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## Conference Report: Ludwik Fleck's theory of thought styles and thought collectives – translations and receptions

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Ludwik Fleck's theory of thought styles and thought collectives – translations and receptions

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*Organizing committee: Pawe? Jarnicki (Project Science Foundation and Ludwik Fleck Centre at Collegium Helveticum); Martina Schlünder (Ludwik Fleck Circle and Max Planck Institute for the History of Science); Ohad Parnes (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science); Rainer Egloff (Ludwik Fleck Centre at Collegium Helveticum) and Sandra Lang (Ludwik Fleck Centre at Collegium Helveticum and TU Munich Graduate School).*

## **Introduction: Aims of the conference**

When Ludwik Fleck published his book Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache. Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv in 1935, the initial reception did not extend beyond a handful of reviews. After Thomas Kuhn “re-discovered” Fleck and initiated the English translation (Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact) with an international collective around Robert K. Merton in 1979, a broader reception slowly emerged in the English-speaking world. A German re-edition appeared in 1980. Further translations into Italian (1983), Polish (1986), Spanish (1986), Swedish (1997), Russian (1999), French (2005) and Portuguese (2010) followed. Fleck has grown popular, a fact the conference reported on here paid tribute to by historicizing and reflecting on various aspects and forms of his ideas, and their development in different languages and in distinct (inter-)national scholarly contexts.[1] A central aim of the conference was to investigate the paths which the reception and translation of Ludwik Fleck’s works have taken and to elaborate issues to be aware of in future translations. The organizing committee was proud to welcome a large number of the translators and editors of Fleck’s work such as **Nathalie Jas** (French), **Stefano Poggi** (Italian), **Mariana Camilo de Oliveira** (Brazilian-Portuguese) and **Mauro Condé**, all of whom who offered first-hand insights to the circumstances and challenges connected to the processes of translation. In addition to the translations and reprints of Fleck’s works, scholars have developed empirical, theoretical, philosophical and historical applications for his ideas and a rich discourse has emerged around them. Today the largest collectives of Fleck scholarship are located in Brazil, the US and Europe (especially Poland, Germany, France and Switzerland); talks and commentaries by **David Östlund**, **Pawe? Jarnicki**, **Martina Schlünder**, **Mauro Condé**, **Sandra Lang** and **Rainer Egloff** represented this range of discourses surrounding the reception of Fleck’s work. One aim of the discussion involved strategies for extending the reach of Fleck’s ideas into other countries and into disciplines beyond science studies and the history of medicine. Any translator of Fleck faces the difficulty of dealing with theoretical terms and of embedding the author in a broader philosophical context. These issues and the new theoretical questions that have emerged from recent translations were introduced by **Katarzyna**

**Gurczyńska-Sady, Hartmut von Sass, Ilana Löwy, Jadwiga Kamola and Nicholas Binney.** Thanks to **Sofiya Grachova, Artur Koterski and Avi Ohry**, new insights into Fleck's biography and historical context are available. **Monika Milosavljević**, and **Wojciech Sady** presented contributions on the contextual origins of Fleck's ideas and on the benefits of applying them. **Pit Arens** showed how Fleck can be adopted by the arts.

### **Translating Fleck: challenges and new questions**

The panel on translation issues was opened by **David Östlund**, who analyzed Bengt Lillequist's 1997 Swedish translation of *Entstehung*. Östlund referred to the complex implications the translation of *denken* as a verb or respectively as a gerund. The Swedish translation struggled a lot with the distinction between *att tänke* (verb) and *tanke* (noun).

*Uppkomsten och utvecklingen av ett vetenskapligt faktum: Inledning till läran om tankestil och tankekollektiv* was the final title, but **Östlund** found more analytical evidence for the verb form represented in *tänkekollektiv*, as Fleck also preferred the verb form in his English writings. He compared Fleck's thoughts to some representatives of Anglophone intellectual history such as Quentin Skinner.

**Nathalie Jas** offered some interesting insights into the process of translating Fleck from German into French. In 2005 she finished the translation after three years, starting as a "non Fleck specialist and non professional translator". The example of Jas may be seen as an inspiration for upcoming translations of Ludwik Fleck's work in other languages. While many others had given up the project of translating Fleck into French, Jas spent years gathering background information by studying dictionaries, literature on Fleck, the interwar period and the history of medicine, all which resulted in a very successful translation.

**Stefano Poggi**, who translated Fleck's work into Italian along with Maria Leonardi in 1983, spoke about Paolo Rossi, the initiator and publisher of *Genesi e sviluppo di un fatto scientifico: per una teoria dello stile e del collettivo di pensiero*. Poggi discussed the intentions motivating Rossi's publication of Fleck's work. During the 1960s and 1970s Italian philosophy of science experienced a paradigm shift connected to the influential works of Kuhn, Hanson, Lakatos, and Feyerabend. According to Poggi, Rossi was more critical of this "revolution" in epistemology and tried to strengthen the theoretical connection between Fleck and the Austro-German environment (especially the Vienna Circle) in which his thoughts had emerged.

The conference also provided a platform to discuss the translation of *Entstehung* from German into Brazilian Portuguese, which was realized in

2010 under the direction of **Mauro Condé**. **Mariana Camilo de Oliveira**, who translated Fleck's text along with Georg Otte, remembered how they dealt with the challenges Fleck's theoretical terms presented. Fleck's neologisms, archaisms, terms from microbiology and self-references were very difficult to translate and the translators were aware that such subtleties would shape the perception of future readers. Camilo de Oliveira illustrated this with a variety of terms that represent those ambiguities very well, such as *Lustseuche*, *Brustkorb*, *Lehre* and of course the Denkstil.

As other contributors pointed out, such issues of translation have not always been treated so sensitively. **Pawel Jarnicki**, **Rainer Egloff** and **Martina Schlünder** presented linguistic, contextual and historical analyses of the English translation of Fleck's works. Fleck's bilingual legacy – he was bilingual in Polish and German, and he published in both languages – was not taken into account when Robert Merton and colleagues translated, edited and introduced the English version of Fleck's monograph (published in 1979). The translation process proved stressful and took several years, as shown by **Martina Schlünder**, who analyzed the process of the English translation based on archival material from Robert Merton's papers. Those papers document the complicated communication between the translators, editors (Merton, Trenn) and the author of the foreword, Thomas Kuhn. They complained of Fleck's "difficult" (Kuhn) and "idiosyncratic" (Trenn, Merton) German and struggled with Fleck's theoretical (e.g. active/passive *Kopplung*, *Beharrungstendenz*, *Widerstandsavis*, *Denkstil*, *Denkkollektiv*) and medical terms just as **Camilo de Oliveira's** team did. **Schlünder** concluded that the English translation decontextualized Fleck's original in several ways. The translators and editors didn't understand the hermeneutical strategies and the radical politics of the book (radical in terms of questioning the foundations of western philosophy by marginalizing and multiplying epistemology). These strategies were mainly embedded in the neologisms and the language ("funny German") the editors misunderstood. Moreover, they didn't understand or did not want to understand the book as an intervention against antisemitism and racism in Poland. Instead they de-historicized it and "improved" it to make connections to Kuhn and social constructivism.

Fleck himself did not self-translate but wrote his theory simultaneously in both German and Polish, as **Jarnicki** argued. There are therefore terms for which an equivalent in both languages can be found, and others (like *Beharrungstendenz*) that were only used in one. A comparative glossary of German and Polish terms can thus be used as a base for further translations into other languages. In the discussion, the dangers of misunderstanding terms and subsequently shaping receptions were raised. Is there a need for a new English translation? Is it important to "modernize" Fleck's language? How can Fleck's ideas be popularized –

and should they be? In this context, Jan Surman emphasized the importance of reflecting on the mechanisms of book markets and which realities they construct by “domesticating” and “foreignizing” a text.

### **Applying Fleck: New discourses enriched by Fleckian theory**

With a remarkable contribution from a Serbian perspective, **Monika Milosavljević** offered insights into the discourses of contemporary and historical Serbian archeology. A young research group founded the Centre for Theoretical Archeology in an attempt to connect different institutions and to overcome nationalist “proto-ideas” that hinder progress in archeological research. Recognizing a lack of theoretical concepts and an overemphasis on attributing “national” status to archeological findings, this group of scholars introduced the theory of Ludwik Fleck into their interpretations. Combined with other sociological and philosophical approaches, such as those of Karl Mannheim and actor network theory, these scholars are attempting to establish a less ideological and more epistemologically reflective style of archeology based on dialogue with discourses outside Serbian borders.

The debate between Tadeusz Bilikiewicz and Ludwik Fleck has often been widely investigated and discussed in the reception of Ludwik Fleck’s works. While Bilikiewicz’s philosophical contributions have been much-discussed, not much attention has been paid to his work on embryology during the baroque and rococo periods (*Die Embryologie im Zeitalter des Barock und des Rokoko*). **Artur Koterski**, a historian of philosophy of science, reconstructed and analyzed Bilikiewicz’s early research in history of medicine. He discussed different historical concepts of eggs, sperms and conception (e.g. Albrecht von Haller, Pierre Maupertuis, John Needham) and embedded them in the broader philosophical context of the corresponding epochs. In doing this, he argued that Bilikiewicz’s thought style can be characterized as a metaphysical, ontological, causal and epistemological realism.

Drawing on his research on the history of quantum physics in the 1920s, **Wojciech Sady** argued that Fleck’s epistemology does not go far enough to explain scientific revolutions. Sady’s case study dealt with the controversy between Max Planck and his followers. Planck, who already during his lifetime was celebrated as the father of quanta, did not himself believe in his scientific discoveries and the revolution he provoked. Indeed, at a 1912 congress organized in his honor Planck still attempted to convince the participants not to believe in quanta. This case study highlights an unexplored question in Fleckian theory and application: How do concepts held by individuals relate to those which appear in publications? Sady’s statement – “What cannot appear in an individual human mind – as mind is socially conditioned – can appear on paper” –

provoked an enriching discussion that may lead to further epistemological reflections on Fleck's theory and application in the history of science.

**Pit Arens's** talk gave inspiring insights on his contribution as an artist to an exhibition on Ludwik Fleck. Conceptualized by the Ludwik Fleck Kreis and on display at Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin 2002 and at Collegium Helveticum in Zurich 2004, the exhibition-installation summed up the state of research on Fleck's life and work at that time. Since the Zurich exhibition the [Ludwik Fleck Center](#) has been established at Collegium Helveticum[2].

### Reception of Ludwik Fleck in different countries

The conference talks and discussions showed that the reception of Ludwik Fleck's work has differed significantly between distinct cultural and linguistic settings. In Poland and other countries of central Europe Fleck is perhaps receiving the strongest theoretical and philosophical reception. Elsewhere, the history and philosophy of science and medicine have managed to find more empirical applications. As **Paweł Jarnicki** and **Sandra Lang** showed, Ludwik Fleck's works are a very common topic of master's theses and dissertations in Poland and Germany, especially in the humanities and social sciences connected to science, technology and medicine. In Brazil, as **Mauro Condé** pointed out, Fleck discourse is much more focused on developing applications and improving scientific practice by including epistemological reflections. Fleck's ideas are often used in the fields of science education, history of science and medicine, sociology and philosophy. According to **Mauro Condé** Fleck fits very well into the Brazilian scientific landscape, which is just as diverse as Brazilian society in general. As **Ilana Löwy** put it in the following discussion, the connection between sciences, politics and social questions is very strong in contemporary Brazil, so that theoretical questions are much more related to future applications than they are in Central Europe and elsewhere, where theoretical reflections predominate. Fleck's popularity in Brazil, linked to the applicability of his ideas and their encouragement of transdisciplinary connectivity, is yet more proof of his significance 80 years after his first book was published.

Among German speaking researchers a strong tendency for Fleck-based applications can also be observed, as **Sandra Lang** showed. Many marginalized thought collectives, especially in medicine, care and education studies, have found Fleck's concept of the plurality of realities and social constitution of scientific facts highly emancipatory.

### Historicizing and Fleck: unknown aspects of Fleck's life

**Sofiya Grachova** investigated the Circle of Jewish Physicians in Lwów

and which role Ludwik Fleck played during his time as its head (1937-1938). She shed light on the project of researching Fleck's own biological and biochemical works, a project which remains largely unrealized. Based on newly gathered archival data from Lwów, Grachova was able to offer interesting insights into Fleck's activities. In the frame of a campaign put on by the Society for the Protection of the Health of Jewish Population (TOZ), Fleck offered popular lectures to inform people about health risks and disease prevention. Such lectures were e.g. on "Love and Hate among Humans and Animals", but also on immunology and serology such as the lecture series "The Mysteries of Blood". According to Grachova this last lecture can be seen as a (critical) answer to the eugenics movement as well as to contemporary Polish ethno-national propaganda.

Besides Fleck's activities in pre-war Lwów, the participants learned much about Fleck's life in Israel and work at Nes Ziona during 1950s and 1960s. This was thanks to **Avi Ohry**, who had personally met with Fleck's son, Ryszard (Arie) Fleck. According to Ohry, Ryszard Fleck and his wife had turned their apartment in Petach Tikva into a "shrine" to the memory of Ludwik Fleck. Ohry also reported on encounters with colleagues of Fleck at the Israel Institute for Biological Research such as Moshe Aharonson and Marek Klingberg. Moreover, Ohry gave a broad historical overview of Fleck's own thought collective in Poland before, during and after the war.

### **Theories of translations and translating: inspired by Fleck**

In discussing the various challenges of translating Fleck's work it became apparent that not only scientific work but also the work of translators is highly collective. In addition to the translators themselves, the process involves an entire group of other actors, many from a more exoteric circle (e.g. publishers and editors), which raises problems of power. Referring to this, **Ilana Löwy** emphasized that communication—translation processes included—never occurs without transformation and remodeling. Löwy illustrated this argument with Fleck's own style of working and thinking. Fleck himself can be seen as very mobile between diverse thought collectives. His "nomadic state" made it possible for him to think beyond the established borders of style. Fleck's open, democratic, reflective and critical way of thinking about complex medical problems offers fruitful perspectives for public health.

**Hartmut von Sass** offered his reflections on transcendentalist and realist aspects of Fleck's way of thinking. He claimed that Fleck can be seen a transcendentalist, even though not in the Kantian style, as the collective in Fleck can't be understood as a transcendental ego. It exceeds the individual but is still not universal. Von Sass stated that Fleck's notion of

social and educational elements of science are evident in his term “learning to see,” which is close to Wittgenstein’s hermeneutic contextualism (“*abrichten*”). Such a philosophy of science is represented by Philip Gardner, as he assumes the construction of knowledge, but does not imply a demand for universalism. Another Kantian and Wittgensteinian approach to Fleck was represented by **Katarzyna Gurczyńska-Sady**, who reflected on the problem of anticipation in Fleckian theory.

**Jadwiga Kamola** analyzed the impact that Gestalt psychology had on the development of Fleck’s thought. By discussing the Fleckian term “*Widerstandsaviso*” and the processes of “learning to see”, she shed new light on Fleck’s philosophical and psychological thought on cognition in general, which was highly shaped by the Gestalt psychology of his times. The active and passive elements of knowledge in the development of scientific facts were discussed by **Nicholas Binney**. Based on a case study analyzing the medical and legal discussions on diagnostics of rickets and abusive head trauma in infants, he showed how important it is to put more empirical and philosophical emphasis on such Fleckian terms.

## Conclusions

Some 80 years after Fleck published his *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache* he seems to be more popular than ever. By now his terms and theories have gained the status of a classic work in the history, sociology, and philosophy of science. A special role in the popularization of his works has been played by translations and the translators who produce them. Reflecting on the challenges of translating Fleck and remaining aware of the significance of Fleckian terminology may prepare the ground for further translations into other languages.

*Editor’s note: A conference film is now available [here](#).*

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## Notes

[1] The conference was organized by Project Science Foundation (as a part of the project Philological analysis of Ludwik Fleck’s Philosophical works and its translations into Polish, English and German funded by the

Polish National Science Centre awarded on the basis of the decision number DEC-2012/06/M/HS2/00313; for a documentation of the project see: <http://ludwikfleck.pl>). It was also sponsored by the Ludwik Fleck Centre at Collegium Helveticum, MPIWG Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, and Ludwik Fleck Kreis.

[2] An online version can be found here  
<http://www.ludwik-fleck-kreis.org/index.php?pageid=32>.

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