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On the Possibility of Transmitting the Fieldwork Experience – Presentation of the Meta-Methodological Conditions of the Transitional Fieldwork

Without any intention to synthesize the broader theoretical discussions about the problem, I shall herein try to outline the boundaries of “the fieldwork”, as an implied, disputed, but also inevitable ethnologic scientific practice. This will be done in a concise and critical manner, within the contexts implied in various ways by “domestic ethnologies”. Particular attention will be devoted to the points where its unavoidable limitations mutate into strategies of manipulating the knowledge and/or academic power.

Key words: Fieldwork, theory, hierarchy of knowledge

The fieldwork practice is undeniably the most intriguing place of production and codification of ethnologic knowledge, equally when it is implied in some sort of tacitly agreed form, and rejected in another extreme; regardless of its deification due to its unique characteristic of immediate cognition, or its demonization, and even criminalization, because of its darkest forgeries and instrumentalizations.¹ In the same way the concept of *empirical knowledge*, which stands in the background of this scientific practice, varies from its a priori position of “discovered” cultural elements to indescribability and unfathomability of other, “placed within the

¹ It is impossible, and perhaps even unnecessary to recapitulate the discussions which in the broadest epistemological, ethical, disciplinary and academic field of anthropologic theory have been assuming for decades the general and/or special and contextual standpoints on the question of fieldwork (experiences, subjectivity, cultural diversity, textualisation, etc.) and which, from the 90ties permeate also the critical discourses within regional ethnologies. I myself have contributed to the issue of theoretical execution of ethnology as a “naïvely realistic” discourse, in the text “Fieldwork returnee”. Therein, I defended up to some extent the status of the discipline which leans on the documentarist methodology, by sheltering it from the general critique, where we have inherent impossibilities and ideals set too high (Prica, 2000).

‘poetry of life’², the modus of its textual representation is equally flexible. Including the complete negation of any need for written works,³ if it represented a unique “verbal scientific genre”, the ethnography, as the *writing from the field*, could be represented by anything within the woods of its previous history, ranging from statistical charts, archive signs and “short notes” from the trips, all the way to poetic extemporations and popular scientific novels.

Although it represents the very foundation of its disciplinary identity even today, the field research has been freed from the undemanding attributes such as primary, preparatory or even “semi-professional” phase of “material collection”. Until recently, at least within the domestic environment, we had a carefree researcher placed in predictable situations and familiar background, whereas today he is a reflective expert prone to introspection and *fieldwork reflection*, willing to unreservedly share with his readers both his initial uncertainty and doubts of “entering”, as well as his self-confirming finale of “exiting fieldwork”. For the nearly inverted, cognitive and textual status of experientially gained fieldwork facts,⁴ the credit goes primarily to *caution against the theory*, both when it originates from accurate information or from secondary sources of academic folklore. In either case – both when complicated conditions threaten with complete giving up, *permanent home dwelling*, or when it is just a pragmatic instruction regarding the publishing of one’s own research in some “top” magazine – that caution is an undisputable heritage of the end of the century, a whisper in the classrooms and corridors of institutions: the fieldwork, simply put, “is not what it used to be”, as this was phrased by Faubion and Marcus in the title of their recent anthology (2009). Being far from the direct *source of information*, it is a point of sensitive examination of the credibility of ethnological knowledge, with still unstable criteria for establishing the correct fieldwork relations, as well as (and especially) their textual verification – among which the *scientific self-proclamation* is perhaps one of its “most popular” or most customary forms. The remote possibility of its further realization in the “naïve” form, which was disparaged by

² It is some kind of mystification of the notion of cultural difference, that is to say consequences of “difficulties in positively defining the Other (which have) caused the retreat of the Other into unfathomability, that is nondiscursivity. There it overtook the heritage of Diltay-Nietzsche’s “poetry of life” which is beyond any kind of conceptual comprehension” (Biti, 1997:76).

³ Olga Supek uncovers the character of “textual abstinence”, that is field instruction to young ethnological generations from the mid-twentieth century, who “must see and feel much more of fieldwork before starting to draw any conclusions. Analogous to this, it is being said that the whole orientation of our ethnological science should be towards material gathering, and future generations, which probably won’t have anything to gather, will be forced by circumstances to start thinking and synthesizing what we entrusted them with” (1976:32).

⁴ Interesting examples of inversion of research levels, that is the requirement of preceding theoretic instructions which, judging by attached texts, subsequently get “tamed” by fieldwork experience, have been collected recently in the anthology ‘Ethnology of the Familiar’ (Čapo et. al., 2006).

Clifford Geertz as a professional deformation of anthropological “metaphysics of presence” (*I was there*), the proclamation of researcher’s authority currently takes place mainly through reassurance in one’s own capacity for dealing with complicated conditions of “being there”, while the status of fragments “once known as cultural facts” tends to retreat to the rear lines, in some sort of “smuggling” the positive knowledge about the world. It is hard to tell how close or far it is from various ethnographic ideals established over the last centuries, to a great extent also as unreachable ideals of epistemologically accurate *fieldwork writing*. However the *substitution of description for inscription*, which can be characterized as a contemporary outcome of discussions regarding the fieldwork reports, is anyhow in line with the basic urge for merging the research (and human) subject, the active aspect of which was set apart with an ancient and incurable cut. Namely, in view of the fact that the concept of fieldwork, experiential, empirical knowledge contains the entire aporic heritage of the Western epistemology, the uncertainty of the modus and strategies of its representations is a consequence of the necessity of orienting oneself far beyond the controversial history of the disciplinary practice itself. It is a paradox due to which experts in the fields which still keep their status of border, “excess” or corrective disciplines within the totality of discourse of humanistic sciences,⁵ were faced with strictly theoretical and occasionally fundamental issues of access to reality and language articulation of the entire human experience. From this, supposedly impartial position, they have been “reverted”, often inappropriately, into judgments of the disciplinary practice, and significantly reduced to a commandment of manipulative, “unaware” nature of the representation of cultural situations and experiences. Having survived that period in different ways, fieldwork is nowadays being placed within the focus of anthropological *professional culture*. From there, as a practice which “ceased to be what it was”, fieldwork equally acts from the position of scientific self-cognition (*fieldwork reflection*), as a source of acquired “neorealist” status of cultural facts, and as the world’s stage in which it is possible to initiate the process of relearning (and teaching) the anthropological method.

After having been reinstalled in their full phenomenological strength, in spite of sharp controversies which have been “put on hold” ever since – and which, not

⁵ In the “richest” form, the epistemic position of ethnology was presented by Foucault (Words and things), where its discourse (actually more in some kind of “natural” than self-thinking way) corrects the “anthropologism” of scientific empiricism (limitation of subject with their own finality). Ethnology (in the form perceived by Foucault) intervenes in redundancy (quasi-empiricism) of science, in the way that it is “possible just in a certain situation, as a unique event in which history has been involved, with its essential relationship to any history, which enables it to connect to other cultures in a purely theoretical fashion” (1971: 414-415). Its epistemic functioning is related with the “position of the Western ratio” which evades the position of episteme in a certain way: instead of offering the empiric materials to the historical positivity of the perceiving subject, like other humanistic sciences, “ethnology puts singular forms of each culture, as well as the differences which confront them within the boundaries which confine it into its own coherency, in the space in which the relationships are connected with each one of the three large positivities (life, need and work, language)” (ibid.)

by chance, coincided with the so-called transitional moment of distribution of political power and academic interests – contemporary status of fieldwork can probably be most precisely described as latent. The ease with which someone is currently capable of going to that place of undeterminable physical and conceptual boundaries depends on various motives and limitations, on the extent to which we are prepared to cope with its scientific and social history, but also on the character of the “cognitive hunger”, or what is left from some authentic research motivation within the prevailing pragmatic, academic, commercial, but also confessional, self-reflective and “self-congratulatory” demands from this theoretically tortured, but phenomenologically vital scientific practice.⁶

The Fieldwork Controversy and the Scientific Context

Since the mid-seventies, when it was placed in the center of ethical-epistemological debates, the problematization of the ethnological fieldwork has been established with twofold intentions and capacities. As an inside-disciplinary call for cleaning the unsightly heritage of scientific history, the discussion set reachable goals for anthropology from the end of the century, as a multitude of minority discourses determined by cultural differences and subalternativity, tightened the criteria for publishing and recording the insights of researchers, that is to say authors, and also enthroned ethnography as a complex writing of intersubjectivity and tentative negotiations over conflicting cultural values (comp. Amit, 2000; Gupta, Ferguson, 1997). At the points where it “stumbled” or pragmatically stopped at the borders of science, the discussion developed further within meta-disciplinary theoretical frameworks of widespread and unresolved concern for the constructivistic character of reality and logocentric character of representation.

Duality or twofold character of this critical intention can also be explored within the ideal of ethnographic dialogue from the turn of centuries, which, in addition to more narrow disciplinary demands for corrective (research and textual) practices, has been hiding also a radical notion of theoretical primacy over any form of scientifically acquired knowledge, all the way to complete negation of empirical guarantee for social and humanistic sciences.⁷ Within this meta-disciplinary

⁶ One of the powerful recent movements for the revitalization of experientialism in fieldwork within the methodological phenomenology has been initiated within the Scandinavian ethnology (comp. Frykman, Gilje, 2003). For the attempt to synthesize the methodological forces in the “domestic terrain” refer to Čapo, et. al. 2006).

⁷ The demand of ethnography as a *radical autobiography* is a concept which not only inherently includes the difficulty of bringing the dialogue with means of ethnographic description, if not it even questions it as the “the betrayal of theory”, but places within bric-a-brac the complete conventional procedure of “proving” the anthropologic interpretation by way of exposing the cultural description, and that is something which could stand for *empiric example* on the background of (imaginary) abstract integrity of the scientific discourse (i.e. Velčić, 1991).

discourse, the scientific practice which, like ethnology, strongly leans on “metaphysics” of experience and presence, suffered as a sacrificial lamb of the total restructuring of scientific disciplines, so to say. If many so-called social sciences retired from that post-structural moment with almost undamaged methodological self-confidence that happened partly because debts have been paid off from the domain of anthropology, as a particular material reservoir for meta-insights into the widespread Eurocentric manipulation over language and meaning. Even though nothing but painful and long-term decay was predicted for anthropological discourse in that capacity – in the unfinished “beyond discipline” status in which Levi-Strauss had been keen on seeing it – it proved to be the most vital point in the new academic re-stabilization of the system of knowledge of social sciences. Ethnography, as *writing from the field* and textual evocation of the experience of reality, although with denied exclusivity of ethnological (anthropological) disciplinary ownership and displaced from its “naïve” epistemological status, now appears in the horizon of new paradigms with axial pretensions (such as cultural studies, for example), actually as a guarantor of their, now theoretically gained (!) empirical authenticity.

After having been exposed to repercussions of meta-disciplinary discussion for the first time, or to “the terror of the theory”, as its non-operational and proportionally less benevolent effects are sometimes characterized, the targeted (ethnological and anthropological) scientific community replied in an exceedingly divergent manner, when it comes to reception and methodological adoption of its complex arguments.

Aversion to theory and its “lethal” implications, which is certainly one of those effects, has nevertheless proven to be exaggerated, at least when it comes to untouchability or re-stabilization of curriculums and research projects. Many discoveries from the self-critical period have been taken for granted, in the form of methodological recipes for “conscious writing”, often twisting into a caricature of its own authentic calls. Compromising response to the far reaching anthropological critique, diminished into a pragmatic safeguard against political incorrectness, while the enthroned ideal of interdisciplinarity is now being “carried out” through the imperative of quoting and overwhelming growth of bibliography, while the same struggle for bare facts, which are the pure gold of commercial social sciences, is now being fought in the shadow of selective and often discriminating decisions of anonymous critics. Awareness of the social background of the research situation is now visible mainly within the ready-made signals from the author’s self-reflection, while the concern for textuality changed into bureaucratic tightening of publishing criteria, and the situation within the “fieldwork” remains more or less the same, perhaps because things cannot be otherwise.

If in its final outcomes we also count the new hierarchy of knowledge, which swept away the authenticity of small and different scientific traditions during the post-socialist moment (comp. Buchowski, 2004) by way of waving the argument

of insider's overwork and inability for reflection, then those individuals that had always advocated "sleeping through" that period, had been right.⁸

On the other, and better, hand, the issue of purposefulness and performativity of the fieldwork knowledge is being revived exactly in the places beyond the reach of the center of its codification, in the so-called "less important" scientific communities with regional publishing capacities. There are now some paradoxes on their, as well as on our side, because staying away from the main race, social insignificance which beneficially reflects itself in the still relative certainty of financing, and even the afore mentioned "sleeping mode" which sheltered them from neurotic aspects of postmodern current, are now suddenly surfacing as collateral advantages.

In such paradoxical environment of vitality of scientific atmosphere – sustained by the fact that discussion over epiphenomenal characteristics of postmodern argumentation at this point got "cracked" into equally epiphenomenal, that is to say specifically contextual junctions of domestic discussions – the dilemmas of the fieldwork methodology and teleology are now surfacing in their purest form, covered up or renewed.

Equally with superficial or angry rejection, or with pious "sticking to the literature", opened topics of anthropological "millenarism" from the late twentieth century stand as a hard rock of disciplinary authenticity, ready for a less spectacular attempt to break them down into singular, scattered efforts, by the multitude of professional "anonymous individuals". Some sort of, perhaps even extorted, *secondary advantage* of contemporary ethnological activities on the periphery does not lie in the recognition of its "transitional character", willingness to adapt, similarity or pragmatic leaning on external factors, but quite the opposite – in the possibility of getting realized within the hybrid environment of contradictory discourses and modes of finding the authentic voice. In that way, the aporic character of ancient epistemologic questions has perhaps been put into brackets, but not into a lasting delay, which is otherwise an obvious alibi for resistance and "denial of the theory" of recent positivistic and traditionalistic currents (including promotion of the exclusive status of discipline's modernistic heritage).

Work on the Periphery

Having been avoided in its basic terminology as a dubious "import of theory", the post modernistic discussion herein appears with a later entry "through the

⁸ Although I did not commit myself to detailed analysis, let alone to arbitration of its foundational arguments coming mainly from I. Kovačević and M. Milenković, I pointed to indicative discussion which has been taking place in the Serb ethnology over a longer period, about, let us phrase it as "the problem of post-modernism". Although strongly contextualized and encased within ideological indications, it partially touches the status of "the reality of fieldwork" itself, that is the question what should we, as ethnologists, "do with it" (comp., among others, Milenković, 2009, Kovačević; 2009. For a quality narrow disciplinary discussion about the problem of fieldwork, comp. Ivanović, 2005)

window”, and additionally burdened with contextual chaos of discourses, those being the conditions which now paradoxically create its authentic atmosphere. In that way, the problematisation of the field research after post-modernism, coupled with the uncertain status of its basic elements, to a large extent reducible into, not any more doctrinal, but methodologically conflicting and productive, issue of the possibility of transmitting the discourse, the communication of scientific traditions, that is to say the very dissemination of the theory within different paradigms and traditions. Although it fails to be of any help in the sense of finding the *final solution*, secondary importance and partition of this sort of disciplinary position is a working matrix of demystifying the postmodernist iconography and diminishing the paralyzing effects of the theoretical oversight. The problem of reality, “has been returned to reality”, the theory has been thrown “back to the fieldwork” wherefrom it (allegedly) arose. Moreover, from here it acts in its scandalous liveliness, inversion of goal and motive, in that form of carnival peripheral *postmodern* which was, perhaps in the most correct manner, although in the desperate forsaking of the trustworthy theoretical nomenclature, named “pasmaterna”! (comp. Biti 1996).⁹ Therefore, it is possible that behind the syntagma “field research” still hides the murky and unselective idea of the cognitive, social and author’s character of disciplinary works, without any clear consistency regarding the relationship with the quality or the quantity of scientific production, also with the wide scale of contradictory scientific, professional and human values in the background. In that way, even within the relatively developed scientific communities, sooner or later appear the paralyzing effects of banal and unscientifically colored distinctions into *hardened field workers* and *unshakeable theoreticians*.

Therefore, theorizing of the fieldwork – even if some individuals consider deep and liberating insights into the discipline as its result, perhaps more often than necessary, is getting characterized as a “hostile activity”, thus increasing the professional disqualifications of competitive, so-called armchair work – conformism and immovability, narrowness of view, empty speculations, uneasy feeling and fear from direct contact, etc.. That is to say, in the midpoint of all local varieties and historical changes in the understanding of the profession, the advantage still goes to the idea of an ethnologist as a “hunter-collector” – faced with experiential status of cultural facts, as a subject with one’s own existential needs.

I shall herein mention the pioneer analyses of the profession’s identity which were conducted by Lidia Sklevicky in the early nineties, where we can find definite confirmation of the champion status of bibliographically moderately accomplished *purebred field worker* within the local scientific community. Work of Olga Supek from the mid-seventies points out the continuity of the fieldwork imperative, in that period positioned as a sort of “educational-correctional” practice for young experts,

⁹ Vladimir Biti is otherwise the author of the most ambitious theoretical synthesis, and, to my mind, the most successful works which deal with “taming”, that is to say contextualization and social “detention” of the general (Western) theory (comp. 1989, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998).

where the necessity of the long-term and repeated dwelling in the field easily turned itself into an alibi for permanent delay in writing and a self-sufficient form of scientific career. Aversion against the fieldwork, which marked the then new generations of ethnologists, pertained also to obscurity of its reduction to transmitting mode of communication, feudal usurpation of data and their misuse as a school evaluation tool. But it also concerned formalism and reduction of ethnographic interest, pious sticking to the contents and patterns of previous texts which had reduced fieldwork tasks onto beckoning and old-fashioned concern for preserving the present state of the culture. On the other hand, compulsory purpose of research threaded through the other opening in the immense multitude of regional and local examples, smallest differences in singular cases of *salt tossing* or kissing the house thresholds, all of them being potentially important and invariant. Huge amount of unauthorized works has been thus put into a reserve position of waiting for the deeper or any other sense, intended to be our debt to the future generations and rare courageous authors, while the ant-work of anonymous enthusiasts turned into experts oppression and inertia. The farce of the fieldwork communication itself, probably familiar to many, was hidden in an anecdotic form for a long time, without any right to develop into – at that time still unenthroned and even illegal – self-reflective expression. Its best and most juicy parts remained unrecognized, hidden, and in the best case stored within half-private notes. Prior to the publishing imperative, which became its subsequent parasite, the function of the fieldwork ethnologist, could be said, had been to simply *be there* occasionally, until both parties, *pupils and peasants* – tired from playing the given roles – in the end strived for complete mutual invisibility.¹⁰

But, where to look for the reasons for losing the experiential-reflective potential of the fieldwork and documentary situational dimension of ethnography, and particularly the suppression of works and authors who occasionally wanted to breathe new life and pertinence into it? Why had it, despite of all the declarative sympathy for its direct subject, lost, or failed to reach, that mythomorphic-poetic charm which was elevated to the throne of interdisciplinary holistic ideal by the late century theories? Before it loses exclusive rights over this style of writing – confronted with demanding subsequent conditions of its production and vending within the cruel environment of social and historic sciences – the traditional European ethnology had written into it many traces of social dominations. The remnants of that bad hierarchy, and even the inversion of its importance, due to which ethnography regularly surrendered to allegedly inferior levels in more obscure academic circles – consisting of uneducated heritage enthusiasts, educated non-experts, students, younger or local scientists, and rather female than male experts – had been transmitted in line with the boomerang law onto the outer status of ethnology, the eternal candidate among other academic disciplines, from which is expect-

¹⁰ The cheerful memory on our hiding in the grass from potential storytellers, I shall herein dedicate to my dear friend, the late ethnologist Dobrila Bratić.

ted to conduct the primary research, “material collection”, for further theoretical processing in the remote centers of interpretative power.

However, the special favorable conditions for reproducing the scientifically confirmed social subordinations were provided by the atmosphere of post-socialism, which in its euphoric rejection of ideological pressure had also rejected almost the complete heritage of local intellectual communities. In an emancipatory call for getting involved into the middle stream of hastily constructed paradigm of *European anthropology*, the East European fieldwork becomes a battle field for the fresh symbolic capital. That battle, after ignoring the existing records, no matter how rudimentary or eclectic, but also in some elements pioneering *domestic theory*, is now being fought over the documentary richness of insider insights. The absurdity of well informed and theoretically sensitive population of transitional experts is now a bare necessity of practical realization within the conditions of declarative cosmopolitan interdisciplinarity, where they are invited to abstain from prolonging the primary task of *documenting the material*, which is ever more expensive in terms of time and money, not to mention the skill and willingness of local ethnologists to – *instead of us* – endure after being thrown into the world.¹¹

All in all, the situation itself speaks in favor of the need for the fresh form of thinking and practicing the fundamental ethnologic activities in smaller and more operational frameworks. Search for the “autochthonous theory” or “Franz Fanon of despised scientific traditions”, as it was put into words by Katherine Verdery (1996), implies that modes of realization cannot be always copied from canonized works, taken over in a fascinated, but always to some extent indifferent ways; instead, they have to be based on their inclusion, digestion and redefining.

Even had there been some reasons for caution or even indifference towards devastating criticism of anthropology which came from one untypical Californian department, especially in its millenaristic tones – it is still a paradox how the average contemporary ethnology failed to find the way of coping with “beautiful” aspects of

¹¹ One of the most impressive insights into the position of early transitional experts is the one written by Andreia Pleșu. “Those researchers had been forced to deal with the given subjects over many decades and they were suddenly confronted with the fact that their scientific curiosity must be repacked in line with the new repertoire of topics, if they wish to have access to money. Topics which, although not monitored and ordered any more, are still subject to economic, social, and sometimes even ideological demands. Those experts must accept specific methods, languages and strategies which have been determined beyond the reach of their individual choices. The concrete language (political correctness) is perhaps less absurd than the wooden language (political conformism), but it doesn’t make it less stiff and finally more acceptable. To end with, those researchers have been forced to accept strict “cannons” of prohibitions and permissions, even throughout their education. What they expected from the normalization after the year 1989 was the freedom from cannons which lack political sensitivity. They didn’t expect the limitations set forth by new cannons, with new prohibitions and concessions. Those researchers have been shaped by the long-term pressure of politization, guided and harassed by arbitrary censors, whose only competence was limited to dividing the libraries into permitted and “dangerous” books. To approach those minds with new lists of taboos, with whimsical recommendations and rules, is something that cannot be excluded from the “mental cruelty”” (Pleșu, 2004, 12)

anthropologic theory, in the period when works of European epistemology abundantly went in favor of it. Far from academic inferiority or devastating acceptance of the conditions of scientific market, there is a place of ethnography as self-sufficient and “dignified” text, close to everyday experiential cognizance in its full complexity of meaning, and not in the capacity of factual reservoir for elevated and established levels of imparting the scientific knowledge and its subsequent “culturalization”. For almost half a century there has been a noble invitation to serve as a counterpunct and controller of European reflection and Western logocentrism.

Return to unused heritage of *domestic ethnologies* doesn't imply exclusiveness and autism, but careful observation of effects and translations of theories within one's own experience and reflection. This also includes unpleasant awareness of the regression of cognitive and interpretative interests of ethnology, which has been maliciously growing over the last twenty years or so, and perhaps also points out the need for reconstruction and more intensive usage of heritage accumulated in the period between the sixties and the eighties.

The period preceding the official, academic and administrative *anthropologization* of European ethnologies, does not represent solely the period of pre-transitional unrecognizability and “crawling” of the discourse of the periphery: it is also characterized by the appearance of uninformed, different improvements, devoid of the wish for formal identification within the diverse and eclectic offer of methodological and theoretical frameworks. That form of provisional, imperfect, personally marked and responsible, but unburdened with authorship ethnographies – which we find scattered in the wide range of expressions, from the ethnology of everyday life and lifestyles, inspired by the critical theory, all the way to strong structural interventions which redesigned the used up meaning of traditional ethnography – represent both the meaningful and strategic elements for delineating the optimal dimensions of “temporary autonomous zones” – ethnological work in the global periphery.

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Инес Прица

**О преносивости теренског искуства
– осврт на мета-методолошке увјете транзицијскога терена –**

Кључне речи: терен, теорија, хијерархија знања

У тексту се сажето и заострено у контексту што га на различите начине подразумијевају „домаће етнологије“, назначују домети терена као оспораване али неизбежне етнолошке знанствене праксе, с посебним освртом на мјеста гдје нужност њезиних ограничења мутира у специфичне стратегије манипулације знањем и академском моћи.