

COMMUNIQUÉS

The Sociology of Relation among Humans, Non-Humans and Hybrids 10–11 May 2010, Gdańsk, Poland

There are at least two contexts for grasping the significance of the conference organized on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Gdańsk. The first is the gradual—and visible already—coagulation of a Polish field of interest in the interaction between humans, non-humans and hybrids in the society, or the manner in which the human relations with the natural and technological worlds are represented and discussed by various disciplines of social sciences—such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, philosophy, feminism etc. In this sense, it might be stated that the event was anticipated and called for by earlier and more recent translations of works of Mary Douglas, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Bruno Latour, Barbara Adam, Phil McNaughten and John Urry; and also by original input by Polish authors such as Jacek Kurczewski, Anna Wieczorkiewicz, Krzysztof Konecki, Lech Zacher, Andrzej Kiepas and more recently Janusz Mucha, Krzysztof Abriszewski, Aleksandra Derra, Dorota Rancew-Sikora (to name just a few).

The second context is more narrow and related to the scandalous potential for scientific conferences of publicly assumed beliefs on sensitive matters such as customs of animal population management, abortion and euthanasia. Such a case is, for example, this year decision of the Faculty of Law and Administration of Warsaw University to cancel the conference on legal and ethical aspects of humanitarian protection of animals due to protests and withdraw from participation of scientists contesting the presence of Peter Singer at the event. Although ‘scandalousness’ was definitely missing as a factor channeling the course of the debates at the Gdańsk conference, the Warsaw occurrence is worth recalling at least for the reason that such an outcome of clash of contesting views is alone a token of the institutionalization of this field of interest in Poland.

Getting back to Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher seems to have been interpreted by spokesmen in Gdańsk rather as a challenge on the theoretical level, and less on the personal-ideological one. Illustrative in this respect is the discussion which followed Iwona Jakubowska-Branicka’s “Commentary on Peter Singer” where Jacek Kurczewski and Jan Poleszczuk debated the legitimacy/opportunity of a culinary ethic based on the principle of no inducement of suffering (as such postulate might be derived from Singer’s work), and the extent to which Singer’s vegetarianism might be an overstatement in view of his theoretical stance. If this pertains—we might further speculate—than this particular culinary ethic could follow as a fourth alternative to

the ones already listed in the key note speech of Jacek Kurczewski (i.e. herbivores, carnivores and anthropophagy).

Yet, Singer was not the only Australian author that captured the attention of speakers in Gdańsk. As such, the relation between humans and animals, and sometimes inconsistent views on the problems of animal cruelty and animal welfare in the work of John Maxwell Coetzee (of South African origin) were amply documented and interpreted by Krzysztof Trzciński.

Regarding the profile of the conference, it should be stated that its overall sociological dimension was successfully accommodated by—although few—nonetheless consistent contributions from neurology (Mariusz Jędrzejko), genetic engineering (Alojzy Morzyniec), anthropology (Tarzycjusz Buliński), visual ethnography (Waldemar Rapior), philosophy (Aleksandra Derra, Ewa Bińczyk), literature (Karolina Wierel), sports (Przemysław Nosal), internet (Marcin Sadło), architecture (Lidia Klein) etc. A common concern of the debates that followed was the applicability of classical sociological concepts in the analysis of contemporary phenomena. For example, Andrzej Lemański's presentation on genetics as instrument and resource of power lead the audience to discuss new social problems and ethical choices that we face in connection with Jurgen Habermas' conceptual apparatus—and whether this conceptual apparatus is further relevant as such.

The initially unintended interdisciplinary stance of the conference is most probably a consequence of the polysemic character of the relations under analysis, which call for and allow various theoretical approaches to the same social phenomenon. More than in the case of human-animal relations—where, for example, we have categories such as symbolic interactionism, the principle of symmetry (Andrzej Nowak) but also theory of cognitive dissonance and unintended consequences (Adriana Mica)—this theoretical polysemy is the case of the speeches concerning what might be termed as the phenomenon of hybridity and hybridization.

In the papers dealing with hybridity as such—meaning that they do not focus on “the proliferation of hybrids [that] has saturated the constitutional framework of the moderns” (Bruno Latour)—prevalent are two interpretations. One, that might be circumscribed to the sociology of emotions, views hybrids as mediators among different communities of empathy that are based on differentiated levels of righteousness (Wojciech Pawlik). This means that the agency of hybrids (and not only that of humans) is subjected to moral considerations. This hypothesis finds its “contemporary” equivalent in Kazimierz Krzysztofek's discussion of the legal and ethical paradoxes raised by the agency of humans as antropotechnical hybrids. The second perspective, as synthesis from the disciplines of comparative religion and anthropology, talks about the ‘hybrid’ as an “archetype” embedded with a cosmological mission in the process of achieving and giving grand meaning (Janusz Barański).

Closely related to the above problematic is the XIXth century social phenomenon of exposure and exploitation of hybridity as cultured freak with an evident commercial purpose (Anna Wieczorkiewicz and Małgorzata Kwiatkowska). As such, in her key note speech on the “spectacular cultural history of hypertrichosis” (a disease leading to abnormal pilosity of the body), Anna Wieczorkiewicz discussed particular cases of

what we might call *hybridity as show*, where the curious medical and physical aspect was supplemented by outstanding linguistic potential and high level of education. Noteworthy is the continuous framing of such cases as hybrids between humans and animals—and this, in spite of the apparent medicalization of the contemporary discourse on the matter. Belonging to a similar register, there is also Urszula Jarecka's analysis of the boundaries of the "cinematical imagination" by employing a theoretical apparatus that is based to some extent on the Aristotelian dichotomy of nature and culture.

In the analyses of contemporary agency of hybrids, the theoretical apparatus is prevalently grateful to the work of Anthony Giddens (Marcin Wełnicki), Bruno Latour (Krzysztof Abriszewski), Michel Callon (Piotr Pawliszak), Ulrich Beck (Ewa Bińczyk) and Donna Haraway (Aleksandra Derra). The legitimacy of such conceptual indebtedness notwithstanding, we would like to welcome the auto-reflections and debates that were occasioned by Łukasz Afeltowicz' and Krzysztof Pietrowicz' critical appraisal of the "decorative" employment of actor-network methodology in current sociological studies. The two authors indicated that actor-network theory gradually gains the status of "revealed knowledge" at the expense of the applicability of its methodological apparatus, and that there is a tendency to perceive Bruno Latour less as a scholar, and more like a prophet.

At first blush, what in the title of the conference is placed at the beginning—i.e. the relations between humans—seems to have been statistically underrepresented in the overall thematic harmonogram. Interesting cases studies have been provided, such as Ewa Nowicka's notes on racism, and Iwona Zielińska's convergence of moral panic theory with Mary Douglass concept of anomaly in the analysis of a particular set of press releases on homosexuals in Poland.

Conclusively, the conference proved to be hugely reviving and intellectually challenging and the response from the academics and students alike has overgrown the organizers' expectations. This situation suggests that there is a need to create a platform to discuss the most relevant problems regarding the relations between humans, hybrids and non-humans as well as the influence of genetic development on society and the adequacy of the scientific language and theory to describe contemporary changes.

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