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PARTICIPATING OBSERVATION IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH: AN INTRODUCTION

Is history a foreign country?¹ More and more historians answer this question in the affirmative, comparing their effort of trying to understand and describe the past societies to the work of the cultural anthropologist. The connections between the methods and subjects of those two disciplines have in the past few decades been tightened, historians make use of the experience of anthropology, while anthropologists refer to historical works. Such names as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mircea Eliade, Michel Foucault, Carlo Ginzburg, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Clifford Geertz now constitute one pantheon of authorities on both these domains.

The basic method of research into history understood in this way is observation. Through our contact with the sources of historical cognition we are to acquire an insight into the past reality, ex definitione external to the researcher and his world. Because of their chronological distance from the object of their research historians, until recently, have been convinced that this type of observation may be objective. Anthropologists, who are in contact with their object in their field-work, could fail to take into account the role of the subject in the act of observation and created the notion of participating observation, to which

¹ “The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there” — this is the beginning of the novel *The Go-Between* by L. P. Hartley (London 1953). This quotation has gained a large popularity with the historians, suffice it to mention D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge 1985, or references to it in the popular work by J. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2000.

they attributed strict scientific norms. Nevertheless, the role of the researcher's subjectivity absorbs in an increasing degree the attention of anthropologists and appears in their methodological reflections². Historians, on the other hand, have only recently given up the illusion of their objectivity, and since there has not been a tradition of scientific reflection on their role in the knowledge-creating process, they started to doubt whether history has any cognitive value at all, and for a short time have fallen into extreme relativism in their scholarly posture.

The authors of the essays presented below take as their point of departure the assumption that historical research may be regarded as a specific kind of participating observation that involves both the object and the subject of research. The comparison of historical research to anthropological field-work may be understood both metaphorically, and literally. Especially in the case of recent history the researcher is frequently a participant or even the hero of the phenomena under his examination. This problem is thrown into relief by Anna Brzezińska when she analyses the autobiography of Aron Gurevich, largely devoted to the history of the milieu of university Art departments in the Soviet Union. Certainly, in his description of his times, this historian, who applies anthropological methods in his medieval studies, could not confine himself to subjective narration. This is rather some kind of auto-history, that is a kind of record of the author's individual experience, and on the other hand an attempt at turning his observations into an objective report with the help of scientific methods.

Still, in his autobiography Gurevich takes for granted that his description would be subjective, while the researchers on recent history declare that their aim is scientific objectivity. Does this mean that their personal experience remains without influence on the results of their research on times in which they live? The answer to this question may be found in the essay by Marta Kurkowska-Budzian, devoted to her research in her native town — Jedwabne — the scene of the murder on the Jewish pop-

² See e.g. P. Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things. The Senses in Anthropology*, Philadelphia 1989; *Anthropology and Autobiography*, ed. J. Okely, H. Callaway, London–New York 1992; *Les Politiques de l'anthropologie. Discours et pratiques en France (1860–1940)*, ed. C. Blanckaert, Paris–Montréal–Budapest 2001.

ulation during the German occupation, described in *Neighbors*, the famous book by Jan Tomasz Gross³. Kurkowska-Budzan applied the methods of oral history, very close in its form to anthropological field-work. Its procedures envisage the possibility of an emotional involvement of the researcher and give advice how to cope with this problem. Nevertheless, the emotions, both those connected with the social reactions to Gross's book, and those caused by the "local" roots of the author herself, made it impossible for her to retain an "uncommitted" attitude to her research at Jedwabne. As a result she decided not to publish her results, so as not to transgress the ethical boundary. Even if we approve of such a posture, still we may ask a question whether all the researchers into recent history are conscious of this danger, and whether they are able to make such a decision?

Fortunately, historians do not always have to face such ethical challenges. Robert Litwiński made use of the testimonies of eye-witnesses in his monographic study of the history of the State Police of the 2nd Polish Republic of the period between the World Wars⁴. In his essay he describes the way he drafted the questionnaire for his interviews with the former police functionaries and members of their families. Of no less significance is his critical analysis of the information he collected. Robert Litwiński declares that it is possible to make a reliable and objective analysis of such testimonies on condition that the historian is aware of the factors that influence the subjectivity of such accounts, among them: the witness's emotions and personal views, and the process of memorizing (and forgetting) itself. An additional cognitive value of such studies is gained from the confrontation of data acquired in this way with other types of source information.

The metaphor of participating observation has been taken as the point of departure for the essay by Tomasz Wiślicz. He points out that the field-work of the historian takes place as a rule in the archive; there he gets into a kind of sensual contact with the past. The quality of this contact, and consequently his general idea of the past era, is certainly influenced by the strat-

³ J. T. Gross, *Neighbors: the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, New York 2002.

⁴ R. Litwiński, *Policja Państwowa w woj. lubelskim w latach 1919–1939 (State Police in the Lublin Voivodeship in the Years 1919–1939)*, Lublin 2001.

egy he adopts in his archival research. However, the metaphor of participating observation, in its fullest sense, concerns the imagined historical world, a world recreated in the historian's imagination on the basis of his source research and the historical works that he reads. In defence of this world the historian engages his authority, becomes its witness and at the same time participant, armed with the methods of scientific observation.

The historians' reflections upon the possibility of applying participating observation to historical studies certainly lead to a deeper understanding of the connections between history and cultural anthropology. At the same time the fact that the researchers' approaches to this subject are so diverse, as we may observe, e.g., in the selection of essays presented below, above all enriches the methodology and theory of history rather than serves the inter-disciplinary character of research. Both the practical, and metaphorical application of participating observation to historical research create their own problems, specific to that discipline. In the first place this is the problem of the historian's *field-work*: do we enter into any interactions with the object of research while we study history? Are these relations emotional? If so, in what way do these emotions influence the results of research? What is the role of sensual experience in the historian's work? Furthermore, what is the role of the objective, external conditions of this work? In the second place — *the participant's perspective*: in the case of recent history the historian is frequently himself a participant or even plays a major role in the phenomena under his examination; how can he separate his subjective memory from the scientific analysis of the problem? Can one be a historian of his own times? What is the value of auto-history and how can it be distinguished from autobiography? The third problem is *the perspective of a native*: is the historian justified in deliberately adopting the perspective of the object under his examination as the method of his work? What are the limitations and dangers of the empathic model of historical research?

The four essays presented here cannot, of course, provide a final answer to those questions, nevertheless they contribute to the discussion of the role of participating observation in historical research.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)