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## IMAGINING POLAND – DOING FIELDWORK IN POLAND

When I was asked to contribute a little text to this special issue, I was wondering about the character of it. What should it be like and what tone would be appropriate? Should it be a personal account of my (ethnographic) experiences as a (German) anthropologist in Poland? Should it be a report about my fieldwork or rather about my personal encounters?

The more I thought about it the more ambivalent I felt. I wanted to contribute something but I could not decide on form and content. I went through my old “field notes” and I went through my diary. Recalling curiosity, frustration, anger, and anxiety, I felt even more ambivalent. I wondered whether I wanted to deal with and write about these emotions and the difficulties I encountered while doing fieldwork in Warszawa once again (I had devoted a whole chapter on these difficulties from a methodological and epistemological perspective in my dissertation). It took me a long time going back and forth thinking whether or not I could or should contribute something.

This is what I came up with.

### ***Eine Vorstellung: Imagination and representation***

In German, the noun *Vorstellung* (and the verb *vorstellen*) has different meanings.

*Ich stelle mir vor* means “I am imagining” which means having a notion or fantasy of something/someone.

*Darf ich vorstellen?* means “May I introduce you?”.

*Eine Vorstellung geben* means “to give a performance” (like a theater play) but it can also mean “to deliver a representation” – as in political, symbolic or social representation.

These different meanings and their implications structure my relationship with “Poland” as much as this contribution. The imaginations that nurtured my view of Poland might have changed but they continue (as in “linger on”) in the backyards of my memory: I can recall them and they interfere with my perceptions and observations. Imaginations played a major role in my decision to do research in Poland. This contribution is a representation of my imagination and my memories, both infiltrated by subjective observations, perceptions and experiences during my stay in Warszawa. They are – as per James Clifford – always partial truth and true fiction (Clifford 1986) and implicated by various power relations or power structures that may or may not have played into what I experienced, observed, perceived and wrote down. The represented imaginations, experiences and encounters are intimately tied to a certain person – me – and to the cultural and social anthropologist I imagined to become, came to be or am still becoming.

The different work involved in imagining and representing and the different emotions are resampled as a love story: imaginations and fantasies, real encounters, falling in love and out of love with a city. Warszawa: a city often called unfriendly and ugly. But no matter how many sins urban planning has committed – I liked the city. Her energy. Her parks. Her roughness. My favorite place does not exist anymore like the Baumgart Café.

Looking back sometimes feels like having fallen out of love which ultimately led to a break up and to separation. However, this separation has been productive in many ways: it redirected my perspectives and allowed different realities to be perceived and served a further reflection of what was going on “at home” as in “looking back from Poland to Germany”.

### **Imagination or Love at first sight**

My first encounter with Poland dates back to the early nineties when I traveled to Kraków for an exchange with a music high school. We stayed individually with families of our Polish counterparts, in my case a young student who played the violin. During the eleven days in Kraków we practiced six to eight hours a day Richard Addinsell’s *Warsaw Concert* and performed it twice. After our daily practice we spent the evenings in cafeterias, drank lots of tea and discussed music, history, life and love, hence everything we considered important and essential at the age 15 to 18.

This stay further nurtured my imagination of Poland as a country full of intellectuals, artists, musicians, and filmmakers (my favorite one at that time was Krzysztof Kieślowski) that could easily be described with two words: “avant-garde” and “ever resisting”.

Coming to Kraków came to be an experience of meeting equals: young people immersed in fantasies about the future – a whole life waiting for us! The future

would be ours, yet still an expectation, a seduction and a destination. Then and there connected through music and youth, full of hopes and wishes for the future to be, a future still distant but surely to come, we were deeply immersed in the moment: a presence and awareness, which only occurs when one is deeply curious about and affected by “the other” as in “being in love”. Those who thought alike and felt similarly estranged by their surroundings found each other. Drinking tea, discussing life and finding out how much we had in common made me feel in the right place at the right time. I felt a sense of belonging, which was beyond reason.

I believe this sense of belonging was possible because we shared the moment as much as we shared a feeling towards the future. This presence connected us, despite the difficult history Germany and Poland share. Due to this sentiment we were able to talk about this history instead of shying away from talking to each other.

When I came to Warszawa a few years later for a summer school during my studies in social and cultural anthropology I felt a similar sense of belonging as a few years earlier. The musicians were replaced by anthropologists, the drinks had changed from tea to beer, wine and *wódka* and the discussions would circle less around music and more around “Europe” and its future, around borders and boundaries, about transformation and hopes linked to those.

To me, Poland remained a destination – a place where I had the most intense conversations with people who were eager to discuss and exchange ideas. To me, the sweetest seduction has always come through engaged conversation that easily bridges a variety of subjects and issues from politics to poetry or more precisely, from the politics of poetry to the poetry of politics.

This was the imagination I returned to when I went to Poland to do fieldwork for my Ph.D. thesis in 2004. I was interested in how women’s roles and women’s positions in Poland had changed or were in the process of changing during the political and social transformation processes after 1989. I was interested in how the political, social and economic transformation worked on gender roles and gender positions, hence how men and women were affected differently (still sticking to the binary gender order).

As it goes even with the great loves of our lives: longing and desire leave, adventure dissolves, reality comes in.

## **Ideas and notions**

During my research stay in Warszawa, Poland entered the European Union (May 2004), the Pałac Kultury turned 50 (2005), the “Polish” Pope Jan Paweł II died (April 2005) and PiS won the elections (October 2005).

Two words were all around in politics as much as in everyday conversation: democracy and normalcy. Both were contested, debated, negotiated, interpreted,

claimed, linked to different ideas, terms and ideologies by different actors. Free market economy and neoliberal ideas, competitiveness, national sovereignty, freedom and tolerance, minority rights, gender in/equality, human rights. Often lines or seemingly clear-cut boundaries between “us” and “them” were set – but who was “us” and “them” changed according to one’s standing.

While in the beginning I was interested in how the political and social transformation processes had structured and restructured particularly women’s lives in two cities, Łódź and Warszawa, I soon had to give up this idea due to financial reasons as much as due to do-ability or rather non-do-ability. I turned to women’s NGOs and informal women’s networks, their actions, programs and strategies as well as to parliamentary debates on the so called women’s (and less so gender) issues. Moreover, this change of direction and perspective had partly to do with what was going on in Poland at the time and had caught my interest.

While in the early 1990s, debates over reproduction and family politics served as coded arguments for the political legitimization and the morality of the new state as well as the dissociation from the “immoral communist system”, during my stay in the 2000s additionally “gender issues” became increasingly contested and the visibility of homosexuals in the public sphere increasingly caused heated debates about what freedom of speech and tolerance means, values that are increasingly associated with contemporary definitions of liberal democracy. I became interested in these different debates and arguments as I saw both as indicative for the broader transformation processes and closely connected to the making of Poland’s future, either by rediscovering or reconstructing the traditional or by referring to discourses of “Europeanness” and human rights. The so called transformation and Europeanization processes from socialism to democracy and free market economy were increasingly codified in moral discourses that implied specific (albeit different) visions of Poland’s future as well as images of the proper Polish citizen and demanded the reconstitution of democracy and the nation-state as much as the reformulation and re-imagining of citizenship identities, intimately tied to notions of rights and responsibilities of both the state and its citizens.

At the same time mechanisms of exclusion and forms of othering became increasingly salient. Some individuals and groups were marked as others to the nation albeit they were Polish citizens, mostly white and Catholic. Following these observations I inquired into the national self-understandings and sexual and gender(ed) politics which inform(ed) the political, social and cultural reconfigurations in post-socialist Poland. I observed that the conflicts about gender policies and sexuality were central for the negotiations of democracy and notions of belonging to the Polish nation in the context of Europeanization and transformation. Moreover, the profound cultural, social, economic and political restructuring from a socialist to a capitalist society and the requirements of the European Union had created tensions between national and supranational norms. I followed

the overlapping discourses, speech acts, reference frames and actions of diverse actors within and outside Poland and inquired into the negotiations of national concepts (at stake), but also newly emerging cultural spaces and subjectivities in the arena of national, European and feminist politics.

## Trust and Power

Particularly in the first months of my stay in Warszawa it was difficult to find women – even in NGOs – who were willing to talk to me. In my dissertation I reflected about these difficulties of doing fieldwork in Warszawa. I was trying to explain (myself?) why it had been so difficult to reach people and talk to them. I was wondering what kind of trust issues or power issues were involved (that would possibly go beyond the usual trust issues) in ethnographic research. I thought about anthropological myths about doing fieldwork and the power relations in ethnographic writing, particularly when it comes to research in the so called complex societies: the history of Poland, the historical relation between Poland and Germany, financial resources, the situatedness of my questions regarding gender, democracy and normalcy, the different positions and positionalities, the various forces, connections and imaginations that played into or shaped my encounters and structured my perception as much as how the women I sought to talk to perceived me. The literature I had read, the perspectives I took and the theories I applied structured what I could see and perceive, what I chose to include, neglected and analyzed. I thought about in which ways our own subjectivity was/is implicated by power relations, which again structure our research field. Social differentiations are certainly constitutive for all relations, but they gain particular meaning in (ethnographic) representations. I understood that there was a strong resistance and mistrust towards being represented by a foreigner, maybe particularly by a German anthropologist. I became aware of the discourses and material differences that structured the whole research process as much as the interaction with those I sought to have contact with.

During the struggles with what I had constructed as “my field” I came closer to the various realities that structured the “field” and my encounters. I don’t want to go into details of these methodological and epistemological thoughts and reflections. What I later came to think is this: what I had come to love about “Poland” – an attitude I had perceived and described as “ever resisting”, the idea of *Polak potrafi*, the stubbornness, the “we do it our way” had a flipside. It was the resistance towards being represented by a strange foreigner – no matter how much I tried to become transparent and seen less an anthropologist and more a person or to put it differently: become a vulnerable subject.

During my fieldwork people were often skeptical, unwilling to share experiences, information, stories. They always claimed to have “no time” or flatly

refused to talk to me. Some advised me to do an internship in an NGO (which I had tried) or “buy myself into” an NGO. Of course, this was out of the question. How could I “buy” information and what kind of researcher, more so what kind of anthropologist would I be if I bought myself an internship as someone suggested to me? In my opinion, I had offered what I could offer – translations, any assistance they could or would need and could not afford to pay for, but nothing worked. Their knowledge seemed increasingly exclusive, almost esoteric. “Membership has privileges”, I sometimes thought. I was not a member. For a long time I had difficulties finding access to what increasingly seemed like a secret circle or a very close-knit family.

### **A turn to betterment: Angela Merkel and the elections in 2005**

The national elections in the fall of 2005 marked a turning point: at that time, I had spent almost 18 months in Warszawa. Many women already knew me and had noticed that I was around a lot. Many of them feared the results of the elections in Poland. It was also the year Angela Merkel was elected German chancellor. The women involved in the so called women’s issues became more open and willing to talk to: they sort of knew who I was, they were interested in sharing their thoughts and fears about the elections and what would happen afterwards to women’s issues and issues of gender equality and they were interested to hear what I thought about the female chancellor in Germany. For many of them a female chancellor was a good sign, a sign of progress and maybe even a turn to advancement/betterment.

By that time I had also met two young anthropologists from Warsaw, Ph.D. candidates like me and also busy with their dissertations and we discovered that we lived in two neighboring buildings. Again I loved the discussions about research, literature and music, having dinner and afternoon tea. Through them I met Ukrainian writers and poets and with them I traveled to Lviv/Lwów. Through a seminar at the Polish Academy of Sciences I met a young American Ph.D. candidate (also anthropology) and she joined our anthropology circle and the two of us – both foreigners – shared our difficulties of doing fieldwork in Poland and comforted each other through the bad times.

Quite a few circumstances led to the departure from my earlier ideas I had had about my research topic. What I had in mind when I came to Poland to do research was in many ways different from what I actually ended up doing and what my book in the end was about. And how could it be otherwise? In many ways we are dependent on our fields, on the people we talk to or the people who are willing to talk to us and of course unforeseen events sometimes redirect our perspectives and the ethnographic gaze. In the end I wrote a book titled: *Polands’ Others* (in German: *Polens Andere*, Keinz 2008).

## Poland's Others

The title of my dissertation was a result of the di-visions which were at play at the time of my research. I observed the naming of those who seemed not to fit into what was declared “Polish”, who did not fit the image of the Polish woman or the heterosexual person; those who refused to play the role they were assigned to. The book is about those who – sometimes wanted, sometimes unwanted – disagree with a certain imagination or image of the good citizen and those who (re)demand the rights the new democracy took away. It is about those who seem(ed?) not to fit into the (the then so much wanted) normalcy. Those who transgressed what was said to be normal and crossed what was deemed appropriate, transgressed the boundaries of what was declared Polish.

These Others are not just the production of an anthropological mind. They were named numerously. I found them in media articles in Poland as much as in international newspapers, in parliamentary debates, in discussions among friends, in side remarks and calls in the street; in basement apartments and government offices, in NGOs and abroad. Most of those who were named or marked as others, did not perceive themselves as other (to the nation), but sometimes as “differently thinking”: modern, emancipated, European – all but contested terms.

In the title of my dissertation I used the term “Others” because I had observed how persons were constituted as “other” against a specific historical and political background. I was not only interested in the construction processes of these others and the kinds of exclusion processes observed. What I found particularly intriguing was that in Poland (at the time!) they were “insider-outsiders” or “familiar strangers”, to use a term – albeit from a different context – from Begoña Aretxaga (2003). These “others” seemed to be seen as uncontrollable or – to put it differently: they were those who marked what would remain uncontrollable. They marked the boundaries of the appropriate and “normal” by transgressing them.

My intention was by no means to give them voice. In fact they did not need me. They could speak for themselves. I was rather interested in what their voices caused. I was interested in the interactions and interdiscursivities that appeared when someone raised his/her voice, spoke up, stood up and became visible.

When I went to Warszawa in April 2004 I had no intention to seek “others”. But during my field research I could observe how individuals and groups were “othered” and hence became “others”, insider-outsiders or familiar strangers. I followed the discourses and mechanisms which made certain individuals and groups “strangers” and ultimately marked them as “others to the nation”.

“The Others to the nation” at that time – and different from the now – were not visible. They could not be identified at once. It was not their bodies, the surface of their bodies or their skin color. They could not be racialized and were not excluded because of racism. They were mostly white (and Catholic) Polish ci-

tizens. In fact, they had not much to fear. They could not lose their civil rights or their status. They did not differ much from any other Polish citizen. They only differed in their attitude: “how they imagined Poland’s future and how they imagined themselves in this future”. It was an attitude towards life, a life style, a sexuality, a way of thinking, a relation to Poland, to Europe, to politics or to culture. Those traits – which can remain invisible (different from racial/racist markers) – became decisive in the moment they turned into social and political interventions: they became visible when they were unwanted and invisibility was demanded or even coerced.

In my book I followed namings and new markers, terms and voices. I listened to them and followed their tracks. I observed what they caused and what they left.

### **Looking back from Poland to Germany**

While looking back from Poland to Germany during my research stay in Warszawa I closely followed German politics that seemed at this point in stark contrast particularly regarding the so called sexual minority rights. While the much contested civil partnership act had finally been introduced in 2001, in 2005 the citizenship test was introduced.

Debates on integration and immigration increased and indicated that specific values and ideas were used to newly designate what the “national” and/or the European adhered to and/or entailed. The tolerant handling of sexual minorities and some rights concerning mainly homosexuals increasingly became a marker of difference not only in Germany but in EU-Europe, a criterion for belonging to the European (read: Western) hemisphere respectively. Equality was increasingly defined in regard to gender, sexuality and secularism, while class and race were (and still are) largely neglected. Definitions of democracy increasingly included concepts of equality and sexual freedoms. The newly introduced anti-discrimination directives and the demands of the member states to incorporate them as well as the recommendations of the European Court of Justice, show how gender and sexual issues have become an essential component of European integration (read: identity) politics. While I embrace/d these progresses in Germany and some other European countries, they had a flipside: the construction of “strange bodies” along newly invented criteria and the emergence of new discourses of dis/belonging. Sexual democracy became an essential part of national and EU integration politics. I felt in a paradoxical situation as the lines of in- and exclusion I observed in Poland and Germany at that time could not be more different. But what seemed so progressive in Germany and some other European countries when it comes to the “sexual turn” in the European Union, the language of equality and antidiscrimination included differently politicized and racialized homophobia. So while looking from Poland back to Germany, I decided for the

next research topic: the emergence of *sexular* (sexual and secular) democracy in Germany.

Today I am situated at the Polish-German border at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder. I am working as a Junior Professor for Cultural and Social Anthropology of late-modern societies and teach courses on migration, gender, sexualities and racism, particularly in regard to discourses of dis/belonging and notions of democracy and normalcy in EU-Europe. I enjoy the international atmosphere with students coming from Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and other countries and particularly working together with Polish colleagues.

Last but not least I love to be able to take a short walk over the bridge to Slubice and take a look down the Oder river and from Poland to Germany. I enjoy the view from any side to the respective other side. Both views continue to shape and redirect my questions such as whether the contemporary specifics of racism signal a shift regarding the function of “the other” and what kind of new criteria are produced for marking difference, and in which ways these new criteria change the function of difference (and vice versa). Particularly of late, I wonder how bodies become marked by difference and how the materialization of bodies in time and space involve techniques and practices of differentiation. From an anthropological point of view, these questions do not just intend to examine the function of differences or reading differences on the surface of the body, but to inquire into how bodies “come to take certain shapes over others, and in relation to others” (Ahmed 2000: 42).

These questions are salient both in Germany and in Poland.

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