Later, in 1984-85, when I returned to my home town of Poznań, I attended his academic seminars, first at the Institute of Philosophy of the Adam Mickiewicz University, and later, after he had been expelled from the university by the Minister of Science, in other places, which were organised by students. Thus, I personally got to know the philosopher from Poznań in the second phase of the development of his views and at the beginning of the third and final phase, when he began to formulate the first theses in the area of negative metaphysics.

Nowak's Idealizational Conception of Science can be treated as a special case of modelling in science and one, but not the only one of many faces of idealization, which the discussed book by Giacomo Borbone rightly points out. I think that it is one of the main merits of the author of the book which is that he went beyond the narrowly conceived philosophy of science and points to the procedures of idealization (or, more broadly, modelling) e.g. in philosophy (Husserl, Cassirer). The fact of the multiplicity of approaches to modelling in science has been raised by Leszek Nowak himself (Nowak 1971, 1992, Brzechczyn 2019, 2022a, 2022b; Wajzer 2022). The merit of Borbone's book is that it introduces other cognitive approaches into the "salons of idealization" and thus broadens the scope of possible understanding of the modelling procedure at hand [using idealization], especially since in the case of Ernst Cassirer or Edmund Husserl we are dealing with anti-naturalistic and ontological-epistemological approaches that definitely go beyond methodological approaches (of the philosophy of science).

I formulate my vote on Borbone's book from a perspective external to idealizational conception of science. This perspective can be described as a historical sociology of scientific knowledge. At the same time, it seems that a certain distance in time already allows for a certain attempt to look at (and evaluate) the broader context within which the philosophical ideas of the Poznan school were born.

I was inspired to take such a perspective in the presentation of the problem of idealization in terms of Poznań's analytical Marxism by reading Katreen Forrester's (2019) fascinating book. The author brilliantly shows the historical, social and political conditions of the emergence of John Rawls' theory of justice and political liberalism, a concept that, although formulated very abstractly, sought to answer the problems of American and non-U.S. society at the time.

In the context of extending the scope and "liberalizing" the method of modelling (e.g. phenomenology), further questions arise: is the Marxian heritage important for grasping the very mechanism of idealization in science, in the version proposed by Leszek Nowak, or is the fact of referring to Marx incidental and historically forced by the "Marxism" then in use and imposed administratively in the academy of the real socialism Poland? Confirmation

of my intuition can be found in the opinion of one of his closest collaborators from those times, Professor Andrzej Klawiter:

The concept that Leszek created was based on Leszek Nowak's ideas, and in Marx these ideas are most simply absent. And this should be clearly stated". (...) it was Leszek's creativity that determined the creation of the school. On the one hand, he would invoke Marx, but on the other, he would show how to make something original out of the relatively vague statements that were there in Marx. Under his eye Marx turned out to be, if not more skillful, then at least as methodologically skillful as Galileo. (Klawiter 2003, 70)

The question about the Marxism of the Poznań School is all the more justified because if we derive its heritage from the tradition of the research approach of Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz and his Poznań students, especially Jerzy Giedymin and Andrzej Malewski, we must remember that they were not Marxists, and at the same time they proposed going beyond the narrow and orthodox positivist understanding of (philosophy of) science. At the other hand, it is worth noting that they survived under the umbrella of logic and its applications the worst period in Polish science, i.e. Stalinism, and skillfully took advantage of the opportunities offered by the period of the so-called "Post-1956 Thaw".

In this context it is also worth to recall the first book written jointly by Jerzy Kmita and Leszek Nowak (Kmita, Nowak 1968), a book in the spirit of the tradition of Ajdukiewicz, and especially Jerzy Giedymin, and the critical rationalism of Karl Popper that he advocated. The authors propose a position of methodological holism (structuralism) and thus go beyond the methodological individualism that characterizes Popper and Giedymin, but this reference to the category of structure (e.g. in linguistics or ethnology) does not have a decidedly Marxian sense; it can rather be interpreted in the tradition of Wittgensteinian rule-following. This book is worth recalling because it contains a certain rhetorical device which marks the cognitive perspective adopted by Nowak, from the point of view of which he discusses different views and presents his own: "It is an attempt to oppose the anti-naturalistic concepts of the humanities with a naturalistic position which, while respecting the correct intuitions of the anti-naturalistic concepts,

would nevertheless be free of some of their shortcomings" (Kmita, Nowak 1968, 4). This schema was taken over by Nowak, in a setting definition of opponents' positions, in relation to which the idealizing approach would constitute their overcoming and abolition of cognitive aporias.

In their case it was the Marxism of the "October Thaw," which soon passed into Gomułka's phase of "minor stabilization" 1956-1968. As he himself analyzed his decisions years later:

March was for me an overt testimony that the deficiencies of this system are not deficiencies, but that it is something systemic. The gap between the ideal and the reality is too great, something has to work spontaneously, causing this gap. At the time, I believed that the system was being reformed and, moreover, I believed that one had to do as Keynes did. That is, Keynes finally turned with his doctrine not to the opposition but to those in power, and it was up to those in power to reform the system in accordance with the recommendations of his theory. I thought that this kind of path had to be followed again, and it was not about my ambition - I thought it should be done at all. And then I thought that it would be some kind of economic theory, a non-standard theory of socialist economy, from the theoretical side it would remain within the framework of Marxian economism. (Nowak [1988] 2011, 678-679)

From this we can infer that Marx's views were close to him earlier, and that his turn was an expression of the ideological stance taken from the family home and the need not only to understand the world, but also to change it. Leszek Nowak quickly became the *Wunderkind* of Polish Marxism in the Gierek era of socialist modernization. He published and printed more books, became a priest of the modern version of the Marxist methodology of science, lectured not only at his home university in Poznań, but also taught doctoral students at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and at Warsaw University, and the methodology of economics at the Institute of Political Economy of Poznań School of Economics [today Poznań University of Economics and Business]. In the party line, he was a member of the Ideological Commission of the PZPR (Polish

United Workers' Party) University Committee (from 1972). In 1975, at the age of 33, he became a full professor.

In an attempt to understand this turn to Marxism (more or less expected), it is worth noting that there is a curious convergence of two post-1968 tendencies. In Western countries there is a young post-war generation for whom Marxism is an attractive 'paradigm' for thinking in a phase of culturally contradictory capitalism. This convergence of Western academic Marxism e.g. analytical Marxists (non-bullshit Marxism) such as Gary A. Cohen, Eric Olin Wright, John Elster, John Roemer and the modernizing and relatively unorthodox or methodological reorientation in contrast to earlier ideological applications of domestic Marxism can be seen as a *signum temporis*.

It seems that both the phenomenon of the Poznań School, and especially that of Leszek Nowak's group (similarly to the marriage of Marxism with Merton's structural-functionalism in sociology by Piotr Sztompka's Kraków group) can be treated as examples of the opening up of Polish science to the West (windows of opportunities) and the introduction of new, let us say "licensed," products to the still mandatory Marxist legitimization ideology, intended to make it more attractive and adjust it to the debates of the time.

In both cases one can observe a modernizing and accommodating tendency, in the sense that, if properly interpreted, it is possible to show that Marx's ideas are still (*sic!*) valid as a cognitive device analogous to the issues raised and developed in the approaches of the time in the philosophy of science or in sociological theory.

As one Warsaw sociologist recalls his performances of those years: "the early 1970s, I listened to a lecture on his theory that raised my deep doubts. He was then admiring himself and his political-intellectual success. I also remember Piotr Sztompka taking great pride in the fact that reading his article on Leninist party theory was recommended for party training."

On the one hand, they were involved in looking for answers in Marx's philosophy, but on the other hand, they simultaneously became part of a system of "intellectual oppression" (ideological chastity), or at least this is how they were perceived by young people from other faculties of the university, whose students have to take compulsory courses in Marxist philosophy and sociology. This aspect undoubtedly differentiates the historical

and social context of the development of Marxist thought in Poland from the setting of its development in Western countries. There it was not a form of domination and enslavement, as the later fate of the author of ICS testifies, when his heterodox intellectual search led him to formulate a version of non-Marxian historical materialism - which in fact is a testimony to his intellectual honesty. Nevertheless, to be a Marxist was at the same time to be a man of the system (in the sense of public perception).

Thus, taking into account the social factors conditioning, or at least accompanying, the development of the concept of idealization, it is worth returning to Klawiter's remark about the [potentially] occasional significance of Marx, perhaps not so much for its origin, but rather for its content. In the light of the line of development that can be traced in the works of Leszek Nowak, it is in the first works that the protagonist of idealization modelling is exclusively Marx, e.g. *O zasadzie abstrakcji i stopniowej konkretyzacji* [On the principle of abstraction and gradual concretization, Nowak 1970], *U podstaw Marksowskiej metodologii nauk* [At the Foundation of Marxian Methodology of Science, Nowak 1971], *Zasady marksistowskiej filozofii nauki* [Principles of Marxist Philosophy of Science, Nowak 1974]. In later works, such as *Wstęp do idealizacyjnej teorii nauki* [An Introduction to the Idealizational Theory of Science, Nowak 1977], which is a more mature account of idealization as a form of modelling in science, Marx is an important author, but not the only one among the classics of scientific cognition, in whose works it is possible to extract (reconstruct) this type of cognitive perspective. In later works, other classics of idealization in various scientific disciplines like Galileo, Charles Darwin or Noam Chomsky appear almost on equal footing.

At the same time, it should be noted that the theory of idealization became a kind of Marxist 'Organon' in the construction of social theory. This was followed by a certain political idea, which Nowak defined in retrospect over the years in the following way:

socialism needs its good, non-conformist and therefore critical theory, which would reveal its hidden mechanisms and thereby give the ruling party an intellectual basis for a more effective policy aiming, as I believed at the time, at the realisation of Marxian ideals. The paradigmatic example was Keynes's theory,

which - as I believed at the time - made it possible to transform the also dreadful pre-war capitalism into something at least acceptable to the people. The idea was to build a theory of socialism of the Keynesian type. With far-reaching criticism of the political practice of the system, and especially of its ideology - I already had no doubt at the time that it was babbling - it was to be a theory faithful to Marx's message and addressed to those whom I considered to be its makers, to the party. (...) But how to make such a theory? One had to look for a method, a Marxian method. While digging through the volumes of *Capital*, I found the method of idealization. And by the way, a Marx quite different from Kołakowski's Marx (by the way, this Marx of Kołakowski's always made an impression on me as a hysterical humanist; I'm not surprised that in the end he got tired of the interpreter himself): Marx the founder of an original methodology. The question was, however, whether this methodology was indeed a good one. The answer was provided by numerous monographs showing that this method, intuitively sketched only in writings, is respected and applied by every field of science, as soon as it emerges from its factual childhood: from physics, through biology, psychology, economics to linguistics or jurisprudence. (Nowak 1985 [2011b], 592-593)

In the context of the "idealization turn," the strategy proposed by Leszek Nowak of reconstructing Marx's methodology can be seen as analogous to the formal and logical sophistication of late scholasticism, which, however, did not save this current from a certain decline (withering away) and its replacement by other approaches. For if we take into account the various functions of language present in the proposed methodology of abstraction and gradual concretization, and in addition to the semantic function of referring to the world, distinguish certain persuasive-polemical (apologetic) functions, then [especially in the first publications on the idealizing reconstruction of Marx's methodology] we see a certain methodological "flight forward." That is, the strategy of avoiding accusations of the empirical inadequacy of Marxian theories (e.g. within economics), by pointing out that the polemicist does not accept or does not perceive (does not realize) at all that his accusations do not relate to the merits, because he adopts a factual

perspective. In Nowak's view, Marx's theses are formulated in terms of an idealizing model rather than empirical (factual) claims subject to direct verification or falsification. As counterfactual theses, they are an attempt to grasp the essence of the phenomena under investigation, which, by the same token, is their radical simplification (abstraction, idealization). Thus, the accusation of empirical inadequacy put forward by opponents of Marxist social, political or economic theory is fundamentally misplaced, since, according to Nowak, it does not directly refute a simplified idealizing model.

If my reading is correct, then, at least in part, the genesis of the ICS can be seen as a search to overcome various "prejudices" and objections to both Marx's texts themselves and their interpretation in existing Marxist interpretations (both canonical and heterodox). It is worth noting that this procedure is put forward at a time when a certain number of former prae-torians and apostles of the new faith are eliminated from the Academy within the framework of cleansings in the apparatus of power (the ideological division), most commonly because they have lost their faith and moved to skeptical and revisionist positions (Leszek Kołakowski or Adam Schaff).

The real question, then, is to what extent the suggestion made here, that independent of the intentions of the authors, was a form of reformed, scientific (not to say 'technocratic' - because of the logical form of expression) Marxism. The term technocratic in this context is appropriate in the sense that reformed Marxism was not only to describe and explain the world, but also, according to the old principle, to change it. It was to provide intellectual tools for effective problem solving and optimization (the category of rationality) of the system. Nowak assumed that ICS and its application in further areas of Marx's thought of categorical dialectics, and especially historical materialism, would enable a social theory formulated in this way to perform diagnostic and predictive functions in the correct (optimal) functioning of the system, which, however, was increasingly evading the analytical categories applied to it. And paradoxically, the transition to a higher level of abstraction, which (at least as a side effect) introduced an idealizing turn, turned out to be the final nail in the coffin of Marxism in its up to now interpretation. For the ideological reconstruction of historical materialism led to the "semantic defeat" of the adaptive interpretation of the same and forced Leszek Nowak and his collaborators to develop a new

approach, which at the turn of the 70s/80s became non-Marxian historical materialism. Emphasizing the significance of the apologetic functions of ICS is not meant to diminish the significance of the originality of the model thinking proposed by Nowak, but rather to point to certain concomitant conditions (*hic et nunc*) of the emergence of this approach, which do not cross out or eliminate the validity of the discussed reconstruction.

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