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Street demonstration as a narrative. Ethnography of public participation

Abstract

The author briefly discusses performative aspects of demonstration which, in his opinion, is a kind of narration, co-created by the demonstrators as their story about themselves. By providing the example of the March of Independence – a mass demonstration in Warsaw, organised annually on the 11th of November by the Polish nationalists, the author tries to answer the questions: what, to whom and how the street demonstration tells its narrative’ and what kind of community the demonstration creates.

Keywords: meta-social commentary, narrative, nationalism, performance, street demonstration, the March of Independence

Half a year ago, I have started my research and focused on performative aspects of the social phenomena of street demonstrations. It is based on the analysis of the March of Independence – a mass demonstration in Warsaw, organised annually on 11th November (which is Polish “Day of Independence”) by the Polish nationalists. Every year this event stirs a debate in the media, often full of controversy and ambiguities. I hope that the use of ethnographic methods of analysis will enable its better understanding.

Method

The method that I have mostly used is participant observation – not only during the March but in the Internet as well (I am conducting my research on the websites and fan-pages devoted to this event). Furthermore, I interviewed participants of the demonstrations in attempt to discover their actual motivation for taking part in it, their reflections on the March and feelings this event has awak-

ened in them as well as the beliefs they wanted to manifest. I am far from drawing any conclusions considering the early stage of my research, but I want to mention some observations I have made so far and my analytical perspective which, I hope, can give some interesting results.

Fieldwork

The March of Independence has been organized since 2009 by two nationalist organisations: The All-Polish Youth (Pol. *Młodzież Wszechpolska*) and The National Radical Camp (Pol. *Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*). What is important, both of them underline that this is the event not only for nationalists but for everybody who is proud of being a Pole and considers himself a patriot and wants to celebrate the Day of Independence. For this reason, there are many different organisations from All-Over Poland Organisation which participate in the March: patriotic associations, catholic groups, football fans, historical re-enactors, politicians and celebrities, social organisations and many others. There are also plenty of individuals who are not members of any of these groups but like the idea of the March and want to participate in it. The vast majority of demonstrators identifies itself with the right side of Polish political stage and is critical toward current authorities.

The March of Independence is considered controversial especially by the left-wing activists who accuse organisers of propagating chauvinism, xenophobia and even fascism. They used to organise blockades of The March which resulted in riots between the two sides. During the last March, there was no leftist blockade, but a group of participants clashed with the police. Some say that they were a group of hooligans who joined the March just looking for an occasion to fight, but there are also people who claim that it was the police who provoked the riots, in order to blockade the anti-government demonstration. Participants of the March very often criticize the image of the March created in Polish mainstream media. They emphasize that it is oversimplified and not reliable because the media concentrate their attention exclusively on the riots, which are only a small element of the whole event.

Meta-social commentary

I perceive this street demonstration as a rather special kind of narrative, co-created by the demonstrators carrying banners, waving flags, chanting slogans and songs and listening to speeches delivered by their leaders. Clifford Geertz could call it the “meta-social commentary”, as it is a narrative which the demonstrating group tells about itself (Geertz 2005:105–106). In case of the March of Independence, this narrative concerns the historical roots of the nation; establishes

the link of continuity with the past; describes modern problems which the group perceives as its own and which drove it to the streets in the first place; and finally looks into the future, establishing common goals for the group. The ideological enemy is also a constant element of this narrative.

The historical roots of the group are expressed – for example – in slogans such as: “honour and glory for the heroes!” which worships everybody who fought for Polish Independence, “Roman Dmowski – the liberator of Poland!” which reminds of the leader of Polish national movement, and for example chanting the name of “National Armed Force” (Pol. Narodowe Siły Zbrojne) – Polish anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet paramilitary organisation operating during and after World War II. There are also historical re-enactors, who remind demonstrators of their bond with concrete groups, characters and events from the past.

Modern problems which are important to the group are represented in slogans and inscriptions on banners addressed to the authorities. For example, they shout: “down with the red democracy!” as they claim the current government policy is a continuation of a bygone communist system and there are still many communists among the authorities today. The football fans have their own slogan: “Donald the bastard, we hooligans will bring you down!”, which is aimed at Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

They are also slogans such as: “down with the Brussels occupation!” or: “yesterday Moscow, today Brussels takes away our freedom of speech!” – because they believe that the European Union policy limits Polish independence.

The common goals for the group are put in words such as: “The great Poland is our aim!” or: “not the red, nor the rainbow, but only national Poland!” – which express a thought that the idea of nation should be the most important for Poles in their thinking about their country. These slogans are aimed at the ideas of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, propagated by left-wing activists.

Those last are described as the ideological enemies. The marching crowd shouts: “the capital of Poland don’t want the leftists!” or: “throw a hammer and a sickle on the red rabble!”. They also sing anti-communist song: “On the trees, instead of leaves, we shall hang the communists!”

There are many other slogans, songs, inscriptions, symbols, and behaviours which one can rate among one of this four elements of demonstration narrative. I have emphasized these only as the elements of meta-social commentary.

Social laboratory

The notion of “meta-social commentary” was developed by Victor Turner. He suggests that it is not only a simple projection of group’s experience but a creative acting of it, its interpretation. From his perspective, meta-social commentary is a kind of laboratory in which a group or society deforms and exaggerates its problems in order to emphasise and examine them (Turner 2005:173–174). During the March of Independence, one can observe many such examples of exaggeration. By

slogans and songs people threaten the government with violence but, in reality, they are not going to put this violence into effect. What they want to express is their dissatisfaction with its policy. All the left-wing activists are called “communists” and all the ruling politicians are traitors and robbers. Modern social problems are compared to and identified with much more tragic events from the past.

Performance

Another notion which is a helpful analytical tool for my research is “performance” – in the meaning which Tim Edensor (2004) gave to this word. His approach was to use a metaphor of “performance” to study how people reproduce their national identity by dramatizing and enacting (performing) it in everyday life. As he says, he explores “national dramas” and links this notion with different phenomena he observes in spheres such as: popular culture, tourism, sport events, carnivals and others. I find it useful when it comes to the analysis of the March of Independence. From this perspective Warsaw streets are a stage, participants of the March are actors and organisers of the demonstration are screenwriters and directors. The question is: where is the “audience”? I can describe it four levels. The first level is people who come only to watch the demonstration and all the Warsaw inhabitants who watch it from their windows. The second is the media and the people who take their knowledge of the March from the television, the press or the Internet. The third are the demonstrators themselves because they perform in front of each other and therefore they construct their common identity. And the last fourth level is each of the participants who plays his role in front of himself to confirm his own, individual identity and his attachment to values expressed during the demonstration. By participating in the March of Independence, I had many occasions to see how demonstrators shouted slogans full of sadness or anger although they were not angry nor sad at all. On the contrary – many of them had great fun doing that. By slogans, the demonstrators try to convince themselves not only to the ideas but also to the particular feelings, even if they do not feel them in reality.

It is difficult to call Polish authorities the audience of demonstration, but it is worth point out that the vast majority of slogans is directed towards them. The slogans are usually full of criticism and aggression as well.

The way the demonstrators play their roles for each of the audiences (city inhabitants, the media, the authorities and themselves) shows how they construct the image of themselves. Ethnographic method, which allows the researcher to be very close to people, their behaviour and experience, may help understand such complicated phenomena as the March of Independence. The metaphor of street demonstration as a narrative turns out to be helpful to explore participants’ identity and find its most important elements.

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