

Ina Alber

Civic engagement in Poland in times of transformation - an approach using biographical research and discourse analysis

[**Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in Polen – ein biographietheoretischer und diskursanalytischer Zugang. (Theorie und Praxis der Diskursforschung). Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 2016. <http://www.springer.com/de/book/9783658133573>]**

Content

1. Introduction – Civic engagement in Poland

- 1.1 Objective and research question
- 1.2 State of research and positioning

2. Epistemological positioning and methodology

- 2.1 Phenomenological sociology of knowledge
- 2.2 Methodology of biographical and discourse research and their triangulation
- 2.3 Patterns of interpreting and acting
- 2.4 Methods and procedure of collecting and analysing data

3. „Civic engagement“ – a changing pattern of interpreting

- 3.1 Civil society and engagement - ascriptions
- 3.2 The family of Kempnińskis – a long tradition of civic engagement
- 3.3 Civic engagement in the People's Republic of Poland – discursive approach
- 3.4 Solidarność as social phenomenon and research objective
- 3.5 Weakness-thesis and civic engagement in Poland
- 3.6 Democracy promotion in Poland
- 3.7 The „numbers-discourse“ on civic society in Poland after 1989

4. Civic engagement as qualification

- 4.1 Introduction to the qualification type
- 4.2 Wojtek Wejda. Democracy needs qualified civil society experts
- 4.3 Danuta Kremer: a civil society expert in demand
- 4.4 Aleksander Trochowski: My passion became my profession
- 4.5 Beata Czapla and Michał Dzierwa: Civic engagement as a normal job
- 4.6 Summary

5. Civic engagement as empowerment

- 5.1 Introduction to the empowerment type
- 5.2 Edyta Truszkowska: We must be able to change something
- 5.3 Nina Jesień: Civic engagement as a resource for myself and others
- 5.4 Krystyna Pietrzak: I am civil society
- 5.5 Krytyka Polityczna – political empowerment of the engaged Polish intelligentsia
- 5.6 Paweł Tomski: There are only a few people like me in Poland
- 5.7 Summary

6. Doing civic engagement in times of transformation

- 6.1 Civic engagement as social inclusion
- 6.2 Two types of interpreting civic engagement
- 6.3 Changing civic engagement in times of transformation - outlook
- 6.4 Methodological conclusions

Summary

Civil society and civic engagement in times of transformation are both powerful and vague. They function as the framework within which civil society activists in Poland perform their engagement. But why do people interpret themselves as civil society activists? Which biographical experiences lead to a pattern of acting called civic engagement and how do the activists through their everyday actions reproduce and transform the discourse about civil society?

These were some of the questions that my PhD research tried to find explanations for. Focusing on the question of “doing civic engagement” in times of transformation my study was conducted within the framework of the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1967). This means amongst other premises taking into consideration both the level of discourses and actors as well as their interdependencies. The qualitative, sociological project focused particularly on the discourse on civic engagement and civil society and biographical trajectories that led to civic engagement. I conducted 13 qualitative biographical-narrative interviews with civil society activists in different towns in Poland. Thereafter, I did biographical case reconstructions – always paying special attention to the difference between the narrated life story and the experienced life history, according to the methods introduced by Gabriele Rosenthal (2004, 2006). I was interested in the sociological case and the theoretical generalizations that could be drawn from a detailed case reconstruction that takes into consideration not only the biographical narrative interview text, but also further sources like archive material, newspaper articles, history text books and scientific literature.

To systematically analysis these source materials as well as the interview texts from the perspective of discourse theory I did an interpretative discourse analysis in the tradition of the sociology of knowledge introduced by Reiner Keller (2012). Special attention was paid to the triangulation of biographical and discourse analysis trying to find answers to the question how civic engagement is constructed through everyday practice in discourses and the acting of the biographers themselves. The results of these triangulations show both a variety of patterns of interpretation within the discourse of civil society as well as two types of interpreting civic engagement either as qualification or empowerment.

I could reconstruct that representatives of the qualification type interpret themselves as experts for a newly established social phenomenon: civic engagement in a democratic society. Their own expertise and qualification is seen as the key for their successful career within the civil society sector. They reproduce a pattern of interpretation and acting found

in the scientific and political discourse about the positive functions of civil society – qualification and ‚usability‘ for the job market, but also social inclusion.

The other type of civic engagement reconstructed on the level of interpretation can be summarized as the empowerment type. The representatives of this type see their civic engagement as a form of emancipation (referring to a concept on the level of social inequality and participation for excluded social groups) and empowerment (referring to psychological and social work concepts of individual empowerment). They refer to and reproduce thereby also the discourse found in democracy promotion of the UN or others stating, that civic engagement serves as empowerment and a form of participation for minorities, for instance.

The triangulation of biographical and discourse analysis was very fruitful to approach the social phenomenon of civic engagement and civil society activists in Poland after 1989. Although the discourse can be characterized as diversified there are mainly two interpretative types of civic engagement within the sample of democracy and human rights activists, qualification and empowerment. The biographical genesis shows that civic engagement functions as a means for social inclusion at many levels in both cases. The civil society activists reproduce and transform the discourse of civil society through their engagement and everyday actions. And of course, my own study also contributes to the reproduction of the powerful, yet unclear discourse of civil society – but hopefully its transformation at points as well.

- Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T., *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, (Anchor books Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1967, c1966).
- Keller, R., ‚Entering Discourses: A New Agenda for Qualitative Research and Sociology of Knowledge‘ (2012) III, *Qualitative Sociology Review*, pp. 46–75.
- Rosenthal, G., ‚Biographical Research‘, in C. Seale, G. Gobo and J. F. Gubrium (eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (London: SAGE, 2004), pp. 48–64.
- Rosenthal, G., ‚The Narrated Life Story. On the Interrelation Between Experience, Memory and Narration‘, in: Milnes, K., Horrocks, C., Kelly, N., Roberts, B. und Robinson, D. (eds.), *Narrative, Memory & Knowledge. Representations, Aesthetics, Contexts* (Huddersfield 2006), pp. 1–16.