Local Scholars, Global Experts: from a Native’s Point of View

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Abstract: In recognizing the hierarchies among different kinds of scholars and scholarships, my paper tackles the problem of the absence Eastern European anthropologists from mainstream scholarly discourse. Going against a line of thought which explains this absence in terms of “Western hegemony,” the paper shifts attention to different issues, asking: is Eastern European absence necessarily detrimental? What are the conditions of translating local concerns into global ones and what is the cost of this process? And finally, in which ways is Western scholarship present in the works of local anthropologists and what are the problems that local anthropology is facing? Although the paper discusses developments in Poland, I hope it may shed light on a broader Eastern European context. I also trust that the discussion on the present-day challenges of anthropology in Eastern Europe may be helpful for addressing dilemmas and queries within anthropology at large.

Keywords: Eastern European anthropology, hierarchies, publishing, ethnographic writing, anthropology at home

In the winter of 2013, I attended a seminar at an American university devoted to the topic of modern European history. The speaker, an advanced doctoral student, presented her work on the Polish intelligentsia and urban resistance under Nazi occupation. One of the first questions she got after finishing her engaging talk was quite blunt: “Why did you choose such a topic?” a young professor asked her, “Is it because of your Polish origins?” The speaker explained that she does indeed have a Polish surname, but that she grew up as an American and that neither the Polish language nor Polish culture were cultivated in her home. “I chose this topic because it is fascinating,” she replied and then asked rhetorically: “Would you ask me the same question if I studied the French intelligentsia or resistance in Germany?”

By comparing an apparently very peculiar Polish subject of research with other no-need-to-be-justified research problems, the speaker touched upon a very salient issue regarding both the hierarchy of problems/concerns/areas studied and hi-

1 Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Michał Buchowski, Chris Hann and Agnieszka Halemba for inspiring discussions. Very special thanks go to Mariya Ivancheva for hearting talks among “natives.”
erarchy among researchers, both of which may easily translate into the hierarchy of the knowledge(s) we produce. This phenomenon best manifests itself in the perception of some academics as “local scholars” - as those who can barely illuminate local specificities – and others as “global experts,” capable of shedding light on universal phenomena and concerns (see Laas 1997 on the conflation between “local” and “particular”/”marginal”). Although anthropologists have expressed little interest in Western Europe, with the choice to study it being, at least until recent decades, not as “obvious” as it was for historians or sociologists (Rogers 1997: 718), a hierarchy of concerns and research sites is also perceptible within the discipline of anthropology. First and foremost, this hierarchy concerns the very knowledge that different scholars build. For even though both local and global anthropologists may draw their conclusions on the basis of carefully scrutinized local contexts, only the latter are perceived as capable of translating these into broader insights.

Furthermore, local scholars are likely to hear that the comments they make or the positions they take result from their “Polish/Croatian/Mexican” perspective; in contradistinction to global experts’ queries, local scholars’ questions do not arise from their anthropological sensitivity or years of scholarly training, but rather from their “insiders” perspective or even the “national lenses” through which they supposedly view the world. In short, a local scholar is often more a “local” than a “scholar,” while global experts seem to have a monopoly of discussing universal issues: his or her local insights illuminate global ones and s/he is never biased. What is important to pinpoint here is the fact that “national lenses” appear to be more condemnable than those of any other sort: the accusation of bias is rarely made against scholars who view research sites and research problems through, say, “neoliberal,” “romantic Marxist,” or “socialist-nostalgic” lenses. As philosopher (and Eastern European) Renata Salecl observes (1994: 1-2):

“Whenever I was invited to speak at a Western university I was always expected to speak about what was going on in Eastern Europe. Even the most abstract theoretical paper I delivered provoked questions such as ‘How are things for women in Eastern Europe?’ In a way, there is a special kind of prejudice at work in this attitude of Western intellectuals. If, for example, Western feminists speak about feminism they can discuss such abstract issues as ‘women in film noir,’ the notion of the phallus in feminist theory,’ etc.; but someone coming from Eastern Europe must speak about the situation of women in her own country because of the ‘horrors’ going on there. But are not similar backlashes happening to women in the West in regard to their abortion rights, sexual harassment in the workplace and the rise of moral majority ideology?”

Salecl’s reflections on the expectations towards “local scholars” also point to the nexus between “natives,” the places they come from and certain images such peo-
ple and places evoke. As one goes to India to study hierarchy and to Italy to study honor and shame (cf. Appadurai 1988), so is a scholar from Eastern Europe expected to speak about the difficulties of postcommunist transformation, nationalism and other “horrors going on there.” No matter what s/he does, s/he is a local expert on these issues.

So far, so conventional: a well-worn complaint of an “Eastern European” scholar about “Western hegemony” and a continuous lack of attention of Western scholars to local scholarship. But the aim of this paper is different; in recognizing the hierarchies among different kinds of scholars and scholarships, I would like to focus my attention to “our” side of the problem and ask: why are Eastern European anthropologists absent from mainstream scholarly discourse? Is this absence necessarily detrimental? What are the conditions of translating local concerns into global ones and what is the cost of this process? And finally, in which ways is Western scholarship present in the works of local anthropologists and what are the problems that local anthropology is facing? I am limiting myself to discussing developments in Poland – the context I am most familiar with - yet I hope that my reflections may shed light on a broader Eastern European context. I also trust that the discussion on present-day challenges of anthropology in Eastern Europe may be helpful for addressing dilemmas and queries within anthropology at large. In discussing these issues, I set off with some critical reflections on anthropological writing and then supplement them with brief considerations on the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork and “native” anthropology.

On Eastern Europeans’ non-presence

In his oft-quoted article from 2004, Michał Buchowski presents his interpretation of the persisting hierarchies of knowledge and the perception of “Western” scholarship as a “better” one. Criticizing Western academics for the use of scholarship from Central-Eastern Europe mainly as a source of data and not as one of theoretical inspirations, he also indicates a peculiar mix of an “inferiority” and “superiority” complex among his fellows from CEE (2004: 10). Rather than “blaming” the West, he discerns complex reasons behind the different statuses of different anthropologies, including the influence of specific ethnological traditions loaded with pejorative stigmas and a dismissal of local intellectual traditions, also by local scholars who hasten to use trendy Western theories. He also observes that while Polish sociologists and philosophers have made their way to the West, no Polish anthropologist has become widely recognized.

A decade later, his observations are still valid. Not only are few Polish anthropological books translated into English, but the key anthropological journals rarely publish contributions by Polish authors. Certainly, the last statement can be reversed: we could also query why few Polish anthropologists send their articles to
the most recognized journals? Apart from reiterating persistently mentioned factors, such as linguistic difficulties and/or financial constraints, it is worth asking whether Polish authors are ready to play according to the rules set by Anglophone publishing houses and highly ranked journals. A look at the works published in one of the most prestigious Polish series – “Monographs” by the Polish Science Foundation⁴ – makes one wonder why few of the exceptionally thick volumes that appeared in this series could be easily published in one of the foreign presses.⁴ For a look at the works published by big international (mainly American and British) publishing houses makes one recognize that they are eager to apply the rule “the more concise, the better;” that they are allergic to long theoretical chapters, pedantically described historical backgrounds and detailed footnotes; and that a comment on the back cover starting with “this beautifully written, elegant ethnography” suggests, in fact, that the author has managed to squeeze his or her ethnographic material into 250 pages. Such requirements often go against what many scholars were taught to do and provoke justified objection as they tend not to allow researchers to acknowledge all the works that shaped their own and make them present their arguments in a simplified manner. At the same time, they also force authors to rethink and clarify their arguments, avoid longueurs and simply make their academic books more “readable.” In his response to Buchowski, Chris Hann rightly points out (2005: 195) that in order to be widely read, Eastern European works need to be written with more “depth and sophistication.”

Yet the issue of publishing means much more than the question of length and “density:” it is a question of writing skills and the capacity of rendering in a non-native language rich-in-detail ethnographic descriptions. What follows is also the capacity of following certain (quickly changing) writing conventions and current vogues, as well as the ability and courage to experiment with one’s text and ethnographic material. The possession of necessary linguistic skills and being up-to-date with “conventions in force” are what make numerous anthropological English-language works into novel, tone-setting and memorable contributions, while at the same constituting a common line of defense for non-English speakers. Being a non-English speaker myself and having long abandoned the hope of becoming a new Joseph Conrad, I sympathize – at least partly – with such a “defense.” However, in an act of repentance, I find it important to highlight yet another aspect of writing strategies which go well beyond the barrier of (foreign) language: namely the question of an artful intertwining of ethnography and theoretical discussions, and the very understanding of what ethnographic material is.

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3 http://www.fnp.org.pl/monografie/. Anthropological books are listed under the “Sociology” section.

4 A monograph by Magdalena Zowczak (2000) is at the moment being translated into English for publication in de Gruyter.
In bringing up this issue, I want to point to one serious drawback in Polish scholarship: the fact that in Polish anthropological works, informants mostly *talk*. The main body of the text tends to contain quotes from (recorded) interviews, but not necessarily descriptions of the speakers. The reader may learn from the interviewed people about their relations with neighbours, but s/he can rarely read a description of any neighbourly interactions. S/he may learn about the difficult life conditions in a postindustrial town, but often does not get a chance to imagine the urban landscape. Reading about the attachment to the Catholic faith expressed by the speaker, s/he might not get to know whether the room in which the conversation took place was decorated with a cross and what program was on in TV. I aim neither to fetishize the ethnographic context nor to argue that it is equally relevant in every situation. Yet I do find it very problematic that many social actors we get to know while reading anthropological works are presented in isolation from their social, political and geographical background, and consequently that we get to know them merely as “interviewees” – as a matter of fact, we barely get to know them. In short, contemporary Polish anthropological works too often come close to a sort of selectively conducted “discourse analysis” and this tendency puts it at odds with the Polish ethnological tradition, rich in thick-description-type monographs and skillfully painted portraits of informants (even if marked by – condemnable in our eyes – feelings of superiority, manifested in the notions of “primitive peasants,” “simple folk” or “backward villagers”).

Apart from the “discourse-analysis with elements of ethnography” type, I would like to name two other increasingly popular styles (neither of which was “invented” in Poland, but both of which are well represented there). The first are “anthropological” reportages and journalistic accounts, which, rather than being published in newspapers and magazines, begin to colonize scholarly publications. The tendency most probably results from the fact that Polish authors have recently begun publishing for a wider audience (in journals and on different internet platforms) and publishing in different registers often leads to blurring the boundaries between academic and non-academic writing. Without entering into the details of the widely debated issue of anthropologists’ public presence (e.g. Eriksen 2006; Pelkmans 2013; Zimniak-Hałajko 2010), it seems worth mentioning that the blurring of the two – scholarly and professional – identities often has important consequences for the writing. By “consequences” I do not only mean the problem of “taking sides” and “value-laden” comments, but the very ways in which we deal with collected material, use gained knowledge and craft texts.

The second type resembles what Roger Sanjek (2004) calls the “theory parades” genre. The drawback of this genre lies in an imbalance between ethnography and theory, or more precisely: in an emphasis on theory at the expense of ethnography. Recent Western scholarship is indeed present in Polish scholarly work, but the applied theories are usually detached from the ethnographic material they originally
supported. “The exchange of tools,” which supposedly constitutes one of anthropology’s strongest points, seems to apply only to theoretical considerations, less so to human experiences and endeavours. And it is precisely for this reason that locally observed phenomena remain local. Rather than being compared to the Hutu refugees studied by Liisa Malkii (1995), the beloved Polish “tribe” of Lemko-Rusyns are portrayed as romantic aborigines with an unusual predilection for nostalgia and remembering. The Silesian separatist movement is rarely confronted with the activity of Basques or Catalans, studied by Jacqueline Urla (1993) or Begoña Echeverria (2007). And mushrooming works on “multicultural dialogue” and “multicultural coexistence” rarely refer to the ethnographic works on multi-ethnic and multi-religious neighbourhoods in London or Berlin (e.g. Baumann 1995), but instead reproduce the – rather static – views of Zygmunt Bauman. Consequently, such works are confined to a national frame (Hann 2005: 196). Even contributions that have explicit theoretical ambitions are often “recycled goods,” which “address ‘trendy issues’ invented by continental tyrants” (Buchowski 2004: 9).

The discussions on the non-presence of anthropological writings from Eastern Europe tend to focus on the hegemony of the English language and the domination of highly ranked journals, to which access is carefully safeguarded. A counter-hegemonic strategy is supposed to entail “active bilingualism,” to use Ulf Hannerz’s expression, and an attempt to keep a balance between publications in one’s native language and in English. What is rarely recognized is the fact that such advice and strategies involve detectable hierarchies, too. First, publishing in one’s own language is important for the development of local anthropology, but, whether we want it or not, it often reinforces authors’ positions as “only” local scholars. And second, one can observe a sad – although perhaps pragmatic – tendency to divide one’s contributions into categories of better and worse. “This article is too good for a Polish journal,” I happened to hear from colleagues, “I wish I had sent it elsewhere.” Rather than complaining about hegemony and pretending we ourselves attribute the same value to different scholarly traditions, it would be much more productive to reflect on the flaws of our own works and on ways of improving them.

In concluding my comments on ethnographic thinness and a specific use of theory, I would like to refer to Kirin Nayaran who observes (1993: 680):

“As I see it, there are currently two poles of anthropological writing: at one end stand accessible ethnographies laden with stories, and at the other end stand refereed journal articles, dense with theoretical analyses.”

It is not surprising, Nayaran notes, that introductory courses to anthropology involve many narrative ethnographies as it is through them that people become “seduced” by anthropology. She therefore calls for “connecting compelling narrative and rigorous analysis,” as only such an approach enables us to render “the viv-
id humanity of the people with whom we work,” as “it is people and not theoretical puppets who populate our texts” (1993: 681). She sees a direct link between the problem of writing and certain misconceptions about “native” anthropology, to which I turn in the following section.

The native and the exotic

The above reflections on academic writing and the difficulty of translating local concerns into global ones apply mainly to Polish anthropologists studying the Polish context. This is not only because such scholars continue to be more numerous, but because these are the “native anthropologists” or “anthropologists at home” most frequently labelled as “local scholars.” At this point, I would like to address one more issue: the contestation of the fundamental distinction between anthropology at home and abroad, the familiar and the exotic, and the extent to which the undermining of this dichotomy has (or has not) changed our ideas about the “ideal anthropologist.” To be clear, in discussing this issue I do not aim to argue that the contestation of the difference between the two anthropologies is right or wrong. Although I strongly believe in the value of native anthropology, I do not feel competent to suggest that fieldwork at home is equally important for training an anthropologist and that it is “a matter of perspective.” What I aim to highlight, instead, is the fact that this very contestation tends to be false; the difference between at home and abroad is maintained, yet veiled under notions of “trans-local,” “global” or “multi-sited.”

To me, the outcomes of the on-going discussions on “native anthropology” seem rather obvious: to be a non-native anthropologist continues to be considered more serious, more real, perhaps more “anthropological.” This fact may come as surprising given the amount of works which deconstruct the idea of “traditional” fieldwork; I mean here not only postcolonial and postmodern critique, but also a critical take on the discipline’s founding fathers’ methodology (e.g. Stocking 1983). Despite field-sites becoming more and more mobile, the demarcating of their “boundaries” seeming increasingly difficult and Western, urban, “white” societies gradually becoming objects of ethnographic studies, the notion of “native anthropologists” is still a powerful one. It is powerful despite the fact that it is not

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5 The reasons behind this fact vary, yet, in my view, financial constraints continue to constitute the main obstacle. First, and very simply, lack of funds prevent people from carrying out long-term fieldwork abroad; they consider that instead of short-term research abroad, it is better to conduct in-depth research in their own country. Due to increasing opportunities for getting grants and funds for research, this tendency has been slowly changing. Second, many doctoral students have permanent and semi-permanent employment which prevents them from undertaking long-term fieldwork abroad, and consequently their doctoral research is often connected with their work (This is especially true for people working for NGOs, in the fields of migration, urban developments, etc.).
clear what it actually means and who exactly is to be defined as an “insider” and an “indigenous scholar.”

The idea of native anthropologist incorporates two problematic, albeit seemingly contradictory, assumptions. The first is the idea of “authenticity.” As Nayaran notes (1993: 676), “a native anthropologist is assumed to be an insider who will forward an authentic point of view to the anthropological community.” The second common assumption, in its turn, implies “lack of distance” and “cultural bias:” being too much of an insider, the native anthropologist may take many things for granted and thus might render “authenticity” in a highly uncritical way. Evidently, none of these assumptions takes into consideration the complexities of people’s identities, the manifold influences we are exposed to, and the multiple ways in which our knowledge is situated – no matter whether we are “insiders” or “outsiders.”

Moreover, the label of “native anthropologist” may be a permanently ascribed one. As an illustration, I would like to refer to one personal experience. Having conducted my doctoral research in Poland, I embarked on a new project which investigates the relationship between class and ethnic identity, focusing on the descendants of Polish immigrants living in the U.S. A vast majority of the people I talked to were third or fourth generation immigrants, had very little knowledge of Poland and did not know any Polish. And yet, when describing my project to a few fellow anthropologists, I heard that the research was probably easy for me given that I am a native. Native of what or native where? Such assumptions, along with the ideas of “authenticity” and “cultural bias,” expose a very important problem, namely a persistent idea of a native “culture” as bounded and homogenous; as interpretable in the same way by its bearers; as an unchangeable set of meanings, values, and references; and finally, as the main channel through which we engage with the world, as if being a woman, a young person, a leftist or a representative of the upper middle class mattered less than the magic of being a “native.” They too reveal the perception of fieldwork at home as “easier,” free of the difficulties that real outsiders face. Once again, I do not aim to question that fieldwork abroad, an immersion in a “completely” new reality, is more difficult and more demanding. I simply want to underline that certain assumptions about native anthropology ignore the very process of becoming anthropologists, the importance of professional identity and academic training: the fact that “[n]obody is born an anthropologist, and curious though it may seem, still less is anyone born a native” (de Castro quoted in Young 2005: 208). To reiterate my earlier observations, a “native scholar” is often more a “native” than a “scholar.”

The solutions advocated against the discourse of native anthropology bear resemblances with those proposed in the context of the hegemony of English language in academic publications. Rather than discussing the pros and cons of anthropology at home and abroad, I believe we should look critically at our own
studies, recognize their weaknesses (often mirroring problems detectable in anthropological writings) and pay more attention to the quality of our fieldwork; a fieldwork which should be carefully prepared and carried out, and which can later translate into meaningful stories, combining “compelling narrative and rigorous analysis.” Doing fieldwork at home, we should aim to demonstrate that the gathered material does illuminate broader phenomena, speak to different contexts and is not confined to “national frames:” it is in this way that we can expose the continuous reproduction of the idea of the “exotic” within anthropological thought (cf. Kapferer 2013) and the hierarchy of research sites, questions and dilemmas integrally connected with it. It is through high-quality work that we can try to challenge the dominant narrative of the bias of local scholars, exposing different ways in which our work is linked to and conditioned by different discourses, ideologies and institutional pressures. In so doing, we could also help the discipline to rethink and better articulate the subject of and the way of conducting anthropological inquiries. In light of a new hegemony – that of the ethic committees and review boards which might soon render any participant observation and interviews questionable - the need of such a reflection seems more pressing than ever.

Acting globally, struggling locally

Our capacity to make such a contribution and “go global” depends, once again, on a more critical view on our own scholarship. I do not mean here solely a recognition of weaknesses and drawbacks - some of which have been discussed in this paper - but also a constructive reflection on what kind of fashions we want to follow, what kind of traditions to draw on and what audience to address. It is a question many of us have to address not only while researching and writing, but also while preparing syllabuses and mentoring students. I also contend that such a critical view demands from us abandoning a conviction about the exceptionality of our (precarious) status within the world-system of anthropology.

In making this call for self-critique, I am far from ignoring the manifold constraints or claiming that everything lies in our hands. After all, the herein addressed problems need to be situated in a broader context of the changing landscape of the academic world. In Poland, this changing landscape means a decreasing number of students which has a direct influence on the number of academic positions. What ensues is a tendency to attempt to attract and keep students at all costs, lowering standards of education. The question of what readings to choose – how to make students familiar with current scholarship without simplistically perpetuating Western hegemony and ignoring local scholarship – appears to be less urgent once the main problem is the very lack of a will to read. Similarly, encouraging students to try to write in English needs to be more and more often balanced by an attempt to teach them how to write correctly in their native language. Inti-
mately connected to this is the promotion of the business-model university, by and large detrimental for the humanities and social sciences which are supposed to play according to the rules set by the natural sciences and prove their usefulness and proﬁtableness.

Last but not least, shamefully low expenditures on research cannot but clip scholars’ wings: they too are co-responsible for the “local” status of the knowledge we produce (and the way it is produced). I certainly wish this paragraph would end with a “light at the end of the tunnel” sentence, but unfortunately recent years have brought further limiting of funds (for instance in the field of textbook publishing and translations) and controversial decisions, such as the classiﬁcation of “anthropology” as a “knowledge of the past” in funding processes. New requirements regarding publications discourage scholars from working on monographs and edited volumes, which not only lie at the heart of the discipline but, to use Nayaran’s expression, help us to “seduce” new generations of anthropologists. All these constatations are not to question the presence of numerous fantastic scholars and teachers who continue to promote anthropology, practice it in an admirable way and publish inspiring works6 – and who do so “despite” rather than “be-cause of.”

In concluding, the task of Eastern European (and, perhaps, other sorts of “lo- cal”) anthropologists is particularly diffi cult, given that not only do we want to shape “global imaginaries” but that we still ﬁght for recognition and ﬁnd it hard to become experts “even” in our own countries. There still exists an enormous discrepancy between anthropology’s possibilities and its role in academic structures and the public sphere (Zowczak 2011). The relation between the local and the global turns out to be much more complex than it would seem at fi rst sight and so are the causes of the persisting hierarchies – of knowledge, academics, research sites and research problems. As a matter of fact, struggling for the position of global experts may soon become no less urgent than reasserting oneself as a local scholar.

6 An increasing number of Polish anthropologists, especially representatives of the young generation, writes in English for an international anthropological audience (see, e.g., contributions by Monika Baer, Magdalena Grabowska, Agnieszka Halemba, Renata Hryciuk, Ewa Klekot, Agnieszka Kościania, Agata Ładykowska, Anna Niedźwiedź, Kacper Pablocki, Magdalena Radkowska, Małgorzata Rajtar, to name but some). It is also worth mentioning that a vast majority of these people received at least part of their training abroad. And that the very way of deﬁning someone as a “Polish anthropologist” might be quite problematic.
REFERENCES


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