

The “Province” from an Anthropological Viewpoint. Reflections from the Perspective of the Dilemmas of Cultural Communication

The dilemmas of cultural communication appearing within the context of deliberations on the province must be additionally explained by resorting to a characteristic of the context surrounding this particular category.

In numerous convictions and expectations “the province” is associated with folk qualities or is an autonomous reality contrasted with the “centre”. According to such opinions, provincial and folk space contains truths of life, ethical values, and an authentic experiencing of the world, which can be juxtaposed with illusion, falsehood, and the superficiality of experiences offered by the contemporary, global manner of communication. Another prevailing conviction claims that even if those positive values had been already composed in a certain manner and participate in new contexts they still remain attractive for social dialogue.

On the other hand, folk qualities as a derivative of the province produce today ambivalent attitudes even among experts on folklore and folk art, ethnographers and anthropologists.

The conceits: “folk qualities”, “folk culture”, and “provincial culture” are applied in assorted meanings and upon different levels of interpretation. Since mention is made of a special reality composed of behaviour, values, and ideas as well as their material dimensions, points of view are easily confused owing to the differently understood ontological status of this sort of culture. A relativisation of world outlooks and manners of using descriptive categories in social dialogue results in paradoxes and dilemmas that appear to be irremovable from the contemporary reception of the world of culture.

Upon the level of description and scientific (research) interpretations it is said that:

1. The class definition of folk culture has been rejected already long ago. In its contemporary form folk culture is an attribute neither of the peasantry nor

even of the inhabitants of villages nor a yet differently comprehended province. It appears, as a rule, in the form of cultures accompanied by an adjective (such as: suburban, corporative, local, regional, or others). After all, in order to be able to speak about such culture it suffices to think about social or symbolic reality as long as it meets the need for emotional solidarity, is a framework of joint convictions, and assists in the discovery of a feeling of identity in assorted lifestyles.

2. For years folk culture known from ethnographic descriptions has not existed as an autonomous functional entity containing concurrence between the type of the economy, material cultural endowment, type of social organization and the religious and mythical-magical world outlook. In this sense, folk culture is only a reconstructed historical model, and in such a form it is of use for regionalists as an historical context in interpretations or quests for local originality.

3. At present, it is much better to speak about “provincial culture” as a qualitatively diverse reality produced by various elements of assorted former cultural entities (including folk ones) but composed differently. This new whole is extra-technological and consists of mental structures often expressed in identical rituals and customs but lacking mythical and magical senses; consequently, they become an eclectic mixture of ceremonies possessing new costumes and often banalised meanings. This is the opinion of an expert on folklore engaged in observing so-called new folklore (Kowalski 2004: 156-158).

4. Provincial culture is a variant of multi-form contemporary culture. The latter is universal, technicised, and can be variously rendered ideological, variable, and multi-value. It is the scene of a game and an exchange of values entailing the emergence of numerous returns and transformations. This nature of contemporary culture is the reason why each element or variant can easily become its magical, i.e. provincial version (even if only due to changing fashion), although there also occur returns to the centre of life in a reconstructed or partial form.

5. Contemporary so-called postmodern stands permit a multiplicity of views of the world, treating them all as enjoying equal rights. A frequent symptom of the present-day way of experiencing the world is once again a quest for the exotic, truth, authenticity, and profundity; such declarations are considered suspicious and beyond deeply justified convictions. Is it, however, possible to refuse us, contemporary men, the ability of experiencing the metaphysical nature of the world, or is metaphysics finally dead? Such questions too can be provoked by reflections on the province.

Within the context of the above-mentioned theses the province and its representations – folk qualities – occur in several ways of deciphering culture texts. They could include:

1. interpretation meta-texts. In those cases, folk qualities and provincialism refer to values and ideas;

2. folklorism – brings to mind folk and amateur art and practiced anew folk customs, the stage, commercialism, agricultural tourism and similar ventures;

3. folk culture comprehended as a model of historical social and cultural reality, the outcome of studies but also of scientific creation;

4. counter-culture (alternative cultures) – reaching for the resources of folk qualities and provincialism in order to propagate certain lifestyles, the theatre, and forms of expression as ideological protest against technicised life deprived of spiritual qualities;

5. ideas and practices of regionalism, propagating the portative slogan of so-called small homelands. In those instances, folk culture provides signs of affiliation and identity despite the fact that the small homeland is an anthropological (literary and sociological) hypostasis and not reality.

In such an application one could say about folk culture and its participation in provincial culture that:

1. it belongs only partly to the contemporary rural environment,

2. the environment of provincial culture (space and society) is differentiated due to the type of consciousness, and thus organized differently than has been described by researchers dealing in the past with folk culture,

3. it is a created, mythicized vision of the world without any dark sides,

4. as a lifestyle and manner of thinking it belongs not only to rural space but cultivates its ideal vision in different surroundings,

5. as a scientific meta-text it has been created anew and belongs to the dictionary of interpretations.

The conclusions are as follows:

Folk culture is more myth than reality. It is a collective story about the past moulding certain world outlook spheres. It can be also the foundation and value of critical assessments of contemporary behaviour. Convictions about the natural character of folk culture and the province also refer, as is always the case in history, to contemporaneity, and are used within it (politics, culture, the regionalist movement). Nonetheless, it is not folk culture in the traditional meaning of the word. New folk culture, the sort that the province requires, mixes tradition and knowledge. History, literature, and ethnography appear on the level of usage and common narration. It is, after all, easy to read a book and refer to an expert who will say what is folk and characteristic for a given region. This sort of application is dominated by the local, integrating and identity-oriented dimension. Its cultural expressions are carnivals, holidays, festivals, fairs, regional lessons, agricultural tourism, etc.

An anthropologist of culture observing these issues, familiar with their nature and expert regarding

meta-textual descriptions, becomes embroiled, together with a trained ethnographer, in dilemmas of social participation. Here, the anticipations of local communities entitled to raise their provincialism to the rank of essential values are focused on the authority of science and institutions traditionally regarded as a source of knowledge. This is at odds with the ironic postulates formulated by anthropology in relation to the description of reality. The anthropologist would prefer to stand to the side and observe spontaneously occurring processes. It has to be said outright, however, that today spontaneity is constant communication and exchange.

On the present-day level of social awareness the scholar cannot avoid questions or refuse to render assistance in the emergence of new forms of using folk culture. The province is not cut off from information, but takes part in global communication according to the same principles as an anthropologist of culture. Let us thus draw a suitable conclusion: we all create mythicized, imaginary realities, with some of us doing this in the province and others about the province. Such is the plight of the contemporary humanities.

The above theses can be illustrated by a *sui generis* interpretation proposed in the title and already partly presented. Undoubtedly, the issue at stake is multi-dimensional. The province remains an important

object of studies pursued by anthropology when we treat the topic realistically; in a metaphorical and conceptual sense the province is an interpretation category. It is also a figure of thought or a stereotype in the catalogue of the concepts of common knowledge. The use of a concept in assorted contexts and discourses grants it meanings, upon which a discussion should cast light. It is thus worth conducting if only an approximate analysis of the semantic field of the incriminated concept and thus demonstrate what sort of functions it fulfils in language and culture.

I shall carry out an analysis of the select vocabulary comprising the semantic field of the concept of the "province" by resorting to my research and linguistic experience. In this fashion, the lexicon used in the analysis will remain highly incomplete, not to say arbitrary, just as in the case of every individual reception of reality.

What is my intention?

This is what Regine Robin wrote: a search for the meaning of the text, sentence, and expression calls for certain work with the text, an ostensible configuration of the continuum and order of the statement so as to arrange it anew and render it a significant legibility [...] to search for the meaning of the word denotes an analysis of all its applications or contexts ... (Robin 1980: 252).

The effectiveness of this method in anthropological interpretations has been already shown in reference to a



Sulejówek

literary text submerged in ethnographic detail. I have in mind an analysis of *Konopielka* by E. Redliński (Galasińska 1989) as well as a scientific publication by an historian treating sources from a Polonocentric viewpoint

(Robotycki 1995). Jędrzej Bartmiński made fullest use of this method for other purposes in his ethno-linguistic dictionary (Bartmiński 1996, 1999).

The essence of the method in question is the imposition upon the texts of three networks of relations: the network of definitions corresponding to the semantic function, the network of thematic or conceptual connections delineating the association group (i.e. positive solutions) and oppositions (negative connections), and the verbal network indicating the functions of someone or "functions on". While determining the dominant (core) of the field there comes into being a collection of expressions identifying the latter. The use of the above-mentioned networks consists of discovering relations amidst words comprising the field.

In the case of the dominant "province" I acted in the following manner: from the open set, i.e. representations of styles of linguistic statements (I took into account literature, science, the essay, and the Polish vernacular) I selected examples of definitions, the usage of words, and descriptions of activities connected with the concept of the "province". This provided a barely approximate structure of the field, but sufficient for my initial recognition. (A further part of the argument will demonstrate the sort of texts I used while seeking the context of application; it also contains references to pertinent literature).

In this manner, the positive "province" (+) entails:

- associations with: Nature, tranquillity, calmness, order, the "small homeland",
- distinguishing features expressed by adjectives telling us that it is local, familiar, close, unambiguous,
- it is evaluated as noble simplicity, the prime fount, an observation point and an ethical assessment of collective life,

– it (its essence) is expressed in a calm lifestyle, a certain manner of perceiving the world, and the predominance of positive social relations, while as a place of residence it is an environment endowed with a large social capital owing to the afore-mentioned local qualities.

The opposite province (-) is:

– a centre, a town, *grand monde*, and Warsaw, characterised as alien from the viewpoint of the province, chaotic, inimical, and incomprehensible.

Equivalents deprecating (-) the province from the point of view of the centre include such expressions as:

– country bumpkin, "villager", simpleton, brute, peasant, "mohair" (wearer of a mohair beret), folklore, "the sticks", ignoramus. They characterise a state of backwardness, a lack of understanding for the spirit of the time and new perspectives, primitive pettiness and a quarrelsome nature.

In both the positive and negative valorisation of elements of the semantic field of the category of "the province" there additionally appears the problem of language and dialect, recognisable as a feature or pragmatics.

The dialect can be a positive feature: as the language used at home or the sign of a group;

– with a negative sign it can be classified as an opposition: the sign of unskilful or impaired speech – the pragmatics of statements.

Already such initial recognition shows that when we say: "province" we are dealing not only with a category of linguistic description but also with anthropological and ethno-linguistic reality (both words conceal social meanings and collective conceits). From this point of view, the province can become the object of observation and anthropological, sociological or historical studies. It should be kept in mind, however, that we are speaking about something that lies simultaneously in the domain of language and culture. In this sketch I am interested primarily in all possible aspects and types of reflections about the province that appear in anthropological texts, studies on folklore, anthropologising sociology, and the belles lettres (regardless of the way in which we shall conceive the latter). I shall thus indicate further examples of the range and manner of writing about the province originating from the earlier mentioned domain of reflections pursued by the humanities. By referring only to particular works I treat them as an illustration of the diversity of the issues under examination.

The province is thus depicted as a place of residence albeit possessing special conditions. It is anthropological space domesticated by constant symbolic valorisation and deciphering, and spans from the cosmological dimension to folklore. This is the way it was described by anthropologists and ethnographers (Benedyktow-

icz 1992, 2007; Czaja 2007), folklorists (Bartmiński 1990), and men of letters (Vincenz 1980).

Such a place of residence can also become the site of individual withdrawal or a collective demonstration of certain social stands connected with social criticism known as anti-globalism. In those cases, living in the province is a conscious choice of life in alternative communities, often inclined towards specific forms of creativity and expression (Sztandara 2001).

Problems relating to, and rhetoric making use of the prime category of our reflections are also to be discovered in texts on the so-called small homeland. Here, the province is connected with such categories as tradition, invented tradition, folklore, and history. All serve the construction (and according to the local population - the recreation) of local "genuine" tradition. Convictions about the truth contained in folklore and regional history stem from a certain categorical axiological stand generating tradition, the latter being nothing else than the past brought up to date. In this case, tradition is also a specific comprehension of time and chronology. These dimensions are either downplayed or not noticed as essential. I deliberated on them upon numerous occasions (see: Robotycki 1998). It is worth drawing attention to the fact that authors writing about local history are to be encountered in almost every locality. They treat questions of chronology in assorted ways, from historical attempts, i.e. critical precision, to freedom of operating with facts. I found such examples in Poronin (Bafia, Nocoń 2004), Jurgów (Ciągwa 1996), Legnica (Urbański, no year of publication), Dobrocice (Wrońscy 2007), Bejsce (Bajka 1994), Wójcin (Wilczyński 1995), Brzesko (Wyczasany 2000), Iwanowice (Miska 1993) and many other localities. I cite only several examples from my collection of local monographs.

What about the "small homeland"? This term, travestied in daily language and once applied by Stanisław Ossowski (private homeland) and Stanisław Vincenz (small homeland), is today regarded as a real being. Meanwhile, in the case of both authors it was a spatial correlate of the imaginary world, a function of a subjective, emotional perception of reality. Currently, use is made of increasingly distant associations. In the semantic relation "the small homeland": space and pragmatics, distinctly shows a preference for real space (area). The cultural effect of changing meanings in the lexical domain of the "province" is visible in collective activities. We know of numerous socio-technical operations intent on rendering the place of residence a realistically comprehended homeland. Literature on this topic is enormous. Here, works by Wojciech Łukowski (2002) and Roch Sulima (2001) are of importance for describing the phenomenon, and examples of an analysis of literature include a study about the nostalgic comprehension of the category of the "homeland" in literary essays (Olejniczak 1992).



Oblęgorek

Within the range of semantic references to the category of the "province" a considerable role is played by the conviction that characteristic features include a specific lifestyle and type of interaction. It has already become an historical truth that anthropology and sociology mention a differentiation of the social environment into *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, introduced by Ferdinand Tönnies. Community is the structural and interactive feature of the province. Observations inspired by this classical differentiation are encountered among such ethnographically oriented anthropologists as K. Górny and M. Marczyk (Górny 2003, Górny, Marczyk 2003). The province organized in accordance with the mentioned principles should have at its disposal considerable social capital – a sociological category known from the contemporary dictionary of the social sciences (Lewenstein 2006).

The province is the space of social dialogue and possible conflicts but to an equal measure of cooperation. Each of those forms is familiar to social researchers. In contemporary Polish society, laboriously building its civic links, the local social debate is particularly important and desirable. This fact could not have evaded the attention of researchers studying the life of local communities. By way of example, local debates were observed by A. Malewska-Szałygin (2002), the extra-legal manner of resolving inner rural conflicts was described by M. Magoska

(1991), and ethical aspects connected with the identity of minorities and local communities were studied at the Department of Social Anthropology in the Institute of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University (Flis 2004). These sociological publications demonstrate that the situation of the province is subjected to changes. The term appears more rarely in assorted publications, where its place is taken by the concept of "locality", of a postmodern provenance. This is not solely the question of a fashionable term. If concepts denote, then there must have occurred a qualitative change of social reality. Dialogue and debate are forms of an interaction of a democratic society organized differently than the traditional province. Researchers have been observing transformations for a long time

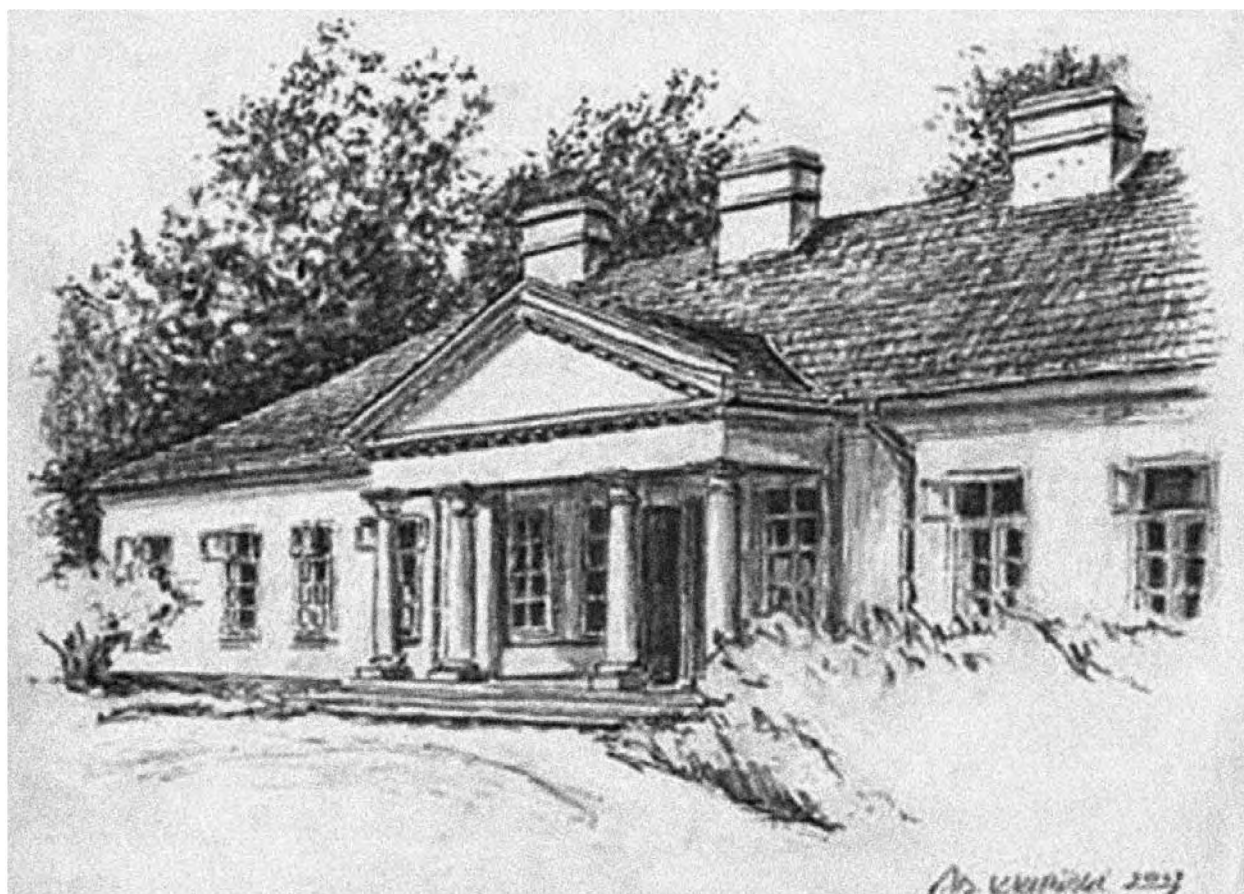
now and pondering the nature of the contemporary local community and culture. Much attention has been devoted to these topics by Joanna Kurczewska and her team. In this case, sociological answers are extremely significant. Former traditional ethnographic knowledge is no longer sufficient. Joint reflections pursued by cultural sociology and anthropology offer new and greatly interesting results, as testified by two volumes of studies edited by Joanna Kurczewska on assorted aspects of the local (Kurczewska 2004, 2006).

The traditionally ethnographic and anthropological range of interests focused on the province includes folk religiosity. We come across its collective expression in recurring miracles inspiring a spontaneous establishment of pilgrimage sites. At the same time, already known sites do not vanish together with their accompanying fairground art and religious kitsch. An excellent example is the dynamically developing centre in Licheń. In a wider dimension, these phenomena became part of the iconic space of the province, creating its repeatable or unique atmosphere. This is the reason why the anthropologist is interested in celebrations of the day of the patron saint of a local church and the accompanying fair as well as their contemporary variants: work connected with servicing tourists and summer vacationers staying on suitably adapted farms (agricultural tourism), the outfitting of summer

holiday locations, open-air markets, and local gastronomy. Here are several examples of anthropological studies developing the presented motifs.

Much is already known, since a lot has been written, about miracles witnessed from time to time in assorted localities in Poland. For years we have been hearing about Oława, Okunin, Radomin, Leżajsk, Lublin and other sites (Czachowski 2003). Art and trade accompanying the *sacrum* have been discussed by, for example, P. Kowalski (2004), while the iconosphere of the province, the local church patron's day, and summer vacation localities have been studied in interesting publications by young sociologists from Toruń (Olechnicki 2003). We are also familiar with sketches dealing with transformations of the visual surrounding of a small town (Witkowska, Nowina-Sroczyńska 1998) and contemporary kitsch (Fiderkiewicz 2006).

Above, I presented the scientific aspect of the comprehension of the category of the "province". Once again, I draw attention to the fact that present-day sociology and cultural anthropology use, as has been accentuated, the term "localness" as an equivalent of the category of the "province", stating upon the basis of empirical observations that the former is the best evocation of the situation of contemporary Polish society. The anthropological viewpoint, however, encompasses not merely ethnographic expressions of social life, and "localness" does



Lusławice

not exhaust the anthropological potential. The anthropologist is interested also in cultural expression achieved by means of colloquiality and assorted forms of art. In such dimensions, the "province" assumes the character of a symbolic gesture, a metaphor, and other possible meanings in the course of discourses of this sort.

Recall that in the past the "nation" offered a residence in the province to its men of merit (citizens, heroes) as evidence of recognition of their accomplishments. In doing so, it granted them a symbolic place of rest and social respect. This is the anthropological interpretation of the residence in Sulejówek granted to Józef Piłsudski, in Kaśna Dolna – to Ignacy Paderewski, in Polanka – to Władysław Haller, in Żarnowiec near Jasło – to Maria Konopnicka, and in Oblęgorek – to Henryk Sienkiewicz. The manor house presented as a collective symbolic gesture is comprehensible within the context of Polish tradition. Polish history and culture were to a great degree rustic. Former magnate residences (and frequently those of the gentry) acted as centres of art and culture. Moreover, land ownership was highly regarded. After all, it is said that the Polish manor, conceived as an institution, preserved national ethos throughout years of partition-era servitude (Gogut 1990, Leśniakowska 1996). National heroes who realised ethical values met group expectations.

The province conceived as a place of creative work, an observation point and one of moral assessments is still something else. In the tradition of most recent Polish culture it is possible to list creatively active persons choosing to stay in the province. Many of them, well educated, in this manner implemented their ideological or artistic programme. Others discovered in the province a suitable distance towards the world of culture necessary for their creative pursuits, while still others returned to their roots. The motives were always numerous. By way of example, let us mention Drohobycz and B. Schulz, Krzywórnica and S. Vincenz, Stawisko and J. Iwaszkiewicz, Kazimierz Dolny and M. Kuncewiczowa, Górki Wielkie and Z. Kossak-Szczucka, Skoczów and G. Morcinek,

Zegrzynek and J. Szaniawski, Gorzeń Górny and E. Zegadłowicz,

Szczawnica and J. Wiktor, and Wołowiec and A. Stasiuk.

If we add the fact that avant-garde theatre companies also seek expression and stimulus in the province (the "Gardzienice" Theatre association, the Węgajty Theatre, the Borderland Foundation in Sejny, the Wierszalin Theatre, etc.), and that the Krzysztof Penderecki residence consists of a magnificent manor and park in Lusławice then it becomes obvious that the province can be a lifestyle from which it is not that far to the "grand world" of high culture.

Authors who in a programme-like manner live in the province treating it as a *sui generis* observation point do not lose contact with high culture.

After all, their work is not provincial but pertains to every important existential and collective problem. Whenever a place is specifically manifested in the creative *oeuvre* it is possible to decipher this situation as a stunt thanks to which the authors situate themselves outside or above the presented world. In literature, the "province" is often an observation point, a metaphor of the axiological order, a model of the world and the cosmos. We also come across a metonymy of the "province" – the house as moral order, a world of values and memory. Nonetheless, the province does not lack images dominated by a tendency to stifle, a feeling of being entrapped, group pressure, as well as a prevailing absence of all hope.

It is worth drawing attention to yet another literary aspect of the province. I have in mind the so-called rural theme in Polish post-war literature. It exploded in the 1970s, but it had certain antecedents and is connected with the names of renowned authors (J. Kawalec, T. Nowak, M. Pilot, W. Myśliwski, E. Redliński) to be discovered not only on book covers but also on the pages of the interesting periodical "Regiony", issued to the end of the century. This was a forum of authors fascinated with the low and provincial circulation of the word, which they regarded as the important building material of culture. The publication of the periodical involved also folklorists and sociologists (R. Sulima, K. Górski, B. Gołębiowski). In both the literary and analytical work the editorial board pursued a question more extensive than the so-called rural theme, whose "godfather" was for a longer time Henryk Bereza. The editors of "Regiony" were concerned with something more than the place of folk/plebeian qualities in the universe of Polish culture. They understood folk qualities as world outlook structures, as values to be universalised in the difficult process of the peasants gaining a personality at a time when they became fully fledged participants of the cultural dialogue (Zawada 1983 *passim*).

Roch Sulima described this process:

...Among writers of folk genealogy, who settle moral and aesthetic accounts with attained culture (Redliński, Myśliwski, Pilot), the "bottom" once again became a point of reference for evaluations. At the same time, it possesses distinctly expressed social contents and is not a supra-social and supra-historical abstract. Contemporary literary critique and publicistics very often refer to the axiology of the "source", recognising it as a model of not solely name granting operations but predominantly those that explain and assess (Sulima 1982: 102).

This was, therefore, a line of thought different than the above-mentioned tradition of the topos of the province in literature. Nor was it the folklore motif present in the history of Polish culture starting with Romanticism.

"Province" has a number of names. Whenever it was mentioned in mythicised history, in literature mythical by its very nature, in an essay and in science I used an

anthropological yardstick, which showed that we are dealing with ambivalent reality and that it is impossible to apply categorical views. I spoke about it in the past tense, indicating various transformations in knowledge and attitudes towards the province. One could say that old cultural habits urge us to see the province in a manner indicated by the semantic analysis conducted at the onset. Apparently, even language does not keep up with changes.

Surrounding contemporaneity introduces amendments into this manner of seeing and experiencing reality. Technology has reduced the time needed for overcoming distance, and communication has made it possible to take part in collective life and to benefit from science and information regardless of the place of residence (TV, Internet, etc.). Even in the so-called province there function structures and institutions reducing the feeling of being cut off from the world. The example of the commune of Tyczyn near Rzeszów and the local school of higher learning is sufficient proof of how the comprehension of the "province" can alter. The globalisation of numerous domains of cultural life has rendered universal styles of daily life realised in each social stratum and place of residence.

Apart from the regions of poverty that comprise a separate problem, models of life became extremely democratised and similar. At times, they have turned into caricatures, but this is already a separate question from the borderland of anthropology and the world of values.

Participation in a differently organised society, in a situation of constant exchange and communication, inclines us towards changing intellectual categories describing and interpreting reality; hence the mentioned category of "localness" ousts the former comprehension of the province and provincialism.

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