

## Interview with Prof. Jan Kubik: The FATIGUE Project

SCIENTIST-IN-CHARGE AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE FATIGUE PROJECT, PROFESSOR JAN KUBIK, IN CONVERSATION WITH *SLOVO*'S EXECUTIVE EDITOR BORIMIR TOTEV.

*Prof. Jan Kubik was the Director of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies between January 2015 and August 2017, as well as Pro-Vice Provost for Europe at University College London. Kubik works on the interplay between power (politics) and culture, protest politics and social movements, and post-communist transformations. He also writes about qualitative methods in the social sciences. His first and one of the most recent books, 'The Power of Symbols against the Symbols of Power' (Penn State Press) and 'Anthropology and Political Science' (Berghahn, with Myron Aronoff) are the best exemplifications of his approach. Kubik studies politics and culture comparatively, but the principal source of his observations and data are Poland and East Central Europe. Since 1991 he has taught in the Department of Political Science at Rutgers University, where he once served as the Chair. He has lectured around the world and has held several prestigious teaching posts and fellowships, including the Graduate School of Social Sciences, Polish Academy of Sciences.*

### WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO THE POINT YOU ARE AT NOW, IN TERMS OF YOUR WORK IN ACADEMIA?

This is a little personal myth I suppose, but the way I want to remember it is that I was in high school, on the train coming back from a town far away from my own, where my brother started working as a theatre director. I went to his opening night, and then a few days later, when I was coming back, he gave me a book. The book was called 'Philosophy and Sociology of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century', two volumes of translations in Polish. Poland was always a bit more open than other countries in the Eastern Bloc, so we had access to quite a few texts not available elsewhere. I remember that there was a chapter in the book by Émile Durkheim, and because I didn't exactly know what I wanted to do, I started thinking that maybe sociology was the way to go. I applied to the Department of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. It was very competitive, but I got accepted. We had an exceptionally interesting cohort, and from the very beginning I was interested in culture and the arts. My first field was the sociology of art, so I started attending lectures in other departments, which was very complicated, but somehow, I got permission to do some history of art. I also wanted to study philosophy, but it was not allowed directly after high school, so I had to wait until I finished sociology. Eventually, I completed four years and a half of sociology then four years and a half of philosophy – overlapping somewhat. When I graduated, I was offered a job at the

university. I was initially thinking about hitchhiking around the world, but I went for a long walk, did some hard thinking, pondering an increasingly clear question: how many times am I going to get a job offer right after graduating? So, I accepted and started working at Jagiellonian. We created, from scratch, the Department of Social Anthropology. It was the first modern department of social anthropology, I believe, in the Communist Bloc. We concentrated on British and American anthropology and tried to learn about it as much as possible. The first major project we had, was to translate back into Polish all works by Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founding fathers of modern anthropology.

In the meantime, Solidarity happened, and everybody around me was very involved. The legal period of Solidarity lasted sixteen months. The end of the strikes and the official acceptance and authorisation of the independent labour union was at the end of August 1980. Martial Law was imposed on December 13<sup>th</sup> 1981. In the summer of 1981 I visited New York and went to the Department of Anthropology, at Columbia University. It was the only one I knew, and I told them I wanted to study there. I was then set to study anthropology for my PhD. I had to take this horrific thing I've never seen before, the GRE (Graduate Record Exam). I took the test in the American Embassy in Warsaw on December 12<sup>th</sup>, the day before the imposition of Martial Law. President Ronald Regan immediately imposed sanctions on Poland, all flights to the United States stopped, and we weren't sure what was happening. The reality was very grim, but also tragi-comical. It was a very confusing and difficult period, but then I got a letter from Columbia University that I was accepted. Despite being very difficult to leave Poland, I managed to arrive in New York in late October 1982, about three weeks after the school year had started. I walked in and I said, "Okay, I'm here and I'm ready to start working on my PhD", and they told me that I'm late for classes. I wondered – what classes? I didn't know that graduate school existed or that I had to take two years of classes. I then went into this period that was extremely intense, I thought I was able to write in English, which was of course an illusion. Those two years went by very fast. I immediately also got involved with the Committee in Support for Solidarity in New York. Later, I took my exams and did a long-distance thesis, finishing about the time that communism fell. In 1989 I wanted to go home and observe the elections in April, but I didn't get permission to, so my first return was in the fall of 1989, when the first non-communist government was in place. In the meantime, I got married, and by 1989 we had two sons.

I applied for a grant from IREX to study post-communist transformations on a local level, so the four of us went back to a small mountain town in Poland - that was my real ethnographic field work. I studied the transformation of the local political administrative structure. When I was in Poland, a call came that there was an opening in Rutgers University, New Jersey. I flew to New Jersey from the mountains of

Poland, and I got the job. I was in the Department of Political Science, eventually becoming the Chair of the Department. I didn't teach anything about Eastern Europe for a while, instead I taught major graduate seminars on methods, social movements, politics and culture, and I always thought – I want to do more on Eastern Europe, but there was no time. Then a friend called and asked if I could write a letter for him in regards to a job opening in London for a professor of Polish Studies, but then I thought maybe I should also apply. I ended up applying, going in for an interview, and not getting the job. A week or two later, however, I was asked to come back for another interview - this time for the position of the Director. So, I decided to try again, and prepared way better for that second interview. After a couple of hours, they told me that I got the job.

**DID YOU EXPERIENCE ANY SPECIFIC MOMENTS OF CLARITY THROUGHOUT THIS JOURNEY?**

I experienced two moments of clarity. The first was when I finished my studies and was asked to work at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. The second was when I came to Columbia University. I toyed for a moment with the idea of becoming an Africanist. I took classes and started reading a lot in relation to Northern Africa. I was also an assistant to a Professor who worked on Morocco, so I did a considerable amount of reading on Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. Then I got scared, and perhaps lazy, that I would have to learn one of those languages. I thought it would be easier and faster (and that matter of time was urgent, because I was older than the others by a few years), so I took a shortcut and did a PhD in Anthropology in about six and half years - one of the fastest in the history of the department. Those are the two moments of clarity I experienced on my journey, first academia, then Eastern Europe.

**HOW DO YOU VIEW THE SO-CALLED IVORY TOWER DEBATE?**

I have to admit that I am very guilty of the sin of getting locked in the Ivory Tower. Since my first reading of Durkheim as a schoolboy on the train, I had tremendous and constant interest in theory. My own work is always theory oriented. However, at the same time I am an empiricist, but my empirical work tends to be delivered in a rather arcane manner, heavily laden with theoretical concerns. I have had doubts about it from time to time, but have been comfortable with it. You're extremely lucky and privileged when you have a job in academia. This is the only job perhaps, where you can lie down on the sofa, grab a book, start reading it –

and you're working. I was enjoying it, even when you go to the bar with friends, and you talk high social theory. Solidarity changed it a little bit, as I started to write a lot about Solidarity, but it was still theoretical and I doubt I managed to go out to the broader audience with my writing much, if at all.

Recently, because of what is happening in the world, and because of the rise in right-wing populism I changed and I realise what you're asking in your question is extremely central. It is not easy for me to write quickly and in a more popular way, but I am learning. One of the big steps I managed to take about a month ago was when I was in Warsaw, teaching at the Polish Academy of Sciences in the middle of massive rebellions and demonstrations. I knew a lot of the people who were organising the demonstrations, and I wondered what the best use of my time would be – so I dropped everything for a while, and for the first time in my life, for a few days I became a social media activist! I started tweeting, writing on Facebook, observing, collecting information, sending it – I had the typical new media activist day, in my pajamas all day. It was extremely rewarding, as my pieces went out, I was interviewed by various media, appeared on Polish television, newspapers called me, I wrote pieces in Polish for some magazines, I was interviewed in two weeklies – and then I realised, that it was very rewarding and important to have different readership. Some of the responses I got from people were very encouraging.

This is extremely important and the moment is critical for the whole world. I think that we need the mobilisation of some intellectual power to resist the forces of populism, and explain to people what is happening, how it usually ends up, that the path to increased authoritarianism and the destruction of checks and balances is never a good idea. All those basic ideas need to be repeated as much as possible in the most popular media. I will be teaching two classes to Rutgers undergraduates concentrating on those things, and I will try to figure out how to make students sensitive to those issues, because I know both from anecdotal stories and some research, that the number of students in universities who are looking with some sympathy towards right-wing populism is growing. Something is wrong. When I'm in Poland and I see young people marching through the street with a Nazi salute, my head is spinning in trying to understand this complete lack of deeper historical understanding and the absolutely horrific consequences that may come with these politics.

I also visited Hungary this summer and that was very depressing. I took the bus from Budapest to Zagreb, and you would never think that when crossing the boundary from Hungary into Croatia, you will have the feeling that you are entering the country with more freedom, where you could just breathe easier. Like most people, I thought that what was happening some thirty years ago, under communism, was over for good, and that it is never going to happen again. I don't exaggerate this kind of suffocating feeling –

Hungary is not a fully authoritarian regime like it was under communism, but it is heading in that direction. The return of this feeling is extremely upsetting, because it is completely unexpected – the authorities have now possibly developed tools to control you, one way or another.

### **WHAT IS THE FATIGUE PROJECT?**

Some time ago there was a call for proposals from Marie Skłodowska-Curie programme within the European grant scheme, Horizon 2020. I don't remember exactly how it started, but I know that Dr. Richard Mole and I began talking about it, particularly deadlines. The FATIGUE Project is a scheme that allows you to train doctoral students for three years. They are called early career researchers, receiving full funding for three years, but they need to be enrolled in a doctoral programme. The whole thing spans for four years, as we have some time for preparation at the beginning and some time for wrapping up at the end. The full title: *Delayed transformational fatigue in Central and Eastern Europe responding to the rise of right-wing populism*. This was my idea, based on something I wrote, so I provided the main narrative. I had this concept that there is something really interesting going on – in the 90s Central and Eastern Europe was in a worse shape than it is today, yet there was no populism, while twenty some years later, these countries are in better shape, certainly Poland, and there is right-wing populism. This is a big puzzle, something rather hard to explain, hence the concept of delay becomes central. Then I came to the use of this word - *fatigue*. Richard contributed on all fronts, from ideas to preparing the massive administrative part of the application.

We applied for the grant scheme last year, but we didn't get it. One comment was particularly upsetting, as we were accused of bias, because we used the "heavily loaded" term of right-wing populism. I have a lot of friends who work on right-wing populism, and wherever I went I challenged people and asked them to give me a better name, and of course, nobody could. This is what it is. So, we reapplied. Richard and I studied the comments extremely carefully. We fixed a number of things, but we never changed the name or removed the phrase right-wing populism, and we got it this year with an extremely high score, almost unheard of. We already had our first planning meeting in Kraków, for which we paid out of my directorial budget, because the scheme starts in January. The advertisements will go out for those fifteen positions distributed amongst the consortium by late January 2018, as we want to have them in place, at the latest by the end of June 2018. People will be hired into the programme from August 1<sup>st</sup> 2018, and the first big workshop will be here at UCL. I will remain at UCL as a Professor at a reduced contract, the main part of my job being to run the project with Richard. We want people to be totally aware that they are not getting

money just to do their PhDs, although that's also the goal, but they need to concentrate on the work in such a way, that we are all working as a tightly constructed team. I want the final product to be a major book on right-wing populism in Central Europe including some new evidence and approaches.

Coming from anthropology, my angle is much more cultural than what I see in the literature. I see a cultural shift that accompanies, or even precedes the political change. I am very strongly convinced that that's how it works, and I observed it in the States throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, when the right-wing political, republican mobilisation was clearly preceded by the formation of social movements and the mobilization, for example, of right-wing new and old Evangelicals in the South, in a very precisely coordinated action. The Tea Party and Donald Trump do not come out of thin air. There are interesting books that show right-wing activists learning from left-wing activists in the 1960s, seen in the broadest sense. As some people argue, what we are experiencing is a counter revolution to the revolution of the 1960s. I call it neo-traditionalism. The return to traditional values, meaning traditional, rather patriarchal family, homophobia, some elements of racism, some elements of anti-Semitism, some elements of authoritarianism, the rejection of the old elites and the old type of politics, which are seen as corrupt and ineffective, and the sense that something new needs to be done. That's what I observed, and when the Tea Party happened in the US, it gradually moved from cultural mobilization to protest politics, and eventually to the "inside" of the Republican Party. Now, I have no doubt that something very similar is happening both in Hungary and Poland. My friend Béla Greskovits from the Central European University just published a paper exploring the mobilisation of what Viktor Orbán called civic circles since 2002. A massive and precise effort to create a base for Fidesz. I will also be a reviewer of a thesis on a similar phenomenon in Poland, studying the several hundred clubs of *Gazeta Polska* – one of the most influential right-wing newspapers – all around the country. The right-wing side of the political spectrum seems better organised than the left-wing side, whilst the center is wobbly, and some centrist positions are disappearing entirely. It is a culture war, and the growing polarisation is extremely troubling. People live in completely different worlds, which are almost impenetrable to one another.

**HOW WOULD YOU ASSESS YOUR DIRECTORSHIP DURING YOUR TIME AT THE SCHOOL OF SLAVONIC AND EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES?**

It is not up to me to assess my two years and a half of directorship. Stepping down from directorship was a very difficult moment for me. It was not an easy decision, one almost exclusively based on personal reasons – I just want to go back to my family and the dog. I've made this decision with a very heavy heart, after a lot of thinking, and I am extremely happy that I retain my association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. I will be here at least every six months, working with the FATIGUE Project and doctoral students.

I think that SSEES is an absolutely terrific institution. I also really like, enjoy, and respect UCL. It is a bit of a difficult place at the moment, because of this growing spurt. I always mention to incoming students that they are entering a construction site. When you are in a construction site, on the one hand you can be excited as you are participating in the project, but from time to time things get messed up and they go wrong, at least temporarily. But the intellectual energy of the place is amazing, both at SSEES and UCL. The main draw for me was the interdisciplinary nature and the seriousness with which it is treated. As I was also one of the Pro-Vice Provosts, responsible for Europe, participating in a lot of high level meetings, it is very rewarding to see the respect that SSEES and UCL have. I came during the Centenary of SSEES (2015), so it was a good time to take stock and the result of this “inspection” was spectacular. During my time, I had a fantastically solid foundation to build on. I can tell you that I am leaving with a sense of accomplishment and pride. Last week was the main week of recruitment season and we were only one of five units of UCL, that didn't go to any adjustments or clearing. We overshot and have more students than we were planning for. I'm very proud of my staff, who were prepared for this. We got exactly what we wanted, we didn't have to go for students with dropped grades.

We have a new crew coming in, and a fantastic new Director. We also have a new Financial Director, who is extremely enthusiastic. Financially we are in a good shape, and that counts for something. Maybe students shouldn't be concerned with that, but in order to run an institution, meeting your financial targets is important. We are beginning to draw more money in terms of research grants. I'm leaving with a heavy heart, but proud, and not leaving completely.