

Leszek Nowak, Idealization and Interpretation

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Abstract: The paper is a voice in discussion over Giacomo Borbone's book *The Relevance of Models. Idealization and Concretization in Leszek Nowak*. The author characterizes intellectual tradition of Poznań School of Methodology and considers types of interpretation of Marx's writing adopted by Nowak and his collaborators. According to him idealization theory of sciences resulted from two kinds of interpretations: adaptive and historical ones.


Keywords: Idealization; interpretation: Leszek Nowak; Poznań School of Methodology.

Giacomo Borbone's book *The Relevance of Models. Idealization and Concretization in Leszek Nowak* (Borbone 2021) consists of an introduction, three principal chapters: *Origins and Characters of the Poznań School of Methodology*, *Science and Marxian Method*, *Leszek Nowak and the Idealization Conceptions of Science*, a conclusion, and a comprehensive bibliography which encompasses Leszek Nowak's and his cooperators' works on the idealizational theory of science.

Borbone considers the intellectual genesis of the Poznań School of Methodology in the context of the tradition of Polish analytic philosophy

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started in Poland, at the end of the 19th century, by Kazimierz Twardowski. After World War II, the links between the tradition of the pre-war Lwów–Warsaw School and the later members of that school in Poznań were Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (Twardowski’s son-in-law) and Adam Wiegner.

Borbone notes the importance of Jan Łukasiewicz whose works contain the idea that scientific law does not simply represent the studied reality but distorts it in such a way that it is possible to extract its most important elements. To that map of intellectual influence, it is worth adding the impact of Tadeusz Kotarbiński’s lectures frequented by Leszek Nowak when he was an extension student of philosophy at the University of Warsaw and the inspiration from Janina Kotarbińska who was the supervisor of Nowak’s master’s thesis (Brzechczyn 2022).

The second tradition of the Poznań School of Methodology was Marxism. After 1956, there appeared so-called scientific Marxism which assumed less dogmatic form, at least in Poland. Within its framework researchers tried to make use of the achievements of the newest methodology of life sciences and of the philosophy of science. The third pillar of Poznań School were Popper’s methodological concepts popularized in Poland by Jerzy Giedymin (review of different traditions of idealization in history of science, see: Wajzer 2022)

However, apart from scientific Marxism based on mature Marx’s works, anthropological Marxism based on his earlier works was also developed in Polish philosophy in the second half of the 20th century. Borbone wonders what motivated Nowak to only take mature Marx’s works as the starting point. He quotes Nowak himself explaining that:

Each of us has numerous ‘works’ written when he was still a student (...). Imagine that one of your treatises, which you held among your papers for decades only out of a natural feeling for your own youthful naivety, is ‘discovered’ by someone and that then numerous ‘interpreters’ begin to declare what you have published is meaningless and that instead your true ‘conceptions’ are those contained in these unpublished writings of your youth: well, what would you think of it? I would submit the matter to a court of justice! (...) Not only the living but also the deceased

have ‘human rights.’ And Marx’s rights as an author have been seriously violated. (Nowak 1987, 274)

That line of reasoning, though, is not convincing for Borbone. According to him, the criterion of having been published is not the only one criterion of choosing any work as a base of interpretation:

the reasons that Nowak puts forward are not entirely satisfactory: why does Nowak in his works often turns his gaze to Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature* as well as to *Grundrisse* and Marx’s *Theories of Surplus Value*? In fact, it is known to specialists that these works remained unpublished but nonetheless Nowak makes constant use of and refers to them, forgetting, in this case, his previous mistrust of the manuscript. The only explanation, in our opinion, consists in Nowak’s conscious choice to use Marxian and Engelsian works where there is that idealizational conception of science so dear to him. This explain why Nowak very often makes use of Marxian and Engelsian ‘manuscripts’ which he in principal underestimates as an authentic source of the thought of the author who, in his opinion, only finds the best expression in published works. (Borbone 2021, 47)

Perhaps Nowak applied two criteria at once: the criterion of having been published and criterion of the time of creation. The second criterion was crucial for Nowak – whether the work was created in its author’s youth or mature age. Of the works created in the author’s youth, those which fulfill the criterion of having been published can be the subject matter of reconstruction. However, the criterion of having been published does not apply to the works written in the mature age.

It is worth noting that while interpreting Marx’s concept, Nowak distinguished two types of interpretation used in philosophy: historical interpretation and adaptive interpretation (Nowak 1989). The goal of the former is to recreate what the author meant at the given time, when the statement in question was made. In adaptive interpretation, the expression of thought is ascribed a particular meaning on account of it being the answer to the interpreter’s question (or problem) which is significant in the context of the interpreter’s culture or society. According to Bogusław Wolniewicz, in that type of interpretation:

We are not then interested in intentions or motives. We are faced with certain theses the origin of which does not matter because we are only interested in the logically necessary consequences of those theses and in their possible reasons. We could phrase it like that: the interpretive issue of the latter kind does not concern the meaning intended by a person but the ‘intended meaning’ of a system of statements. (Wolniewicz 1968, 53)

One might put forth the thesis that the idealization method discovered in Marx’s writings (also called the abstraction method) was the result of the application of historical interpretation. Marx’s methodology was interpreted in a similar way by Bert Hamminga (1990) and Adolfo García de la Sienra (1992). Nowak and his cooperators’ transformation of Marx’s abstraction method into the idealizational theory of science was, on the other hand, the result of the application of adaptive interpretation (Nowak 2000, 178).

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