Commentary

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Erased or Surviving Despite Challenges? The State of Anthropology in Poland

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opan-2020-0102>

received September 7, 2020; accepted September 30, 2020.

Abstract: Two years have passed since Jarosław Gowin, the Polish Minister of Science and Education, has signed a new law known as the Constitution for Science (Konstytucja dla nauki) or simply Law 2.0 (Ustawa 2.0). Law 2.0 declared that ethnology and anthropology are no longer independent fields of scientific inquiry, but are part of a new discipline: the study of culture and religion. In this essay, I analyze the effects of this law on ethnology and anthropology in Poland. I look at how the law affected anthropological research, especially its financing, and training, including enrollment of students. I place this discussion withing the broader context of reforms aimed at Polish higher education.

Keywords: Polish anthropology, Ustawa 2.0, Constitution for Science

On October 1, 2018, Jarosław Gowin, the Polish Minister of Science and Education, has signed a new law known as the Constitution for Science (Konstytucja dla nauki) or simply Law 2.0 (Ustawa 2.0). The new law has affected many aspects of Polish higher education, but no discipline bore the brunt of the ministerial decision as much as ethnology and anthropology. Law 2.0 erased the discipline declaring that ethnology and anthropology are no longer independent fields of scientific inquiry. Rather, they are part of a new scientific venture: the study of culture and religion.

Institutionalization of scientific disciplines is dependent on many factors, including opportunities and ways to pursue professional careers in research (Ben-David, 1997), recognition by academic journals, in which research is published, substantial increase of new data and new information (Fabiani, 2012), development of novel research methods or migration of researchers between different fields (Heilbron, 2004). Monteil and Romerio see disciplines as a “form of political institution, tasked with defending its external (its “academic territory area”) and policing its internal boundaries.” Citing Heilbron (2004) and Vinck (2007), they posit “that disciplines are to the academic world what the nation-state is to the political world and the firm to that of trade” (Monteil & Romerio, 2017, p. 234). While there are departments of religious studies or theology at several Polish universities, there are no departments of culture and religion, no training programs granting degrees in this new field, or journals that combine the study of culture and religion as a disciplinary pursuit.

Defending his decision, Minister Gowin argued that there were too many disciplines in Poland. Harking back to the collectivization of agriculture during the Stalin era in the former Soviet Union and the 1948 agricultural ‘reforms’ in Poland, the minister compared disciplinary programs to farmsteads (*folwarki*) and argued that science should be interdisciplinary and the disciplines ought to be broad (Orłowski, 2017). Should then small *folwarki* be consolidated into large *kolkhozy*?

Two years after the law was signed, many questions remain. Why was the decision to abolish ethnology and anthropology as independent disciplines made? Why did Minister Gowin want to trade scientific disciplines for interdisciplinary programs?

As a migration scholar, I certainly appreciate interdisciplinary approaches to the study of various dimensions of international migration and mobility. Personally, I thrive being part of interdisciplinary research teams without ever

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losing my disciplinary (anthropology) identity. At the same time, I realize that the interdisciplinary gaze, dating back to the 1960s (Heilbron & Gingras, 2015), has met both with honors and with criticism (see Lyon, 1992; Jacobs & Frickel, 2009; Smith, 2016). The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) spoke of crossing disciplinary borders and intellectual deprovincialization in social sciences. He thought interdisciplinarity was a relatively easy enterprise. Indeed, Geertz was a poster child of interdisciplinarity. He influenced disciplines as diverse as history, sociology, and cultural studies (Bortolini & Cossu, 2020) without ever ceasing to bring anthropology to the table. He certainly did not advocate erasing anthropology.

In Poland, the Ministry of Science and Education's demand for interdisciplinarity in academia resulted in many arbitrary decisions, including keeping some disciplines while abandoning others. To be fair, the government initiated a consultation process with the academic community regarding the proposed classification of scientific disciplines. However, it seems that participation in much of the consultation was by invitation only. Several chairs of ethnology department I spoke with were never called to provide input. I am not even sure whether members of the Committee of Ethnological Sciences of the Polish Academy of Science were consulted on this decision.

One of the commentators noted that the consultation process included mainly university leadership and by-passed ordinary faculty and students. He also bemoaned the amount of money spent on the consultations. In an interview with the journalist Maciej Orłowski, Aleksander Temkin, a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the Warsaw University and the founder of the Crisis Committee of Polish Humanities (Komitet Kryzysowy Humanistyki Polskiej) compared the consultation process to a political campaign: "This was more of a political campaign than a debate with the membership of the Polish academy. The Ministry of Education hand-picked convenient partners" (Orłowski, 2017). Professor Waldemar Kuligowski, an anthropologist at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, is of the opinion that the Constitution for Science did not follow the rules of public consultation. Kuligowski also emphasized that Polish anthropologists repeatedly asked Minister Gowin for a face-to-face meeting but to no avail (Konarzewska-Michalak, 2019b).

Defending his decision, Minister Gowin invoked the OECD classification of scientific disciplines, but failed to notice that in the OECD system ethnology (together with anthropology) are considered autonomous scientific disciplines (polsatnews.pl, 2018). The Committee of the Ethnological Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish Ethnological Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze) demanded that Minister Gowin revoke his decision immediately. They emphasized that Polish ethnology and anthropology have had a long history in Poland, going back to May 1919 when the Institute of Ethnology was established in Poznań at the Adam Mickiewicz University. It was the first department conducting research and training for ethnographers, ethnologists, and anthropologists in the reborn Polish state. It is worthwhile mentioning that the history of Polish ethnography, ethnology and anthropology is inextricably intertwined with the history of Poland. The discipline played different roles during the partitions and at the dawn of independence, it had different goals in the difficult years of post-war reconstruction and in the communist era, and it had to face many challenges during the recent transformation of the political system (Dohnal, 2018).

The signatories of the protest letter reminded Minister Gowin that our very own Bronisław Malinowski shaped global ethnology and anthropology (Goździak & Main, 2018). Malinowski and his contributions to anthropology have not impressed Minister Gowin. He was persuaded when Polish astronomers invoked Nicolaus Copernicus and Johannes Hevelius to argue that astronomy should remain an independent discipline. In the case of anthropology, he was unrelenting.

Anthropologists from outside Poland also supported their Polish colleagues. The World Anthropological Union (WAU), the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES), and the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) urged Minister Gowin to reinstate ethnology and anthropology. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) also sent a letter. At the *Polonia Restituta* conference held at the Faculty of History in Poznań, a group of several dozen students of ethnology and doctoral candidates, along with 10 faculty members also protested. During the speech of Minister Gowin, the protesters stood holding cards with the word "ethnology" in their hands (some with lips sealed with a masking tape). After the Minister's statement was finished, they left the room (Konarzewska-Michalak, 2019a). Unfortunately, Minister Gowin was not moved by these protests and adhered to his original decision to create a new discipline combining the study of culture and religion.

The attack on ethnology and anthropology was part of a broader attempt to reform Polish academia. According to the new law, university presidents, deans and departmental chairs would no longer be elected by their peers, but rather nominated by university councils, composed mainly of entrepreneurs and politicians. The law also calls for the

replacement of tenure-track jobs with flexible employment and increased collaboration with businesses that would fund research. These neoliberal mantras have been part of the so-called “good change” (*dobra zmiana*) promoted by the Law and Justice-backed conservative government and eerily reminiscent of Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again campaign in the United States.

It is often said that history repeats itself. Indeed, in Poland social sciences went from holding tremendous cachet to becoming a punching bag for politicians. 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 in the footsteps of the Soviet model, prehistory, classical archaeology, and ethnography, previously three separate disciplines, were subsumed by a newly created history of material culture. This move fit nicely with the Soviet-backed government’s desire to promote political nationalism.

After the political thaw of 1956–1957, ethnography programs were reinstated. However, the political establishment continued to push ethnography to focus, mainly or solely, on folk culture and stay away from social or cultural anthropology. Anthropologists such as Jan Stanisław Bystróż, Jan Czekanowski and Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska who tried to resist the political directives were charged by the state press with racism and robbed of their rights to publish and hold lectures (Kuligowski, 2018).

The 1970s and 1980s brought about positive changes. Perestroika initiated in the Soviet Union resulted in gradual liberalization in Poland and the whole Soviet bloc. Polish anthropologists were able to conduct research in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South and North America. I was a graduate student in the late 1970s and early 1980s and remember vividly our forays into theories developed within cultural and social anthropology. While looking for inspiration towards American or British anthropology was allowed, our efforts were closely scrutinized by the Polit Bureau. The final signature on the doctoral diploma was that of the party member in charge of university matters.

The transformation of 1989 and the resulting democratization in Poland changed the field of ethnography. The departments of ethnography became departments of ethnology and cultural anthropology, but this was not a superficial change of labels. The new names reflect the depth and breadth of research themes and methodologies Polish anthropologists have been pursuing for quite some time. Eight thousand trained anthropologists have significantly impacted the development of anthropological knowledge production and training. They have also contributed to museum practice, played important roles in non-governmental organizations and cultural centers, and many other institutions, both in Poland and abroad. Given the mounting anti-immigrant sentiments, xenophobia, and Islamophobia incited by the populist government, there is an increased need for anthropologists with expertise in international migration policy and practice, cultural and social diversity, willing to study and advocate on behalf of marginalized populations. Polish anthropologists are keenly aware of this need.

Two years passed since the new law went into effect, but many questions remain: Why did the government pass Law 2.0? Why were anthropologists targeted? Is it because contemporary Polish anthropologists, following in the footsteps of Jan Stanisław Bystróż, have undertaken “uncomfortable topics” such as: critical studies of the current establishment, knowledge production, gender policies, rising nationalism? Are Polish decision-makers emulating Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, who has removed gender studies from Hungarian curricula, exiled the Central European University to Vienna, and ordered a government-appointed board to oversee the affairs of the University of Theatre and Film Arts? It certainly seems so.

The new law passed. However, over 100 regulations have still to be written in order to fully implement the Constitution for Science, a very imprecise act. Colleagues I consulted in preparing this piece, compared the transformation process to walking while blindfolded. For example, there is currently no clear understanding about how resources will be distributed.

Anthropology is an empirical science. Anthropologists do field research and it is hard to imagine otherwise. Anthropological fieldwork is a long-term endeavor and even if anthropologists do not travel to the proverbial Trobriand Islands, but conduct research in the south of Poland, in Norway or in Siberia, funds are needed. The latest regulation pushes us to the very bottom of the financing scheme. Professor Kuligowski illustrated this as follows: “When the co-financing scale ranged from 2 to 4, anthropology was funded at level 3. Now the scale ranges from 0 to 6, and we are at level 1, almost at the very bottom, despite the fact that we are part of a very highly rated faculty (...). It seems that we are facing institutional death” (Konarzewska-Michalak, 2019a).

If anthropology no longer exists, where will the money for anthropological field research come from? In Poland, virtually all research money comes from the government. There are no private foundations in the country that could

sponsor academic research the way private foundations support scholars in the United States or in the United Kingdom. Who will be evaluating grant applications from anthropologists and ethnologists? I ask myself this question as I am preparing a grant application to the National Science Center (NCN). It took several emails to the grants management team to ascertain which review panels to check off. In the end, I marked several that might include an anthropologist or some other social scientist familiar with anthropological methodologies. But this exercise resembles Russian roulette.

Faculty members operate under very uncertain circumstances, but so does university leadership. During the inauguration of the 2018/2019 academic year, the rector of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Professor Andrzej Lesicki said: “We are facing challenges related to the implementation of the new regulations. We will introduce them in an atmosphere of instability of the law, undermining the authority of the courts and the constitution as well as the principle of the tripartite division of powers, which is fundamental to democracy” (Mazur, 2018). This is a very important and grave concern.

Issuing the new Constitution for Science, Minister Gowin aimed to consolidate disciplines and standardize the way research is carried out. From my somewhat parochial perspective of a Visiting Professor at my *alma mater*, the Adam Mickiewicz University, I see both changes and the status quo (as much as we can talk about a status quo during a pandemic). In an interview with Piotr Kieraciński (2019), the outgoing rector, Professor Lesicki, indicated that ethnology as a study major can continue to exist even when the discipline of ethnology no longer figures in the Polish scientific classification. And in Poznań it does. The Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology is now part of the Faculty of Anthropology and Cultural Studies. The faculty pursue both anthropological research and interdisciplinary studies. The ethnology major is also part and parcel of the other five departments of ethnology and anthropology in the country. So far, so good, fingers crossed.

The future is, however, still uncertain. We do not know yet what the long-term effects of the new laws might be not only on financing but also on student enrollment. Will students want to study ethnology when they read in the media that the discipline no longer exists? Will there be an independent evaluation of the effects of the new law?

The new law is not the only factor that influences student enrollment. The number of students admitted to study ethnology and anthropology has always been small. When I was a student, there were 15 of us studying in the master’s program and we were considered a large cohort. The cohort ahead of us had eight students. The numbers were small not because there were few applicants. Quite to the contrary, if I remember correctly, there were 4-5 candidates for each available slot. We thought we were part of an elite major. My much younger colleagues call ethnology a niche major and think ethnology is just not as popular or well-known as other social sciences.

This year, enrollment might also be affected by the on-going pandemic. However, it is difficult to assess the effects of COVID-19 on the number of students who would end up pursuing an ethnology major as the enrollment has not yet been completed. Moreover, students can apply to three different programs at the same time to increase their chances to pursue a university degree. This means that the number of ethnology majors might be further reduced if they chose other majors.

I am not necessarily advocating strategies to expand enrollment. Polish anthropology is taught as classic cultural (and sometimes social) anthropology and does not prepare students for employment in a wide range of jobs. Students with an MA in anthropology are groomed to pursue doctoral studies with the hope that they find employment in academia. Among the six departments of ethnology and anthropology, not all offer courses and practicum in museum studies. When I was a student, all five departments offered several courses preparing students to work in museums. We also had to do two summers-worth of practicum in an ethnographic museum or a *skansen* (open air museum). This avenue is no longer available to most anthropology students. There are also no courses in applied anthropology, anthropology of education, and limited number of courses in medical anthropology. This state of affairs further limits employment opportunities.

From my transnational perspective and as an anthropologist who spent most of her academic career in the United States who has recently returned to Poland, I do not understand the new performance evaluation system that is partially dependent on publications. The mantra ‘publish or perish’ very much underlines what US-based university faculty and researchers do. However, in the United States, tenure and promotion committees do not consult some arbitrarily drawn list of journals that are assigned a certain number of points; rather they look at impact factors (also not always a mark of high quality) and assess the faculty member’s scientific and teaching achievement in its totality. When I first looked at the list of periodicals drawn by the Ministry of Science and Education, I was astounded that a number of flagship journals in the international migration field were not appropriately recognized and assigned high marks. As former Editor-in-Chief

of a major interdisciplinary journal on migration and a scholar with over 30 years of experience conducting research on international migration I know the quality of migration studies journals well. Minister Gowin wants Polish scholars to engage in interdisciplinary pursuits but does not seem to reward publications in interdisciplinary periodicals. Faculty now have to list four publications a year that fall within the newly created discipline of the study of culture and religion. I am not sure if my recent publications in the *Journal of Human Trafficking*, *Ethnologia Europea*, and the *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* would qualify.

Polish anthropologists (and other scholars) are not incentivized to conduct research. Unlike American and European academics, Polish faculty who secure research grants are not given any teaching relief or research leave. The only exceptions are fellowships such as the Fulbright scholarship that require residency outside Poland. In case of research grants, they get a couple hundred extra dollars a month. Faculty members who participate in large research projects funded by the European Commission, such as Horizon 2020, cannot be compensated for their work at the levels that the EC considers appropriate, but rather have to include in the budget Polish rates. Our German, French, Swedish or Italian colleagues who want to collaborate with us are astonished. When I brought this issue up with the university administration, I was told that rectors of different universities are in discussions with the Ministry of Education to solve these discrepancies. Apparently, the talks have been going on for a few years and there is still no resolution. And yet, Minister Gowin claims that he wants Polish scholars to be competitive and work with colleagues in other countries.

These are but a few examples of the immediate effects of the new law. I am certain that as time goes on, we will see more undesirable outcomes. I am not against reforms, not at all. However, I would like to see changes that would support anthropologists (and other scholars) as we carry out our day-to-day responsibilities at the university and in the field.

There is certainly room for improvements and reforms in Polish science and education. Anywhere in the world, scholars who do research with human subjects have to get approval from their ethics committees. Cultural and social anthropologists always do research with human subjects. While ethics committees do exist at some Polish universities, their establishment is at the discretion of the university rectors. Moreover, applying for an ethics clearance is not mandatory even at the universities where such committee exists; scholars are merely encouraged to seek ethics approval. Unless they are part of an international research consortium, most Polish anthropologists do not bother to go through the ethics approval process. There is also a need to improve mundane things like giving students a university-generated email account. For now, students use their own private accounts.

In summary, there are many challenges and some deficiencies in Polish academia, but Polish anthropologists are surviving despite these challenges. My own department passed the recent accreditation process with flying colors. At least two faculty members received a Fulbright scholarship since 2016, the year the new law was introduced. As one of my colleagues, Wojciech Dohnal (2018, p. 15), wrote: “I cannot imagine that a discipline so closely related to Polish science and playing such an important social role will cease to exist. Let us not allow the 100th anniversary of Polish ethnology to be its last jubilee!”

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