Memory, Identity and Politics of Memory

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The Other Like Me. Three-and-a-Half Voices to the Theoretically and Practically Valid Problem

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1.

Cognizing the other, us *vs* others or our own *vs* someone else's within a divided group, along with processes of diffusional intercultural permeation, hybridizing and fusing the heterogeneous (thus conditioning not only the imitative and dependent, but also the original and specific) – undoubtedly, these were the most fundamental problems for the humanities and culture of the previous century. It is not without reason that they have given rise to a wide range of studies, commentaries, philosophical and theoretical conceptualizations. It has long been obvious that debate over these matters has not been restricted to academia, but first and foremost in the cultural arena with all its conflicting historical, political and social issues. One could say that they constitute one of the few domains in which the humanities, broadly understood, can carry out research which is not only cognitively and substantially valuable, but also potentially good and socially useful, depending on the effects of implementing programmes which are (socially) corrective, formational and educational in nature.

The trouble, as we know, is that the two main approaches developed in this field came to a deadlock. The first approach was the classically modern programme of cognizing the other in the culturally universal categories established by Euro-American anthropology of the first half of the 20th century. The indisputable greatness of its achievements cannot conceal the fact that the anthropologist, playing here the role of an observer, translated specific forms and texts of local culture into the "universal" descriptive glossary which was in fact the glossary of Euro-American anthropology and its historical cognition. In the course of time, this Eurocentric version of universal and objective cognition started to reveal clearer features of knowledge-power, resulting in the domination and subordination of the other. Understanding by "leaning over" and observing the distinctiveness of the Other, disregarding the noble art of persuasion in favour of the knowledge-gaining value of cognizing the other also disclosed the superior, patronizing perspective which inherently creates a hierarchy while taking away the other's voice to speak on their own behalf; it stigmatized and marginalized the other.

In the second half of the 20th century, the critique of the crypto-Eurocentric cognitive universalism stimulated the development of another influential model: multiculturalism which also had its time of fame and success; the time which already belongs to the past. If the former announced that "everyone is almost the same, but not quite" (paraphrasing the well-known formula by H. Bhabha), the latter proposed a programme based on the tolerant-pluralistic (and relativistic) approach that – simply – 'people are different' because there are different cultures in which they participate and different role models and experiences defining their identity. As a result, the program of multiculturalism was planned to support practices which were to strengthen and develop the identity of individuals and communities (no matter how they were understood) and not those considered "universally" valuable and worth promoting from an external perspective. Whereas universalistic claims to learn the truth generated cognitive disputes and ideological conflicts in the former Eurocentric approach, the latter model was aimed at suppressing these conflicts by replacing disputes about beliefs with disparities between subjective positions and disagreements between different viewpoints.[1]

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1   I am inspired here by observations of Walter Benn Michaels, *Kształt znaczącego,* trans. Jan Burzyński (Kraków: Korporacja ha!art, 2011) – especially chapter *Posthistoryzm* and Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) – esp. chapter *Shame Now.*

2.

I simplify – maybe too radically – both approaches and I disregard their numerous important consequences in order to expose only one aspect common to both: understanding the other. The first approach leads to deforming the other's image in the categories of dominant culture. The second one, in practice, desists from attempting to understand the other at all by eliminating ideological discord, supressing cognitive interest itself. According to these assumptions, cultures – similar to human experiences – are equal because they are incomparable, incommensurable. Furthermore, as identities are not beliefs – you cannot change them or argue with them – it's necessary to learn how to tolerate (bear with) them. As long as normative (cultural, political, state) systems controlling human behaviour effectively fulfil their functions, there is no need to go beyond the requirement of formally integrating federated enclaves of ethnic groups or to make an effort to understand their aspirations, motivations and peculiarities. In effect, the cognitive task is limited to recording personal and cultural differences, omitting challenges related to both the processes of cognitive understanding and ethical engagement or responsibility. What is worth noting is that recording differences does not have to have an affirmative character only – negation, rejection, refusal to understand 'others' problems' are also part of the equation. The reverse of affirming cultural differences in multiculturalism would be refusing to be interested in the other exactly because they are the other – not mine, not ours, but strange – a refusal adequately expressed in the following reaction: 'it's not my problem.'

SEP (somebody else's problem) is a category of the psychosocial analysis of behaviour and attitudes (rich in specialist literature) which has been popularized in the Polish humanities mainly thanks to an excellent work *Cudze problemy. O ważności tego, co nieważne. Analiza dyskursu publicznego w Polsce* [*Others' Problems and the Importance of What is Unimportant: An Analysis of Public Discourse in Poland*], edited by Marek Czyżewski, Kinga Dunin and Andrzej Piotrowski.[2] This volume, initially published 25 years ago, is still very much relevant, and it has been recently referred to in numerous posts online under such headlines as: "Immigrants are not my problem." SEP practices functioning in everyday life and in political discourses – identified and shown by the authors – are stimulated by three main affective motives: fear, shame and guilt which may result in xenophobic attitudes manifested nowadays through different kinds

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2   *Cudze problemy. O ważności tego, co nieważne. Analiza dyskursu publicznego w Polsce,* ed. Marek Czyżewski, Kinga Dunin, Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2010). If not otherwise specified all translations of referenced works are provided by the translator of the respective article.

of mentality and (anti)social behaviour. Merely referring to the subject taken up by today's humanities and social sciences is not unusual. Here are the first two stanzas from Fisz's[3] song entitled *To nie mój problem* [*It's Not My Problem*][4] in which both highly humanistic models of cognition (quasi-universalistic and identity-related) are filtered through ideas and notions related to popular culture portraying – very convincingly – the 'habitus' of its typical representative:

> There's no truth, only interpretations
> My space has four faces
> From atoms to molecules
> The space keeps shrinking
> Two quarters on the left
> Two quarters on the right
> You've got to decide
> But it's not my problem
> But it's not my problem
>
> Every aspect is correlated
> You need to be black or white
> You need to be Batman or Zorro
> You've got to have pride and honour
> You've got to have the right opinion
> But it's not my problem
> But it's not my problem

3.

In view of the deadlock as well as negative consequences of these two approaches, let us observe that maybe we need to look for other inspirations and solutions consistently based on the dualistic thinking about the relation between I and the Other as separate, autonomous monads. Generally speaking, I believe that it is necessary to re-orient this argumentation to admit that a crucial and inherent part of our self-knowledge, mature self-consciousness, as well as critical self-cognition, while belonging to a community, is also our image in the eyes of others and the ability to adopt the external point of view, to confront it with our cultivated internal image of ourselves.

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3   Fisz is the stage name used by Polish musician and composer Bartosz Waglewski.

4   Fisz, „To nie mój problem," in *Zwierzę bez nogi,* Emade, DJ Epron 2011, accessed February 28, 2017, http://teksty.org/fisz-emade,to-nie-moj-problem,tekst-piosenki.

I am certain that only this simple action, although perhaps uneasy to carry out, can make development of intercultural relations, encounters and dialogues indispensable on a daily basis, and in the interest of communities and individuals.

Mikhail Bakhtin, who is surely one of the most original and relevant scholars of 20th century literature and culture, offers us a very useful category which could help us reach this objective. What I have in mind here is "wnienachodimost" ("outsidedness") – one of the key concepts in Bakhtin's glossary. In his work about Bakhtin, Tzvetan Todorov suggests that this hardly translatable term should be "internationalized" (by reaching out to Greek sources) and called "exotopy," while a Polish translator Danuta Ulicka translated it as "niewspólobecność" ("noncopresence"). Bakhtin introduced this term in his works (probably inspired by Johannes Cohn's "transgradience") as early as in the 1920s, then frequently used it, systematically expanding the spectrum of its application. This technical term describing 'intra-literary' relations between author and character eventually turned into a universal category of historical cultural anthropology. It occupies a well-deserved position in contemporary interpretations of Bakhtin's theory (as well as in the theory of interpretation and post-colonial/post-dependence studies), which allows me to pass over examining its primary meanings, that is to treat it – outside its historical and Bakhtinian context – as a valid proposition for the transition period, a type of bridge or ramp over the abyss of today's history, politics and mental-and-social attitudes and behaviour.

In the most general terms, exotopy is about identifying the "shifted" position of the experiencing cognizant subject always situated – temporally, spatially, nationally, and culturally – outside the object of perception (whether it is another object, subject, community, culture, or him/herself). However, what is most important is that one should not see this as a weakness or an obstacle to overcome (for example, by participation or empathy), but an inherent feature of human (self-)cognition, a condition of authentic understanding and a marker of inventiveness (creative exploration).

"In understanding," wrote Bakhtin, "the most significant matter is the (temporal, spatial, and cultural) n o n c o p r e s e n c e of the cognizing subject in relation to what he/she wants to creatively comprehend. Yet, a person is not able to truly see even their own appearance or to grasp it fully. No mirror or photograph will help him/her with that. Only other people are capable of grasping and understanding his/her real appearance, due to both their spatial noncopresence and the fact that they are t h e o t h e r s. [...] Someone else's culture is only revealed in the eyes of another culture. [...] We ask the other culture new questions which it wouldn't have posed itself, and we search

through it for answers, and the other culture responds, unveiling its new aspects and new layers of meaning."

One could say that this view, though originally formulated, is in fact a classically modern outlook on the value of the external point of view, on looking at oneself or confronting the image of oneself with that image reflected in the eyes of the other, which is part of that European tradition already initiated by "the strategy of the Other" in de Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. What is more interesting (and less often noticed), however, is that Bakhtin associates it with a truly innovative conviction. It leads the scholar to rejecting the idea of the individual as well as a national culture as a kind of a closed container (a view we owe to romanticists, such as Schelling, and von Herder's concepts of culture as a sphere or an island). As far as the subject is concerned, Bakhtin argues that "one is not given any internal area of independence, [but] one is always on the verge, and delving into oneself, one looks into t h e o t h e r ' s e y e s or sees oneself with the eyes of the other." The same concerns culture: "We should not […] imagine the field of culture as a certain spatial entity with boundaries, but also possessing its internal territory. The field of culture does not have an internal territory: it is entirely located on the boundaries. They run everywhere, intersect at its every point."**5**

Let us notice that from this point of view, boundaries between what is internal and external do not distinguish any longer an autonomous identity of the individual or communal wholeness, but on the contrary, they run within it, or more to the point, they gather in (and sometimes create) its centre. This is because, as wholeness originates on the verge, it has the status of being a border territory where the external gets internalized, whereas the part considered to be most interior exposes its external genealogy. I believe that this latter identity concept – as exotopy, as a self-diversifying self, as the internalized Other – not only anticipates key observations of contemporary thought, but it may also constitute the legitimately shared assumption concerning inter-cultural dialogues. It somehow elicits (in the interest of the one who understands with effective, critical self-cognition) the necessity of self-definition, attention, and respect – towards the Other. The Other who is both within and without.

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5   Characterizing this thread of Bakhtin's thought I partly used my own description contained in "Polish Post-Colonial and/or Post-Dependence Studies," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2014), special issue: *Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies?*, accessed February 28, 2017, http://tekstydrugie.pl/file/fm/Dokumenty/t2en_2014_1webCOMB.pdf
Further quotations from Bakhtin's works: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Estetyka twórczości słownej*, trans. Danuta Ulicka, ed. Eugeniusz Czaplejewicz (Warszawa: PIW, 1986), 474; Ibid., 444; Bakhtin, *Problemy literatury i estetyki*, trans. Wincenty Grajewski (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1982), 26.

4.

I realize that my reasoning can be criticized as being unsophisticated, prudential, or even dull… But even if this is so, I still believe that when we realize or think, in short, about "the other" that he/she is "just like me," the barriers of untranslatability of perspectives, points of view and experiences disappear or are suspended – the same can be said about the politically odd, ideologically 'twisted' ladder of hierarchization, domination and subordination, and centre-peripheral dichotomies. Coming from the same source, what can be managed further is the syndrome of xenophobia and the feeling of one's "deficiency" which generates reactions: a refusal to offer interest based on fear, or open hostility towards otherness, but also shame (of who I am) and guilt (for what I did).

The other is like me – an exotopical identity of the Bakhtinian individual – and culture shows the way because our identity, being oneself, means being outside of oneself. In a sense, such a dynamic represents the primary socialization, or broader communalization; in the meaning of interactive and reflective dependence on others; in a dimension of transcending, of going "beyond oneself" in eccentric fashion… If the specificity of modern cognition takes the form of cognizing the other, it is because the real unveils itself to us as the radically other whom we are as well (as perhaps Bahktin would say). Therefore, when we think that we cognize with the cognized, in fact we cognize with ourselves. Literature and art have always known about this – this is why they have the effect of the transgressive-retroactive nature of artistic invention: going beyond oneself which gives access to what we have participated in from the very beginning.

Translation: Marta Skotnicka