

## Polish anthropology on the eve of the new millennium

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ABSTRACT *Author summarizes the main achievements of Polish anthropology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, presents the main research problems of this discipline in contemporary Poland and points at the potential dangers which may be faced by Polish anthropology in the forthcoming years.*

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### Introductory remarks

The wave of assessments, discussions and futuristic forecasts, which have been heard in the recent years, has not omitted Polish anthropology. The accessibility of these assessments releases us from an obligation to report on them and allows us to limit ourselves to reminding only the three works, which constitute the groundwork for our considerations. These three works are: 1) *The main directions of the development of Polish anthropology in the years 1985 – 2000*, a document drawn up for the 2nd Department of Biological Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences by P. BERGMAN, Z. DROZDOWSKI, T. KRUPIŃSKI and A. MALINOWSKI [1985] and accepted by the Anthropology Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences in January 1985, 2) *Anthropology in Poland; the problems, achievements, dangers and prospects*, a

report prepared by T. BIELICKI and J. CHARZEWSKI [1995a, b] for the Scientific Research Committee in 1994, and presented in a modified form at an anthropological conference held in Poznań in 1995, 3) *Polish anthropology at the close of the 20th century – the directions and tendencies of the development of its social functions*, an article written by the author of this paper, and presented at a conference held in Błażejewko in 1985 [DROZDOWSKI 1988]

Fifteen years ago when we were talking about the problems Polish anthropology would face at the close of the 20th century we focused on the questions, which after a certain modification in line with the present situation could be formulated as follows: 1) How can the major achievements of Polish anthropology in the 20th century, being also an inspiration for its future development, be recapitulated? 2) Which main problems faced by the modern human, in particular Polish, population can be, at least in part, solved by anthropology? 3) What main

scientific problems are studied by the contemporary Polish anthropology?

4) What potential dangers will anthropology in Poland have to face in the approaching years? 5) What shape of the discipline is to be expected on the turn of the present millennium?

### **Polish anthropology in the 20th century**

I think, that I will not commit oversimplification, if I sum up the main achievements of Polish anthropology in the ending century in the following way [BIELICKI *et al.* 1989; DROZDOWSKI 1995; MALINOWSKI & WOLAŃSKI 1986]:

1) Construction of the discipline's system of links with almost all universities, including the education of specialists on the academic level, as well as formation of its corporate shape manifesting itself in the establishment of the anthropological association, of organisational structures in the Polish Academy of Sciences (including its own scientific centre), of a system of scientific periodicals, in introducing its representatives to international institutions engaging in the study of man.

2) Outlining and working out the original research problems, expressed in the original studies, often with the characteristics of scientific schools such as a) the Polish School of Anthropology of Jan Czekanowski, b) the Warsaw Comparative-anatomic School of Edward Loth, c) Evolutional and Comparative Biology initiated in the Poznań environment by Adam Wrzosek and Michał Ćwirko-Godycki, d) sports anthropology created by Jan Mydlarski and Karol Stojanowski, resulting today in the original research on bio-social conditions and effects of

human motor activity, e) Initiating the research on biological manifestations of social stratification and secular changes in their conditions, which allows us today to refer to the Polish School of Social Anthropology rooted deeply in the history of the discipline, f) Expanding the scope of "anthropology of skeletal populations" (extinct populations biology), concerning also the issues of paleopathology inspired by Adam Wrzosek and developed by Tadeusz Dzierżykray-Rogalski.

3) Organisation of extensive, complex anthropometric research, which as early as in the inter-war period placed Poland among countries most thoroughly, researched from the anthropological point of view.

4) Saving the discipline from planned reduction at the beginning of the 1950s, and from excessive involvement in discussions going on in those times, and wise use of the premises of its further development.

### **Biosocial changes as a subject of anthropological research**

Among the most important in this field the following changes can be mentioned.

1) Economic and social transformation of Poland causing: a) growing social stratification, entailing a considerable pauperisation of large groups of society, expansion of poverty zone with all of the bio-social results of this process, b) collapse or serious danger of collapse of vast areas of the economy leading to the growth of the number of the unemployed or people working for a minimum wage, c) departure from the idea of welfare state, which in the free-market economy

assumes the shape of aggressive 19th century capitalism, d) decline of certain social groups which are being replaced by new ones with a different manner of work and different life-style.

2) Economic transformations also lead to changes in the sphere of ecology, with still continuing degradation of the natural environment and only rare cases of its reconstruction.

3) In the long perspective of the cycle of demographic changes the birth-rate in Poland is decreasing, resulting in the lack of simple replaceability of generations in some regions; Poland is slowly moving towards the group of ageing populations with all of the bio-social consequences of this fact.

4) The state of health of the population of Poland continues to be poor – with a high percentage of diseases constituting global threats.

5) The character of work is changing in the majority of occupational groups; forms of management characteristic of post-industrial economy are gaining on importance. They additionally increase the pressure on the human nervous system provoking barely known biosocial effects.

6) The mobility of the Polish population is growing both in the sense of domestic movement as well as the migrations abroad. Similarly, we observe a greater influx of groups of people from other countries into Poland. I think, that the changes taking place in more distant conflict zones will also have some influence on the overall situation.

### **Main research problems**

The main research problems of the present-day Polish anthropology could be summarised as follows:

1) In the field of ontogenetic research the complex works documenting the changes taking place in the Polish population as a result of economic-social and ecological transformations continue. These studies are spreading beyond the phase of progressive development, dealing more and more often with the senility phase and assuming a longitudinal character in conjunction with the science of physical education. It is also worth noting that there have been attempts at formulating a general theory of ontogenetic development.

2) Polish research in the field of social anthropology have referred to the above-mentioned studies, and according to some scientists have derived from them in a significant way expanding the research of biological effects, mainly of social stratification and secular changes taking place in the situation of the occurrence of different social strata and occupational groups.

3) In the sports anthropology the works on bio-social conditions and results of directed increased and disturbed motor activity, including also occupational activity, which becomes a subject of research for physical education sciences have developed to a considerable degree. Recent years have also brought significant results in the research of human motor activity evolution.

4) Also the research of the “anthropology of skeletal populations” is experiencing a renaissance in Poland, forming the premises for the identification of biological and demographic structures of different ancient populations, diseases they suffered from (paleopathology), as well as the results of ethnic changes that were taking place in the past.

5) In the field of theoretical anthro-

pology dealing with “the anthropological theory of man” [BIELICKI & CHARZEWSKI 1995b] the research is focusing on the issues raised at the seminar entitled “The species characteristics of man”.

6) Polish anthropology is also credited with inspiring and developing studies on the structure of human motor activity; these studies have become the basic field of investigation for the science of physical education [CHARZEWSKI 1997, *Spoleczne kontrasty...* 1998].

7) Anthropology’s account has been also enriched with chronobiological research, which have been flourishing in the recent years.

8) Another important domain investigated by Polish anthropologists is human ecology – the studies in this field have been conducted both in Poland and in non-European populations attractive from the scientific point of view.

The above-mentioned list does not include all of the actual fields of our activity. Perhaps the choice presented resulted in an oversimplification. Yet, all selection tends to be based on generalisation and is subjective by nature.

### **What potential dangers may be faced by Polish anthropology?**

These could be summarised as follows [DROZDOWSKI & DZIERZYKRAY-ROGALSKI 1982; DROZDOWSKI 1996, 1998].

1) The traditional fields of anthropological research are becoming a ground of increasing penetration by other disciplines of science. Initially they are merely suppliers of research techniques and methods, and documentary materials for these disciplines, finally to become appropriated.

2) Opposite processes are very rare –

we do not enter new fields, or we play only a secondary role in their penetration. I do share the opinion of T. Bielicki and J. Charzewski that our activity is losing dynamism, which may lead to the marginalisation of the discipline. We often fail to present our issues in an attractive and interesting manner.

3) We will face problems related to the turnover in the generations of anthropologists. The anthropologists educated at the turn of the 1940s are approaching the end of their academic activity, while the next generations – although fairly well prepared to fulfil their tasks – are only now entering their academic maturity. Furthermore, the fact that a large group of researchers has left our discipline to work in other fields of science has been undoubtedly of great significance for its present shape.

4) The process of building and assimilating new research techniques is too slow.

5) In the present situation academic level schools are still science’s main working ground. This is also true of anthropology. In the course of program transformations its scope of study becomes a mere supplement to the new package of information related to other disciplines, which is quickly losing its touch with anthropology. At the same time, facultative lectures on anthropological issues are very popular among students and attract also people studying subjects other than biology.

### **What shape of Polish anthropology is to be expected?**

Disciplines of science tend to change over long periods of time, and revolutions in this area tend to have deplorable effects. The changes that will be taking

place in the Polish anthropology in the forthcoming years will to a certain degree stem from the present state of this discipline. In my opinion, anthropology in the following years may develop in the following way.

1) A classical definition of anthropology stating that it is “a science studying man as the biological basis of social occurrences as well as their social results” adequately explains the profile of the discipline presently situated somewhere between biological and social sciences. One should expect the development of co-operation of anthropology with the following disciplines: a) physical sciences – in particular with sciences dealing with transformations of the abiotic environment, b) biological disciplines dealing with genetics, ecology, developmental and comparative biology, c) social sciences – especially with sociology, demography, economy. Thus, anthropology should become a part of a more complex picture.

2) Such understanding of the discipline entails a necessity to reshape its scope of research to cover new interesting areas such as: a) Biological (bio-social) results of economic, social and political changes taking place in Poland and marking a biological trace on the condition of various social groups and regional populations, b) effects of changes occurring in the natural environment (both abiotic and biological) on individuals and populations, c) biological and social results of changes in the occupational activity of man, d) biological characteristics of ancient, or perhaps, in broader terms, extinct, human populations, e) research of bio-social conditions and results of ethnic changes taking

place in various regions (mostly outside Poland).

3) The system of research techniques and methods should be expanded and developed in line with the requirements of particular research tasks, and a wider use should be made of the techniques offered by disciplines close to anthropology. Anthropological education system also needs reshaping. Extension of the supplementary studies that would attract also specialists from adjacent disciplines should be seriously taken into consideration. To this end representatives of co-operating disciplines could meet at regular working meetings.

## Conclusions

To conclude this paper we should ask ourselves a question: What is the inventory of Polish anthropology at the brink of the 21st century? Here we have to mention the following assets: 1) a growing number of young, active anthropologists, well prepared to fulfil their tasks, 2) attractive scope of study (biological results of social stratification, research on changes of human population, biological characteristics of skeletal populations, bio-social conditions and results of work, biological conditions and results of ethnic changes) attractive not only for university students but also potentially interesting for the whole society, 3) experience, including also organisational experience, being an asset of a large group of still active anthropologists, useful in transforming and improving the discipline in line with the needs of the forthcoming years, 4) growing social interest in the changes taking place in the human – both regional and general – populations, preparing the ground for the

greater popularity of anthropology in terms of information it can provide.

However, society needs to urgently answer the following questions: 1) Which areas of bio-social study of man should be particularly intensively penetrated by anthropology?, 2) Is the present system of anthropological education adequate to the needs arising from the development in the field of anthropology and in the co-operating disciplines?, 3) What problems of human and population studies should we popularise in particular and which social groups should they reach?

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### Streszczenie

Wiek XX stanowił dla polskiej antropologii okres jej pełnego ukształtowania: obszaru badań, metod badawczych i struktur organizacyjnych. Powstały oryginalne i znaczące szkoły naukowe, których koncepcje przeżywają, choć w zmodyfikowanej postaci, do czasów współczesnych. Zarysowuje się hipoteza, że w okresie przełomu tysiącleci antropologia polska wkracza w zagrożonych strukturach organizacyjnych, ze słabo sprecyzowanymi programami badawczymi i przy wygasającym udziale w procesach edukacyjnych. Tymczasem przemiany biologiczne i społeczne, dokonujące się zarówno w polskiej populacji jak też innych regionalnych populacjach, stwarzają nowe i obiecujące pole badań. Jaki zatem w tej sytuacji powinien być obraz polskiej antropologii najbliższego dziesięciolecia?