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## The Book in Society : a picture of the General Reading Habit in Empirical Investigations

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Information on the Research  
in the Field of the Sociology of Literature

L'Information sur les recherches  
dans le domaine de la sociologie de la littérature

Janusz Ankudowicz

The Book in Society

A Picture of the General Reading Habit  
in Empirical Investigations

The aim of this paper is to present selected information, data, opinions and statements illustrating—in so far as the limits of an article permit and with the present research output—the circulation of the book in our society.

We shall concentrate on mass reading behaviour and patterns of this behaviour rather than on individual ones, i.e. we shall deal not with phenomena occurring in relatively narrow and exclusive circles of society, but with those taking place in large communities among social groups and categories whose participation in the literary culture is comparatively recent and whose reading experiences and qualifications are not very rich.

The forming of the complex of processes and phenomena which is called the general reading habit started in the second half of the previous century and is clearly connected with the general changes

taking place in culture in the course of the last several decades. From the sociological point of view this means the broadening of the social range of participation in culture on a scale incomparable with the experiences of the past epochs. The general reading habit is a part of the changes in culture, a constitutive element of contemporary mass culture, an element which is specific only inasmuch as the book is a specific form of a cultural message. Most often, though not exclusively, the general reading habit is associated with those forms (both type and scale) of the reading phenomena which we come up against in public libraries. But though the reading facts occurring there can be treated as exemplary and to a certain extent characteristic of the general reading, it should be most forcibly stressed that not all aspects of this notion are reflected there.

Materials and opinions used in further parts of this paper are drawn from empirical investigations conducted in post-war Poland by representatives of various disciplines of research and endorsed by various institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The first and very simple attempts at the purposeful gathering of information which could be helpful for characterizing and studying phenomena of reading date from the 1890's.<sup>2</sup> They brought rather fragmentary data on the accessibility of books, dissemination of the reading habit, information on the most popular books. These first soundings, characteristic of which was their incompleteness and lack of regularity in gathering of material, originated from the vital and developing trend of educational work, were a result of the growing need for gathering facts and materials which could be useful in working out educational syllabi. Since there had grown a new

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Badania czytelnicze w Polsce. Wybór literatury za lata 1945–1965 (Investigations on the Reading in Poland. Choice of Literature in the Years 1954–1965)*, Warszawa 1966; *Badania czytelnicze w Polsce. Wybór literatury za lata 1966–1972 (Investigations on the Reading in Poland. Choice of Literature in the Years 1966–1972)*, Warszawa 1974, both compiled by Instytut Książki i Czytelnictwa Biblioteki Narodowej (the Institute of the Book and Reading of the National Library).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Z. Prażmowski, *Co u nas czytają? (What Do They Read?)*, „Kurier Codzienny,” 1890, No 268–269; J. Dunin, *Początki badań czytelniczych w Polsce (The Beginnings of Investigations on the Reading in Poland)*, „Bibliotekarz,” 1966, No 7–8.

audience—the increasing number of literates—it was necessary to find out as much as possible about this audience.

Between the Wars the range of investigations concerning the reading habit widens greatly. Beside the environmental conditioning of the choices of reading, the means of book circulation are studied, as well as the dissemination of second-rate literature, or the psychophysical efficiency of reading. These investigations not only cover more problems, but are also more, though not satisfactorily, systematized.

Immediately after World War II the research on the reading was initiated by *Biuro Badania Czytelnictwa* (Bureau for Investigations of the Reading), to be continued, after a few years, in various aspects, by representatives of university centres, institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences, librarians, publishing houses and booksellers, by institutions appointed for conducting such research (as the *Instytut Książki i Czytelnictwa Biblioteki Narodowej*).

The study on the reading will be considered further on according to the pattern which, arranging problems into groups, attempts to comprise multiplicity and variety of relations between the main subjects of the study: the reader and the book. In its simplified form this pattern can be presented as a division of problems into the following groups:

1. Problems of accessibility and contact, i.e. problems implied by the following questions: within how wide social limits, in what ways and due to what inspirations does the contact the book—its reader take place?

2. Problems of the reader's choices, or the question of qualitative aspects of the reading. What is mainly involved here is the recording and characterization of the repertoire of the reading matter specific for different groups of readers. Penetration into this sphere means the settling of some rudimentary questions concerning the reading culture, its levels and differentiation.

3. Problems of the reception of texts. Within this group we place a relatively wide range of phenomena—from the ways of reading and interpreting both fiction and non-fiction, through distinguishing a specific character and identification features of the book, understanding of the text, recognition of literary conventions, the reader's

motivations and expectations—up to the effects of reading. It is to be admitted that neither our empirical materials nor methodological experiences in this field are abundant.

One of the general conclusions regarding the place of the book in the complex of other forms and ways of conveying the symbolic content is a thesis on a specific character of the book as a carrier of message, this specific character consisting in the fact that the message is of a potentially social nature, realized and actualized with every reading. This brings definite consequences for both possibilities of the dissemination of content and the means of organizing circles of readers. For the reception of a message contained in a book to be accomplished the reading motivations as well as mobilization of imagination, knowledge and reading experiences must come into play. The book, owing to its more homogeneous contents, more decidedly than e.g. periodical publications differentiates social communities. Consequently, the readers, in comparison with audiences of other forms of conveying a message, are a minority, but at the same time they form a category marked by their being more open to various messages and by a greater activity of participation in culture than non-readers. This feature is taken in some sociological studies as a sufficient premise for treating reading as an indicator of a higher standard of participation in culture.<sup>3</sup>

According to the investigations made on representative samples of both country and urban population in 1965, 78% of the inhabitants of towns and 57% of the country population considered themselves to be readers of books.<sup>4</sup> In the investigations of 1972, made in a large community of over 25,000 people, it was found that 39,5% of the respondents had not read a book throughout the whole year. Thus, only 60,5% of that community can be acknowledged as readers.<sup>5</sup> In a small town lying in the centre of a region which is being industrialized, 80% of the adult inhabitants reckon the reading of books as an accepted and practised form of cultural

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<sup>3</sup> A. Pawełczyńska, *Studia nad czytelnictwem (Studies on the Reading)*, Warszawa 1969, p. 15–16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> E. and E. Wnuk-Lipiński, *Problematyka kształtowania się potrzeb czytelnicych (Problems of Forming the Readers' Needs)*, Warszawa 1975, p. 35.

activity.<sup>6</sup> In traditional small towns of Southern Poland 49% of the adult population read, or at least claim to read, books.<sup>7</sup> Among the young country people 67% of the respondents define themselves as readers of books.<sup>8</sup>

On the basis of the data, both those cited and those not referred to here, the maximum social range of the book at the beginning of the 1970's can be defined with great probability as covering about 50–60% of the country population, the same percentage of inhabitants of small towns, and about 70–80% of the inhabitants of bigger towns and regions which are being quickly industrialized. The cited figures require, however, some comment. The given percentage is not to be understood as a percentage of people who actually and regularly read. The figures should be treated rather as delimiting the declared range, as an illustration of positive attitudes toward the book, as a signal of accepting the book as a value, a form of conveying a message. They delimit the social range of the accepted needs rather than of those really felt and proved by reaching regularly for a book.

Consequently, a justified question arises: what is the social range of active and really practised reading behaviour? Again, we can avail ourselves of the approximative data. By various reckonings and with more detailed information—as when the frequency of reading and the number of books read in a given period are taken into account—the range of active readers can be assumed to cover 8–15% of the country population and 10–20% of the urban population, since within these limits positive declarations are confirmed by regular reading.

A comparison of the two above-mentioned groups of readers, each representing a different type of attitude toward the book, draws our attention to a certain fact of a sociotechnical character: relatively wide-spread social recognition of the book as a value can,

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<sup>6</sup> J. Ankudowicz, *Książka w kulturze uprzemysławianego ośrodka lokalnego* (*The Book in the Culture of the Center Being Industrialized*), in print.

<sup>7</sup> J. Ankudowicz, *Czytelnictwo na tle życia kulturalnego i struktury społecznej mieszkańców małych miast* (*The Reading Habit Against the Background of the Cultural Life and Social Structure of the Small Town Population*), Warszawa 1975, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> *Czytelnictwo młodzieży wiejskiej* (*The Reading Habit of Young Countrymen*), Warszawa 1971.

given certain undertakings inspiring motivations, result in changing the declared range into the sphere of actual contacts with the book.

Results of the investigations allow us to formulate a thesis that in the post-war period the reading public increased. The range of the book in each of the social groups and professional categories proportionally broadens, the number of readers availing themselves of libraries increases.<sup>9</sup> These tendencies can be presented as a more general formula: the reading of books is a developing form of participation in culture.

The book circulates in society by various channels and reaches the readers in various ways. Statistical data illustrating the amount of money spent from the family budget on books, analyses of turnovers of bookshops, information on sums of money left in bookshops by the so-called individual buyer suggest that private collections of books do not play an important role in the dissemination of books.<sup>10</sup>

According to the investigations covering the whole of Poland, 41% of our nationals have private collections, usually consisting of about 20 volumes. Larger libraries—of 100 and more books—are in the possession of about 3% of the rural population and about 16–20% of the inhabitants of bigger towns and centres which are being quickly industrialized.<sup>11</sup>

Though the investigations carried out several times in the same social groups indicate that the number of persons collecting books is increasing, the pace of these changes is very slow. Generally, it can be granted that home libraries, when viewed on the scale of the whole society, are of too small a potential to be able to stimulate needs for reading, to inspire active reading behaviour. Thus,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ankudowicz, *Książka w kulturze...* and statistical data in annual sets of a publication *Biblioteki publiczne w liczbach (Public Libraries in Figures)*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Budżety rodzin pracowników zatrudnionych w gospodarce uspołecznionej 1963–1965 (The Family Budgets of State Employees)*, „Statystyka Polski – Materiały Statystyczne”, (“Statistics of Poland – Statistical Materials”), vols. 13, 31; B. Cywiński, *Księgarnie i ich klienci (Bookshops and Their Customers)*, Warszawa 1966; R. Cybulski, *Popyt na rynku księgarskim na tle przemian społeczno-gospodarczych w Polsce Ludowej (Demand in the Book Market Against the Background of the Social and Economic Changes in the Polish People's Republic)*, Warszawa 1966.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pawełczyńska, *op. cit.*; Ankudowicz, *Książka w kulturze...*

as fundamental for putting the book within the general public's reach we should acknowledge the public library. This institution of the authority unquestioned by the readers, performs, in spite of all its shortcomings and limitations, various and differentiated social functions, the most important of which is probably to introduce the book to the world and to equalize cultural experiences.

The overall picture of the reading habit and individual reading behaviour is conditioned by many factors the interrelations of which are extremely complicated. It has not been successfully defined yet which of them act as the necessary ones and which are connected with others, or what precisely their importance and influence is. Socio-demographic factors, social descent, kind of work and professional qualifications, social environment, the place in the social structure, personality features—all these modify the reading activity, choices and ways of interpreting. The crucial significance, however, is unanimously ascribed to education.

Nearly all investigations confirm the following general rule: the distinct threshold after the crossing of which the range of the book positively broadens, the regularity of reading grows and the scope of the reading matter widens, the choice of this reading matter being at the same time more selective and the reception more correct, is the secondary school. We only need to confront the above statement with the statistical data illustrating the structure of education of the population to become aware of an important limitation with which the widening of the range of the book meets at present. At the beginning of the 1970's about 80% of our adult nationals had not been prepared to participate in the literary communication. This situation, however, implicates some definite prospects: development of education on the level of the secondary school will impart dynamism to the growth of the reading habit, will broaden the social range of the book and contribute to differentiation and enrichment of the choices of reading.

Recognition of the level of education as the main factor determining the range of the book and the standard of the reading culture does not amount to recognizing it as the only active one. In fact, this element has also a great part in forming attitudes toward the book when combined with other factors.

As far as the choices of reading are concerned, a characteristic

feature of the general reading is the unquestionable dominance of fiction or, to be more precise, of the novel. Fiction constitutes 80–96% (depending on the social group) of the declared reading choices, thus playing an important role as a factor forming cultural experiences. Studying the results of analyses carried out in different periods of time and in various social groups, we can arrive at the conclusion that the choices of reading are marked by stability—in the course of time they change very slowly. Moreover, as regards the dominants of the literary interests they are similar within a particular social group.

In respect to the choices made, the reading public can be very distinctly stratified. The most common type of choices is the exclusive reading of fiction. This kind of reading decisions is characteristic of people with low professional qualifications and elementary education, i.e. of people with short reading practice and, in consequence, rather a limited store of reading experiences.

The dominating interest in fiction does not mean that fiction exhausts the possible reading choices. A large number of investigations provides us with material indicating that a small percentage of our society is, or at least declares to be, open to educational and scientific content disseminated in various ways, the book included. Nevertheless, an interest in the popularized scientific and professional books constitutes a very narrow current in the general reading; the percentage of readers of non-fiction in various groups is very low. It has been found that a great part of non-fiction books in public libraries do not fulfil tasks imposed on them, since these books are rarely read, if at all. Observations which have been made over the last ten years prove, however, that an interest in non-fiction increases, though at a very slow pace.

The future reading choices will be determined first of all by changes taking place in the system of education. Expansion of the secondary education and the raising of its standard will most likely bring about an intensified contact with the book, as well as a differentiation of the canon of reading matter, in which non-fiction will probably form a greater part than now.

Recently we can observe a growing interest in the process and mechanisms of the reception of both literary and non-literary texts. At the sources of this interest is the conviction about the cognitive

significance of these problems which are to be taken up for the explanation of the act of literary communication and for the better understanding of the social functions of literature.

The present situation in research is marked by more propositions than definite achievements. The unquestionable significance of several investigations which have been made so far lies in the very fact of revealing problems and formulating questions; but since they bring too scanty a material, they are less useful for forming a clear picture of many conditions and aspects of the reception of various types of texts.<sup>12</sup>

Those investigations concerned problems of motivation, treating them as preliminary and important for the reception of a literary work, since they indicate types of reading attitudes and expectations which initiate the reading decisions. They brought a number of valuable findings which, though still requiring to be verified, elaborated and made more precise, settled some questions concerning differentiation as well as the most typical adulterations and errors of reception.

A general conclusion that can be drawn on the basis of these materials is that a reader who has not acquired at least a secondary education is unable to discover the multilayer structure of a literary work, his reception being restricted to the superficial layer which he interprets literally. Neither is such a reader prepared for the reception of a popularized scientific text, following only its incoherent fragments. Although the border-lines between the distorted and the complete reception of a literary work do not quite coincide with the division into the levels of education, it is the secondary school that protects reception from becoming deformed and impoverished.

A detailed discussion of many essential questions settled by the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. K. Kraśniewska, *Czytelnictwo kobiet (The Reading Habit among Women)*, Warszawa 1973; B. Sułkowski, *Powieść i czytelnicy. Społeczne warunkowanie zjawisk odbioru (The Novel and Its Readers. Social Conditioning of Reception)*, Warszawa 1972; W. Szewczuk: *Psychologia zapamiętywania (Psychology of Remembering)*, Warszawa 1965, p. 81 ff.; *Recepcja treści oświatowych (Reception of the Educational Content)*, Warszawa 1966; J. Pieter, *Czytanie i lektura (Reading and the Reading Matter)*, Katowice 1967; Z. Boksański, *Młodzi robotnicy a awans kulturalny (Young Workmen and Their Cultural Advancement)*, Warszawa 1975.

investigations on the general reading habit is impossible within the limits of an article, as, for various reasons, it is impossible also to present a complete picture of the contemporary reader or of the social fate of the book. Attention can only be drawn to some facts, in the belief that empirically gathered knowledge about the reading leads to a better understanding of the important cultural behaviour of man.

Transl. by *M.-B. Fedewicz*