

Social Imaginaries of
the State and Central
Authority in Polish
Highland Villages,
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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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Originally published in Polish, 2008, entitled *Wyobrażenia o państwie i władzy we wsiach nowotarskich 1999-2005*

This present edition published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0026-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0026-6

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INTRODUCTION

TRANSLATED BY TOMASZ WIŚNIEWSKI

The book presents the results of the fieldwork conducted at the beginning of the 21st century in the south of Poland in the mountainous region of Podhale. This region, according to the voting polls, has shown continuous high support for right-wing conservative political parties (see: pkw.gov.pl). The realised research project sheds some light on this phenomenon. It also aims to explain the reasons for the discontent of the rural communities with the direction of changes that had been implemented in the 90s.

The project was conducted using ethnography, a technique adequate for the rural environment, where surveys and questionnaires often yield unreliable results. The goal of the project was to recognise the local common sense and imaginaries about the state, government authorities, politics and democracy. The analysis and subsequent interpretation of the data gathered during fieldwork reveals a vision of a state that is deeply rooted in a multi-generational experience of organising labour on a peasant agricultural farm. The perspective of this mode of work organisation was constructed basing on locally used descriptions and comparisons – it is thus a theoretical model stemming from the ethnographic method and thus possesses a metapragmatic character. This model allows for explaining why the introduction of liberal democracy in the 90s resulted in grass-roots criticism that manifested itself in complaints and profanities in rural communities and explains the right-wing voting preferences.

The fieldwork materials that provide arguments for the thesis about this ‘agriculturally-grounded’ way of thinking about politics made it possible to critically approach the theory that the post-transformational imaginaries about the state and the government result from the so-called post-communist or post-socialist mentality (sometimes referred to in short as *homo sovieticus*). The data gathered in this book thus provides evidence to support the thesis of a post-peasant, or a post-agrarian character of the rural imaginaries. (The critique of the term ‘post-communist mentality’ is further outlaid in my article published in „Ethnologia Europea” 2011, 41:2).

The book, which I hereby present to the Anglophone reader, was published in Poland in 2008. Since then I have thought through and

discussed some of the issues presented here. If I was to write this book today, I would probably steer from such a sharp distinction between the rural and urban discourses, and focus more on their interconnectedness instead. Currently, I have been continuing the research on Podhale, realising a new research project which focuses on the relationship between the information presented by the media and the common-sense knowledge. When I trace the local ways of making use of the media information, I am mostly interested in its use in constructing individual political identifications. The media discourse intersects with the local imaginaries, which on the one hand play a filtering role, and on the other hand become constantly reshaped by the flow of new information. The research process thus – similarly to the process of creating political identifications – always remain open projects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Anna Zadrożyńska – my research supervisor and promoter; the person that had shaped my understanding of ethnology and has supported my research and writing endeavours with great engagement.

I would also like to thank the students of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology (IECA) at the University of Warsaw, who have participated in the research project described in this book with enormous passion, vast knowledge, and emotional and intellectual commitment.

My thanks go to Justyna Jasionowska – the head of administration of the IECA - for her commitment to work for the Institute and for many years of friendship. I would like to thank also Joanna Koźmińska – the head of the library of the IECA – for her help in reaching the newest, Anglophone readings and for her work on the library collection that rises to the challenges of the modern world

And last but not least, I would like to express my great gratitude to my family for their love and support.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Ethnology and politics

When social protests erupt, some voices can be heard in the public political debate which clearly are out of place. They are often rich in slangy or plain vulgar expressions. It is not only their wording that sounds blatant to the educated recipient, but also their content usually seems incorrect, crude, or obsolescent. It is hard to assume that both the language and the message are isolated outbursts stemming from a stressful situation of protest. At the market or on the bus or train, one often hears in passing scraps of conversations about politics, in which opinions like this can be heard:

There's no one in charge of this country!;
The government is not up to the task at all!;
We know who really rules Poland!;
Those MPs, they need to be chased out!;
How do I know what these elections are for?!

Such things are said not only in situations of social protest, but are a standard feature of casual conversations about politics outside the mainstream of public discourse. It can therefore be assumed that alongside the debate taking place in the Sejm's lobbies, in television and radio studios, and on the pages of newspapers and periodicals, an alternative debate goes on that is hidden from the eye of the media. It consists of millions of everyday conversations about politics, pre-election speculations, and comments on ideas disseminated through the media.

Informal discussions on politics vary. There is the casual exchange of views among the educated urban elites and that of the poorly educated rural population. That the casualness of comment is universal was shown to be an illusion by Clifford Geertz (1993, 83–84), who revealed its cultural dependence. The casual conversations on politics by educated people are fundamentally different from the talk of the poorly educated, and there is no need to evoke the sitcom about the “Kiepski” family,

(reminiscent of the American sitcom “Married... with children”) to realise this.

The public debate is led by the “dominant classes” (Bourdieu 1996, 382). The casual discourse of the “working classes” (Bourdieu 1996, 418) comes briefly to the surface of the public discourse only in situations of conflict, while on a daily basis it forms an under-the-surface stream of complaints about the authorities and the state. Its covert nature is emphasized by the notion of “hidden transcript” proposed by James Scott (1992, 58).¹ The “hidden transcript” does not fit into the mainstream of public discourse, largely because it is couched in different language, is a different form of expression within a different convention.

Sociological public-opinion polls obviously embrace all segments of the society. People who would never have had the opportunity to present their opinions on the public forum can, thanks to survey techniques, appear as a percentage of the aggregate preference for a particular political party. However, it is a poor form of participation in the public debate. Many social-science scholars have of course produced in-depth studies describing shifts in public opinion in an effort to determine the factors shaping it. An example of such a study is *Budowanie demokracji* [Building Democracy] by M. Grabowska and T. Szawiel (2003), where the authors present the level of acceptance for democratic procedures in the 1990s, the political transformation and democratic policies. The opinions are broken down into percentages. Connotations linked with the concept of democracy were examined by asking the respondents to choose one of the proposed answers phrased in language used by the creator of the questionnaire. Consequently, even so insightful a study leaves very little scope of expression on the topic of politics to people who do not use that language.

From the ethnologist’s vantage point, one can conclude that the sociological polling techniques place the researcher in an authoritative position. In his famous essay on ethnographic authority, James Clifford (1988, 21–54) presents the measures undertaken by anthropologists to reduce the authoritative stance of the researcher both during fieldwork and when composing the report based on the collected materials. These attempts produce varying results with different authors, but anthropological research methods are characterized by a much greater openness not only to the diversity of language, but above all to the diverse ways of perceiving the world.

¹ “We shall use the term hidden transcript to characterize discourse that takes place ‘off stage’ beyond direct observation by power holders” (Scott 1992, 58).

Field studies, which allow ethnology and cultural anthropology to preserve their identity as a discipline (Clifford 1997, 52–91), rely on in-depth open-ended interviews, often simply referred to as conversations, that are given some structure by the researcher's interests or by a questionnaire where the questions need not be asked in any pre-determined order. The result is a voice recording of extensive statements in which the interviewees can use their own expressions, concepts or labels and construct their narratives by themselves. Of course, by asking the questions, the researcher to some extent imposes his/her own point of view, but this kind of imposition is incomparable with a situation when the interviewee can only choose one out of nine responses prepared by the researcher, worded in his language and using expressions that are clear to the creator of the questionnaire but not necessarily to the respondent. As a result, ethnographic fieldwork—"studying them ethnographically—that is under conditions of social intimacy with real informants" (Herzfeld 2001, 296)—gives the interlocutor much greater freedom to present his/her own point of view. An interpretation of the response helps deduce the sense which the words used there had for the respondent. While reducing to some extent the researcher's authoritativeness, this approach not only reveals the different meanings the words have for the interviewees, but also the different "views of the world" (Rapport 2000, 394) hiding behind them.

Research materials collected in this way reveal a completely different outlook on matters of the state, on power, political transformation, and democracy. By reconstructing² the "rural" way of perceiving and describing political matters, the researcher tries to stick to his role of interpreter. We all speak Polish here, both politicians and journalists as well as social-science researchers and their respondents, or, as ethnologists prefer to call them, interviewees. And yet, as the field materials will show, we speak different tongues in which the same words have different meanings. For example, the word democracy in the language of newspaper columns has a completely different meaning than it has in the conversations we had with the inhabitants of villages around Nowy Targ or at the local market. The ethnologist, at home with the discourse of the symbolic elites and familiar with the language of everyday conversations in a rural community, acts as a mediator not only between the two languages but also between the images of the world they represent.

² I will explain why I use the verb "reconstruct" later in this chapter.

Research concepts

It should be emphasized that empirical research in dialogue-based anthropology is not so much about engaging the reality as about the reception of the reality: ways of perceiving it, experiencing it, and participating in it, but, above all, the ways of articulating and expressing it. “The anthropologist, in point of fact, collects interpretations, or to be more precise, gathers interpreted images of the world, its depictions” (Kaniowska 2006, 25). What is interesting from this point of view is not the actual reality of, say, the political and public life of a country, but the ideas people have about it. The point of departure for thus conceived research is the phenomenological attitude of “suspending judgement”. The phenomenological approach has its consequences:

when I come across notions that I sometimes do not share, or those that differ dramatically from “the current state of knowledge” ... I dismiss the issue of their being true or false. I assume, after the prominent practitioners of this approach to “cultural texts”—Bachelard, Jung, Eliade—that the truth of these notions simply consists in the very fact of their existence (Czaja 2005, 173).

In this book I also describe notions that are remote from my own, which I do not identify with and, not insignificantly, which are expressed in language that I do not use. I do not view their truthfulness in terms of whether they give justice to, say, the processes of Poland’s transformation or the functioning of democracy. My intention is not to argue with the “rural” point of view, but to present it in all its diversity; and certainly not to jibe at its ineptness and naiveté, or, conversely, at its signalling deep suspicion. What I intend to show is that very different world-views can be found where one least expects them. The knowledge of these world-views is not supposed to serve their evaluation, but should instead be used for understanding the different points of view and building a consensus, which is a must in a society with universal suffrage.

The concept of “collective representations” (Durkheim 1912; Lévy-Bruhl 1910) has a long tradition in the social sciences. Its brief presentation will help capture the term’s time-variable connotations and discern its different shades of meaning that function today. Starting with the French social scholars from the turn of the twentieth century, it should be noted that Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1910) described representation as “an intellectual or cognitive phenomenon” (Lévy-Bruhl 1926, 23), “the image or idea of an object” (Lévy-Bruhl 1926, 23). He believed that apart from individual representations there are also “collective representations”

(Lévy-Bruhl 1926, 23). He believed tribal peoples' representations to be "mystic" (Lévy-Bruhl 1926, 25) when juxtaposed with "our mentality", as he referred to the way of thinking of contemporaneous Europeans, which—as he wrote in 1910—"ceased to be" (Lévy-Bruhl 1926, 31) mystical. The latter assertion does not seem as obvious today as it did at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Emile Durkheim identified notions with concepts, writing simply: "these notions, too, are real concepts" (1915, 432). He assumed that "[l]ogical thought is made up of concepts" (1915, 432), that "[the concept] is a manner of thinking that, at every moment of time, is fixed and crystallized" (1915, 433). At the same time he underlined their social character, writing that they were "the work of the community" (1915, 434), that "[t]he concepts with which we think are those of our vocabulary" and that "language ... is the product of collective elaboration" (1915). This aspect was emphasized with Durkheim's use of the adjective "collective" in the phrase "product of collective elaboration".

Subsequent works in the field of sociology of knowledge, while bringing descriptions of the process of "the social construction of reality" (Berger and Luckmann 1966), show how world-views are developed and spread in society. They describe the processes of transforming the stream of impressions and experiences into "constructs of thinking" (Schutz 1962, 3), as well as methods of their preservation, validation, and dissemination. Through the processes of typification, generalisation, and idealisation, a socially constructed image of reality is formed which to its users appears to be the reality itself (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

The reflections of anthropologists on this issue centre around the concept of "world-view", functioning in anthropology from the beginning of the twentieth century (Frobenius). It embraces the basic descriptive categories intended to capture the thoughts, feelings and values that make up culturally-conditioned notions of the world which affect human behaviour (Rapport 2000, 394–404). This concept was adopted by many anthropologists in order to emphasize that the researcher who used it was interested in the way people understand the world rather than in the sphere of social activity or social structure. World-view was sometimes contrasted with the term *ethos*, with the assumption that *ethos* refers to its emotional aspect, whereas *eidos* to the cognitive. Usually, however, the term "world-view" combined both of these dimensions and was at times used to contrast the traditional "peasant image of the world" with the modern, urban, cosmopolitan one (cf. Redfield 1956).

A cognitively constructed world-view is man's essential cognitive tool. The need for this construct stems from the human need "to grasp the world of experience as intelligible" (Kołakowski 2001, 2), the "desire to see the world as continuous" (Kołakowski 2001, 4). Such a vision of order was for centuries provided by myths because

[m]yth makes accessible to us a world in which our existence, our thoughts, and our desires, together with that world, are already referred to a non-conditioned order that thereby they can be not only known but also understood (Kołakowski 2001, 118).³

In contemporary culture, the presence of myth is still being noticed. It is inevitable, because

the sheer presence of a specifically human consciousness in the world produces an irremovable mythopoeic energy in culture, while both the bond-creating role of myth in communal life and its integrational functions in organizing personal consciousness, appear irreplaceable, and in particular irreplaceable in favor of beliefs regulated by the criteria of scientific knowledge (Kołakowski 2001, 118).

The human need to experience the world as meaningful and stable cannot be met by science, a system of knowledge constructed methodically but too extensive, too specialized and too complex to serve as a handy tool in the daily confrontation with reality. The role of science is therefore limited mostly to providing concepts and ideas, usually removed from the context of a scientific system, which support a handy quasi-system of common-sense knowledge. The distinction between science and common sense goes back to the opposition in Greek philosophy between *doxa* and *episteme*, where "*doxa*, unlike *episteme*, in the usage of the Sophists to Plato and Aristotle, referred to a world of conjecture, or cognitive illusion" (Czaja 2005, 163), as contrasted with true knowledge resulting from rational, methodical cognition. Common-sense thinking overcomes this sharp contrast.

In common-sense thinking, science is not the polar opposite of myth because it is itself conceived of as part of it. Elements of scientific language get into its scope after being subjected to mythological

³ To account for my using the word myth, let me evoke the definition proposed by Maria Janion, who describes myth as "a set of world-views reaching beyond the rational layers of consciousness and forming a pattern where one can not only sense its archaic character, but also its current impact, obviously playing more on the impulses of imagination than evoking rational thinking" (Janion 1991, 188).

processing. After such treatment, the so-called “scientific outlook” is easily assimilated by the structures of mythical thinking (Czaja 2005, 381).

Common-sense thinking has been explained and characterized in different ways. One way of looking at it, and the most popular in anthropology, is presented in Clifford Geertz (1993), where he defined common sense as “a cultural system, though not usually a very tightly integrated one” (1993, 76), which is characterized by “naturalness”, “practicalness”, “thinness”, “immethodicalness”, and “accessibleness” (1993, 85). The author of *Local Knowledge* emphasized that there is a diversity of common senses. Basing on anthropological examples, he pointed to the cultural dependence of common sense, which we have come to consider as universal in its obviousness. What is more, he disputed the claim that common sense is “what the mind cleared of cant spontaneously apprehends” (Geertz 1993, 84) directly from the experience. He was of the opinion that it is “what the mind filled with presuppositions ... concludes” (1993, 84) that forms the image of the experience, making it meaningful. Common-sense thinking is “an interpretation of the immediacies of experience, a gloss on them” (1993, 76). The result is a system, like other subsystems of culture, produced during the historical process (Geertz 1993, 76), which in turn makes it “heterogeneous” (Geertz 1993, 92). Its components, stemming from different incompatible systems of knowledge, beliefs and ideas, when combined through the work of imagination, create a “pseudo-homogeneous” (Niżnik 1991, 164) picture of reality, appealing to its users with its consistency, and irritating philosophers with its lack of methodical ability (Hołówka 1986, 175).

The representations making up the shared common-sense picture of reality should not be viewed as insignificant confabulations; according to Rabinow (1984, 234), “representations are social facts”. Representations and images do not point in the direction of individual fantasies, but rather to “collective imagination”, which today has evolved into a “collective social fact” (Appadurai 1996, 5) and is considered to be an essential component of the cognitive process:

no longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility (Appadurai 1996, 31).

Imaginative component is really well expressed in Charles Taylor notion “modern social imaginaries” (Taylor 2004).

By social imaginary I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations. ... I adopt the term imaginary because my focus is on the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but it is carried in images, stories and legends. ... The social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy (Taylor 2004, 23).

World-views are modified by external factors, they change under the influence of cultural interchange connected with the migration of people and information. They are also transformed through historic processes. Describing the transformation of ideas functioning in philosophy, and more broadly in scholarship and art, lies in the domain of the history of ideas (Foucault 1972, 137–38).⁴ Departing from its assumptions, Michel Foucault proposed a new approach which he called “archaeology of knowledge” that involves “an abandonment of the history of ideas, a systematic rejection of its postulates and procedures” (1972, 138).⁵ The historian of ideas sifts through the layers of ideas of subsequent epochs. The ethnologist lacks the historian’s apparatus necessary to embark on such a foray into the world of past ideas, yet finds it difficult to resist the temptation to get immersed in the past in order to capture the contents that found their way into the local rural discourse starting from the late nineteenth century. It is certainly not possible to point to regular ideological layers in anthropological materials collected during field studies. Their analysis returns a mixture of various ideas.

⁴ The history of ideas “follows the genesis, which, on the basis of received or acquired representations, gives birth to systems and *œuvres*” (Foucault 1972, 137).

⁵ “Archaeology tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourses; but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules” (Foucault 1972, 138). “Archaeology describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive” (Foucault 1972, 131). “[A]rchive defines a particular level: that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated. ... It is the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (Foucault 1972, 130).

This “free blend of heterogeneous elements” (Czaja 2005, 373) is aptly described by Dariusz Czaja in his study on everyday ideas about the soul:

In this matter ... there function dozens of common-sense “theories” which, without any concern for cohesion or consistency, present their views on the nature of the soul. Depending on the needs, this or that component of the tradition is—mostly unwittingly—brought to life and is often supplemented with the users’ own terminological innovations (Czaja 2005, 372).

In the everyday discourse concerning the soul that is reconstructed here one can easily notice the phenomenon of “glosolalia”. The informants use language belonging to different traditions and deriving from numerous, often distant, historical layers. ... When constructing its knowledge about the soul the common-sense mind works precisely as the Lévi-Strauss *bricoleur*, gluing together themes and motifs from different orders, often incompatible with one another (Czaja 2005, 373).

When writing about contemporary images one cannot ignore the impact of the media, “the force that media representations carry in the construction of contemporary imaginations, identities, and power relations” (Herzfeld 2001, 294). Without doubt, media reporting, by turning reality into “narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” (Appadurai 1996, 35), supply people with components for constructing their own images, and not only those of the authorities and the state. The media, especially in their coverage of political events, go to great lengths to convey “the sense of ‘objectivity’ [and use] of the rhetoric creates the illusion of bedrock factuality” (Herzfeld 2001, 295). These measures are geared to imposing on the public the vision of reality adopted by the programme’s producers. And yet, Herzfeld stresses, the viewers “may interpret television content quite differently than its creators intended” (2001, 301). As a result, even though media reporting has a broad reach and one would think greatly shapes the viewers’ perception of the reality, it is always received locally and is superimposed on their previous views.

As was said above, social imaginaries are not individual confabulations without consequence for social life and culture. On the contrary, they appear to have a great impact. Sets of them that combine into “political myths” (Wrzesiński 1994, 22) are a powerful weapon for those trying to win power, and a useful tool of those holding power (Wrzesiński 1994, 22). One can point here to the still living “myth of the Good Emperor”, “the myth of the national power of the Polish people”, and many others, still functioning today, as is borne out by the Nowy Targ materials.

An exceptional example of the dark power of political myths has been the impact, tragic in its aftermath, of “the Serbian political ethno-myth”, which drove its proponents to cruelty, ruthless violence and bloodshed (Čolović 2002). Analysing the Serbian example, the author of *The Politics of Symbols in Serbia* (2002) says that while “in critical periods of social life” political myths

occupy a far greater expanse of public communication than in periods of relative stability. However, they are not created by crisis nor do they disappear with it (Čolović 2002, 81).

With all their instability and changeability, world-views and myths reveal surprisingly consistent continuity, which was stressed not only by Fernand Braudel.

From reflections on the power of imaginaries it is time to pass on to a presentation of their means of expression. Representations are largely held, shaped and revealed in discourse. Hence, as Ricoeur (1976) said, any discourse is realised as an event, any discourse is understood as meaning. World-views, imaginaries are meanings, senses transmitted through discourse. They are not volatile like speech acts, therefore “what we wish to understand is not an event, i.e. it is not something transient but it is meaningful, something lasting”. Consequently, “discourse [is an] event plus sense” (Ricoeur 1976, 16). This statement by Ricoeur is the basis of my definition of discourse, according to which discourse means utterances (“speech events”) and the world-views revealed through them (“sense”). The issue of how far statements indeed reveal images will be tackled further in this discussion.

The great popularity of the category of “discourse” in the humanities has resulted in a multitude of interpretations of the term and proposed methods of its analysis. The concept is often used in the plural; there is talk of discourses that differ from one another and can be classified, thematic classification being one of the options. A distinction that proved very useful in the interpretation of the Nowy Targ interviews was that introduced by Czyżewski, Kowalski, and Piotrowski, who defined “public discourse” as “any statements that are available in the public domain” (1997, 11); “discourse of politics” as “that part of public discourse which embraces statements of politicians made within the roles assigned to them in the framework of political institutions” (1997, 18); and casual conversations as “discourse about politics” (1997, 19).

I use these terms in this study, and I supplement the key term, “discourse about politics”, with two adjectives: rural and local. These refer me to another classification of discourses which could be called class-based, if as

the differentiating factor one adopted “class *habitus*” (Bourdieu 1996, 437). A differentiating *habitus*⁶ allows us to separate “the working classes” (e.g. Bourdieu 1996, 186) from “the privileged classes” (e.g. Bourdieu 1996, 178) or “dominant classes” (e.g. Bourdieu 1996, 186)⁷, which according to Bourdieu constitute “two antagonistic world views, two worlds, two representations” (1996, 199). *Habitus* is a principle that not only generates practices but also shapes any “judgement of taste” (Bourdieu), while “the ‘common senses’ determined by *habitus* embrace not only the participants’ cognitive structures but also their emotional attitudes” (Jacyno 1997, 30). *Habitus* also determines “political competence” (Bourdieu 1996, 399).⁸ Bourdieu also undermines the belief in the independence of “personal political opinion” (1996, 398) by emphasising its being conditioned by *habitus*. He writes about “authorized speech of status-generated competence” (1996, 413) which one receives through education and which is juxtaposed with “an equally status-linked incompetence” in political affairs (1996, 413). Thus *habitus* becomes, in reference to conversations about politics, the basis for distinction between the discourse of the symbolic elites and that of the working classes. For the purposes of my study I have replaced the term “discourse of the working classes” with “rural local discourse”.

Returning to the adjectives “rural” and “local” which in this study complement the term “discourse about politics”, the use of “local” calls for justification, especially as localness is no longer an obvious category, so

⁶ The concept of *habitus*, in use since the antiquity, is understood by Bourdieu as “both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (principium divisionis) of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constructed” (Bourdieu 1996, 170). It is “not only a structuring structure, ... but also a structured structure” (1996, 170), which influences choices and evaluations. Tastes and lifestyles are “systematic products of *habitus*” (1996, 172). *Habitus* is rooted in the objective socio-economic situation of the given class, and in this sense it is a “virtue made of necessity” (1996, 175).

⁷ Bourdieu does not believe the French dominant class to be homogeneous and subdivides it into “dominant fractions of the dominant class”, or the bourgeois, and “dominated fractions of the dominant class”, or the intellectuals (1996, 574).

⁸ The “political competence” characteristic of the given class is “a greater or lesser capacity to recognize a political question as political and to treat it as such by responding to it politically, i.e., on the basis of specifically political principles (rather than ethical ones, for example)” (Bourdieu 1996, 399).

when introducing it one must ask about “the nature of locality in ... a globalised deterritorialised world” (Appadurai 1996, 52). This problem will be considered in the chapter devoted to the area where the field study was conducted. The addition of the term “local” to the concept of rural discourse about politics is intended to show that the claims presented in this book are based on the interpretation of materials collected on a definite research territory, i.e. the villages around Nowy Targ, and refer specifically to it.

The concept of local discourse has been functioning in anthropology for several decades and is explained as everyday modes of talking that are rooted in a given community and reveal the local world-views (Rapport 2000, 117). The concept of discourse understood in this way avoids being as sweeping as the interpretation offered by Michel Foucault, for whom discourse was some kind of all-embracing convention that subordinates individuals by depriving them of the role of prime movers, a kind of unconscious unconditional code for thinking and communicating.⁹ Meanwhile, in local conversations on current events the inventory of world-views of the talking community (palpable unit) is being constantly negotiated (Møhl 1997, 36). Events from the community’s life, once they have been discussed and interpreted, become an element of the local discourse and extend the set of world-views on the social reality, perceived

⁹ But, as Rapport (2000, 117) emphasises, the student of discourse should bear in mind that a convention is never assimilated equally and may, in concrete cases, take very specific forms. First and foremost, it should be realised that discourse is never a mere exchange of conventional words and behaviours. Under the skin of conventional forms of expression are hidden very individual convictions and views. True, discourse does provide the forms of expression, but it is the individuals that fill them with the actual content. In a situation where the meanings they receive are similar or identical, this happens as a result of various connections between the individuals and not through the operation of some super-force engulfing everyone and forcing them to think in this particular way. Evoking Wittgenstein, Rapport argues that even though every player knows the rules, each of them applies them differently (efficiently or clumsily), each understands them slightly differently, shows a different involvement in the game, and experiences it differently. This diversity of players and their individual strategies makes the game lively and interesting. If everyone kept faithfully and passively to the convention, the game would lose all its attractiveness.

not as depiction but as the reality itself (Møhl 1997, 26–27).¹⁰

It is worth considering here the problem of the mutual relationship between discourse and world-views. Let Geertz's claim serve as the basic assumption, this being that images of the world are not something covert that need to be excavated from the recesses of the mind. On the contrary, they are overt and shared publicly. Hence the main issue concerning the mutual relationship of discourse and world-views is the question to what extent the latter are revealed in interviews and how far the researcher is able to isolate and describe them. While describing them, does he reconstruct or construct them? It is well known that every interpretation is burdened with the potential for "overinterpretation" (Eco 1992), and the researcher may, in accordance with the allegory evoked by Roy Wagner, become the legendary Chinese artist who distanced himself from the reality by mounting a wild goose that he himself had drawn (Wagner 1981, 9). Studies on this problem propose certain principles that would curb such arbitrariness and facilitate evaluation of the authors' approaches (e.g. Eco 1992; Fish 1980; Gadamer 2013, and others). Yet even if curbed by such rules, interpretation remains an art of "constructing" as opposed to "construing" (Fish 1980, 327). Reconstructing the local imaginaries by the ethnologist amounts in large measure to constructing them. While I am fully aware of this, I will keep to the verb "reconstruct". May its use be a token of the hope that the imaginaries described by me are not my arbitrary construction but the result of mutual efforts to communicate effectively, an attempt of "constructive negotiation" (Clifford 1988, 41) of the senses made by the team of researchers and the interviewees.

¹⁰ Perle Møhl (1997) describes a rural community, the inhabitants of La Brumaire, a village located in central France in the region of Le Berry, where the author conducted her research in the years 1990–1993. The villagers of La Brumaire interested her as a group talking about communal matters. It is both the subject matters and the stories themselves that bring them together and turn them into a community. It is a community of discourse. This is what the author focuses on, collecting and presenting the tales, the story tellers, and their rhetorical techniques and strategies such as elisions, lies, irony, innuendos, etc. She takes a close look at different versions of the narratives and notes their variability dependent on the circumstances. But she is not interested merely in the organisation of the discourse. Equally important for her are its social functions, the way it bonds the community and imposes a hierarchy, defines each member's position, creates identity and delineates the "insider – alien" boundary, and provides the tools for their instant identification.

Research methods

For ethnology and cultural anthropology, “fieldwork remains critically important—a disciplining process” (Clifford 1997, 64).

In the case of anthropologists and “fieldwork”, the loop of mutual constitution is unusually tight. The community not only use (define) the term “fieldwork”; it is materially used (defined) by it (Clifford 1997, 55).

The term in question is highly imprecise. James Clifford describes changes in the way field studies are conducted as “anthropological styles of research” (1997, 59) in all their diversity, from long-lasting exotic expeditions to a series of short visits to the given area (1997, 59). He also shows how the philosophy of field research has changed, from a strong focus on the place understood as a clearly delimited space to a more flexible conception of “fieldwork habitus” (1997, 64), while in this context Clifford understands the term habitus as “a cluster of embodied dispositions and practices” (1997, 69). Those practices, constitutive for the discipline, are a constant topic of the ethnologist’s reflections and controversies. Every now and again a summary of the conclusions is published in the form of a textbook for graduate or PhD students, i.e. future researchers ready to embark on a field trip (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

The ethnologist sets off into the field equipped with what can, after Hans Georg Gadamer, be called “prejudices”. This term has a pejorative meaning. But in the hermeneutic approach it signifies knowledge with which the interpreter begins his task, i.e. knowledge that is a precondition for understanding. The “prejudices” include the commentator’s knowledge, derived from research as well as picked up informally. Those anticipatory resources must be supplemented with anthropological imagination, of which Kirsten Hastrup wrote that it is essential for understanding another culture—“the ocean that separates and, indeed, connects selves and others can be traversed only by way of the anthropological imagination” (1999, 65). The fact that knowledge is supplemented with imagination does not preclude the empirical and honest character of the ethnographic research.¹¹

It is appropriate to describe briefly the “prejudices” with which our research team started their work in the villages of the Nowy Targ region. The whole group had gone through preparatory training involving getting acquainted with the literature on concepts organising philosophical

¹¹ “However much anthropological knowledge rests upon the investment of ‘individual anthropologists’ imaginative powers, this does not subvert the empirical foundation” (Hastrup 1999, 63).

discourse on matters of politics such as the state, power, representational democracy, etc. The intention was to supplement the researchers' knowledge so as to avoid a clash between the "urban" and the "rural" type of everyday talk. Getting acquainted with the centuries-old tradition of political thought, of necessity brief, was intended to homogenise the researchers' knowledge and correct it sufficiently for the local world-views to be confronted with it. Thus it is difficult to say to what extent the researchers' previous informal beliefs were replaced with philosophical ideas. I think that the outcome was some kind of fusion of the two modes of thinking, academic and non-academic.

Here I should provide a brief characteristic of the research team, which changed over the years. Between 1999 and 2000 it consisted of me acting as organiser and leader, and a group of sixteen students from Warsaw University's Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology: Amanda Bruczkowska, Martin Garcia-Dąbrowski, Magdalena Gyłybowa, Aleksandra Kaniecka, Agnieszka Krześniak, Paweł Lewicki, Katarzyna Mądra, Maria Migdańska, Maria Myszkowska, Krzysztof Nierojewski, Szymon Nowakowski, Anna Ogniewska, Dorota Rojewska, Magdalena Rychlińska, Alicja Stojanowska, Emilia Sułek, as well as Iga Rutkowska from Warsaw University's Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in the Humanities. The research was conducted as part of the laboratory fieldwork within the subject: "Ethno-politology—talking with highlanders about politics". The research was continued in September 2001. I was then assisted by two graduates of the BA programme at the Institute, Amanda Bruczkowska and Dorota Rojewska, who had been in the original group. The fieldwork in the spring of 2004 was conducted by Amanda Bruczkowska and myself, and in 2005, by three graduates from the Institute, members of the original research group: Amanda Bruczkowska, Emilia Sułek and Paweł Lewicki. All the research was done under my supervision.

The first questionnaires were constructed on the basis of theoretical knowledge and my previous field experience. The preparatory reading concerned not only the philosophy of politics but also rural culture, both traditional and from the period of the Polish People's Republic. These were supplemented with studies on peasants' views on the state. This knowledge was applied when preparing a set of questionnaire questions. Anthropological imagination prompted how to formulate the questions for the researchers to learn what they wanted to know and for the interviewees to understand the question and find the issue sufficiently close to their experience to be willing to provide an extended reply.

The questionnaires from the years 1999–2000 were centred around the key concepts of the philosophy of politics such as the state, nation,

citizens, power, politics, democracy, free elections, the president, law and liberty. The questions stimulated the interviewees to formulate extended explanations, e.g. of the concept of the state through a request for an explanation “as you would explain it to your grandchild”, for an evaluation of the kind of state you would say is “good” or “bad”, for good and bad solutions, for sketching out an ideal formula and an evaluation of its implementation. The researchers were advised to pay special attention to the contexts in which the interviewee would use the concepts in question spontaneously, and in which meanings, for example when the word “state” signifies the authorities, when the territory and when fiscal institutions.

In the years 1999–2000, 356 questionnaire-based conversations were held with the inhabitants of villages in the Nowy Targ administrative region. The interviews, recorded on a dictaphone, revealed the local definitions of the above concepts as part of common-sense knowledge about politics, or ethno-politology. The results of that stage of the field research, presented in a collection of articles called *Rozmowy z góralami o polityce* [Talking with the Highlanders about Politics] (2005), revealed that the concepts used by the researchers were on the whole understood quite differently by the interviewees.

While evaluating the questionnaire-based research and juxtaposing it with the materials collected in the years 2001–2005 with the use of research instructions, it should be stressed that the interviews based on detailed questions were disciplined and produced answers that digressed less from the topic, and allowed the respondents to explain the sense of the terms and expressions they used. The questionnaires forced the interlocutors to reflect on issues to which they would not normally give any thought, to think about the meanings of words that they considered widely known and obvious, as well as the sense of terms they hardly ever used. And yet the potential for intellectual violence inherent in the questionnaire interview prevented discovering the whole diversity and specificity of the local world-views. The researcher imposed on the interviewee the topic, the order of issues discussed, as well as the concepts and formulations.

The usually quite surprising denotations of the political terms that cropped up in the Nowy Targ interviews did not add up to a cohesive local picture of the sphere of politics. The supposition that these difficulties were the effect of the use of a questionnaire that imposed on the respondent the researcher’s outlook and language, forced us to change our research technique; this was done in 2001 by replacing the questionnaire with some research instructions. Also the venue of the interviews was changed. Experience to date showed that conversations about politics were

more natural and lively at venues such as a market or shop rather than at people's homes. That is why the researchers moved to the market grounds in the town nearby, which greatly raised the temperature of the interviews, turning them from dialogues into polyphonic discussions, all the more heated for being conducted in the period leading up to the parliamentary election in 2001.

The research instructions were applied to interviews at the market in 2001, where 25 conversations were voice-recorded. Research with the use of this technique was continued in March 2004, resulting in 12 recordings, and in September 2005, when 49 recordings were collected. The purpose of using this less formal technique was to give the interviewees an opportunity to propose their own format of response. The instructions I prepared in September 2001 and then modified for each subsequent stage of research, suggested initiating each conversation with the question "Who are you going to vote for?", continuing with follow-up questions appropriate to the flow of the response. In the pre-election period, both in 2001 and 2005, the question seemed natural and elicited extended and emotionally-charged responses.

The instructions suggested the researchers join in the ongoing conversations at the market and invite the interlocutors to take part in a multi-sided debate. It was suggested they do not hide their own election preferences so that the polyphonic debate which the conversation at the market usually turned into could be on more equal terms. The effect was that the researcher's was only one of many voices, usually the most irritating one. His/her political preferences were commented on and evaluated without mincing words. The possibility for the researcher to present his/her views greatly stimulated an exchange of opinions by all the participants.

The market as a place of trade and social get-togethers turned out to be an excellent venue for conversations on the topic of power and the state. They would start spontaneously, unprovoked by the researcher, who often simply joined in the discussion. This was much easier than persuading a person occupied with work at home to stop what they were doing and talk about politics. During the day, the only people to be found at home in the rural villages were women looking after their children and the elderly, who did not always turn out to be interesting interlocutors. At the market, there were fewer elderly people and more traders, craftsmen and farmers, i.e. middle-aged men often running their own businesses and hence greatly interested in the economy and the state's fiscal policy. The market conversations usually involved several vendors and often their customers. Consequently, the researcher's voice virtually disappeared in the more and

more emotional exchange, and the flow of conversation was controlled by the interlocutors themselves. Needless to say, during such heated discussions there was no room for explaining the meaning of the terms being used. It was also difficult to encourage people to engage in any deeper reflection, so the ensuing materials were rather “shallow” but highly emotional and open-ended, which allowed the researcher with his/her microphone to recede into the background.

This description of research techniques is worth supplementing with a short general characteristic of research methods applied in ethnology. An open-ended interview, for this is how the village and market conversations can be classified in the terminology of sociology, even when conducted with the help of a questionnaire, offers considerable freedom of expression. A simple question, e.g. about one’s voting preferences, does not bring short responses that would be directly connected with the topic. Often, instead of information on their chosen party or candidate, the researcher would hear a colourful string of expletives which was a synthesis of what the interlocutor thought about the people in power and politics as a whole, which ended with a detailed account of how the Polish fur-coat trade had been brought to ruin through a misguided fiscal policy. As far as questions requiring deeper reflection are concerned, for example about what democracy is, the replies were often about relations within the family and included references to the Bible and evocations of the Gospels. This type of response, not referring directly to the question asked, is not treated by ethnologists as worthless research material. On the contrary, it was in such seemingly remote reflections that the local world-views on the state and power revealed themselves.

The topic of politics determines a very broad “talking community”. It consists of virtually all the people who are interested in the problems of their country. Although those conversations do not require neighbourly or kinship proximity, they do not preclude it. Such conversations are held in the family circle, with a group of friends, but also with people encountered by chance. The only precondition is that they be interested in events on the Polish political scene. This was considered by the Nowy Targ interlocutors to be a typically male interest, so the participants in the polyphonic debates on politics were mostly men. The natural place for such exchanges is a bar or a bench outside a shop, and sometimes they take place on public transport, often at the market where the vendors of sheepskin coats or slippers and farmers selling their horses, cows or pigs, not infrequently fortifying themselves with alcohol, willingly comment on events on the Polish political scene.

When attempting to characterise the means of expression used by our interlocutors I have to point towards the humorous way they conducted a conversation. It set up the relationship between the researcher and interviewee which allowed the latter to maintain a distance. Our Nowy Targ interlocutors were very self-assured. Most often they expressed their views in the form of sarcastic jokes and ironic innuendos, as well as words of abuse addressed at politicians. The researchers needed time to get used to this manner of speaking. The use of a jocular tone did not mean that they treated matters of the state and its authorities lightly. It allowed them to express their views and emotions in a form locally considered less radical than expressing them directly, i.e. with the use of vulgarisms.

When listening to those conversations one could say, echoing the title of Michael Jackson's book *Politics of Storytelling* (2002), that the Nowy Targ interlocutors applied a specific "policy" or tactic when engaging in the conversations. They had their own opinion of educated city dwellers, and it was far from positive. They believed that members of the intelligentsia, who had "their brains washed by the newspapers", understood nothing of "what was going on in this country". That is why in their conversations they used the convention of enlightening the researchers by explaining to them the basic local rules of how the dark spheres of power functioned. Irony and sarcasm went very well with this lecturing tone.

It is worth noting, however, that despite maintaining a distance and a certain superiority, the interlocutors often tried to answer the questions in accordance with the researchers' expectations, or, more precisely, in accordance with the local belief as to what the person with the microphone would like to hear. An example of such local diplomacy may be answers to the question whether democracy is a good system of ruling a country. Virtually all the respondents replied "yes" because they believed every enlightened person should answer this question in the affirmative. But in the next sentence they added that Poland needed a strong hand, that preferably there should be one strong ruler, because "this is an awfully unruly nation". While the first sentence was expressed in consideration of the researchers and was an attempt to boost one's own image as a person who follows the spirit of the times, the second one expressed a widely held local conviction.

One should underline the emotional involvement that accompanied the Nowy Targ conversations about politics. Politicians, whose decisions had a significant impact on the economic dimension of the interlocutors' lives, were usually the object of disdain or outright hatred. These sentiments were sometimes camouflaged with jocular, sarcastic or ironic formulations. Often, however, they were expressed directly with an elaborate string of

obscenities, expressive gesticulation, and a raised voice. George Marcus (2002) wrote that the potential to get emotionally involved is a necessary component of people's civic attitude, is a token of mental and emotional identification with the affairs of the community.¹² But for emotions to become constructive elements of civic involvement, some definite conditions need to be met, for otherwise they turn into helpless rage. This was clearly visible in the Nowy Targ conversations and was an obvious signal to the researcher that what s/he was dealing with was not the concern of a Polish citizen but a totally different attitude.

The use of obscenities, the simplest form of expressing emotions, accompanied the conversations in Nowy Targ all the time. It should be conceded, however, that certain words that are received as vulgar by the researchers are part of the Nowy Targ village dwellers' everyday vocabulary. On the whole, however, obscenities and words of abuse were used intentionally, to emphasise the user's anger. Sometimes their use was controlled for the sake of the researchers, the majority of them women. Yet a certain level of vulgarity in what was said, so typical of conversations about politicians, was always present, as is illustrated by the quotations in this book.

The fact that a large proportion of the research team were young women was of great significance. Talking about politics with women provoked jokes based on ambiguities. On the other hand, it had an electrifying effect on the gathered company and fired up the debate. Many participants in the polyphonic discussions at the market tried to show off their knowledge, eloquence, and sense of humour, in other words make an impression on the female researchers from a big city.

¹² In his book with the telling title *The Sentimental Citizen* (2002), George H. Marcus reminds us that for the theoreticians of representative democracy, for the creators of the United States' Constitution and virtually all philosophers of politics, the desirable citizen is a rational citizen. Marcus recognises the need for rationality, but he believes that a citizen must also be emotionally involved because it is emotions that, by activating the mind, drive him to make judgements and take action. Rationality alone is not capable of infusing public life with spirit; only emotions can stimulate people. Marcus classifies emotions according to their impact on civic life. He devotes a lot of attention to civic anxiety arising from a sense of responsibility for the state. This constructive anxiety motivating people to try and improve the political reality is the opposite of discouragement and fear, feelings lying at the basis of non-involvement, passivity and hopelessness. Lack of will is the greatest enemy of public life, and fear kills all civic initiative. Fear usually has its roots in the social experience of an all-powerful totalitarian regime. People whose voice has for generations been heard have a greater sense of co-responsibility for, interest in, and anxiety about civic matters.