Activist anthropology
as a cultivating of participant observation.

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ABSTRACT

The text describes a consideration of activist anthropology, which I treat as an extension of participant observation. It stems from and builds upon the methodological eclecticism of anthropology/ethnology. For me, activist anthropology is the closest to the original premise of participant observation because in this view the researcher's participation is possibly closest to that of the research partners. I present the theoretical foundations on which it is based and the circumstances of my research-activist practice in which my interpretation of it was developed. I demonstrate in the text its features that reinforce the need to distinguish the term activist anthropology as a specific practice of participatory observation and anthropology itself.

KEYWORDS:

activist anthropology, ethnography, participant observation, activism, field research, method.

Among anthropology/ethnology institutes across Poland, we have students who are fascinated by the field and are looking for their way of doing anthropology and beyond, as each of us negotiates our position and role in society. The next generations are more and more engaged in social activity and try to find themselves as citizens in Polish/European society. Young researchers, searching for their path, get introduced to the reality of university, points and grants. They try to make their own paths through student circles, university institutions, grants and their own research. This text is an attempt to convey my response to the search for my path in our field, which grew out of a reconsideration of participant observation, of which activist anthropology is a specific form of cultivation.

Methodological approaches in our field have changed over time. In Poland, the times when Bronisław Malinowski was called the 'chain dog of imperialism' (see Jasiewicz 2004), and we functioned only as an auxiliary science of history within the 'history of material culture' (Posern-Zieliński 2005: 114), are, from the perspective of the young generation of anthropologists, long gone, and participant observation as defined by Bronisław Malinowski is the basis with which we introduce students already in the first semester of their studies. But still, as in the past, we must fight for our discipline's subjectivity. Fighting for emancipation and not perceiving anthropology only as a historical discipline. Due to political changes, we have been classified into a fuzzy category (not included in the OECD classifications) of "cultural and religious sciences". The Polish categorization is very far from OECD and diminishes the subjectivity of our scientific discipline. Despite many protest actions and support from foreign organizations and authorities from around the world (see Dohnal 2018), this change came into effect and we have come to function in this reality. Our weapons of weakness remain efforts to maximize the preservation of our ethnonym,

anthropology (see Buchowski 2020), and to continue to develop and disseminate knowledge about our discipline.

One such effort might be to maintain the individual identity of our discipline by highlighting our methodology and how it contributes to transforming ethics, epistemology, and theory. Anthropology is no longer distinguished by "what do we research?" as contemporary research fields are explored by many different academic disciplines. The distinguishing feature of anthropology remains "how do we research?" through the practice of ethnography (Kaczmarek 2016: 125). Specifically, practicing participant observation, if possible informal observation, and participating in the activities of our research partners, during which we are becoming part of the practices being performed. When during participant observation ourselves, we can hardly distinguish between the researcher observing the participant and the participants anymore. This creates a unique space for assimilating information that stems from the unique nature of anthropological relationships between people.

The basis for these reflections is my research-activist practice, which in 2018 I focused on engaging with groups supporting *Obóz dla Klimatu*, which was just getting organized. There, for the first time, I overtly acted as a research-activist who became part of the group and was more often seen, and still is, as an activist who is a researcher rather than a researcher entering the group. I was a person who was increasingly enmeshed in interpersonal relationships. This made me part of transnational activist networks as a researcher-activist. Thus, between 2018 and 2020, I had the opportunity to co-found the following groups *Miesiąc dla Kimatu*, *Obóz dla Klimatu*, *Limits jsme my* and *Ende Gelände*. They all fit into the category of "new social movements" (Della Porta, Diani 2009; Paleczny 2010) used to describe New York's Occupy Wall Street or Spain's Indignados movement (see Rozalska 2015). "New" movements, in contrast to "old" movements established in the 19th century (socialist and communist), primarily undertake ecological, feminist, pacifist, anti-nuclear activities and defend human rights including minority rights. *Miesiąc dla Kimatu* operate mainly in Poland, *Limity jsme my* in the Czech Republic, and *Ende Gelände* — the most numerous and known for organizing civil disobedience actions — in Germany. *Limity jsme my* and *Obóz dla Klimatu* are mainly involved in organizing climate camps, i.e. meetings of activists that sometimes turn into acts of civil disobedience, while *Miesiąc dla Kimatu* is a group that functions only for a short period of time in order to encourage the residents of Poznań and its surroundings to become activists and get involved in the organization of the climate camp. Each collective identifies itself as anti-coal, anti-capitalist, and anti-fascist, marking the inseparability of these three demands.

While co-creating these groups, we formed specific relationships that built mutual trust, which became the basis for the bond that developed between us. As time went by, my activity became more and more involved. However, I still remained in a kind of liminal zone — I was someone between researcher, activist and friend. This is a problem experienced by many researchers who go deeply into the field. They reach for a variety of methods to deal with this situation. I found it helpful to reflect on activist anthropology. The origins of activist anthropology can be traced back to 1977, when Paul Rabinow (2010) pointed out that there are not "primitive people," but human beings who live differently. However, this observation, now quite obvi-

ous, was still far from being equated with the people among whom we conduct our research. Essential to the emergence of activist anthropology was a critical reflection on the entire research process, from the process of constituting ethnographic authority (Caplan, Knowledge 1992) and researcher authority (Geertz 2000; Clifford 2000) to the role of text (Clifford, Marcus 1986; Marcus, Fischer 1986). An additional inspiration for the emergence of activist anthropology was the contribution of economic anthropology and its critical approach to the market economy and consumption. Marcell Mauss (2001), Marshall Sahlins (2003), and Carl Polanyi (2010) played an invaluable role here, creating space for the anthropologist to engage with groups that construct their local political ontologies in non-schematic ways (Escobar 2008; 2011; Casas-Cortes, Osterweil, and Powell 2013) and to engage with activists in the struggle for global justice (Graeber 2009). All of these works not only help to imagine the worlds described, but also draw the context necessary to understand them (see Demmer, Hummel 2017).

During my research-activist practice, I reached for the methodological suggestions in Agata Hummel's (2017) article, which is devoted to the search for a research perspective that allows for the best possible grasp of the issue of activism. Although I do not share all of the author's thoughts, after all, our perspectives were often different, just as my understanding of activist anthropology is different, I nevertheless found her work very inspiring.

In my view, activist anthropology is an extension of participant observation. When we step into the role of researcher-activist, we do not stop at participating in the lives of our research partners and learning from them, but we also step into other roles. Together with the people from whom we would ordinarily obtain information, we create new social relationships, taking an activist and sometimes even leadership role in them. This specific bond between research partners and the researcher prompts the search for a perspective that can more appropriately frame the issue of activism. This is due, among other things, to the disillusionment with "conventional" ethnographic methods, especially the power relationship between research partners and researchers. This problem was already pointed out by Paul Rabinow in Reflections on Field Research in Morocco when he realized that from the position of power of the researcher, he was practicing symbolic violence against his informants (Rabinow 2010: 115).

My research situation was a little different. When I entered a group that was just forming, I always communicated what I did and why I decided to work with them. I did not enter the existing structure of the group, as it was just being formed, in which process I actively participated. My "ethnographic immersion" deepened every day, sometimes even turning into "drowning" — every day I was flooded from all sides with new information and experiences, which in practice made it impossible to gradually "enter" the field, because it was being created around me. New people were joining the group, new relationships were forming, and I was actively participating in all of this. In such a situation, research partners became my collaborators, who did not expect from me any committed action or specific knowledge as a form of "payment" for information. Our relationship did not take the form of a transaction, but of a partnership. Information was for the asking, and action on behalf of the group

became a duty. At times, I was expected to take the initiative because I was seen as one of the group leaders. For example, during one of the workshops, a participant said at the forum that she felt uncomfortable having to speak before those she considered to be group leaders did, pointing to me and two other female activists. This allowed me to see that just as in social life politics changes and hides under many masks, takes different forms and is expressed through different discourses and practices, so too does my role in the community I have chosen to explore, and that I may unexpectedly be assigned a leadership role. This is a far different situation from being an observer, even a participant observer.

Practicing activist anthropology and sometimes playing a leadership role had its negative consequences. At first, I felt too comfortable and included a lot of information that did not contribute much to the analysis of the phenomenon itself, but which might have endangered my research partners. After reflection and consultation with other activist researchers, I was able to avoid this danger and decided to remove some data from the final version of the text. I did the same with my research notes and journals, most of which I decided to destroy while researching and writing the paper. I decided to take such a radical step because the groups I described are often treated by governments or other institutions as political threats, anarchists, leftists, eco-terrorists, etc. Some of my research partners were therefore concerned about the political and economic impact of these groups. Some of my research partners have been repressed by the police and other services because of this — they have been held in police stations and police cars to intimidate them, sometimes taken to court, harassed by summonses for questioning, and repeatedly carded. Additionally, several of my friends were assaulted by members of far-right groups. Given their experiences, I decided to destroy the records so that the information they contained would not endanger the lives, health, and freedom of my research partners.

I began my field notes in the classic manner. I assigned codes or pseudonyms to my research partners, but with time I abandoned this method. This happened when during our conversations the topic of police surveillance came up. My partners mentioned wiretaps and undercover officers in unmarked police cars appearing at their homes. One person was assaulted and severely beaten, and his car was vandalized. At first, I downplayed this information, but after working with them for a while, I began to experience what I was being told. I experienced the first instance of a disturbed sense of security while at a climate camp. I was photographed by policemen in unmarked police cars, and I was repeatedly accosted and asked many questions in a manner that was far from pleasant. The atmosphere of permanent surveillance was intensified by any anomalies in the operation of phones including remote activation of Wi-Fi, data transfer, bluetooth and microphones. During my activist-research practice, I was also searched and carded by uniformed services, and eventually I also experienced direct violence from police assault squads[1]. I was finally persuaded to abandon the classic ethnographic interview as a research tool by the reaction of my

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[1] I use here the colloquial term police assault units to describe the units in Poland called *Oddziały Prewencji Policji* (OPP) or *Samodzielne Pododdziały Prewencji Policji* (SPPP), in Germany *Bereitschaftspolizei* and in the Czech Republic *Speciální Pořádkové Jednotky*.

partners, who seemed to feel uncomfortable during the interviews. Not so much because of the information they provided, but because they feared that it was being kept in one place, whether in the form of an audio recording or traditional notes. Recording in-depth interviews or biographical interviews with activists whose activities constantly expose them to legal consequences or attacks from political opponents could have created an additional danger if the information obtained during them was stored in a form other than in the memory of a trusted person. In order to avoid this, and with a view to mutual trust, during the research I resigned from recording conversations, limiting myself to necessary notes. Consequently, I sometimes needed to ask the same questions repeatedly in order to remember the answers well. Thankfully, I knew I could count on their understanding and appreciation for respecting their rules and privacy. During my research among climate activists, I had to learn an additional skill to effectively protect my privacy and theirs. It turned out that using a variety of encrypted communicators was useful for this. In addition, I also learned to distinguish between information that should flow through one channel or another and those that can be sent through Facebook or as a regular SMS message. I also found it necessary to regularly check all information sharing platforms in order to stay up to date with the groups' activities. Another habit I developed was to stop carrying my phone with me at all times. After just one week of community life, I stopped walking around the apartment with my smartphone in my hand, aware that this could contribute to disrupting meetings whose participants wanted to be sure to keep the meetings completely confidential.

The ethical choices I made during my research were the result of the situations I experienced and my critical reflection on them. It seems to me that this is inevitable in the work of an anthropologist. Operating in such a fluid environment as social life requires a constant willingness to change, to revise research goals and methods and tools, and a willingness to change oneself in one's interactions with others, especially commitment. I believe that practitioners of anthropology, as always, should create standards and set a new course for the rest of science.

We need the involvement of academics in research, relations, local and global activities for faster reform and transformation. The aloof researcher who describes and analyzes reality without revealing his experiences and emotions should eventually turn into a withered branch of the anthropological methodological tree, and events like the ones described below are thankfully fading away.

> One young researcher speaking at a popular science event about her experiences and difficult emotions related to the field recounted her requests to her supervisor for help in methodologically dealing with her emotions and relationships with her research partners. To questions and requests for help as to what attitude to adopt when the bond between the researcher and her partners tightened, she heard like a mantra that she should distance herself as a determinant of the researcher's professionalism.

We should replace distancing with reflection on the research process and in-depth autoethnography, which is very useful during the later analysis of the collected ma-

terial, because we should remember that the basic tool is the researcher himself, and many factors influence his perception of the reality in which we have come to practice anthropology. I am ready to propose the thesis that practicing anthropology is inseparable from engagement. I have not met an anthropologist/anthropologist who was not engaged in the social issue being explored. Whether it be social movements, folk crafts, beliefs, or consumption. Whether the methods the anthropologist/anthropologist uses are ethical is another matter. In addition, the question of ethics is not clearly understood in our environment, for one researcher it will be ethical to declare himself as a researcher in a group while recording conversations without knowledge and storing them on encrypted disks and an armored closet, the other will support his group, consult the content of the texts for many months, even at the expense of the smooth development of his own career. We are forced to face many dilemmas in a system intent on accountability and technologies disciplining our work (see Shore 2008) focused on profit and pathological control of academic effectiveness, in effect distancing the university from society.

This makes us face not only the "methodological eclecticism" that Aleksander Posern-Zieliński (2005) spoke of, but also an ethical one, which may further distance us from a consensus around what our discipline is. Despite the many differences in research approaches situated between survey research and participant observation (see Kaczmarek 2016), we strive to create a community that supports each other, grows, and efficiently mobilizes in situations relevant to our discipline. It is on such ground that an activist anthropology is produced that seeks to combine the "different" into the "coherent."

Activist anthropology can be classified as a specific form of engaged anthropology. However, this time I will start with ethical issues. For the purposes of this text, I will not attempt to define what anthropology is, but I will point out that anthropology/ethnology as a scientific discipline gives you the tools and, if you are lucky, the predisposition to look at the world, connections, relations, persons, and everything non-human in a specific way. Activist anthropology is a specific kind of ethical approach in which we consider ethical behavior towards ourselves and Science more than towards our research partners, because taking care of them is an unquestionable priority. One could delve into divisions over engage, engage, applied, public, practical, collaborated anthropology that attempt to define and delineate engaged anthropology and consider shades of meaning of the term "engagement." In this text, I do not pretend to trace the network of connections between science and activism (see Baer 2014). At this stage of consideration, it suffices to assume that the distinctiveness of this approach is distinguished by the researcher-activist mindset, the desire to engage, apply, practice, bring change or educate while maintaining the desire to pursue cognition. In its essence, activist anthropology seeks to connect. Therefore, for the sake of clarity of message, let me not engage in a detailed discussion of the particulars of the evolutionary branch from which it derives. What we should focus on is the fact that through practice it connects theories, methods, and academic considerations/debates by drawing them back to the human being. It connects the researcher and the activist in human beings. So does the observer and the writer. Connecting in action — this is how activist anthropology can be summed up. However, forestalling

the accusation that activist anthropology is nothing more than the activism of the anthropologist, I would like to further demonstrate its features that reinforce the need for the term.

1. First, activist anthropology emerges from the need for cognition as a method of in-depth analysis of social phenomenon, which seems to be closest to the original premise of participant observation.
2. It fulfils the role of an academic reaching out to society, or rather not leaving society, who uses his or her skills to extend the debate about the future shape of society beyond the walls of the university. This is where I see the difficulty in maintaining the perception of our activities as academic. What is needed is the attentiveness to maintain a critical approach to the observed reality and the ability to reflect on the observed reality.
3. Here comes the danger of not reflecting on the subject because of the involvement in the activity. In order to prevent this, we need a detailed autoethnography as an immanent part of activist anthropology, which allows us to reflect more fully on the human being in the analysis, not the other, but ourselves. It allows us to avoid the accusations of the previous century of what Elsie Clews Parsons called in her practice "propaganda through ethnographic method" (Friedlander 1988: 286).
4. By openly communicating our role in the activist community we create space for reflection, critique, development, and improvement of the functioning and sustainability of the movement or community. Often through informal interviews that take the form of long discussions we can find questions that help to overcome often undisclosed problems within a movement or community.
5. In this approach, the Anthropologist/Anthropologist appears as an "expert in asking questions", she gives a new course of events to the reality within which she/he appears.

In this approach to the practice of anthropology, the researcher does not merely describe a found social reality. He/she becomes part of it and takes responsibility for his/her actions and the social role he/she plays. Assuming that anthropology is a kind of set of social-intellectual traits which make up the predisposition which we are endowed with in the educational process — this predisposition allows us to look at the surrounding society in a different way — it becomes our duty to use our skills not only to accumulate knowledge, but also to make present analyses, actively participating in the development of groups and trying to use the previously acquired knowledge for the benefit of the wider public. Such activities can take countless different forms and I see the possibility of using it not only in working with activist groups. We can use our skills for what my research partners have called a path to a better future when researching heritage, migration, gender, family, power, and I see no limit here even when researching with groups very distant from us in terms of worldview (see Filip 2015) — our very presence in such a group creates a space for dialogue that is a path to a better future.

I do not believe that activist anthropology is a universal tool. Sometimes access to a group is so limited (see Filip 2015a) that other people are unwilling to talk to us, and

the prospect of deeper dialogue with the group becomes impossible. Sometimes our research takes a form in which there is no direct contact with live individuals, and the field is understood in multiple ways (see Buliński, Kairski 2011). We study the content of the Internet and the actions of people active in it, but despite the apparent lack of contact "with living people," there is also space here to apply activist anthropology. In some groups, communication through contemporary communication methods becomes the primary way of interacting, and just as learning the local language was once the basis of understanding, now the acquisition of new and very diverse communication methods and tools takes a similar form. I see a particular space for the use of activist anthropology during networked research among groups engaged in open-source intelligence (OSINT). In this regard, the skills of people who have gone through anthropological education turn out to be extremely useful and improve the activities of such groups.

Finally, whether we decide to practice activist anthropology or choose another path of anthropological practice, the final decisions we make about the material we collect remain in our hands. We function in a reality in which content — most often contained in a text, sometimes in a film, an exhibition, or some other medium through which we communicate the fruits of our deliberations on an issue — is the culmination of our work, and it is in the work on content that the final difficulty of not crossing the thin line between scholarly text and propaganda. The decision is always ours, but here, in addition to all the previously mentioned tools (including autoethnography), review work is essential. Reviewers extremely often seem to be belittled especially in a neo-liberal point scoring reality focusing on accountability, competition in the name of quality, efficiency, glorification of excellence, cult of management and promises of economic success (Halffman, Radder 2015: 165–173). This system does not gratify mutual support among academics and activities for the common good. The critical eye of a reviewer less emotionally invested in the research material and content of our work often helps to look critically at our analysis and interpretation, and it is often the one that ensures the clarity of the argument and its accessibility. However, it is another issue that concerns our activism within the academy and our effective influence on legislation. This is a very important issue that still needs a lot of work and engagement from the entire academic community, definitely deserving of discussion in a separate article.

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