

Ideological Background of Intercultural Dialogue in Social Anthropology

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Abstract—The article centers on various ideological patterns of the other in socio-anthropological discourse and demonstrates that these patterns influence the practice of intercultural communication, necessary for field studies in this discipline. The article emphasizes one of the conditions of a dialogue with representatives of simple societies, that is a position of social anthropologists, who should be eager to understand the other in his/her unique cultural milieu and at the same time critically reflect the limits of their own ways of life.

Keywords: *cultural others, simple societies, intercultural dialogue, social criticism, position of social anthropologist*

I. INTRODUCTION

A dialogue enables people to understand each other and be aware of ideas they have in common, but at the same time it can't be triggered off without the basic assumption that the agreement among participants (for example, representatives of different worldviews, approaches, cultures) is possible. The process stands for the fact that other persons are considered to be intelligent creatures, who are capable of rational conversation and collaboration. The dialogue also implies that interlocutors, involved in it, use their reason to solve arising problems with speech acts (not with physical force), demonstrating the willing to take the other's point of view (not to conquer or hurt the other as in symbolic violence [1]).

Theoretical approach involves a particular kind of a dialogical process, that is a process of achieving an objective knowledge. During this academic dialogue researchers are supposed to exchange questions and criticism in order to get rid of one-sided, dogmatic perception of reality. Within a cooperative search of unprejudiced picture of events a person obtains a position of an objective observer, distant from one's own "biographical situation" (A. Shuts) and disposed to test any suggestion from other researchers unbiassedly.

Social anthropology as a discipline which takes shape in the second half of the 19th century together with the development of theoretical approach to simple preliterate societies combines two mindsets: longing for a dialogue for

the sake of objective knowledge and longing for establishing social relations for the sake of mutual understanding and intersubjective knowledge. Social anthropology focuses on representatives of other cultures (simple societies), that are the objects of social studies and simultaneously the participants of interpersonal communications (subjects of particular world views and life attitudes). However, goals and ideological basis of this communication change over time, as well as a socio-anthropological vision of simple societies and their members.

II. THE IDEA OF "PRIMITIVE" OTHERS

Throughout the history of social anthropology, the meaning of intercultural dialogue was not established once and for all and neither was the extent of anthropologist's involvement in other cultural environment under study. For a long time in ethnological field studies there dominated a model of "the Lone Ethnographer" [2], who was more oriented on subject-object relations with native people. Members of the tribes could tell about themselves, share their recipes of living, but they could not cancel theoretical and psychological distance, existed between them and Western observers, since the observers regarded them as belonging to a so called "primitive" type of society in comparison to "the advanced" one.

"Primitive" societies were initially marked as outdated, left in the past for any modern civilization which has a state system, an urban way of life, written culture and differentiated economic order. The concept of "primitive" society contains the color of "simplicity" that loses in many ways to complexity of contemporary social reality. "The primitive" implies "the other" that can be recognized as something familiar, though undeveloped, embryonic, related to the "childhood" of any civilization [3]. In this regard a complex contemporary thought (aimed at demystifying the world, analytical interpretation of symbolic arrangements) has nothing to do with primitive thinking that multiplies the essences and tends to be fixed on anthropomorphic analogies, guided by irrational fears and indifferent to objective reality.

According to evolutionist anthropologists "primitive" thinking is a sample of naive/archaic perception of the world,

that is different from civilized thought, – disciplined and effective in gaining positive knowledge. A member of simple society is emotionally and ideologically in tune with his/her natural environment, relies on the branched system of kinship (including kinship with a totem animal or plant, kinship with this or that social group), exists in the time of permanent recurrence of events, cycle movement of seasons.

During intercultural interaction an anthropologist acted as an expert, a person of knowledge, who contrasted sadly with aborigines and their way of life. Aborigines could teach Western people nothing new, they just give information to justify the anthropologists' ideas about social progress and different stages of human development through time. The communication between social anthropologists and natives, if it was at all, was not a dialogue in its proper sense. Western guests were occupied with gathering data to fit their scientific blueprints. They did not treat the representatives of other cultures as equal partners, capable of producing fruitful ideas, but only as bearers of exotic way of life with its archaic stereotypes and beliefs in its full expression ¹.

Knowledge about "primitive" cultures either contributed to political resources of running the "primitive" others, or confirmed the progressive schemas of historic development of human mind, whereas daily habits of simple societies served as an eloquent demonstration of human prejudices in their unreduced forms.

III. THE IDEA OF COMPLICATED OTHERS

The attitude towards simple societies altered when "naïve" thought and "primitive" cultures were recognized as having their own logics and justified ways of living, comparable with ones in contemporary societies. Instead of talking with people at the early stages of historical development, social anthropology initiated a dialogue with representatives of other cultural worlds, whose self-expression and perception of environment were drastically different from familiar modes of cognitive experience, but at the same time regarded as justified and original. Instead of searching for the "primitive" predecessors of civilized people, social anthropologists were engaged in looking for a full subject of a dialogue, who cognized the world, produces interesting ideas, images, longs for rich and real life. In this case the other is one who can be listened to by researchers not only for the sake of objective knowledge, but for the sake of anthropologists' self-development and self-knowledge. The "primitive" other could trouble the enlightened mind and provoke one to defend oneself from false beliefs. The complicated other encouraged a rational subject of Western civilization to deal with things which were difficult to comprehend from habitual point of view and which required that a researcher should surmount the limits and prejudices of one's own culture.

¹ More often than not evolutionist anthropologists got their data indirectly from travelers and missionaries in order to build their picture of historical movement.

The complicated character of simple societies comes to the fore when social anthropologists stop assessing socio-cultural differences within progressive scale, where familiar values and ideals of Western civilization are grasped as a starting point of reference. Social anthropology rediscovers simple societies, finding in their artifacts a creative mind no less inventive than "civilized" person's intelligence. In this sense the other appears with his/her unique ways of arranging information and dealing with social/natural environment. In order to see the other as other, social anthropologists have to be interested in routines and worldviews, different from their cultural milieu and at the same time understandable as results of reasonable human activities. Such is C. Levi-Strauss' structuralist approach, that emphasizes a logic of primordial myths [4] and classifications [5]; such is J. Derrida's postmodern method of deconstruction, that points out to impossibility to cut this or that culture to mono-bloc of distinctive essential features [6]. Drawing on the approaches like these, social anthropologists challenge hermeneutical ability of modern person to understand other forms of life "in their own context and on their own terms" [7], investigate the nuances of other languages [8] and complicated systems of kinship [9], pay attention to architectonics of meanings, hidden behind seemingly unsophisticated beliefs of the "primitive" peoples.

The complexity seen in simple societies arises, on the one hand, from communicative barriers between different life worlds, taken as natural by those who were grown in them. Beyond those life worlds people face "unnatural" norms and meanings, which they have to learn from the beginning as part of stock of knowledge inherent to other culture. The task of practicing anthropologist is to overcome the gravitation of "one's own tribe", perceive strange others not as drastic strangers, dangerous to one's stable existence, but as different others, members of their own life worlds, understandable as collective experience of being. This shift from total strangers to interesting others in socio-anthropological discourse enforces scientists to seek translation equivalents and build bridges of understanding between distant cultures. In this sense social anthropologist differs from a naïve tourist, grasping exotic appearance of other cultures, but an attentive participant of intercultural communication, in charge of mutual understanding, in search of common language, expanding the limits of one's experience and knowledge ².

On the other hand, the complex character of simple societies cannot be noticed without contemporary methodologies that allow researchers to analyze deep structures and nets of meanings expressed indirectly in various cultural phenomena. Regarding the others as real others – is a result of exploiting new cognitive strategies which foster the sense of limits, distrust of immediate impressions as well as a need for multilevel interpretation. It is the need for solving difficult questions, conducting thought experiments, psychological exploration of human

² About contemporary trends in global tourism and its influence on intercultural communication look in Olga Chistyakova's paper [10]

mind against other socio-cultural background, that is a hallmark of intellectual and social life of contemporaneity.

IV. THE CRITICAL ATTITUDE OF ANTHROPOLOGIST

Revealing the Other of Western civilization, social anthropologists tends to look critically at their own natural attitudes and norms of existence. That critical look lets them go beyond the limits of their cultural stereotypes and explore “idols of consciousness” (F. Bacon), which cannot be detected by their contemporaries.

The dialogue with other cultures becomes possible when anthropologists leaves the privileged position of representatives of exemplary system of values and social organization. According to American anthropologist A. Kroeber, we need a few centuries before we can fully understand “couvades, totems and taboos of our own culture” [11]. But as for social anthropologists their work on the border of at least two cultures accelerates the process and makes room for questioning close and distant cultural worlds.

In the context of socio-anthropological critical thought, the researchers notice the drawbacks of “civilized” forms of human existence (consumer societies, market economy and individualism) and recognize the possibilities of learning from simple societies. Thus, the way of life, dependent on entertainment industry, is compared to the regime of existence in preliterate cultures, where people take care of “simple things”: being at work, with others, understanding the significance of birth, death, changes in social and existential status (when one becomes adult, married, old).³ Unlike “primitive” people, who know how to adapt to reality physically and emotionally and who were able solve key problems of their existence without sophisticated technical means, a contemporary person is more like a user of complex technologies, which he did not invent and which he cannot reproduce on his/her own. It is in this way S. Diamond speaks about simple societies as “our primitive superiors” [13], or, in other words, they do not suffer from kinds of alienations, typical for complicated forms of social organization.

Though simple societies cannot be regarded as perfect, the rejection of their significance demonstrates the hidden dogmatism of monologue mind, incapable of reasonable and equal conversations with others. In this sense a figure of social anthropologist sets a model of understanding person who is able to comprehend different points of views, go beyond simplified concepts of “ours”/ “strangers”, “the normal”/ “pathological”, be ready to revise one’s own beliefs, develop communicative competences and employ them in non-standard situations. Indirectly anthropological description of life and participation in other cultural world includes an inclination to find and overcome sociocultural limits, and that is a consequence of dialogical communication with concrete others, whose interests and

values are taken into account and appreciated. Intent on understanding and dealing with cultural others, anthropologists direct their criticism to cognitive and emotional immobility of “civilized person”, as well as to shallow existence of social actors of modern times who are unaware of meaningful and structural complexity of social world (being abstracted from others and from themselves).

Actually, anthropologists are in dialogue with different cultural worlds (including their own), demonstrating their hermeneutical openness to novelty and readiness to master another stock of knowledge. The communication they participate in is not only informative, it may change their “natural attitude”, influence their worldview in general. It is in this context that M. Mead suggested to regard any cultural phenomenon not as a new form of the known objects, but as something exceptional and not seen before [14]. The experience of getting in touch with other culture is a kind of “passage” [15] to the wider and more complicated look on the things in general, liberating a person from monocultural “dogmatism”. But at the same time this experience leads to a sympathetic talk with other people, no matter whether they belong to familiar or unfamiliar social milieu.

In order to have dialogue with others, anthropologists are not only supposed to grasp more than one region of meanings (cultural worlds), but also to exist in several temporal dimensions. The first one belongs to the perspective of Western person, who should gather and reconstruct the essential features of another social experience within limited time allotted for research and as far as other culture keeps its intact forms. The anthropologist is required to work, having the demands of his/her culture in mind (economic resources, set periods of scientific production). The second dimension belongs to the inner perspective of the culture in view. In this way the researcher should follow the pace of life accepted in the examined society. The goal is to combine “life worlds”, different tempos of existence – waiting for “key” events, happening in measured time of non-hasty societies, and swiftly live “a whole life within a few years” [16].

V. CONCLUSION

The experience of social anthropology demonstrates that dialogue is possible when its participants are able to detect differences and similarities in their views and life positions. Dialogue presupposes a sense of borders, gravitation of distances and possibilities of transcending them. If initially social anthropology tried to embed simple societies in simplified schemes of social development, later on it starts seeking the adequate ways of describing the others as part and parcel of the complex universe of meanings. This way understanding of other cultures, as well as a dialogue with them, is a process with open horizons.

The problems of finding common language with others (and having control over others) is transformed in socio-anthropological discourse into the problem of detecting and understanding the real others, whose presence is important as a sign of infinite possibilities of shaping the human world.

³ J-P Sartre in the middle of the XX century described the man’s fundamental situation: being in the world, at work, with others and being mortal [12]

Today social anthropology tries not to miss the other and exhibits diverse mindsets, value orientations, systems of expressions and meanings behind daily routines. In the world, where the borders between cultural worlds are blurred because of mass culture clichés and simple societies are integrated in industrial civilization, social anthropology may give hope that at least intellectual travels to other cultural worlds are still possible.

Meanwhile the history of socio-anthropological literature demonstrates the fact that understanding the Other does not reduce to all euphoria from meeting, revelation, wonder, accompanied interpersonal relations. A real talk with potential other may be nothing more than inconspicuous, ordinary enterprise, a practice of translation and clarification of meanings. A sense of exceptional event, a dialogue, may appear after a while, when individual figure of other will point out to a whole life world with its own “rules of the game”, limits and chances, traditions and values. The event of meeting and dialogue may come to mind retrospectively, as the event of interaction between two worlds, which in daily routine are in “unfolded” or “dissipated” state. They are recovered and revealed under a focused and interested look, within a longing for a meaningful Other.

A dialogue with others in its proper sense cannot be reduced to an immediate negotiation process, but covers the time of mental appeal to the other, hermeneutical exploration, the process of reflection on the concrete event against the background of cultural and scientific knowledge. In other words, it includes aspirations and intellectual preparation, which precede the real speech situation, as well as understanding of meanings, revealed after the communication took place.

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