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Ethnography, Memory, Experiment: Towards an Alternative Social History of Poland

Teksty Drugie 2023, nr 1, s. 117–130

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Despite numerous attempts to explore the experiences of villagers and rural workers in People's Poland, including those of so-called worker-peasants, their full anthropological recognition remains elusive. What also remain unclear are the senses of these experiences for what could be called the process of state formation and, more generally, the overall political landscape during the years of the People's Republic of Poland and state socialism. In fact, these experiences are still difficult to recognize, and despite recent advanced studies,[1] they remain hidden in as-yet unknown stories. It is therefore necessary to reexamine the rural-worker experience while, at the same time, integrating it into the ambitions, desires

1 Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* [The sleepwalkers' revolution. An exercise in historical logic] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013); Ewelina Szpak, *Mentalność ludności wiejskiej w PRL. Studium zmian* [The mentality of the rural population in the Polish People's Republic: The study of changes] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2013); Agata Zysiak, *Punkty za pochodzenie. Powojenna modernizacja i uniwersytet w robotniczym mieście* [Points for social origin: Postwar modernization and the university in working-class cities] (Kraków: Nomos, 2016).

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and difficulties, on the one hand, related to social inequalities and the necessity of labor migration, and on the other, the creation of a stabilizing structure, that is the state as imagined and practiced on a daily basis.

As an illustration, young people from rural areas in central Poland migrate to other countries of the European Union for work, thus forming fresh identities and communities. For instance, a cohort of young people from the village of Broniów, as mentioned by Paula Mikołajczyk,[2] create elements of their identity around electronic club music, jumpstyle and hardjump, which they discovered while working in construction in the Netherlands. This is the integrating stimulus, which they listen to in their cars, which they drive around the villages near Radom after returning for a few months' break. At the same time, through these experiences of leaving and returning, utterly detached from immediate rural needs, new senses of social activities emerge related to the local community, rural commune, and ultimately the locally practiced state. Nowadays, however, these also include actions related to local political competition, internal conflicts, or ambitions. These are, for example, frictions between rural activists in several villages near Szydłowiec – on the one hand, people who have returned from migrant work full of energy and want to manifest their success and prosperity, and on the other hand, those activists and village leaders with long-standing visions of community development. What is therefore needed here is a method of understanding the political through a gradual immersion in history, in the everyday work of these people, their ambitions, anxieties, economies, thriftiness, and ultimately the creation of microcosms of collectivities and relationalities of people, farming, factories, public buildings, knowledge, and also quiet, informal skills.

Within such processes, therefore, it is possible to uncover an alternative rural history, which can reveal entirely different political and anthropological meanings. To achieve this, we need to develop a fresh outlook on what we consider to be an alternative or even potential history,[3] a history of different citizenship or a different social and political subjectivity. The image of a decolonized history, free from the established dominance of historians-as-intellectuals, calls for its own redefined understanding of history. What is most significant, however, is that these phenomena are burdened by an unyielding form of memory that, as Ariella Azoulay has shown in her

2 Paula Mikołajczyk, *Rap, hardstyle, disco polo. Słuchanie muzyki a wytwarzanie tożsamości, grupy i wspólnoty doświadczeń wśród młodych mieszkańców wsi Zaława i Cukrówka* [Rap, hardstyle, disco-polo. Listening to music as identity creation among the youth of the villages of Zaława and Cukrówka], Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Ethnographic Laboratory Term Essay, 2016.

3 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

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works,[4] removes historical facts and events and pushes them into the deep, existential shadow of non-existence. Here, this shadow is the prevalent tradition of Polish sociology – actually local public sociology – which had long asserted through its historical and sociological studies that communities of peasants and worker-peasants who migrate to cities are inherently unable to develop a mature society on their own.

This image was developed in the form of the theory of "sociological vacuum" or "anomie"[5]: the idea here was to demonstrate that during the communist era, small groups often gained benefits illegally and informally within their closest circles, which was considered a certain value. There were descriptions of society as a collective of family and kinship networks, sharing privileges and illegal access to goods, taken and in some ways stolen, for example from production facilities. The 1990s were also said to be characterized by close relationships among peasant and peasant-worker groups, guided by a concept known as "amoral familism."[6] These descriptions refer to the informal and unspoken methods of handling work-related problems and maintaining social status within a close-knit family or small neighborhood group, and such practices were often viewed as being at odds with the principles of a properly functioning society. Furthermore, this was accompanied by a sense of shame deeply ingrained in post-war society during the People's Republic of Poland era. The insights of such profound social shame related to the process of modernization appeared, among others, in the studies of sociologist Jacek Wasilewski.[7] He discusses the creation of a deeply rooted social belief or superstition, a form of collective memory, and suggests that this displacement and social history has burdened Polish society for decades,

4 Azoulay, *Potential History.*

5 Mikołaj Pawlak, "*Jak przemieszcza się próżnia? Wędrówka tezy Stefana Nowaka między obszarami i kontekstami*" [How can the vacuum move? The journey of Stefan Nowak's concept amidst areas of thought and contexts], *Stan Rzeczy* 1 (2016).

6 Elżbieta Tarkowska and Jacek Tarkowski. "'Amoralny familizm' czyli o dezintegracji społecznej w Polsce lat osiemdziesiątych" ["Amoral familism" or the social disintegration of Poland in the 1980s)] in *Socjologia świata polityki*, vol. 1, *Władza i społeczeństwo w systemie autorytarnym*, ed. Jacek Tarkowski (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 1994); see also Edward Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

7 Jacek Wasilewski, "Społeczeństwo polskie, społeczeństwo chłopskie" [Polish society, peasant socjety], *Studia Socjologiczne* 3 (1986): 40–56; "Jesteśmy potomkami chłopów. Z prof. Jackiem Wasilewskim rozmawia M. Duch-Dyngosz" [We are the descendants of peasants. An interview with Prof. Jacek Wasilewski, by M. Duch-Dyngosz], *Znak* 684 (2012): 14–17.

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causing a significant defect, incompetence, or even cultural immaturity. This is believed to result from the fact that people came *en masse* from communist villages.

The Polish social memory, as depicted by the press and academic publications of the 1980s and subsequent transformation period, gives an incessant impression that rural dwellers, new groups of workers and labor migrants did not contribute their own perspectives on the past to the historical consciousness. During the post-socialist transformation, the initial development programs supported by international institutions focused on "civic reconstruction" and promoting the growth of the third sector, seen as forms of extending and consolidating the achievements of the democratic opposition during the communist era, that is a "proper" social life, as discussed, among others, by Elżbieta Drążkiewicz-Grodzicka.[8]

In this article, I aim to examine the communalities of rural and working-class groups from a fresh perspective. I look closely at social history, particularly of rural areas, during the late 1960s, 1970s and even 1980s, as a time of critical transformations. For rural residents, this was a time of exceptional development and historical transformation, for example the relaxation of compulsory quotas and food deliveries. Above all, however, it was a period when agricultural associations, cooperatives, and machinery centers operated relatively well; pensions were introduced (in the early 1970s), also for land ceded to the state.[9] All of this is accompanied by community elements, such as volunteer fire brigades, informal meetings, neighborhood gatherings, Saturday dances, and village festivals. Moreover, this was a period of increased construction activity, when individuals took it upon themselves to build houses and outbuildings. People from rural areas, who had completed vocational training in construction and were working on building sites and factories in the cities, began constructing their own single-family, cuboid-shaped houses.[10] They used new technologies they acquired in the city and knowledge gained via technical and vocational education that was widely available at the time. At this time, the very foundations of shared social subjectivity were

8 Elżbieta Drążkiewicz-Grodzicka, "'State Bureaucrats' and 'Those NGO People'. Promoting the Idea of Civil Society, Hindering the State," *Critique of Anthropology* 36 (4) (2016): 341 –362.

9 Mariusz Gomuła, *"Zastał Polskę drewnianą a zostawił murowaną…", czyli wpływ dekady gierkowskiej na życie społeczne wsi polskiej* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2004); Ewelina Szpak, *Mentalność ludności*, 42–43.

10 Marian Magdziak, *Od chłopskiej chałupy do domu współczesnego rolnika* [From peasant cottage to the house of the modern farmer] (Łódź: Wyd. Politechniki Łódzkiej, 2018), 167; Szpak, *Mentalność ludności*, 63.

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gradually arising, which were also located in each individual's rural background, migration experience and urban life.

A Different Perspective: Bottom-up Practices, Self-Organization

During my research with the field collective team[11] in villages near Radom, I discovered that community spaces such as the local fire station, school, and village community center play a significant role in consolidating informal organizational activity. These buildings, built in the 1960s and 1970s by the people with their own hands as part of a "social deed" (*czyn społeczny*),[12] have a symbolic significance here. In order to recognize this type of organization as a unique and valuable social structure, it is important to acknowledge the informal and exclusive nature of their collaboration. Examples of community involvement can be seen in the form of volunteer fire brigades, village sports clubs, village halls, and schools. These are informal, historically continuous, and formally informal social institutions.[13].For example, in the 1990s and beyond, virtually all men, then often either permanently unemployed or migrating circularly for casual work, were a part of the voluntary fire brigades, which for them was a source of identity and socio-existential stability. In the same vein, Weronika Najda highlights the wide range of activities within the Hubal sports club in the village of Chlewiska[14]: organizing football teams and matches, club activists, supporters and even the families of footballers from local villages. The village community center in Zaława, which hosts the Country Housewives' Club, was established through social action despite being

11 See e.g. Tomasz Rakowski, "A Cultural Cyclotron: Ethnography, Art Experiments and a Challenge of Moving Towards the Collaborative in Rural Poland," in *Experimental Collaborations: Ethnography Through Fieldwork Devices*, ed. Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Criado (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 154–178.

12 "Social deeds" [czyny społeczne] or "production deeds" [czyny produkcyjne] were basically actions of common building, widespread in socialist Poland, both forced and enthusiastic, and embodying quite intriguing affective qualities. Initially, they were a continuation of the Soviet form of common labor called *subbotnik* or *voskresnik*, standing for voluntary and unpaid work for the public, held at weekends, and initiated by the Bolsheviks as soon as 1919.

13 Weronika Plińska, "Ochotnicza straż pożarna – klub kultury" [Voluntary fire brigade – a cultural club], in *Lokalnie: animacja kultury/community arts*, ed. Iwona Kurz (Warszawa: IKP UW, 2008), accessed February 20, 2023, http://www.wpek.pl/pi/85047_1.pdf.

14 Weronika Najda, "'Królowie boiska.' Samoorganizacja wiejskiego klubu sportowego" [Kings of the playground. Self-organization of a village sport club] in *Oddolne tworzenie kultury. Perspektywa antropologiczna*, ed. Piotr Cichocki et al. (Warszawa: Instytut Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej UW, 2016).

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part of a state-run institution. The village head and his friend found radiators in a scrap yard and used them for heating, while the villagers rebuilt the premises with their own efforts. There is a solid grassroots element to what might initially appear to be a state-run institution. People create institutions and their infrastructure in their free time, often using materials that are typically considered waste. State institutions are thus filled from the bottom up. Such an approach is at odds with the sense of "entitlement" of villagers, often attributed to them by journalists and researchers. Of course, conflicts, arguments, and strife may arise, but the idea that state institutions should give or provide something is alien to this logic of action. Thus it seems that rural communities are developing their own spontaneous, unrecognized social activities that, in a way, fill the memory of recent decades, the communist era and the period of transformation. The time of the modernization of the People's Republic, the socialist state, especially in the 1970s, did not represent for rural Poland just some inert, external force. On the contrary, it revealed a new sense of the events and experiences of villagers. It turns out that their history was completely different, that is it was the time of developing their skills, technical imagination, methods of experimentation with equipment, action, and rural activism.

The dominant interpretations of social life and social vacuum consider the informal rural structures of self-organization as flawed, marked by a circle of "acquaintances," tight groups, and unregulated ties. I believe, however, that it is possible to hold an opposing view, pursuing the phenomenon of bottom-up rural activities that may be harder to grasp but still crucial. On the one hand, there are dominant interpretations of social life with images of a "sociological vacuum," which consider rural informal structures of self-organization as flawed: a circle of "acquaintances," tight groups, and unregulated ties. Yet I believe that it is possible to construct an opposite perspective, seeking the phenomenon of bottom-up rural activities, which are difficult to grasp fully. This is where the movement to "reclaim" the history of social thought, also known as the "decolonization of minds" (as coined initially by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o), begins.[15]

However, the problem is that the attempt to reclaim a "bottom-up" or "local" organizational sense is hindered by its own underlying assumptions. This is due to the problematic division between the dominant (colonizing) and dominated (colonized), central and peripheral, "academic" and "popular" domains. The boundaries and tension between discourses are fluid and can draw on and derive from each other. This approach ensures that informal and

15 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi and Kampala and Dar es Salaam: East African Educational Publishers, 1986).

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grassroots efforts receive special attention. However, this knowledge can be opened up in various ways. One way is to view these processes as a "heteronymous shift," a term coined by Alexei Yurchak.[16] This means a specific social act of reproducing the forms of social institutions and the state, while reinterpreting their social meaning. This "shift" even transcends what might be called a form of resistance, simulation or "feigning action," but rather continues the social ideals of "state life" (in Yurchak's research, the former "Soviet life"), only in a spontaneous, bottom-up manner. In this way, the situation also turns out to be very complex. On the one hand, we have a model for understanding modern society (civil society) as a normative model defined by certain ideals. On the other hand, we have a research and theoretical practice that finds processes of continuous, bottom-up fulfilment and state formation through social, spontaneous or civic processes. This second process – a bottom-up "capture" of the state – is crucial here and can help identify what is crucial for future actions. Moreover, in this view, the process of creating a state from the bottom up is not just about establishing a specific institutional framework, a legal and organizational apparatus, with an institutional network, but it primarily involves a certain mental "subjective dynamic" of local social actors, as Begoña Aretxaga put it.[17] Such bottom-up realizations of the state may involve situations of resentment towards non-existent or dysfunctional structures, that is the state "abandoning" citizens, but also its subjective, daily and even "mad" production. This strange proximity between the people and the state structures is therefore essential here; it sets the state apart from other hierarchical systems that are centralized and characterized by power dynamics. Instead of a capillary, disseminated power, what we have here is primarily a form of affective state[18] that functions on multiple levels of the imaginary, creating a certain quasi-fictional entity – that of a virtual psychic power.

An example of such an "inner state" can be seen in the way Elżbieta Szewczyk from the village of Broniów, an agricultural pensioner and former cow breeder and long-time councilor, remembers and understands the changes of the last few decades. During our conversations, I noticed that she had her own social theory which she developed and updated daily. Her story would begin, circle back to the start, and then expand. It was coherent, albeit repetitive. Roch Sulima called this "necessary literature," which includes writing

16 Alexei Yurchak, "Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3 (2003): 480–510.

17 Begoña Aretxaga, "Maddening States," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (2003): 393–410.

18 Mateusz Laszczkowski and Madeline Reeves, *Affective States. Entanglements, Suspensions, Suspicions* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2017).

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with passion when drafting letters for official purposes, such as applications, complaints, and wills of peasants.[19] Elżbieta's creativity was a combination of verbal, imaginative, and memorial aspects, tailored specifically to her own world. Her creativity was more "on demand" rather than "for sale," as noted by Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev when comparing the work of folklore and the work of literature.[20] Usually, her thoughts revolved around small post-enfranchisement farms of the former "Congress Poland," where it was not profitable for individual farmers to buy large agricultural machinery. What fascinates her are the places where, as she says, "there must have been farmers' associations" communal cooperatives and purchasing centers. She is confident that she could easily see these places from her current residence, which she shares with her family. In fact, she and her husband constructed a state-subsidized modern cowshed in the 1980s that can be viewed from their kitchen window.

The windows on the other side of her house overlooked the road and bushy fields. And this, conversely, is the place that Elżbieta hates. In her vision of the world, this overgrown field is perhaps the most decisive negation of what was supposed to be there: a village square and a functioning purchasing center. Elżbieta finds the shrubbery bothersome; it is something that she has fought against all her life as a long-time councilor, deputy mayor and member of the Rolmlecz company's supervisory board. This vision proposes that the "compact villages" of the southern Mazovia region should prioritize the establishment of relatively small farms instead of large multi-hectare ones. Despite the prevailing trend in industrial farming, farmers may only have one or a few cows. However, thanks to farmers' associations and cooperatives, they can still operate effectively. According to Elżbieta, individuals can sell small quantities of milk, receive necessary payments, and cultivate small plots of land and pastures. "The villages start working! This milk is not useless. It is the best for the internal market," she says. Elżbieta pointed out that the changes in the 1990s led to this overgrown shrubbery and the destruction of potential and past cooperation. "This is where the bushes come from," Elżbieta told to me over and over again. Her vision of the disastrous changes of the 1990s is complete. Conversations often revolve around the transition from well-maintained fields to abandoned and overgrown pastures, ultimately resulting in empty spaces, unfulfilling lives for those affected, and disenchanted smallholders often found drinking near local village shops. However, the loss highlights

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19 Roch Sulima, *Słowo i etos. Szkice o kulturze* [The word and the ethos. Essays on culture], (Kraków: Fundacja Artystyczna Związku Młodzieży Wiejskiej "Galicja," 1992).

20 Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev, "Folklore as a Special Form of Creation," trans. John M. O'Hara, *Folklore Forum* 13 (1980): 1–21.

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the ideal picture of a complete and appropriate dairy job. It is represented by images of a multitude of small-scale dairy farmers with their milk cans, the so called "canners," who find it profitable to operate small farms.

According to her system, their opposite and the cause of their lack of profitability is due to the new farms and production standards, which involve large-scale production and being a "tanker," that is, using tanks to cool the milk immediately after milking. At the same time, she emphasizes that the best milk comes from the "canners," and although its production "will not pay off," it is ideal "for the internal market" and, above all, it keeps people occupied on the farm. It brings a kind of widespread social "healing" – "deshrubberying." Elżbieta's vision is coherent and, simultaneously, almost intrusive, repeatedly evoked. What is perhaps most significant here is a particular way of thinking, remembering and acting that does not fit into the frame of collective memory, a very different perspective on what happens outside the mainstream of communist memory and is a form of affective relationship with the state, also realized as a bond with an inner, psychic entity, as depicted by Aretxaga.[21]

Social Art Experiment: Self-updating Stories, Alternative Forms of Memory

In my opinion, such knowledge can transcend the contradictions of the center-periphery system and take us to an entirely different world – one shared by many other local figures building their knowledge and their unique social theory. Such distinctive perspectives on history and collective memory can be found in many other sources, such as, even in their meanings, the works of the renowned Polish rural artist, Daniel Rycharski, and his collaborator Szymon Maliborski. Some notable works include the Pomink Chłopa [Monument to a peasant], which gained widespread attention during its journey across Poland. It travelled from northern Mazovia to Krakow in the south, then back to Warsaw, and finally to several villages near Lublin and the city of Lublin itself. This is a statue of a distressed Kurówko village headman, inspired by Albrecht Dürer's unrealized artwork to commemorate the peasant revolts and wars of the sixteenth century. The statue shows Adam Pesta, the village headman and former "canner," sitting on an empty, useless milk can that he found in his yard (when he still had a cow, he collected the milk in cans while working as a stoker at a school). The figure of the "canner," placed on a lift platform constructed by Stanislaw Garbarczuk, an outsider artist from Rycharski's father's home village, attracted stares and drew visitors' attention during this journey. Most importantly, however, it needed to be integrated into

21 Aretxaga, *Maddening States.*

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the agricultural self-organization, as the trailer with the statue was towed by tractors from village to village, decorated with sprays, and painted. It was thus a kind of inscription of a unique peasant history into the broader peregrinations throughout the Polish collective memory, also in cities, where the monument stood in the shadow of Warsaw's skyscrapers. Meanwhile, another project was simultaneously underway – to relocate a dismantled cottage in which a village woman had lived alone on the edge of Kurówko village and turn it into a museum of alternative social histories called "Village People: Museum of Alternative Social Histories."[22] The house, assembled as a metal scaffolding covered with plexiglass sheets, with brick walls, and banners from farmers' protests spread out on the ground and the austere artwork of Stanisław Garbarczuk, was erected on Krakow's embankments, across from Wawel Hill. The contrast between the old, dilapidated cottage and the majestic Wawel Castle in the same view was striking.

Such memory is perhaps even more evident in the banner of the martyr, St Expedite, designed and made by Rycharski for the trade union farmers. It features the image of a Roman legionary, surrounded by a wreath of fire, with a raven at his feet ("what you have to do tomorrow, do today") and the statuesque face of the artist himself. The banner was handed over to agricultural activists from the Solidarity trade union at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. It became a very important, albeit intimate, political meeting with a small group of representatives of the struggle for farmers' rights. The chairman of the agricultural Solidarity union from Stopnica loudly raised slogans such as "Poland Is Not Yet Lost." However, it was explicitly intended to commemorate the forgotten dramatic event from 2013, when an impoverished pensioner from Kielce committed suicide in protest against the abandoning of people like him (sick, eking out a living, experiencing poverty). Thus, alongside other events, the village's political circles created their own patron and historical event. This topic was often discussed by activists, who decided to pass a resolution to this effect in May 2015. They had it with them at the museum on the day the banner was handed over (May 2016). It is, therefore, yet again, a unique and emotional story that came into being in an intimate performance. As researchers of grassroots (oral) history have pointed out, it

22 See Weronika Plińska, "Lekcja historii. Pomnik Chłopa i Muzeum Alternatywnych Historii Społecznych Daniela Rycharskiego i Szymona Maliborskiego" [A history lesson. The Monument to a Peasant and the Museum of Alternative Social Histories by Daniel Rycharski and Szymon Maliborski], *Magazyn Szum*, accessed May 9, 2023, https://magazynszum.pl/lekcja-historii-pomnik-chlopa-i-muzeum-alternatywnych-historii-spolecznych-daniela-rycharskiego-i-szymona-maliborskiego/; Tomasz Rakowski, "Ethnography and Art Experiments in Rural Poland. Beyond the Culture of Shaming: Coevalness, the Inward Turn, and Proto-sociology," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2017): 91–110.

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is significant because it is created by individuals whose lives are considered "politically" important enough to be documented in official history. Perhaps, then, these stories convey more "truthful" elements since they do not aim to promote any particular knowledge perspective and, in the words of György Lukács,[23] they lack substantial authority as they "have nothing to lose by telling the truth."

However, I do not think alternative stories should be regarded as quiet, voiceless or at all devoid of privilege. It is clear that such experiments, which foster knowledge and "necessary creativity" in general, can develop effective existential empowerments and skills to achieve goals. Hence, relying on the concepts of "being unentangled" and "speaking the truth" by peripheral and marginalized communities alone may not provide a satisfactory explanation for the benefits of embracing the grassroots. So the point is for this other form of memory, emerging amidst the activities, prints, images, and peregrinations of Pomnik Chłopa, to be taken seriously and trusted again. It is also essential to be able to turn information about other cultural senses and socio-biographical experiences into reliable data – through, for example, the contextualization of situations and the repetition of recognitions. The analogy with Dipesh Chakrabarty's[24] methodological reflection from his well-known text on subaltern histories may serve as a helpful guide here. The "other" histories present in the oral transmission that Chakrabarty writes about concern the Santal people in India, who were considered "indigenous" and held a lower social status during British colonial rule. As it turns out, in the accounts and versions of historical events, the motivation for rising against the British Crown differs greatly from the typically recognized motivations present in historians' studies. These reasons can include beliefs in supernatural powers and other non-human factors. The reasons behind the Santal rebellion against the British were not simply dismissed as merely bottom-up, muffled, and voiceless. Instead, the rebellion tells a story of disparate epistemologies and logics. Chakrabarty goes beyond regarding subaltern history and its oral transmission as simply "other" history. He also incorporates a different perspective, a history of the "potential," as described by Ariella Azoulay[25] which

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23 Cf. Marta Songin, "Z podporządkowanego punktu widzenia. Roszczenia poznawcze klas podrzędnych" [From the view of the subaltern. Epistemic demands of the subaltern class], in *Humanistyka i dominacja. Oddolne doświadczenia w perspektywie zewnętrznych rozpoznań*, ed. Tomasz Rakowski and Anna Malewska-Szałygin (Warszawa: Instytut Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2011), 34.

24 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

25 Azoulay, *Potential History.*

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is not confined to the official discourses of those in power. Thus, one can see these bottom-up, alternative histories as knots, poking out from under the linear European understanding of cause and effect, understood in the light of "bound" materials and facts. As Chakrabarty writes, "Subaltern pasts are like stubborn knots that stand up and break up the otherwise evenly woven surface of the fabric."[26]

We encounter something very similar in the case of alternative social histories, the "Village People" museum, other imaginations, or the Elżbieta Szewczyk village history project. This historical material not only carries a story about local cosmology, a different ontology of events, and mythicized images, but at some level it also tells a story of real historical experience. Therefore, I daresay that informal, spoken, experiential data about the past, extracted from ethnographic conversations or artistic projects, may yield knowledge that significantly alters the existing historical knowledge, and therefore also the framework of Polish collective memory. Moreover, I see these grassroots, alternative and sometimes rebellious collections of knowledge as uniquely essential in "cementing," "binding" and understanding history. To put it another way: I believe that the memory forged in dominant historical discourses is based on written records that can still be analyzed and interpreted. It thus contains a shift into the past, depositing and identifying sources, and as long as these are past sources, cognitive distance also provides a "security" of thought; it refers to an archive – to a space of detachment, distance, manipulability, comparability of data. Rebellious, other or alternative history works in precisely the opposite manner. It speaks of the coeval, present here and now, reconstructed in a different way that is necessary, remembered, incomplete, but highly intense.

Conclusion: Alternative Social History and Fragile Agency

When it comes to the past, we often have to piece together history from incomplete sources. With this particular case, however, we have a unique approach to historical data from the very beginning. There is neither the illusion of "full access" to contemporary data, nor the illusion of incomplete and indirect access to "how things were" in the past. Instead, this reveals a heightened awareness of perceiving reality as actions that are fundamental for constructing historical memory. However, these actions are often diverse and distinct, influenced by one's experience of a theory of "how things were." It is not merely a plea for oral or alternative histories and, as in Chakrabarty's case, "subaltern histories." It is not about filling in the existing map of history,

26 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 106.

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nor is it about archiving the statements of witnesses to history, creating digital repositories of oral knowledge – for such "archiving" can lead to the neutralization of what is remembered, or even devaluation of oral history or as merely a specific addition to the knowledge of historians. The starting point here is alternative memory, developed through the ideas of Elżbieta Szewczyk and the experiments of Daniel Rycharski. It is the account and encounter of a person carrying transformative knowledge, more as "witnessing history" than oral history. It is an "elementary particle" of oral history – an account of "how things were" and what is of real significance. In Chakrabarty's work, such alternative, "subaltern" pasts are often in opposition to the dominant historical narratives; in the cases discussed here, these forms of memory take on yet another form. They are not just an "addition" to oral history, independently found and collected; they are not a historical source neutralized right from the start.

It may be valuable to consider the role of agency in history within the framework of its unfinished and "uncertain" nature, which only becomes clear in hindsight. Instead, it will be agency (or rather efficacy) in the sense of the ability to achieve goals and shape experiences. This concept is akin to an anthropology project, as it begins and ends when the proximity and engagement of understanding begin to transform the known world, when it is "discernible," which means that it puts up "resistance." This agency (or "fragile" efficacy) in the past becomes apparent when, in anthropological research, as well as in the work of artists and oral history activists, past actions gradually gain significance as their meaning evolves from literal to historical. A kind of "inner liminality" arises, a very intimate and subjective understanding of social and historical experience, captured in Johannes Fabian's[27] ideas of unicity and coevalness, that is a situation of experimental and unsettling nature of sharing social experiences. It is a form of knowledge that Tim Ingold[28] recently wrote about more as an act of "doing" than as ready-made, accumulated knowledge or projected future; the future here is merely an imagined point tying together the threads of action. This is a radical shift: instead of an "accumulated past," which was usually at stake in anthropological method – in the study of identity, memory, and all other areas – the focus is now on a future that is co-created and co-predicted in the present. This improvisation, the co-creation of the conditions of understanding, is an irrevocable shift towards that which is anchored in a collectively cultivated future (although each time,

27 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

28 Tim Ingold, "To Human is a Verb," in *Colloquia Anthropologica*, ed. Michał Buchowski and Arkadiusz Bentkowski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, 2014).

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simultaneously also – in a certain imagined, remembered past). Therefore, it reaches towards the possible and, as such, is a form of revealing new, evoked and quite spontaneous areas of contemporarily remembered history.

Translated by Inga Michalewska-Cześnik

Abstract

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Ethnography, Memory, Experiment: Towards an Alternative Social History of Poland

Research on the self-organization and creative potential of rural communities in Poland suggests several decades of unrecognized conflicts of knowledge and social identity. This article demonstrates how work that is experimental both ethnographically and artistically can help reveal unfixed or absent elements of Polish identity conducted in contemporary village spaces. The author suggests that ethnographic and artistic work can uncover unfixed cultural memories, enabling a new perspective on the formation of Polish society. This process paints a different, alternative social history, and at the same time it suggests a new perspective on issues of citizenship, social subjectivity and our understanding of history in a theoretical and methodological sense.

Keywords

history, memory, experiment, countryside, ethnography, art

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