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Dossier Ludwik Fleck

The beginnings of the reception of Ludwik Fleck's ideas in Polish (1936-1989)¹

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Abstract:

The article discusses the beginnings of the reception of Ludwik Fleck's theory of thought styles and thought collectives in Polish, from his first polemics with Izydora Dąmbska in 1936 to the first edition of the Polish translation of *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache* in 1986 and its reviews.

Keywords:

Ludwik Fleck; thought style; thought collective; reception of Ludwik Fleck's ideas in Poland

21

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Responding to a questionnaire sent by Thomas Schnelle, a friend of Ludwik Fleck's, Józef Parnas, wrote:

Ludwik Fleck said: 'applied research leads to reform, fundamental research-ideas lead to Revolution'. This was his book! Ludwik Fleck warned me: 'do not organize science. Poles will never thank you. Work experimentally and think. 100 years will pass away – and your work will be quoted'. (Schnelle 1978-1979)

Ludwik Fleck was wrong. Worldwide reception of his theory of thought styles and thought collectives began not 100 years but roughly 40 years after his most important texts were published (1934-1936). Today there are English (1979), Italian (1983), Polish (1986), Spanish (1987), Swedish (1997), Russian (1999), French (2005) and Portuguese (2010) translations of his German-language book (Fleck 1935a). Fleck wrote also several theoretical papers in Polish,³ so nearly half of his philosophical legacy was originally written in Polish. However, the proper reception of his ideas in Polish⁴ only began in the early 1980s, and not from these papers. In this article I would like to present the history of the beginnings of the reception of Fleck's ideas,

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³ For more information see Table 1 in (Jarnicki 2016).

⁴ Poland is the only country in the world where people speak Polish; however, after the war (1945-1989) there was no independent Republic of Poland, instead there was the People's Republic of Poland that was dependent on the Soviet Union, hence I speak of the reception in Polish rather than Poland.

covering the period before the Polish translation of the book appeared as well as the reviews it received after its publication.

Pre-war period (1936-1939)

Even though Fleck's theory was largely forgotten after the Second World War, it is worth noting that before the war Fleck's papers were published in the most important Polish journals, including two articles in the prestigious "Philosophical Review" ("Przegląd Filozoficzny") (Fleck 1935b; Fleck 1936).⁵

In the pre-war period, three reviews of Ludwik Fleck's German book were also published (Chwistek 1936; Rotstadt 1936; Dembowski 1939),⁶ the first in a social-literary weekly, the second in a medical weekly and the third in the annual "Polish Science" ("Nauka Polska") devoted to – as stated in the journal's subtitle – its "Requirements, Organization and Development".⁷

There were also two polemics – first in "Przegląd Filozoficzny" with Izydora Dąmbska, a philosopher and pupil of Kazimierz Twardowski, the founder of The Lwów–Warsaw School. In the end of her paper titled *Is the intersubjective similarity of sense-data the necessary assumption of the sciences?*, Dąmbska criticizes Fleck's claims (Fleck 1936) that only people characterized by the same or similar thought style can understand each other, and argues that

even the most inspired prophet, poet or a mystic, in some everyday life situations finds common ground [literally: a common language] with a sober scientist, and belongs to one style with the latter. In which situations? In those in which they do not sleep and have to have serious consideration for everyday life conditions. (Dąmbska 1937, 293)

Fleck answered deftly that this is the case

only if they live in the same everyday life milieu. In this case, however, a prophet, a poet, a mystic and a scientist do not think and act as a prophet, a poet etc., but as members of the same thought team: a defined collective of everyday life. But if they live in different milieus – one of them is, for instance [...] a Hindu from the caste of Brahmins and the other is an average European intellectual – then even in such simple matters as washing up or eating they won't find any common ground. Despite the fact 'they do not sleep and have to have serious consideration for everyday life conditions', and possibly just because of this. (Fleck 1938, 194)

This short exchange is a good representation of the nature of this polemic. Dąmbska, incidentally, did not publish a rejoinder to Fleck's argument.⁸

A second polemic, this time against Tadeusz Bilikiewicz, a psychiatrist, historian and philosopher of medicine, took place just on the eve of war, in a holiday issue (July-September 1939) of a social-literary monthly (Fleck 1939a; Bilikiewicz 1939b; Fleck 1939b; Bilikiewicz 1939a), so it was largely unnoticed until Stefan Symotiuk⁹ found it in 1983 (Symotiuk 1983b). English readers can peruse this polemic since it was translated into English by Ilana Löwy (Fleck 1990b; Bilikiewicz 1990a; Fleck 1990a; Bilikiewicz 1990b). This is worthy of note because of a central term used by Fleck in the title of the paper that initiated this discussion – *Nauka i środowisko*, which is translated by Löwy as *Science and Social Context*. "Środowisko"¹⁰ is better

⁵ The latter was the first paper in the issue!

⁶ Leon Chwistek was a philosopher, mathematician and painter; Julian Rotstadt was a neurologist; Jan Dembowski was a biologist.

⁷ This latter review is longer than the other two and also refers to the two papers mentioned above.

⁸ This polemic is discussed and translated into German in (Graf and Griesecke 2007).

⁹ Stefan Symotiuk is a philosopher.

¹⁰ In Polish, this may refer both to physical and cultural surroundings.

translated as “milieu”, however.¹¹ This is important since it is possible that the misunderstanding with Dañbska mentioned above inspired Fleck to develop this thought.

War and post-war period (1939-1978)

In 1990, Andrés Rivadulla asked: “How could a philosopher that in the thirties advanced many of the ideas of such great epistemologists like Kuhn and Toulmin escape notice in his own country and outside it?” (Rivadulla 1990, 23). As we have seen, Fleck was noticed before the war, so he was “forgotten” just after it, and probably not only because of content-related reasons. Polish history is quite complicated and difficult to understand for people from the outside. In 1939, Poland essentially lost its independence on 17 September with the invasion of the Soviet Union and only started to regain it in 1989. During the war, there were obviously no conditions to pursue normal academic life. The invading German forces liquidated Polish universities, and the Soviets changed the rules of education (at every level) in a way that set the various nationalities that inhabited the Republic of Poland against Poles. After the war the People's Republic of Poland was established, a totalitarian state – especially before 1956 – that was entirely dependent on the Soviet Union.¹² It is not the objective of this paper to discuss these “external” reasons in great detail, but it will suffice to say they surely played a role in Fleck's work being lost within academic circles.

Even if there are some minor signals that some people read Fleck after the war – Stanisław Lem, for instance, mentioned Fleck in his *Philosophy of Chance* (Lem 1968, 200) and Bogusław Wolniewicz mentioned Fleck in the foreword to a translation of Richard Avenarius's *The Human Concept of the World* (*Der menschliche Weltbegriff*) (Wolniewicz 1969, XLIII) – there was no discussion of Fleck's theory.¹³

Certainly the turning point – albeit the real, significant change would only take place ten years later – was the Polish edition of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1968) in 1968. We have to bear in mind, however, that “Fleck” is not a typical Polish surname (it sounds more German or Jewish) and the book Kuhn quoted was written in German, so for anyone who didn't already know who Fleck was, it would have been hard to guess that he was a Polish citizen before the war. Nevertheless, the rumour spread that the famous Thomas Kuhn had been inspired by a Polish microbiologist.

Before the Polish translation of the book (1979-1985)

In 1979 – around the same time as an American translation of Fleck's book (Fleck 1979) was published – an annual publication of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (Lublin) appeared; its philosophical section contained three texts about Fleck. The first one was written by Zdzisław Cackowski. For a long time, Cackowski was certainly the most important proponent of Fleck in Polish. Cackowski was born in 1930 and studied philosophy in Moscow (1950-1955) where he specialized in Marxist philosophy and epistemology. In his first text about Fleck (in the first paragraph, Kuhn's reference to Fleck is of course mentioned) he reported Fleck's voices from the *Report on the Activities of the Philosophical and Sociological Society in Lublin 1945-1947 and Supplement 1948*¹⁴ (Cackowski 1978-1979). In the same edition, Ewa Pirożnikow, then an employee at the Institute of Marxist Philosophy, published her *Methodological Problems in Ludwik Fleck's Works* (Pirożnikow 1978-1979) which, it has to be said, was not presented in a very systematic way. Even though the first bibliography of Fleck's publications – consisting of 120 entries – enjoined to the third text and written by Irena Rubaszko (Rubaszko 1978-1979), points to more philosophical texts, Pirożnikow's presentation is based on only two papers: the first mentioned above (Fleck 1935b) and another that Fleck published just after the war (Fleck 1935b; Fleck 1946). In the third text, Irena Rubaszko, who was a librarian

¹¹ This is because the translations of subsequent texts should be consistent, and it would be strange if we had translated Fleck's earlier text (see above quote from polemics with Dañbska) “only if they live in the same everyday life social context”. Moreover, in the third paragraph Fleck quoted Schrödinger's *Ist Naturwissenschaft milieubedingt?*

¹² Ludwik Fleck repeatedly tried to emigrate to Israel from 1948, but only received permission to do so in 1957.

¹³ Two obituaries were published after Fleck's death ([Anonim] 1961; Groër 1962).

¹⁴ Fleck lived in Lublin from 1945 to 1952, at which point he moved to Warsaw. In 1957 emigrated to Israel, where he died in 1961.

at the Medical University in Lublin, gave a sketch of Fleck's biography and discussed the subject matter of all Fleck's publications.

Two years after the American edition of Fleck's book was published, the only Polish review of it appeared in the philosophical journal "Philosophical Movement" ("Ruch Filozoficzny") written by Waldemar Voisé, a historian of science (Voisé 1981). Also in 1981, in the "History of Science and Technology Quarterly" ("Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki") the first longer article on Fleck in Polish was published, titled *The Sociology of Ludwik Fleck's Scientific Knowledge [poznania]* (Gierasimiuk 1981). This piece is one of the most interesting and concise presentations of Fleck's ideas – the subtitles of its parts are: *The idea of historical-comparative epistemology*; *The historical-cultural determinants of development of knowledge [wiedzy]*; and *The social context of cognitive processes*. Although Jerzy Gierasimiuk, a philosopher who worked with Zdzisław Cackowski but left the university after several years, mentioned the American edition, he quoted Fleck's book from the first German edition, so this text contained the first translations of selected passages.¹⁵

In 1982, the Polish translation of Robert Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure* was published. Five pages of the *Author's Foreword to the Polish Edition* are devoted to Fleck (Merton 1982, 10–14). At that time there was no Polish translation of Fleck's book, so when Merton quoted Fleck, the translators were translating from the English translation of the German original.¹⁶ Merton briefly discusses the history of the first edition of Fleck's book as well as Fleck's ideas about "scientific communicating", active and passive "factors" of knowledge and esoteric and exoteric circles. From today's perspective, some of the quoted passages can seem amusing; there are references, for instance, to "newspaper science" and "dictionary and guide science" (not to "journal" and "textbook science" as we would say today). Nevertheless, the most important advantage of Merton's foreword is certainly that it was read by Polish sociologists.

Also in 1982, an issue of "Philosophical Studies" ("Studia Filozoficzne")¹⁷ appeared containing three texts on Fleck. Two of them (Markiewicz 1982; Wolniewicz 1982) are presentations from the Colloquium on Ludwik Fleck organized by Lothar Schäfer and Thomas Schnelle in 1981 in Hamburg.¹⁸ It is important to mention that Thomas Schnelle, in writing his PhD about Fleck, was attempting to familiarize himself with Fleck's biography to the greatest extent possible, so to that end he sent questionnaires to scores of people who knew or might have known something about Fleck. Additionally, he made several trips to the People's Republic of Poland for the same purpose.¹⁹ Although it is not possible to measure the exact impact of this work, one can imagine that it probably played a significant role in stimulating interest in Fleck among Poles. Moreover, in all likelihood the two texts mentioned above (Markiewicz 1982; Wolniewicz 1982) probably wouldn't have been written if it were not for Thomas Schnelle's project.²⁰

The third text, the presentation of *Ludwik Fleck's Epistemology* by Zdzisław Cackowski (Cackowski 1982), is based on the book and two Polish papers – the same ones upon which Pirożnikow's presentation was based. Cackowski quotes Fleck's book at length but again these passages are taken from a translation of the American translation.²¹ From Cackowski's text we learn that also in 1982 a Polish translation of Fleck's book was being prepared by Wydawnictwo Lubelskie (Lublin Publishing House). Cackowski also coined three slogans which he repeated in his subsequent articles on Fleck: "epistemological historicism", "epistemological collectivism" and "paradigmatic character of cognition". Cackowski also coined a fourth one

¹⁵ He also refers to Fleck's first German paper (Fleck 1929).

¹⁶ The translators had evidently no idea who Fleck was, and didn't give any references to any Polish texts of or about Fleck.

¹⁷ "Przegląd Filozoficzny" was closed in 1949 by the Communist government because of its independence. It was substituted by "Myśl Filozoficzna" ("Philosophical Thought") (1951-1957) and then by "Studia Filozoficzne" (1957-1990) with Leszek Kołakowski as the editor-in-chief. After the People's Republic of Poland collapsed "Przegląd Filozoficzny" was reactivated in 1990.

¹⁸ Since they are published in English (Schnelle and Cohen 1986), these texts fall outside the topic of discussion here.

¹⁹ During which Służba Bezpieczeństwa (the Security Service) unsuccessfully tried to recruit him as a spy (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Peoples Republic of Poland [Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej)] 1979-1985).

²⁰ Władysław Markiewicz, for instance, was Schnelle's scientific consultant during the first research trip (DAAD scholarship) in March 1979.

²¹ Although this translation of a translation is not very precise, it contains no mistakes such as those present in Merton's Foreword.

– “incompetence and oververbalism [*nadwzbalizm*]”²² – that was formulated during his discussion of Fleck’s paper in which Fleck described the “scientific” work of a collective in Buchenwald concentration camp. Cackowski quoted Fleck: “one can say that the lack of specialist education in the empirical field can best be recognized by the limitless accuracy of logical inference” (Fleck 1986b, 124) and defined “oververbalism” as the “phenomenon of incommensurability of words to contents, the phenomenon of verbal constructions overgrowing the actual content” (Cackowski 1982, 77) in opposition to “underverbalisation” – that what is not verbalized and in fact impossible to verbalize but obvious for members of the collective within a certain thought style. Cackowski had, however, gone too far when he claimed that “logic is a field that is particularly prolific in oververbalism” and that the “field the most susceptible to oververbalism is undoubtedly philosophy. [...] It is enough to observe the Stalinist period of the development of Marxist philosophy to see clearly a content barrenness covered by oververbalism, sometimes reaching the level comparable to classical scholasticism” (Cackowski 1982, 77).

A little over a year later, in the same journal, Jerzy Perzanowski, a logician who was, incidentally, a student of Roman Ingarden and Izydora Dąmbska, crushingly criticized Cackowski’s ideas. In a part titled *Oververbalism of logic and philosophy or philosopher’s imprudency?*, he wrote:

Science should not be confused with its school (textbook) presentation, nor creativity with scholastic formulas, nor lively medieval philosophy with school philosophy. But regarding the Stalinist philosophy I take professor Cackowski’s word for it. Is it, however, an example for the author’s main thesis? It is the case that Marxist philosophy yielded to the pressure of brutal coarse force, and it generated its oververbalism by means of dialectical “logic”, which truly has little in common with logic – and yet professor Cackowski writes on the latter. (Perzanowski 1984, 194)

In 1983, two reviews of Thomas Schnelle’s book (Schnelle 1982) appeared. The first, a positive critique by Jacek Ganowicz, a sociologist, that was published in “Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki” (Ganowicz 1983), was a thorough review which enabled Polish readers to become acquainted with the content and basic thesis of Schnelle’s dissertation. The second, by Mirosław Skwieciński, appeared in the quarterly “Problems of the Science of Science” (“Zagadnienia Naukoznawstwa”) (Skwieciński 1983) and is also positive, but a careful reading shows that its author didn’t know much about Fleck – he writes, for instance, that Fleck created a “theory of thought styles and thinking teams”, which is clearly translated from German; his reference to the first Polish paper of Fleck also betrays his German source, since it sounds different to that of the original.

Also in 1983, Stanisław Symotiuk described the earlier unknown polemic between Ludwik Fleck and Tadeusz Bilikiewicz (Symotiuk 1983a).²³ As this has subsequently been translated into English, there is no need to discuss it here (Symotiuk 1983b).

Finally, in 1985, a biographical volume titled *Profiles of outstanding representatives of the science of infectious diseases, epidemiology and microbiology* contained a brief biography of Ludwik Fleck (Hencner 1985).

The Polish translation of the book (1986)

There is a significant difference between the publishing market today and that which could be found in the 1980s behind the Iron Curtain. At that time there were only a few journals in each discipline, so, for instance, a philosopher could be fully up to date of all the latest developments in his or her discipline; also, far fewer books were published, therefore each new book was something of an event. This was the case with the publication of the first Polish translation of Fleck’s book (Fleck 1986a).²⁴ It was translated by Maria Tuszkievicz, a microbiologist and former student of Fleck. The volume contained the book itself, and was preceded by Cackowski’s *Introduction to Polish edition* (Cackowski 1986) and followed by *An Appendix to the Introduction* (at the end of the volume!), which included reprints of whole polemics between Fleck and Bilikiewicz and Fleck’s post-war paper (Fleck 1946), and finally there was an *Index of names*. The

²² “Oververbalism” is a neologism in Polish, since “wzbalizm” means “verbosity”.

²³ It was not included in Rubaszko’s bibliography mentioned above.

²⁴ 5,000 copies were printed.

Introduction, half of which was, in fact, a résumé of Cackowski's earlier texts, contains a curious line: Cackowski, speaking about this particular edition, opines that "By publishing the Polish translation of Fleck's book in Lublin, the academic community of Lublin thereby performs its moral duty and, at the same time, takes advantage of the moral law", which is based on the fact that Fleck lived in Lublin for seven years after the war. I decided to quote these pretentious words (which would have been excusable had Cackowski not repeated them at least three more times) to show that the most important proponent of Fleck in Poland was, to put it mildly, an unusual character.²⁵

After the Polish translation (1987-1989)

The Polish edition of the book was reviewed six times between 1987 and 1989, three of which were published in the most important journals of their fields – the fields of philosophy ("Studia Filozoficzne"), the history of science ("Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki") and the science of science ("Zagadnienia Naukoznawstwa"). The others were featured in "Cosmos" ("Kosmos"), a journal of the Polish Copernicus Society of Naturalists; "Man and Worldview" ("Człowiek i Światopogląd"), a journal of the Association of Atheists and Freethinkers;²⁶ and "An Overview of Methodological Literature" ("Przegląd Literatry Metodologicznej"). Although the lack of a sociological journal is eye-catching, two of the reviews are written by sociologists.

The shortest review, which in fact summarizes not the book itself, but Cackowski's *Introduction*, appeared in 1989 (Kubicki 1989).²⁷ Zbigniew J. Wójcik, a historian of science, wrote two reviews (Wójcik 1987; Wójcik 1988). Andrzej Szóstak, a sociologist, published a review under the title *A Treatise on thought style* (Szóstak 1987). Its critique is generally positive, although not without criticism: "Fleck's ideas require determinations and explanations" (Szóstak 1987, 110). The other two reviews are more interesting. Symotiuk, whose review bears the meaningful title *The Missing Link*, indicates that "without much difficulty a few more papers of Fleck could have been attached to the book [...]; we would have had then [...] his 'Complete Works' from the field of the science of science" (Symotiuk 1988, 180). He claims that the main advantage of Fleck over Kuhn is that Fleck's theory is focused on change, while Kuhn capitulates here since "shifts" between paradigms (like shifts between Gestalts) are unobservable (Symotiuk 1988, 182). The author of the most comprehensive review, the sociologist Bogdan Siewierski, is the only one who criticizes the translation, albeit only in a general remark: Fleck's speaking style, which at times is full of abstruseness, does not facilitate easy reading, and the Polish translation, sometimes very awkward, unfortunately does not compensate for this defect" (Siewierski 1987, 267). Nevertheless, this review is very enthusiastic about Fleck's theory; the author quotes all the important definitions from Fleck's book, discusses almost all of the important concepts of the theory of thought styles and thought collectives, and claims that this book is certainly not only of historical importance, but that it also is certainly not a treatise: "Fleck's original work contains elements which still today can enrich the philosophical, methodological and sociological reflection on formation of systems of knowledge" (Siewierski 1987, 274).

At roughly the same time, two papers on Fleck appeared – a sign that the proper reception of Ludwik Fleck's theory had truly begun. The first one (*The Elements of Ludwik Fleck's epistemology. Review of the output and reception*) by Elżbieta Pakszy, a philosopher, is not very comprehensive but is based not only on the book, but also on almost all of Fleck's most important Polish papers, and it also refers to some papers of the contemporary reception (Pakszys 1989). The second, written by Artur Dorobiński, another philosopher, is the result of a systematic study whose aim was to "reconstruct the most important categories of Ludwik Fleck's theory and to evaluate this theory in respect of the place it takes in the dispute between the cultural and logical approaches to science" (Dorobiński 1988, 99).

²⁵ However, he was a prominent person at that time: in 1986-1989 he was a member of The Consultative Council to the President of the State Council (of the People's Republic of Poland) Wojciech Jaruzelski; in 1987-1990 he was a rector of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin.

²⁶ This was a Marxist journal; the members of the association were mostly also members of the Communist Polish United Workers' Party.

²⁷ Roman Kubicki is a philosopher.

Conclusion

Fleck was certainly read before the war; however, those who reacted to his works then were mostly not philosophers. War put a comprehensive stop to the written exchange of thoughts, and after the war Fleck's theory was largely forgotten. The turning point was the Polish edition of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure...* (1968), where Kuhn's mention of Fleck in the preface aroused people's curiosity. The situation evolved still further in 1979, when three short texts about Fleck's works were published. Although later publications from abroad were reported (Schnelle's book and the American edition of Fleck's book), before the Polish translation of Fleck's book was published (1986) there were no systematic studies based on all of Fleck's philosophical writings at all. In part, this was because some of Fleck's texts were still being "discovered". In this period only one paper based on the German original text of the book emerged.

The Polish edition of the book was edited by a philosopher and translated by a microbiologist. Its publication was an event in itself. The volume also contained several, but not all, of Fleck's other papers so it cannot be regarded as a "complete works". It received generally positive reviews, but they were not without criticism towards Fleck. The translation is not of the best quality, but that is a topic for another paper.

Before 1989, most publications about Fleck appeared in philosophical journals, some of which focussed on the history of science. However, none of the texts appeared in sociological journals. Of the authors of these publications, sociologists make up nearly a quarter (5), philosophers are definitely the most numerous (9), and the list also includes historians of science (2) and a librarian. We can say that the proper reception of the theory of thought styles and thought collectives began three years after publication of the book. This is definitely the greatest merit of Zdzisław Cackowski; however, the unique character of this Polish proponent of Fleck probably influenced his subsequent reception.

If I had to choose texts (from those mentioned above) to be translated into English, I would choose Bogdan Siewierski's review of the book (Siewierski, 1987), followed by the papers of Gierasimiuk (Gierasimiuk, 1981) and Dorobiński (Dorobiński, 1988). Symotiuik's discussion of the Fleck-Bilikiewicz polemics has already been translated (Symotiuik, 1983) and is well worth reading.

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