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News / Berichten

In memory of Olga Amsterdamska

It is difficult to find words for the death of someone who was not only a colleague but also a dear friend. Olga's death at the young age of 55 feels as something not-right and incomprehensible, the fact that she is not with us anymore a source of great sadness.

It seems a strange coincidence, that someone with the name Amsterdamska, who was born in Poland and fled as a teenager with her mother and sister to the United States, should come to work at the University of Amsterdam. Somewhere 1984, she came to Amsterdam for the first time, applying for a fellowship in the department of Science Dynamics. It was also the day we met for the first time. In her presentation, she made a powerful impression. Her devotion to academic argument about 'things that mattered', her precision and intellectual rigor were already clear in that first encounter. She had, as someone told me recently 'a formidable mind', her talent and quality recognized and appreciated in different academic arenas. Soon after her visit, she was appointed.

Olga came well equipped for research into cognitive development of science and technology. She had completed her BA in sociology and philosophy (cum laude) at Yale and then continued her doctoral studies at Columbia, where she wrote her dissertation under the supervision of Robert K. Merton, the 'founding father' of sociology of science. Her PhD thesis, a study of schools of thought in linguistics, was published in 1987 by Reidel.* In a first presentation in Amsterdam, she unfolded her plans to shift focus from the study of linguistics to that of biomedicine. A bold step, but her reasons for doing so were well considered and based on purely intellectual considerations. Olga was deeply curious about the workings of scientific research and its results, the reasoned truths about the world we live in. The essentially philosophical question 'How can we know what we know and how do we come to accept statements of fact as such?' was one that drove all her work. In her work, she looked for explanations based in the social world, convinced as she was of the historical contingency of proc-



* *Schools of Thought: The Development of Linguistics from Bopp to Saussure*. Sociology of Science Monographs. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987.

esses of truth finding, also in science. The study of science and technology, or STS as the field became internationally known, was her home ground. She was editor in chief of one of the field's main journals, STHV (Science Technology and Human Values), for a number of years.

Olga knew how to bring over her own enthusiasm for the workings of scientific research to a younger generation. When she was appointed as a tenured lecturer in the Science Dynamics department, she proved a dedicated and inspiring teacher and played a key role in developing the department's educational programs. The course she taught for a number of years, "The Double Helix", provided generations of students with a challenging introduction to the field of STS.

Because Olga primarily sought to understand cognitive change through historical reconstruction; much of her work can be seen as contributing to the history of biomedical sciences as well as to the field of science studies, a multidisciplinary field in itself. The variety of academic journals and websites in which obituaries for her have appeared, is an indication of the appreciation her work gained within, but also outside the field of science studies, her 'own' terrain. This is not only due to her sharp analysis and precise argumentation, but also to her depth of knowledge of the fields she worked on. When Olga did her research on cognitive change in bacteriology, she discussed the details of bacteriological problems with laboratory researchers in this area in such depth that she seemed equipped to enter the laboratory as one herself. The same can be said for other subjects she worked on: molecular biology, epidemiology, laboratory testing in medicine, and the last longer-term project she embarked on, the study of autism.

Olga cared about the principles of good academic work, and could be very fierce in her comments when she thought intellectual integrity to be at stake. One of the occasions on which this became crystal clear, was when the popular French philosopher Bruno Latour published his book "Science in Action. In a review called "Surely You Are Joking, Monsieur Latour," she wiped the floor with the fundamentals of his theory and blamed him for promoting a social science "whose only goal is to tell inconsistent, false and incoherent stories about nothing in particular."* In the review the argument leading up to this conclusion was spelled out with great precision and clarity, though few people seemed willing to accept the implications of her challenge. It remained strangely still after her review appeared and she was disappointed about the growing popularity of this radical relativist position, which she considered facile and even dangerous in its moral consequences. Olga certainly did not fear a fight, and however unfashionable her opinion may have been at the time, her input in the ongoing discussion about the nature of scientific knowledge is valued highly. So much is clear from the recent decision of the international STS community to honour her memory with an 'Olga Amsterdamska award' for the best article in STHV. It is a recognition of the quality of all her work, in writing and discussions, and a moving

* "Surely You Are Joking, Monsieur Latour," review of *Science in Action* by Bruno Latour, in: *Science, Technology and Human Values*, Vol. 15 (1990), 495-504, p. 503.

gesture toward her husband Gene and daughters Naomi and Hannah, as well as us, her colleagues and friends.

For medical anthropology and medical sociology, I think the importance of her work lies in the breaking open of medical knowledge and technology as ‘matters of fact’. For medical anthropologists and sociologists the problems they encounter often have to do with what is seen as a lack of appropriate medical knowledge and technology, or an uneven distribution of it, or an incorrect, naïve or otherwise inadequate application of it. How this knowledge is constituted is mostly not questioned. Especially in more applied research in these fields, the problems formulated are usually the opposite: how can medical knowledge and technology be introduced, disseminated and applied in better ways? Olga’s work, in which she showed how research into biomedicine and the development of medical knowledge is related to institutional medical practices, she introduced a fundamentally critical attitude towards the nature of scientific knowledge. Any study in the social sciences in which medical knowledge is the subject of discussion in one way or another, would profit from her carefully argued insights in the construction and use of medical facts.

How cruel, that it was Olga who came to suffer from a mysterious muscle disease. She took it as a reality with no ‘why’ questions asked. But her drive to know was no less. In the hospital, a laptop and various articles from medical journals spread out over the bed, she kept asking doctors difficult questions and was confronted with the real-world uncertainties of medical knowledge, so often encountered in her own research: “They know so little. How can they make decisions?” At the same time she realised: “believing they could think a bit more is still my over-optimistic view of medicine.”

Although not unexpected, the message on August 27 this year that she had passed away, came as a terrible shock.

This may not be the right place to mention how you could laugh with her over silly nothings-in-particulars, how she loved literature, what a good cook she was, or how beautiful the watercolors and drawings she made. She was kind at heart and a dear friend. She was a very special person and will be missed by many.

Anja Hiddinga

Some other relevant publications by Olga Amsterdamska

E.J. Hackett, O. Amsterdamska, M. Lynch & J. Wajcman (eds.), *Handbook of the Social Studies of Science*. MIT Press 2007.

Demarcating Epidemiology, special issue on “Demarcation Socialized,” *Science, Technology and Human Values* (vol. 30 (1) 2005), 17-51.

Achieving Disbelief: Microbial Variation and the Disciplinary and National Styles in Epidemiology, special issue on “Constructivism and Ludwik Fleck,” *Studies in the History of the Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 35 (Spring 2004), 483-507.

(with Anja Hiddinga), Trading Zones or Citadels: Professionalization and Intellectual Change in the History of Medicine. In: *Medical History: The Stories and Their Meanings*, ed. by

- Frank Huisman and John H. Warner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 237-261.
- Research in the Hospital of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research. In: *Creating A Tradition of Biomedical Research: Studies in the History of the Rockefeller University*, ed. by Darwin H. Stapleton (New York: Rockefeller University Press, 2004), pp. 111-126.
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- Amsterdamska, Olga, Ilana Löwy, John Pickstone and Patrice Pinnel, *Medicine and Change: Historical and Sociological Studies of Medical Innovation* (Paris: Libbey, 1993).
- Between Biology and Medicine: The Research Career of Oswald T. Avery. In: *Medicine and Change: Historical and Sociological Studies of Medical Innovation*, edited by Ilana Löwy, Olga Amsterdamska, John Pickstone and Patrice Pinnel (Paris: Libbey, 1993).
- Stabilizing Instability: The Controversy over Cyclogenetic Theories of Bacterial Variation during the Interwar Period. *Journal of the History of Biology* 24 (1991), 191-222.
- Medical and Biological Constraints: Early Research on Variation in Bacteriology. *Social Studies of Science* 17 (1987), 657-87.
- Intellectuals and Social Movements: The Experts of ‘Solidarity’. In: *The Social Direction of the Public Sciences*, edited by Stuart Blume, et al., *Sociology of the Sciences Yearbook*, Vol. XI. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987.
- Institutions and Schools of Thought: The Neogrammarians. *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (1985), 332-358.