

Teksty Drugie 2017, 1, s. 91-110
Special Issue – English Edition



Ethnographic Experiments and Art in Rural Poland: Beyond the Culture of Shaming – Coevalness, the Inward Turn, and Proto- Sociology

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The text is based on a research project funded by the Polish National Science Centre, no. 2012/05/D/HS2/03639.

DOI:10.18317/td.2018.en.1.6

Debate on the genealogy of Polish society appeared quite suddenly and in several places at once. As early as the 1980s, sociologist Jacek Wasilewski wrote in *Spółeczeństwo polskie, społeczeństwo chłopskie* [*The Polish Society: Peasant Society*],¹ and recently reiterated in the *Znak* monthly,² that the rural, peasant identity of the nation at the time of the Polish People's Republic was associated with subordination and the recollection of poverty and deprivation, and hence with tendencies to meticulously accumulate material goods, to inbreed and turn to "familism," and to feeling uncertain and dependent on fate. Despite the stigma of being rustic and migrating to a new urban environment, as well as the shame of rural roots resulting from the far-reaching social

Tomasz Rakowski – Assistant Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, and lecturer at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw. He is also a medical doctor, a specialist in accident and emergency medicine. Author of *Hunters, Gatherers and Practitioners of Powerlessness: An Ethnography of the Degraded in Postsocialist Poland*, Berghahn Books, 2016.

1 Jacek Wasilewski, "Spółeczeństwo polskie, społeczeństwo chłopskie," *Studia Socjologiczne* 3 (1986): 40-56.

2 "Jesteśmy potomkami chłopów," an interview with prof. Jacek Wasilewski, conducted by Marta Duch-Dyngosz, *Znak* 684 (2012), accessed May 12, 2017, <http://www miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/68420122-prof-jackiem-wasilewskim-o-genealogii-polskiego-spoleczenstwa-rozmawia-marta-duch-dyngoszjestesmy-potomkami-chlopow/>.

upheaval that came with communist-era modernization, it is evident from a certain perspective that the discovery of peasant genealogies entails justification of a certain “defect” inherent in the emerging society in the communist era. Once again, the core of shame in Polish identity is disclosed in this way, fulfilling the fate of a society undergoing an intense rebuilding period. The problem, however, is that not only is it a real social process that one can investigate and describe, but, above all, it is a field in which the most sensitive points of contemporary Polish societal relations and relation with others may be drawn up and outlined. Thus, the hidden cultures of shaming are the place of constant intercultural encounter, in which a certain attitude towards “one’s own otherness” develops. It is a kind of laboratory of social co-existence, opening and closing on experiences of diversity and change, on paving one’s own way in relation to cultural classifications. Thus, our contemporary means of coexisting with others and, consequently, with ourselves, is played out in Poland in light of the stigma attached to “village people.”

Shame is a very powerful mechanism of “I”; it has an embodied character and can include the whole of a momentary individual experience – it can “question our whole being.” It is associated with the sense of social inadequacy, exposing deviations from the ideal “I.” It is a form of reaction to exposure, to the lifting of the “veil.” Shame is originally associated with a public, social situation. The root meaning of the word “shame,” as Ernest Kurtz writes, “implies this process to uncover, to expose, to wound.”³ Shame is therefore an “ostensible” activity; it indicates a defect, an inadequacy, and may take a more explicit, public form, which may be at the same time “open and undifferentiated,” as Helen Lewis wrote.⁴ It is a form of cultural regulation, a situation of public communion or indication related to a direct hierarchical social relationship, as Norbert Elias has shown in his studies on customs in ancient Europe, that is about the training of embarrassment in being naked or, in general, the physiological transparency of “the high-born.”⁵ Only gradually, in the successive centuries of modern Europe, did all that was social begin to wander inward, to internalize itself, “burn with shame” in the imagined relationship towards others. In this way, writes Giddens, shame reaches the “archaic environment,” “undercuts the roots of trust,” in which an individual distinguishes his or her own identity

3 Ernest Kurtz, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: iUniverse 2007), 28.

4 Helen B. Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971); see also Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 66–68.

5 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

(against others); it is “the negative side of the motivational system of the acting person.”⁶ This transition from a public situation to a more intrinsic one is crucial here, as it is still a social relationship that then goes beyond the whole identity. It can cause aggression directed towards oneself together with a deeply internalised sense of inadequacy. In this way, something that Helen Lewis calls “stifled” shame appears, a kind of shame that Anthony Giddens directly describes as a form of unconscious fear of one’s own adequacy, directly related to the sense of fearing for one’s ontological security.⁷

Acting and thinking according to the rules and imaginings prevailing in the rural world can dangerously open this path to “stifled” shaming. This is the case when subsequent stages of modernization discourse appear, revealing and diagnosing the problems of development and social change in post-socialist Poland. It is this “mental apparatus” of the village that many authors represent as a fatal feature of a society rebuilding itself. There is a very forceful discourse in which all that is rural is perceived as something afflicted by embarrassing “retardation,” which negates desired cultural trends. It is synonymous with what one should get rid of and rebuild as quickly as possible. Such diagnoses appear in an exaggerated form in many public statements by scholars, such as Janusz Majcherek, who identifies villagers as a group causing “a break in modernization.”⁸ The rural environment is also often depicted with images of mediocrity and mundane everyday life. The documentary *Czekając na sobotę* [*Waiting for Saturday*],⁹ in which rural youth occupy themselves with boring, pointless activities, can serve as a particularly striking example here. Young villagers do not work, do not have any interests – in one shot young people are incessantly browsing the screens of their mobile phones, in another one they demolish an old, disintegrating vehicle, in yet another they idly occupy a shabby bus stop; all this is juxtaposed against erotic shows in rural clubs and discos on Saturdays, portrayed as embarrassing, distasteful entertainment.

In thinking about the profound presence of the world of villages in contemporary Poland with the latter’s transformations and social experiences, there is always a disturbing (and embarrassing) presence of some “difficult” intra-social contact. In this connection, the world of social elites – publishers,

6 Giddens, *Modernity*, 67-68.

7 Ibid.

8 Janusz Majcherek, “Hamulcowi modernizacji,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 8, 2012; see also „Chłop to nie obywatel,” an interview with Maria Halamska, conducted by Łukasz Pawłowski, *Kultura Liberalna* 2 (2015).

9 *Czekając na sobotę*, directed by Irena Morawska and Jerzy Morawski (Poland, 2010).

film productions, and social debates – retains the upper hand culturally. Thus it turns out that to a large extent we are indeed dealing with a generalized interpretation of the village as “incomplete” in terms of social life. This is a strategy in which village dwellers are not only identified or criticized, but become more imaginary, a “zero-state,”¹⁰ so as to be able to think of a proper, desirable form of social development, so as to understand what is social. Put it another way, they become figures “useful for thinking.” It does not even concern the fact that there is dispute over knowledge of the countryside, in which, on the one hand, the well-known literary black and white stereotypes – of the village as paradise and the village as hell – clash with one another (as depicted by Ewa Korulska, who describes these typical literary images as “created by the Polish intelligentsia”),¹¹ but the fact that we are entering the field of encounter, conflict, and continual transformation marking the forms of different backgrounds concurrent in society. On the one hand, we are using the very specific language of village life, while on the other, symbolically subjugating and orientalisating the village for our own heuristic purposes.

Such license to reflect on and rework the sources of shame that appears when discovering rural identity is thus accompanied by an image of a very strong, dominating narrative, stemming from the milieu of metropolitan elites, sociologists, historians, and people of culture – that is, the mythmakers¹² in possession of dominant, intellectual capital, whose aim has been “to change, to improve, to develop” and to defend the society from “flimsiness, trash, tackiness.”¹³ Thus there emerges a process of interpreting social life, including the social and political life of the country, which introduces, to use Michael Foucault’s words, also invoked by Leela Gandhi,¹⁴ “double suppression: in terms of those excluded from the process and in terms of the model and standard it imposes on those who receive this knowledge.”¹⁵ Thus there appears a sort of internal colonization or orientalisation of the

10 Olga Kwiatkowska “Lucim czyli konsekwencje pewnego projektu,” in *Zaangażowanie czy izolacja? Współczesne strategie egzystencji humanistów*, ed. Jacek Kowalewski, Wojciech Piasek and Marta Śliwa (Olsztyn: Colloquia Humaniorum, 2007).

11 Ewa Korulska, “O chłopie – bez tytułu,” *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 1-2 (1994).

12 *The Mythmakers. Intellectuals and the Intelligentsia*, ed. Raj P. Mohan (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

13 Teresa Bogucka, “Obrona mniejszości,” *Gazeta Wyborcza. Magazyn*, April 5, 2001.

14 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory. A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

15 *Ibid.*

countryside and periphery Orientalism *à la polonaise*, as Michał Buchowski wrote¹⁶. But it is also the situation in which these actors themselves, the rural circles, begin to subordinate their voices to the discourse of the centre, suppressing with embarrassment their own languages and experiences. They subsequently perform an internalised self-colonization or alternatively, in the words of Ewa Klekot (more in the context of folklore and regional studies),¹⁷ self-folklorisation. On the boundaries of this process, the boundaries of intersecting expressions and discourses, in the postcolonial “contact zones” that Mary Louise Pratt has written about, there appears a moment of embarrassment, an awareness of inclusion and exclusion from the legitimate description of social reality, or from constructing the descriptive language of one’s own situation, albeit in terms of some hegemonic description.

In this article, I am going to reverse the perspective yet again and demonstrate that there are ways out of this catch-22 and ways to include the experiences of people living in rural areas, so that the perspective of suppressing and orientalising the rural experience would be at least subject to significant dissolution. It is not just about decolonizing the description as such or disclosing the elements of “one’s own” voice/rural experience (though it will be the starting point), but about the identification of such perspectives and actions which promise a new encounter, a conciliation with the rural world, an understanding that balances on the verge of shame and, perhaps, crosses this boundary. I shall refer to the world of rural skills and foundations of social subjectivity of village people encountered in experimental artistic and ethnographic projects related to the situation of “coevalness” of both sides of the encounter (J. Fabian), the conditions of interdependence and the possibility of making “the inward turn inward” (N. Rapport) and the possibility of constructing an alternative, protosociological, social knowledge. In this space, artists’ projects in subsequent sections will merge with what is ethnographic and up-to-date; with contemporary rebellions and strategies for agricultural cooperation, and even bottom-up expressions of agricultural work; with other “separate” village-specific materiality and technical imagery; and finally with other alternative social histories produced by these communities. I would say that each of these activities may be treated as a way leading to the abandonment of the postcolonial “contact zone,” where shame comes to the fore, is reinforced, and (as in the

16 Michał Buchowski, “The Specter of Orientalism In Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 3 (2006): 463–482.

17 Ewa Klekot, “Samofolkloryzacja: współczesna sztuka ludowa z perspektywy krytyki postkolonialnej,” *Kultura Współczesna* 1 (2014): 86–99.

characters of Rushdie's novel)¹⁸ from a complex architecture of socially created barriers can turn into a totalizing, thoroughly penetrating "incarnation of disgrace" that subsequently lives its own, violent life.¹⁹

Coevalness: Rebellious Installations From The Village Of Kurówko

The problem is that while in Polish public discourse the village as the birthplace of social tensions has been around for a long time, its current problems and tensions often remain invisible and are difficult to fully grasp. The "peasant" genealogy of contemporary Polish society, closely associated with post-war migration and relocation of rural people to big city blocks and tenements, was rediscovered (rather painfully) in Poland a few years ago. From the beginning, many things could account for this, including strong social conflict born in the period of the Republic of Nobles and lasting until the last years of the Second Republic – it is a whole history of deepening social inequalities. At the same time, in subsequent studies and interpretations – from the work of Jan Sowa,²⁰ to Michał Łuczewski²¹ and Andrzej Leder²² – we find, on the one hand, analyses confirming the experience of profound economic subordination of the countryside and, on the other, elements of a resistance culture, a revolt against exploitation and even in the beginning of the nineteenth century, an opposition to assigning the word "noble" in designating the nation, not to mention a stubborn persistence for example in Galicia, in identifying oneself as "we-imperial," that is the subordinates of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor.²³

According to Andrzej Leder, social transformations resulted from the fact that right after the war and after the "post-war" period, there was a quiet revolution that the society "sleepwalked through."²⁴ Mansions, which were the centres of local authority, disappeared as did the bourgeois workshops

18 Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Vintage, 1995).

19 See Marek Pacukiewicz, "Między wstydem a bezwstydem – eksperyment Salmana Rushdiego," *Napis* 18 (2012): 271-286.

20 Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* (Kraków: Universitas, 2011).

21 Michał Łuczewski, *Odwieczny naród. Polak i katolik w Żmijce* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2012).

22 Andrzej Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013).

23 Łuczewski, *Odwieczny naród*.

24 Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja*.

and commercial businesses of the Jews who were exterminated in the Holocaust. In his view, people migrating from predominantly poor and overcrowded villages, descendants of peasants, gradually filled the vacuum. The profound transformation of the post-war era was thus “displaced” and “forgotten,” and when the years of political transformation came, it turns out that this syndrome remained deep inside the Poles. From this perspective, Polish society and its growing middle class, which descended from rural migrants, are marked by a certain defect, even a certain unawareness, or even worse – immaturity. Resentment, memory of subordination, elements of envy, greed and tendency to accumulate goods, reluctance to care for the common good, all such defects and deficiencies were thus re-discovered not only in the inhabitants of rural areas but also among the inhabitants of cities – the emerging middle class – which was largely constituted by rural migrants.

What makes these interpretations take such forms? What makes us discern in the rural cultures the inertia and its overwhelming impact on our genealogy? I would claim that, despite a certain immense, liberating potential that these interpretations constantly bring, there is still the tendency for the countryside and all that is rural to become more of a “heuristic tool” than something to be understood. We are dealing here with the projection of the village and its problems into the realm of the past, not only in the sense prevailing in discussions about the abolition of serfdom 150 years ago, or about the Galician Slaughter, the peasant rebellions, and strikes during the interwar years, but also in the sense that the village is deeply suspended in the past, in the “extra-temporal” world. What does “extra-temporal” mean? It means that the debate about past experiences is at stake here and that we can discuss them at the level of facts related to social history, written data, documents, statistics, memories, and historical analyses. These sources of knowledge are complete and closed; thus the past itself is also distant, so it is not a point of contact from which “there is no escape.” On the one hand, I am convinced that these efforts have opened the way for historians, cultural researchers, and many others, but on the other hand, it is worth noting here that we are dealing with a reality that has been shifted over time, so essentially “ready,” “tamperproof,” and secured for the interpreting historian. In other words, there is no longer any action in it – there is only ready material deposited in the texts, merely waiting for intense analysis.

For many reasons, I believe that an encounter with the world of Polish village people is also possible when genealogies cease to signify and mean what is rural and when the carriers of social experiences are encountered as real people, subjected to the pressures of different policies and dependencies. I believe that in this way we access rural worlds, which are first and foremost losing their “safe” historicity; it is not marginalized in time, but present

here and now, and moreover, as George Marcus once wrote, it simply implements the structures which are deeply disturbing both for “us” and “them.”²⁵ The artistic and ethnographic projects and actions, that I shall present here briefly are clearly, opposed “thinking through history” and relying on “ready-to-interpret” historical sources. While engaged in their latest undertakings – “Monument to a Peasant” and “Village People: A Museum of Alternative Social History” – Daniel Rycharski and curator Szymon Maliborski from the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw did the opposite: they got involved in the most current events, fulfilling the job of artists-ethnographers. They joined the farmers protesting under the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. They listened to their stories about the purchase of land by the “money mules,” about the fake buyers of tens of hectares of land, about the scourge of wild boars uprooting fields and pastures, and about extending the repayment of financial penalties for surplus milk. They collected narratives about Poland and Polishness, observed spontaneous symbols of national, identity-related emotions and “awkward discourses”²⁶ (“We are defending the last bastion of Polishness, Polish land and forests”). They would meet with members of Solidarity and other trade unions; they looked at the installations of peasant activist Gabriel Janowski, such as tree stumps wrapped in barbed wire, sacred figurines, whole installations fitted to trees on a green belt, a no man’s land where, as farmers say, “they bother no one,” or an array of meek wooden lambs, with bowed heads and strapped with a well-known logo: “Teraz Polska!” (“Time for Poland!”).

In this way, the creators of “Monument to a Peasant” currently remain in the opposition, and they may even become, as Weronika Plińska²⁷ wrote, an allusion to a peasant “social revolt.” Their project is a column set up on a farm trailer for spreading manure, and at its top is a wax figure of the “sorrowful”

25 George Marcus, “The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scène of Anthropological Fieldwork,” *Representations* 59 (1997): 85-108.

26 Anna Malewska-Szałygin, “Zmagania z nieporadnymi dyskursami w polityce. O pożytkach płynących z metody zastosowania etnograficznych badań terenowych,” in *Humanistyka i dominacja. Oddolne doświadczenia społeczne w perspektywie zewnętrznych rozpoznai*, ed. Tomasz Rakowski and Anna Malewska-Szałygin (Olsztyn: Colloquia Humaniorum, 2011).

27 Weronika Plińska, “Wciąż obcy kontekst. Pomnik chłopca Daniela Rycharskiego,” *Magazyn Szum* 11 (2015): 68. See also Waldemar Kuligowski, “Więźniowie ziemi i stereotypu. Chłopi polscy jako buntownicy,” accessed January 12, 2016, [http://magazynsztuki.eu/index.php/teksty/117-wiezniowie-ziemi-i-stereotypu-chlopi-polscy-jako-buntownicy/](http://magazynsztuki.eu/index.php/teksty/117-wiezniowie-ziemi-i-stereotypu-chlopi-polscy-jako-buntownicy).

peasant, full of grief, Adam Pesta. The monument of the peasant, in this case the administrative head of Kurówko, which is Rycharski's home village, then moves a few hundred kilometres down country roads to Krakow, as a representation of the harm done to peasants, like its prototype, the monument sketched by Albrecht Dürer, which was never created and was supposed to commemorate the bloody suppressed wars and peasant revolts in sixteenth-century Europe. Likewise, the project "Museum" is a distinct representation of the village: it is a dismantled country cottage, with a collection of rural history-objects placed between its overturned walls. This documentation includes, among others, materials from meetings with the farmers protesting under the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, a crushed television screen resembling a gallon and filled with cheap wine, as well as a prominently displayed, bloody bandage of a worker who suffered from an accident during the assembly of the exhibition. The worker was from Kurówko and is a close relative of Rycharski – his grandfather.

This situation relates to what anthropologist Johannes Fabian described in his book (from the 1980s) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*,²⁸ namely the complex temporal relationships of every cultural description. He demonstrated that marginalizing the described or experienced otherness outside the here and now, toward either non-present "history" (a corpus of sources subjected to re-evaluation, interpretation, and association in a causal continuum), or toward a non-present "ethnography" cast out of time (the description of supposedly unchangeable, extra-temporal habits, and ways of life of some "people") precludes a properly effective encounter of different human worlds. However, the real encounter of differences in perceiving the world is possible only when there is something that Fabian calls the coevalness of the encounter. The encounter, which is supposed to imply something happening in reality, he writes, is possible only if the involved parties share their time with one another.²⁹ One could say this is a situation where the experience and reality of other people are current and when people have the capacity, to act that is to shape and co-shape the interpretation of this world and the place in which we exist together.

This is almost straightforward. Although Rycharski, in one of his projects, built a gate-portal in front of a farmhouse to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the abolition of serfdom, the host of this place, village administrator of Kurówko, delivered and recorded a speech on all issues that currently

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

29 *Ibid.*, 30.

bothered him, such as buying land, creating large-scale farms, the inevitable desertification of villages, and the future. When asked about serfdom, he did not really reply and admitted that this is not a clear, actual point of reference passionately discussed among neighbours. When I ran my ethnographic interviews in Kurówko, I found it hard to understand that a couple of middle-aged farmers, with a dozen-hectare farm and a gateway facing almost directly the gate-portal did not know exactly what it was commemorating and what was inscribed on it ("150 years of abolition of serfdom"). It is thus evident that tensions exist elsewhere; that the rural people of Northern Mazovia, where there are less and less farmers (and more and more agricultural corporations buying land) have their own complaints, their own lament. In this situation the "rusticity" itself is not so much aroused by its social, class, cultural, and therefore "stifled" mechanisms of embarrassment, but it rather becomes a real, disturbing contact with a new historical process that shapes the parties of the encounter. Such encounters are quite different from those encounters with the genealogy and peasant roots of Polish society. Rather than interpreting "genealogy," they are more like actions full of danger associated with coming into contact with one's own distinctness. "It is more like "sharing time" and remaining in contact, in a "dialogue situation," contrary to interpretative and embarrassing attributions to time, place, and social role; contrary to what Johannes Fabian calls the "denial of coevalness."³⁰

The Inward Turn, Beyond Cultural Attributions: The Discovery Of Home-Made Artefacts

In this way the history of rural experience demands what one would call "actual decolonization." What does it mean? Postcolonial Polish studies have frequently pointed to the appropriation of history, always radiating from the centre of the Polish Republic, orientalizing and subordinating the experience of its eastern peripheries to the centre. I am inclined to believe, however, that the most fateful process of colonisation experienced by the whole society was the history of internalized subordination, the creation of the "discourse of embarrassment" of all that is rural. It is therefore, above all, a very current birth of social history, written from the point of view of very special interpreters, namely, social scientists. From this very perspective, the transformations of Polish society are the transformations of rural people together with their "mentality," familism, and non-citizenship. From the very beginning it is, therefore, more of a "burden," a "system residuum," whereas the strategies of rebellion and resistance, social movements, and good civic practices are

³⁰ Ibid., 31.

perceived as arising primarily in cities (this is where, as some might say, the history of a “free society” is taking place).

People from the villages of Broniów and Ostalówek, among whom we conducted our artistic and ethnographic projects (“Prologue,” “Ethnography / Animation / Art”),³¹ have their own, very distinctive history of the past few decades. The history of the Polish People’s Republic is often reminisced about with fascination – for example, years of going to schools and boarding houses in cities, years of vocational training. Conversations and experimental ethnographic studies reveal such activities in the village which are still unknown to researchers. It turns out anew how important such places as firehouses, local schools, and village halls are, but in the sense that all these buildings inspire specifically informal, bottom-up organizational activity, such as “community service,” which we unambiguously associate with typical “socialist farce,” but in the accounts I gathered in villages, they appear as something very important. Therefore, “community activities” are often recounted with enthusiasm as they are perceived as an experience of resistance and self-determination rather than socialist subordination.³² In addition, the story behind this phenomenon is worth noting. The villagers – the people working on construction sites in cities and in factories, who completed building schools in the 1960s and 1970s – started to build walls and construct buildings on their own, using new techniques. They took advantage not only of the fact that they had access to the materials, but also that they had acquired the necessary skills (bricklayers from the vicinity of Broniów in their stories frequently mention spontaneous show-offs, contests, physical challenges, and work “for show”). Regardless of any shortage of materials and tools, they developed incredible abilities and technical creativity: in Broniów and neighbouring villages, there are self-constructed tractors, mowers with engines from washing machines, welding machines, in every household these self-made devices are still used, invented, and manufactured anew.³³

The skill to reconstruct and constantly rebuild and repair is related to a completely distinct technical imagination. Devices are always stripped and reassembled, they are given a distinct function, perceived in a different way. For example, one of the inhabitants of Broniów explained to me that

31 *Etnografia/animacja/sztuka. Nierozpoznane wymiary rozwoju kulturalnego*, ed. Tomasz Rakowski (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013).

32 Weronika Plińska, “Ochotnicza straż pożarna – klub kultury,” in *Lokalnie: animacja kultury/community arts*, ed. Iwona Kurz (Warszawa: IKP UW, 2008); Tomasz Pisarzewski, “Wspólnota wiejska – przemiana,” in *Lokalnie: animacja kultury*.

33 Łukasz Skąpski, “O urządzeniach z Broniowa i Ostalówka,” in *Etnografia/animacja/sztuka*.

his self-constructed tractor is a great machine, because it has a built-in engine from a Fiat 126p, which can even “haul a ton” and “when it breaks down, I will throw it away and I will buy a new one for one hundred zloty and I will insert another one just the same.” This statement comprises a typical way of thinking about devices, houses, and machines as entities that are subject to transformation, thus “fragile” and “breakable” by definition. This transformation as well as their wear and tear are their positive attributes, not their durability. One might suppose that the inhabitants of Broniów would prefer their devices to be solid, durable, and covered by a warranty. However, there arises the problem of discovering a completely different technical imagination and other ways of thinking – these devices are always “to be redone.” When some young people from a neighbouring village bought a ready-made chainsaw, they instantly replaced its parts (e.g. spark plugs) with ones from older saws to make the new one “cut better.” Nonetheless, an intimate sphere is revealed in this way in which these self-made machines may appear “clumsy” – it is difficult to talk about them at first as they are a source of embarrassment. Thus it is also a protected zone, an area of “cultural intimacy” to use the concept of Michael Herzfeld.³⁴

In the beginning, accounts of “shaming,” a certain kind of inadequacy, or simply anxiety, accompanied all our projects concerning self-made devices, which we carried out together with a group of artists and cultural activists. Artist and co-founder of the “Azorro” group Łukasz Skąpski documented the self-made devices, appliances, cars, tractors, and finally fitness equipment. He made photo shoots of young people in their gyms, in soft light, with props, weights in their hands. Such encounters were initially hesitant, shaky. The authors of these self-made devices and equipment might treat their works as something of their “own,” something they were somewhat proud of, but facing the artist, they could see and did see that there was something that they felt a bit embarrassed about – something they feared. After all, these self-made machines are not registered; they exist beyond regulations. When we brought up the idea of preparing an exhibition of these devices in the centre of the village, people were hesitant till the last moment. Mechanic Andrzej Chylicki, especially, was not entirely sure whether his buggy should be exhibited. When we came to see him, it turned out that he had already cleaned the engine, filters, refuelled, and was making the throttle cable from the hand-brake cord – he had decided to exhibit his vehicle. In my opinion, this is the very moment when something particularly important happened. The meeting took place in the sphere which had initially been embarrassing, but then

34 Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

both parties of the meeting for a moment seemed to exist anew, beyond their previous ways of being. This is a situation of “coevalness” in the sense that technical activity is no longer a cumulative, rural “cultural resource.” A transformation is taking place here, in which the encountering entities are together, for a moment they become “other people, they give one another an oblique glance, not fully recognizing each other, but at the same time they re-discover themselves and their motives for action (“I’m born, so you could be born,” to evoke the metaphorical language of Jerzy Grotowski).³⁵ Both parties thus undergo a change, leading to a shared, experimental creation of experience, towards something that is still to come, that is still to happen. It is therefore a situation in which the perspective of what is accumulated in culture has been trespassed, and so has the way towards what is just emerging, in the direction – as C. Gatt and T. Ingold write – of a new, “improvised” world.³⁶

Another meeting took place a year later. Magdalena Lipska from MSN (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw) was preparing a project about a piano constructed by Wiesław Zielonka from Broniów. He is one of the extraordinary masters of Broniów. After elementary school, he joined the Voluntary Work Corps for the youngsters in Szczecin, where he learned bricklaying. Later, he passed his skills on to his younger cousins and colleagues from the Volunteer Fire Department, and nowadays, they constitute a whole clan of bricklayers who have gained recognition as professionals and go to work in Europe. They also constantly rebuild and improve the headquarters of the fire department in Broniów as part of their “voluntary work.” However, Zielonka, and then others, started to experiment and build on their own. They not only build edifices, but also produce building materials such as cinder blocks (Zielonka made his own construction of a vibratory table on which he moulded the form for the units). He has also constructed many self-made devices, such as a tricycle from a motorbike, and a lawnmower from a pram and a vintage rotary washing machine. On the fence he welded oil lamps (from railway switches), which he got while working for the railway, and he lights them during the holidays. When Magdalena Lipska was preparing the project for MSN, she came up with an idea that the avant-garde experimental pianist Marcin Masecki could give a concert, variations based on Bach’s *Kunst der Fuge*, on the instrument constructed by Wiesław Zielonka in the common room located in the village centre. The point was to make the work of Zielonka – that is, the piano he

35 Jerzy Grotowski, *Święto, Odra 6* (1972).

36 Caroline Gatt and Tim Ingold, “From Description to Correspondence. Anthropology in Real Time,” in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, ed. Wendy Gunn, Ton Otto and Rachel Charlotte-Smith (London: Smith Bloomsbury, 2013), 145.

had created, the concert and the encounter – “a social fact,”³⁷ to use the curator’s words. A few years ago Zielonka got a broken, damaged instrument. He transported it to Broniów and began to add the walls of the piano, fitted in the strings, most of which he had to make himself from copper wire extracted from car tires, mainly from a Czech Skoda – according to him “they produce a good growling sound.” He replaced several dozen missing keys and produced the new ones from a refrigerator door. When Lipska came to him with her idea, Wiesław Zielonka willingly agreed. He had previously participated in activities of the Field Collective, and in a parallel project led by Magda Lipska and Alicja Rogalska.

Zielonka was always very willing to cooperate. However, when a tuner hired by MSN came to his house and said that the piano was not suitable for playing, he became very agitated. He accused the tuner of having no idea about the instrument and stated that he would tune it himself, using an optical micrometer he had found when working for the railways. The concert nonetheless took place. Masecki, who came to the concert despite his busy schedule (right off the heels of a Latin American tour, he came by car), immediately liked the instrument, and said that it had a “Japanese sound.” When Zielonka’s piano was placed in the common room and Masecki gave a wonderful, improvised concert, everyone was very impressed, both the local community and the guests from big cities and galleries. Wiesław Zielonka, however, was performing at the Wedding Bands Competition in nearby Pawłów at the time and regretted very much that his schedule overlapped with the pianist’s arrangements with the Museum. After the concert, we drove to Pawłowo, at Masecki’s request, to meet Zielonka. Everything happened very quickly as Masecki had other scheduled commitments and had to be back in Warsaw soon. We found Wiesław Zielonka in Pawłowo, in a circle of musicians raising toasts to each other, behind the common room, where band auditions were being held. Masecki and Zielonka greeted each other cordially and then started talking. Zielonka was moved, saying that he wanted to be a musician, that it was his dream, but that his life turned out differently. Masecki listened to the constructor of the piano he had just been playing – experimenting with sounds – and talked about his father who was a tuner, and how he learned to tune instruments as a child. In my opinion, it was a particularly important moment for Zielonka – it must have been a form of recognition for his work on a damaged instrument.

What exactly happened then? One might say that it was an extraordinary encounter of two creators from two different social backgrounds. The

37 See <http://artmuseum.pl/pl/wydarzenia/marcin-masecki-fuga-na-dwa-pianina/> accessed February 12, 2016.

appearance of “social boundaries” in such social events is thus unwanted; everything is happening on the border of the metropolitan art world, of the perfect piano school, and at the same time of a rural culture of redoing things and creating home-made devices. Somewhere on either side, there are echoes of the culture of shame and a silent awareness of the difference between the two spheres of activity. This meeting, this project of breaking the logic of the culture of shame related to all that is “rural,” to all that is “getting through” into the cities, accused, perhaps, of a certain “primitivist fantasy,”³⁸ as Hal Foster would put it, “in which the Other blends in with the unconscious, spontaneous creative process, like in Lévi-Strauss’s idea of bricolage. However, it must be noted that here these stereotypical roles are subject to transformation. The pianist is not the central figure here, who “used” the creator and the situation of the meeting. Instead, he follows the piano maker, looking for him in a nearby village, at a concert in Pawłów. Zielonka is moved by the meeting. He meets a partner in conversation, which is especially connected with the figure of the artist’s father, the tuner, and talks with agitation about this kind of work. In this situation, both interlocutors “share time” and do not push each other into timelessness or the past – so there is no cultural or social type-casting. There is thus something I would call a “turn inwards,” the moment of going beyond cultural categories, beyond any “local knowledge.”

To do this, however, it is necessary to discover that perceiving the cultural apparatus as something that is exhaustive (a “mentality”) is extremely problematic. It then becomes a form of captivity, it is something “indelible,”³⁹ it can become an “inadequacy” – it can be hidden, but you can never get rid of it. In this sense, the culture of the rural environment transforms into the culture of shaming and embarrassment, becoming a stigma, representing a permanent disposition (there is the Polish expression “there’s a straw sticking out of your shoes,” which can be translated to “country bumpkin”). If we take a closer look, we will see that this is the result of blurring the perception of people as actors capable of transcending their cultural forms of existence. However, I think that it is not only possible to transgress the culture of shaming, but that it is even necessary, following a theory that contrasts with definitive cultural assignments, that is the theory of “Anyone” created by Nigel Rapport. In a certain way, this is due to such encounters as the one that took place in Broniów, between ethnographers, Łukasz Skąpski, and creators

38 Hal Foster, *Artist as Ethnographer*, in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Chicago: MIT Press, 1996).

39 See Brigitta Helbig-Mischewski, “Kilka uwag o wstydzie w kulturze niemieckiej i polskiej na podstawie prac badaczy niemieckich,” in *Wstyd za PRL i nie tylko*, ed. K. Łozowska (Szczecin, 2010).

of self-made devices, and similarly between Marcin Masecki and Wiesław Zielonka. However, this is not a simple “suspension” of cultures and cultural assignments, or the illusion of reconciliation, meeting on a “neutral” ground. It is rather the recognition of a certain potentiality beyond the “culture of shaming,” the possibility of making the “inward turn.” Nigel Rapport⁴⁰ made a kind of breakthrough in thinking about culture and about “cultural conditioning.” While the aim of many advanced and classical anthropological studies is to interpret the actions of people while being submerged in the local worlds, in the worlds of “local knowledge” (Clifford Geertz’s concept of culture, based on revealing subtle cultural forms), Rapport proposed a perspective of interpretation of individual’s actions in its absolute, abstract sense. An individual extracted from culture thus becomes here the starting point for thinking. Hence the human being, the “Anyone,” is equipped with the rights and the capacity to transcend any cultural forms.

This project – as Rapport clearly emphasises – is not only cognitive or descriptive, but also ethical. It is a search for a underaking which could be Kantian in essence, extracting an individual from cultural particularism. What is particularly important, this ability to transgress one’s own (cultural) fate, to “live a thousand lives,” is not so much connected with the belief that external, cultural or social determinants are a burden and that in the future they will be successfully overcome, but with the conviction that individuals have the ability to invalidate them, transform them, move away from them. Hence, the reality of cultural assignments, as well as social tensions, inequalities and entanglements, which also stand behind the “culture,” does not lose in this perspective neither its presence nor its enormous impact on individuals’ lives (as can be seen in the biography of Wiesław Zielonka and Marcin Masecki). Nevertheless, by building a figure of an individual as an actor, who is always capable of, and entitled to, cross the collectively created paths of action (or paths of understanding) and, consequently, by making a turn towards the individual, the situation of anthropological knowledge is as if reopened. Moreover, Rapport claims that the individual actor should first be recognized as endowed with the power and ability to be on the move precisely because the power of cultural patterns and particular forms of action is so significant and powerful that it can prevent the existence of an independent, moral position of the subject. The force of the “turn inwards” thus becomes, paradoxically,

40 Nigel Rapport, “Apprehending Anyone. The Non-Indexical, Post-Cultural and Cosmopolitan Human Actor,” in *Colloquia Anthropologica*, ed. Michał Buchowski and Arkadiusz Bentkowski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, 2013); Tomasz Rakowski, *The Unrelenting Ability to Act. Nigel Rapport’s Anthropology of Freedom*, in *Colloquia Anthropologica*.

a guarantee of the moral perspective of the individual in the world of cultural equipment and socially created forms of adequacy; not only beyond cultural assignments but at the same time contrary to and due to them.

Proto-Sociology and Collaboration: Beyond the Culture of Shaming

One can thus say that it is all about breaking the invisible wall of the culture of shaming, that it is a move out of a certain socio-cultural trajectory. This disposition is difficult to recognize, but extremely important. It is the capacity to “be in motion,” a state called “metanoia” by the Greeks, towards the liberated, moving mind, and thus to a certain “internal liminality” of the subject, that is a human, or as Rapport writes – an “any,” an unassigned.⁴¹ All this is paradoxical indeed. If it is at all possible to understand the encounter of the village with reality and, at the same time, to go beyond the paradigm of embarrassment (and shame), beyond a certain game of adequacy and class inadequacy, it will only be through discovering this fundamental, unlimited freedom, this freedom from culture, that is from something that people are furnished with in such a complicated way.

We can go a step further and follow yet another direction. I think that meetings can be designed in such a way as to involve the village as a present actor, engaged in very similar social thinking. This is the way that more and more often ethnographers write. People from the worlds under investigation are recognized as those who, along with the cultural researchers, anthropologists, and artists, anticipate and shape knowledge about what is to become known, what they anticipate as knowledge. Such situations occur when the force of social, aesthetic, and political imagination remains symmetrical on the side of people as creators and sources of social thought. This is what researchers call the para-site of fieldwork.⁴² Together with a group of ethnographers, artists and community artists, we endeavored to create a social project which would be able to bring out these alternative encounters between worlds, and, above all, to build a site for such encounters and a certain closeness. Thus we prepared in Broniów, near Szydłowiec, an exhibition entitled *History of Broniów's Sociological Thought* – on white-covered cubes we placed red-lighted heads, formed of tape, and next to them we hung dashboards with a coherent lecture of social thought by five inhabitants of Broniów, “reflexive activists,” with their own ideas). We created five

⁴¹ Rapport, *Apprehending Anyone*.

⁴² Douglas Holmes and George Marcus “Collaboration Today and the Re-Imagination of the Classic Fieldwork Encounter,” *Collaborative Anthropology* 1 (2008): 81-101.

stands with posters presenting the main slogans of individual thinkers from Broniów (on an illuminated platform we put two famous volumes of *History of Sociological Thought*⁴³ by Polish sociologist Jerzy Szacki, because we wanted to show that the exhibition inscribes itself into this classic work; that it was, moreover, an indispensable supplement). The catchwords of the exhibition were associations that form a sequence of connotations: “people,” “guard,” “common room,” “building,” “team,” “land,” “food,” “village,” “unity,” “rhythm,” “action,” “cooperative,” “community interest,” “assert one’s rights,” “value of action,” and “something that will remain after us.” In the background, there was even a soundtrack composed of these keywords. It was not about the history of sociology as such, but it was first and foremost a situation in which, by experimenting, we tried to present how five people from Broniów think as a kind of rural, incessant activity, invisible, because grown into the current situation. This is the world of thought, which – quite like the world of “Warsaw residents” of *The Ethos of the Left* by Andrzej Mencwel⁴⁴ – is initially embedded in actions and activism, political endeavours, but which over time finds its way into life-long speculation, into a certain passionate, internal knowledge, absorbing people. It is knowledge in which the authors of “thoughts,” who in the course of time were to some extent deprived of the possibility of acting, confronted with other violent ideas and policies, are at some point left “alone with the world.”⁴⁵

There were five unique representatives of rural social thought: 1) Elżbieta Szewczyk, a long-time councillor, dairywoman, creating images of land that is overgrown, of „bushiness” and desocialisation of the world, as well as creating images of benign, small agriculture; 2) Barbara Szparaga, a village administrator creating her vision of a rural “fight for one’s rights”; 3) Zdzisław Szparaga, a bricklayer and firefighter, perceiving action in the long-term; 4) Wojciech Zbrozarczyk, a young mechanic, entrepreneur, councilor, and ideologist of the “concentric movement” in local politics; and last but not least 5) Zenon Szparaga, a farmer and retired serviceman, a former village administrator, rural activist, forming the ideas of quiet cooperation and unity. All these figures have been described in detail elsewhere,⁴⁶ and it is impossible to present in this

43 Jerzy Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej* (Warszawa: PWN, 2002).

44 Andrzej Mencwel, *Etos lewicy. Esej o narodzinach kulturalizmu polskiego* (Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009).

45 Roch Sulima, *Słowo i etos. Szkice o kulturze* (Kraków: Fundacja Artystyczna Związku Młodzieży Wiejskiej „Galicja”, 1992), 31.

46 Tomasz Rakowski, “Alternatywne historie myśli socjologicznej. Działania, imaginacje, pragnienia,” in *Etnografia/animacja/sztuka*.

text the full scope of this spontaneous sociological or para-ethnographic way of thought. I tried to demonstrate that it is possible to go beyond what is closed off in time, pushed back safely into the past, beyond what is cultural and attributed. Therefore, it was supposed to be a different form of encounter, it was more the creation of space for alternative forms of thinking in terms of “social knowledge,” but directed towards the future. In an ethnographic sense, it was a certain co-creation of the field of knowledge, going “beyond the Malinowski concept,”⁴⁷ in which it is a priori assumed that researchers come to an isolated and closed world which is equipped with “culture.”

I suppose that it is most crucial here to finally go beyond cultural assignments, fully aware of the activities of the subjects with which we cooperate, co-creating knowledge or, as in the described cases, co-creating social and artistic events. In this way, we also go beyond the framework of the situation of shame, linked to what is culturally and socially “assigned,” to accumulated social tensions from which the fear of inadequacy arises. I am talking here about a meeting in which people we worked with begin to be recognized as constructing/arranging actors, like anthropologists, sociologists, or artists, for the scene itself, as they put their understanding of what is cultural, social, and political into action. “Our task,” say Holmes and Marcus, is to fully initiate the capacity to analyse and recognise our interlocutors and co-workers in the process of defining what is important in our actions.”⁴⁸ It is therefore an attempt to enter a situation of co-creation, where both parties in the encounter are the architects of the scene of social knowledge and where spontaneous local social knowledge appears. This is not so much proto-sociology, an intermediate stage which in itself does not yet contain any “sociology,”⁴⁹ but a proto-sociology which is an ability attributable to anyone of us, as Rapport would have put it. Rapport also refers here to the very significant statement by Victor Turner, which permanently puts an end to all that is “cultural” and what embarrasses (everything that brings down and elicits “disgrace” in the former, postcolonial world). “There were never,” writes Turner, “any innocent, unconscious savages, living in a time of unreflective and instinctive harmony. We, human beings, are all and always sophisticated, conscious, capable of laughter at our own institutions.”⁵⁰ This is quite opposite to the

47 Douglas Holmes and George Marcus, “Refunctioning Ethnography. The Challenge of an Anthropology of the Contemporary,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication, 2005).

48 Holmes and Marcus, *Collaboration Today*, 86.

49 Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej*, 15.

50 See Rapport, *Apprehending Anyone*, 163-164.

deconstructive and postcolonial/critical measures that condone locality and cultural conditioning – traditional objects of cognition in anthropology. It reaches for a new theoretical perspective in a completely different way. Rapport claims that this moment was well put by Virginia Woolf, who wrote that “One begins letters «Dear Sir», ends them «yours faithfully»; one cannot despise these phrases, laid like Roman roads across the tumult of our lives, since they compel us to walk in step like civilized people [...] though one may be humming any nonsense under one’s breath at the same time.”⁵¹ It is rather a certain unlimited capacity for ironic and critical liminality. However, this passage is not primarily outside the individual, in an anthropological debunking or in socialized shows, but within the individual acts of “anyone” of us.

All this, therefore, reaches the reserves of extraordinary competence of emerging inter-societal encounters, in the context of the encounter with the experience of the village and with another, alternative social history. I think that if it is at all possible to decolonize the history of the village, where this decolonisation transforms it into a field in which all that is happening and how all these growing social experiences in Poland are to be understood, then such a process can be relied on to create such a scenario, such a situation where people meet coming from different experiences and backgrounds – rural, intelligent, mixed, and hybrid. In this way, the fundamental right of each and every one of us to be “somebody else” will be realised. This right to live “a thousand lives,” to “look with irony” at one’s own institutions, the right to discover one’s own, unexpected ability to “go beyond” – beyond cultural ascription – towards all that the future will bring.

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, 162.