

FOLK CHARACTER AND PROVINCIALISM AS AN ALTERNATIVE AND PARADOX - - EXEMPLIFIED BY POLISH CULTURE

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The author discusses national character and provincialism as alternatives and paradox, based on the example of Polish culture. Namely, he proposes the thesis that provincialism can be viewed as the one of the alternatives of contemporary culture. He emphasizes the polysemy and manifoldness of the terms "provincialism" and "national culture", and his discussion is placed within a wide terminological framework -- from national culture as interpretative metatext, through folklorism, provincial culture as scientific creation, the culture of underground (hippie culture) to the homeland and domiciliation.

The thesis submitted in the title, stating that provincialism can be one of the alternatives of contemporary culture should be enriched with additional characteristics and the context in which they can appear.

Thus, provincialism manifested in numerous opinions and expectations in Poland is still (or again) considered to be real, ethical and authentic, not only in comparison with the illusions, falsity and superficiality of participation and expression of mass-culture, but also in comparison with manipulation of social life, for example, in politics.

Moreover, nowadays provincialism evokes ambivalent attitudes also among experts in folk art and folklore.

"Provincialism" and "Folk culture" are notions conveying numerous meanings, and therefore they are applied on various levels of interpretation.

As we are considering, in this case, sociological reality comprising attitudes, ideas and values, points of view and presuppositions are easily mixed up. In the presence of an increasing number of world patterns and the casual interpretations of culture within this culture, some paradoxes that are difficult to get rid of come into being. What is more, contemporary culture exists not differently, but paradoxically.

The theses mentioned above can be proved on the basis of the following assumptions:

1. It is necessary to reject the class definition of folk culture. In its present form, it has nothing to do with peasantry.
2. For a long time now, folk culture has not existed as an autonomous, functional whole, with its economic self-sufficiency corresponding to the type of social organisation and myth-magic philosophy.
3. It has been replaced with the culture of "folk type", which is different in its quality and which has been composed of "broken" parts belonging to various cultural systems, also of folk character; however, it has been differently set together. This new extra - technological entity comprises structurally the same but symptomatically different rituals, customs and outlooks, which are eclectic but still myth-magical.
4. The culture of "folk type" (or provincial) constitutes a variant of multifarious contemporary culture, which reveals its common and technical character. It is also changeable and ideologically biased. Some of its elements disappear for some period of time, so as to reappear again in the new converted shape and context. As a result, each variant can easily become its marginal version, by way of example of fashion, or, on the contrary, it can reach its very centre in a newly reconstructed or fragmentary form. The, so called, post-modern, contemporary attitudes approve of a number of outlooks co-existing in search of the truth, exotica, authenticity and profundity of experience.

Folk character and provincialism appear in this context as dominant entities of several alternatives of paradoxical way of "culture texts" interpretation.

They can be:

- 1) interpretative metatexts - provincialism refers then to values and ideas,
- 2) folklorism - which is associated with customs, folk and amateurish art,

- 3) folk culture as social and historic reality - being a result of both studies and scientific creation,
- 4) counter-cultures - which reach for provincialism to offer alternative ways of life, theatre and expression as a protest against the "soullessness" of the contemporary world,
- 5) ideas and practical creation of the, so-called, "small homelands" - in such cases provincial culture should support the signs of affiliation, although a "small homeland" constitutes sociological hypostasis rather than reality.

The paradoxical character of these alternatives manifests itself not only in dealing with popular knowledge, but also with scientific tradition. Thus, we can come to the following conclusions concerning provincial culture:

- it is characterized by different communities (social group, space) as opposed to the research done by the former ethnographers dealing with its past character,
- it only partially belongs to the rural world nowadays,
- it is a created vision of the world without its "dark sides",
- as a "metatext" it has been recreated,
- as a way of life and reasoning, it is not only characteristic for rural community, but some archaisms are consciously cultivated in different environments as well.

This paradoxical character also manifests itself in the following way. There is a possibility of existence of such a pair of sentences, out of which every single sentence can, on one hand, be approved of, and, on the other hand, prove to be contradictory. It is a logical gist of paradox. Paradoxes of culture result from its symbolic character.

Parallely, there are numerous ways of imposing and interpreting its meanings. The same "text of culture" can be differently interpreted, and all the accepted range of meanings causes the fact that either paradoxes themselves or some paradoxical situations come into being.

However, these is also a process leading to overcoming paradoxes in culture. Systems of values with the norms protecting them become categorical in their character.

Some mythologies, beliefs, ideas and also science and literature justify the existing hierarchy of cultural entities resulting from axiology. A process of cultural suppression of paradoxes by means of mythical justification becomes the lot of a contemporary anthropologist.

He decomposes the mythical character of culture showing, at the same time, that the whole cultural range of the methods applied for

eliminating paradoxes are just ways of concealing their logic and not really the ways of doing away with paradoxes themselves.

The set of assumptions, presented above, concerning the mechanism of paradox functioning in culture, constitutes frame analysis for the mentioned alternatives of folk culture existence in our Polish environment.

Ad 1. Folk culture as an interpretative metatext

Tradition constitutes here an argument for values and cultural continuity. Folk culture is a consciously created category with the application of its former elements. Figurative reasoning is very much in favour of it. The "figures" of reasoning involve hidden opinions, according to which ethical values, common anthropological experience, knowledge and "natural" philosophy are included in folklore. These opinions return to us as the ones which have been brought out of folklore by the authors who somehow lost the awareness of their own subjectivity of the truth of their effort to "describe the world", especially the folk world, which they have known as "natural".

Provincialism as a lesson, and its possible ethical or cognitive depth is not objectively given. It is rather a "delicate" activity of an interpreter who becomes a creator of meanings. Moreover, in the process of creation some exchange of roles often takes place. Sometimes a writer¹ performs a role of a cultural anthropologist, while writing his essays, whereas a well-known, experienced folklorist uses the notion "Word" as a metaphor and applies it as a basis for his interpretation.²

Thus, provincialism understood as metatext functions like literature. There is no point in looking for some exact correlation with history or reality in this case. It is an author's ethical message and therefore it is culture creating.

¹ Marian Pilot, whom I am writing about here, is a Polish writer of folk origin /born and brought up in a village/. His works, however, belong to élitist culture. In one of them, titled "Blackwoods", he analyses elements of peasant and nobleman culture, which have found their place in contemporary, democratic and common Polish culture.

² This is the method of Roch Sulima which he applied in his work: "Word end Ethos", Kraków 1992.

Such an interpretation, close to Bachelard's attitude broadens possibilities of ethnology but at the same time demands some phenomenological intuition on the part of a researcher.

Ad 2. Folklorism

Folklorism has been both favourably and unfavourably written about so many times that it is not necessary to prove its paradoxical way of existing in culture.

It is not the matter of opinion to conclude that paradox exists, whereas most declarations concerning folklorism are opinions filled with evaluation due to the social range of the phenomenon and involved human emotions.

Folklorism as an attitude and a form of expression does not fully fill in collective and individual life. It is conventional and has been transferred to a "stage" (differently understood), from a festival, restaurant to a shop counter. It is based on false presuppositions of an actor and an audience, while being evoked as a custom. Enthusiasts are then full of admiration whereas the exhibitors experience some kind of dissociation. It gives rise to reproaches for non-authenticity, commercialism and a cheap thrill.

Conventionality and authenticity, stylization and ethnographical truth remain the basic paradox of folklorism. Theatrical application of folklore "on stage" with its actual disappearance from everyday life made ethnographers guard the tradition. They inform country people how to be folk-like. Nobody knows whether they do it for the sake of folk culture, or for their own sake.

Ad 3. Provincial culture as scientific creation

In historical reconstructions and in model presentation, provincial culture appears as "traditional peasant culture".³ It is a kind of historical, functionalist fiction based on fragmentary source material and field research dating from the XIX century. Its scarcity causes the fact that the model is founded more on suppositions than on reliable historical sources.

Thus, our knowledge is very narrow, which was already realized by the reviewers of Polish folkloristic collections of the XIX century.⁴

The world of folk culture presented in ethnographical materials has remained incomplete up till now. There are still "areas" which have not

³ It is paradigmatic notion, used in order to describe and interpret folk culture. It was commonly applied in ethnographic works of the 1930–1970 period.

⁴ Oskar Kolberg (1814–1890) was its author. In 1839 he started collecting folk songs and tunes, and then more materials which were used in monographs on all regions of Poland. They were first edited in 1865. During his life Kolberg published 33 voluminous of his works. Nowadays, all Kolberg's materials have been published. They comprise 61 volumes, letters, indices and other fragmentary materials.

been researched, which need deconstruction, research programmes, bases of paradigm and even new habits.

The way of popular and scientific functioning of ethnographical museums is important for the image of contemporary ethnography. The knowledge about culture obviously becomes popularized by the authority of ethnographical exhibitions. Unfortunately, the fact of the changeable ethnological paradigm rarely finds its reflection in the ways museums function. In most of them, there are still permanent exhibitions, which are anachronistically grounded.

A gap between the traditionally understood "ethnographic" image of a Polish village and its former, empirical and present reality has not disappeared but deepened. The paradoxical hiatus between aesthetic consciousness of the, so called, "country people" and constantly promoted folk culture, between morality and the apparently particular, ethical values of folk culture sometimes becomes an eyesore.

In the meantime, another fashionable and already myth-like viewpoint concerning provincial culture, has come into being. This is its ecological character. It is not the first time that we discover what we really want to find in provincial culture. The question arises whether the discovered feature has actually existed as its immanent aspect, or whether it has only been imposed on it. So far, a one-hundred-year experience has proved that it is the second choice which undoubtedly appears to be true.

Ad. 4. Provincialism as counter-culture

Nowadays provincialism can be practised and then it comprises customs, rites and rituals. It supplies materials or framework for para-theatres searching for archaic and non-conventional forms of expression.

Folk content itself is always paraphrased in such usages. Different kinds of counter-culture, most often the ones of white-collar workers' (or the so-called *intelligentzia*) try to find natural truths and new ways of reaching individual or common awareness just in folklore. The participants of counter-culture think they set up new areas of creative experience. They mix up the course of culture, rituals and languages.

Searching for "charm and simplicity of heart" and sitting in a circle they chew on wholemeal bread, touch trees and wander across the woods at night.

They are naïve thinking that they get rid of the covering of unaccepted culture, whereas it has already taken place before!

It is worth mentioning that⁵ "The Gardzienice Theatrical Association" was original and disciplined in its search, whereas their followers tracing old cultures appear to be banal when they imitate other people's gestures and compile their eclectic "deeds".

Ad. 5. Small homelands (*Heimat*)

The notion "small homeland" has been used in many different ways in recent scientific works. One should remember, however, that it is derived from "homeland". Their connotations constitute the same basis for mythical ideas, values and tradition. "Small homeland", as a sociological category, has already been used *avant lettre* by the classic Polish sociologists. Stanisław Ossowski,⁶ the author of the notion "private homeland", explained that it is a spatial correlative of the imagined world. It is a function of subjective reality and emotions, and in this way it is rooted in a myth and symbol.

In social practice, Ossowski's idea has been reversed. The correlative of awareness, as not every inhabited area is a "private homeland", has become the space, which is described in the following way: here is the area that has been inhabited "by us", where we create our "small homeland".

Nowadays "small homeland" constitutes an ideological catchword which should bring together local communities and regions that are in the making. Those different usages of the notion do not promote the cogitation of its original and proper meaning. Remote associations, which are used, move away its semantic field. The sociological notion has become an idea which is accompanied by numerous sociotechnical endeavours applied in order to make an inhabited area into a realistically understood homeland.

And that is when the associations with tradition, folklore and identity are evoked. It is a well-known phenomenon, the old problem of social bonds, which is different from a "small homeland".

Thus, the notion here has lost its former cultural context and has become an item of a "linguistic muddle" being used by amateurs and naïve enthusiasts of provincial culture.

⁵ It is a well-known group of alternative theatre conducted by Włodzimierz Staniewski. It takes advantage of A. Artaud's, M. Bachtin's and J. Grotowski's theatrical ideas and performances. In Gardzienice near Lublin, he is running a Centre for Theatrical Practice, which attracts enthusiasts from all over the world.

⁶ Stanisław Ossowski (1897–1963), an outstanding Polish sociologist, is a representative of humanistic sociology. He is an author of numerous innovative works concerning nation, national bonds and collective consciousness. He proposed differentiation between the experience of local and ideological ties.

The number of alternatives that culture participates in, can certainly be higher. Folklorists and ethnographers can easily trace them. One can be sure that a paradoxical way of interpretation will also be possible due to the fact that paradoxes constitute a significant element of our metatextual metaphorical way of world image cognition and thus, they will never disappear from culture.

Paradoxical formulae not only protect us from narrow-minded, single-track ideas, but perform the function of indispensable elements of intellectual activities in European culture, as well.

NARODNI ZNAČAJ I PROVINCIJALIZAM KAO ALTERNATIVA I PARADOKS - NA PRIMJERU POLJSKE KULTURE

SAŽETAK

Na primjeru poljske kulture autor raspravlja o narodnome značaju i provincijalizmu kao alternativama i paradoksu. Postavlja tezu da provincijalizam može biti jedna od alternativa suvremene kulture. Naglašava višeznačnost i višeslojnost pojmova "provincijalizam" i "narodna kultura", a svoje promišljanje vodi u širokome rasponu pojmova: od narodne kulture kao interpretativnoga metateksta, preko folklorizma, provincijalne kulture kao znanstvene kreacije, kulture undergrounda (hipi-kulture), do zavičaja i zavičajnosti.