

MIGRANTS, NOMADS, SCIENTISTS, FLANEURS: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH (Warsaw University, 15–16 March 2007)

A scientific conference devoted to *Participant Observation in Historical Research* was held at the Historical Institute of Warsaw University on March 15th and 16th, 2007. Its aim was to deepen the understanding of links between history and anthropology through a comparison of the methods used in these two disciplines. The view that historical research is a specific kind of participant observation with regard to both the object and the subject of research was accepted as the starting point. The conference was attended by historians as well as by historians of historiography, methodologists of history, anthropologists of culture, sociologists and experts on culture.

The authors of the papers were clearly divided into two distinct groups: those who thought that the use of participant observation in historical research was a tenable metaphor (mainly researchers specialising in old epochs), and those who did employ various types of participant observation in their research (historians specialising in contemporary times and anthropologists).

The former attitude was represented by Piotr B a d y n a (Wrocław) who tried to reply to the question: *What Benefits Can a Historian Derive from "Participant Observation"?* In his opinion this research technique is not, and cannot be, useful in research on distant periods, for only contemporary times are directly accessible to historians. Nevertheless, the technique provides some methodological solutions which are still important in such research questions as, for instance, observation of non-verbal, spatial, para-linguistic and linguistic behaviour, as well as ethical questions, openness towards a researched culture and emotional engagement. Marcin S t a b r o w s k i (Wrocław) followed a similar line in his paper *The Senses, Feelings and Reason in the Study of the History of Culture*, in which he pointed out that a researcher must adopt the perspective of the subject of his research in order to discover the intellectual world image of the investigated individual or social group. Stabrowski made use of a profound analysis of fragments of the 17th century diarist Jan Chryzostom P a s e k, confining himself to an axiological interpretation, in order to show the perspectives of such an analysis. In a paper *Field Work from the Perspective of 1,000 Years. The Visions which Archeologists and Historians Have of the Meeting in Gniezno. Towards a Cultural Interpretation*, Przemysław W i s z e w s k i (Wrocław) discussed to what extent the metaphor of "observation" can be applied in medieval research and the validity of diverse opinions on an historical fact, a result of the specific character of the method of "participant observation" (he chose as his example the Emperor Otto III's famous meeting with King Boleslaus the Brave in 1000) In a paper *The Taste of the Archives and the Smell of Blood. Two Levels of an Historian's Field Work* Tomasz W i ś l i c z (Warsaw) drew attention to the typical place of field work for historians specialising in old epochs, namely, the archives which supply historians with a sensual contact with the past, its value depending on the adopted cognitive strategy. According to Wiślicz, it is a historian's general view of an epoch, a view formed during his investigation of sources, that is the second level of his participation; only then can he conceptualise his monographic research. The

paper by Wojciech Piasek (Toruń) "*Being there*", "*Being here*" in *Historical Research. Historical Source as a Mirror, Trace, Pre-Text and Pretext* showed the parallelism between participant observation in anthropology and the changing understanding of historical sources in historiography. Both participant observation and source analysis have ceased to be an instrument guaranteeing access to an objective reality. However, they are still constitutive elements of their disciplines, though they have rather ethical than epistemological impact.

Many of the papers on the practical problems of historical participant research referred to various kinds of oral history. In her paper, *My Jedwabne. The "Insider-Outsider" Perspective in Research on Oral History*, Marta Kurkowska-Budzan (Cracow) discussed the field work conducted in her native town, Jedwabne, whose Jewish population was murdered at the beginning of the German occupation, in 1941, a fact described in T. Gross's famous book *The Neighbors*. The publication of the book and the reaction to its author's statements altered the collective memory of the inhabitants of Jedwabne, changed Kurkowska-Budzan's status in the investigated community and made it impossible to carry on reliable research on the basis of oral history. In the paper *From Autobiography to History: The Formation of Individual and Collective Memory of the Jews Settled in Lower Silesia after World War II*, Kamila Dąbrowska (Warsaw) presented the results of the research she conducted among Lower Silesian Jews and showed the process of the creation of this group's history as a function of its experiences. The paper by Joanna Wawrzyniak (Warsaw) *The Practice and Effects of Oral History. Remarks on the Research Proposed by Anna Grupańska "Memory of the PRL (Polish People's Republic). Stories about Joint and Individual Methods of Living with the System: 1956-1989"* discussed this research programme which was conducted with the use of oral history. In the paper *Stories about the Fate of the Inhabitants of Lower Silesia or the Ways of Listening to History*, Izolda Topp (Wrocław) drew attention to the fact that for a researcher into culture, biographical stories oscillate between historical experience and endeavours to objectivise it, and that the researcher, too, participates in their formation as a listener/participant in the conversation during the field work. Michał Kierzkowski (Poznań) outlined the role which emotions, sensual experiences and objectivity play in a historian's work with an oral source ("*Oral History*" — *A History of the Examined Person and the Examiner*).

The reflections of historians practising oral history were backed up by representatives of other disciplines which use similar methods. In a paper *Between Exclusion and Participation — towards Empathic Sociology* Elżbieta Tarowska (Warsaw) cited various kinds of social exclusion to show the evolution which had taken place in contemporary sociology in the researcher's attitude to the examined person. The now prevailing demand for direct contacts and participation has created many problems, including ethical ones: they are connected with the inequality between the researcher and the person he examines and with the sphere of emotions. The anthropologist Renata E. Hryciuk presented her reflections on *Participant Observation in Anthropology: Dilemmas, Restrictions and Surprises Encountered in Field Work in Mexico City*. On the basis of the experiences she acquired in her research on the understanding of maternity in Mexico, she depicted the complex relationship between the anthropologists and the investigated communities, pointing out that an analysis of the researchers' own emotional experiences was very important for a proper interpretation of the results of research and for understanding their context. The paper by Bartłomiej Walczak (Warsaw) *On a Researcher's Mimetic Entanglement: the Case of Frank Hamilton Cushing* concerned the use of participant observation in anthropology. Walczak presented the pioneer of this type of research, pointing out that Cushing's long stay among the Zuni Indians had led to a change in his personality and that he had finally restricted his research in order to fulfil what he thought was his duty towards the investigated community. According to Walczak, this was not due to

the inadequacy of the fledgling method but to the method's inseparable links with mimetism.

Several papers dealt with the role which accounts by participants in events had played in forming history. Wojciech Wrzosek (Poznań) discussed *The Reliability of Eyewitnesses and Participant Observation. Epistemological Problems, looking for historico-philosophical or epistemological reasons that would justify a researcher's confidence in accounts by eyewitnesses*. Robert Litwiński (Lublin) read a paper entitled *Accounts by Participants in Events and Witnesses as an Historical Source. The Experiences Gathered in Research*, in which he presented his reflections on the criticism of this kind of sources in connection with his monograph on the State Police in the Second Republic. The next two papers analysed specific sources of testimonial character. In a paper entitled *Historian and the Child. Emotions in an Analysis of Sources and in the Formation of an Historical Narration* Barbara Klich-Kluczevska (Cracow) analysed the complex emotional ties between a researcher and the subject of his research if the researcher examines the subject's childhood using sources of private provenance. In a paper "*Cheap Chromolithographs*" and "*Documents in Verse*" — *the Poetic Chronicles of the Holocaust*, Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz (Warsaw) discussed the status of literature created by writers of Jewish origin during the time of Shoah. The authors wanted their chronicles to be a reliable testimony, and they have been recognised as such by researchers from the Central Jewish Historical Commission, for these chronicles acquaint researchers with "tragic human content" of Holocaust, which cannot be described in scientific language.

Great attention was also paid to the role, opportunities and dangers facing historians because of their commitment to a cause. The paper by Dobrochna Kąłwa (Cracow) examined the role which gender had played in Polish research on the history of women. She analysed the studies by Polish female historians who had referred to the category of gender and compared them with participant observations referring to the sociological aspects of scientific debates in history and in gender studies in Poland (*Gender Consciousness in Polish Research on the History of Women. Reflections*). In a paper *The Prospects of Metaxu-Methesis in the Communicative Situation of a Cyber Historian* Ewa Sołska (Lublin) presented a plan for an "anthropological engagement" of historians in the political history of contemporary times, for this could lead to the formation of a new political theory. Historians' participation would be desirable for ethical and methodological reasons, because they transmit ideas and experiences from one epoch to another and between different cultures. In a paper *20th Century Migrations — a Challenge to History Teachers as Participating Observers*, Barbara Jakubowska (Warsaw) proposed a multifarious use of this method in the teaching of European history to help it deal with its greatest challenge: the migratory character of European societies; this would require support for multiculturalism and, at the same time, forefforts to create a joint European historical consciousness. The challenge could be met by historians' profound "anthropological" participation in the didactic process. In the text "*The History of the Author's Times*" or *Memory and Historical Imagination as Cognitive Instruments*, Marek Woźniak (Lublin) presented historiography as a reflection on the author's own culture, in which descriptions of the past help the author to cope with his own past, which means that they refer to the author's current commitments. Piotr Witek (Lublin) in his *History on the Screen. The Methodological Problems of Visual History* pointed out that the historical audiovisual language had been formed as a kind of contemporary post-literary and post-historiographic equivalent of the pre-literary ways of taming historical cultural experience. The question of emotions in historical studies was raised by Jolanta Kolbuszewska (Łódź) who in her paper *Reason — Imagination — Intuition. Sources of Cognition in the Reflections of Polish Historians at the Beginning of the 20th Century* analysed the theoretical opinions on historical epistemology expressed by such historians as Stanisław Zakrzewski, Jan Karol Kochanowski and Kazimierz M. Morawski.

A few papers analysed participant observations contained in the works of prominent historians. Anna Brzezińska (Łódź) discussed Aron J. Gurievich's *Istoria Istorika*, wondering whether this was an autobiography or an autohistory, for in his reminiscences the author had used the research methods of history and historical anthropology. Karolina Polasik (Poznań) analysed Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's famous book *Mantailou, the Village of Heretics 1294-1324*, pointing out that this was a deep, systematic ethnographic study created with the help of a specific kind of field work method which originated in cultural anthropology but had been accepted by historians as a historical one (*Field Work in the Practice of an Ethnohistorian. The Case of Le Roy Ladurie*). Jacques Le Goff was the hero of the paper presented by Paweł Rodak (Warsaw) who described the role played by his hero in the foundation of the *nouvelle histoire* current which introduced anthropological methods in history. The most far-reaching result of this approach to history was Le Goff's participation in the *ego-histoire* project, in which the historian's life provided the foundation for reflections on the historical process (*History according to Jacques Le Goff*). In his paper *A Question about Historical Anthropology (in Poland)* Jacek Kowalewski (Olsztyn) discussed the reception of the model of cultural historical research in Polish historiography, pointing out that historical anthropology elaborated in the 1960s and 1970s still held the dominant position. He drew attention to the role which Polish anthropologists should play in reviving intellectual cooperation between their discipline and history.

The conference was an intellectually inspiring event for scholars representing various disciplines and different opinions on the role which participation plays in historical research. The debates were accompanied by a lively discussion, and during the summing up the participants emphasised that even though the papers reflected different methodological views, the participant observation referred to in the title was a promising starting point for future research projects.

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