

# The disappearance of social anthropology

In 2018 Jarosław Gowin, the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education, signed a new law called *Konstytucja dla Nauki* (Constitution for Science). One of the accompanying documents to this law introduced a new list of academic disciplines, with neither social/cultural anthropology nor ethnology included as independent disciplines. Instead, those were subsumed under a new label of “sciences of culture and religion” together with cultural studies and religious studies. We are convinced that removal of ethnology/anthropology from the list of disciplines in Poland can have negative consequences for further development of anthropological research in our country. This decision is likely to be highly consequential, especially taking into consideration the fact that anthropology/ethnology has been made a part of “science of culture and religion” – a conglomeration that, to the best of our knowl-

edge, does not exist anywhere else in the academic world and that amalgamates very divergent scientific endeavors.

This is happening in a situation where throughout the world social anthropology has become firmly established as an academic discipline, with more and more departments and associations either being created or, what is especially significant here, changing designations from regionally specific names to (social) anthropology. This happened in 2017 in Germany when *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde* became, following a majority vote among its members, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturan-*

thropologie and in Russia, where in 2009 a new Laboratory for Social and Anthropological Research was established at the University of Tomsk and where the Ethnology Department of the European University of St. Petersburg changed its name to the Anthropology Department in 2008. It seems that after many years of discussions and doubts about the future of social anthropology, the discipline has become in general more consolidated and self-confident.

Poland, however, has not been at the forefront of this consolidation process, and the present ministerial decision might make consolidation of anthropol-

ogy in Poland even more difficult and might negatively influence international cooperation. This might be the case especially if we take into consideration that the two disciplines with which ethnology/anthropology has been included under “science of culture and religion”

**“AN ADMINISTRATIVE DECISION TO LUMP ANTHROPOLOGY TOGETHER WITH DISCIPLINES FOCUSING ON HUMAN CULTURAL PRODUCTS HAS ALREADY HAD PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES.”**

## Extract from: “Erasing Polish Anthropology?”, Main and Goździak’s statement in *Anthropology News*:

.../The attack on anthropology is part of a broader attempt to reform Polish academia, in which the democratically elected university presidents will be replaced by rectors nominated by university councils (composed mainly of entrepreneurs and politicians), where free market competition and collaboration with businesses will rule, and where tenure-track jobs will be replaced with flexible employment. These neoliberal mantras are repeated over and over by the politicians involved in the creation of the new law. The wider reform is part of the so-called “good change” (*dobra zmiana*) promoted

by the conservative Polish government and eerily reminiscent of President Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again campaign in the United States.

Many questions remain: Why has the Polish government passed this law? And why has it targeted anthropologists? Is it because anthropologists have undertaken critical studies of the current establishment, knowledge production, gender policies, rising nationalism, and a slew of other “uncomfortable topics”? Are Polish decision-makers following in the footsteps of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has ordered gender studies to be removed from Hungarian curricula? It certainly seems so.../!



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claim very different disciplinary histories, different bodies of theoretical works, and, what is most important, different methodologies and methods than anthropology does.

**WORLDWIDE**, the designation Social Anthropology has gained increasing resonance. This reflects this discipline's self-understanding as a social science, basing its theoretical claims and research conclusions on investigations conducted directly among and with people and not based solely on analysis of their cultural

products. While the disciplinary borders are always – and should always be – porous or fluid, an administrative decision to lump anthropology together with disciplines focusing on human cultural products has already had practical consequences, namely a cut in “operational costs” (*kosztochłonność*) of the discipline. Apparently, the ministry has (falsely) assumed that religious studies, cultural studies, and social anthropology share methodologies and methods and therefore require the same (and minimal!) amount of money to conduct research

and to train students. For a discipline for which fieldwork is the most important method of enquiry, this can have disastrous consequences. Other consequences include procedures for evaluating the existing institutes of ethnology and anthropology as well as the possibility of granting doctorates and habilitations. Those will be probably granted in sciences of culture and religion, and not in ethnology, and this might hinder the participation of young anthropologists from Poland in international programs and lead to the isolation of the Polish anthropological community. Moreover, although the proponents of this new law claim that it will strengthen interdisciplinary work, in practice its formulations will likely lead in the opposite direction. For example, each scientific journal has been linked to a particular discipline or disciplines, and every researcher also has to decide in which discipline their work is to be evaluated. If they subsequently publish outside their own disciplinary journals, their publications will not count towards their final evaluation score. Thus, the Constitution for Science aims to flatten the structure of Polish science. This can result in easier management, both in economic as well as in political terms, but what is actually at stake is a restriction of academic freedom.

**STILL, THIS MINISTERIAL** decision does not have to be interpreted as a deliberate attack on a rebellious discipline, as some authors have suggested (see Main and Goździak's statement in *Anthropology News*, Dec. 7, 2018),<sup>2</sup> and does not have to be seen as a repetition of events from the socialist past. Rather, this decision can be seen as a part of a zealous drive towards business-like management, evaluation according to fixed criteria, and raising efficiency in science – a drive that is seen not only in Poland and not only in relation to the actions of our present government. Recent years have seen a significant number of protests at universities in many countries of Europe and beyond. Some of them, such as the protest related to the restrictions on the operations of the Central European University in Budapest or problems encountered by the European

University in St. Petersburg, have been justifiably interpreted as caused by political actions of the state apparatuses. Other protests, like those concerning retirement funds for university staff in Great Britain, educational cuts in Denmark, or the low pay of non-tenure track teaching staff in the US, are related rather to the neoliberal capitalist approach to science and higher education, which seems to dominate in governmental attitudes toward present-day academia in general. We think that what happened to ethnology in Poland is rather a form of collateral damage, very unfortunate and harmful damage, but stemming rather from this drive towards efficiency and bureaucratization, coupled with ignorance concerning the nature of anthropological enquiry, than from an intentional wish to destroy a rebellious discipline. Even though many Polish anthropologists work in the field of gender studies and political or engaged anthropology, which are associated with the left side of the political spectrum, we are not recognized as such by public opinion. Our "leftism" is not visible in the public sphere in ways that would make us a target of persecutions on the part of a conservative government. In fact, anthropology is hardly visible in Poland at all.

**LET US REPEAT** – the present reform, including removal of ethnology/anthropology as an independent discipline, is damaging for social anthropology and for academic life in Poland in general. Still, we also have to admit that to a large extent the present situation is our own fault. Throughout this short statement we have used mostly "social anthropology" as a disciplinary designation, but in reality we should have used ethnology, social anthropology, cultural anthropology, and maybe even ethnography – all of which appear in Poland as self-designations in various kinds of academic institutions. On top of this, the association of Polish anthropologists (ethnologists) is called *Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze*. This is usually translated as the Polish Ethnological Society, but it literally means the Polish Society for Folk (or People) Studies. Now, one can argue that all those are historical names; however, this prolifera-

tion of names leads to confusion among people who are not that much interested in what we as anthropologists actually do, but who can nevertheless decide on our futures.

Moreover, there is too little cooperation between institutes and departments of anthropology (ethnology, etc.) in Poland. There are also internal disagreements concerning its broader academic nature. While it is fair to see this state of affairs as desirable, because respect for diversity is a part of anthropological ethos and methodology, and moreover because discussions and disagreements are *sine qua non* of any scientific enquiry, we should have realized much sooner that we have to present a consolidated front to the state management. This is necessary if we want to argue for academic freedom and against a parametric game (*punktoza*) that kills academic creativity. It is also true that for too long we have taken administrative decisions as given. Instead of challenging them, we have tried to adapt to them. This has to change. We hope that the disappearance of ethnology/anthropology in Poland will only be temporary and that we will reappear from this crisis with more awareness of what brings all the people who call themselves social anthropologists, cultural anthropologists, ethnologists, or ethnographers together. ✖

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### references

- 1 *Society for the Anthropology of Europe*, Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main, December 7, 2018. Available at <http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2018/12/07/erasing-polish-anthropology/?fbclid=IwAR2Ww19RFdu5eCm2njlqHhpbwiUUD8MLOUAXdgDWmGJX8EDPho-43qXRjPc%20>
- 2 *Ibid.*