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ENGAGED ANTHROPOLOGY IN POLAND.  
BEYOND THE POSTMODERN CONCEPT OF SCIENCE

**The development of the discourse on engaged anthropology in Poland**

In this article I address the issues of engagement<sup>1</sup> in anthropology<sup>2</sup> which, over the last decade, have become the subject of lively polemics among ethnologists in Poland. The debate began in 2004 with the publication of a kind of manifesto by Agnieszka Kościańska in "(op. cit.," journal, entitled: *Ku odpowiedzialności. Etnologia w Polsce: tradycje i wyzwania* (Toward Accountability. Ethnology in Poland: traditions and challenges)<sup>3</sup>. Since then, Polish as well as foreign researchers, anthropologists and the representatives of other disciplines, young and experienced scholars, have commented on the issues raised by Kościańska<sup>4</sup>. Of

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay the term "engagement" is used interchangeably with "commitment".

<sup>2</sup> Engaged anthropology is also the subject of my doctoral dissertation entitled: *W poszukiwaniu nowej tożsamości. Analiza wybranych koncepcji antropologii zaangażowanej* (In Pursuit of a New Identity. The Analysis of the Selected Concepts of Engaged Anthropology), written under the supervision of Professor Katarzyna Kaniowska at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Łódź in 2011.

<sup>3</sup> It should be emphasized that reflections concerning engagement appeared in Polish ethnology much earlier, but they did not gain any interest. M. Buchowski, for instance, wrote about the social responsibility of ethnology, in an article entitled *Zmiana w antropologii* (Change in anthropology) (1995). These issues were also the subject of a conference held in 1979. Papers presented there were published in a book *Funkcje społeczne etnologii* (Social Functions of Ethnology) edited by Z. Jasiewicz (1979). They provide an interesting overview of the discussion addressing the practical applications of ethnological knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> The following researchers contributed to the debate, which for two years was published in "(op.cit.," journal: A. Kościańska (2004), J. Tokarska-Bakir (2004a), W. Burszta (2004), Z. Sokolewicz (2005), M. Buchowski (2005), G. Godlewski (2005), M. Baer (2005), B. Fatyga (2005), M. Herzfeld (2006), G. Kubica (2006), T. Rakowski (2006). Afterwards, the problem of engagement in anthropology was raised in the book: *Zaangażowanie czy izolacja? Współczesne strategie społecznej egzystencji humanistów* (Engagement or Isolation? Contemporary Strategies of Social Existence of Humanist Scholars) edited by Kowalewski and Piasek (2007), and in the work: *Antropologia zaangażowana (?)* (Engaged Anthropology) edited by Wróblewski, Sochacki and Steblik (2010), which was the result of a conference organized by the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Jagiellonian University in 2008. The following books are also important for discussions on engagement: *Badania w działaniu. Pedagogika i antropologia zaangażowane* (Action research.

particular importance is the fact that their reflections are not solely concerned with the possible ways of understanding of anthropological engagement. This debate poses more general questions about the purpose of modern ethnology<sup>5</sup>, the subject of ethnological research, political dimension of constructing knowledge and its practical applications. The range of topics under consideration proves that reflections on engagement and accountability are invariably linked to a much broader debate in Polish ethnology, which is ongoing since the 1970s. I am referring here to the discussion on the identity of our discipline, which has emerged as a result of paradigmatic changes, influenced by transformations in social, economic, political and technological domains, as well as by the reception of the works of French, British and American anthropologists. The goal of this essay is to answer the question of how the researchers redefine anthropology in the light of commitment and responsibility, and to look at their proposals through the prism of social and historical contexts.

It should be noted that a reader might expect an author who analyses the outlined problems to take sides and to form radical judgments and definitive opinions. According to many researchers, an attempt to maintain a certain distance toward the issues discussed here is at odds with the idea of engaged anthropology as such. It is also assumed that the analysis of engagement must necessarily include the author's clear statement on commitment. This view is consistent with the logic of a discourse on engagement, which is founded on characteristic oppositions such as: academic vs. applied, exclusive (hermetic) vs. common (public), acquisition and advancement of knowledge vs. introduction of changes, apolitical vs. ideological/strategic, relativism vs. ethics, anthropology (metareflection, theory) vs. ethnography (practice), inertia vs. action, indifference vs. responsibility, scientific vs. non-scientific. The construction of the discourse resembles a zero-one system, and therefore does not allow the researcher taking part in the discussion to go beyond the oppositions outlined above. Since my aim is not to evaluate, but to present and analyze the discourse on commitment while considering the issues of my interest, I attempt to occupy the in-between space (which is graphically reserved for "versus").

Before discussing the above-mentioned debate, I would like to point out that the problem of commitment and responsibility of the discipline is also not alien to foreign

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Engaged Pedagogy and Engaged Anthropology) (Červinková, Gołębniak, eds., 2010) and *Etyczne problemy badań antropologicznych* (Ethical dilemmas of anthropological research) (Kaniowska, Modnicka, eds., 2010).

<sup>5</sup> In this article I use the term 'ethnology' in order to refer to the institutional context in which the discipline is situated. It captures the diversity of Polish interests in Otherness, as it includes different schools and traditions which constituted the discipline since the moment of its foundation, for example, first ethnographic interests in peasant communities, New Polish Ethnology as well as cultural and social anthropology. In turn, I bring up the notion of anthropology to refer to the research paradigm that emerged in Polish ethnology in the 1980s, and which redefined its interpretative framework and interests.

anthropologists. Anthropological reflection on engagement has a long and rich tradition – particularly vivid among American scholars – dating back to the mid-50s of the last century. Since then, a number of different proposals of practicing engaged anthropology have been put forward in the western debate<sup>6</sup>. Some of these gained recognition among Polish researchers and are referred to in the course of local discussions (for example: public anthropology, critical anthropology, feminist anthropology or practical anthropology).

However, of the greatest importance, for the development of contemporary discourse on commitment in Poland, was the familiarization of Polish ethnologists with the ideas proposed by those researchers who identify themselves, or are identified, with postmodern anthropology. The essence of postmodernists' considerations was a critical reflection on the fundamental issues relating to the discipline i.e. means and purposes of anthropological knowledge and the modes of its legitimization, the subject of research and the methodological procedures. An indispensable element of these discussions was reflexivity understood in terms of the specific discipline's self deconstruction, associated with the development of an awareness regarding the situatedness of anthropological self, the power relations existing between the researcher and the researched, the presence of violence in the process of understanding and describing socio-cultural reality, as well as the rhetorical nature of cognition and ethnographic experience (see Clifford 1988; Mokrzan 2010; Strecker 1988; Tyler 1987). As indicated by Katarzyna Kaniowska, as a result of this "critical self-assessment" and due to the opening "of anthropology to the achievements of the related disciplines and the intellectual currents prevailing in the humanities", there emerged a new paradigm which changed the approach to truth and narrative, redefined key anthropological concepts and developed new ideas (Kaniowska 2004: 51-52). This new paradigm simultaneously generated a lot of tensions and concerns relating to the status of anthropology as a science, which arose mainly because of difficulties of defining the subject of anthropological research, and with "the legitimization of multiple procedures of gaining

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<sup>6</sup> The idea of engagement in western anthropology (e.g. USA, United Kingdom, Chile, Colombia) acquired particular significance in the 1960s. It was also the time when an interest in Marxism and feminism grew noticeably within the humanities and social sciences. Commitment was then defined in terms of taking sides with the oppressed of the Third World, or with disadvantaged social groups. Moreover – as pointed out by P. Kellet – there is also a wide variety of research approaches that are part of the broader current of engaged qualitative research, which primarily focus on the practical use of ethnographic data. These are: "applied anthropology, action anthropology (including Participatory Action Research), praxis anthropology, engaged anthropology, practical anthropology, as well as advocacy anthropology" (Kellet 2009: 23). Other contemporary engaged projects include, for example, public or militant anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 1995).

knowledge", but also as a consequence of a lack of homogeneous anthropological discourse (Kaniowska 2004: 53). An epistemological crisis which accompanied the elaboration of the new paradigm, as well as the changes occurring in the world such as globalization and the transformation of the communities which have been the focus of anthropological interest, contributed to the development of a reflection on the nature of contemporary anthropology. Questions arose about what anthropology should be like and what goals it should pursue. But even more importantly, the fluid and indeterminate nature of the new paradigm allowed for multiple – often significantly different – answers. One of them is that anthropology should be engaged.

### **Ways of defining engaged anthropology**

This proposal, which can be interpreted as an effort to overcome a cognitive skepticism associated with postmodern reflection, is an attempt of Polish ethnology to deal with the dilemma of the reconfiguration of its own identity in the face of the challenges posed by the contemporary world. It should also be acknowledged that the idea of engagement gained popularity especially among the younger generation of anthropologists, and can be viewed as a symptom of the need for a thorough reconstruction of the discipline. How should anthropology then be redesigned or reinvented<sup>7</sup>? To answer this question it is first necessary to provide a definition of engagement. This task is not, however, as simple as it may first seem.

A brief analysis of the debates held by Polish researchers shows that engagement is understood quite freely, depending on the methodological perspective of the disputant. Anthropologists try to provide their own interpretations of the idea, as well as to clarify with what activities they associate it. Engagement may be, for example, understood as a struggle for freedom and equality, or in terms of a practical application of the results of ethnographic research (Kościańska 2004), as taking responsibility for knowledge, as well as tools and methods of gaining it, which may conceal human suffering (Tokarska-Bakir 2004a), or as the participation in public debates (Burszta 2004; Kościańska 2004). It is also identified with

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<sup>7</sup> I am referring here to *Reinventing Anthropology* published for the first time in 1969 (Hymes, ed., [1969] 1972). In the book, considered as a manifesto of radical anthropologists, authors expressed the need for a reconceptualization of anthropology. On the one hand it reflected the fierce political debates of the decade, and on the other, it was a compilation of texts challenging the theoretical paradigm that dominated the discipline in the 1960s.

political (strategic) situatedness of anthropological self and the critical role of science (Kościańska 2004; Baer 2005, 2006; Buchowski 2005). Some researchers also define it as a form of a co-existence with other persons allowing an understanding of the nature of humanity (Kafar 2010a, 2010b). These various ways of conceiving anthropological engagement do not fully cover the complexity of the issue in question, as it can be perceived as a compilation of the above-mentioned definitions.

The difficulty of providing a precise definition of the concept, make the discourse on engagement appear inconsistent and chaotic. In my opinion, this proves that we are dealing here with the anthropological project as being under construction, and – since the discussion also points to the issue of the identity of ethnology – with propositions of many possible ways of the discipline's development. As Polish engaged anthropology cannot be seen as a fully constituted sub-discipline, the aim of this article is not to determine which of the proposed projects should be accepted and which should be rejected. I believe that in order to capture the discourse in all its richness and diversity, and to understand its phenomenon, various ways of understanding anthropological engagement have to be taken into consideration.

It also needs to be emphasized that although proposals of engaged anthropological projects significantly differ, a few common features can be noticed. These projects share the conviction that the goal of a committed science is not solely to understand socio-cultural reality, but also to provoke change and transformations of the world. This observation allows us to build a very broad definition of engagement as a form of intentional interference in a discourse, in the life of respondents, in the symbolic order, or in the public space. On this basis two main areas of concern, which the debate on engagement encompasses, can also be specified. These relate to issues of practice and ethics<sup>8</sup>, which in the light of reflection on commitment gain new dimensions and meanings. Practice, analyzed in terms of engagement is understood as returning to doing fieldwork, which – due to many critics – was abandoned with the birth of postmodernist thought in Polish ethnology. It is also related to the question of the applicability of anthropological knowledge, which is invariably associated with a call for the development of the discipline's symbolic capital. In contrast, the problem of ethics is considered here in reference to the relationship between the researcher and the researched, redefined in the spirit of commitment and responsibility.

Many of the articles dedicated to the problem of engagement, begin with the call: "Let us stop debating, and let us act!" (Michoń, Pawlak 2010: 48). Increased interest in practical

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<sup>8</sup> I refer to these issues separately for clarity of argument. In fact it is very difficult to separate them in research practice.

anthropology is – as claimed by some of the researchers who take part in the discussion – related to the ongoing "boredom with reflexivity" (Wróblewski 2010: 22), as well as with a critical assessment of postmodernism, which is assumed to be the cause of the "permanent crisis of identity" and of the "paralysis of anthropology" (Wala 2010: 41). Thus various forms of practical anthropology are perceived as panacea to restore faith in the cognitive power of the discipline and to construct a stable and recognizable image of anthropology in the public sphere. For many researchers the turn toward engagement is thus correlated with giving primacy to practice over theory, reflection and methodological considerations.

The appeal to act (which becomes the synonym of "to engage") very often refers to "the return" to fieldwork research and to the role and importance of ethnographic experience<sup>9</sup>. Within the discourse on commitment ethnography becomes a form of obligation, a duty of a scholar, and is viewed as an indispensable element of anthropological work (Rakowski 2007). It should be emphasized that researchers do not refer here to the traditional understanding of ethnography, i.e., to empirical studies that aimed at providing general conclusions about the ways in which various cultures are structured, nor do they refer to ethno-graphy understood as a reflection on the textual nature of experience. Ethnography is associated here with the achievement of a variety of goals, such as for example strengthening the position of anthropology in the public sphere and thus building its symbolic capital by realizing socially relevant research (see Górný 2007). The supporters of this claim believe that knowledge gained during fieldwork contributes to solving social problems and fosters their deeper understanding (Baer 2006; Rakowski 2007). Moreover, as underlined by Tomasz Rakowski, ethnographic experience is engaged, as long as it is oriented toward respectful hearing of how other people interpret reality, with attentive observation of the strategies they use. This attitude allows those living on the margins of a society to tell their own story (Rakowski 2006, 2007).

In the analyzed discourse, to act means at the same time to use anthropological knowledge (ethnographic data as well as anthropological interpretations) for different purposes and in various contexts. Engagement can therefore be identified both with ideology, activism and political interventionism (Brocki 2006, 2007), as well as with critical reflection

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<sup>9</sup> The word "return" is intentionally put in quotation marks. It is not legitimate to claim that since the 1980s Polish ethnologists ceased doing ethnographic research, and only returned to fieldwork with the development of discourse on engaged anthropology. In the debate on commitment, the word "return" is associated on the one hand with the need of reconceptualization of fieldwork and qualitative research methods, and on the other hand, with an opposition to theoretically oriented, reflective meta-anthropology (cf. Wala 2010: 41-42).

developed on the basis of "ethnographic detail" and oriented toward social change (Buchowski 2005; Baer 2006; Kościańska 2012). When engagement is considered any type of activity that presumes the application of knowledge gained in the course of research, sub-disciplines such as applied or practical anthropology (Kościańska 2004), as well as cultural animation (Godlewski 2005), are also perceived to be committed endeavours. Practicing of engaged anthropology is also identified as a type of intervention designed to bring about positive and desirable – from the point of view of the community under research – changes (Červinková 2008, 2009).

The emphasis on the applicability of anthropological knowledge is closely linked to the discussion about the recognition of our discipline in the public forum. It stems from the fact that many researchers consider as detrimental the situation in which anthropology plays no significant role in the media and is given no great importance in the public sphere. Thus, in the discourse on commitment, the following questions appear:

What needs to be done in order for ethnology not to operate in the popular consciousness as a science dealing with insects or volcanoes (sic!), and in order for anthropologist not to be an 'expert' on the design of Kurpian cutouts or the traditional techniques of Koniaków's lace knitting? (Michoń, Pawlak 2010: 48).

According to the researchers who spoke in the debate about engagement, a way of changing this situation is through the popularization of anthropological knowledge (Burszta 2004; Kościańska 2004; Tokarska-Bakir 2004a; Buchowski 2005), demonstrating its usability (Kościańska 2004; Buchowski 2005) and making it attractive to a wider audience (Michoń, Pawlak 2010). Anthropology may become useful when, instead of dealing with marginal issues, it provides information relevant from the social and economic point of view (see Kościańska 2004; Buchowski 2005; Steblik 2010), and when anthropologists start to comment in the media on important current events (Burszta 2004). Recognition will increase the moment anthropological texts become available to readers from outside the "hermetic academic environment" (Michoń, Pawlak 2010). It is also believed that "humbugization of anthropology", defined as striving for the approximation of a scientific text in to a popular one, will result in making anthropological knowledge appreciable (Michoń, Pawlak 2010). Pawlak and Michoń therefore believe that anthropological text has to be an attractive and digestible commodity.

Anthropological reflection has – according to some researchers – also powerful educational potential, and can significantly enrich public debate (Kościańska 2004; Tokarska-

Bakir 2006; Górny 2007). This is associated mainly with the critical function of anthropology, which aims to relativize and defamiliarize cultural beliefs, by demonstrating that – as pointed out by Michał Buchowski paraphrasing Czesław Robotycki – "nothing is obvious" (Buchowski 2005: 6). It may lead, as the researchers claim, to the fundamental changes in perceiving the phenomena which lie in the centre of anthropological interest. It has also been recalled that it was due to our discipline that many elements constituting common worldview have been revised in the last fifty years.

For example, an attitude toward various minority groups, which are different, "other", the cultural pluralism, the recognition of the rights of various cultures to independent existence and the rights of ethnic, religious and any other minorities to preserve their specificities, development and identity, pointing to the ethno- and Eurocentric nature of many scientific theories and life attitudes (Górny 2007: 147).

Interestingly, many researchers identify the fact that our discipline is not considered socially useful with its present condition. It turns out, however, that even thirty years ago Polish ethnology was described in a similar manner. In 1979, Krzysztof Braun argued that:

In our country, the position and possible activity of an ethnographer is reduced to a very narrowly defined framework. For an average citizen, it is associated with folklore, sometimes with Kolberg and Cepelia<sup>10</sup> and sometimes with monuments of traditional folk culture: a thatched roof of rural buildings and carved saints in museums. The opinion that ethnography is a kind of hobby and that an ethnographer can only work in a museum, cultural centre, Cepelia and occasionally as a researcher at university or in the Polish Academy of Science, is so common that even ethnographers themselves believe in it. No wonder that in some circles ethnography has been recognized as a science of limited usefulness (Braun 1979: 124).

This shows that ethnology in Poland has been dealing with similar problems for a very long time<sup>11</sup>.

Another important aspect of the discussion on commitment is the consideration of the ethical dimension of ethnographic experience, and of the research responsibility of anthropologists. At the most basic level, this is expressed in the (uncritical) statement that anthropological knowledge is founded primarily on meeting with another human being<sup>12</sup> (see

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<sup>10</sup> The Cepelia Polish Art and Handicraft Foundation

<sup>11</sup> While considering the voices on engagement which appeared before 2004, and thus before the emergence of the debate which is the subject of my interest here, different contexts in which these comments were expressed should be taken into consideration. However, it is impossible not to notice similarities between today's and earlier appeals to change the way of perceiving the tasks and goals of ethnology.

<sup>12</sup> It has to be noted that human or man are not neutral categories. As pointed out by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "«Man» is a discursively constructed subject position, its presumed abstract character in no way anticipates the form of its articulation with other subject positions. (The range is here infinite, and it challenges the imagination of any «humanist»). For example, it is known how, in the colonial countries, the equivalence

Kafar 2010a, 2010b; Michoń, Pawlak 2010: 47; Wala 2010: 41). It is worth noting that increased interest in ethics is associated both with the intensification of the debate on the conceptualizations of fieldwork and research methodology (see Kaniowska 2010), as well as with the philosophical reflection on such categories of human experience as: suffering, pain, violence.

While in the first case we are dealing with perceiving ethics as an important factor regulating relations between the researcher and the researched, in the second case, ethics becomes the category superior to epistemology, while engagement is the inextricable element of this type of anthropological endeavour. Examples of such research projects carried out in Poland are the works of Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (2004b, 2008, 2009) and Marcin Kafar (2010a, 2010b). They are largely inspired by the "philosophy of dialogue", also called the "philosophy of meeting" or "philosophy of the Other", of which representatives are such thinkers as Emmanuel Lévinas, Martin Buber and Józef Tischner. And although these anthropological projects differ in many respects, they share the belief that "the ethical relationship is beyond knowledge" (Lévinas 1985: 88), and therefore ahead of any epistemological claims.

It is worth adding, that this type of reflection is also familiar to Western anthropologists (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1992, 1995, 2000; Bourgois 2006). It is characteristic to those anthropological projects in which the fields of research are territories affected by war or other forms of violence, and thus invariably combined with the experience of pain and suffering. These are the areas in which the "refugee, exile, undocumented immigrant or internally displaced person, survivors of massacres, genocide, and other crimes against humanity must face the daily challenge to remake everyday life" (Sanford 2006: 1). These problems do not leave anthropologists indifferent, but force them to ask questions which take into consideration not only the standards, values and ethical principles which constitute the anthropological endeavour, but also the issue of moral obligation towards the Other, which consists in exposing harm, being a witness, and opposing oppression and violence. Here, the suffering of the Other becomes the ultimate point of reference, the ontological foundation that destroys all forms of rationalism and relativism.

Engaged anthropology in Poland should be considered as a project in progress, and not yet fully constituted. And although most of the articles on the subject are merely postulates, some scholars attempt to realize their proposals (Tokarska-Bakir 2004b, 2009; Kafar 2010a,

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between «rights of Man» and European values' was a frequent and effective form of discursively constructing the acceptability of imperialist domination" (Laclau, Mouffe 1992: 116).

2010b; Rakowski 2009; Chomicka 2010; Kościańska 2012). These projects are extremely diverse in terms of research methods, forms of narrative, theoretical and methodological perspectives. Ethnologists who practice engaged anthropology use traditional questionnaires and participant observation (Tokarska-Bakir 2009; Chomicka 2010), as well as methods based on participation, or co-experiencing the world of the researched (Červinková 2008, 2009; Rakowski 2009; Kafar 2010a, 2010b). Also several different genres are found in engaged anthropological texts. These publications include both monographs (Rakowski 2009), as well as personal, impressionistic essays containing descriptions of not only the subject of research, but also experiences and thoughts of the author (Kafar 2010a, 2010b). Works of engaged scholars are written from various theoretical and methodological perspectives, such as critical anthropology (Kościańska 2012) or phenomenology (Rakowski 2009).

### **Political contexts of engagement**

Taking into consideration the fact that "science is the same cultural domain as language, art and custom", it needs to be recognized that "the history of ideas, and thus also the various anthropological theories, should be viewed as a product of the era and the society in which they are formulated" (Buchowski 2011: 29). In a similar way, one can interpret the emergence of discourse on engagement in Poland. Particularly important in this context seem to be the controversies that accompany the attempts to redefine anthropology in the spirit of commitment and responsibility. According to Marcin Brocki engaged anthropology is an activist and political endeavour, and therefore does not fit in the framework of a scientific discourse. Brocki refers here mainly to the proposals of Monika Baer, Agnieszka Kościańska and Michał Buchowski, who understand commitment in terms of the critique, "which unveils the masking role of culture (...), reveals how culture legitimizes inequality and social injustice" (Buchowski 2005: 6; see also Baer 2006: 83). Critical anthropology has here the same functions as social criticism, which, by disavowing the hierarchical structure of social relations and its cultural validations, allows the researcher to take on the side of the oppressed, disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Therefore "critical theory explores what exists, but it does not accept the studied status quo" (see Mucha 1986: 9). According to Brocki, commitment in this sense is a category that belongs rather to a political or ideological order and transcends the boundaries of anthropology, which aim is to "awake doubts, not to urge to proclaim the only right ideologies" (Brocki 2007: 178).

The dispute reveals that the debate about engagement involves a very important issue, namely – as shown by Buchowski and Baer – a considerable resistance toward politics, which stems from historical background of Polish ethnology. According to Buchowski this "strategy of avoidance" was for the ethnologists an important element of survival, or a form of a hidden opposition to the Marxist paradigm of science in force in the 1950s (Buchowski 2011: 19). This practice seems to be so deeply rooted in our discipline that it determined the research interests of many generations of ethnologists. These interests, as Monika Baer has put it, are characterized by escaping "from dialectics to structuralism; from materialism to symbolism; from positivist description to interpretation; from empirical studies of peasant culture to a theory of culture" (Baer 2005: 6).

Undoubtedly, the discussion on the commitment which has emerged in Poland can be seen from the perspective of an ethical and political turn, and thus is inscribed in a wider phenomenon characteristic of contemporary humanities. The political dimension of the concept of commitment becomes clear especially in relation to similar projects pursued outside of Poland. Within those projects "politics" can be defined at least in two different ways. Firstly, in terms of political action that is oriented to promote interests of a particular social group<sup>13</sup>, or to empower its position within a discourse<sup>14</sup>. Secondly, in the wider sense "politics" – as indicated by Michael Herzfeld – means various contexts of the use of power, which is the basis of all social relations (Herzfeld 2006: 6). This broad understanding of "politics" (understood as a synonym of a "strategy") is comprehensively discussed by Monika Baer. The author writes that it is "a critical reflection on the consequences of our situatedness, on the values we profess; the goals we try to achieve; strategies we use; power relations in which everyone in one way or another is involved" (Baer 2005: 7).

However, in the ongoing debate, the concept of commitment, is not always identified with politics. This is particularly evident in the statements made by researchers of the younger generation who treat the discussed issues with particular respect and manifest great interest in the prospect of a practical application of anthropological knowledge. The debate about the engagement is important to them, mainly because it opens a possibility to consider

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<sup>13</sup>An example which illustrates this way of understanding "politics" is the analysis of social phenomena provided by radical anthropologists, who defined a space of political action as a tangle of various structures of power, understood in terms of state institutions and international organizations asserting their dominance over vulnerable groups. The analysis of the researcher – researched relation is recognized here as the interaction between the hegemonic, industrialized West and the preindustrial Third World countries.

<sup>14</sup> This can be observed *inter alia* within feminist studies, where objectification and subjugation of women by the dominant androcentric discourse forces a researcher to take action of a political nature. It consists of strengthening women's position in public or academic discourse.

anthropology not as a strictly academic discipline, but also as a profession recognizable outside the academy. As pointed out by Katarzyna Wala:

Today, Polish anthropology is experiencing something, that was defined by Marcin Brocki as "positive demographic change", i.e. the increase in the number of students compared to the 1980s (...). Only a few of them can count on employment in the academic structures. Nevertheless, the creators of the curricula, do not seem to be interested in the future of the graduates of ethnology, even despite the fact that the greatest need for the development of new forms of education is on the side of young anthropologists! (Wala 2010: 44)<sup>15</sup>.

In a similar vein, Jakub Steblik sees engaged anthropology as an opportunity to make anthropology recognizable as a profession. The researcher claims that in this respect our actions should be guided by "pure" pragmatics. He does not opt for using anthropological knowledge in order to help disadvantaged communities or discriminated groups, but searches for its applications in various sectors of economy, for example in the field of new technologies<sup>16</sup>. As he points out:

an attempt of anthropology to move into the domain where it can be practically used, is the most logical consequence of the conditions in which anthropology exists. If it remains in its current form, it condemns itself to marginalization and ignorance (Steblik 2010: 62)

These statements show that the increased interest in engagement is symptomatic, and most likely indicates the next generational change within the discipline, which is unavoidably associated with wide transformations in the social and political sphere, that have taken place in Poland over the past two decades. The young ethnologists, brought up in the democratic-liberal, capitalist discourse, consider anthropology mainly through the prism of the role it may play outside the academy. This view on science and its goals is further reinforced by the concept of "knowledge-based economy" (in which an intellectual property becomes the major

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the increased interest in practically oriented anthropology, which took place in the Anglo-American debate in the late 1990s, appeared – according to S. Silverman – as a result of the changes which had occurred in the western universities a decade earlier. They were associated with a reduction of academic posts and at the same time with the increase of employment of anthropologists outside the academia, which, as the researcher notes, brought "the long-standing tension between academic anthropology (which fancied itself «theoretical») and applied anthropology into a new phase. The tension did not disappear, but the academics had to make room – in their institutions and in their professional societies – for a new brand of colleague" (Silverman 2005: 328).

<sup>16</sup> Within Polish discourse on engagement, attention is rarely drawn to the differences between engaged and applied anthropologies, which is not fully justified from the point of view of the Western debate. It has to be noted that engaged anthropology is largely identified there with social criticism, action oriented research and leftist worldview. Meanwhile, applied anthropology is associated more with liberal ideology. Therefore, despite the fact that both engaged and applied anthropology are oriented toward introducing changes, the nature of these changes is entirely different.

concern) promoted in the public discourse. At the same, the new generation of Polish ethnologists does not recognize practice-oriented knowledge as knowledge that serves political goals, to which a conviction of the post-ideological nature of neo-liberalism certainly contributes (cf. Žižek 2006).

What is more important, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education seems to meet the expectations of young ethnologists. The reforms introduced in October 2011 – being a consequence of the implementation of the Bologna process – may lead not only to profound changes in the way anthropology is perceived within the university, but also may change the image of the discipline outside the academy. They put a particular emphasis on the reconstruction of the curriculum, which, according to the document entitled *Autonomia programowa uczelni. Ramy kwalifikacji dla szkolnictwa wyższego* (Program Autonomy of the Academy. Qualification Framework for Higher Education) (2010), should focus on strengthening the practical use of skills acquired by students and on adapting to the current needs of the labour market. The implementation of the Bologna process, therefore, strives to create an army of skilled professionals who will be able to use their knowledge for practical purposes.

Although the program outlined above may seem attractive, especially for graduates of ethnology, it also entails some risks. Its consistent execution may lead to what Slavoj Žižek describes as *Denkverbot*, a fundamental prohibition on thinking, which – according to the philosopher – is characteristic of the contemporary liberal democratic discourse (cf. Žižek 2004: 167-168). The Slovenian philosopher argues that the implementation of the Bologna solutions contributes to the reorientation of the objectives of not only universities, but of science itself. Adjusting curricula to educate experts whose main task will be to solve predefined social, cultural or economic problems, is accompanied by weakening of the public use of reason, which Immanuel Kant described in *An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?* Kant argued that the public use of reason is to raise doubts, not to attempt to overcome problems defined by various institutions, but rather to reflect on the ways they are defined (Žižek 2010; cf. Kant 1996).

Particularly valuable in this regard are the guidelines provided by Zofia Sokolewicz (1979). This researcher criticized the situation in which our discipline found itself in the 1970s by emphasizing that the way ethnological studies were organized had the effect that the knowledge which was required from graduates was largely understood "as the sum of pieces of information about a particular region or type of dress or architecture". On the other hand – as Sokolewicz argued – no thinking was required, i.e., no effort was put in developing skills

of analyzing and interpreting ethnographic material, the collection of which should never be considered as an aim in itself. "Knowledge, the information is the starting point for the creation of the theory, and of thinking" – she argued (Sokolewicz 1979: 19).

These words seem to be also valid in the contemporary debate about commitment. The reason for this is that many young ethnologists perceive methodological and theoretical reflection as secondary to the practical aspects of knowledge. And this does not merely apply to the somewhat one-dimensional assessment of postmodern or reflexive anthropology as a "retreat towards meta-anthropology" (Wala 2010: 41), but also to viewing the academic dimension of our discipline as a certain obstacle in realizing practical purposes (for example being present in public debate). Therefore, anthropology – according to young researchers – should abandon its "tough academic cocoon" and must use the language accessible to an average recipient of popular culture (Michoń, Pawlak 2010: 48). It is only how it can meet the demands of a shimmering, colourful digital post-postmodern era.

In my opinion, however, questioning of the academic status of the discipline may result, not in building the symbolic capital of anthropology, but in its trivialization or – equally dangerous – in declaring as anthropological such actions that do not fall within the framework of scientific discourse. In addition, the support of the academic status of ethnology is a possible strategy of resistance – a weapon of the weak (Scott 1985) – against changes to which higher education is recently subjected, and against promoting those scientific disciplines which are claimed to be useful for the economy, while at the same time rejecting the humanities, which – as is commonly believed – are the "breeding ground for the unemployed". The rejection of such claims seems to be indispensable. It expresses support not only for the humanities, but also for an idea of the university, and thus, for an understanding of education and science, such that they are not confined solely to the vocational training of graduates. Taking sides with the academic, "socially useless" idea of science, is not in compliance with negating the possible practical applications of anthropological knowledge. Both these dimensions of research, theoretical and practical, may coexist and provide essential knowledge about socio-cultural reality (cf. Pawlak 2013).

## **Beyond postmodernism**

To conclude, it can be argued that the occurrence of the debate on engagement in contemporary Polish ethnology is a kind of response to the dilemmas of post-modernism. It

thus expresses a desire to overcome epistemological anxiety and to reject the thesis that "today's anthropologist is a cognitive hypochondriac, constantly doubting the discipline's abilities which, for its coryphées of the not so distant past, were undisputable" (Burszta, Piątkowski 1994: 10). Nevertheless the attitude towards postmodernism is ambivalent. Engaged anthropology is seen not only as an antithesis of postmodernism, but also as a project that is grounded in postmodernist considerations and yet oriented toward providing change. The first approach is represented by a claim that engaged anthropology is a response to the political indifference (or insufficient politicization) of postmodern anthropology (Baer 2005, 2006) and its extensive focus on methodological and theoretical issues (Michoń, Pawlak 2010; Wala 2010). It is also argued that engaged anthropology allows the recapture of a non-relativised concept of truth and thus enables one to see the very real suffering of the Other (Tokarska-Bakir 2004a, 2004b), as well as the proximity of another human being (Kafar 2010a, 2010b).

Other researchers believe, in turn, that the considerations initiated by publications such as: *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford, Marcus, eds., 1986) or *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Marcus, Fischer 1986) contributed to the development of new forms of practicing anthropology, mainly in regard to "conducting fieldwork, career choices, and also methods of ethnographic representations of cultures" (Červinková 2009: 62). Thus, they enabled the development of a modern anthropology that includes an engaged approach to knowledge. Likewise, we can understand Rakowski's claim, according to which engagement means the turn to ethnography that is aware of the lessons provided by reflexive and critical considerations of the cognitive possibilities of science (Rakowski 2006, 2007, 2009).

Analyzing the debate on commitment that occurred in Polish ethnology, it can be concluded that engaged anthropology is not a homogeneous project, and it is not a sub-discipline in the traditional sense, as it does not provide a consistent theoretical apparatus, any particular research, narrative technique, or specific methodological perspective. Perhaps this is primarily for the reason that – as Buchowski points out – "the problem does not lie in the method itself, but in the approach to the world and the attitude towards the status of things and minds" (Buchowski 2005: 6). From this point of view, engaged anthropology appears not as a separate current, but as a worldview, striving for a redefinition of the framework of contemporary ethnology in the spirit of ethics, politics, social responsibility, or – as proposed by Steblik (2010) – "pure" pragmatics.

**Key words:** engaged anthropology, practice, ethics, postmodernism

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