



Anthropology? 'Anthropology'?

What

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In September 2018, Jarosław Gowin, Poland's Minister of Science and Higher



Education, abolished anthropology as an academic discipline by an executive decree. The much-protested new law on higher education entered into force on 1 October 2018. Amid mounting outcry, this post attempts to outline the significance of this decision, identify its practical consequences and situate it against a background of our discipline's more general crisis.

In a famous scene from the 1980s Polish comedy film *Miś* ('Teddy Bear') a man walks into a post office to make a long distance phone call. 'London?' the jaded clerk behind the counter replies. Checking the thick register she responds, 'There's no such place called "London". There's only Łądek, Łądek Zdrój.' To a Polish ear, Łądek, pronounced 'Łondek', is phonetically similar to 'London'. The man patiently explains that he means 'London, a city in England', to which the clerk angrily exclaims: 'Why didn't you say it's abroad?! Gotta look it up!' The scene ridicules the ignorance and parochialism of Polish public institutions in the declining years of 'real socialism'. But with Minister Jarosław Gowin's recently introduced academic reform, foreign anthropologists seeking collaboration with their peers in Poland may soon expect to be confronted with a similar response: 'Anthropology? What anthropology? There's no such discipline.'

October 1 is the inauguration of the new academic year in Poland. It was on that day that the new law on Higher Education and Science entered into force. The law had been passed by the parliament against [widespread protests](#) last summer. Proudly dubbed the 'Constitution for Science', the law is the Minister's cherished brainchild. While Gowin and the right-wing government, of which he is a member, claim that the new law is a response to the Polish academia's calls for a reform, in fact many academics are concerned.

Gowin's new law centralizes academia, subjects it to increased control by political appointees and big business, and intensifies demand for commercially applicable research. It advances the tendency towards reducing universities to the role of boot camps for techno-managerial cadres.

Many actions, not included in the law itself, were introduced by the Minister's



executive decrees. Disciplines were lumped together into a small number of newly created umbrella disciplines. Anthropology became included in 'Culture and Religion Studies', a subset of the Humanities, while most other branches of social science were listed under a separate category. The abolition of anthropology was immediately met with protest by the [Polish Ethnological Society](#) and all of the anthropology/ethnology departments across the country. International anthropological associations such as the WAU, WCAA, IUAES, and AAA, as well as the national anthropological unions in several countries were quick to express their solidarity with Polish colleagues, issuing appeals to Minister Gowin to revoke his decision.

Beyond the obvious absurdity of [erasing anthropology](#) in Bronisław Malinowski's homeland, what does Polish anthropology's abolition mean in practice and why exactly are anthropologists crying out?

Evaluation

The abolition of anthropology as a self-standing discipline will make the work of Polish anthropologists far less visible to foreign colleagues and less recognizable to funders. The Ministry argues that the 'consolidation' of disciplines is necessary to enable accurate evaluation of research. 'Evaluation' is explicitly a keyword guiding the broader academic reform. Anthropologists will be immediately reminded of Marilyn Strathern's *Audit Cultures* (2000). Just how our work is going to be evaluated is very much part of the reasons for anthropologists' outcry. The Ministry has prepared a list of journals organized by the newly created umbrella disciplines. Only articles published in journals listed under the heading that corresponds to the author's official disciplinary affiliation will count as part of the researcher's output and basis of their individual evaluation. The list for "Culture and Religion Studies" does include most of the leading international anthropology journals, but very few if any interdisciplinary ones or those with a regional focus. This means that Polish anthropologists will have to think twice before they commit to an interdisciplinary research or writing project. Thus the



executive decree belies the Ministry's declared goal to facilitate the internationalization of Polish research by creating a simplified, more legible structure.

Money

Other concerns are financial. Before the reform, centrally allocated funds for research and salaries used to be distributed to faculties according to the ranking of their respective research outputs. To take one example: my own home department, the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, is part of the Faculty of History at the University of Warsaw, which also includes the departments of history, archaeology, art history, and musicology. Owing, in part, to the anthropology department's contribution, the faculty's research has steadily ranked in the highest possible category, 'A+'. But the reform reduces the role of faculties in favour of the newly created disciplines (the exact structure and role of faculties is yet to be decided). The consequences of this will differ for different departments. For us, since the average rating of the newly created "Culture and Religion Studies" is lower, the change means less funding.

Furthermore, money is also allocated to specific disciplines according to their 'cost absorption coefficient'. Basically, the more expensive the kind of research in a given field, the more money the discipline receives.

Fieldwork-based disciplines such as archaeology or (until now) anthropology receive a bit more than those disciplines, primarily in the humanities, whose research is conducted mainly in libraries, and natural science disciplines that require labs furnished with expensive equipment receive significantly more. This was so before the reform and the new law preserves the general principle. The reform introduces a more nuanced scale for calibrating the various disciplines' respective research costs. Previously, with 1.0 being the basic standard, the maximum coefficient for any discipline used to be 3.0, and most humanities disciplines ranked 1.0 or 1.5. The new decree extends the scale up to 6.0. On the



face of it, the change would seem beneficial, and perhaps it is – for some. But with anthropology’s merger with non-fieldwork based Culture and Religion Studies, our coefficient drops to the minimum level. Our already miserable research funds become even more pathetic. Again, by curtailing the financial possibilities for conducting research, participating in international conferences, and quite simply staying up-to-date with international literature, the executive decision belies the Ministry’s proclaimed goal of internationalization.

Research and Teaching

Moreover, the fear is that the merging of disciplines might be a first step towards a de facto abolition of anthropology research and teaching. For now, the departments and study programmes stay in place. A confusing situation is created in which anthropology (or ‘ethnology’, as for historical reasons it is more commonly known in Poland) remains recognized as a study programme but not an academic discipline. Students will continue to be enrolled and receive degrees in a field that’s a Schrödinger’s cat – at the same time alive and dead. But the new law gives rectors and newly created supervisory boards composed of government appointees and business representatives free reign in restructuring universities. The threat appears quite real that at some point in the near future the rectors and supervisory boards might decide that non-profitable departments representing non-existent disciplines such as anthropology should be shut down in the name of austerity and ‘rationalization’. Coincidentally, a new Polish edition of Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* came out this year – now *that’s* useful social science! It offers a clear understanding of the world’s contemporary challenges. Who needs anthropologists with their esoteric hair-splitting, their ‘predicaments of culture’ (Clifford 1988), ‘gender trouble’ (Butler 1990), ‘blurred boundaries’ (Gupta 1995) and ‘partial connections’ (Strathern 2004)? Who needs their nonsense about ‘mushrooms at the end of the world’ (Tsing 2015) and forests that ‘think’ (Kohn 2003)? They only make things complicated, while Poland (and humanity) needs solutions and applicability to become great again.



Visibility

This points to a final set of issues concerning the reasons why the Minister's meat-axe fell on anthropology. Talking to colleagues abroad, they often think this must be part of ideological warfare, eradicating anthropology as a source of ideas hostile to Poland's nationalistic and conservative government. Much as I wish anthropology in Poland was so politically significant as to merit the nationalists' and conservatives' in government special (if malevolent) attention, I don't think this is the case. More likely, it seems to me, the abolition of our discipline is a result of its low public visibility paired with the sheer ignorance of Ministry officials. 'What's that anthropology?' I imagine them wondering, 'Dunno - something about culture, you know, folk dances and strange beliefs and rituals.' 'OK, so it's Culture and Religion, right?'

In the newest issue of *Anthropology Today*, Bruce Kapferer ([2018](#)) writes about the threats to anthropology posed by the enmeshing of our discipline and academia as a whole in what he calls 'techno-corporatizing realities' and 'economic pragmatism'.

The pressure to produce applicable and commercializable results deprives anthropology of its distinctive strength: the capacity, by drawing on ethnography, to move beyond the confines of the already known. 'Anthropological practice is vulnerable to outside political, economic and socio-cultural forces', Kapferer states.

But he also points out how anthropologists are, in part, themselves to blame. Abandoning the project of ethnographically derived theory-making, we have de facto accepted a secondary position in relation to other disciplines whose theories colonize our work and to whom we often serve as mere purveyors of 'raw data.'

While the details of Kapferer's argument are debatable, I think his analysis broadly describes, in part at least, also the origins of the specific situation of anthropology in Poland at present. For historical reasons too complex to explore



here, Polish anthropology had been isolated from the developments of the discipline in the English-speaking world for decades. Still today there is a significant gap in terms of the availability of Polish translations of anthropology's modern classics. Departments and university libraries are often too underfunded to afford access to current international literature. These problems are not specific to Poland only. Faced with structural, financial and institutional obstacles, and additionally confused about our discipline's transnational legacies and distinctive strengths, we have been unable to establish public relevance and recognizable voice for anthropology around the world in general, and in Poland in particular. We have thus found ourselves unprepared for the present assault by the combined forces of conservative government and corporate power.

This might help understand why, for instance, informatics, initially also slated for 'consolidation' with other fields, has been able to secure its standing in the disciplinary landscape of Polish academia redrawn by Minister Gowin, while anthropology hasn't. I do want to think all is not yet lost, but we're fighting an uphill struggle, and we rose up late. Our colleagues in astronomy have succeeded in getting their discipline back. Perhaps the Minister hopes they will name a star after him one day - though an Armageddon asteroid might be more apt. But anthropology? What could we possibly name after Gowin? A savage tribe?

Please sign [Allegra's letter to Minister Gowin here](#).

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