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Feminism, Feminist Anthropology, and Reflexive Anthropology

Introduction

Feminist anthropology, frequently unfairly considered a late-comer in anthropology, the theoretical input of which in reflexive ethnography remains small, breaks down into many discourses linked with one assumption - namely that the fact of being a woman considerably influences the research process. It is one of the most interesting issues that have appeared as a result of a revision of cognitive ideals in "the science of man" thanks to the ongoing process of the emancipation of female experience under the aegis of postmodernism. Yet, feminist theory often remains in the shadow or on the margin of academic debates about the concept of reflexivity in social sciences. Despite this tendency, I would like to focus on the input of feminist anthropology in the reflexivisation of anthropological expertise.

I would like (following Jürgen Habermas) to assume the most general definition of reflection, considering anthropologist reflexivity as an attempt to understand the role that presuppositions, prejudice, research methodology, and data silently approved by the subject, play in his/her cognitive process, and, in the end, in the result of the research, i.e. ethnographic description. What I call "meta-anthropology" is an autonomous discourse, dealing with theoretical reflection on a problem of producing anthropological knowledge, and on its ideological and historical foundations in terms of the determinants of anthropologist cognition, the dynamics of its changeability, and its influence on changes in the theory, methodology, and epistemology of this science. By "discourse" I mean its basic sense in the theory of culture, "a domain of production and circulation of rule-governed statements" (Mills 7–8).

In cultural anthropology, reflection theory has become a discourse correlated with meta-anthropology. I employ this term to describe a peculiar trend, developed and practiced in American anthropology, looking for a key to the understanding of anthropological knowledge, in particular conditioning describing research practice in various historical situations and cultural contexts" (Lubaś 13). Both in Polish and foreign anthropological texts this discourse frequently functions as "experimentalism", "new criticism"

or simply "postmodern anthropology". In this article I would like to outline the role of feminism and feminist anthropology in shaping the main views of reflection theory.

I shall start by outlining the development of feminist anthropology. I will try to introduce its evolving theoretical objectives, together with the peculiarity of a feminist approach to social studies. Then, as I move towards feminist reflection and its significance in anthropological discourse, I would like to list those issues that feminist critics consider to be determinants of anthropological cognition and constraints on anthropological knowledge. The idea of a "strong reflection" developed in feminism and "standpoint theory", regaining possession of locality, situationism, and perspectivism of all the scientific knowledge, most importantly cultural studies. Finally, I will pose questions about the epistemological implications that gender can have for ethnographic research.

Beginning, development and changeable objectives

A brief look at the history of feminist anthropology makes it possible to follow the changing objectives and strategies of women's writing about culture. In the context of issues raised in this article, it will make it possible to determine the moment in which feminist antropology started to pose interesting questions about the nature of the female research experience and the difference between the "predominantly" male and female epistemology in the social sciences.

Feminist anthropology appeared on the academic scene about fourty years ago, in the middle of the 1970s. Initially, it drew inspiration not only from the women's movement of the late 1960s, but also from the writing of such anthropologists as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, who highlighted women's role in culture. The following names of pioneering "feminist" critics are frequently mentioned: Elsie Clews Parson, Hortense Powdermaker, Zora Neal Hurston, and Ruth Landes.

The first authors in the field stray from the scientific conventions of their times: they research small, exotic, primitive cultures, trying to link the observations regarding female experience in foreign cultures with their own experience in their own cultures. As Ellen Lewin writes, "Curiosity about the Other' was filtered through a sense that the problems facing women in the West were urgent, and that the more banal versions of cultural relativism could no longer be used to disguise their significance" (Lewin 1). Thus at the same time, without straying from the traditional anthropological assumption about the historical changeability and relativity of cultural forms of human life, the first generation of feminist critics assumed "the existence of fundamental commonalities between women across cultural boundaries" (Lewin 1).

Thus, the first field of feminist anthropological research was formed. It was an attempt (dictated by a strong belief that in different world cultures women's voices were subordinated and silenced) to make women visible thanks to ethnography. However, in the 1970s, as a result of the publication of the first research results, "female anthropology" (as it should be called) developed intellectually and assumed a more important position in academia. In the background there appeared feminist interventions in the academic practice of marginalization and infantilization of women who wanted to pursue a career in anthropology (Behar 7–10).

The situation changed in 1970, when Peggy Golde edited *Women in the Field*, a groundbreaking volume of essays by anthropologists fighting for academic recognition for the discipline that they were developing and making a legitimate scientific field. The problem of the struggle against injustice and inequality experienced by women in many cultures was first raised in the book together with "how being a woman might affect the experience of the anthropologists as they conduct their research in different sorts of settings and in different historical times" (Lewin 9).

In the next few years, two key books were published, which occasioned an avalanche of publications about the inferior role assigned to women in diverse cultures, at the same time drawing attention to the feminist way of practicing social studies with its disparate epistemology.

The first one was *Women, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. It represented a type of research that analyzes different societies and reveals a universal structure of assymetry and the dominance of one sex. As the authors write, "Everywhere we find that women are excluded from certain crucial economic or political activities that their roles as wives and mothers are associated with fewer powers and prerogatives than are the roles of men. It seems fair to say, then, that all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated and although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life" (Rosaldo 3).

The second book, entitled *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, differed slightly from the previous book. Three introductory essays paid less attention to the universal phenomenon of sex assymetry, and raised the issue of how male bias influenced anthropological knowledge, especially in the theory of cultural evolution (Lewin 9). Sally Slocum forwarded a radical critique of the idea that hunting as a male profession constituted the engine of cultural evolution of some societies, and she suggested a radically different reading of the fossil samples (Slocum 12). Kathleen Gough disagreed with the traditional

assumption that the hunter and gatherer society was universally androcentric (Gough 12). What linked different styles of practicing female anthropology, was an attempt to describe experiences from an intercultural perspective, to demonstrate the infinite variety of women's lives, and to stress subordination to the interests of men.

Female anthropology evolves into "gender anthropology" when scholars notice that it is impossible to explain and abolish differences and the assymetry between men and women without employing general categories of distinction that function in culture and through culture. It is about the category of "gender", which is not an equivalent of "sex", a category which made a remarkable career in the 1980s and 1990s in cultural anthropology. Together with the basic assumption of the cultural anthropology of gender that "gender is a cultural construct", and "men and women, far from being natural objects... are fundamentally cultural constructions" (Moore 71), the whole discipline abandons the program of documenting culturally defined inequalities between the sexes and turns to questions concerning the place of gender "in broader patterns of meaning, interaction and power, not only among those people who are the object of investigation, but among anthropologists themselves" (Lewin 20). The anthropological studies on gender remained under the strong influence of a movement operating within academia, "women's studies" as they are called today. Three decades of existence have enabled gender antropology to distill its identity and, in contrast to postmodern scholars such as Judith Butler or Seyla Benhabib, who are more philosophically inclined, to stay close to concrete cultural studies practiced under the aegis of interpretavism. It is within anthropological studies of gender, as in the first years of existence of the "anthropology of women", that revolutionary demands were made – "anthropological knowledge (as well as any other) needs to be conceived as situational and thus set in a concrete dynamics of a research situation" (Lewin 17). Feminists active in the field of anthropology claimed forcefully that "men's relatively greater power shapes the field encounter and influences its later ethnographic representation" (Lewin 18). This is an approach to the question of feminist reflexivity and other determinants of anthropological knowledge that feminist thought turns to.

Since the 1980s we can officially speak of feminist anthropology, which includes all the interventionist discourses and approaches to the issue of women in culture. Studies carried out in this field are diversified. In terms of theory, feminist scholars try to deconstruct the traditional division between the insider and the outsider, pointing out that becoming completely assimilated in a foreign culture is impossible. Frequently, feminists study the relation between the anthropologist and the subject of research, proposing experimental study techniques and narrative strategies which reflect the specificity of this interaction.

At the same time, compared to its previous form, feminist anthropology insists on the "positionality of knowledge" and on the influence of this factor on ethnographic writing and anthropological knowledge. Numerous scholars are concerned with the epistemology of cultural anthropology and strive to undermine the dogma of objectivity by analyzing the ways in which anthropology constructs its object of cognition (Wolf). Thus feminists bring their approach to the debate over culturally determined knowledge and its scientific representation. They offer a programme of endowing anthropology with an element of emotion and intimacy between the participants of the experiment, more emotional and experimental ways of writing about culture, and finally, fuller understanding of the fact that anthropology constructs and modulates its subjects, data and representations, based on the category of gender in which contemporary feminist anthropology, according to Helen Callaway, sees "both a cultural construction and a social relation" (Callaway 29).

Feminist approach to social sciences

It would be difficult to find a bigger blunder about militant feminist anthropologists than that committed by James Clifford. In the introduction to *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Writing Ethnography*, a book which he co-edited with George Marcus, he writes, "Feminism had not contributed much to the theoretical analysis of ethnographies as texts" (Clifford 20). It is not difficult to invalidate this rather hasty thesis.

Feminist critique of social sciences is based on the assumption that women are excluded from the process of constructing knowledge. Their experience should be admitted to the process, and research should be done from the female point of view. The main methodological assumption is to acknowledge the authority of subjective experience, as well as experiential knowledge as an important research category. Feminist scholars argue that woman not only can be a valuable field of study, but also a valid subject.

Feminism battles against particular versions of positivism and its epistemology, and feminists argue that positivism constitutes a scientific ideology according to which "there is only one logic of science, to which any intellectual activity aspiring to the title of science' must conform" (Neuman 56). Such a model of science is based on the idea of separating fact from value, as well as on the formal separation between the subject and the object. Objective reality exists regardless of the individual perspective, and free access is only admitted to the researcher. Feminist perspectives in the social sciences question the answers to epistemological questions given by positivism. Who can possess knowledge? How can it be gained? What is knowledge? The answer is that social actors dispose of diverse knowledge, gained in different ways, and this knowledge should be admitted.

Feminism is a trend which radicalizes the commandment of reflexivity, especially popular in sociology, as it assumes that traditional objectivity in the positivist sense must turn into "feminist objectivity", which means "situated knowledge". For feminist scholars, the nature of knowledge is changing: knowledge is always "partial, situated, subjective, enmeshed in power relations, and relational" (Hesse-Biber 13). Thus research entirely devoid of social influence or personal elements is a pipe dream. Each piece of research is situated in a historical and social context: social convictions, ideologies, traditions, social structure, and other numerous factors influence research in many different ways. The idea of feminist objectivity is based on the assumption that each scholar brings certain social influences into the research; thus his objectivity functions only within the limited scope of his beliefs and experiences.

We should probably remember that the main commandment of reflexivity is not only an encouragement to realize various cultural determinants of how we look at cultural reality and how it is represented in scientific discourse. It is also an appeal to scientists to reveal the limitations of their own position in their research. In the following section I would like to demonstrate that these demands are at the centre of feminist epistemology and form the basis of the program of feminist anthropology, making it the most advanced discourse, the influence of which on reflexivity in anthropology cannot be overrated.

A feminist perspective is social studies not only encourages one to examine the way a particular problem has been researched, but also why a particular problem has been chosen (Hesse-Biber 13). This approach is connected with the struggle over a notion of objectivity, which becomes more powerful thanks to the discovery of various cultural determinants and limitations in anthropological cognition. Sandra Harding, who has been working on strong objectivity in the feminist sense, argues that revealing the whole history, the beliefs and convictions of the researcher on every stage of the experiment, and analyzing both the object and the subject of the experiment, leads to an increase in objectivity. It is one of the main strands in feminist standpoint theory, and it will be examined in the next part of this essay.

Standpoint Theory and reflexivity radicalisation

Standpoint theory plays an important role in feminist anthropology. Its main assumption is that society creates various standpoints from which social life is experienced. This idea is based on the Hegelian concept of the struggle between masters and slaves, according to which the latter develop in their consciousness a double perspective, based on the experience of exclusion and oppression at the hands of their masters, and on the perspective of the oppressors that they develop in order to survive. Analyzing

this mechanism, feminists demand that attention be paid to the marginalized viewpoint – women's viewpoint – in the epistemology of all cultural studies. They claim that "using also the marginalized position as a point of departure, the objectivity of scientific gaze becomes maximilized, since it subjects to research non-obvious fields" (Hesse-Biber 16).

The point of departure for standpoint theory is a strong belief that in a society stratified by various factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and political views, which shape cultural structure itself, the activity of groups situated on the top and at the bottom of the hierarchy organizes and marks the boundaries of how we think about ourselves and the surrounding world (Harding 43). However, actions of those from the bottom of the hierarchy can also generate reflections in order to examine the experience of all the subjects and highlight those relations between people that have so far been unnoticed. Standpoint theory assumes that the knowledge of an individual is pervaded with history and social life. That is why "women's perspective discredits sociology's claims that to constitute objective knowledge is feasible independently of the position of the researcher" (Harding 45). The thesis that science can erase the "fingerprints" found in every process of knowledge production should be treated as an illusion, the sources of which are historically identifiable.

For empirical epistemology the subject of knowledge must have a number of characteristics. For instance, it must be historically and culturally included or invisible, because by definition knowledge is universal. Furthermore, the scientific subject must be of a different kind from the studied object: he/she must be situated in time and space; thus he/she must transcend history since it assumes that knowledge is gained individually, and not by culturally specific society and subgroups of a particular social group and gender or race. In standpoint theory, subjects of research are constructed differently: they are first and foremost visible and embodied, their knowledge coming from unique experiences and not from universal abstract examination. As the subjects of research are socially situated and embodied, they do not differ from the objects of research. The same social forces that shape the subject constitute the object and vice versa. Thus, it can be stated that knowledge is produced by societies and communities and not individuals. The subjects of knowledge remain heterogenous, diverse, contradictory, and incoherent. The knowledge that they represent comes from the different ways in which they are located in society.

It seems that this theory refers to and creates stronger standards of objectivity. Harding writes that "strong objectivity requires that the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical causal plane as the objects of knowledge. Thus strong objectivity requires what we can think of as 'strong reflexivity'" (Harding 55). This argument is based on the assumption that "widely held beliefs function as evidence at every stage

of scientific inquiry: in the selection of problems, formation of hypotheses, design of research, collection of data, interpretation and sorting of data, decisions about when to stop research, the way the results of research are reported, etc" (Harding 55). The subject of knowledge must be considered one of the objects of knowledge.

As Hesse-Biber, Lackenby, and Yaiser explain, strong reflexivity is "a process through which the researchers critically look at their cognitive schemata or the frames which encompass their social location" (Hesse-Biber 219). Feminist reflexivity does not differ in this respect from various definitions of reflexivity in contemporary anthropological theory. They demand enhancing reflection, so that by questioning the assumptions and values that social scholars bring in their research, the influence that they have on the research process, and finally, how the scholar's position may influence the subjects we do not try to achieve a wider range of objectivity. Sandra Harding's program of objectivity enhanced with reflection, as a counterargument for critics of feminist anthropology who accuse her of outrageously glorifying subjectivism, is an exception here. Thus a closer relationship with subjects, based on trust and emotions, or a more ethical one, should be reached, following the feminist credo "Do research for people, not on people" (Schenk-Sandbergen 270–1).

Implications of feminist anthropology for ethnography

What kind of material could this reflexivized methodology (which takes into account the subject's political and social situation as well as his/her gender) bring? How is it different from anthropological methodology which, as feminists ironically remark, is attached to the model of objective scientific studies based on "the myth of the researcher as any person, without gender, personality, or historical location, who would objectively produce the same findings as any other person" (Warren 8).

This new quality will be a deliberate presence (in the sense of "openness"), unprecedented in post-positivist anthropology, of subjective factors in feminist ethnographies, factors such as "age, social class, race, ethnicity, and gender" (Schenk-Sandbergen 268). This presence comes from a feminist assumption that these factors "shape access to the field, the collection of data, and the interpretation of the findings" (Schenk-Sandbergen 269). Convinced of the exploitation and misunderstanding of the real needs of anthropology as an objective science, free from judgment, observing foreign cultures from a distance, feminists do not seek to eliminate any cultural, social, historical, or political "views" of the subject, but they aim to incorporate them into their own model of ethnographic studies. The researcher's personal experience, as Bell writes, the exposition of "emotionally charged moments" of ethnography, during "emotionally charged

moments in which the jigsaw pieces of another culture arrange themselves with clarity, only to defy description, to be beyond scientific discourse" (Bell 29), is also part of these subjective elements.

In the final part of this article, I would like to examine the way in which feminists explain the role of gender in ethnography. I will try to answer the question in what sense it can be treated as a determinant of anthropological cognition unveiled by feminist reflexivity.

First, as Bell points out, female anthropologists are more conscious of their gender than men; that is why they are able to "explore culture as complex collages of intersecting interests of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality" (Bell 2). In the traditional subject of gender relations women are seen as researchers with knowledge that is not worse than men's, "whose observations in the matter are for the most part presented as a norm" (Bell 2), and who are not as sensitive to the question of gender difference and differences in perceiving cultural reality. Moreover, as we learn from Cesara (15) and Golde (67–9), field researchers are allowed to cross local boundaries of gender. Rohrlih-Leavitt, Sykes and Weatherford, and Cesara write that, thanks to their developed emotional sphere, women may have a better understanding of the field situation (Rohrlich et al 17). A female anthropologist has a better access to the world of women in a foreign culture thanks to her ability to avoid restrictions of patriarchal dominance (Wax).

Against the positivist convention of picturing the scientific subject as perfectly abstracted and historically unsituated, and simultaneously freely participating in foreign cultures, feminists argue that, as there is no possibility of an ungendered life, the same applies to a text or to sociological research (Callaway 30). In anthropology, this conclusion refers to "engendering knowledge" (8–12), as Pat Caplan calls the project of studying another community or society, containing an element of scrupulous analysis carried out by the researcher on himself/herself as a gendered subject.

The category of gender as one of the most important and inalienable determinants of anthropological cognition is quite obvious but is still ignored by mainstream scholars. As I have demonstrated, gender may make field work both easier or more difficult. If we look at Kirsten's Hastrup's book, *A Place Apart*, which presents research that she carried out in Iceland, we learn that at first she was met with unfriendliness, and then violence, for ignoring the territorial rules connected with gender (95–99). By the way, this violence has brought key results for her work, as Helen Callaway reminds us (Callaway 31).

To conclude, in this essay I have demonstrated the role of feminist anthropology in shaping critical self-awareness in cultural anthropology, considered as a growing

realization among scholars that cognition in social sciences (especially in cultural anthropology) is subject to various constraints and conditioning, including culture. The radical problematization of perspectivism and of the "positionality" of knowledge has taken place thanks to feminist reflexivity and revisions made to the anthropological tradition. Feminists should be given special credit for linking perspectivism and positionality of knowledge with gender. They attach much importance to this issue, arguing that the epistemology of social research that they propose is not to focus on the ideal of universal truth reached in objectified intellectual procedure, but is based on an experiencing subject – a scholar who does not hide his/her cultural burden that he/she brings, and rather emphasizing it. The knowledge of women, as feminist theorists claim, is alway partial and situational, limited to occupied space and standpoint. That is why feminist anthropology demands the posing of questions about the influence of gender on the form of cultural studies, field research, and the interpretation of data. Feminists give a number of significant answers, which point to differences both in the cultural problematization of gender and in research determinants imposed by the category of gender in return.

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