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## MALINOWSKI'S LEGACY: REFLECTIONS ON ETHNOGRAPHY IN POLAND, AND POLAND IN ETHNOGRAPHY

When I started graduate school in 1988, I thought I wanted to do research somewhere typical for an anthropologist, such as New Guinea. I had read Bronisław Malinowski's seminal ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, and was enchanted by the tropical Trobriand Islands and the brave Argonauts who set out across the sea in outrigger canoes to participate in the Kula exchange. I dreamed of living in a remote corner of the world, and through attentive listening, observing, and participating, I imagined that, like Malinowski (1961 [1922]), I would uncover the underlying structure, the imponderabilia of actual life, and the native's point of view. But then in 1989, the world changed. Following the Round Table Agreement in Poland, gashes in the Iron Curtain exposed tantalizing glimpses of a world that had been largely closed off to those of us living on the other side. I already knew a little about that world from a visit in 1986, and from my mother's stories about her upbringing in Warsaw before World War II. But it also was clear that Eastern Europe was the new frontier for anthropology. Few (from outside, at least) had studied there, and it looked like everything was about to change, anyway. So no one knew exactly what was going to take shape.

Poland is in many ways a perfect natural laboratory for investigating the construction, reproduction, and contestation of national identity. Poles have produced a vast body of scholarship, literature, and art exploring what it means to be Polish. And they have done so under particular political circumstances; even though the expectation of political autonomy is a key component of most modern definitions of nation (see especially Anderson 1991), much of Polish nation-building occurred in the absence of a sovereign Polish state. My research question became: What happens to Polish national identity in the context of postcommunism, when Poles are released from the yoke of Soviet influence and regain political autonomy and the freedom to run their country as they wish? I traced two trajec-

tories – processes of democratization and market liberalization on the national scale, as well as the experiences of high school students who were “coming of age” just as their country was transforming. Always envisioned as a longitudinal project, I kept in touch with residents of urban Kraków and rural Bieszczady for twenty years, documenting their expressions of national identity (via both practice and discourse) as they built a life for themselves in postcommunist Poland. Because I followed the same people over time, I did not have to guess how they would fare, nor what would happen in the country more broadly. Instead, I witnessed Poland move toward integration into the European Union, and participants move into adulthood (Galbraith 2014).

My perspective on national identity is shaped by my scholarly orientation and by my personal background. As a researcher, I am primarily interested in practice-based, bottom-up expressions of national belonging. I consider the deeply perspectival quality of national affiliations – how they are conditioned by time and place, and especially by **who** is involved. By training and by inclination, I am curious about the psychological dimension of cultural experience, especially the perspectives of particular individuals as they negotiate their positionality within the broader cultural milieu.

Additionally, my personal family history drew me to questions about Polish national identity. My mother was a proud Polish patriot who served in the Home Army and participated in the Warsaw Uprising. She was a true believer in the romantic rhetoric about freeing her homeland and the necessity of the human and material sacrifices to achieve that goal. But she was also deeply traumatized by the devastation she witnessed; it left her questioning but never abandoning that idealistic patriotism. Her trauma was in some ways relieved by her migration to the United States. She started what she sometimes called her second life, in which she could live in peace, taking care of her home and family. But in other ways, the physical separation from her homeland meant the effects of those traumatic experiences were never resolved, and in fact displacement among people with no clue about what she had witnessed produced its own kind of secondary trauma. As glad as she was to live in the US, she remained deeply attached to Poland, or at least to her idea of Poland, and continued to identify as Polish.

On the other hand, although I was born in the United States, I felt the dislocation of being a first generation citizen. Raised by uprooted people, my sense of connection to my own native place was fragile. Visiting Poland for the first time in 1986 was part of a personal quest, as stereotypical as it sounds, for my roots, for someplace that would feel like home. Initially, I was disappointed. Again, my experiences echo stereotypes in that I had to feel like a stranger in another country in order to realize how American I really am. But after just a few weeks, I developed an attachment to Poland that has grown stronger with each successive visit.

I offer this all as a preface to my anthropological investigation of Polish national identity. As much as I knew my mother’s romantic patriotism was an ideal

constructed under particular historical circumstances (indeed she knew this, too), I also witnessed the power of that ideal in her. I wanted to understand how national identity can have that kind of experiential reality, and how it would influence the reshaping of Poland following the fall of state socialism.

A number of Polish scholars have helped me develop my ideas about national identity generally and about Poland specifically. I learned from both Jan Kubik and Zdzisław Mach the importance of symbolism for shaping not only public opinion but also emotional responses to the nation. Kubik's *Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power* (1994) showed how national symbols became a political tool during the Solidarity period, used by state authorities to legitimize the existing power structure, but also employed by the opposition to challenge the state and assert an alternative basis for legitimate power. In other words, appropriation of national culture and history was a central feature of both the state socialist government and the resistance. Religion and religious symbolism also played a central role in public expressions of power, unity, and opposition. In *Symbols, Conflict, and Identity* (1993), Mach delved into fundamental political and symbolic aspects of national and ethnic identities. While he emphasized the social structural dimensions of identity building, he also recognized the emotional and ethical influence symbols have on subjective senses of belonging. These issues of self-identity in relation to dynamics of power resonated with me, and helped me frame the questions I asked in my own study.

I began fieldwork for my dissertation in 1991. As a Fulbright scholar, I had an affiliation with the Jagiellonian University under the supervision of Zdzisław Mach. Not entirely satisfied with the constructivist orientation of Benedict Anderson (1991), Eric Hobsbawm (1990), and Ernest Gellner (1983), I was still seeking a framework for understanding national identity that would also account for the experiential, embodied dimension of attachment. Sociologist Stanisław Ossowski's (1967) distinction between the "ideological" *ojczyzna* and the "little" *ojczyzna* helped me along in this regard. Ossowski employed the distinctly Polish concept of *ojczyzna* ("fatherland") to identify two dimensions of national identity, one based on ideology, persuasion, and top-down forces, and the other based on more immediate experiences and feelings of attachment to familiar places and people. Importantly, he recognized that attachment to place operates both on the conscious and experiential levels, in terms of both thoughts and emotions, and via official, political, elite channels as well as personal connections within a particular place.

Ossowski's insights about a more intimate level of national belonging strengthened my conviction that immersion in a particular community was essential for the kind of ethnographic study I wanted to do. But I was not satisfied with the idea of working exclusively in a village setting as was characteristic of the ethnographies of Chris Hann (1985), Carole Nagengast (1991), and the earlier work of Frances Pine (1993, 1995). Instead, I wanted to explore the similarities

and differences between an urban and a rural setting. Zdzisław Mach suggested I visit Bieszczady, a mountainous region in the southeast corner of Poland with its own distinct history including a population that was formerly ethnically and religiously diverse. With the help of Jerzy Jestał, who had recently received a doctoral degree from the Jagiellonian University, I visited several towns including Lesko, which became my rural fieldsite. Lesko had the benefit of having four high schools, a nearly unprecedented number for a town of just 6000 people. Thus began my twenty-year engagement with young people from Kraków and Bieszczady. Through participant-observation, semi-structured group and individual interviews, and informal conversations, I witnessed their coming of age as Poland's democratic system stabilized, market liberalization reshaped the economy, and eventually the country moved toward European integration.

The challenge was, and remains, distilling shared understandings about what constitutes Polishness, while also tracing the myriad variations in the experience, expression, and valuation of those understandings. In my book, *Being and Becoming European in Poland: European Integration and Self-Identity* (Galbraith 2014), the culmination of my longitudinal study, I focus on life stories of particular individuals, each of whose viewpoints are shaped by their personal trajectories through life, and by their own reactions to broader historical events and cultural factors.

Part one of the book examines shifting orientations toward time and space. With regard to temporality, I found that a national mythology, which highlights Poles' heroism (sometimes martyrdom) in the face of suffering, shapes perceptions not necessarily because participants accept it uncritically, but rather because everyone knows this particular version of the Polish past. As Leszek Koczanowicz notes, "any struggle for the past is in fact a struggle for the future" (Koczanowicz 2008: 20). He has in mind the political realm, but I explore how such politicized constructions of the past become touchstones for individuals' own orientations toward the present and future. One significant pattern I found in the generation I studied is a shift from a preoccupation with the present to an increasing willingness, and indeed need, to plan for the future. When they were in high school, the new system in Poland was still too uncertain for them to make long-term plans. Rather, they adopted an attitude of "waiting and hoping" that prospects would improve eventually. In the meantime many continued their education, which put them in a good position to find employment once the economy stabilized. Overall, this approach worked for participants in my study, most of whom grasped opportunities as they materialized. However, I also make the point that within the neoliberal climate, they **have** to think about and plan for their future; with less social welfare guaranteed by the state, the burden of securing their future falls increasingly on citizens. This has been particularly challenging for those lacking in skills, opportunities, and good fortune, contributing to the backlash against neoliberalism and European integration that have become even more apparent since the book was published.

With regard to orientations toward space and place, I was particularly interested in the kinds of attachments participants feel toward their region, nation, and Europe, and what the relationships are among various scales of identity. Participants from Bieszczady tend to identify strongly with their local place, even when they no longer live in the region. They equate the region with familiar landscapes and immediate memories of childhood and family. Kraków residents express a great deal of pride in their city, but they identify more strongly with the nation. I hypothesize that this is because they tend to see Kraków as the place that embodies the essence of the nation as a whole. As such, their attachment to Kraków also affirms their national identity. European identity, by contrast, tends to operate in qualitatively different ways than regional and national identity. Both urban and rural participants told me that they identify with Europe **because** they are Polish; in other words, being European is considered a byproduct of Poland's geographic location within Europe, not a distinct identity with its own qualities. Attachment to Europe, if participants express any at all, tends to be less emotional and more instrumental. As a symbol, "Europe" represents the affluence many seek to achieve in their lives, and as an instrument, loyalty depends on what they think they can get out of being a part of the European Union. This, of course, has significant implications for European integration.

Part two of the book explores orientations toward European integration (a topic also studied by Jasińska-Kania and Marody 2004; Mach, ed., 1998; Mach and Niedźwiedzki, eds., 2002, to name a few who provided a context for my own research). Participants in my study said the most frequent and immediate effect of becoming a citizen of the European Union is the increased opportunity for mobility. The ability to cross borders without showing their passports epitomizes a prosaic and yet profound outcome of membership in their everyday lives. Nearly every Pole I know had already spent time abroad (as a temporary worker or as a tourist), so it is not mobility per se that is at issue, but rather the ability to travel legally, without formal regulation. Life of Poles living and working in England especially (where one million Poles settled after 2004) has become a rich focus of research (Galasińska 2009, 2010; Galasińska and Kozłowska 2009). Whereas these studies reveal ambivalence and even negative sentiments toward Poland among migrants, participants in my study, even those living in England, expressed more nostalgia and attachment. The second area in which participants said they have experienced the impact of the European Union is via development projects subsidized by the EU. This is particularly apparent in Bieszczady towns like Lesko that received funds for sewer systems, sidewalks, pedestrian plazas, tourist infrastructure, and cultural heritage projects. Again, participants tend to view the EU instrumentally; favorable assessments are linked to material benefits of membership. Negative assessments, by contrast, emerge out of concern for material and cultural threats to the nation.

In retrospect, I think that many of the people I met were surprised that I would come all the way to Bieszczady to study Polishness. And considering the region's

unique history, it was perhaps an odd choice. Nevertheless, I was interested in taken-for-granted aspects of nationness that I hypothesized would be common throughout Poland: often-repeated historical narratives, general assumptions about Poles, and associated sentiments of attachment to the nation. I expected these shared patterns to be shaped by common lessons in history and literature at school as well as everyday experiences at home, church, and other public spaces. But I also expected regional variations on these common patterns. As anticipated, my fieldwork confirmed many convergences between state-level and locally driven conceptions of the Polish nation (in Kraków especially, which is often portrayed as the historical and cultural heart of Poland). But I also found that local historical events had an outsized influence on the identity of the Bieszczady residents I knew, meaning that their little *ojczyzna* sometimes overshadowed the ideological *ojczyzna* and commanded stronger loyalties.

As Poland moves further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is increasingly clear that Polish identity is not monolithic, and variation extends beyond even the regional, urban-rural, generational dimensions I had been focusing on. While I might have taken the publication of my book as an opportunity to begin a new project in another geographical area, instead I have been sucked right back into my mother's land. This time, however, I have been seeking answers to new questions, still related to identity, but centered more around memory and commemoration, and in particular the place of Jews within Polish culture and society. With hindsight, I realize that all along Polish citizens and scholars have pointed out to me the relevance of ethnic and religious minorities for the construction of Polish national identity, whether it be Ukrainians in the east, Germans in the west, or Jews throughout the country. Jews in particular have served as what Mach has called "significant others" (Mach 2011; see also Lehrer 2013: 11).

Again, I have followed my personal connections to the topic of Jewish heritage via my mother, while also tracing broader social trends in Poland. For years I have known that my mother's mother converted from Judaism to Catholicism in the 1920s, but I did not ask about it because I knew how uncomfortable the topic was for my family. Only recently, I have felt the compulsion to learn more about who my ancestors were, and why my family was reluctant to talk about them. Teasing out the complex web of these personal Polish-Jewish connections overlaps with the broader challenge of coming to terms with the history of Jews in Poland. This challenge has been taken up by Polish scholars as well, notable among them Katka Reszke's (2013) ethnography of the new generation of contemporary Polish Jews and Monika Murzyn-Kupisz's (2015) study of the revival of memory of Jews and the socioeconomics of heritage projects in the town of Chmielnik.

My foundational questions have not changed: What does it mean to be Polish? What are the tensions and parallels between local- and national-level discourses and practices, between public rhetoric and personal experience, between thought and feeling? How does the public become personal, and vice versa? What trans-

national and national agendas exert their authority, and how do people within face-to-face communities adapt to them, push back against them, or assert alternative ethical stances? But this new topic also engenders new questions: With regard to national identity, how is difference fit under the umbrella of Polishness? Are certain kinds and degrees of difference more easily accommodated? What about multiple, overlapping, simultaneous allegiances? And specifically with regard to Jews, what are the contours of the resurgence of memory about Jews in Poland? What is being done with the incomplete fragments of tangible and intangible Jewish heritage? What **can** be done, considering the devastation realized during World War II and frozen by the silence that followed during state socialism? Why are local places throughout Poland revisiting this difficult history now, and why are Christian residents spearheading commemorations and Jewish culture festivals in their local communities?

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to develop my project on Jewish heritage during the 2014-2015 academic year, this time as a Fulbright scholar in the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. This was a valuable experience in multiple ways, central among them my immersion in a community of scholars engaged in a high level of discourse about critical theory and its application. It was also instructive to spend an extended period of time in a different region of Poland, to experience yet another dimension of variation within what typically constitutes Polishness. It provided a context for my own self-reflection about the orientalism that can be part of Western scholars' gaze, particularly when the rural south is taken to represent the whole of Poland (a criticism made by Buchowski 2006). In Poznań, formerly within the Prussian partition of Poland, the narrative of Polish history emphasizes the early kings of that region, as well as cultural characteristics more often associated with Germanness elsewhere in Poland.

To conclude, much can be learned about national identity via ethnography from and about Poland. I have focused on the psychological dimension of cultural experience that shapes deep-seated orientations toward the nation. Some aspects are overdetermined by national mythology passed on through families, schools, and other institutional settings. Produced and reproduced as they are in everyday practices and discourses, these aspects tend to be more generally known (even among those who challenge them) and thus more resistant to change. Nevertheless, the more time I spend in Poland, the deeper my recognition of the diversity of Polish experiences, and the variations in what it means to be Polish. At present, Poland is at a kind of crossroads – between social and political forces reasserting an idealized, prototypical model of Polishness, and more progressive voices pointing out the multiple kinds of diversity that have always existed under the umbrella of Polishness. One of the compelling aspects of my research on Jewish heritage in Poland is seeing how these two pathways can converge in memory projects, as when heritage workers place Jewish history within the

broader history of their town, or call it their Christian duty to confront the tragedy that befell Poland's Jewish residents. In this way, while Polish national identity is reproduced, it also reaffirms the relevance of significant others who remain symbolically important even when they are not physically present. Here again, new insights about the workings of national identity can be revealed by the study of ethnic and religious minorities in Poland.

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