

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

We live in times of accelerated changes – social, economic, and political – which are currently transforming most societies and areas of human life. Every day brings not only new shifts in political orders of various countries but also clearly observable metamorphoses of labor patterns, family forms, and modes through which we participate in political life, communicate, and are related to each other. All these things constituted a seemingly stable foundation of social life in the past, but this is no longer the case. The pace of these changes and their complex mechanisms make it difficult to discern what directions they are actually taking.

Such a cognitive confusion has also engulfed sociologists. Some scholars note the crisis of society or even its demise, while others are equally assertive in announcing the birth of a new form of social life: the postmodern society, and yet others maintain that we are witnessing the crisis of sociology itself. Fragmented into a myriad of specialized research programs, the discipline seems unable to develop any generalized image of either contemporary reality or social change as such.

At the onset of the second half of the twentieth century, sociology seemed convinced that it has at its disposal the tools necessary to understand, or perhaps even manage, the social and economic reality. Today, however, instead of peacefully reaching the end of history, at which point the secular model of the world would materialize in the form of a democratic, knowledge-based society of individuals, we witness unexpected twists and turns, which involve the disappearance of social forms that seemed to be firmly grounded, accompanied by the re-emergence of forms long deemed obsolete. The prevailing sociological model of the society either ignores these phenomena or seeks to explain them in terms of ad hoc conceptions, anchored in common-sense knowledge.

Thus, when we became interested in processes of social change, we decided to return to the sources of sociology and its most fundamental concepts or assumptions – ones that provide the foundation on which the discipline was built. Among them, a crucial role was played by the conviction that social changes have a discontinuous and nongradual character, that they did not follow any higher logic of development, and that subsequent “incarnations” of social order are not simple continuations of the previous order on a higher level of complexity. The overarching concept that determined classic sociological analyzes was that of social bonds: relational linkages tying various elements together to form a larger whole capable of coordinated action and causing individual actions to be, consciously or unconsciously, subordinated to the realization of common good.

This book attempts to answer how these bonds are formed, how they are dissolved, and how they are forged anew. It offers a preliminary consideration of what affects us all these days, regardless of any specific conditions, a reflection on the course and consequences of the ongoing transformations of the social order. At the same time, it invites to reconsider the foundations of sociological thinking. Today, sociology needs this kind of debate more than any time before.

Fourteen years ago, when we started our work on this book in Polish, the processes whose consequences we are experiencing so powerfully today, have only begun to come to light. However, already at that point it was quite clear for some sociologists that we are actually dealing with changes leading to the “end of the world as we know it.” Today, the ground-breaking works by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Immanuel Wallerstein or Manuel Castells – which were also for us a source of inspiration – are part of the sociological canon. Unfortunately, their impact on sociological research has been rather minor, since the conceptual apparatus of contemporary sociology still remains unable to grasp those processes of change that affect the very basis of social organization of life.

At the same time, however, the basic factors influencing such a change – ones which we identified fourteen years ago – are now gaining ever greater importance within the processes that mark “the beginning of a world we are still learning to recognize.” This bolsters our courage to introduce this book – despite its age – to the English-speaking public.

For the purposes of the English edition, we have slightly altered the composition of the book. The original chapters 1–2, focused on the condition of contemporary sociology, have been shortened into one section whereas the last chapter has been divided into chapters 8–9.

Warsaw, September 2018

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