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MB: Michał Buchowski

ZB: Zuzana Bártoová

AL: Agata Ladykowska

VT: Viola Teisenhoffer

VT: Welcome to everyone in this first, maybe last, but hopefully not last, podcast in our lives. So I would like to welcome Michał Buchowski, who is our keynote speaker to our upcoming conference in the frame of our Visegrad Fund project, *Assessing Religious Change in Central-Eastern Europe*. And here we are gathered in the studio with Zuzana Bártoová and Agata Ladykowska and myself, Viola Teisenhoffer, who are coordinating this Visegrad Fund project, again *Assessing Religious Change in Central-Eastern Europe*. And we're gathered here today in this podcast, which for us is entirely new, to discuss hierarchies of knowledge in the study of religious phenomena, but not only, in social sciences in general in Central-Eastern Europe. So I give the word to Agatha and Zuzana also with whom we conceived this Visegrad fund project. So how did we exactly arrive to this question of hierarchies of knowledge, of which Michał Buchowski is a great specialist and who is very engaged in this debate? How did we arrive to that? The word is yours.

AL: Our distinguished guest is our keynote lecture for the upcoming conference of the Visegrad project and Professor Michał Buchowski, from the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in Poland and European University Viadrina in Frankfurt am Oder.

VT: What do we mean by these hierarchies of knowledge? Of course I'm about to give the word to Michał Buchowski. So we are relying on basically on three texts, one of them published in 2004. In any case, its title is „Hierarchies of Knowledge in Central-Eastern European Anthropology“ and it was published in the *Anthropology of East Europe Review*. So in 2004 (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/aeer/article/view/296>), this is an inaugural study about these hierarchies of knowledge, and then we have two studies from 2014, which were, I'm not entering in the details, I'm not giving you the complete references to the research for yourself, but in any case, you have to look for a special issue of Cargo. It's a special issue of the Czech journal Cargo from 2014 (<http://cargojournal.org/index.php/cargo/issue/view/19/24>). It's a special issue on critical anthropologies in of Central-Eastern Europe. And what we can see here is a sort of a timeline because the first study we are referring to is from 2004, then again in 2014. And now we're almost in 2024. And where are we in this question of hierarchies of knowledge? And just a few more words about this inaugural study, because of course this is a very thorny question, because we shouldn't think when we are talking about these hierarchies of knowledge, we're not only speaking about an east -west divide which is obvious in this case when we talk about Central-Eastern Europe but this is this implies even other fragmentations, even in the field of anthropological and more broadly social scientific studies in the Central-Eastern European countries because these imply different theoretical stances or the different uses of theories coming from the West. And then, of course, there are local researchers, “local scholars” in quotation marks, three quotation marks, who precisely are against these Western theories and who opt for more empirical choices. So these hierarchies of knowledge also apply to local relationships in the field of social sciences. And so what does this expression mean? It comes with very nuanced terms, because it has emotional aspects, it has cognitive aspects, it has

relational aspects. But we can also talk, and I'm using Michał Buchowski's terms, mental borders. These imposed mental borders are upon us. We can also speak about intellectual segregation. And we should not, it may seem strong like this, but it's completely justified. So the question is, how do we stand today with these questions?

MB: Well, I feel to be pulled up to the blackboard, so... I say a few words about several things. First of all, I don't know whether it's relevant or not. Actually, I began my studies with traditional folk religiousness. This was my MA topic many, many years ago. And then I worked on magic, science, and religion, but it was mostly all in theoretical terms. And when the change came, I mean 1989, and most people jumped on the topic, I withdrew from it, because it is like, I don't want to swim with the current, that was perhaps the motivation. Then at this hierarchies of knowledge. Well, what does it mean? It means that knowledge produced in different places, which is hierarchized according to the place where it is produced. That is, that there are some centres and peripheries, that this knowledge is valued differently because of the place of production. And these centres of knowledge production are "coincidentally", of course, in inverted commas, are placed in the Western centres of knowledge, in anthropology mostly in Britain and the United States and partly France. And when you look at several data which I hope to provide also tomorrow in my keynote lecture, this becomes obvious. And then of course. there is a question why is it so and whether it's just. And there is a conundrum of course whether on the one hand there people would say well there is always quality and the quality should come first and there are some let's say theories or scholars who attract attention of the others because of the quality of their scholarship. And then this is of course a powerful argument.

On the other hand there is that why they are always placed at the same universities because this hierarchies of knowledge not only apply to the simple east-west divide but also there are hierarchies within certain regions or countries even. There is a difference between the I don't know London School of Economics and some provincial university in the UK or between Chicago and Berkeley and some community colleges across the United States so people can also complain in these terms.

But there was something in 1990. After 1989, I mean, we were very much interested in what's going on in the West, and we, I mean, scholars from Central and Eastern Europe and probably not only, we've learned a lot about it, we very much tried to get literature, Western literature, which was not so easily available as today. It was really difficult to get books or copies of books, photocopies of books, etc. And then there was this interest on the part of the Western scholars in what's going on in the scholarship in Central-Eastern Europe. And then there was a hope after 1989, also when the EASA emerged, for instance, a European Association of Social Anthropologists, which actually very graciously included also the so-called ethnologists or ethnographers, even in our region and in Eastern Europe, that this is the opening moment for the flow of knowledge or exchange of knowledge and even more people from our region, scholars from our region, try to learn even more from our Western prominent and very good, no doubt about it, very good scholars.

There were scholarships offered and you are an example of it. It seems that I am the only one who was not trained in the Western academia in this small group. There were scholarships offered and you are an example of it. It seems that I am the only one who was not trained in the Western academia in this small group. We collaborated with these scholars. We invited them for lectures. We invited them. We sent our students to them as many as possible, etc.

And then, you know, after ten or fifteen years, by 2004, it was 15 years. Some of us, it was not only me because there were also people with whom I talked in Slovenia, in Hungary and other countries that there is an expertise on Eastern Europe that comes from the outside and we feel that we have learned a lot and we feel that we actually try to do our best also to synchronize our knowledges so to say and to contribute to this scholarship that by 2002 when the book on post-socialist for instance was published and several other books which are mentioned in these articles collected volumes. There was no single scholar from Eastern Europe with the exception of Dobrinka Kostova as far as I remember who co-authored an article with Christian Giordano. Apparently, he invited her to write this article together.

So there was a kind of disappointment that somehow prompted me to write this article which was quite emotional and based on a rudimentary knowledge or rudimentary facts and actually I developed these arguments not maybe in this 2014 but in the in the article in Focaal in 2012 (<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/focaal/2012/63/focaal.2012.issue-63.xml>). It's a full elaboration of these arguments, which is very much respectful for everything that was going on in the scholarship, in the anthropological scholarship in Western Europe, but also indicating that, well, something should be done, and we should fight against something... something which Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, and what is his name, Eduardo Restrepo, I think that Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Restrepo call on the one hand cosmopolitan provincialism and provincial cosmopolitanism. That means that we are people in the centres of knowledge who live in this ivory tower of their own ideas that they do just exchange ideas between them and they don't see what's going on outside. And so that in that sense this is provincialism, although they claim that they are cosmopolitan. And we, in the peripheries in these peripheries of knowledge, we are provincial cosmopolitanists because we know everything about this, producing the centres, theories, although we don't participate in their production in that sense because we are ignorant.

And this is not just a question of the quality, the so-called quality of scholarship that decides about it. Science is social practice and many social rules obtain also in the production of science. And there is something systemic to it. And this is the crucial problem, how to overcome the systemic barriers that somehow causes, that some knowledge is more valued than the other. And in that sense, when it is so, it is not fair. And we should see what is in it.

I will finish. just with one sentence it's a real conundrum because how to keep anthropology unified on the one hand and at the same time cosmopolitan, as with language for instance, how to produce a local scholarship in local language and linguistic diversity is as important as biodiversity also in the scholarship production. And at the same time to communicate to the whole world in the language different than English today, at least today. So the same goes with the scholarship. How to be local and universal at the same time. And I think that the recipe or the prescription which Johannes Fabian gave in his last chapter in the book of *World Anthropologies* (2006, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003087434-18/world-anthropologies-johannes-fabian?context=ubx&refId=c5fc5c63-d3c5-4a66-9cea-3a724592c272>) is probably the only solution that we should keep to unsettle these hierarchies all the time. And this is the only way we can do, object them all the time, unsettle this hierarchies. And I hope this is also, this conference is a small, or is a contribution to this unsettling.

AL: I really love that metaphor of, let me rephrase it, cosmopolitan provisionalism and provisional cosmopolitanism, right? Is that correct? I like it very much and it says a lot, it's a beautiful metaphor. But in connection to this, I mean, this is a great conclusion that we should

somehow subvert those hierarchies of knowledge, but the problem that we see is that these are processes. There are systemic kind of patterns that are obvious and visible to you and to us, but that they are not acknowledged universally. And in academia, both in Central-Eastern Europe and we see that in Western Europe, there is a kind of denial that they exist, that there's an assumption that we are all democratic, that we all have equal chances, and if we try hard enough, we will all have equal chances and equal success. But this is very tricky, and this is very unfair to say that, not only because the structural inequalities, financial inequalities exist, but also there are much more subtle mechanisms of play, and it's very difficult to convince someone who doesn't want to see them.

VT: To get back to this idea of how to deal with these hierarchies of knowledge, even between us, how would I advise, for instance, students what to do? Because now we do have access to international literature, although I sense that institutional access to JSTOR and all those databases is much more limited here than it used to be in the West. So this is why I'm thinking about this intellectual itinerance to go back and forth between the two ways of thinking even for methods because an interesting point or an interesting observation, Agnieszka Pasięka makes in her 2014 studies in *Cargo* (<http://cargojournal.org/index.php/cargo/issue/view/19/24>), that immediately when we see local ethnographies made in Central-Eastern Europe, there's a lot of emphasis on speech and discursive analysis and little description. For instance, if adopt a stance of intellectual itinerance, then I go to classical ethnographies and try to apply that in these different localities, which are not so exotic. So this is one example.

And in the other direction, it's to assess critically these western notions and not to adopt them uncritically. In Agnieszka Pasięka article, she quotes someone I can't recall, but she writes a theoretical parade, like using, buzzwords and big theoretical frames, which are disconnected from the ethnographic data. So I think our task is really to experiment. Of course, if we assume that we're experimenting with the concepts and methods and theories, we can establish some kind of a tighter dialogue between the two perspectives.

AL: I was also thinking about this, as I say, timeline, because Michał says what was in the 90s, how it all started, then you're quoting the article from 2014. And just recently, this year (2023), we were writing an introduction together, and we were trying to pinpoint several issues, and we had this reflection that in the study of religion in this region, there is some sort of postcolonial mindset that is somehow both embraced by the Western scholars doing research in this region and then the local scholars doing research in this region. And this is always in this idea of dominance of subjugation and this subaltern position that is somehow on an implicit level, implicitly somehow accepted locally. So Michał, did you see any continuity? Did you also see or maybe not, that some of those threats, some of those mechanisms are still at work?

MB: First about this in a sense navigating between the both traditions. Yes, nobody of us is against any scholarship, that's not the point. It's just the point that there should be, in our perspective, that there should be some more equality so to say, between different knowledges produced in different parts of the world. And of course, what I've said before also that this universality of knowledge, we can refer also to discussion between rationalists and relativists in the past who claimed that knowledge is Gellner, Ernest Gellner, one of the heroes of many anthropologists, including myself, whose knowledge is universal and independently of the context it travels anywhere. And then there is a question, what kind of knowledge do we have in mind here? And then a relativist would say that the knowledge depends on so much factors.

In that sense, I'm closer, in many respects, I'm closer to this relativist approach. But nobody else is against any kind of scholarship, as I said.

And we should do this what you have suggested. Go to other universities, visit other scholarship centres, learn, if you only can, go to Chicago, London or, but also go to Brno, to Praha, and also see what people do there. And this kind of oscillation or constant navigating between different people also that you meet and a different scholarship, this is what enriches our perspective all the time. This is what I advise to anybody, any student. Don't just sit at home and be closed because this kind of closed in one place because the time of Immanuel Kant sitting called his life in Königsberg is over. It's not only that now there is an access to any knowledge because of Wiley Blackwell or any portal where you can get any publication. It's not enough to read. It's it has to do with this let's say personal experience and meeting these other scholars, seeing this other academic milieus and learn from that. This is the first point.

The second point with Agata's question. This 2004 article wasn't the first one. Anthropology has been always critical towards its own knowledge production, and we can go back to, I don't know, not only Talal Asad, but Stanley Diamond and others, kind of criticism of colonialism. They undermined anthropological knowledge, but this was a different story. But then there was also this world anthropologist movement which emerged mostly in Latin America, which is also telling, yes? Or it tells us something. But most of the time, these scholars were actually who participated in this movement, like Arturo Escobar or Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, Marisol de la Cadena and others, most of them were trained at American universities and maybe this is the moment when they learn that there is something wrong going on. Why? On the one hand, being trained in this American academia, they realize that there is something wrong with this systemic hierarchies of knowledge, as we call it.

But then this 2004 article has been somehow, there was no special knowledge about it. We can say that this was the same story was replicated in Central-Eastern Europe. And we have our particular concerns. And there was some reaction to it and I think that some about this timeline. There's something's happening, that there are there was a scholarship or a special effort in your, I would say, home institution that is Max Planck that three huge volumes about the history of ethnographies were published. And whoever wants to learn something about the history of ethnographies can find a lot of information there, and it was produced in a joint effort of scholars coming from Eastern and Western parts of Europe. Then I think that there are also several articles written by prominent scholars also from the West who say that we should, whenever we do this, we should somehow join these two traditions. And some of these prominent scholars, I can give names, but I don't know whether it's appropriate. They acknowledge that before they were trained in the tradition they should ignore what's going on in the academia, in the countries where they do research and then now they see that it was a mistake or they should have done it differently and they advise not to do the same mistake.

There are changes I mean, nothing is still but in general, whether there is a breakthrough in the centres of knowledge and the production of knowledge and the mechanisms which you have also asked about, the mechanisms, there are these journals, prestigious journals, and there are gatekeepers, and the gatekeepers, they actually accept on the articles that somehow fit their own images, what science, what good anthropology is, and what good anthropology is not. So, this is this kind of reproduction. When you come from the outside and you have even a brilliant idea, possibly or potentially a brilliant idea, at some point in some situations, it

won't be published because it somehow doesn't, as I said, fit what these people imagine about good scholarship. This is my answer.

AL: I'm listening to you and I'm afraid that some of our listeners might say that we are forging conspiracy theories.

VT: One of these concerns publications, whether for masters, doctoral students or even more established researchers, it's very interesting to observe that these bibliometrically brilliant and high-ranking journals are usually not open access, only several years after the publications are there. So people have to resort to different online methods to really have readership, otherwise it's very expensive.

And on the other hand, these local Central-Eastern European journals, such as *Cargo* that we mentioned, but I think the same can be said of *Ethnologia Polona*, they're open access, right? Or the Estonian, is it Estonian? Journal *Folklore*. Yes, it's immediately open access, go read them and I encourage everybody to look into these journals and you have very interesting studies in there. So don't be frustrated by Wiley Blackwell or JSTOR. This is just a way of illustrating that we are not into conspiracy theories or that where I don't know, frustrated Central-Eastern European researchers or something.

ZB: I would just like to add a point about this discussion and this feeling that somebody doesn't want to recognize that there are still these hierarchies. I was in France in June on the the conference of French Social Sciences Association. And there was a lecture exactly about hierarchies of knowledge, but this time it was about hierarchies of knowledge of the West and Asian scholars in sociology. And they were actually discussing the same thing, that these scholars from Singapore, for instance, they are supposed to know all the literature that was done about their particular subject in Chinese and in other parts of Asia, but at the same time they are supposed to know all the literature about this subject from the West. And the lecturers told that the situation for the Westerners colleagues is different, because when they studied the particular subject, they are just supposed to know Western literature. So not only there is this hierarchy of knowledge that some theories are maybe more valuable than others, but there is also more pressure on some scholars to actually do more than others.

MB: In that sense it's a global phenomenon yet. Let's say that the Brits complain about Americans that they do dominate the scholarship and Australians complain that these are Brits and Americans and then South Africans that Brits Americans and Australians dominate the scene and then Western Europe, Britain and partly France, Western European countries also to complain with exception perhaps now of Scandinavia. And these hierarchies, you know, they work in so many directions and also within the countries, I mean. This tendency to this bibliometric, the audit system, there is a different position of Warsaw University and University of Szczecin for instance. And also probably this works for anthropology, that you rather go to Warsaw, Poznań or Krakow and study anthropology than to other place, I am just inventing. This internal country hierarchies, they also are present there. In the past, it was this division which was referred too many times between this western-oriented anthropologists who discarded somehow this ethnology, those people who practiced this more continental ethnology. And some people tried to establish this kind of hierarchy within even departments. These ethnological studies that were practiced here for so many years and are so difficult to change its direction. It's also visible in the academic structure that in some countries there are two departments that compete, one of ethnology and the other one of

anthropology and they compete and ethnology simply want to keep their own tradition and I think that the best solution is when you have people in the same department without this kind of let's say images and conflicts between them that these two disciplines have different value here simply because this has a stamp of British or American or French academia.

And at the point which was raised here somehow, but has not become so much explicit, is the production of theories. Local scholarship, as if people outside of these centres were unable to produce any theory. And I think that the people in these academic circles outside the strongholds, self-claimed strongholds of academia. They also produce nice ideas and interesting ideas and revealing ideas, but there is a question whether they are recognized by these who are in power to claim that it is a theory that is a real sociological, anthropological, or religious studies theory that should be discussed worldwide and not only in one place and that there is something to it.

And I can give examples of theories that were very good theories but produced in Tartu, not very big university and not in the West, also in the communist times. Or pro domo sua I would say that one of my two supervisors, he actually produced a theory of practice that was similar, independently, that was similar and equally rigid and good to the theory of practice of Bourdieu and Sahlines and with some connections to Godolier and but he's not recognized because he didn't publish much in English and then it was in the time when there was some kind of iron curtain and the things like this. So this is also this issue the theory can be produced not only in some places but anywhere. And then there is a question, how this theory is circulated in a sense and how it is accepted by those who are not very much interested in propagating theories different than their own.

AL: Which you said is very interesting and reminds me that it is actually a task because it reminds me Grazyna Kubica who did this history of Maria Czaplicka showing her, her figure and with what she struggled and where she arrived and how her life was. But this is somehow deciphering, right? Like decoding, decoding from the current perspective, what her life might have been and why, to what situations she was exposed that were limitations she was exposed to, which could be a case for your supervisor. We could, maybe some of your students, of our students could do similar job. But this is about equally important theories or equally efficient or brilliant ideas or researchers that we have here in this Central-Eastern Europe and that we could promote now, but what to do for today with us? Like, how can we reach wider publics with our research, with our knowledge?

MB: First of the question that you have asked, what to do? We should do it via media, and, I don't know, TikTok or Twitter and why not, the podcast like this one. But this is the question of the public who is interested in what we do or do to enlarge this general public. The other question is how to get what we produce to the larger scholarship audience internationally. In the current situation or in the contemporary world or the academia is organized I don't see other way than to just try hard to publish as much as possible in English and as prestigious journals as possible.

AL: It seems that we arrived at some sort of a conclusion, even though the topic is not exhausted. None of the discussions possible would be exhaustive because there's a perpetuating systematic inequality production mechanism, which is, let's say again, it's not a conspiracy theory, it's something that's at work and we should master ourselves at undermining it and exposing those mechanisms and with these words we invite everyone to

listen to the podcast, we invite everyone to read publications by Michał Buchowski and follow the events that follow from the Visagrad project. Thank you.

ZB: Don't hesitate to share the podcast with everybody around you.