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**Auto-ethnography: research into one's own culture. Some methodological insights.**

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The methodological issues I would like to discuss are drawn from my own research while preparing my PhD thesis in urban anthropology. My research is being carried out in Zagreb, Croatia. It is focused on New Zagreb, the newer part of the city built intensively between the 1960s and 1980s, as part of the socialist urbanization. I am using various data (master plan, demographic data, newspapers etc), but my main research tool is interviewing. I have collected a significant corpus of urban experiences - oral testimonies on living in New Zagreb. Following that material, I address a number of issues with regard to living in a socialist/postsocialist city: the relationship between the architectural precepts, ideological discourse and everyday life; stereotyping of the urban setting; community building and place-making; the identity of city inhabitants and community attachment; conceptions of home; reflections of the contemporary political, economic, social and cultural transition at the level of everyday life in New Zagreb neighbourhoods.

The argument in the paper is developed around the issue of carrying out the research into one's own culture, and using oneself as the narrator: I was living my childhood during the socialist period; I am a witness to the changes of social and cultural life during the transitional period from 1990s onward; I am an inhabitant of the urban setting in which I do my research; I participate in contemporary life and changes, in urban culture, everyday life and urban identification no less than my informants. Therefore, my research position is that of being participant, insider, a "native" in anthropological terms. The methodological reflections that derive from my position are discussed from the aspect of anthropological research practice and ethnographic writing.

Cultural and social anthropology, as disciplines of the American and British tradition, shaped their scholarly recognisability by pivotal orientation to "the Other" – the "primitive", the tribal, simple, exotic and distant. The European - and thus the Croatian – tradition of ethnology also singled out "the Other" defined as "old, rural, and authentic". In various anthropological/ethnological traditions "the Other" became a temporal and spatial category, packed with cultural, symbolic, value-system and political significance.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interest gradually turned to focus on one's own – the British "anthropology at home", the American "urban anthropology", the Croatian "ethnology of our everyday lives", giving indicative names to that change of course. The new orientations in the discipline had to square accounts for their new position in relation to the two traditions. First, in relation to the earlier frameworks within their own scholarship, seeking for a paradigmatic link, conceptually or methodologically. Second, in relation to the research fields of other sciences, primarily sociology, which has its research area in modern (urban and industrialised) societies. The positioning of new research pursuits of "one's own" within anthropology, initiated a critical discussion on the capacity of the anthropological theoretical tenets, concepts, research units and methodological instrumentation for dealing with the new research area – contemporariness, multiculturalism, multiple identities, complexity and modernity.<sup>1</sup>

"Otherness" still has remained a key characteristic of the ethnological insight. American urban anthropological research, particularly that of the 1970s, was often based on research into the communities that feature urban "Otherness" and diversity – ethnic communities, deviant groups, the marginalised and the homeless. "Otherness" as a subject of ethnological research in modern societies is also emphasised in the observations of the French ethnologist, Marc Augé. His "nearby Others" are close to the ethnologist, but they are not "fully culturally similar" (2002: 30-31).

This shift in focus of research is also referred to in the corresponding name, *auto-anthropology*. Although this is a term of broad meaning that is not unified among various authors, I shall focus on its definition in the sense of the change in the subject of research of the discipline itself. Further on, I shall reflexively comment on the research process, epistemologically and conceptually, discussing the hybrid nature of *auto-ethnography*.

Auto-anthropology implies a twofold positioning of the researcher in relation to "his/her own". First, in the analytical sense - research subject is the researcher's immediate surroundings (Augé, 2002). Second, in the contextual sense, where "one's own becomes a category of knowledge. As explained by Marilyn Strathern, auto-anthropology is the one that is "carried out in the social context which produced it" (1987: 17). In other words, it is the research in which the researcher and the researched group *share* the premises and concepts of social and cultural life that underpin anthropological enquiry.

My personal research situation overlaps many "auto" references, the mentioned spatial and discursive (research of one's own as "place" and as "knowledge"), and, I would add, the experiential and the identifying. *Personal* (my life experience) and my *own* (culturally, socially, politically, economically, symbolically and contemporarily) *overlap*, making up a continuous *fluid research context* with certain permeable, soft places in the conceptual, methodological and narrative aspect.

In my work, the everyday life, concepts and processes of the city are both the theme of my research and aspects of my personal life. Unlike empathy - emotional, intellectual or imaginative – which is demanded in classical anthropological methodology, my research position necessitates contrary procedure that could be called poetic "wonderment", or scholarly defamiliarisation or rationalisation. I encountered the difficulty to achieve the distance from the concepts that I was interested in my research, since I also have adopted them as part of my personal life experiences, discursive models and value-system. These are the concepts that are interiorised, culturally close, familiarised, the ones in which various aspects of our lives (both of my informants as well as mine) have been evaluated and understood, the concepts within which we think about our lives, assess our situation, and conceive our urban life. It is necessary to take a step back, a *distance from* entrenched, common sense, and interiorised thought and practice, to undertake a rational distancing from the personal, experiential field of living and validations. For example, the method of observation with participation is redefined in such a process on the basis of completely contrary principles from those set by anthropologist Malinowski during the 1920s, from which anthropology bears its methodological specificity. The process of "entering" the research community, integration and familiarisation, the method by which an anthropologist grasp the "native point of view", is redefined in research of one's own and the personal in distancing from the community, and rationalisation of the interiorised

(knowledge, history, experience). The process of "going native" takes a new orientation - "going strange". An essential precept of my research work is the new stance towards the classic ethnographic axiom "go out into the field": I do not enter the field in order to conduct research into the model of meaning, feeling, moral and value systems norms; instead, I am *in the field*, ontologically and epistemologically co-existing with the field. Therefore, I do not have to surmount the barriers that in the classical anthropological fieldwork methodology separate ethnographers from the experience of autochthonous members of particular cultures and societies. As a researcher I have to distance myself from the field, but still I always remain the "native informant". When research of one's own is being conducted (of the cultural, social, political, economic, symbolic one's own ...), the researcher cannot avoid his/her own experience, which is not only the experience of the fieldwork and of the situation, but of life. That very conversion is debatable, both epistemologically and methodologically: "using myself as an informant about my own society ... as a part of the process of systematically transforming cultural familiarity into systematic knowledge" (Gullestad, 1991: 89). Therefore, there are two key meanings of auto-anthropology, a step back and distancing from "one's own", and an incorporation of "the personal" in the researched subject.

The experiential directness by which the anthropological methodological paradigm is also legitimised, is brought to its maximum in such a research situation and intensified to the degree of the blurring the borders between researcher/informants, maintaining distance/being involved, and authenticity/deformation. In this pendulum position it is also difficult to distinguish between scholarly observation and maintaining the analytical level on the one hand, and autobiographical consideration of one's own life on the other hand. One inspires the research question in the other, intuitive responses demand some form of verification in other experiences or studious explanations, while the scholarly analytical level is galvanised with analysis of one's own experience. I found myself in uncertain territory when I tried to assess the possibility of my own personal story becoming part of the body of the collected narratives about urban life – should it be set apart as a separate autobiographical-analytical essay type? But then, why should it be given separate status, despite how it is treated, and how should a separate, autonomous analytical process be conducted? Should the personal narrative be inserted into the entirety of the narrative material, from which quotations, fragments and illustrative parts could be set apart in the final text? The researcher's field autobiography has already been a legitimate part of the

ethnographic genre, promoted by the postmodern critics: the author's story includes auto-reflexive field notes and depicts the creation of the ethnographic context and knowledge. In my work the author's story has a different connotation: what is in question is the life story of an individual – the researcher - which becomes the integral part of the narrative corpus of the research. In keeping with the above-mentioned auto-anthropology as a field and discourse on researching one's own culture and society, we may also speak of *auto-ethnography* as the hybrid genre of ethnography and autobiography, of writing that blends the "personal" and "one's own".<sup>ii</sup> According to Clifford Geertz (1983), speaking of the mixing of genres in postmodern intellectual life, this is a "blurred genre" that "refigures social thought".<sup>iii</sup>

That genre is immanently dialogical at both the research and personal level. At the first level mentioned, the dialogue is achieved through the interview model that is not probing but dialogical, where the conversation between the researcher and his/her collocutor becomes an *exchange* of speech, experience and opinions. I was led to this conclusion by my own field experience, where interviews often developed into a *conversation* that was more like an exchange of comments, an agreement or disagreement on views and the conversation about mutually experienced themes rather than interrogation on research themes. Although I tried in the beginning, in the first interviews, to reduce my voice to a minimum of involvement, trying to maintain researcher distance, with time I succumbed to the pleasantness of conversation and the interviews themselves became richer. When later transcribing the interviews, I noticed that, with time, the conversations became a forum within which I developed some theses and rejected others, all this unfolding within a context that is not exclusively analytical, but also personal, about my life. In that way, these conversations were continuously open to a process of creating a research undertaking, and also a sequence of personal development.

The decision to conduct a personal narrative in an imaginary dialogical form – according to the themes of the prepared questionnaire - gave me a new insight. I noticed the difficulty associated with systematising thought into a coherent response in the part of the questionnaire in which I had intentionally put direct questions. For example, the theme of home (the comprehension of home, the elements which make up a home, relations with other structural frameworks – culture, society, socialism, etc.) were richly contextualised from the research aspect during the conversations, with the personal experiences of the

people I interviewed, their origins, status, and a description of a series of their everyday practices. I would also put direct questions during an interview (what does home mean to you?), to which I hardly ever received a direct answer in any of the interviews. I encountered the difficulty with conceptualising a *notion* - its content and borders - in the form of a condensed response, only when I put the question to myself.

When I sum up the process-oriented nature of my own stance towards research, I set aside three points that most significantly influence the research. First, there is the prompting to reflect my own experiences and to heighten the awareness of personal concepts; second, collected knowledge about the researched area (particularly from architectural and urban-planning studies) transformed my view of the place researched, and, consequently, my interpretation; and, third, the fact that I got to know people through meetings and contacts, and the number of personal links that I established, considerably changed my viewpoint. Thus, the research provided the incentive for my increased reflexiveness towards personal, experienced situations, places, and encounters, leading to rewriting of part of my personal history, and making certain new emphases and evaluations. Since the research in question is one in which "the conditions of the researcher's life are created as the field", in which the endogenous position (the life of the researcher) and exogenous (the research project) are combined, the situation sometimes arises in which "you forget to make notes because you feel that this is your life" (cf. Emerson and Pollner, 2001). From that research aspect, continuous reading of professional literature created a balance and always returned me, conceptually, to my research position and the project, and to my identity as a scholar.

In sum, within the auto-anthropology, the prefix "auto" refers to three categories. First, it refers to the auto-reflexivity within the discipline, in terms of its critical capacity to redefine its basic conceptual and methodological premises. Second, auto-anthropology refers to the "own" - the research of one's own culture. In anthropological terminology, explaining research by the conceptual and interpretative instrumentation "from inside" is a characteristic of the emic approach. Research into one's own culture and society is necessarily *emic* in the auto-anthropological sense, since the same contextual (social, cultural, and conceptual) nest is in question. Therefore, the main question in the auto-anthropological production of knowledge is bound up with what we could perhaps call an interiorisation of the *etic* approach - that is "translating" the researched entity into notions, concepts and discourses of anthropological scholarship, by which one would finally

legitimise the relevance of the project and the discipline. Third, the auto-anthropology refers to the "personal" - the personal life experiences of the researcher are constantly re-evaluated during the research process, but also, this kind of reflexivity participate in the creation of the research process. Any kind of research into one's own contemporary culture places the researcher into peculiar position of (experientially) insider and (scientifically adequate) outsider. This *hibridity* is salient position of the researcher in auto-anthropological research and interpretation process.

Since there are significant methodological convergences between anthropology and oral history, I hope that presented consideration of research practices could open up fruitful discussion.

#### Literature:

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<sup>i</sup> There is a host of literature that analyses the changes in the subject of research within various national disciplinary traditions of anthropology/ethnology, for example see volumes Jackson, 1987; and Segalen, 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> There is a rich body of studies that examines the use and significance of the "personal story" in research of the ways in which both individual and social forms are culturally constructed through the biographic genre. The emergence of the terms that link the life story and the discipline date from the mid-1970s, but they were not fully systemised terminologically in their use by various authors. There is mention of the "ethnographic

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autobiography" (the life story of an "ordinary member of society"); "the anthropological autobiography", as a new genre in which the anthropologist becomes an autobiographical subject; "auto-ethnography", as writing about one's own culture, without necessary autobiographic references, "native anthropology" (where earlier informants become authors of studies about their own culture), "ethnic autobiography" (personal stories of members of ethnic minorities), and "autobiographic ethnography", which introduces the anthropologist's personal experience of the fieldwork into ethnographic writing. Summing up the diverse forms, the editor of a collection of papers on auto-ethnographic articles, defined the term as "self narrative that places the self within a social context". This is, at the same time, a method and a text, where the authorship may be that of the anthropologist (when he/she is dealing with his/her own culture), but not necessarily so (Rewed - Danahay, 1997, Introduction). The converging and permeation of the biographical and ethnographical genres prompted the key question of the relationship between the researcher and the collocutor, the scholarly authority and legitimacy, authenticity and experience (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Okely & Callaway, 1992).

<sup>iii</sup> Speaking of "blurred genres", Geertz (1983) refers to the mixing of genres in postmodern intellectual life, which blends philosophical debates, literary criticism, scholarly discussions, literature, empirical observation, testimony, travelogues and ideologisation. A resultant difficulty lies in the location of the author and his work within paradigmatic disciplinary borders.