

## TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL HISTORY OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

R. KLEŚTA-NAWROCKI, W. PIASEK

---

Anthropologists, departing from their original subject of study – primitive, non-European, traditional, peasant communities – turned towards their own “cultural” surroundings, the “here and now”. However, changes in anthropology did not merely result from the prosaic and dubious reason of the disappearance of its hitherto subject of study. What played a key role was the fact that the “naturalness” of the Western society was questioned towards the end of the 1960<sup>s</sup>. What had seemed to be a cultural norm and a benchmark started to be perceived as a “world among worlds” and ultimately the division into “the West” and “everything else” also turned out to be illusory and questionable. Anthropology, with culture as the central concept in its analytic dictionary, has attempted to understand it. Culture “shared” by members of a community and treated as uniform, permanent and timeless, started to raise doubts. New questions were posed: “shared” by whom, how and on what conditions?<sup>1</sup>. The treatment of culture has changed fundamentally; there was a turn towards multiplicity, diversity and fluidity; culture has become a field of the unequal and diverse relations of people and groups in a diverse society. To some extent, even the concept itself was criticised and rejected as cognitively useless. This nearly ended tragically for anthropology itself, as the point of using the concept of “culture” began to be questioned<sup>2</sup>. There was also a danger of not being able to say anything

---

<sup>1</sup> Vide: N.B. Dirks, G.E. Eley, P.B. Ortner, *Introduction*, [in:] *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, Princeton 1994, p 3–4.

<sup>2</sup> Vide: W.J. Burszta, *Teoria kultury, czyli “dłużej klasztoru niż przeora”*, [in:] *Kultura jako przedmiot badań. Studia filozoficzno-kulturoznawcze*, ed. B. Kotowa, J. Sójka, K. Zamiar, Poznań 2001, p 157–164. There was a very interesting discussion in the Polish quarterly “Konteksty,” started by an article by Dariusz Czaja, in which he criticised the concept of “culture” and proposed to replace it with the category of “life.” Vide: D. Czaja, *Życie, czyli nieprzejrzystość. Poza antropologię – kultury*, “Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa”, 2002, no 3–4, p 6–22; W. Michera, *Kultura, empatia i techniki skrawania*, “Konteksty. Polska

about the world beyond what follows from its current observation and theoretical speculations about it. However, this atmosphere was undoubtedly favourable to re-evaluating the traditional subject of an anthropologists' interest and opened a research area which is at an easy reach, available "here and now". This led to another update, in a sort of reverse way, of the anthropological goal to "make explicitly exotic populations appear implicitly familiar and explicitly familiar populations appear implicitly exotic"<sup>3</sup>. In fact, by adopting this kind of perspective, defined by breakthrough works and discussions, anthropology found the antipodes under its own feet<sup>4</sup>. It also had to realise that what used to be the antipodes has become the backyard of many anthropologists of the next generation.

One of the responses of Polish anthropologists to the re-evaluation mentioned above is anthropology of the contemporary. As Barbara Fatyga writes, "the concept does not have [...] a clearly defined referent, and neither do we have its adequate definition. For various authors who use it, it is usually a set of more or less clear theoretical, methodological and – perhaps first of all - philosophical intuitions, connected with the history of anthropology, its constant cognitive dilemmas and the postmodernist approach, popular until recently"<sup>5</sup>. Classifying ways of understanding anthropology of the contemporary, the author points out that we talk about anthropology of the contemporary "first, and it would seem most obviously, in connection with the «new» subject matter of anthropology, i.e. contemporary societies, in contrast to the traditional subject matter (of the so-called primitive societies and traditional cultures); second, in connection with reformulating basic anthropological problems, such as relation of nature to culture, the issue of ethnocentrism, relativism or the relation between the researcher and their subject; third, in connection with the necessity to respond (also

---

Sztuka Ludowa", 2002, no 3–4, p 23–25; W. Szpilka, "Żyj i daj żyć", "Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa", 2002, no 3–4, p 26; Cz. Robotycki, *Hermeneutyka i życie na marginesie rozważań Dariusza Czai*, "Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa", 2002, no 3–4, p 27–28.

<sup>3</sup> J.A. Boon, *Other Tribes Other Scribes, Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religion and Texts*, Cambridge 1992, p 9. Cf. K. Hastrup, *A Passage to Anthropology. Between Experience and Theory*, London 1995, p 7.

<sup>4</sup> J. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York 1983; *Writing Culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography*, ed. J. Clifford, G.E. Marcus, Berkeley 1986; G.E. Marcus, M.J. Fisher, *Anthropology as cultural critique*, Chicago 1986; *Anthropology at home*, ed. A. Jackson, London 1987.

<sup>5</sup> B. Fatyga, *Dzicy z naszej ulicy. Antropologia kultury młodzieżowej*, 2nd revised edition, Warszawa 2005, p 7. In this volume, Paweł Łuczeczek undertakes a meticulous reconstruction of the beginning and history of contemporary anthropology. His take on contemporary anthropology and its characterisation are controversial in some points – which is a good thing. We hope that this leads to polemics with the author.

by ethnologists and anthropologists or sociologists with an interest in anthropology) to research challenges posed to science by “t-d” (transition to democracy) [...]; fourth, [...] in connection with [...] identifying anthropology of the contemporary with postmodernist trends in the humanities and social sciences and with (declared) underestimating of other traditions and trends of thought; fifth, in connection with disappointments which researchers, faced with the contemporary, suffered from their original disciplines – in this case anthropology is perceived as the new world, a land of hope”<sup>6</sup>.

In this situation it is best to provisionally define anthropology of the contemporary in the most obvious way, which also allows it to preserve its internal diversity and raises the fewest doubts as a result of an agreement as to the mentioned disappearance of the hitherto subject of study. What may be regarded as the defining feature of anthropology of the contemporary is its subject matter defined by the concept of “the contemporary”. Referring, in understanding it, to the subject matter, we do not determine what theoretical tools and methods should be used to study the subject matter in question.

The term “the contemporary”, despite immediate associations, in this case means more than the “here and now”. Used in contrast to “primitivism”, it refers to the industrial and postindustrial reality of western culture. The fact that anthropologists of the contemporary study the cultural “here and now” that surrounds them does not preclude their research practice from including earlier states of modern and postmodern culture as well.

Industrial and postindustrial cultural reality is a ground where historians can meet anthropologists and anthropologists can meet historians. In our opinion, such a meeting is a necessary part of research on modern and postmodern culture. Of course, as is often the case, it may be limited to a “courtesy greeting” which does not contribute anything to history or anthropology and only shows that we have known each other for years and it is only right to say hello; but it may also considerably enrich both sides<sup>7</sup>.

Anthropologists of the contemporary should meet historians of the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century in the appointed field of study. History, introducing this most important criterion, next to man and time, is precisely the history of society in its modern and late modern shape. Usually, historians point to the French Revolution as the moment of birth of this society. From a chronological viewpoint, in Anglo-Saxon historiography the period in question would be included in the

---

<sup>6</sup> B. Fatyga, *op.cit.*, p 46–47.

<sup>7</sup> Waldemar Kuligowski writes, controversially, about the need for such meetings in the current volume.

modern period, following the early modern period. In Polish historiography, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are usually treated as separate epochs following the modern period. The leading figure of French historiography, Jacques Le Goff, proposing the concept of the “long Middle Ages”, states that they ended in 1800 with industrialisation and fundamental changes in mentality<sup>8</sup>. “Those creators of history”, the French historian writes, “that the revolutionaries were, whether through their attachment to the system, called feudal, or through their religious policy (which was a straightforward result of the medieval «heresy», condemning the Church’s immersion in earthly life) showed us that in 1780 people did not share our approach to history, they did not accept our definition of values or our way of interconnecting them”<sup>9</sup>. In Le Goff’s view, then, there would be the pre-modern period, i.e. the long Middle Ages, and the modern period.

Obviously, when we propose modernity as a common area of study for anthropology and history by contrasting it with traditional culture, we do not believe that it can continue to be conceptualised in a classical way, borrowed by anthropology from sociologists, for whom modernity could be one, unilinear and inevitable<sup>10</sup>. The modern and the contemporary, together with processes that define them, do not have to and do not cause societies to become culturally identical, or even similar; rather, they bring new, perhaps more subtle, cultural differences. Waldemar Kuligowski, analysing in depth anthropologists’ recent discussions on modernity, and referring to its current state, writes that “modernity at present is neither a single and united civilisational project, nor an export product of the centralist West, distributed to chronically antiquated peripheries, nor a privileged form of life, whose lobbying was seen to by a specific science policy and social engineering” and he concludes, “Maybe it never was all that after all, at least not simultaneously and consistently”<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, the understanding of modernity is undergoing an important re-evaluation again, and both contemporary anthropology and history seem helpful with this. As Michael Herzfeld rightly observes, we cannot seriously speak about one, basic modernity since each modernity has its own history<sup>12</sup>.

Considerations on the modern and the contemporary from a broad and critical perspective enable us to question the uniformity and reasonableness of using

---

<sup>8</sup> *Le Moyen Age s’achève en 1800... (entretien)*, “L’Histoire”, 1990, no 131, p 47. Vide: J. Le Goff, *Un long Moyen Âge*, Paris 2004.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 49.

<sup>10</sup> W. Kuligowski, *Różnicowanie nowoczesności. Nowa debata w antropologii społecznej*, Poznań 2012, p 31–75.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p 102.

<sup>12</sup> M. Herzfeld, *Anthropology. Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*, Malden 2001, p 55–89.

such concepts as real in the social world, which is not a practice very far removed from methodological strategies of studying the contemporary, and even is a *sine qua non* condition of the constant process of criticising and questioning the created classification models. This, as a matter of fact, leads to further consequences in studying the contemporary itself. We understand that it cannot be studied today only with the help of classical fieldwork and must include a broader context of global influences and be supported by other sources, including an analysis of globally circulated discourses also present in the modern media. Historical conditions, or rather contemporary opinions and uses of these conditions, which are each time present in given communities, are not without significance in this case. In this context, history itself stops being an unchangeable database and becomes something that people use. The arsenal of uses and opinions includes, in fact, the concepts of “traditionality” and “modernity”, which cannot be interpreted in an essentialist manner any longer and should rather be the subject of specific research in specific social and cultural communities than a universal conceptual network which can be used to study the communities in question. Similarly to the study of “traditionality” and “modernity” in our example, other specific phenomena and groups deserve attention in the contemporary perspective, since studies of comprehensive systems such as state, nation etc. are conducted with increasingly more difficulty and increasingly less willingly. It is even less easy to conduct such studies when we agree with those depictions of the contemporary that do away with the limit and uniformity of any distinguished whole, for example as a result of such phenomena as migrations, tourism, trade and politics. It seems, however, that history and anthropology have quite a lot to offer each other in a research effort designed, or rather conditioned, in such a way.

In the first volume of the “Anthropology of History Yearbook” we wrote about signing the preliminaries of peace. The aim of the current volume is to propose more specific opportunities for anthropologists and historians, for historians and anthropologists, to find common ground. We no longer speak of anthropology and history in general terms. As authors of the idea, we point out the opportunity for anthropology of the contemporary to cooperate with history of the contemporary. We are still at the beginning of the proposed journey, but this time the aim and field are more narrowed down. Anthropology and history may dance a flirtatious *pas de deux*<sup>13</sup> on the concrete dance floor of the contemporary.

---

<sup>13</sup> M. Herzfeld, discussing the relationship of anthropology and history, uses the metaphor

The texts collected here were not written by their authors with the thought of participating in the project of establishing some areas of cooperation between anthropologists and historians, historians and anthropologists. It is us, proposing such an area and its preliminary conceptualisation, who place the texts in this context. It may therefore be said that it is a move which wants to cast a spell on reality, although it is motivated not by naivety but by the belief in the “instrumental” power of the word. In any event, there is no harm in a little dose of naivety in present times, when cynicism and irony are much easier to encounter.

---

of a flirtatious *pas de deux*: “Anthropology and history have danced a flirtatious *pas de deux* throughout the past century.” (id., op.cit., p 55).