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Two Metaphors of a Meeting with Culture – Autobiographical Researcher’s Perspective

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COMMUNICATES

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TWO METAPHORS OF A MEETING WITH CULTURE – AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

There is no objective observation,
only observation socially located
in the worlds of the observer and the observant.
(Denzin, Lincoln, 1997, p. 28)

The meeting with culture can take place on various levels of cognition, involving various perspectives of study/research of this phenomenon that accompanies a man from the very beginning of their existence. The quality and value of the meeting depends on such autobiographical factors/conditions of the cognitive subject as: life story, culture, language, location in the world and society, discourse that he is the object/ author of. Similarly important is the paradigm of the understanding of culture, chosen by the subject, which requires specific ways of cognition. This understanding may be hidden also in metaphors that he uses to describe his meeting with culture. As a result, the following issues are of interest for me: What are the consequences to my meetings with culture of the understanding of (the term) culture preferred by me? What is the relation between the cognitive subject, in the context of his biography, and the reality explored by him? What is the hidden sense and meaning of my metaphors describing my meeting with culture? How does it influence and shape my cognitive experience?

1. Cognition or colonization?

I will place the understanding of (the term) culture around the ruminations of Michael Agar, who stands for change in the area of defining the term “culture” and “language”. The two selected elements are, according to Agar, inseparably integrated, since *culture is in language and language in culture*¹. A language is something more than a collection

¹ M. Agar, *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*, William Morrow & Co 1994, p. 28.

of vocabulary and grammar, since it is immersed in culture that provides it with specific identity. While culture is not only *this something* that a group of people posses, but *it is something that happens to us when we meet others, face obstacles, become aware of something inside us during the pursuit to understand the differences. Culture is consciousness, self-knowledge that reveals our hidden ego and opens door to new ways of living*². In such an understanding, culture refers to two subjects: first, there are people that I meet and want to acquaint myself with, second, there is myself – the cognitive subject. The subject of cognition are the differences that I encounter on my way, which refer to both myself and the subjects of my cognition. The specific sensitivity, which allows me to realize and understand the differences, discloses to me other possibilities of existence, of being in the world. Through a change in my way of thinking I build knowledge, create culture. On the other hand, such formed understanding of culture contains its hidden discourse. Namely, there is the characteristic division into *I/we* and *them*, in which *I*, my development and way of cognition stand out in the foreground, and *they* are in the background – as others than me. Apart from that, in my cognition of culture I am concentrated only on what differentiates me from others, not on possible similarities. I presume, that the hidden discourse seriously limits my meeting with culture, which is based on unequal positions. Perhaps, the meeting is more like colonization of my own influence than subjective cognition?

2. Autobiographic perspective or hidden domination?

In the above discussed understanding of (the term) culture an important role is given to a reflexion on personal experience of a cognitive subject that consciously changes his perspective of existence in the world. In the context of such analysis there is a need to include my autobiography to the cognition performed by me. Consequently, I gain insight into the whole complex of conditions and factors that form my identity, and thus determine the perspective of my cognition. Since, every research is auto-formative in dimension and biographical in sense³. *Thus, the context of creation of my own biography, its social and cultural relation, can be treated as an important platform of methodological analyses*⁴.

Each cognitive subject is intertwined with numerous relations of domination and rule to which dependent is the process of creation of knowledge⁵. M. Foucault connects the categories of power/knowledge and subjectivity, which become a chain-link of

² Ibidem, p. 20.

³ J. Piekarski, *O drugoplanowych warunkach poprawności praktyki badawczej w pedagogice – perspektywa autobiografii* [in:] D. Kubinowski, M. Nowak (eds.), *Metodologia pedagogiki zorientowanej humanistycznie*, Kraków 2006, p. 98.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 98.

⁵ T. Szkudlarek, *Poststrukturalizm a metodologia pedagogiki*, "Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici" 1997, Booklet 317, p. 173.

power. Power/knowledge, trials/fights to which it is subject and of which it consists, define the possible forms and areas of cognition⁶. A subject closed in a specific discourse continues and co-creates the discourse, transmits the relations of power to other members of society, adding to the process of constructing their subjectivity. The subjectivity of a cognitive subject, following the thought of N. Postman, is limited by the language that it uses. *Yes, we do live in the edifice of language. We try to guess what is beyond it from a more or less constant location inside it. Nevertheless, the "edifice" is peculiarly constructed (and nobody knows what should be its "correct" shape). The number of its windows is limited. The windows are dimmed and placed at various angles. We have no choice, we have to watch the structure that the edifice allows us to see*⁷. As a consequence, there is a need of critical reflection over the complexity of the autobiography of the cognitive subject and of analyzing its influence on the perspective of cognition and relations with the subject, the subject of the meeting – culture.

As an example, our meeting with culture could take place based on ethnographic activity, i.e. conscious involvement in the life of a group that is the subject of our study⁸. The method of ethnography contains an enormous cognitive potential, since it allows to *truly understand the studied reality, even experience it*⁹. An indispensable element of such activity would be reflexivity directed both towards autobiography of a cognitive subject and cognitive search. It means rejecting the concept of cognition isolated from wider society or biography of the cognitive subject.

Cognitive practice could adopt, in accordance with postmodern anthropology, various forms: ethnography as auto-narration – researchers present field research filtered through their very personal experience; dialogue ethnography – placing ethnographic description in the context of interaction between an ethnographer and his native interlocutors; an ethnographic text evoking (summoning) various contents with help of suggestion, riddle, ambiguities, ironic, paradoxical, or even esoteric formulas¹⁰. Due to such constructed texts, a cognitive subject endeavors to reveal the hidden (under the coat of autobiography and the discourse presented by him) relation of power, prejudice and influence exerted by him on the analyzed group. Finally, cognitive search can take the form of auto-ethnography, referring to the therapeutic value of the personal life of an ethnographer, revealing the areas of his life that were hidden and ne-

⁶ M. Foucault, *Nadzorować i karać. Narodziny więzienia*, Warszawa 1993, pp. 34–35.

⁷ N. Postman, *W stronę XVIII stulecia. Jak przeszłość może doskonalić naszą przyszłość*, Warszawa 2001, p. 81.

⁸ I. Kawecki, *Etnografia i szkoła*, Kraków 1996, p. 45.

⁹ M. Kostera, *Antropologia organizacji. Metodologia badań terenowych*, Warszawa 2003, p. 28.

¹⁰ M. Lubaś, *Etnografia i badania terenowe w (krzywym) zwierciadle postmodernistycznej krytyki*, „Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 2000, no. 4, pp. 146–153; idem, *Rozum i etnografia. Przyczynek do krytyki antropologii postmodernistycznej*, Kraków 2003, pp. 165–174.

glected¹¹. In the above sense, we include into the cognitive activity a specific perspective of experiencing the world by a cognitive subject.

Cognitive activity, auto-ethnographically and autobiographically involved, appears as a process of critical reflexion over a cognitive subject and the relations with the studied reality constructed by him/her. It seems to reveal the hidden elements of power/knowledge distorting the process of cognition, studies the relations of the one that discovers with various discourses that influence research reality. Nevertheless, in the cognitive process constructed in such a way, the cognitive subject may aim at hidden domination over the studied reality. Since, firstly, he gains an entirely new possibility to create his new identity, secondly, the right to expose his influence on the cognitive process. A hidden danger to a cognitive process may be the defined by A. Coffey production of self indulgence (of the ethnographer "I"), performer under the cover of cognitive action. The cognitive subject becomes the central area of interest in the cognitive search, and the therapist function overcomes the research one¹². For this reason, it is worth venturing into discussion of the existence and essence of relation between the autobiographical perspective involved into the cognitive process, and the hidden/visible domination of the cognitive subject.

Two metaphors of meetings with culture

A metaphor is present not only in our language, but predominantly in our everyday thinking and life because it defines and constructs everyday actions causing that our understanding and experience of things, phenomena, processes relies on other things, phenomena, etc. For example, in a metaphor, *an argument is a war*, a fight of words is hidden, and its structure refers to an attack, a defense and a counterattack. Commencing in the discussion we imagine and realize it exactly in the form of this metaphor¹³. A metaphor can serve the function of a perspective of a meeting with culture, which on the one hand serves to describe the phenomena interesting to us, on the other hand to search for their hidden meanings – deconstruction.

Below, I will present two metaphors describing my meeting with culture, which refer to the autobiographic perspective and auto/ethnographic activity. Each of them conceals the hidden meaning prescribed to particular meetings.

A meeting as a journey

This metaphor describes my journey to the countries of Western Europe, ventured together with my friends. They were spontaneous and informal in character, accompanied by curiosity of a foreign reality and a desire to experience the difference. Sightsee-

¹¹ A. Coffey, *Ethnography and self: Reflections and representations* [in:] T. May (ed.), *Qualitative research in action*, London–Thousand Oaks–New Delhi 2003, pp. 326–327.

¹² Ibidem, pp. 327–328.

¹³ G. Lacoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago 1980, pp. 3–5.

ing was a common cognitive activity, which was registered with help of a camera. A meeting with another culture seemed an adventure due to which I gained new knowledge and experience.

What is the hidden sense of this metaphor? The journey suggests a return to the permanent place of living, in this sense, my cognition is a short-term process, one that does not allow for deeper insight and understanding of the culture experienced by me. I take part in it, being strongly rooted in my socio-historical placement, which is further strengthened by the presence of my friends. This situation is a source of such an attitude towards the studied culture which is based on a strong position of *I/we* and subordinate position of *they/others*. The main motivation of the meeting with a new culture seems to be the hidden desire to master the fascinating difference, assimilate it and treat it as our own. The cognition is constructed on the foundation of experiencing episodic, often unrelated elements of culture.

A meeting as a migration

This metaphor refers to my experience of being an immigrant in Danes, a stay without the set date of coming back to Poland. I study at untraditional university, I use English, without any knowledge of Danish. In addition, I intensively take part in the meetings of the University International Club.

What are the hidden elements of my meeting with Danish culture in this metaphor? This is mostly a perspective marked with the status of a foreigner, an alien that is on the side of *the others*. My cognition, marked with the feeling of being *different/worse* can cause distortions in the perception of reality. The status of *the other* is strengthened by the unfavourable to newcomers immigration law (since 1993 it has been changed over forty times to limit immigration) and by a specific attitude of Danish society towards immigrants (involved in the discourse of the dichotomous division of Danish society into *we-the Danes* and *they-the immigrants*)¹⁴. The decision to come back to Poland was postponed. This resulted in suspended functioning and only partial, even instrumental involvement in the cognition of Danish culture. The suspension of the decision to come back to the homeland carries serious consequence for the country in which the immigrant stays. I mean Great Britain, or Ireland countries to which, in search of jobs, numerous Poles have gone. Even though Poles were *invited* there, they are supposed to come back to their homeland. However, there is a serious risk that this will lead to a situation similar to the story of Guestworkers in Germany¹⁵. An important element of my theory is constituted by the academic discourse executed at my university

¹⁴ F. Yilmaz, *The Irony of Danishness: Egalitarianism as an obstacle for ethnic equality*, Paper Presented at International 'Culture and Power' Conference, Lisbon 2003, Portugal. <http://communication.ucsd.edu/fyilmaz/paper.htm>

¹⁵ R. Mandel, *Ethnicity and Identity among Migrant Guestworkers in West Berlin* [in:] N.L. Gonzales, C.S. McCommon (eds.), *Conflict, Migration, and the Expression of Ethnicity*, Boulder 1989.

(Danes). It is specified with the given political orientation and the attitude of the university towards the government. An additional limitation of my perspective results from the lack of knowledge of Danish, which hinders, if not renders impossible to understand Danish culture. Another one could be remaining solely in the circle of other foreigners, etc.

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The purpose of the two perspectives of meeting culture presented by me was to cause awareness of how many elements of our biography can have influence on and distort the picture of the culture studied by us. In my opinion, when we are conscious of the limitations of our perspective of meeting a culture can help us better understand people and ourselves inside the culture.

Each cognitive person – a researcher, reflects the world as it appears in the context of his everyday life¹⁶, simultaneously, with the use of the knowledge constructed for himself, he takes part in the creation of the world and social life¹⁷. Consequently, he is endowed with huge responsibility for the shape and quality of the result of his work, which have special meaning for social life. Reflexiveness and critical activity of the cognitive subject are the conditions of fulfilling this role. It is valiant that he functions as a hunter of what is hidden, and noticing the mechanisms that enslave an individual and society, he becomes suspicious towards all certainties¹⁸. For, this is them that cover the sense and meaning of the culture studied by us.

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¹⁶ D. Urbaniak-Zajęc, *W poszukiwaniu kryteriów oceny badań jakościowych* [in:] D. Kubinowski, M. Nowak (eds.), *Metodologia pedagogiki zorientowanej humanistycznie*, Kraków 2006, p. 216.

¹⁷ T. Bauman, *Badacz jako krytyk* [in:] D. Kubinowski, M. Nowak (eds.), *Metodologia pedagogiki zorientowanej humanistycznie*, Kraków 2006, p. 190.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 195.

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