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## THE POSTMODERN OPENING IN POLISH SOCIO-CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY. A PROJECT REALISED?

### **Preliminary remarks**

The main part of the discussion here pertains to postmodernism “in Polish”, although it is obvious that at least until the mid-1990s, the native discipline has shaped its internally differentiated character in the process of an accelerated reception of theories and concepts formulated in world anthropology even two decades before that. A new anthropological thought, emerging on the basis of philosophical and humanistic reflection, developed mainly by representatives of new intellectual currents from the United States, England and France, reached the Polish academic circles through translations, private readings and library inquiries abroad. In the following text, however, I consider what postmodernism meant for world anthropology. Recently, this topic was taken up by Michał Mokrzan in the article *Odpowiedź na pytanie, czy kiedykolwiek byliśmy postmodernistami?* (2014)<sup>1</sup>. In it, he analyzes first and foremost the classic publications mainly from western anthropology, which have already been discussed on several occasions (see Kaniowska 1999a; Kuligowski 2001; Lubaś 2003; W. Burszta 2004; Brocki 2008; Majbroda 2011). Thus, references to the findings and breakthroughs in the development of this school in Europe and the United States appear in my considerations only incidentally, i.e. wherever it seems necessary from the point of view of the narrative.

The postmodern reflection undertaken gradually by Polish ethnologists was closely connected to the widely discussed crisis of representation and reflections on the literary turn of the discipline. It prompted anthropologists to look critically not only at works created by them, but above all, the understanding and methods of defining the anthropological research practices,

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<sup>1</sup> Eng. An answer to the question: Have we ever been postmodernists? The title of this text refers to an article by Czesław Robotycki, entitled *Antropologia kultury w Polsce – projekt urzeczywistniony* [Eng. The Anthropology of culture in Poland – a project made real] (Robotycki 1995a, which appeared in the jubilee volume of “Lud”, published in 1995 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the magazine and the Polish Ethnological Society. Today, two decades later, we formulate some other questions in the discipline, however, the article referred to attests that the diagnoses of socio-cultural anthropology are inevitably aging, but at the same time, in an underexposed and insufficient way.

as well as the status of related knowledge. There is no place to discuss the debates about the course and consequences of the literary turn in anthropology; I write about this process more extensively in other publications (Majbroda 2011, 2014a, 2015a).

Bearing in mind the history of the changes taking place in the discipline, one could say that its postmodern opening did not occur in the beginning of the 1990s as a *novum* deprived of roots. However, it was also not a direct continuation of the movements developed in Polish ethnology in the 20th century. It is worth recalling that many epistemological assumptions, which are usually attributed to postmodern inspirations in science, have far-reaching origins; for example, cognitive relativism, the issue of cultural translation, or the concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia. In these initial observations, I am trying to state that postmodernism, understood as a condition of socio-cultural reality (Lyotard 1997a), but also as the general context for currents emerging from the criticism of negatively valued modernism, has sharpened and named earlier intuitions and trends that could be regarded as postmodern. Accepting that assumption that “[postmodern is something that remains in a *verwindend* relationship with modernism: it is what it accepts from and undertakes modernity, carrying with it her traces (...). Postmodern carries modernism on, but it distorts it]” (Vattimo 1997: 136)<sup>2</sup>. Such understood postmodernism, is not “[modernism at the end of its life, but at the moment of birth, which is constantly repeated]” (Lyotard 1997b: 58).

When choosing this topic, it is worthwhile to refer to Dan Sperber’s concept of the “epidemiology of representations” (1985), to reflect on what conditions have inhibited the postmodern opening of Polish Ethnology in the 1970s and 1980s, which resulted in that only at the brink of the 1990s, we can observe an increasing interest in this style of thinking. A clear difficulty with its acceptance at the threshold of transformation could be explained by the assumption that, the implementation and acceptance of a particular worldview, current of thought, philosophy (all these terms do not exhaust the existing attempts at the diagnosis of postmodernism) in the space of science, is decided by the functionality of the totality of its research practice, as well as the actual social and cultural demand, and not its artificially created forms, for example, saturating anthropological texts with traces betraying its postmodern origin.

### **Familiar and postmodern at the same time?**

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from source languages other than English are mine – Z.B.

In the 1980s, Western postmodern thought, which clearly constituted a breakthrough in global scholarship, rarely appeared in Polish sciences. Commentators of intellectual life in socialist Poland emphasize, however, that science's gaze was directed toward the West, and that taking up ideas and concepts developed in "other theoretical spaces" constituted an ersatz of freedom. As Jolanta Brach-Czaina writes about the humanities in the days before the transformation: "Keeping up to date with the latest intellectual trends and fashions, in those days in Poland meant something more than just the ordinary, professional duty of scientists and intellectuals" (Brach-Czaina 1995: 348). Despite recognizing in the Western currents an antidote for the increasingly burdensome socialism, the Polish ethnological community experienced Western anthropology gradually, which was connected with the opening of borders, the emergence of international organizations such as the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et Folklore (SIEF), as well as the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), founded in 1989, of which representatives of the Polish ethnological community became members (Jasiewicz 2002: 70-73). At the same time, a slow but systematic process of exporting domestic ethnological/anthropological reflection to the West was taking place (cf. Buchowski 2008, 2012).

It is difficult to resist the impression that the diagnoses made with regard to the cognitive situation shaped in the discipline on the wave of poststructuralism, but also, paradoxically, in the context of "post-ethnography", can sometimes also be applied to the terms "postmodernism" or "postmodern anthropology". Early postmodernist reflections of the 1960s and 1970s were not met with particular interest in Polish ethnology, as it was based in structuralist, phenomenological and hermeneutical theories and concepts. Zofia Sokolewicz recalls this period in the history of the discipline in the following way:

If it was a revolution, it should be called a crawling one. It started in the 1970s. It took more than one generation to make its effects, which were far from the original intentions of the creators anyway, result in a new canon, a change of questions and research procedures, as well as cognitive assumptions about the nature of the reality studied (Sokolewicz 2010: 15).

Anthropologist Michał Buchowski, offers a similar reflection, in which he draws attention to the slow departure of Polish ethnologists from a traditional model of doing science, emphasizing "the process of forming dissociative groups against the modernist model began

relatively late and was initially very slow. It seemed that ethnographers had resisted novel theoretical models the longest” (Buchowski 1995: 42).

However, when looking at the changes that were taking in the discipline at the time, one can risk the statement that Ethnology was experiencing a “homely postmodernism” at the time. In other words, Polish Ethnology’s striving for independence can be seen as post-modernist, or anti-modernist action, even though the “post” achieved by it was to be considered too hermetic and scientific (in the pejorative sense of the term) a decade later. This, in turn, created more and more intense attempts at overthrowing it.

The gradual transition from a “traditional ethnography” to ethnology in the 1980s, became to be known as a moment of the formation of a distinct ethnological current in the history of the discipline, often seen in the context of the current rebellion of the young, referred to as “young Polish Ethnology” (Buchowski 1995: 47-48; Jasiewicz 2002: 69). The category of “postmodernism” was not yet recognized and “did not function” neither in the thinking or at the level of research practice. Moreover, as Robotycki recalled, the current attempts at crossing the boundaries of traditional ethnography were received “quite sourly and with disbelief” by the community (Robotycki 1995a: 227). The phenomenological fascination of Zygmunt Benedyktowicz, Wiesław Szpilka, Dariusz Czaja, and the interest in structuralism and semiotics of Ludwik Stomma, Robotycki, Ryszard Tomicki and Jerzy S. Wasilewski arose largely from the negation of a traditional way of understanding and practicing ethnography. This was manifested in new research questions and the pursuit of thus-far unexplored theories. To some extent, the ethnology of the 1980s and 1990s developed on the basis of the exhaustion of the explanatory possibilities of traditional ethnography. It was cultivated in Poznań by Michał Buchowski and Wojciech Burszta, and developed under the influence of Jerzy Kmita’s socio-regulatory conception of culture (Buchowski 1990, Buchowski, W. Burszta 1992). Although the word postmodernism does not appear in the publications of the above-mentioned anthropologists of this period, it is hard not to notice that their methodological reflections on the philosophical contexts of interpretation are close to those developed at the time in Western anthropology, practiced already with a postmodernist consciousness. After several years, out of this approach developed an interest in the border between anthropology and literature (see W. Burszta 1996, 2015), as well as cultural criticism, postcolonialism, post-socialism, capitalism and neo-liberal

reality (see Buchowski 1996, 2001). The above mentioned anthropologist, Czesław Robotycki, has referred to this period in an interesting way, drawing a map of research interests of the current ethnological community in the following way:

Anthropological interpretation in Polish ethnography has taken the form of individual research options, thanks to the simultaneous emergence of different theoretical paradigms, which enabled the view of culture from different points of view. The newly posed questions about the essence of culture and the ways in which it was investigated, questioned, in its first step, a realistic model of science. Anthropology applied different ways of interpreting culture (Robotycki 1995a: 228).

As we know, as a result of paradigm-forming activities these orientations were, firstly, to override the traditional model of practicing the discipline; and secondly, they fulfilled the function of periodical, monopolistic stabilizers of institutional science, giving direction to research, and fostering their concentration within newly-formed schools in Polish ethnology. The above-mentioned ethnological currents were therefore “post-modernist” in their critique of the modernist model of doing research, and their diversity corresponded to a postmodern approval of polyphony in the discipline. However, the research that was carried out and the publications that were published clearly prove that the 1980s and 1990s, and the following decade in the history of discipline, were a period of very theoretical, sometimes even hermetic analyses, which did not have much in common with the postmodern opening of anthropology, characterized, among other things, by a critical gesture of rejecting grand narratives that strived to work out conclusive solutions. Nevertheless, it was at this time that analyses re-interpreting and demythologizing the “traditional peasant culture” and the similarly traditional modus of its research appeared. Waldemar Kuligowski perceives the process as an expression of native anthropology coping with its own ideological context. He writes:

The heritage of Kolberg, Dolega Chodakowski and Szulczewski, later strengthened by the ideology of the Polish People's Republic, had researchers flounder in the less and less attractive topic of rurality and repeat certain formulas ad nauseam, which have finally become, as is common with such practices, naturalized. The efforts of a number of ethnologists were needed (Burszta senior exposed the ideology of folklore, Stomma criticized the canonical image of the 19th century country, Węglarz and Robotycki pointed to the mechanisms of mythologizing folk culture) to transcend the cursed and

self-renewing sphere of the short-lived world of *praesens ethnographicum* (Kuligowski 2003: 225-226).

The focus of ethnologists was then concentrated on the analysis of ethnographic texts, whose critical, post-modernist reading has brought a disillusion with the ethnographic version of the description of culture, it showed its axiological background, its positivist (already devalued at the time) variant of rationalism, as well as the dissonance between ethnological explanations at the level of theoretical assumptions and empirical research. This diagnosis is shared by Robotycki, in his description of the atmosphere in the ethnological community, in which the anthropological opening was already taking place. As he wrote, “critically oriented anthropologists, through appropriate analyses of ethnographic texts, create an anthropology of ethnography, reluctantly accepted by those who were not capable of self-irony” (Robotycki 1995a: 233).

The critical and revindicative attitude of part of the ethnological environment resulted both from an internal evolution of the discipline, as well as its inspiration with the direction of changes and trends observed in science globally. Sokolewicz's memories make it clear that even in the 1970s, access to important anthropological publications opening the way to new ways of cognition was limited, and the only journal in the field that allowed Polish ethnologists to discern among Western theories and research practices was “Current Anthropology”, published by Sol Tax since 1963. However, even this journal was not known and read in all ethnological centers in Poland (Sokolewicz 2010: 25). It focused on the most important debates that were being had in Western anthropological communities, focusing on the intensified practice that could be described as an ethnography of ethnography. On the basis of the intensive analysis of the condition of the discipline, questions were asked about a paradigm shift in the field, the assessment of the achievements of positivist methodology, and locating anthropology on the border of science and art. Moreover, the status of empirical data and fieldwork, as well as objectivism and inter-subjectivism in anthropological cognition were problematized (Tokarska-Bakir 1990: 3).

In Polish anthropology, these questions were to appear later in meta-theoretical and self-reflective publications, which constituted critical analyses of the disciplines cognitive possibilities, as well as its leading discourses after the transformations in the 1980s and 1990s.

These publications include: Katarzyna Kaniowska's *Opis. Klucz rozumienia kultury*<sup>3</sup> (1999b); Wojciech Burszta's *Czytanie kultury. Pięć szkiców*<sup>4</sup> (1996); *Różnorodność i tożsamość. Antropologia jako kulturowa refleksyjność*<sup>5</sup> (2004); Waldemar Kuligowski's *Antropologia refleksyjna. O rzeczywistości tekstu*<sup>6</sup> (2001); Michał Buchowski's *Zrozumieć Innego. Antropologia racjonalności*<sup>7</sup> (2004); Dariusz Czaja's *Sygnatura i fragment. Narracje antropologiczne*<sup>8</sup> (2004), *Znaki szczególne. Antropologia jako ćwiczenie duchowe*<sup>9</sup> (2013); Marcin Brocki's *Antropologia – literatura – dialog – przekład*<sup>10</sup> (2008); as well as the work of other representatives of the discipline, who recognized the importance of redefining anthropology's identity and diagnose its condition beyond the positivistic paradigm of science, against the backdrop of representation, and first and foremost, in the course of anthropology's struggles with the legitimacy of knowledge produced within it. In this process, the closure of traditional Polish ethnography took place.

### **The transformational opening**

Some commentators connect the emergence of postmodernism in Polish humanities with the intellectual breath of the year 1989 and the subsequent years of the opening of science to the so far poorly recognized currents and directions, which were already settled in the West for several decades (Jasiewicz 2006: 32-33, Buchowski 2012: 32-33). The transformation of the political system was conducive to the absorption of the concepts and theories developed in the West by Polish anthropology, which was largely a result of increasingly available, read and translated publications. In 1986, a book by George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* was published. A year later, Stephen Tyler released *The Unspeakable. Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World*, and Bob Scholte's article, "The Literary Turn in Contemporary Anthropology" (Scholte 1987), was published in *Critique of Anthropology*. In 1989, only two copies of James Clifford's book *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* existed in the Polish ethnological

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<sup>3</sup> Eng. Description. The key to understanding culture.

<sup>4</sup> Eng. Reading culture. Five Sketches.

<sup>5</sup> Eng. Diversity and identity. Anthropology as cultural reflex.

<sup>6</sup> Reflexive Anthropology. On the Reality of the Text.

<sup>7</sup> Eng. Understanding the Other. Anthropology of rationality.

<sup>8</sup> Eng. Signature and fragment. Anthropological narrations.

<sup>9</sup> Eng. Special Characters. Anthropology as a Spiritual Exercise.

<sup>10</sup> Eng. Anthropology – literature – dialogue – translation.

community – one in Warsaw and the other in Cracow (Sokolewicz 2010: 25). Soon its translated excerpts began to appear in the journal “Konteksty Polskiej Sztuki Ludowej”, which undoubtedly contributed to the popularization of the new anthropological thought in Poland. These publications, step by step, revealed not only the blurring of genres of scientific texts, but also the variety of ways of practicing anthropology. With their reception, there was a growing awareness in the discipline of the limits to the research and descriptiveness of socio-cultural reality.

The latter of these issues underwent a thorough reflection on the wave of the reception of the book *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford, Marcus, eds., 1986). The analysis of contexts in which references to this book have appeared in Polish anthropological publications, clearly shows that it was read primarily in the context of reflexivity, as an important voice in the dispute over the shape of the critique of knowledge (Sokolewicz 2011: 348, see Lubaś 2014: 39-65); as a clear exposition of the poetics of anthropological texts, their stylistics, rhetoric, genres, which started to be considered not only in terms of philological concepts, but also as carriers of specific perspectives and worldviews (Kuligowski 2001: 15, 2015: 38; Rakowski 2009: 23). Therefore, the book was ascribed an important role in the orientation of anthropology to “self-criticism”, “self-description”, and “meta-anthropology” (Majbroda 2014b). There were also critical voices in the Polish community, arguing that the book did not offer a revolutionary breakthrough, neither to world nor Polish anthropology (Brocki 2014: 29-37).

Criticism of the anthropological discourses and research practices opened the way for undermining unmaintainable, negatively valorized scientific styles of investigating reality and the patterns of knowledge that determined them. In search of new inspirations, the anthropology of the time also turned to philosophy, being in a way its practical test (Kaniowska 1995: 62). All these changes took place on the wave of the reception of subsequent publications, sealing the literary, textual and self-reflexive anthropological turn.

### **Postmodernism made in Poland**

The postmodern opening of Polish ethnology began at the beginning of the 1990s, and was intertwined with its increasingly pronounced anthropologization. The process of adopting “proper” postmodernism had at least two stages: it seems that the first phase of getting acquainted with this phenomenon consisted primarily in the reception of Western publications devoted to this topic and an attempt at popularizing them in the Polish scientific community. The second stage of gradual acquaintance with postmodernism took the form of negotiations between the Western current and the native realms, according to the recognition that “good knowledge of the original works of the authors of new currents in world ethnology and anthropology is the basis for creating positive research alternatives and critically acclaimed domestic achievements” (Robotycki 1995a: 229).

The second, more difficult to implement, but also cognitively more interesting stage of the struggles with the postmodern undertaking, Polish ethnology – slowly evolving into anthropology – began to see the need to break the monoparadigmatism of the discipline, which for many decades, was manifested in concentration on folk culture and traditional ethnographic methods. Subsequently, the communicative model of culture, developed in the structuralist and semiotic current of post-ethnography, was gradually abandoned. They began to be perceived as exhausted and less inspirational approaches to the Polish anthropological community; they were deprived of a theory of practice in Pierre Bourdieu’s approach.

The impact of postmodernism on Polish ethnology tended to be perceived as a driving force responsible for the emergence of a “new paradigm” that revealed the current problems of the humanities and social sciences (Sokolewicz 2010: 29, Kaniowska 1995, 1999a). It was as if it was the answer to the burning need to name certain phenomena and to diagnose the epistemological and research situation of the time. Perhaps it fostered the courage to draw up the urgent, strategic tasks that were seen to be laying ahead of Polish anthropology. It has also become a peculiar postmodernism, a kind of dictionary of terms, which have permeated anthropological texts as handy phrases, almost formulaic passages that testified to the grounding of the subject matter in postmodern cognitive disillusion.

It is not an accident that I reach to this expression, aiming to highlight the revindicative character of the reflections that were taken up by the discipline as postmodernist. This gesture of

unveiling, showing the lining of the research conducted, the need for differentiating proposed theories is an important moment for the emerging self-consciousness of the discipline.

In most likely the first publication which attempts to describe the discipline trying to tackle postmodernist thought, *O czym opowiada antropologiczna opowieść*<sup>11</sup> (W. Burszta, Piątkowski 1994), there is a conviction, according to which:

the discussion within anthropology is in perfect harmony with those trends in the modern humanities, which are termed as postmodernist. In fact, it seems that it is precisely on the example of anthropology that one can show in its full length, what postmodernism is really about, and the ways in which it negates modernism in philosophy, science and art (W. Burszta, Piątkowski 1994: 8).

The image of anthropology as an avant-garde of new thought currents stemming from the criticism of principal modern philosophical assumptions has also appeared in Marian Kempny's book, *Antropologia bez dogmatów – teoria społeczna bez iluzji*<sup>12</sup>, according to which “‘postmodernist anthropology’ in its experimental phase in practice implies the suspension of the great nineteenth-century vision of the Science of Man” (Kempny 1994: 145). In another place in the book, we read that “the opposition modernism *versus* postmodernism, which appears in anthropological literature as a simple negation of the first by the latter, (...) breaks down against postmodernization, a particular barrier which modern anthropology is unable to cross. It can be suggested that such barrier is the solution of the problem of interpretation and translation” (Kempny 1994: 186).

The reception of postmodernist thought has thus so far influenced the ways of thinking and speaking about anthropology, about the nature of cognition, the nature of reality and cultural and social practices. However, it primarily inspired the meta-theoretical reflection, which embodied the criticism of the concept of truth, the objectivity of anthropological knowledge and assumptions about the transparency of ethnological data, which form the basis of scientific interpretation. The above-mentioned situation in the discipline has not always been valued

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<sup>11</sup> Eng. What is said in the anthropological tale.

<sup>12</sup> Eng. Anthropology without dogma – social theory without illusion.

positively, as is evidenced by Barbara Olszewska-Dyoniziak's article, *Co to jest postmodernizm w antropologii?*<sup>13</sup>. In it, she embeds her reflections in Ernest Gellner's (1997) findings, and writes directly that the contemporary currents in anthropology that were influenced by postmodernism, negate "all objectivity of cognition" and disregard "all theoretical and methodological rigor in research", leading to "cognitive nihilism", a negation of the possibility of "any scientific knowledge of culture" and the resignation from "a serious attempt to describe something in an accurately documented way that is subject to verification" (Olszewska-Dyoniziak 2000: 6-7). In this statement, we can see the negatively valorized repercussions of the postmodern opening of anthropology, which meant, in short, its departure from epistemological goals.

The clear ambiguity in the assessment of postmodern inspirations in the discipline is apparent in the monograph, *Amerykańska antropologia postmodernistyczna*<sup>14</sup> published in 1999, which is a compilation of translations of texts written by Western anthropologists, who illuminate this current from many points of view. In the introduction to the book, the editors avoided giving a clear answer to the question of whether postmodernism in anthropology existed, leaving the task of solving the issue to the reader. They wrote: "the works contained in this book are meant to reflect the meanders of anthropological reflection called postmodern by many, although we do not settle, whether rightly so" (Buchowski, Kempny 1999: 10). In the further part of the introduction, we read that:

the case of postmodern anthropology fully reflects what is so heavily emphasized in it: that anthropological thinking is conditioned by both, methodological factors and philosophical dilemmas that are treated as common, although not universal, or even more so, transcendental, as well as by historical and cultural contexts (Buchowski, Kempny 1999: 14).

Therefore, as the authors seem to argue, postmodernism has made it clear to anthropologists that cognition is largely situational and, as such, is not based on an *a priori*, positivist concept of science.

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<sup>13</sup> Eng. What is postmodernism in anthropology?

<sup>14</sup> Eng. American postmodern anthropology.

Wojciech Burszta devoted a lot of attention to postmodernist inspirations in the discipline, among others, in the collection of reflections: *Czytanie kultury. Pięć szkiców*<sup>15</sup> (1996), and especially in the publication *Różnorodność i tożsamość. Antropologia jako kulturowa refleksyjność*<sup>16</sup> (2004), in which the anthropologist carefully looked at the propositions of postmodernist thinking in science, advocating its cautious application in anthropological reflections on cognition, otherness, and in discussions about the usefulness of the notion of culture. He perceived postmodernism as an answer to the end of the reign of “monoculture” and of a “modernist idea for life” (W. Burszta 2004: 49). Brocki, in an article entitled *Antropologia postmodernistyczna wobec krytyki*<sup>17</sup>, emphasized that “postmodernists (...) make anthropology the subject of their own interest in order to be able to trace the conditions and ways of constructing the reality examined by an ethnographer” (Brocki 1999: 30), which is consistent with the recognition of other anthropologists (W. Burszta 1992: 130; Kaniowska 1999b: 21; Kempny 1994: 179). In a similar context, Krzysztof Piątkowski saw a kind of helplessness of postmodern anthropology with regard to its subject matter, noting that “the postmodernist reflection upon culture itself as if builds a plexiglass wall in front of itself, demonstrating cognitive helplessness in relation to the endlessness of potentially probable emerging weaves of meanings” (Piątkowski 1999: 37). This statement very clearly underlines the imagined state of the discipline, condemned to self-reflexivity and cognitive nihilism, induced by the realization that, as Burszta wrote in the early 1990s, the task of anthropological practice in the postmodern period is not explanation, but reflection upon the impossibility of explanation” (Burszta 1992: 4).

The fragments extracted from the Polish anthropological publications reflect the atmosphere around postmodernism prevailing in Polish anthropology in the early 1990s. They show clearly that it was presented in terms of novelty, freshness, as well as a clear theoretical relaxation, as if postmodernism allowed for a loosening of corsetal methods of investigation, and at the same time, could not offer a scientific alternative. Its low utility in solving epistemological problems diagnosed in the discipline was feared much earlier.

Unspecified and intuitively applied to Polish scientific realities, postmodernism initially functioned in anthropological discourse, as an exotic “other” – partially recognized, raising

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<sup>15</sup> Eng. Reading culture. Five sketches.

<sup>16</sup> Eng. Diversity and identity. Anthropology as cultural reflexivity.

<sup>17</sup> Eng. Postmodern anthropology in consideration of criticism.

concerns, yet intriguing. Its emergence on the cognitive horizon exoticizes not only the horizon itself – the research subject, but also its cognitive strategies. As Janusz Barański emphasized in the article *Koniec etnologii czy koniec wieku etnologii? Garść wróżb u progu nowego wieku*,<sup>18</sup> judging the consequences of the opening of the native discipline to postmodernism: “we have treated ourselves to a californication of our unrefined, albeit our own and original, ethnology: we are walking on Polish soil, but our heads are as if submerged in Los Angeles’s virtual smog” (Barański 1999: 99). It seems that the problems diagnosed by Western anthropologists were largely related to socio-cultural anthropology in the global dimension. Therefore, efforts to rethink the local form of the discipline in broader, external contexts, seem to be justified. However, the implementation of these considerations in the native discipline does not have to mean a mechanical, thoughtless repetition of interpretative frameworks and anthropological schemes of analysis, developed in different theoretical spaces, the negative effects of which were noticed by Barański:

when reading some of the works of Polish ethnologists inspired by the conclusions of postmodernist anthropology regarding various *native people*, one has the irresistible impression that we are dealing here with a phenomenon related to cloning (...). Such writing (reading, etc.) of culture, comes across, not even as the creation of a virtual reality, but simple fiction, where by using the singular power of the logic of substitution, a Samoan is replaced with a native of Greater Poland. In this way, a native postmodern anthropology is created (Barański 1999: 99).

Since anthropology turned out to be the product of a specific cultural and geopolitical context, the question arose in Polish anthropology about the extent of warranted extrapolation of theories developed in the West to non-Western, e.g., Central European, contexts. Buchowski, already mentioned above, noted that “many Polish ethnologists eagerly refer to ideas developed by their Western colleagues”, emphasizing that “there is of course nothing reprehensible about it, provided that these ideas are used as an inspiration for one’s own interpretation of materials” (Buchowski 2008: 123). However, “often, anthropology was or still is understood to be a practice of re-quotation, recycling of ideas, themes imposed by continental tyrants –

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<sup>18</sup> Eng. The end of ethnology or the end of the age of ethnology? Several predictions at the threshold of the new century.

deconstruction, postmodernism, literature and anthropology, globalization, mediatization and consumerism” (Buchowski 2008: 123).

The adaptation and diffusion of each discourse is governed by specific economics. It is not worth paying attention to concepts that do not give us a chance of a return on the investment. Therefore, in “Polish-style postmodernism”, investments were made more economically, with greater hope put in making the anthropological statement more attractive, rather than in its implementation in specific research projects. The process was largely based on reaching for stylistics associated with postmodernist discourse, which not only refreshed the language of anthropology, but also focused on evocation – inducing certain approaches and emotions in potential readers (see Czaja 2004, 2013).

The density of the use of metaphors and concepts in anthropological discourse which conventionally could be termed as postmodern has led to a situation in which statements-satellites have appeared, which have taken up an interpretive game with them. Robotycki (1995b: 84) has made a critical statement about this phenomenon, noting that the anthropological reception of philosophical thought is reduced to banalization. A few years later, Kaniowska, when addressing this topic in the article *Antropologia wobec postmodernizmu*<sup>19</sup>, pointed out that “violating the requirements of scientific discourse damages the reputation of science, because it threatens to banalize it” (Kaniowska 1999a: 19). As the anthropologist emphasized: “This threat can take a twofold form in science (especially in the disciplines of the hard sciences): we may have to deal with the banalization of the examined reality, but also the second, in my view, the more dangerous, banalization of the cognitive tool” (Kaniowska 1999a: 19). The researcher gave as an example the publications permeated by the essayist concept of science, which can be found on the pages of “Konteksty” (Kaniowska 1999a: 24)<sup>20</sup>. This cognitive situation favored a kind of self-reproduction of the scientific communication system: argumentative and critical texts of metadiscursive character appeared, and the anthropological community had the impression that a turn had occurred, and the conviction that if not a new current, then at least a new way of

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<sup>19</sup> Eng. Anthropology in consideration of postmodernism.

<sup>20</sup> The cited critical observations on the emergence of postmodernist inspirations in Polish anthropological publications touch upon a particular communicative situation in the discipline that could be defined as, after Jerzy Pelc, an incursion of the humanist literary science into the humanities, which manifests itself in that “the metaphor and abstraction, used together, open the way to building constructs without a basis in empirical reality” attesting to “the depth of the humanist-literate and their ability to construct sophisticated cognitive models” (Pelc 2000: 180).

interpretation of researched phenomena has emerged. They undoubtedly boosted and refreshed, not only anthropological discourses, but also the image of the discipline in the scientific space (cf. Pomieciński, Sikora, eds. 2009).

One can also assume that one of the consequences of adopting postmodern ideas by the Polish anthropological community was the realization that neither modernity nor postmodernity are phenomena of Western origin, and the West is not the only locus of phenomena which can be subject to postmodernist interpretation. In Polish ethnology, it caused researchers to turn to popular culture and widely understood media. Cultural narratives included in movies, painted art, music, and in popular literature provided anthropologists with different modes of articulating the anthropological experience (see W. Burszta 1996, 2004, 2015; W. Burszta, Kuligowski 2005, 2009, Kuligowski 2007, Czubaj 2010, Piątowski 2011). In the period described, some authors published articles in which they re-approached the analysis of everyday, common socio-cultural practices, presented in the context of previously recognized trends and theories, which seemed to give way to new ideas in the discipline, but still proved their cognitive attractiveness (Robotycki 1992; Sulima 2000).

### **How is the new created to allow the old to survive?**

It is not always warranted to project contemporary ideas and research concepts onto the past. However, re-examining texts from the past in accordance with new interpretations is a positive and a not-so-new phenomenon. In the article cited above, Barański noted the negative impact of anthropology practiced within the “Rice gang” on the “methodological critical self-reflection” developed in Poland in the 1990s. In writing about the “American postmodern wave” that hit “our Slavic shores” effectively suppressing “the native reflection, which was held in a similar spirit” (Barański 1999: 2). It is worthwhile to stop here for a moment at this diagnosis, and consider Polish research projects and publications created until the 1990s, which went beyond modernist thinking, not so much anticipating the postmodern in the discipline, but certifying that the modernist model of practicing the discipline had to be negated with time, even if we did not know at the time that it could be called a postmodern opening and we did not realize that we were still somehow stuck in modernism (Latour 2011).

If we consider the element of the reinterpretation of phenomena and the refutation of the theories developed so far as one of the more explicit manifestations of postmodernism in the discipline, it would be hard not to agree with Barański, who, suggests the publication *Chłop potęgą jest i basta*<sup>21</sup> (Robotycki, Węglarz 1983), which deals with myth of peasantry, as an example of Polish reflection held in this spirit, although not necessarily this rhetoric. Following this path, we could say that if self-reflection is the measure of postmodernism, then certain publications can be referred to as “postmodernish” in the process of contemporary re-interpretation, for instance, Maria Czaplicka's *Mój rok na Syberii* (2013)<sup>22</sup>, Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska's *Spoleczność wiejska*<sup>23</sup> (1948), and many more, especially recently thought books (cf. Kaniowska 1999b: 149-177), written decades ago when anthropologists' heads were immersed in the clouds of Polish cities and villages, or in Siberian snowstorms, and no one dreamed of the virtual smog of Los Angeles. A good example of a text that brings out the “postmodern potential” of an older publication is the re-reading of Józef Burszta's book *The Village and the Inn* (1950) by Kacper Pobłocki, who sees it as “an attempt to show how vodka was an integral part of the everyday life and folklore of peasants and how nobility have forced peasants to consume vodka since the 16<sup>th</sup> century” (Pobłocki 2009: 242). The researcher emphasizes that this is an idea “as innovative and inspirational as the book *Sweetness and Power* written three decades later by Sidney Mintz” (Pobłocki 2009: 242). He also argues that the way in which Burszta describes the famous “lack of morality” of Polish peasants, partially brings to mind Thompson's concept of “moral economy”, and that his findings could have made a global career (Pobłocki 2009: 242).

In this regard, it is worth mentioning, among others, Thomas Rakowski's research project, reconstructed in the publication *Etnografia/Animacja/Sztuka*<sup>24</sup> (Rakowski 2013). The ideological dimension of this ethnographic and animation project is important, as it is aimed at confronting “a fairly common social imagination, within which the social and cultural life of Polish rural areas is recognized as incomplete, lagging behind, requiring education and a remedial program” (Rakowski 2013: 8). However, these communities are actually ripe in “local competence”, “grassroots creativity” and “cultural hot spots”, which could be brought out,

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<sup>21</sup> Eng. The peasant is powerful, period!

<sup>22</sup> The book *My Siberian Year* by M. Czaplicka was published for the first time in London in 1916.

<sup>23</sup> Eng. The rural community.

<sup>24</sup> Eng. Ethnography/Animation/Art

unveiled and stimulated by ethnographic and animation activities based on collaboration with the local communities, creating “culture in action” (Rakowski 2013). : 24). One could say that practicing ethnography in collaboration with art and cultural animation, presented here out of necessity only briefly, was made possible by a “postmodern consent”. However, the issue becomes more complicated when we read into the sources that inspired this undertaking. They go deeper, drawing on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. What also comes to mind are some analogies to the style of practicing ethnography by Jacek Olędzki, which we can reconstruct while reading the book *Murzynowo* – a monograph containing descriptions aimed at the disillusion of an image of rural culture, ingrained in traditional publications.

In a sense, in this publication, the ethnologist makes a critical analysis of the previous ways of describing traditional culture, and at the same time, unveils the political and social determinants of these descriptions. Is it legitimate, thus, to declare that he anticipates the revindicative reading of anthropological texts, who got their impetus from the poststructural foundations of postmodernism? Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (1995) followed such path of reading Jacek Olędzki’s ethnography, but in the end did not consider his work as unambiguously postmodern, as Mokrzan did (2014: 19), in order to show the mechanism of postmodern anticipation in Polish anthropology. Tokarska-Bakir has clearly states that she does not intend to reduce Jacek Olędzki’s work “to the label ‘postmodernist researcher’, nor to show the paradox of someone who, by using the tried-and-true method of ‘escaping backwards’, anticipated his modern epoch” (Tokarska-Bakir 1995: 19).

Similar doubts may be raised by the postmodernist label applied to the book *Bałuckie chronotopy. Opowieść o łódzkiej dzielnicy*<sup>25</sup> (Krupa-Ławrynowicz 2013), which tells the story of the titular district. It is embedded in the current of urban anthropology, reaching to sociological and philosophical concepts, and taking Mikhail Bachtin's ideas as its main inspiration, above all his concept of the chronotope. It has a rich narrative and the presence of the anthropologist-author, who intertwines her own experience of the titular district with the analysis. Following the path of the trans-disciplinarity of this publication, one could say that it is an example of a postmodern opening in the discipline that brings to life Bachtin's concepts historically embedded in modernism, in harmony with the ideology, and going beyond modernity in its thinking (cf.

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<sup>25</sup> Eng. Bałuckie chronotopes. The story of a Łódź neighborhood.

Vrhel 1993: 7-22). However, it is worth bearing in mind that the directions of borrowings can be reversed, showing that the repetition of certain thematic lines, concepts and metaphors is observed thanks to the “memory of the discipline”. It is made possible, inter alia, both thanks to the relatively slow aging of anthropology, and the fact that, within the discipline, we can observe not so much radical epistemological cuts, as a constant widening of its epistemology. Therefore, often the “new” turns out to be a chance for the survival of the “old” in anthropology, as paradoxically, it can extract and refresh from the past outworn, discredited, and forgotten ideas. The history of the development of anthropology has proven this many times.

### **Emancipatory dimensions of the Polish postmodernist undertaking**

Sometimes, it is hard to resist the impression that so far, commentators of the postmodern opening of the discipline attribute its meaning a much wider scope than just the space of science. It may be said that the aforementioned opening carried with it a certain potential to liberate the discipline of both “ethnographism” and theory, which, on the wave of transformation, turned out to be too narrow for its ever-increasing cognitive horizons. Postmodernism also assumed some sort of transposition, demythologization, unveiling the lining of existing theories, in order to indicate their dependence, ideological entanglements, and worldview sympathies. Thus, the inspirations coming from postmodernism did not influence the stability and reproduction of previous anthropological practices, but, on the contrary, they brought with them the need to rethink social, cultural and geopolitical contexts. Certain manifestations of this “new consciousness” of the researcher could be found in, for example, the texts that make up the volume *Teren w antropologii. Praktyka badacza we współczesnej antropologii kulturowej*<sup>26</sup> (Buliński, Kairski, eds., 2011). On the other hand, voices casting doubt on the dialogicality and the associated emancipation of minorities and subordinate groups, which the “logic” of cognition had so far located in the outskirts, appeared very fast, and if it included them in the scope of its interests, then they were usually introduced bearing the status of a reified other.

In the Polish anthropological community, attention was being paid to the fact that postmodernism, by sharpening the ideologism of anthropological knowledge, was itself strengthening its foundations by introducing axiology, according to which scientific knowledge is good when it supports minority groups that had been negatively affected, and it is bad when it

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<sup>26</sup> Eng. The field in anthropology. Research practice in contemporary anthropological and cultural studies.

is used for their repression. According to Brocki, this moral model of knowledge “however, loses a fundamental characteristic of science, which is the crossing of cultural constraints (...), it eliminates criticism in favor of fear of punishment for dissident interpretations – instead of liberating (as normal science does), the moral model is inherently oppressive” (Brocki 2008: 41)<sup>27</sup>. Marcin Lubaś (2003: 4) reached for other arguments, aimed at unmasking the weaknesses of postmodernism in anthropology. He embedded them in the principles of scientific knowledge based on empiricism, theory and method, and thus, on the triad, which according to the researcher is not of interest to representatives of postmodernist anthropology, who only consider history and social and cultural contexts of knowledge as the subjects of their reflection.

One could thus ask, what purpose did these recognitions, critical of postmodernism in anthropology, serve, apart from the fact that they explicitly essentialized its image by placing it on the side of action and reflection that threatened the science embedded in the rigor of empiricism, verifiability and communicability of anthropological knowledge? Mokrzan, noticing this phenomenon, explains it only on the level of rhetoric, as “the construction of the great quantifier that had a political goal”, seeing it in “activities aimed at maintaining either the identity of the discipline, or the theoretical and methodological identities of individual groups of anthropologists”, and adding that “such action was founded on an erroneous, but strategic recognition of what modernism and postmodernism were” (Mokrzan 2014: 21). However, what raises questions is not so much the consequent and just defense of anthropology’s epistemological goals, but rather, a certain exaggeration of dangers, which were seen in the spread of postmodernism in the discipline. Especially that it is clear from a perspective of time that the scale of its influence on Polish anthropology was not small, perhaps, but it did not have the potential that could change it in a radical way. The reason is that the influence of postmodernism on anthropology consisted in the popularization of concepts and theories associated with it, followed by their discussion, which enhanced the meta-anthropological reflection and contributed to the widening of the anthropological inter-discourse. It would be hard to disagree that the postmodernist inspiration played a role in the remodeling of empirical research, however, it should be underscored that it happened not so much with the postmodern

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<sup>27</sup> This statement is one of many in the debate that has for some time been transferred to the fields of engaged and applied anthropology (see, for example, Baer 2014; Brocki 2013). Its discussion, however, goes beyond the scope of this text.

opening of the discipline, but thanks to the reactions to it: reflexive, literary and interpretive, which I tried to show in a different publication (Majbroda 2015b).

### **Conclusion**

Postmodernist inspirations in anthropology are no longer controversial today, they solidified and settled in Polish anthropological discourse to the point where they seem to be quite transparent. Postmodernism “Polish-style postmodernism” functioned in a specific translational domain, where the literal understanding of “translation” does not exhaust the contexts of the mentioned functioning. On the one hand, anthropologists adjusted their anti-fundamentalist assumptions to the realities of their own discipline, which translated into posing new questions, made it possible to see previously unnoticed phenomena and to make attempts at the illumination of the old in new contexts. On the other hand, a continuous process of criticism of the condition of the discipline started, which got swept away by the postmodern opening. Attempts to apply postmodernism in Polish anthropology were, however, inspired by the impulses stemming from local cultural heritage and the characteristic challenges of Polish everyday life. Often, the clash of these universal, after all, modes of interpretation with the idiosyncratic nature of the local phenomena created new research undertakings, which this text references. They testify to the postmodern opening of Polish socio-cultural anthropology. This openness, which I perceive as a realized reality, though not pervasive, is a phenomenon that already belongs to the history of the discipline, and which has been surpassed by performative ethnology, anthropology turned to affect and experience of reality, post-posthumanities and many others that are waiting to be named, and that are finding it difficult to make their way to the anthropological debate.

Yet again, posing the question articulated outside of anthropology by Reinhold Martin, repeated a while ago by Kaniowska, and more recently by Mokrzan: “Have we ever been postmodern?”. One could answer: yes, repeatedly, and adding that the present, multifaceted face of anthropology has been shaped to a certain degree by postmodernist inspirations. It would be naïve to say that under their influence, a distinct trend in the discipline known as “Polish-style” postmodern anthropology has been shaped. It is easy to see, however, that postmodernism was more than a “pot in which so much is boiling, that the status of the ingredients that constitute the subject of our interest is problematic” (Mokrzan 2014: 19). Thus, I would not look for the weaknesses of the postmodern opening of anthropology in the amplification of the concept of

terrain and the multiplication of the object of its investigation. This process was, by the way, one of the elements of the anthropologization of the discipline, and today it is one of its essential features. A question worth asking could relate to how we deal with this variety. Are we able to avoid the trivialization of the anthropological discourse? Do we have contextual theories that would enable us to combine these “ingredients” in new ways, without sacrificing the epistemological ambitions of the discipline? Is it possible to escape from this eclecticism? These questions remain open. One of the possible answers is suggested by the attractiveness of anthropology practiced contemporarily, which grows out of, among others, the above-mentioned, perhaps only seeming, contradictions.

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