

## NEW POLISH ANTHROPOLOGY

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*Despite the fact that anthropology in Poland faces the same crisis as anthropology worldwide, namely, the disappearance of the traditional subjects of interest, it still maintains, a unique theoretical and methodological perspective, the main points of which are: holism, qualitative methods, methodical skepticism and a focus on the primacy of culture. This approach also appears to be useful in doing research on complex modern cultures. In its shift from the more traditional to more modern subjects of interest, Polish anthropological research has focused on national identity, popular culture, subcultures, consumer culture, and lifestyle, among others.*

**Key words:** *ethnology/cultural anthropology, crisis, tradition, modernity, theory, methodology, cultural studies*

Let me start with the ridiculous statement that there is a serious problem with Polish cultural anthropology; but I might add that, at the same time, there is also a problem with all anthropologies.

As far as Polish anthropology goes, I would like to give a simple example. We currently do not have departments of anthropology in Poland, but Departments of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology; and, as far as I know, this habit of nomenclature has also developed in other East European countries. One could say that it means that both ethnology and anthropology are practiced in one department. But this is not the case. It means something different.

It means that the academic community of anthropologists, ethnologists or whatever we could be called, has a serious problems with its identity. It is not able to decide which name is better – ethnology or anthropology, or maybe it would be best to follow the latest trends in postmodern American anthropology, especially those propagated by the so called Rice Gang, and use the term ethnography? However, a political dilemma then arises: ethnography was the official nomenclature in the communist period, hardly anybody's favorite period, including the academics.

But why do I suggest that Polish ethnology, anthropology, or whatever shares similar problems with the representatives of this field of knowledge elsewhere? I think this is so, because all anthropologies or ethnologies are facing the process of the disappearance of the traditional subject of interest. And this traditional subject means a relatively simple society, small and in some way isolated from interaction with the modern world or/and, in recent decades, subaltern and marginal groups of that world. This subject of interest has its own history and I would like to indicate some similarities and dissimilarities between Western and Eastern anthropologies, as I call them. In this case, as far as the political dimension is concerned, using the term “Western”, I mean, above all, the colonial anthropology of West European countries, including the US. “Eastern” means European countries which did not have colonies, for example, Poland, as well as Scandinavian countries and, to some extent, Germany. I would like to focus on Poland, but this example is quite representative, since East European countries, to some extent, shared similar histories.

Therefore, the Polish tradition of anthropology differs from Western traditions in at least one aspect. Whereas the main subject of the latter were the so-called primitive cultures of the New World, colonized by Western powers; the main subject of Polish and other East European ethnologies were the so-called folk cultures. Scholars who wanted to deal with non-European cultures did their research in Western academic centers; Bronislaw Malinowski is perhaps the best-known example. The opposition “our - foreign” or “us” and “them” was, in the East European context, identified with the opposition of “upper classes - the people” or “upper culture - lower culture”. For East European anthropologist, a peasant filled the role that the Trobriander filled for Malinowski. This attitude to the people, peasants, as local strangers/

foreigners emerged at the turn of the 19th century and survived into recent decades. This interest was a kind of self-limitation, but on the other hand, it led to the development of a unique theoretical perspective. This perspective also belongs to Polish anthropology, which, obviously, still shares much with other anthropologies, both in the East and the West.

I think that, firstly, this is the holistic approach to culture. Secondly, it is a qualitative, rather than a quantitative, approach to the subject. Thirdly, it offers a strong methodical skepticism resulting from a special tradition of dealing with cultural strangeness - put simply, a permanent attitude of methodical astonishment, including astonishment at the scholar's own culture, the attitude of a permanent outsider. These theoretical and methodological priorities lead to a focus on the primacy of culture, but not in the historical sense, typical, for example, of evolutionism; on the contrary, in the sense of indispensability and durability of some fundamental phenomena of culture. For example, this focus includes such phenomena as community, meaning, and custom in contrast to state, utility, and law. This primacy of culture assists its understanding in terms of an informal structure or a hidden dimension.

In a broader perspective, this attitude was formed during dozens of decades of research on primitive cultures and folk cultures. The result of this research was a model of primitive and folk cultures. I think that the main features of such a model are: informal relations and their direct character; the power of authority; the great role of religion, the tendency towards group uniformity, the myth of group importance, and, last but not least, the mythopoetic or symbolic character of the associated world-view. I think that this intellectual heritage was the basis of all anthropologies, all over the world, for decades.

But in the Polish case, the phenomenon mentioned above, the disappearance of the traditional subject of anthropology, resulted in rethinking this heritage and in attempting to adapt the disciplinary tradition to new subjects. Namely, at the beginning of the 1980s, a group of young Polish anthropologists published a collection of postulates for the new approach to anthropology (Benedyktowicz et al. 1980; Benedyktowicz et al. 1981). The main point of this manifesto was that no academic discipline is really able to deal with culture, when its scope of research is restricted, and when it employs anachronistic methods. This, in the opinion of the group, was

the case with Polish anthropology. Anthropology should attempt to evaluate its own research potential and forge a new methodology. Those who want to address the problems of a complex modern culture, not only primitive or folk cultures, must face the task of defining new research problems, new methods and new ways of interpretation.

One of the inspirations for this new theoretical movement with its new perspective was the Russian school of semiotics. The scholars of this school dealt with a broad range of subjects, from Slavic myths to contemporary literature. I would like to mention Mikhail Bakhtin, a forerunner of the school, and Jurij Lotman. Their main interest was literature, thus, some of their works were translated into French or English. For Polish anthropology, however, the most important research undertaken by the scholars of this school were the semiotic analyses of Slavic folklore and folk cultures, less known in the West. It was a crucial moment of change in Polish anthropology, because young Polish scholars adopted not only the French structuralism of Levi-Strauss or post-structuralism of Roland Barthes, but also semiotic methods to ethnological research. This new anthropology adopted, together with this branch of semiotics, Umberto Eco's semiology, the above-mentioned French structuralism, the so-called French 'nouvelle histoire', and the phenomenological-hermeneutic methods of religious and cultural analysis, following such scholars as Rudolf Otto or Mircea Eliade. The hermeneutic approach focused on the research of symbols and world-views, emphasizing the mytho-ritual character of culture. Researchers from this group also interpreted the entanglement of norms and attitudes connected with one's outlook on life, and the cosmological-ritual vision of the world.

The recognition of the semiotic, polysemic and communicative character of culture appeared useful in the analysis of traditional anthropological subjects. In addition, it imposed the methodological postulate of a systematic approach to culture. It became necessary to interpret cultures on the basis of their internal rules and more general patterns. The tradition of anthropology helped to answer important questions about the mechanisms of symbolization and mythization such as, for example, how a so-called primitive exists in contemporary modern culture, regarded as structures and not as temporal sequences. What is more, it turned out, for example, that contemporary modern cultures resembled, to some extent, those traditional cultures in their

pictorial communication, described a long time ago by one of the fathers of proto-anthropology, Giambattista Vico; or in respect to Durkheimian “collective representations”, magical thinking described by Marcel Mauss, or myth-making, as it was formulated by Levi-Strauss. Generally, the paradigm of folk culture or the model of primitive culture helped in approaching every kind of culture as an ideational, mental being, as a thought reality.

This above-mentioned theoretical movement postulated: firstly, a rejection of positivist, functionalist, reductionist directions in favor of a systems approach that takes as its point of departure categories which apply to the culture being studied; secondly, the application of a coherent conceptual and methodological apparatus in analyzing the semantic side of cultural phenomena; thirdly, concentrating its interests on spiritual culture understood in a wider sense (including religiousness, ceremony, mythology, art, and the problems of cultural identification); and finally, a commitment to interdisciplinary studies understood as an assimilative and multi-faceted use of contemporary achievements of history, sociology, semiotics, religious studies, linguistics, art history, and literary theory.

This approach appeared to be very effective. From the beginning of the 1980s, anthropologists have written many articles and some books and carried out research on “modern culture”, not only the primitive or folk cultures. There are anthropological analyses of film; advertising is an equally popular topic, referring to its use of various mythologies or mythical structures; there are also studies of subcultures and anthropology of youth. Anthropologists have analyzed rock and popular music, fashion, visual arts and graffiti. Hidden meanings are sought in architecture and urbanization of space. National identity in the post-communist era appeared to be an extremely important subject. Finally, some anthropologists focused on the impact of political changes on family life, worldviews, and aesthetic values. Article subjects such as punk rock, graffiti, photography, journey, direct sale, material objects etc.; and books on popular mythologies, the European Union or video are only some examples of the wide range of interests inspired by the movement initiated more than two decades ago. The initiators of that movement, who were at that time young scholars in their late twenties or early thirties, have educated the next generation of academics, to which I personally belong.

On the whole, the interests of anthropological interpretation are not restricted. The new Polish anthropology addresses different topics pertaining to various areas of culture, yet prefers to modern culture. The influence of that approach has in recent years resulted in the introduction of a separate mandatory course in the curriculum of each university department teaching anthropology, a course entitled “Anthropology of contemporary culture”.

As well as the aforementioned methodological and empirical issues, the movement also involved a discussion about theoretical backgrounds. This discussion was based, first of all, on local traditions of critical thought and concerned anthropological theory. One might call it a kind of a local, provincial postmodern critique, because the initial impulse did not come from Western critics, like Derrida or Foucault. Schematism, figurativeness and stereotypes, in both older and more recent academic accounts of folk culture, were the main subject of this critique. This issue was adopted by critical anthropologists from the aforementioned group, who, through a careful analysis of ethnographic texts, showed the mythical foundations of their own discipline, and created what they called, “an anthropology of ethnography”, hardly acceptable to those incapable of an auto ironic attitude. Reinterpretation, the re-reading of source texts or texts once written by ethnographers that are today considered the canon of anthropology, is thus an important component of the new Polish anthropology. Reinterpretation was made possible by changes in the methodological orientation. And, as I was saying, without foreign inspiration; the ideas of Clifford Geertz or James Clifford came a little later. The movement appeared even earlier than the American critical ethnography, which we know from the publications of the above-mentioned Rice Gang, for example.

George Marcus in one of his recent books wrote that the new trend of unconventional purposes, sites and subjects appeared in American anthropology. His examples are moving from a study of Italian villagers to the multinational European Parliament, from a study of a Japanese factory to the international fashion industry, from Transylvanian villagers to Romanian intellectuals (Marcus 1998). I insist that this shift was initiated in Polish anthropology even earlier than in the West.

The imperialism of scope to which this anthropology aspires may seem suspicious. Its unrestricted nature can, however, be defended. Czesław

Robotycki, my teacher and one of the founding fathers of the new Polish anthropology, pointed out some of its bases. Firstly, anthropology, understood in this way, is a discipline overlapping other humanities and social sciences. Secondly, anthropological theses are quoted by other disciplines much more often. Finally, and most importantly, anthropology has entangled itself in ontological, epistemological and axiological disputes, thus starting a dialogue with other branches of academic knowledge. In this dialogue, anthropology significantly influences the outcome by providing unique arguments. By the way, the question of whether anthropology is an academic discipline or an art of understanding arises every now and then. Anthropology is like that - it interprets culture and itself in such a way, that both the culture and the interpretation are structurally complex, speak many languages, and are metatextual (Robotycki 1995). This is, by the way, a very close perspective to that of the above-mentioned George Marcus in his conception of a multi-sited anthropology, with an anthropologist as a circumstantial activist.

Despite possible uncertainties, I trust that such a perspective can be useful in solving several problems of contemporary societies and cultures involved in the twin processes of globalization, on the one hand, and fragmentation and hybridization, on the other. Anthropological tools seem to be accurate, especially in this second kind of phenomena of small scale. But generally, these two-fold changes are predominantly of a cultural nature. For example, economic products are no longer only material and manufactured goods, but information, symbolic and cultural goods, as well. Economic growth seems to be as much dependent on the development of cultural capital, as it is on the ownership of economic capital; material goods are often to be consumed for the sake of their cultural and symbolic dimension. Generally, contemporary societies and economies are increasingly sign-based, dependent on information, symbols and images. An understanding of these processes contributes to the analysis of changes in culture, from the organization of local government to industries of culture, from new forms of citizenship to the role of the media.

Let me remind you, then, that, after all, anthropology is a field dealing with „man and culture”. There is probably no doubt about it among anthropologists. Not so long ago, Renato Rosaldo wrote that culture in this sense mediates all human conduct. It has to do with everyday life; material,

economic, and institutional realms; politics, romance, religion, and spirituality (Rosaldo 1994). Simply, we deal with this, aforementioned, primacy of culture or culture regarded as a way of life. I think that this is obvious for all anthropologists. However, in recent decades, disciplines, which are also interested in culture, such as cultural sociology or cultural studies, appeared; not to mention the anthropological concept of culture used by some theories of archaeology, psychology, history, art history, literary theory, political science and economics. This also creates some problems concerning the identity of anthropology. What is more, particular traditions of the discipline also differ in different parts of the world. Perhaps the best example could be a comparison between the American anthropology, inside which close formal and informal links between physical, cultural, and linguistic anthropology and archaeology are maintained, and European cultural anthropology/ethnology, if you will, almost completely separate from the above-mentioned disciplines. In Poland, for example, anthropology, linguistics and physical anthropology are parts of completely different faculties.

At the same time, we can see a general tendency to blur the boundaries between disciplines dealing with the subject of “man and culture”. There is another aspect of this situation: the more particular disciplines are tied to particular academic traditions, the more their names become simple labels. Among Polish scholars dealing with culture, I personally know educated anthropologists who do research on literature, and educated theorists of literature who do research on the traditional folk culture. As far as I can tell, this assertion also applies to foreign academic life and its pluralism, which resulted from the great number of academic centers and people working in them.

I think that I am a good example of such contemporary challenges and shifts of interests. I am a graduate of ethnography – this was the formal nomenclature of the discipline in the communist period (with a thesis on Slavic mythology; so, one would say, a “traditional one”); next I completed a postgraduate degree in ethnology – this is the nomenclature of the discipline in the post communist period (the thesis was on the language of political propaganda; say – a “modern one”); finally, I identify, above all, with cultural studies: my post-doctoral dissertation was on material culture and social symbolism of the material world – commodity aesthetics, fashion, lifestyle,

consumer culture. In this respect, I am a typical example of the tendency among anthropologists, mentioned by George Marcus, to shift from the first project, which is framed by the traditional field of anthropology, into the second – experimental and new for the discipline, which, he claims, is a growing tendency in American anthropology. Not only in American, as we see.

And this is not something completely unusual and new. I think that the best example of an anthropologist who identifies himself with cultural studies is James Clifford. As far as particular topics are concerned, some works of Clifford Geertz are close to such a perspective; he wrote, for example, about political rhetoric, which was the thesis of my doctoral dissertation; or Mary Douglas's works on cultural meanings of goods; or Marshall Sahlins' works which apply an anthropological attitude to economy. The younger generation is represented by Arjun Appadurai, with his interest in commodity culture and global cultural issues, or Grand McCracken's work on consumer culture. An even younger generation is represented by the British anthropologist, Daniel Miller, who has done research on shopping, cars or the Internet.

Perhaps the logical conclusion of this presentation about the new Polish anthropology that I identify with, would be a statement on the powerful position anthropology takes among the humanities and social sciences in Poland. Unfortunately, this is not the case, because folk culture still remains at the academic core of the discipline. Furthermore, we are institutionally dominated by sociologists, for whom society is almost the exclusive subject of their interest. Some of them call themselves sociologists of culture, but, in fact, the empirical research on modern culture is performed almost exclusively by anthropologists from the above-mentioned group.

It is further evident now, I think, that the new Polish anthropology is very close to the perspective of cultural studies; at least as represented by the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. But I believe, that despite this closeness, anthropology defends its uniqueness, its experience in dealing with cultural strangeness, both in theory and method. This allows it to look at the researcher's culture from the point of view of understanding strangers, of others; hence giving it a chance to better understand the researcher's own culture. As a matter of fact, the boundaries of particular social sciences and humanities disciplines are, fortunately, not the most important factor influencing the current situation in these areas of human knowledge.

Finally, I would like to mention a few valuable publishing initiatives, which helped develop the ideals of the new Polish anthropology. The first is a quarterly entitled *Polska Sztuka Ludowa (Polish Folk Art)*, which has been published since the 1940s by the Institute of Art at the Polish Academy of Sciences and Arts. It embraces different areas, ranging from folklore, symbolic culture, regional and minority cultures, to avant-garde art, aesthetics, drama, literature and popular culture. It lends its pages to those voices promoting a wider interpretation of anthropology and its mission, beyond the paradigm of the so-called folk or primitive culture. Thus, it added a subtitle at the beginning of the 1990s and is currently called *Polska Sztuka Ludowa – Konteksty. Antropologia kultury-Etnografia-Sztuka (Polish Folk Art - Contexts. Cultural Anthropology-Ethnography-Art)*. Its interdisciplinary and anthropological perspective and aspirations are emphasized by this title. The term “contexts” is of major importance here and relates, among others, to Clifford Geertz’s postulate of thick description. This refers to culture as a sphere, in which phenomena occur in their appropriate contexts.

The latest academic initiatives, concerning the anthropological concept of culture and fields of interests of the new Polish anthropology, are the two series published by the Jagiellonian University Publishers, edited by my colleagues and myself. In the first one, called *Anthropos*, examples of the application of the Polish academics’ anthropological concept of culture are published; including the work of scholars from different fields: anthropologists, historians, sociologists, philologists. In this series, books on the following subjects have been published: traditional weddings, political propaganda, popular culture, architecture of landscape, film, and the so-called Sarmatian culture of the Polish nobility, to mention just a few. The other series, called *Cultura*, specializes in translations. The titles in this series have included, so far, books by John Storey on popular culture; Eric Rothenbuhler’s work on ritual; David Muggleton’s book on contemporary subcultures: Roland Barthes’s classic on fashion; the latest Michael Herzfeld’s *Anthropology*; one of Turner’s books on ritual; some newly translated work by Geertz, or examples of the newest approaches in cultural studies, such as Paul Willis’s book on ethnographic imagination. This last example is, by the way, very characteristic; a scholar with a degree in philology, dealing with subjects typical of sociology (above all youth subcultures), identifying himself with cultural studies and using ethnographic methods in his research.

In conclusion, I think that we still have a serious problem with our anthropologies, be they Polish, Croatian or American - the problem of evolving subjects, of crossing interdisciplinary boundaries, generally – the identity problem of the discipline. There are many promised lands on the human horizon still waiting for their explorers – anthropologists. However, the examples of publications and publishing series I have just given, seem to confirm that, at least in Poland, the tendency to melt the different fields of humanities and social sciences inside the broader discipline of cultural studies, has been fruitful. The question is whether we are able to save our identity in the waters of that ocean of cultural studies, which these days seem to be better equipped for dealing with contemporary human issues - ethnicity, gender, identity, popular culture, or, most recently, crucial issues such as cultural politics and policy. Despite the fact that cultural studies, in Poland usually called “kulturoznawstwo”, are still in the process of institutional construction, their academic power seems to be only a matter of time.

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## NOVA POLJSKA ANTROPOLOGIJA

### Sažetak

Antropologija u Poljskoj prolazi istu krizu kao i antropologija u svijetu, točnije, nestanak tradicionalnog subjekta istraživanja koji je uključivao relativno jednostavna, mala društva što su na neki način bila izvan dodira s modernim svijetom i/ili, u zadnjih nekoliko desetljeća, podređene i marginalizirane skupine toga istog svijeta. Antropologija je, međutim, stvorila jedinstvenu teoretsku i metodološku paradigmu, čije su glavne postavke holizam, kvalitativne metode, metodološki skepticizam i naglasak na primarnosti kulture. Rezultati tog istraživanja bili su modeli "primitivnih" i tradicijskih kultura. Glavne značajke modela jesu: neformalni odnosi i njihova neposrednost, moć autoriteta, velika uloga religije, sklonost zajedništvu, mit o posebnosti skupine te, naposljetku ali ne manje bitno, simbolički karakter pripadajućeg svjetonazora. Šire gledano, taj je pristup stvoren tijekom nekoliko desetljeća istraživanja "primitivnih" i tradicijskih kultura, a može biti koristan i u istraživanju modernih, složenijih kultura. Ovo intelektualno naslijeđe može biti temelj za sve antropologije svijeta. U tom prijelazu iz tradicionalnijih u modernije teme istraživanja poljska se antropologija usmjerila na istraživanja nacionalnog identiteta, popularne kulture, supkultura, konzumerizma, stila života – da spomenem samo neke primjere. Taj prijelaz nastaje istovremeno sa sve većom interdisciplinarnošću u humanističkim i društvenim znanostima. U slučaju poljske antropologije takav je razvoj situacije rezultirao usvajanjem pristupa koji je bliži kulturnim studijima. Taj je pomak vidljiv u sadašnjem kurikulumu studija etnologije i kulturne antropologije. Pitanje je da li etnologija može sačuvati svoj identitet istražujući teme poput etniciteta, roda, identiteta, popularne kulture ili najnovije i izuzetno važne teme poput kulturnih politika.

**Ključne riječi:** etnologija/kulturna antropologija, kriza, tradicija, modernost, teorija, metodologija, kulturalni studiji