Twilight Zone Anthropologies: The Case of Central Europe

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Abstract: This article aims at contributing to the discussion on the global hierarchies of knowledge and flows of anthropological ideas. Anthropologists perceive themselves as advocates of an egalitarian ethos. Nevertheless, for various interrelated reasons, the discipline of anthropology is divided into privileged and underprivileged regions. Cross-cutting disparities find expression in such notions as center and periphery, Global South and North and, last but not least, East and West. Central and Eastern European anthropology, which was already diversified under communist regimes, has become even more varied in the postsocialist period. Despite this it is often perceived by metropolitan anthropologies as a provincial enterprise burdened by paradigms from the past. These intricate power relations are described and the pecking order of different systems of knowledge questioned. By referring to selected achievements of anthropologists in Central Europe, the intellectual and innovative potential of twilight zone anthropologies is promoted.

Keywords: hierarchies of knowledge, world anthropologies, twilight zone anthropologies, Central and Eastern European anthropologies

The “anthropological East” was perceived in the West in much the same way as communism: unattractive, non-innovative and outdated. Johannes Fabian’s (1983) concept of allochronism fully applies here: Eastern European ethnographers were coeval, but resembled living skeletons of the past. Many scholars from the region have shown that this was not really the case. Slavko Kremenšek wrote that Slovenian ethnology had already moved away from traditional folklore studies in the mid-1960s (cf. Godina 2002). In countries like Slovakia and Bulgaria meanwhile, theoretically sophisticated structuralist and socio-historical interpretations of folklore materials were developed (cf. Kilianova 2005; Elchinova 2002). In the 1960s, in the period of the Prague Spring, the ethnological scholarly tradition in Czechoslovakia was so conspicuous that it earned a distinct designation – the “Czech School” (Koffer 2011). In Poland, phenomenological, semiotic and various forms of structuralism were practiced. In the 1970s, members of the movement representing these theoretical orientations published

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1 I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers whose critical remarks have helped me to improve and expand my argument.
a manifesto in which they described themselves as the “new Polish ethnology” (Barański 2008). It was not only in the aforementioned country that the theoretical and research landscape was very diversified long before 1989 (Buchowski 2002).

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Much has been written about the decolonization of knowledge from the perspective of postcolonial studies, South-Asian and Latin American Subaltern Studies, and going beyond both of them, the so-called “Decolonializing perspective” represented, for instance, by Anibal Quijan, Walter Mignolo and Ramon Grosfoguel (2008). All these intellectual formations use various strategies in order to undermine the existing power relations reproduced in an unequal world in the domains of social relations, economics, politics and culture. Subaltern and Postcolonial Studies have been criticized by even more radical “Decolonializers” for reproducing the western episteme based on the Cartesian duality of mind and body, and resulting in the acceptance of the view that there exists a “god’s-eye” view, in other words objective knowledge detached from the “body-politics of knowledge” (ibid.). For instance, this attitude is deemed to be replicated by scholars working in critical postmodern, Foucauldian and Wallerstein’s world-systems’ traditions. An effective decolonization of knowledge should undermine epistemological Eurocentrism and allow for an emergence of heteroglossic knowledge that will be cosmopolitan and local at the same time.

I would like to present some thoughts about the hierarchical relations that have emerged as a result of the power held by the Western centers and the critique of them by the Southern Rebels from Asia and Latin America. Anthropology took part in these struggles, for which the World Anthropologies Network, a book on World Anthropologies (Lins Ribeiro and Escobar 2008) and the World Council of Anthropological Associations figure as icons. Situated in a certain global and historical context, I have to make clear what is my own anthropological genealogy. I was educated as an ethnologist in Poland, one of the Central European countries, at the time when it was situated on the mental map of the world simply in the East. After completing my PhD and being employed at the University in Poznań as an assistant professor, I pursued further studies in the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany. Later, I lectured also as a visiting professor at Rutgers University and Columbia University, and I spent a considerable time at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Budapest. I served as a President of the European Association of Social Anthropologists and later as chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations. I still serve as president of the Polish Ethnological Society. It is not egocentrism or navel-gazing that lies behind this short account of my anthropological career. I just want to say that as in the case of many other colleagues, my life trajectory coaxes me to make some insights pertinent to the multivocality.
of world anthropologies in a globalizing world, especially with respect to the situation of Central and Eastern European anthropology.

The notion of “episteme” raised by Decolonizers seems important. By dint of this term serious arguments were launched that virtually all knowledge produced in the domain of science has Eurocentric roots. At the same time, equally strong counterarguments claim that science, although it is a mode of knowledge production born in Europe, can be at least partly independent from social and cultural constraints. As such, science allows for a diversity of ideas which are selected by way of rationality, and thus modern scientific practice can be implanted in various non-European contexts. Long ago this point was made by rationalists in their discussions with relativists, most prominently by Ernest Gellner (1992).

While one does not have to agree with Gellner’s philosophical reasoning, there is empirical evidence that within this “Western episteme” a variety of epistemological traditions exist. In anthropology, there are differences between and within Northern American, Scandinavian, German, French, and last but not least Central European anthropologies. Divisions between ethnologists (Volkskundists) and “real” anthropologists became as fake as they were legendary. Within Anglo-Saxon, Francophone, etc. anthropologies there is a long history of paradigmatic fights and political conflicts between empiricists and interpretivists, politically minded scholars and postmodernists, symbolists and those focused on material relations of power. Moreover, within this essentialised Western epistemological tradition, visible hierarchies between national and regional traditions persist. As a result, Europeans tend to complain about North-American hegemony, and various Anglophone peripheral anthropologists feel marginalized in relation to those located in metropolises. Within the confines of the Francophone universe, similar phenomena can be observed. On a European level, Southerners whine about Northerners’ domination. Central and Eastern Europeans, meanwhile, often feel ignored in the whole continental system of knowledge production.

Moreover, these hierarchies are refracted at the national level. Within given states individuals or academic institutions protest against the self-appointed and self-congratulatory authority of the central power-holders and established gatekeepers located at the richest universities. In many places, the symbolic power of the label “sociocultural anthropology” is used against supposedly backward “ethnology” and “folklore.” Thus, while presented as unified, Western/Northern anthropology itself is internally divided both with regard to epistemic traditions and the political economy of science. From the inside, the discipline looks like an eternal battlefield of various factions and fractions. Even in the philosophically refined critique of Western epistemological dominance, such as that represented by the Decolonizers, the specter of essentialism is present. In other words, the subaltern school, postcolonial theory and the decolonial school relapse into the same essentializing modes of thought that they attempt to criticize.
A division into Center and Periphery, as well as global North and South, reappears in all these debates about entangled economic, social, cultural and epistemological domination and hierarchies. However, this duality not only reifies the map of anthropological traditions by making it white and black, but also leaves various anthropological regions out in grey areas, placing legions of anthropologists worldwide in a cognitive and scientific-political limbo. Several of these, “twilight zone anthropologies” for instance, Japanese or Mediterranean, in one way or another have already managed to mark their presence on the intellectual map. However, several others have not been able to do so, while many do not really want to engage in this global battle for recognition, for instance (at least partly) Russian anthropologies and those coming from mainland China. Several scholars in the latter both see themselves as self-contained and self-sufficient scholarly entities or sustainable interpretive communities. In any case, several diverse anthropologies located betwixt-and-between do not quite fit the dualistic division into North and South, or even Center and Periphery. Chinese anthropologists appear marginal and provincial to Westerners, but from their own perspective the reverse may be the case.

We definitely should not think in terms of lines and clear-cut boundaries, especially where intellectual traditions are considered. To do so would strengthen reified divisions and reproduce a part of the essentializing strategy anthropologists tirelessly attempt to deconstruct. However, one may wonder why in all this discussion about world divisions the North/South axis has become so conspicuous, while the East/West axis, so prominent during the Cold War, has disappeared. The reintroduction of this forgotten, conceptually constructed dividing line into ongoing debates about hierarchies of knowledge should help us to see with more clarity the position of Central and Eastern Europe in the global chart of anthropological ideas. I hope that at this point the reasons for my above-mentioned personal testimony become more understandable.

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But let me start this short discussion in an indirect manner. In the 1980s and 1990s several intellectuals from what was than commonly known as Eastern Europe claimed that this region, which should actually have been called Central Europe, was kidnapped from the West by the barbaric East, i.e. the Soviets.

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2 “At least partly” has to be emphasized. In the contemporary world, total isolation is in practice impossible. In the case of Chinese anthropology, attempts at internationalization are undertaken. Furthermore, at Western universities many Chinese students and post-docs acquire Western style-education. [I owe this remark to one of the anonymous reviewers.] It should be added that Chinese scholars are also engaged in the work of global organizations, such as the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and the World Council of Anthropological Associations.
ing to Milan Kundera (1984), the historical shaping of Central Europe meant that it actually belonged to the West but, left behind the Iron Curtain, it was orphaned and placed unjustly on the mental map of Westerners in the East. All the arguments used by Kundera in this call for emancipation were reified, and this was not merely a strategic, but also a spontaneous essentialism; he, along with many other scholars, thought that cultures, even civilizations, exist in a billiard-ball-like formation. Nevertheless, via this seemingly strange route of a novelist’s argument, I want to shed light on the status of post-socialist anthropologies that are in fact left out of world anthropologies discussions.

Kundera argued that Central Europe has always belonged to the West, since it participated in all the major Western European cultural trends, such as Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Enlightenment and Modernism. By analogy, we may say that, in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, it also participated in the major anthropological scientific traditions. Bronisław Malinowski and Franz Steiner figure as tokens illustrating this phenomenon. Although, to a large extent Central European anthropology belonged to a “nation building” (Stocking 1982), German-style tradition, it is, I think, as legitimate as any other tradition practiced anywhere. However, in the post-war period it fell off the global anthropological radar being mistakenly classified as vulgar-, or at best orthodox-Marxist (cf. Buchowski 2011). As mentioned at the very beginning, anthropologists east of the river Elbe dividing Germany participated in their own ways in several anthropological orientations; they also managed to develop their own original ideas that emerged in the twilight zones considered by western anthropologists as simply grey and gloomy.

Let me illustrate the point with the case of Polish ethnology/anthropology. First came the development of the so-called new Polish ethnology. In the mid 1970s several authors interpreted ethnographic materials, both historical ones and those they collected themselves, in a new way (see Stomma 1976, 1976a). They opposed a positivistic paradigm predominant since World War II that I call “ethnography” (Buchowski 2011). They announced their ideas in a tripartite manifesto (Benedyktowicz et al. 1980, 1980a, 1981). Although it consisted mainly of succinct characteristics of the ideas of scholars representing theories considered important for the group, which ranged from the “Tartu school in semiotics” (mainly Jurij Lotman, Boris Uspianskii, and Eleazar Mieletynskii) via the phenomenology of religion (e.g. Mircea Eliade) to French and British structuralism (e.g. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner, Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas), it also contained a concise declaration of interpretive ideas written by Ludwik Stomma, himself strongly influenced by the French intellectual tradition. In these ideas, man is perceived as a “producer of signs.” New Polish ethnology stood out from sociology (in the French context à la Issac Chiva) and neo-Marxist economic anthropology (à la Maurice Godelier). The “New Ethnologists” wanted to follow the structural-
ists’ concepts of deep structures of thought based on binary coding, and reject orientations considered positivist – for instance functionalism; to practice anthropology by using the ideas of history, semiology, studies of mythology and literature, linguistics, and art history; to emphasize a symbolic aspect of culture; and to discard arbitrary classifications and favor instead interpretations uncovering structures of long duration.

Within the new Polish ethnology, three major theoretical trends can be identified: a phenomenological trend (represented mainly by Zbigniew Benedyktowicz); studies of contemporary myths in popular culture (Czesław Robotycki); and a structuralist one. Within the latter, at least three caucuses should be distinguished: first, structuralism that is deeply concerned with the mythical nature of any cultural creation (Stomma); second, that inspired by the British version of structuralism (Jerzy S. Wasilewski); and third, a strain strongly influenced by Russian semiotics and Eliade’s morphology of the sacred (Ryszard Tomicki).

Some scholars declared that the “new Polish ethnology” could not succeed, since its ideas did not match the hegemonic paradigm (Jasiewicz and Slattery 1995: 195). In reality it exerted a lasting influence in Polish anthropological studies. The next generations of scholars, e.g. Zbigniew Libera, Marcin Brocki, and Piotr Kowalski, followed in these footsteps and went beyond them. In this way, the school left its imprint on the way research was conducted and materials interpreted. Brocki claims that this orientation “to this day is (...) the most original and inspiring phenomenon in Polish ethnology” (2008: 202). This is an exaggeration, especially in view of the fact that rival orientations existed (for more details, see Buchowski 2002, 2011). Now, new cohorts of scholars are much more interested in critical, engaged and political anthropology. Nevertheless, the “new Polish ethnology” was an original interpretive paradigm (even if it may appear methodologically incoherent) that emerged as a result of a unique mixture of western anthropological ideas, Tartu-Moscow semiotic school insights and local Polish interpretive traditions. One may only regret that only very few of the works of these scholars were published in English.

The new Polish ethnology was formulated against an important anthropological perspective of research inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice (see Ortner 1984). A novel approach taking into consideration social practice close to, on the one hand, Maurice Godelier and Marshall Sahlin’s ideas of the hierarchical and dialectical relations between “the mental and the material” and, on the other, Bourdieu’s theory of practice, have been developed independently of these anthropological contributions by a philosopher, Jerzy Kmita (cf. 1982, 1985). Kmita outlined the so-called socio-regulative theory of practice and culture that at the turn of 1970s and 1980s attracted several anthropologists working mainly at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. It uniquely combined elements of Karl Marx and Max Weber, strengthened by Florian Znaniecki’s concept of a “humanis-
tic coefficient,” which assumes that subjects’ perception of the phenomena studied should be taken into account in the social sciences’ rendition of culture.

As mentioned, social practice constitutes the core concept of this indigenous theory. It is treated as a functional structure that represents a realization of historically transformed social reality. The latter is constantly produced and reproduced by conscious subjects participating in it. Acting people motivated by values and goals they want to achieve and knowledge instructing them in how to realize these goals, decide about the shape of a given practice, but they can do this only within a certain structural context. This is a classical attempt at interpreting the relation between “structure” and “agent” that at the same time Sahlins, for instance, also wanted to solve. Culture itself is understood as a form of social consciousness, which consists of normative convictions (about values which are worth achieving) and directive ones (how to achieve these values), both of them particular for any social group. Understood as “ideational” reality (à la Ward Goodenough), culture functions as a subjective and functional regulator of social practice and is conditioned by the same practice. In contradistinction to the “new Polish ethnology,” agency is ascribed to social actors. Practice and culture comprise a field of constant negotiation between individuals and groups located differently in a social structure and invested with differential power in shaping social practice and the cultural representations of it.

In the 1980s, the school focused on the reevaluation of existing anthropological theories. Its representatives embraced the view that science is a domain of culture and practice similar to, for instance, linguistic, artistic and religious cultures and practices. Anthropological theories were not seen merely in terms of their logical connections, but in a broader sociocultural context. In this view, scientific images do not reflect reality, as positivists believed, but are a part of the “cultural dimension of the human objective world” (Pałubicka 1990). Anthropological descriptions themselves present changing constructs regarding cultural phenomena that, in fact, are permeated with our own culturally determined views of them. An ethnocentric character to anthropological concepts, their process of evolution and the cognitive implications for our current view of cultures, in particular of “Other’s” cultures, were emphasized. Driven by these assumptions, the “socio-pragmatists” from Poznań tried to relativize commonly shared and universally applied anthropological categories such as language, magic, religion and ritual. Thus, their reinterpretations addressed various spheres of culture: linguistic (Wojciech Burszta), customs and morality (Jan Grad), and magical, religious and ritualistic (Michał Buchowski), while relativism, rationalism and cross-cultural translations (Zbigniew Gierszewski, Buchowski, Wojciech Burszta) were also discussed.3

3 I discuss these issues in more detail in Buchowski 2011.
In the 1990s, some representatives of the “Poznań School” continued a tradition of critically scrutinizing anthropological theories (Wojciech Dohnal and Piotr Fabiś), while others researched mutual relations between anthropology and literature and philosophy (Burszta and Waldemar Kuligowski). Others followed in the footsteps of the cultural critique inherent in Kmita’s theory of social practice and addressed issues of relations of power and cultural hegemony (Buchowski and Monika Baer). These works became a point of reference for further research on gender relations, inequalities emerging from the process of neo-liberal transformations after 1989 and some studies comparing post-colonialism to post-socialism.

As in the case of the “new Polish ethnology,” the school from Poznań was quite well acquainted with some western ideas, especially in the philosophy of science, but it worked out an original theory of culture of its own, as well as a methodology that enabled an unprecedented reinterpretation of anthropological theories and prompted more critical and “materialist” readings of post-communist transition.

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Nevertheless, in the vein of Kundera’s cultural resistance to Soviet domination, ethnologists also longed for the West and Western ideas. For many, western-style social and cultural anthropology was fetishized and constituted an iconic model to be followed. These politically conditioned relations with Western scholarship led, especially after 1989, to a self-imposed colonization similar to the processes that have taken place in the fields of economy and politics. Western models have often been uncritically embraced. In this sense, Central European anthropology has become a part-and-parcel of the West, but in the Westerners’ anthropological perception it still figures as a poor kin and is situated in a grey zone. In Wallerstein’s terms, it is semi-periphery on the map of the global flow of anthropological knowledge. In any case, it is neither the East nor the West, and is mistakenly placed by Southern Rebels simply in the hegemonic North.

There is one more insight pertinent in this context. A more general picture of the post-socialist intellectual panorama has to be outlined. To understand the dynamics of post-colonialism and post-socialism, it is essential to see that postcolonialists speak in the name of the intellectual contents of anti-colonial revolutions against, and struggles with, the West and its global colonial and neocolonial dominance. Is there a contemporary voice in Central Europe that does this? I do not think so, because 1989 was not an anti-colonial struggle against the West: quite to the contrary, its capitalism is seen as the most attractive version of modernity. As indicated above, the West was seen as a liberator, protector and future ideal. Post-communist political intellectuals often called for outright self-colonization by the

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4 For more details about these relationships see Červinková 2009.
West in order to become liberated from the Eastern model and from the Soviet embrace. Transition theories appealed for a direct, often extremely neoliberal emulation of the West. Michael Herzfeld (2002) labels this kind of dependency crypto-colonialism. In such settings of intellectual and material dependency, no Frantz Fanon can be born in the region. The social location of Central European scholars as underdogs in the anthropological community of scholars does not equate to a different epistemic location. If their perspective really differs, then it is rather in its reactionary stance in relation to other critically minded anthropologists both in the South and West. Whether anthropology in Central Europe can become a tool for finding a post-crypto-colonial voice, as powerful and influential as that in the Global South, depends probably upon its capacity to work out a self-conscious program for an alternative modernity in Central Europe, which will be highly skeptical towards hegemonic neoliberal as well as populist, or even nationalist, ideologies. Actually, in rising to this challenge, anthropologists seem to be in a privileged position due to the discipline’s critical approach to all forms of cultural domination that arise out of social hierarchies and injustice.

One has to add that, in the beginning of this new century, a number of anthropologists have tried to engage in mainstream Western anthropological debates. Quite a few among them have been trained at various western European and northern American universities or profited from scholarly exchange. All of them import new ideas back home which they apply in research and teaching. In a productive dialogue with local traditions, they try hard to overcome existing global hierarchies of knowledge and contribute to the emergence of critical anthropology. There is a hope that as a result, in ways similar to the described above with regard to the socialist past, new original ideas are developing. In these attempts, an overcoming of an intellectual crypto-colonialism seems to be axiomatic.

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By referring to the example of Central Europe, I have just wanted to emphasize that (1) we should always be aware of the existence of such twilight zones that constantly emerge and re-emerge on the global anthropological map, and (2) that thinking in terms of blocks and lines is not only essentializing, but often intellectually futile. World anthropologies should rather be conceptualized as rhizomes, strings, flows and osmotic relations, as the product of continuous space, time and social relations “traversed by economic and political relations of inequality” and “part and parcel of a global system of domination” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 45, 47), but also as intricate and ever-changing contact zones.

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5 It was Katherine Verdery who asked a question about who would become the Frantz Fanon of the new corpus of knowledge in and about Central and Eastern Europe (2002: 20).

6 There is no room to render them in detail. I have tried to indicate some, although without really analyzing them, in Buchowski 2012 (chapter IV: “Supplement: Emerging Currents”).
Meanwhile, twilight zones can potentially be very productive also in the domain of anthropological knowledge. At contact zones, “border thinking” can thrive. It can be seen as a critical response both to hegemonic ideas and to marginal fundamentalisms like conservatives’ and nationalists’ reactions to modernity. Border thinking creates a friendly milieu for avoiding fundamentalism and methodological nationalism, as well as isolated, parochial particularism. The latter, a version of which is described by Lins Ribeiro and Escobar as “metropolitan provincialism” (2005: 13), can be easily exercised in the centers of anthropological power. Border thinking in twilight zones also promotes a horizontal dialogue as opposed to any form of vertical monologue. Its slogan goes something like this: “we are all equal because we are all different.” Mutual interaction and dialogue opens spaces for transmodern, universal, transversal and pluriversal anthropology, which still needs a common conceptual language, despite this very diversity of intellectual traditions.

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