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LOCAL CRAFT, THEORY FROM ABROAD:  
JACEK OŁĘDZKI'S PHENOMENOLOGY

In the mid-1990s I carried out my first piece of fieldwork on the socioeconomic transition in rural Poland. I observed the villagers' houses, talked with their owners, tried to understand the way they ran their households in the times of rapid change. The very first instructions I had been given by my teachers were empirical to the core. I was told to focus on the ways of using and conserving food, to find out about local meanings of food contamination, water, earth and soil. Only a few days into the fieldwork I noticed, together with other students, that, in the village we were doing our research many households started running small grocery shops with colorful letters fixed on windows. Although we had spent there a few days before, only then we noticed those shops and registered them as important social facts. Our teacher, Wojciech Pieniżek, told us then that it usually takes some time to overcome the „initial inability to see” in anthropological fieldwork. We missed something obvious, we must have looked at it, but at the same time we did not register it. Our teacher was on the mark: as it turned out later on, during my own research on Polish socioeconomic transition, petty trade such as street vending was embraced especially by unprivileged groups (Sulima 2003: 133; see also Humphrey 2002 for the larger context) and could be seen not only as means of securing a livelihood, but also as a particularly important act of marking their presence in public space.

Back in the 1990s we had no substantial knowledge of contemporary literature on phenomenological anthropology produced by Western scholars. We relied on our local, anthropological skills when out in the field collecting data. We spontaneously tried to develop research skills, directing our attention toward various phenomena of daily life and trying to learn how to observe the so-called ethno-

graphic facts. Therefore, one can argue that there was a kind of phenomenological strand in Polish ethnography, focused on interpreting details, using them in order to reveal the subjective sense of social actor's actions and practices. I could reconstruct other theoretical approaches embedded in these interpretations as for example some were directly inspired by the writings of Russian structuralism and semiotics such as the Tartu School. Nevertheless, the central focus of these ethnographic struggles was empirical, and was related to fieldwork practices. My argument is that a particular way of seeing facts, events, signs, words, conversations was developed during those years, although it was not grounded in any existing and recognized theoretical or methodological approach. A particular kind of sensitivity emerged among Polish ethnographers, filmmakers, photographers and curators of ethnographic museums. Moreover, this special kind of sensitivity and a certain academic „craft” was inspired by the work of some Polish ethnographers such as Jacek Olędzki or Piotr Szacki who were somehow the precursors of phenomenological approach to ethnography in Poland.

### **An aesthete: ethnography as praxeology**

In this article, first of all I would like to discuss some characteristic elements of Jacek Olędzki's way of doing ethnography. Jacek Olędzki was known for a particular skill of seeing facts emerging during fieldwork. Since the 1960s, Olędzki worked a lot in Poland, Mongolia, and Western and Central Africa. He published a number of books. However, first of all he was simply practicing ethnography, meeting people, recording, making notes, filming and taking photographs.

Another Polish anthropologist Magdalena Zowczak (2004) dubbed him once an aesthete. He tried to immerse himself as much as he could in people's practices, movements, gestures, and in the materiality of the field site. Olędzki was known as a researcher who directed his attention to almost unfathomable details. His famous long-term fieldwork was conducted in Murzynowo, a village on the bank of the Wisła river near Płock (Olędzki 1991). For years he worked there over what he described as „signs of being”. He talked and even quarreled with people, participated in their daily lives, took photographs, collected objects, filmed. He was particularly sensitive to the activities of villagers, fishermen, herders, craftsman, river-traders and others, and how they marked their „ownership” in a peculiar way. Thus he discovered a vast field of meaningful practices: marking objects, places, tools, bricks, paddles, and how people adorned animal ears with various ornaments. When he noted different kinds of carves on sheep ears, for example, he was also trying to observe their transformations not only as a technical mark, but at the same time a mark signifying the herdsman ownership, and a certain „thoughtfulness of presence,” as he put it. It was also an act of taking care of herdsman's own skill. Olędzki analyzed various kinds of marks he

found on the walls of the local church, and especially on the southern wall, that was not covered with moss. These „signs of being” represented to him particular acts of remembering. He tried to find their meaning by focusing on other signs, such as small holes in the bricks placed at the human eye level, when people were standing or kneeling. He tried to qualify these practices of how villagers made holes with their thumbs, coins or stones, as practices of marking their presence or as manual acts of penance and mourning. At the same time he depicted these acts as sensual, praxeological experiences<sup>1</sup>. „In the course of the other people's and other communities' life” as he put it once, „I would distinguish a continuous, everyday existence on the one hand and less or more distinct *moments of being* on the other” (Olędzki 1991: 12).

Of course, such interpretations may lead us to a much more nuanced view of the history of the church in Rokicie, of the villagers, fishermen, the river trade and local religious practices. But I want to pause here, and only to show that Olędzki was trying to analyze objects in a very particular way: as entities that led him immediately to people's manual practices, to movement of hands, to acts of forming things with fingers. Therefore, things found by him in the field became in fact signs of such actions and praxeological movements, „shaded actions”, as George Herbert Mead put it (Ingold 1992: 496). It is worth emphasizing that Olędzki as a photographer and filmmaker was often focusing on hands forming matter, as for instance hands forming sheep bells in the Podhale region, fingers shaping dough figures of farm animals in Kurpie, Mongolian shepherds making wooden tools – a kind of horse curry comb, the *chosuur*, designed to brush their horses with particularly calm and delicate gestures. Olędzki sought to see these practices as qualified acts of forming materiality of the world. In a plateau near the Wisła river, for example, he found old villagers' households: abandoned, crumbling wooden houses of his informants' ancestors. He observed parts of the structure, hidden under the layer of clay and revealed because the clay had peeled off. These were wooden strips, crossing each other, built in order to fix the internal layer of the walls such as stones and pieces of brick. „It is incredible” he noted „that those strips are fixed at absolutely equal intervals – as in ornaments and other aesthetic motives”. And he continued: „it seems obvious that if that grid remained hidden, the builders should not really have cared if intervals were even or not. But they were” (Olędzki 1999: 249). He seemed to have been genuinely impressed.

Thus, Olędzki discovered how informants and their objects were linked in a specific way. He revealed human action as something poised in between, in the man-object environment. But I would argue that there he also developed a particular way of revealing the very usage of materiality. He saw his informants as

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<sup>1</sup> A praxeology-focused approach in anthropology, corresponding with Olędzki's approach, has been recently developed by Laurence Douny (2008).

acting subjects, but at the same time he uncovered this link on the level of manual, or even praxeological practices. Then, the materiality of the objects seems to be changing and is seen from completely different perspectives. When Olędzki (1989) conducted research on local religiosity and spirituality among villagers from the Kurpie region, he was still filming and photographing objects and trying to record movements in which his informants used their hands and fingers. He also analyzed various sorts of small objects and artifacts left in sanctuaries. He observed rosaries made of candies, cones, tiny medals, coins, little glasses. In the same manner, in the early 1960, when he analyzed the preparation of ornamental objects made of dough for religious ceremonies (Olędzki 1961), usually animal figures such as cows, pigs, horses, sheep, locally famous goat figures, and stork paws, Olędzki showed further usages of this dough. It was given to children to play with, it was fed to farm animals, put under the ceiling, and, as in case of stork paws, taken to the farm and even to stork's nests. When explaining this practice, he demonstrated that they were usually prepared in the early spring, and were intended to animate or vitalize the fields.

Olędzki showed how these small and sometimes even minute objects were related to the surrounding environment. He referred for example to gestures, to a sense of meteorology and to beliefs in the opening of the land, the soil and stirring its vital forces. His attention was directed towards the experience of meteorological world as embedded in peoples' gestures. In his book *Ludzie wygasłego wejrzenia* („People with a burned-out gaze”) he recalled a Masai man making gestures of thanksgiving towards the rain and the storm. Olędzki wrote: „these are special gestures, more explicit than any words; he makes them in the open space, directly under the sky. He lifts his spread arms and bare hands, tilts his head slightly backward and gazes into eternity” (Olędzki 1999: 183). Olędzki also wrote about the gestures of awe made in Polish villages during thunderstorms: people taking out images of Saint Agatha and blessed candles, putting out hearths. From a slightly different perspective he wrote on shepherds of Mongolian steppe describing the peculiar interplay of haggling and lying: the Mongolian shepherds, he argued, pretend before the thunder (depicted as deity *Luu*) that they are the untouchable *noyons*, aristocrats. During the storm they yell at the sky „Here is a human!” („Here is a *noyon!*”) which means „Don't kill!”. What we can see in this ethnography is that the man and the surrounding world are conceived as one, active field of acting, making gestures, and animating the deeply embodied meanings.

### **A phenomenologist: embodied actions and being**

Let me now come back to methodological issues of phenomenology and embodiment in Jacek Olędzki's work. I have already noted that there are parallels between phenomenological debates within Western anthropology and Olędzki

ethnographic craft. Olędzki studied embodiment, and focused on people's actions, their material worlds and environmental neighborhoods. He built up knowledge about their manual, bodily abilities. This was particularly visible in the case of Mongolian nomads who use their fingers while sitting in a yurt (*ger*) to initiate games or tell stories. He was able to see the fingers and the objects in his particular way, i.e. as veering off from their regular usages. Therefore, objects were given an additional meaning or even a potential for new usages, for transforming. Olędzki followed the paths of objects, their games, as one could say, in order to depict people's „moments of being” and a particular embodied engagement with the surrounding environment.

First of all, this seems to be in tune with methodological challenges set out by Tim Ingold in his work *The Perception of Environment* (Ingold 2000), wherein he built a framework for discovering people as actors in their environment. Olędzki, already in his works from the 1970s and 1980s analyzed gestures directed towards the weather and the scrupulous manual work of his informants. Ingold argued against the dominant Western scientific perspective that people primarily experience the environment as an immersion in the „manifold of earth, sky, wind and weather” and accordingly he tried to build „a program of research that would give us a more accurate idea than we presently have of how people routinely succeed, in their everyday, skillful coping” (Ingold 2000: 171). Likewise, the well known phenomenologist Michael Jackson (1989) tried to frame his understandings of fieldwork first of all by focusing on bodily actions. Watching, and imitating moves and gestures of a woman from the Kuranko tribe while lightening a fire, he set a frame for emphasizing bodiliness, skilling and training the body, cultivating the environment, using firewood with a particular sense of efficiency and care. Jackson got close to these mundane activities and scrutinized the very local sense of skill and practice, as these local meanings are frequently embedded in practices rather than in ideas. „I have endeavored”, he wrote, „a grounded view which begins with interactions and movements of people in an organized environment and considers in detail the pattern of body praxis which arise therein” (Jackson 1989: 134).

There are thus parallels between the work of Jackson and Ingold and the writings of Jacek Olędzki in the way Olędzki tried to capture the particular sense of manual, embodied actions: signifying, making holes in bricks, forming dough. But he showed that these acts could be seen in a particular way: he showed that ethnography can reveal the transforming potential of human actions, gestures and movements in the context of man-environment relationships. We can appreciate this when we watch his documentaries in which he filmed movements of hands and fingers while kneading dough and making little goats or deer. These are only small forms. Maybe thus, because of this transforming potential, Olędzki made photographs of these objects in a very particular way, i.e. he used the light and the photographic lens in such a way that they seemed as if they were monumental sculptures (as Magdalena Zowczak pointed out, 2004: 239).

Studying embodiment or even the „weather-world” (to borrow Tim Ingold’s term) is also the main point of the numerous works of another phenomenologist Thomas Csordas. Studying embodiment, he argued, may entail focusing „neither on behavior nor essence *per se*” but on „experience, and understanding that there is a function of interpreting action in different modes and in different idioms” (Csordas 1999: 150). Thus, Csordas moved forward and tried to invoke Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) idea of embodiment and (bodily) being in the world as a point of departure. He takes a path on which pre-reflective data and sensory engagement could be raised to the level of a methodological approach. This is precisely the sense in which Olędzki developed his particular research skill. He built a different craft of being in the field: different modes and different idiom of interpreting actions, seeing ethnographic detail, directing his attention, following gestures and tiny objects. Elaborating his professional attention, he was able to transform his perceptual horizon in order to see facts that emerged during fieldwork. Thus, he often immersed himself in details that many other anthropologists would never find worth analyzing (cf. Tokarska-Bakir 1995).

### **An apprentice – ethnographer’s path**

Nonetheless, some important questions remain unanswered and I would like to raise them here. What is the relation between his ethnography and the methodological reflection within phenomenological anthropology theory? Is there something comparable between Olędzki’s use of the experiential sources and some Western ethnographic methodologies? And, finally, is it possible to indicate any particular feature of this phenomenological research process and the type of reality this process refers to? By a way of answering these questions I am going to set out some theses, also on a more general level.

First of all my argument is that a particular virtue of seeing ethnographic details was developed in Olędzki’s works and at the same time the larger part of this ethnographic knowledge was gained thanks to his skills of noticing the unpredictable facts, what he dubbed „signs” or „moments of being”. Therefore, a certain practical craft of conducting fieldwork has been developed within the Polish ethnographic tradition, but rather as a „tacit” research knowledge and sensitivity rather than a set of formal methodological reflections and guidelines.

How can we account for this? Thorsten Geiser (2008), following the work of Ingold (2000), employed the term of „apprenticeship” in order to understand such a pre-textual process of obtaining professional knowledge. An apprentice learns how to follow his teacher ontological horizon, i.e. how to engage with the surrounding reality (Geiser 2008: 308-311). Learning about this „horizon” is like getting to know the surroundings with the help of a blind person’s white cane: it is not a stable, material thing any more but a certain pattern of following ob-

jects, events, and meanings. Thus the apprentice, in this case an ethnographer, could make sense of his field and the studied people by immersing himself in their gestures, artifacts, practices or utterances. Like a blind person, the ethnographer is thus equipped with a cane. Put differently, people's actions, words and artifacts begin to function as such a stick. It serves not only as a perceptive tool, but also is instrumental in the process of expanding ethnographer's horizon, so it now includes the worlds of other people. „Thus, the observer”, according to Geiser, „perceives the environment not directly, but via the demonstrator” (Geiser 2008: 310). Olędzki was able to perceive the environment, the events, or the phenomena not directly, but via the demonstrators: the people, the movements, the objects. And by this his „being in the world” expanded.

Olędzki's approach to fieldwork became important among his students and a number of other Polish ethnographers. His work became a viable alternative to the text-derived ethnographic interpretation (Clifford Geertz's idea of thick description) which was very influential in Polish anthropology in the 1990s when I began my ethnographic research. One could even argue that in the last two decades this paradigm and the very idea of „writing culture” dominated almost entire ethnographic methodology in Poland; almost every interpretation was conceived as an act of writing texts, composing voices, and criticizing discourses that emerged in ethnographic accounts. What is then the relationship, our teachers asked us such a question, between the discourse, the material of events and the ethnographic texts? Such questions have begun to be asked very often, leading to the discovery of inevitable necessity of textualising other people's realities. We started to discover that real-life situation in which everything the ethnographer sees, hears and feels is a fiction created by the informant, a fiction of the world in which (s)he lives, not unlike the other fiction the ethnographer creates in tandem: the fiction of the other and the fiction of him/herself doing the ethnography. As Polish anthropologist Wojciech Burszta argued in that time, in ethnography „discourse in a sense *evades* reality's control, as the world created in its framework is one possible world, an imagined one” (Burszta 1993: 195, emphasis original).

I did not believe, however, that this is the case and, as I see it, it was particularly Jacek Olędzki who showed to me very clearly that imagined cultural knowledge does not, in the majority of cases, forfeit its reality. After reading his monographs I started to follow his work and reveal that even the most internal, idiosyncratic behavior can be congruent with reality, though it does often remain invisible, yet perceptible. But why, indeed, is it perceptible? In order to answer this question I will present the process of my own learning ethnographic reality that I have passed through during long-term fieldwork among the unemployed miners of Wałbrzych in southwest Poland (Rakowski 2010). The mines of Wałbrzych were being closed down since the beginning of the 1990s in the process of postsocialist transition; it is necessary to say that a huge, and hard to assess by official statistics,

number of unemployed appeared in Wałbrzych and its surroundings. What was the reaction? Many ex-miners and other workers started excavating coal from the few-metres-deep shafts and fore-shafts. Almost ten years ago Wałbrzych became the centre of illegal, non-industrial coal pits (*biedaszyby*).

When I launched my fieldwork I focused on many different aspects of diggers' work; I was particularly interested in audio-sensory knowledge they, and I did too as I continued my fieldwork, developed. Let me cite a fragment of a digger's free narrative: „see... just you have to know, I have got something like the animals do (...) The rock gives you signals, you understand? (...) If this ceiling fell it would be the end...”. Thus, I came to notice a widespread practice of listening to the shafts in order to recognize the danger. This is exactly what they were saying: they listen to the shaft; they make a few strikes with their pickaxe and then listen, each one in his own corner. Moreover, they listened and used their kinesthetic sensitivity by concentrating on „feeling” the soil as it fell from the ceiling above them, as well as were mindful of the sounds made by the wooden structure of the shaft. Let me quote another comment:

Birch is such a type of wood that it breaks like a stick... and that's why I don't like birches ... Spruce cracks too, but you can hear that it starts cracking... I have an allergy for birches... Spruce fractures slowly, you can hear that... When you hear a birch cracking, it is usually too late... Only yesterday I heard that spruce started cracking... I built new pillars, I fixed it, and everything is OK... It works well now.

Later on they told me that they try to avoid shafts in which they had stopped working. They said that previously abandoned (*nie-robiony*) pits are „uncertain and unstable”, and as long as they keep working in a shaft they consider it safe. Real danger may arise once they start to return to a shaft. Thus, we can see that a pit they work in becomes something like their extended body, a senso-motoric whole, comprising several parts, individuals and bodies. This kind of experience shows that ethnographers still may be able to detect and describe a kind of „perceptible reality” in the field. It was thanks to Ołędzki's work that I could have made this discovery and experience fieldwork as a process of deepening our ability to act and participate in the researched reality and, at the same time, as a process of building our own original path of seeing and recognizing the dense points in the field.

My argument it thus that a novel idea can be derived from this: but it operates not at the level of theory or method but first of all on the level of practice. Thus we may even say that probably it is possible to understand anthropology of Europe not only as ethnographies written down by a mind holding a pen (a paraphrase of Morris Berman's vision of history, see Csordas 1999: 149) but as ethnographies first of all written by an active body, by expanding its being. To put it differently: there lurks a possibility of discovering original strands of practicing



anthropology, not only in Polish context and in the light of Olędzki's work, but potentially in almost every place.

If the above is the case, then there is still so much to do in the sense that we need to recognize hidden traditions of doing fieldwork within the different local anthropological traditions in Europe. One may only wonder what we could discover if we followed these acts of building up knowledge – on various levels of sensual engagements and across various European ethnographic traditions – that potentially hide underneath the veneer of written texts. This is an area still waiting for its discoverers. But thanks to Olędzki's efforts and achievements this work could be understood first of all as a unique art of shaping and animating the ethnographic craft – comparable to „grounding” in Michael Jackson's (1989) work or experiencing „the reality of events” in Kirsten Hastrup's (1995). And then this process could be expanded to building a cluster of fieldwork memories, perceptions and recognitions, a sequence of note-taking, the „headnotes” as Simon Ottenberg (1990: 144-146) put it, or even when filming, observing or following gestures. This could possibly be a unique and still underestimated potential of every local ethnographic tradition in Europe and elsewhere.

**Key words:** fieldwork, methodology, ethnography, phenomenology, Polish anthropology, theory of anthropology

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LOCAL CRAFT, THEORY FROM ABROAD:  
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(Summary)

In this article the author focuses on Polish ethnographies written between 1960-1990 by Jacek Olędzki and argues that it is possible to find a particular way of seeing ethnographic details in these works. The larger part of this ethnographic knowledge was gained thanks to specific skills of noticing and collecting non-discursive data during fieldwork. Therefore, a certain craft of participant observation has been developed within the Polish anthropological tradition. The author refers also to seeing and understanding ethnographic details within the phenomenological/experiential literature in Western anthropology championed by Thomas Csordas, Michael Jackson and Tim Ingold. Yet, these are usually studies which express very clearly their methodological points. On the contrary, the craft of seeing and understanding in Olędzki's ethnography is rather practiced than spelled out in the form of methodological claims. Therefore, some pertinent questions are put forward here: is there anything particular in Olędzki's tradition of gathering ethnographic material? Is there anything comparable in his use of the experiential sources with any Western ethnographic methodologies?

**Key words:** fieldwork, methodology, ethnography, phenomenology, Polish anthropology, theory of anthropology