



Erasing Polish Anthropology?

Society for the Anthropology of Europe

Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main, December 7, 2018

Anthropology is no stranger to political attacks. In the United States in 2011, Florida Governor Rick Scott argued that there was no need for more anthropologists in the state. He said he wanted to spend taxpayers' dollars giving people science, technology, engineering, and math degrees. Ironically, his own daughter studied anthropology. We remember too well the closing of the anthropology departments at Howard University and before that at Allegheny College. Budget cuts and shutting down individual departments are painful and often harmful to anthropology, but they pale in comparison to an ongoing effort to erase the discipline in an entire country.

Erasing the discipline is exactly what Jarosław Gowin, the Polish Minister of Science and Education, has done. On October 1, 2018, he signed a new law known as the Constitution for Science (Konstytucja dla Nauki) or simply Law 2.0 (Ustawa 2.0). Aspiring to reform Polish sciences, Minister Gowin declared that ethnology and anthropology are no longer independent disciplines. Instead, they are now part of a new field of scientific inquiry: the study of culture and religion. Never mind that there are no institutions – departments, training programs, or journals – to justify the creation of this new discipline.

The attack on anthropology is part of a broader attempt to reform Polish academia, in which the democratically elected university presidents will be replaced by rectors nominated by university councils (composed mainly of entrepreneurs and politicians), where free market competition and collaboration with businesses will rule, and where tenure-track jobs will be replaced with flexible employment. These neoliberal mantras are repeated over

and over by the politicians involved in the creation of the new law. The wider reform is part of the so-called “good change” (dobra zmiana) promoted by the conservative Polish government and eerily reminiscent of President Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again campaign in the United States.

Many questions remain: Why has the Polish government passed this law? And why has it targeted anthropologists? Is it because anthropologists have undertaken critical studies of the current establishment, knowledge production, gender policies, rising nationalism, and a slew of other “uncomfortable topics”? Are Polish decision-makers following in the footsteps of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has ordered gender studies to be removed from Hungarian curricula? It certainly seems so.

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This is not the first time in Poland’s history that social sciences went from holding tremendous cachet to becoming a punching bag for politicians. As part of the reform of higher education initiated in the late 1940s, the Polish Ministry of Higher Education decided to eliminate independent ethnological studies, considering them to be a product of bourgeois science. Following the Soviet model, three previously separate academic programs – prehistory, classical archaeology, and ethnography – were replaced by a newly created history of material culture.

The political thaw of 1956–1957 reinstated ethnography programs, but for many years the push was



Bronisław Malinowski, born in Kraków in 1884. LSE Library / Flickr (No known copyright restrictions).

for ethnography to focus, mainly or solely, on folk culture and stay away from social or cultural anthropology. Those anthropologists who tried to resist – Jan Stanislaw Bystroń, Jan Czekanowski, Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska – were accused by the press of being racist and deprived of their rights to publish and hold seminars.

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Things changed in the 1970s and 1980s. The effects of Perestroika on the Soviet Bloc and gradual liberalization in Poland enabled Polish anthropologists to conduct research in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South and North America. After 1989, when Poland underwent democratization, the departments of ethnography became departments of ethnology and cultural anthropology. This was not a simple change of labels. The new names reflect the richness and diversity of research themes and methodologies Polish anthropologists have been pursuing for decades. Estimated at eight thousand trained anthropologists, the discipline has made important contributions to the development of academic knowledge production and training, museum practice, establishment of non-governmental organizations and cultural centers, and many other institutions both in Poland and abroad. Given the current population changes resulting from international migration and growing xenophobia against migrants incited by the populist government, there is a growing need for anthropologists with expertise in cultural and social diversity, willing to study and advocate on behalf of populations that are marginalized and discriminated against.

Polish anthropologists are aware of this need and – like their predecessors – are strongly protesting Minister Gowin's new law. The Committee of the Ethnological Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish Ethnological Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze) have demanded that the decision regarding ethnology and anthropology be revoked immediately. They argued that Polish ethnology and anthropology had been included in the OECD classification of social sciences as an autonomous research discipline. They also pointed out that the discipline has had a long history in Poland, going back to 1919 when all Polish universities established departments of ethnology. At our own university, the Adam Mickiewicz University in

Poznań, preparations for the centennial anniversary of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology in April 2019 are already under way. The signatories of the protest letter also reminded Minister Gowin that ethnology / anthropology, the main discipline of social sciences and humanities both in Poland and in the world, has been shaped by our very own Bronisław Malinowski. Polish ethnology and anthropology continue to draw the attention of world anthropologists: The International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) and the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) are planning to hold the next world congress, aptly called World Solidarities, in Poznań in 2019.

Polish anthropologists are being supported in their current efforts by colleagues from outside Poland. The World Anthropological Union, IUAES, WCAA have all sent letters to Minister Gowin supporting those Polish anthropologists who have urged him to reinstate anthropology and ethnology as independent disciplines. The American Anthropological Association has also written a letter in support. Hopefully, protests in Poland and pressure from the world anthropological community will reverse this decision. Indeed, Polish astronomers have already prevailed: Minister Gowin is promising to reinstate astronomy's status as an independent science. Invoking Nicolaus Copernicus and Johannes Hevelius seems to have impressed Mr. Gowin. Will invoking Bronisław Malinowski work as well?

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