



Maciej Falski

Institute of Western and Southern Slavic Studies
University of Warsaw
mf.falski@gmail.com

Neighbourhood as a Social and Cultural Issue

Abstract

The neighbourhood is a broad category, which is present throughout sociological and cultural research. Of course, articles of the latest issue of "Colloquia Humanistica" do not exhaust the problem. However, we present crucial texts that relate to rarely undertaken issues, some of which might even be considered pioneering. We hope that they will be inspiring for researchers who are interested in the humanities and cultural studies, and once again we are pleased that we have been able to create an issue that is not merely declaratively, but truly interdisciplinary, and yet consistent. We try to present an understanding of the neighbourhood that emerges from the presented texts. The connotation they are most concerned with is that of exchange and opening, of contact, which is based on upholding the borders of one's group – and of oneself, one's own space, but at the same time, on opening to other people and the need for communication during which communities and people define themselves. The neighbourhood and contact are also the basis for the exchange processes, the thwarting of which can lead to the most dangerous phenomena for the functioning of societies.

Keywords: neighbourhood; interdisciplinary approach; cultural contact; border

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL License (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. © The Author(s), 2015

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

Editor in chief: Jolanta Sujecka

Conception and academic editing of this issue: Maciej Falski

Two types of experience influenced the choice of the category of neighbourhood as the main theme of the fourth “Colloquia Humanistica” volume.

Firstly, it is a frequently cited category in Balkan studies. In the experience of this cultural area, where the central government was distant and alien for centuries, a specific quasi-public sphere that is based on direct contacts at a micro scale has developed (Falski, 2011). What is more, the Balkans were, as we would say from today’s perspective, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region, so daily practices required communication with culturally different people. This tended to develop neighbour-oriented strategies that allowed maintaining social order at the level of the local community. This phenomenon has been described repeatedly, and researchers have introduced the category of neighbourhood – the Balkan *komşuluk* – to ethnological research (Bielenin-Lenczowska, 2009; Lubaś, 2011; Lubańska, 2007). In our issue, the text by Olimpia Dragouni refers to this question but based on a unique, thus far rarely analysed material, namely the *Fetve* of Hussein Đozo, interpreted in the context of the political reality of socialist Yugoslavia and in the perspective of Islamic modernism. As a result, we have gained an important comment on the discussion about Bosnian Islam and relations between communities living in Bosnia. This country can be considered a typical example of a post-Ottoman society that painfully adapted to the framework set by the political order based on the category of an ethnic nation. The text by Dragouni looks for answers about the possibility of coexistence of many faiths in a material which is most often analysed by researchers without any experience of Islam. The neighbourhood, understood as respect for the other, which marks our own limits, turns out to be a well-established category in Islamic interpretation of Islam, which was represented by Đozo. This, in turn, is an important contribution to the discussion about the alleged intolerance of Islam. The article by Wojciech Sajkowski also refers to the Balkan context. The neighbourhood of Dalmatian towns, dominated by the Italian cultural layer, and the Slavic provinces was described by French travellers in a perspective of a collision between the world of civilized heirs of Rome and barbarism. The author reveals how these seemingly descriptive accounts were dominated by an ideological perspective, the Western-centric conception of history and culture that overlapped what was seen. As a consequence, spatial neighbourhood was interpreted as a distance of civilization, and these established patterns of interpretation made it difficult or impossible to communicate, preparing the ground for the civilizing mission of France from the time of the Illyrian Provinces.

The second experience that influenced the choice of the main topic are the culturally oriented urban studies. In modern, complex societies, this dimension of micro-contacts often becomes a subject of research by sociologists and ethnologists. Residents of large estates try to domesticate and tame space, they produce patterns of activities and build networks of contacts, creating their space in a seemingly hostile environment (Gulin Zrnić, 2009). In everyday interactions, the specificity of place and neighbourhood is shaped, and small behaviours and rituals decide about building the opposition the own and the foreign, and about whether or not a newcomer is be accepted into the local community. It is difficult to describe the city as a whole in qualitative research because this leads to significant simplifications. Relations between neighbours, on the other hand, are a dimension of everyday life and as such allow for a more adequate account of how individuals cope in the urban space and what mechanisms determine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their activities (de Certeau, 1984). In our issue this trend of research is touched upon by the text by Kamil Wielecki, devoted to strategies adopted by immigrants in post-Soviet Russia. He describes the market and the marketplace as an interesting place of formation of inter-ethnic relationships between a dominant group and those who are considered strangers. However, the paradox of the post-Soviet space lies in the fact that non-Russian groups are, in a sense, “Russian” due to their former imperial affiliation and the persistent perception of the Russian world that includes the former Soviet republics as well. Another aspect of this issue is addressed by Meglena Zlatkova, who examines a phenomenon that attracted little interest in cultural studies. Urban greenery and urban gardens were a special integration space in the period of socialism, while in the new socio-political order they take on new meanings. Green areas not only play an important role in the urban ecosystem but they also become grounds and a pretext for relations at the micro scale. The trend of urban research is also represented Martha Norkunas’s article, which explores the space of two American cities seeking expressions of racial politics. Discrimination adopts specific spatial forms, and concerns not only legal but also physical division of the discriminated from the dominant group, white people, who try to eliminate people of colour from the neighbourhood. For this purpose, elements of spatial planning are used that divide the city into separate parts, which prevent members of both groups from becoming neighbours and maintain ways of transform them into strangers.

These three texts reveal three different possible uses of the categories of neighbourhood. In all of them, neighbourhood is defined as a social dimension of urban space, as exemplified by its selected areas, such as

market, garden or street. Places of this kind promote communication and exchange that takes place between individuals outside the official flow, which imposes fixed, usually stereotyped social patterns of interpretation. Most researchers consider the city by definition as a space of communication and diversity (Hannerz, 1980) that dynamically shapes relationships between its users. The places chosen by our authors create conditions for opening up to other people or otherwise show dangerous consequences of closing this possibility, as in the case of racial politics in Austin or Nashville. Common areas allow for establishing contact and accepting a stranger as a part of one's own space, and if communication and common practices are impossible, separation and antagonism are formed.

A text that relates to the spatial understanding of the neighbourhood in a particular fashion is the essay by Joško Božanić. He describes the experience of an island community not through the semantics of closure and isolation, which persisted in the European tradition, and which reflects the perspective of landbound cultures, but as an experience of opening. The sea is described as a space of constant contact, favouring migration and exchange, as evidenced by the specific language of the sea, the marine community of practices and material culture. Paradoxically, in the Vis archipelago fishermen's culture, it was the Adriatic islands that could be considered as open space, and other communities of the Mediterranean as being in close proximity. The author's observations relate to a culture based on the traditional maritime economy and traditional methods of communication and transportation. From today's perspective, it is rather a description of the world of the past, but thought-provoking nevertheless as a reflection on inter-cultural exchange and defining culture in general. Joško Božanić's essay is an inspiring reference to the famous *Mediterranean breviary* of Predrag Matvejević, based, however, on fieldwork carried out on the island of Vis by an experienced dialectologist of the Mediterranean.

Leo Rafolt draws on a different interpretation of neighbourhood. His article will be particularly valuable to researchers of Grotowski's theatre, which it puts in a broad perspective of, on the one hand, the work of Barba and Zarrilli, on the other hand, the Far East performative tradition. What is important here is the context of anthropological research that investigates the cultural implications of movement and physical behaviours. Observations of movement create an axis that allows for a comparison of the Japanese theatre and martial arts with Grotowski's exploration. Cultural distance is reduced during the search for the communion of experience, the corporeal nature which is the basic dimension of existence in the world. This text can be regarded as an innovative contribution to the research on cultural performativity.

In the discussion section we present a report about a research project conducted on neighbourhood relations in Croatia. The text is therefore about neighbourhood in the most literary sense of being a resident of a near space, and the aim of the research it describes was to trace the kinds of changes that accompany the changing socio-cultural circumstances: migration to cities, construction of large housing estates, and large residential buildings. The discussed surveys may be a good introduction to qualitative research that reveals emergence of new patterns of behaviour, or the durability of existing ones.

The neighbourhood is a broad category, which is present throughout sociological and cultural research. Of course, articles of the latest issue of “Colloquia Humanistica” do not exhaust the problem. However, we present crucial texts that relate to rarely undertaken issues, some of which might even be considered pioneering, as in the case of the articles by Olympia Dragouni and Kamil Wielecki. We hope that they will be inspiring for researchers who are interested in the humanities and cultural studies, and once again we are pleased that we have been able to create an issue that is not merely declaratively, but truly interdisciplinary, and yet consistent.

In conclusion, let us try to present an understanding of the neighbourhood that emerges from the presented texts. The connotation they are most concerned with is that of exchange and opening, of contact, which is based on upholding the borders of one’s group – and of oneself, one’s own space, but at the same time, on opening to other people and the need for communication during which communities and people define themselves. The neighbourhood and contact are also the basis for the exchange processes, the thwarting of which, as shown by the examples given by Martha Norkunas, can lead to the most dangerous phenomena for the functioning of societies.

References

- Bielenin-Lenczowska, K. (2009). *Sąsiedztwo w obliczu konfliktu. Relacje społeczne i etniczne w zachodniej Macedonii – refleksje antropologiczne*. Warszawa: DiG.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Transl.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Falski M. (2011). Likwidacja modelu *osmańskiego* w Bośni po 1995 roku a kryzys państwa. *Slavia Meridionalis*, 11, 204–219.
- Gulin Zrnić, V. (2009). *Kvartovska spika*. Zagreb: Jesenski i Turk.
- Hannerz, U. (1980). *Exploring the city: inquiries towards an urban anthropology*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lubańska, M. (2007). The Neighbourhood in the System of Coexistence of Muslim-Christian Local Communities in Rhodopes, Bulgaria. *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, 31, 237—246.

Lubaś, M. (2011). *Różnowiercy. Współistnienie międzyreligijne w zachodniomacedońskiej wsi. Studium z zakresu antropologii społeczno-kulturowej*. Kraków: NOMOS

Note

The author is a member of the editorial team.

The text was supported by own sources.