

Przemysław Rotengruber

Man in a World of Values. What is Applied Cultural Studies?

Summary. The aim of the study is to present the project of applied cultural studies – a result of work inspired by the output of representatives of the Poznań School of Methodology. Florian Znaniecki, Jerzy Topolski and Jerzy Kmita give a picture of culture the research of which is – to put it as briefly as possible – subjected to the principle of diversity in the models constituting it. Human motifs demand careful research precisely because they escape a simple comparison of arguments resulting from the knowledge of social facts. In accordance with this assumption the concept of applied cultural studies is accompanied by the conviction that heterogeneous systems of models of culture may become the object of development.

Keywords: applied cultural studies, theory of culture, Poznań School of Methodology

Przemysław Rotengruber, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, Institute of Cultural Studies, Szamarzewskiego 89A, 60-568 Poznań, Poland, e-mail: proten@amu.edu.pl

Applied Cultural Studies in a Historical Perspective

The birth of cultural studies, the dispute around its cognitive status, and finally the demand for its transformation into an applied field of knowledge are events that, in the opinion of many, comprise the modern history of the social sciences. It would be hard to find this surprising. Margaret Mead, in her *Preface* to Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, recalls that: "in 1921 the term 'culture' [...] was part of the vocabulary of a small and technical group of professional anthropologists. That today the mod-

ern world is on such easy terms with the concept of culture, that the words 'in our culture' slip from the lips of educated men and women almost [...] effortlessly [...].¹ The changes talked about would not be possible without the successive loosening of the rigours of homogeneous social theory. This process is one bristling with difficulties. On the one hand it forces those representing the social sciences to acknowledge the ambiguity of their verdicts. These sciences are grappling with the incommensurateness occurring between what they establish in general and the diversity of data representing the detailed level. On the other hand, this diversity testifies to the astuteness of researchers receptive (also) to information that may demolish their hitherto perceptions of the order shaping social reality.

The accumulation of these two factors results in the separation of local images of man embroiled in all sorts of social interaction from the monolith of knowledge. As a result of this operation it is not only this person who gains (by acquiring knowledge of himself). Putting back together the fragmentary images (diagnoses of local identities) exposes the researcher to dangers related to the unpredictability of the result. He is not certain whether, by completing a circle, he will reach the place he started from. Getting lost in the labyrinth of knowledge to which one is a guide is not a pleasant experience. Yet it is most evidently inspiring, as it forces criticism, a consequence of which is a new look at issues that need to be grasped cognitively. The acquired uncertainty of the social researcher makes one proud. It provides the grounds for believing that we are capable of recreating the connections between theory and practice better than our predecessors. In the meantime such supposition is not confirmed by historians of philosophy. From their point of view it is rather the case that we are returning to the debate regarding the nature of the world and the limits to knowledge about it.

The writers of ancient tragedies tell tales of people embroiled in a conflict of values. Oedipus, Antigone and Electra are only ostensibly in control of their destiny. The choices they make in no way protect them from the insidious influence of *fatum*. Experiencing uncertainty rises – in those tales – to the level of ontological diagnosis. You could say that the participants of ancient performance identify unreservedly with the characters of the drama. This is most probably why in his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines *katharsis* as the capacity to experience genuine feelings under the influence of the artistic message.² The sophists stand up to the dramatists of those ancient times. Protagoras believes that thanks to reason, man, "*as the measure of all things*," has an influence on what he encounters. Sadly, those who subscribe to this view ei-

¹ M. Mead, *Preface*, in R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, Boston 1959, p. vii.

² Aristotle, *Poetics*, Oxford 2013.

ther question the existence of objective rules of proper conduct, or give up hope of understanding them cognitively. The choice that the subject is faced with is whether he himself will set the rules governing his life, or whether others will impose them on him. The boundary separating *doxa* from *episteme* (common belief from knowledge) is not crossed in either case. The sophists believe that the world of values is heteronomic. However, reporting on the world and the rules governing it must, in order for it to be understandable (if only for its author), be coherent. Hence the incommensurateness occurring between homogeneity of thinking and the diversity of what is described and managed.

Socrates enters the dispute with the Sophists. Although he does not question the thesis of the heteronomic nature of reality, he denies the subject initiative in regard to creating order without constraint. Socrates sets *arete* (virtue) against external (cognitively mediated) goals. The axiological limiters on the part of the subject force him to be restrained in his judgments; namely, this subject acknowledges the thought that the only valid knowledge (*episteme*) is that regarding his ignorance. The position that Socrates takes is a logical consequence of the assumptions adopted by the sophists and by Socrates himself. At the same time it is the end of the humanities practiced according to the diachronic model. The subscriber to Socrates' views would, by modelling reality using his own perceptions of his desired state, be behaving in spite of himself. Yet he has nothing else at hand. This is probably why Socrates' successors choose research methods close to the notion of homogeneous rationality (or the law of non-contradiction). Plato positions the world of ideas above the material world, one full of paradoxes; from the principle of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), Aristotle creates a recipe for the auspiciousness of one's own community of fate, and ultimately the auspiciousness of he who decides to tend to their own political context.

The models of homogeneous rationality, putting it briefly, remain valid to our day. Of particular importance in the history of science is the birth of modern natural history. The 'mathematisation of nature' carried out by Galileo at the turn of the 17th century reaffirms habitual doubters in their conviction of the cognitive "*adequacy of things and the mind.*" In the meantime, the technological success of Western man translates with difficulty into his safety, self-fulfilment or feeling of happiness. Despite the improvement in his fortunes augured so many times, he remains a prisoner of models of thinking that do not so much render him receptive to defined areas of experience as conceal from him all the rest (due to the incommensurateness of its content). Discussions regarding the nature of man, a state's political model, or sources of social anomies are the best example of this.

Deliberations over the heteronomic nature of the social world are reviving in our times. This is being initiated by the question regarding how the rule of how them law of non-contradiction contributed to the displacement of what is different from the philosophical description of reality. The significance of this issue for contemporary social theory is beyond discussion. The hermeneutic multitude of interpretations, Marxist combination of economic and awareness-related factors, Nietzschean opposition of Apollonian and Dionysian attitudes, Freudian Eros and Thanatos, and sociological ambivalence as a source of anomy; these are but the first examples of a loosening of the demand for coherence placed on social theory. At the same time an epochal awakening does not mean that those awakened give up the dispute over what divides them. Some focus on the subject's cognitive capacity, others on the specifics of the world outside. Indeed, these obstacles are not trivial. But when discussion on the multitude of regulators of community life is carried over into the area of culture, then the difference is conspicuous as the object of protection given by those who – following the example of the ancient philosophers – want to take matters into their own hands.

Applied Cultural Studies as the 'grandson' of the Poznań School of Methodology

The discovery of social facts by Émile Durkheim is considered a turning point in the social sciences. Durkheim proclaimed that by using them he could gain insight into matters determining the quality of collective life. A social fact was meant to explain the position of man embroiled in social interactions with an accuracy comparable to that achieved by the natural sciences. This was to be accomplished by bypassing the normative convictions held by the researcher. Durkheim used this break with philosophy as the foundations of a new field of knowledge. He believed that it legitimately aspired to be called the mirror of society. Sociology – and other social sciences with it – was meant to comprehensively report on what is in a collective sense. Instead, over a century of efforts by its proponents have revealed significant shortcomings. The most serious faults discovered in the sociological project include the interpretation of social facts and their diversity. Durkheim's 'social fact' does not provide a reliable insight into the content of research. On the contrary, it is the object of never-ending disputes regarding what it refers to.³ Instead of clarifying social reality, it demands

³ É. Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, New York 1997; M. Ziółkowski, *Wiedza, jednostka, społeczeństwo*, Warsaw 1989, p. 56.

(previous) knowledge about it; only such knowledge enables clarification of what has taken place.

The process of reconstructing the picture of social reality carried out by summing up empirical data is proceeding just as lamely. The researcher involved in this task is struggling, on the one hand, with the problem of a surplus of definitions distinguishing a particular form of collective life, and on the other with the irregular occurrence of these attributes when diagnosing a collectiveness *in concreto*. The way in which Talcott Parsons characterised the American people in no way pertains to the facts describing the situation of the Albanians, Poles or Ukrainians.⁴ This description most certainly does not deny these nations the right to political self-definition, since they possess numerous arguments in favour of them being taken seriously.

In view of the difficulties in comparing empirical components with a general representation of what has been researched, the doubt regarding whether the promise contained in the names of sociology, ethnology or political science went too far is gaining ground. To express this thought with greater precision, are they reaching the *logos* constituting – according to their representatives' assurances – the background of social existence? This is very doubtful. Since these sciences give no guarantee regarding the accurateness of their result (determined on the basis of heterogenic data), they are exposing themselves to the accusation of harmfulness or uselessness. This can be clearly seen when comparing the weakness – thus understood – of knowledge through reporting with its ascribed forecasting functions. The prediction of future events based on an incomplete explanation of what can be seen resembles reading from tealeaves. There are countless such examples. Attempts at determining who would never be inspired by Weber's spirit of capitalism, when traditional societies would transform into new tribes, or how to design living together in a multicultural formula have ended in failure.

So where, in that case, should one look for ways out of this impasse? Does the failure of the sciences regarding social facts signify a return to philosophy? The answer is an emphatic no. Between the assumption (essential in the case of the empirical sciences) of the cognitive accessibility of the world and the ontology of social existence practiced using speculative methods is culture understood as an autonomous object of research. Its visible manifestations are models of conduct whose durability and breadth are obviously carried over to be reflected in the specifics of collective life. A quality of the window of culture is that by throwing light on social facts, it blurs their contours. Constituting a product of a defined community of fate, it creates sets

⁴ A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1986.

of norms and directives escaping simple observation. Hence the requirement for research aimed at establishing what – in an axiological sense – this community is.

This demand corresponds to the views of the hermeneutists. The practicing of sciences on culture in the manner proposed by W. Dilthey and those of the Baden School was supposed to involve interaction between a representative of knowledge regarding events distant in time or space with a philosopher recreating – on this basis – the normative convictions of their participants. Unfortunately, it would be hard to acknowledge that research intention a success. Over a century of strivings by the hermeneutists to confirm the applicable qualities of their method testify to its inadequacy. They prove the requirement for it to be supplemented with a pragmatic component. And this is provided by Florian Znaniecki, who assumes that the distinguishing feature of the world of culture is an order of values. Although the originators of these values are individuals, and their user is social organisation, the logic of their concomitance – one and the other – escapes control. By reversing the dependency, precisely because culture does not succumb to (simple) intervention in its content, it facilitates social steering via intersubjectively verifiable correctness criteria.

In the light of the assumptions made, cultural studies cannot be practiced other than as an applied field of knowledge. The world of heterogenic values does not yield to permutation into a (homogeneous) theory of culture. In the meantime the question about whether lesser research goals are achievable (such as the analysis of founding myths, studies into cultural memory, or research regarding the prevalent hermeneutics of participation) remains open. One would search in vain for answers to this in Znaniecki's philosophical project, although it does contain useful pointers. In using them, one should state that cultural studies can be applied as knowledge on models of culture shaping the attitudes of specific people. This knowledge applies not only to the prevalent models, but also those marginalised or forgotten. After all, they all contribute to the normative convictions of the researched collectivity. In order to change these models into knowledge useful in diagnosing and forecasting, it is essential to determine their origin and the connections between them. Hence the intention to classify them using two criteria.

The first criterion – given the working name of time criterion – enables the distinguishing of long-duration models (according to Fernand Braudel's definition) from models of social change (promoting new content frequently at the cost of what was previously in force). The second criterion – the criterion of importance – regards the cognitive status of models of culture. To put it more precisely, it is based on the telling apart (as proposed by Jerzy Kmita) of the subjective-rational conditionings of the said models (world views determining their user's behaviour) and functional conditionings (constituting a reaction to external determinants; worth emphasising

ing here is that this is a reaction subordinate to the rule of minimum own costs and maximum gains coming from adjustment).

Both the subjective-rational conditionings and the functional conditionings refer to the convictions of the subject reproducing them. However, one must not ignore what it is that determines their distinctiveness. The selection of models according to the functional key is carried out with the help of knowledge (technical and applicable) regarding what is a consequence and what a cause of a specific phenomenon or process. Models conditioned subjectively and rationally are treated differently. Their normative rooting (frequently an after-effect of their long duration) means they retain their validity even when coming into conflict with practice. To use Weber's metaphor, one could risk stating that functionally determined models dominate in demythologised parts of the social world, while those conditioned subjectively and rationally retain their symbolic (magical) potential despite limitations or obstacles that the said world creates.

Applying the two distinctions results in classification embracing four subsets of models. These are long-duration models conditioned subjectively and rationally, long-duration models conditioned functionally, models of social change conditioned subjectively and rationally, and models of social change conditioned functionally. Each of the types listed says something different about the group investigated. Not only the presence of specific models needs to be taken into account; so, above all, does the dependence that they co-create, with different force and in different ways, affecting their user groups.

The proposed approach can be applied in setting out the research area for applied cultural studies. Instead of doubling the findings of other social sciences, it makes use of a method taking into account the ontological distinctness of the fragment of reality it is exploring (Znaniecki). Cultural studies is thus defined as a research discipline possessing its own field of knowledge. This field, due to its internal (axiological) diversity excludes the connection of its components into a homogeneous reporting on the whole. However, knowledge of these components allows for them to be turned into a description – useful in terms of diagnosis and forecasting – of what happens to a given community of fate. Hence the demand for applied cultural studies, a field of knowledge, its scientific credibility determined by its applicable qualities.

To rephrase that last thought more precisely, the goal of applied cultural studies is to reconstruct and manage models of culture understood as hidden regulators of social life. Although the means mentioned above facilitate one's negotiating of the world of culture, they do not provide the grounds – at any stage – for retracting from the intention of extending or reorganising one's research skills. Since the main threat

to the project is the danger of research findings being distorted due to insufficient consideration being given to the distinctness of models of culture, it is essential that a backdoor remain for stepping beyond the adopted procedural model when the findings confirm (or even suggest) that this model is insufficient. The assumed cognitive restrictions do not come from nowhere. They derive from the assumption adopted earlier of the diachrony of the world of values, and the live experiencing of participation in culture surprising even its most perceptive observers with its diversity and unpredictability.

Applied Cultural Studies as an Invitation to Dialogue

The project of applied cultural studies presented here is a result of work inspired by the output of representatives of the Poznań School of Methodology: Florian Znaniecki, Jerzy Topolski and Jerzy Kmita. They give a picture of culture the research of which is – to put it as briefly as possible – subjected to the principle of diversity in the models constituting it. Human motifs demand careful research precisely because they escape a simple comparison of arguments resulting from the knowledge of social facts. To the surprise of its user – insufficiently reflective – this knowledge fails when he tries, with its aid, to steer community life. What the user placed hope in is what fails. He made the search for *logos* an argument justifying the reduction of important attributes of the world of man. But these distinguishing features return via the side doors. They return, because their importance was underestimated. They are living proof of the uselessness, or limited usefulness, of explanatory schemas whose construction is contrary to the logic of the world of culture.

The concept of applied cultural studies (in its proposed shape) is accompanied by the conviction that heterogeneous systems of models of culture may become the object of development. This involves the promotion of desirable models of behaviour at the cost of those acknowledged as dysfunctional. The content of culture changes only slightly (or changes slowly), but this does not rule out the researcher's impact on its condition. A culture expert, with the help of politicians and teachers, is capable of adjusting the attitudes among members of a given cultural community based on their own convictions regarding what is good or right.

The view presented here should not discourage proponents of applied cultural studies representing other theoretical orientations from the discussion regarding its desired form. The journal's editors count on it become a venue in which the germane exchange of views regarding the impact of culture on man's behaviour, and

the influence man has on the condition of culture, will be possible. In relating this question to the dispute between the sophists and the writers of ancient tragedies, papers promoting both positions would be welcome for this journal's pages. The purpose of this invitation is to compare the arguments of those proclaiming that the world of culture should be perceived as an inviolable order (and one determining everything it relates to) and those who believe that the said world's inhabitants are makers – not fully dependent on what is existing – of value. Both one and the other, by getting involved in the dispute regarding the limits of human freedom, give the lie to logocentric views. By rejecting closed theory in favour of a multitude of rules constituting cultural reality, they are opening up to dialogue with their scientific and non-scientific circles. After all, only from such a perspective are they able to discern significant fragments of what constitutes their subject of research.

Literature

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