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On Freedom, in the Land of the Free – Through the Eye of an Anthropologist: Reminiscences

In the 1980s, I applied for a Fulbright scholarship. At that time, the procedure was a convoluted one; before it even reached the Commission, it had to go through the sieve of the Polish communist Ministry of Education. After the first, preliminary screening, the selection was made by the funders, but my application had a hard time leaving the walls of the state fortress. After I had not received a reply for the second time, I went to the office in person and asked about the status of my application. After an hour of waiting in the hallway, a dignified lady came back with a sheet of paper and announced that my application had not met the formal requirements. She could not tell me which it had not met. I was furious but I thought, *c'est la vie*.

Soon after the 1989 transformation, the situation changed. The year 1990 was the first *free* from governmental pre-selection and my application went straight to the American Embassy, where I was invited for an interview. After several days, when I learned that I got the Fulbright scholarship for the 1990–1991 academic year, I was overjoyed. I represented a field that was popular and renowned in the USA. In Poland at that time however, ethnology and sociocultural anthropology did not enjoy similar status and were viewed as less important than the great social sciences or humanities, such as political science, the political economy of socialism, history (the “right” kind, of course), or sociology. Considering these unequal power relations between various fields of knowledge, the fact that my application was accepted might have been surprising in Poland, but from the perspective of American academia, it was nothing extraordinary. This is the reason why it was vital to bypass the Polish filter, which was imbued with ideology and distorted by the interdisciplinary hierarchy.

At that time, the West, especially the United States, was a researcher's destination of choice. I was an anthropologist but also a graduate of Professor Jerzy Kmita's [Grad] intellectually robust Poznań School of cultural studies. Kmita was

a student of the famous logician Jerzy Giedymin, who first taught in Poznań, and later in Great Britain at Durham University, the University of London and the University of Sussex [Zamiara]. Giedymin himself studied under Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, associated with the pre-war Lwów-Warsaw school of philosophy and logic. Being part of this circle made one believe that he or she could follow the basic rules of critical thinking. We considered the Poznań theory of culture as a logically coherent and methodologically cohesive achievement of scientific reflection. In this regard, I had no complexes, but I did greatly admire the science across the ocean. I went there to study the achievements of American symbolic and cognitive anthropology. I believe I completed this task successfully, a result of which was the publication of two selections of texts on this subject [*Amerykańska antropologia poznawcza; Amerykańska antropologia postmodernistyczna*].

There is no doubt that the support for such exchanges was a form of scientific policy on the part of the American government and an extension of diplomacy. Simultaneously, it reflected an assumption about an irrefutable hierarchy of knowledge, which we all shared at the time: what was thought, written and published “in the West” was better, more profound and valuable than what was being created or could ever be created in “our” (post)communist part of the world. It was also believed that by nature, the flow of ideas went only one way. This was an element of a more general view that “the West is the best.” This (post)-Cold War conviction was based on “obvious” concrete examples of Western economic, technological and political superiority, with the USA in the forefront. Around that time, Francis Fukuyama [Fukuyama] wrote that the end of the Cold War ended history, which after 1989 would bring the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy.

On freedom “through the senses”

As a Fulbright scholar, I embarked on my adventure in the “free West.” I still had to select the location. From several available options, I picked one that was particularly far from Poland – the University of California at Riverside, which is in the southwest corner of this enormous country. I wanted to experience the West

that was not only “free” but also “wild.” I suspect that I was greeted as an exotic visitor from behind the Iron Curtain. Nevertheless, from day one of my stay, I, too, found many things to be peculiar and eccentric: the sounds of a shooting on the streets at night and the flaring lights of the police cars investigating the scene; a dancer dancing on the table and a Greek restaurant owner breaking plates. Later came Halloween with people dressed up as pregnant nuns and other bizarre figures, a party with students jumping in the pool, country music concerts in a typical suburban bar... I also remember the incredible flora, and oranges and avocados falling from the trees straight onto the sidewalk. All this exuded a sense of freedom. At the same time, you felt as if you were watching live scenes from Hollywood movies. Even then, the idea of Jean Baudrillard’s [Baudrillard] simulacra begged the question of whether it was Hollywood that was copying America, or was America copying Hollywood?

The unobvious benefits of my visit to the USA, though hard to quantify, are indisputable. I was leaving a country that had barely overthrown the previous system, which many believed had enslaved people. It was ruled authoritatively but also inefficiently, which made it go down in history as a shortage economy. To be sure, my travel to the Mecca of consumerism was a shock to my system of values and, at least in the first days, comprehension. In the Poland of the late 1980s, an academic position paid the equivalent of \$30 a month, while a pizza in California cost a few dollars at the time. I had to overcome a mental barrier and realize that I was navigating a different reality. Luckily, the Fulbright stipend was generous enough to allow me to take advantage of these simple but important pleasures. Was this a leap from a “dictatorship over needs” [Fehér et al.] to a world “of the freedom to satisfy needs”? At the time, I thought yes. On the other hand, it has been known for a while that – as the abovementioned Hungarian scholars believe – needs are relative and their structure is shaped by the society and the system that governs it. Hence, a question arises: Is it not a similar world where we remain enslaved to the needs that are manufactured for us and within us?

My stay in the United States gave me an opportunity to use the *lingua franca* of contemporary science and allowed me to familiarize myself with the *modus operandi* of global research. The country also impressed

me with how easy it was to get a driver's license, open a bank account, rent an apartment, and use a number of institutions and public services. Formalities and paperwork were limited to a minimum. In these simple matters, it was indeed a country of freedom. It also exuded a sense of freedom because of the space, which might have been subjective, but affected me nonetheless. The road trips across the boundless landscapes of Arizona, Utah or Texas, the Californian desserts, the prairies and forests of the Midwest, and the Rocky Mountains provided an incredible sense of freedom. A two-day ride on a Greyhound bus from Los Angeles to Lawrence, Kansas was an experience that words fail to describe; fatigue and weariness mixed with the awe of the mountains and rivers, boulders and trees. Europe has always been more densely populated and the outdoors more often disrupted by the presence of people. However, it is not the primary difference in how open space is experienced. I cannot explain this awe in terms other than a sensory feast. To this day, when I think about those vast landscapes, I become nostalgic for this freedom – and the blue skies.

One experience moved me in particular. In the spring of 1991, Operation Desert Storm began, the objective of which was to take back Kuwait from Iraq. I was lucky enough not to have experienced the war of my home country, although my parents lived through it, I watched it in movies and read about it in books. Its notion had settled in the collective memory, and by extension, in mine, as an event that brought chaos and tragedy, bombs and artillery shots. Unfortunately, it was the same way for the Iraqis, but what was happening in the United States did not tally with what I imagined. This produced a dissonance in the sense that life in the country that was at war was going on as usual. If it had not been for the media coverage, no one would have been able to tell that their country was waging a war with Iraq, whose military power at the time was assessed as one of the largest in the world.

On freedom – a few “scholarly” reflections

Let us now consider the real, quantifiable effects of the Fulbright scholarship.

One thing is certain, I never regretted going to Riverside and the great Los Angeles because I met not

only kind, but also intellectually inspiring anthropologists there. Professor Michael Kearney installed in me a habit to draw from the ideas rooted in critical social thinking and familiarized me with pioneering research on transnationality at the time. I continue to cite his works to this day. I have worked with Carole Nagengast, whom I met there, on several projects. At that time, her book on Poland [Nagengast] was forthcoming. I read it as a manuscript and later used it in my work on the rural areas in the period of the transformation [*Reluctant capitalists*]. Moreover, we collaborated on a project assigned to us in 1995 by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, entitled “Learning Capitalism: Practices and Discourses in Poland.” Subsequently, we co-edited a substantial work *Poland beyond Communism*. Together with my collaborator and adviser, Professor David Kronenfeld, and two other researchers, we co-authored an article which, coincidentally corresponds with the leading topic of this special issue and discussed the issue of cognitively framed *freedom* [“Language”].

Simply put, the article about the cognitively framed notion of *freedom* considered the struggle of the nations in Central-Eastern Europe [“Language”] for freedom. Starting with the famous novel *1984* by George Orwell, we tried to comprehend how, despite four decades of authoritarian regimes in the countries of Central Europe, the efforts for freedom remained alive. How was it that in spite of the propaganda, the shackles of oppression were thrown off and political freedom was regained? We adopted a semantic and psychological perspective, and, to be precise, the cognitive and extensionist semantic lens, following some of the ideas developed by Kronenfeld. We assumed that there was a certain notion of being free and unrestrained, which develops in childhood. It may be even ingrained in our nature – being free, having the privilege to move around freely (perhaps this is the source of my nostalgia for the boundless American landscapes), not being forced into anything, enjoying the freedom of choice. Although cultural and historical factors have shaped a different understanding of freedom in the USA and Poland, both countries share a fundamental sense of what freedom is due to this universal experience of what it means to “be free.” When a sociopolitical system uses practices

which deny this feeling – e.g., leaving the country is prohibited, enslavement is painted as freedom, quasi-democracy is presented as the only authentic “socialist democracy” – we experience a cognitive dissonance in the sense described by Leon Festinger [Festinger]. The discrepancy between our idea of the world and its factual state bothers us, and as a result, we either modify the meaning of the concepts and words, such as freedom or democracy, or make efforts to change the world that does not match our vision. Since the experience of freedom is fundamental, it is hard to change it. In the language of de Saussure [de Saussure], what occurs is a distortion of the relation between the signifier and the signified, the content of a word and its objective reference. Consequently, the situation necessitates an intervention. We believed that this was, among other reasons, the drive behind the efforts for freedom and the political overhaul initiated in Poland, which swept through the continent, if not the globe.

Deconstructions and demystifications

Today, my approach to a number of the issues discussed above in the article has changed. First, a trivial observation challenged my essentialized notions about the East vs. the West and the presupposed hierarchy of values, according to which the West was better and superior to the East. For those living in Central Europe that was “kidnapped” away from the West [Kundera], the West stretched beyond the Iron Curtain. It included everything from the Elbe to Hawaii, sometimes all the way to Westernized Japan. It was a homogenous space inhabited by the “people of the West.” Soon after I returned from California, in 1991, I went for a short visit to Bremerhaven in West Germany. At that point, I realized that what I had imagined was removed from what I saw there. The passersby strolling down the street on a Sunday afternoon, carrying cakes purchased in confectioneries on their way to visit their families, behaved quite similarly to the people in my hometown in Poznań, and rather different from the residents of Los Angeles. Where was that West if the world in Germany was closer to the one in Poland than in America? The dichotomous breakdown into West and East lost its firmness for me, as did other reifying categories.

Another one was the perception of America as a bastion of democracy radiating out into the world. When Saddam Husain attacked Kuwait, and the United States came to its defense, I thought it was a “legitimate war” – after all, an invaded country was being liberated. It is hard to change one’s mind about those events, however, the second invasion of Iraq in 2003 forced me to reconsider what the interests of empires are and what they are really fighting for when “liberating” a country. September 11 was an unbelievable event, which also redefined a number of issues. Around that time, I happened to be staying at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ, close to New York. (I had visited the WTC on September 9, around 4:00 pm, only thirty six hours before the attack.) The invasion of Afghanistan continued to project America as the land of the free, spreading freedom. There is no denying that the Taliban regime was merciless towards many people. However, by ignoring the local traditions, the “only legitimate” political order was enforced with a missionary zeal. As a result, the lives of the people did not improve. In the 21st century, the

continued spread of freedom in North Africa and the Middle East destabilized the region, triggered a series of forced migrations, ensued in the so-called migration crisis in Middle East and Europe, and resulted in the suffering of millions of people.

It seemed obvious to me that democracy, so desired by Central Europeans, had undeniable benefits, while a free market offered a variety of advantages. Many a person contributed to achieving both. Over time, however, it became clear that this system, like any other, had downsides as well. Economic restructuring took on the form of shock therapy, perhaps the best we could have had. Notwithstanding, it inevitably led to tectonic social changes. There were attempts to frame them in neoliberal discourses of a radical, globalized form of capitalism, known as Thatcherism or Reaganomics. Orientalizing terms, such as backwardness, laziness or lack of civilizational competencies, which had been used to describe Central Europeans during communism, were employed to portray a class of people considered as *Homo sovieticus* – the fossils of the old system within those societies. This discursive process led to a depreciation of the new misfits, the Others. They were labeled with the category of “second-class” people, ill-adjusted to life in the contemporary world. They were portrayed as subjects of ancient cultural habits. Closed off in isolated villages, towns and poverty zones, in various aspects of life, they experienced freedom as financial insecurity and unemployment. It is true that a number of these “victims of the transformation” ultimately found a way out of their predicament using the freedoms that they were granted – a political choice, which translated into joining the European Union, as well as traveling and emigration. Nevertheless, after years of being financially disadvantaged, symbolically ill-treated, and stripped of their dignity, they finally turned to the populist ideas that were oriented towards a closed traditional national community, which finally ennobled them.

Parallels and paradoxes

In the second decade of this century, neoliberal discourses, which had been dominant for twenty years, found themselves on the defensive. The so-called right-wing populists garnered electoral support after they had convinced the previously disregarded groups that they were the salt of the earth and that their representative politicians spoke on their behalf. The previous advocates for the changes – cosmopolitans, international elites, local compradors of international capital, and supporters of ideological liberalism – became the enemy of the people [*Czyściec*]. All of them were presented as the new Others within the divided society. This way, the vilified *Homo sovieticus*, “moiré berets” took revenge on *Homo occidentalis*, “silk scarves.”¹ The right-wing populists have promised to bring oligarchs and elites to justice and to defend ordinary citizens from the dark forces of globalization. They have claimed that strengthening the community and building a strong nation would guarantee a sense of security. One of the elements of this security is defend-

¹ “Moiré berets” is an ironic expression that stands for people supporting the Polish conservative-nationalistic and Catholic movement organized around Father Tadeusz Rydzyk and his media conglomerate based in Toruń. It is derived from handmade berets often worn by old ladies. “Silk scarves” is my own metaphor which is meant to contrast self-proclaimed enlightened liberal elites that look down on the “unenlightened masses.”

ing the homogenous nation from immigrants. Consequently, both the lower and the middle class, wronged by neoliberalism, consider themselves as the defenders of traditional national values, promoters of Christianity, and the last bastion of the “white race.” They are the target audience of the political groups that appeal to the “will of the people” in their rhetoric.

Hence, populist programs combine anti-elitism with xenophobia. The former direction is vertical, the latter horizontal [“Between nationalism” 1192]. National integrity requires clear patriotic declarations according to the exclusionary slogan “if you’re not with us, you’re against us.” The arrival of the new Outsiders, or Aliens – meaning immigrants and refugees, particularly Muslim – has strengthened these types of discourses and practices on another interethnic, inter-religious, even civilizational level. The “refugee crisis” from 2015 unambiguously exposed these sentiments. What seemed to be a promise of great freedom in the 1990s, freedom which was going to sweep across the globe – not only the states which managed to rid themselves of communism but also Middle-Eastern, Central-Asian, and North-African countries – proved to be little more than a tragic fantasy for a lot of people. Fukuyama’s vision of the “end of history” [Fukuyama] conceded to the vision of the “clash of civilizations.” [Huntington] The fall of the Berlin wall, which sparked hope, was, in fact, the beginning of the erection of many more walls. “Fortress Europe” has become a reality. In the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, as they are on the border along the Rio Grande River, thousands of people are perishing in efforts to escape death and suffering, war, hunger, and humiliation. One of the symbols of reinstating “normalcy” and freedom after 1989 was taking down barbed wire. Today, the eastern border of Poland is fenced with barbed wire installations, a web of motion sensors, thermographic cameras, and flying drones. For years, a huge wall has been built along the border between Mexico and the United States. Do walls have a place in the above-mentioned cognitively framed notion of freedom? Absolutely not. Have walls and barbed wire become today’s symbols of the free world, the way they used to be considered symbolic of the authoritarian or even totalitarian regimes?

Populism translates into a number of practices and views, both in Poland and the USA. What they

undoubtedly have in common is the aforementioned anti-elitism and the fact that some politicians proclaim to be the people’s tribune. They also share anti-liberal ideologies, for example, an approach to sexual minorities, homosexual marriages or abortions that is saturated with religious rhetoric. In this area, Poland and the United States have grown considerably closer since the 1980s, which makes them stand apart from more liberal, mostly West-European countries. The views of President Donald Trump on Muslims, Mexicans, racial relations, and conflicts coincide with the anti-refugee and anti-immigrant rhetoric of the current Polish authorities. In the employed technology of power, the main target is Muslims portrayed as the cultural, religious and civilizational Other. The motif of the “clash of civilizations” thus returns like a ghost. The notion of “nation” is the glue of such narratives. The legends of a mighty America that is always number one, carrying the torch of freedom and democracy across the globe, or the calls to “make America great again” correspond to the myths of the “frontier orientalism” [Gingrich 108], according to which Poland has a special place at the table of Western nations because it has protected the civilized world throughout history from barbarians, whether they were Muslims or Bolsheviks. This belief tallies with the sentiment that the secularized Europe, devoid of its Christian roots, must regain its lost identity. As the current Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, stated in an interview for the conservative-Catholic TV channel *Trwam* owned by Father Rydzyk (see footnote 1), which often describes Europe as imposed by Brussels’ bureaucracy Babylon: “We want to transform Europe. It is my dream to re-Christianize it.” [Orłowski] To quote Philip S. Gorski, if “Trumpism” is “a secular form of religious nationalism” [Gorski], then its Polish counterpart is “religion deeply imbricated or intertwined with nationalism.” [“Religion and nationalism”] Paradoxically, these quasi-religious ideas are often expressed in words that devolve into hate speech.

When I went to the United States for the first time, I saw it as the land of the free. It seemed this way to me in spite of the inequalities, which I saw firsthand, and despite the historical damage done to native Americans or the past enslavement of African-Americans, of which I had known. Even today, in many respects, this country still operates as a space

for freedom and its embodiment. However, the issue of “freedom” has grown complicated. We desire it as always, but it turns out that our societies refuse it to someone else. We surround ourselves with walls and wires, symbolically and literally, denying the right of freedom to others. Nearly three decades after my first visit to the home of Washington and Jefferson, these barriers still exist, even between Poland and the USA. We are still waiting for complete freedom of travel and a visa waiver for Polish citizens.

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ABSTRACT

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On Freedom, in the Land of the Free – Through the Eyes of an Anthropologist: Reminiscences

This article discusses three interconnected threads related to the notion of ‘freedom.’ The first focuses on the personal experiences of the author, who left for the United States in 1990, when the country was considered an ideal of freedom. The second investigates the cultural conditioning of how freedom is understood in Poland and the USA, and the cognitive hypothesis indicating a universal way of experiencing freedom. The third talks about the state of freedom in the contemporary “free” world, where border walls are multiplying, and the social attitudes of Americans and Poles have been colored by a siege mentality and xenophobic populism.

Keywords: anthropology, freedom, democracy, xenophobia, populism