



The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series 3  
(1/2016): 143–148 [REPORT]

## Making Cultural Studies Count – A Report from the International Conference “The uses of teaching and researching foreign cultures in today’s universities: what seems to be the problem?”, Orléans, France, June 11th – 13th 2015

Wojciech KOSIOR

The present conference was organised by the Department of Literatures, Languages and Humanities (LLSH) at the University of Orléans, France and took place between 11–13 June 2015.<sup>1</sup> It stemmed from the collective work of the RÉMÉLICE research team, specialising in the study of foreign literatures and cultures.<sup>2</sup> Members of this research group have been focusing on issues related to the transmission of foreign cultures and the impact of research on them at a university level. The team has so far organised several conferences and seminars and, according to the official call for papers, one of the main stimuli behind the present event was the question whether “between the retreat into embracing uselessness as a principle, and the voids created by budget cuts, can the humanities still claim any non-market value?”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>The organising committee consisted of Thomas Pughe, Mathieu Bonzom, Claire Decobert and Karin Fischer. I would like to take this opportunity and express my gratitude to Karin Fischer for reading the draft of this paper and sharing insightful comments.

<sup>2</sup>RÉMÉLICE stands for “Réception et Médiation de Littératures et Cultures Étrangères et Comparées” (“Reception and Mediation of the Foreign Cultures and Literatures”). More information can be accessed [on-line](#) (accessed: September 26th 2015).

<sup>3</sup>[On-line](#) (accessed: September 26th 2015).

## The Problem

The point of departure for the conference was the problem of teaching foreign cultures and languages in the contemporary academic setting that is currently experiencing some significant structural transformations. One of the most relevant aspects of these changes is the gradual but impending commercialisation of the higher education sector, which in turn leads to imposed research subjects and limits the scholarly freedom according to the rules of demand and supply. Since the decision-making institutions that hold the purse strings rarely consist of academicians themselves, the situation is additionally complicated by the unrealistic expectations addressed to the scholars on the one hand and the inability to see the factual achievements furnished by Cultural Studies<sup>4</sup> on the other. What is more, the condition of humanities and sciences differ in this regard and although their conflict is sometimes exaggerated, it remains true that the latter are in a somewhat privileged position, due to the more “immediate” application of their discoveries. Finally, each teaching facility has to consider the expectations of their potential and actual students, who enrol on programs for various reasons often involving their future professional career and standard of living. Thus, all the dilemmas listed above can be narrowed down to the essential question that permeated the conference: how to teach foreign cultures in a relevant way without compromising either their scholarly or pragmatic value?

The conference gathered over twenty scholars of various professions and specialisations from Europe, Africa, South and North America, making it a truly international and interdisciplinary event. This variety was strikingly reflected in the conference programme accommodating a wide range of subjects.<sup>5</sup> The broad topical range notwithstanding, the actual discussions inspired by particular subjects naturally gravitated towards the complex question of teaching foreign cultures and languages. Here, two essential aspects became apparent. First, it quickly turned out that the departments of humanities still seem to follow the Renaissance ideal of an academic polymath whereas the modern labour market demands a trained professional with a precisely defined set of practical skills. While this expectation of profes-

<sup>4</sup>For the sake of brevity, Cultural Studies are hereby understood as any academic reflection on the matters of culture(s) and, by extension, language(s). This approach allows to include various scholarly disciplines in the present discourse and accordingly extend the range of conclusions.

<sup>5</sup>For the programme see [here](#) (accessed: September 26th 2015).



sional hyper-specialisation explicitly goes against the traditional models of a broad humanistic education, it can no longer be ignored and dismissed, since the survival of many humanities departments depends directly on their supposed economic relevancy. This dilemma is inherently connected to a series of dichotomies: professional skills versus broad knowledge, specialisation versus adaptability, competition versus understanding others and the mechanical reproduction of culture versus individual thinking.

Second, this broader framework led to the question about the pragmatic nuances of teaching cultures and languages reflected in the conflicted purposes of the academic education: explicitly the universities are supposed to train specialists in given professions while implicitly they prepare potential intellectual revolutionaries. Although this dichotomy should be taken as a simplified theoretical model rather than a rule, the clash seems to permeate the discussions of the programme committees across universities and often results in drastic cuts in courses involving “general” humanities. The situation seems to be additionally complicated by the fact that the once-elevated position of the university as an institution teaching both theory and profession has been significantly challenged by various other bodies such as private vocational schools, advanced training courses organised by particular employers or, last but not least, the virtually unlimited range of courses and materials in any given subject that are accessible on-line for free. Given the almost world-wide availability and apparent “transparency” of knowledge, both theoretical and practical, its acquisition is no longer considered the privilege of the intellectual or financial elite.

## The (Possible) Solutions

The central point of the conference was the round table debate focused on defining the problem and proposing some preliminary solutions to the current condition of Cultural Studies. It quickly became apparent that although the freedom of research is hindered by economic pragmatics, there are several possible directions to be followed in order to break the impasse. Firstly, the question of the usefulness or uselessness of Cultural Studies needs to be deconstructed in order to challenge the implicit assumptions concerning the very concept of the term “useful”. Its understanding has changed dramatically throughout the ages and the practical outcome of this observation is that usefulness is always a matter of perspective – and instead of deliber-



ating on usefulness in general it is far more appropriate to consider it with regards to the particular parties involved. Therefore, any discourse involving this term should be preceded by a clear explication and supplemented by defining whom the “useful” concerns.

Secondly, although financial factors cannot be excluded when discussing the significance of the contemporary academy, universities cannot be turned into commercial units and the decisions regarding topics of research should not be simply shifted to the non-academics. This is where language comes in as an important way of promoting the relevance of Cultural Studies. The parlance of scholarly discourse is not seldom perceived as cryptic and as such cannot be expected to bear influence on the decisions of those who do not grasp its meaning or, simply put, scholars need to speak the language of their financial patrons and address their values and motivations. Another way of dealing with the problem of budgeting might be a more rational distribution of money by restructuring departments and fostering interdisciplinary cooperation with other faculties, especially those of political sciences. Cultural Studies need to be presented as a part of the broader academic endeavour aimed at executing factual influence on various spheres of communal life.

Thirdly, learning cultures and history allows for a more complex and adequate understanding of contemporaneity. Moreover, cultural sensitivity allows us to see that often minute cultural differences and misunderstandings can lead to dramatic conflicts in the long run and from this perspective teaching foreign languages and cultures is a way to prevent potential disasters in the future. This phenomenon is often ignored by the decision-making bodies that expect immediate results rather than this kind of “butterfly effect”. Accordingly, humanities in general and Cultural Studies specifically have a politically strategic significance and need to be “advertised” as such to a broader audience and in particular to the financial powers-that-be.

Fourthly, this cultural sensitivity cannot be attained other than via a broad education marshalled by the traditional academic model which leads directly to an awareness of multiplicity and complexity. The standpoint theory – the assumption of different perspectives on history, culture and religion as always existing within a specific context – has a very pragmatic application. Simply put, the sheer observation of the coexistence of a wide variety of cultures seems to lessen the imperativeness of the social influence of their respective institutions. Another way of attaining this perspective is through the acquisition of foreign languages and, as one of the participants



put it, only after learning a foreign language, i.e. realising the practical difference between *signifié* and *significant* is one able to perceive one's own parlance from a different perspective. In other words, one of the results of the broad academic education is the training of a potential intellectual revolutionary: a person who is capable of advancing a positive and creative challenge to the existing order and, instead of seeking final solutions, engages in a perpetual debate.

Finally, the small and highly specialised academic units are the most endangered ones: "unpopular" language and literature courses, highly theoretical studies and interdisciplinary programmes – they all face a serious threat of being closed, which would eventually hinder the development of all branches of the humanities. One of the possible remedies for this situation is to facilitate the flow of information and financial resources between particular departments and scholars by forming international consortia. This in turn should result in the creation of a global academic network empowering the smaller academic units and engaging with the rest of the society. This option is all the more valid given the unprecedented availability of digital means of communications.

## The Outcome

The latter remark concluded the round table discussion and as such can be taken as an invitation for subsequent action. The academic world is one global village and although the challenges are serious, the means of addressing them are numerous. Of course, due to the complex nature of the problem it was ultimately impossible to come up with one solution during a limited period of time and the present conference should be perceived as a part of a much broader sweep intended to evoke an awareness of the problems outlined above. Accordingly, the selected papers will be published in the form of post-conference monograph planned for Autumn 2017 while the organising committee does not preclude the possibility of similar events taking place in the future. It is also worth noting that the organisers took advantage of modern technology and uploaded the presentations of the key-speakers on YouTube thus making them available for a broader audience.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the present report is also intended to be the part of this process. Hopefully we can make Cultural Studies count in the modern world.

---

<sup>6</sup>The videos can be accessed [on-line](#) (accessed: September 26th 2015).



**Note about the author**

Wojciech KOSIOR – a graduate of Psychology and Religious Studies, assistant researcher at the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations at the Jagiellonian University. His research involves the Hebrew Bible and the early Rabbinic Literature. He is currently studying Jewish demonology and angelology as well as the apotropaic dimension of the basic Jewish customs and rituals.

**E-MAIL:** [wojciechkosior@tlen.pl](mailto:wojciechkosior@tlen.pl)

