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Fieldwork Dillemas: Problems of Location, Insiderhood, - and Implicit Discourses

In this paper I want to address some problems of so-called 'native anthropology' and anthropology more broadly, through the native anthropologists' double – insider-outsider position. Drawing from my own fieldwork research on post-socialist transition and cosmopolitanism in the northern Serbian town of Novi Sad in 2005 and 2006, I want to investigate the issue of *location* and complex processes of positioning and othering in which I was caught myself due to my 'double position' as an insider and outsider and through which my informants understood and made sense of their 'place in the world'. This positioning is relevant for the investigation of the social processes of identification and location-building as a one of the key anthropological issues, as well as for understanding of the construction of *anthropological location* itself.

Key words: hierarchy of places, anthropological location, anthropology at home, othering and alterity

Introduction

Looking back to the recent history of (western) anthropology, its reflexive turn in the early 1980s mostly manifested itself as a problem of ethnographic representation. As George Marcus, one of the leaders of this literary anthropological turn, himself recently wrote,

"since the 1980s, and the Writing Culture critique of ethnographic representation, the writing of ethnographic texts in anthropology has been distinguished by the perennial appearance of new works composed of tropes and stylistic strategies that reflect the diverse influences of the period of critique" (Marcus 2007: 1127).

He further argues that we need to "push the spirit of experiment back toward the conditions of producing ethnography in fieldwork" (ibid).

In this paper I would like to join this quest, linking my research to those, who long before this Marcus's confession, tried to think about the concept of fieldwork and what Clifford (1997) calls (anthropological) "fieldwork habitus" (on the 'problem of fieldwork,' see for example Gupta and Ferguson 1997a; Amit 2000; cf. an useful overview by Ivanović 2005). In that sense, I want to investigate the constitution of the social existence of human beings as the subjects of anthropological knowledge as they emerge from the different practices of fieldwork. I will focus on processes of *othering* and *alterity* and formation of counterparts that were central for the constitution of the discipline from its very beginning, regardless of the particular national tradition of its practicing, i.e. *othering* being made on the principle of class and race, such was the case in Eastern European and Latin American anthropology, or on the colonial distance as it was in Britain and France.

I will focus on fieldwork practice of a certain kind of anthropology at home, trying to answer the following questions: which kind of anthropology is anthropology at home; which kind of anthropologists are native anthropologists and as which kind of subjects their informants can emerge. Drawing from my own fieldwork research on post-socialist transition and cosmopolitanism in the northern Serbian town of Novi Sad in 2005 and 2006, I want to investigate the issue of *location* and complex processes of positioning and othering in which I was caught myself due to my 'double position' and through which my informants understood and made sense of their 'place in the world'.

Researching cosmopolitanism in Serbia

What I wanted to do in the "field" of Novi Sad

My research focused on the relationship between processes of identification, location and politics in Serbia. Starting point of my research was to investigate the relationship between identity and politics, and the complexity of what this might mean in contemporary Serbia, particularly for young Serbs. I wanted to consider the complex and often contradictory process of how people understand themselves in relation to their history, to their contemporary lives, to particular and more general others with whom they compare themselves and in relation to concepts, ideals and stereotypes about how, and who, they might like to be.

In that sense, my research records the way a particular group of people – mostly young, well-educated and relatively high social status Serbs feel dislocated by recent socio-political changes which they feel have left them with a 'spoiled identity' to borrow a Goffman (1968) phrase. Drawing from former Yugoslav 'exceptionalism' among socialist countries and in order to get beyond, or

perhaps above, their national identification they attempt to be cosmopolitan – people without a particular nationality; people whose cultural, aesthetic and moral sensibilities have made them the same as others from around the world who share the same sensibilities. However, as many authors have noted almost any use of 'cosmopolitanism' must be explained through its geographical specificities. Following a similar line and focusing on different social practices (including travel, music, shopping) as constitutive rather than reflective of identification I tried to find a more nuanced way of exploring people's experiences in post-socialist Serbia.

I decided to locate myself in Novi Sad, capital of the north-west Serbian province of Vojvodina with around 300,000 inhabitants, between August 2005 and September 2006.

I focused on young, mostly well educated people who understood themselves and were usually understood by others as people with high cultural capital and pro-Western cosmopolitans. Some of them were students, and some of them were employed or unemployed professionals. I came to know the families of some of them and befriended some older people, whom I met in Novi Sad. However, I primarily spent my time with highly educated urban people who were Novi Sad 'born and bred'; although some of them came there as students and some of those stayed after they finished their studies.

My aim was not to conduct a community study "grounding the interpretation in whole lives known in their totality" (Ferguson 1999: 21). I have been interested in discursive practices that people use to construct themselves as cosmopolitan, 'European' subjects, and the tactics they employ in comparing themselves to concepts, ideals and stereotypes about how, and who, they would like to be. Instead of focusing on the explicit expressions of national identity, I focused on various *everyday practices* that served as a window through which to analyse the discursive cultural meanings of 'Serbian-ness' and 'European-ness'. I was trying to understand people different ways in which people employ these ideas in order to conceptualise recent changes and their own social position. I often relied on what Fernandez calls "revelatory incidents", which he defines as "especially charged moments in human relationships which are pregnant with meaning" (Fernandez 1986: xi). I believe that my long-term participant observation made me present at many of these incidents and I tried to place them "in their multiple contexts, to tease out their multiple meanings" (ibid). In other words, I was interested in what these conceptualizations *do* for the people I was working with, how these narratives and some practices allow them to position themselves in a series of social fields and in relation to a series of divisions, processes and contexts. I focused on processes whereby my informants' positioning was acted out in different places, whose importance was constructed through comparisons with something somewhere else. My informants tried to understand themselves through certain 'global' practices (like music playing and listening and shopping) that they understood as 'dislocated' – not tied to a

particular place – and I focused on their positioning tactics towards the imagined 'global space' they constructed through various practices, and that was my necessity tied to the *particular places* in Novi Sad (see Appadurai 1995, 2000). Thus, I spent a considerable amount of time with people in public spaces, but also in more private settings. My informants tried to claim and establish a certain public space for themselves in Novi Sad (for example certain bars, or clubs), but my focus was not on the construction of public space as such. This was a consequence of the very nature of my fieldwork as I wanted to capture a range of practices and meanings that were not located in one place (see also Jansen 2005a). Thus, in order to capture those meanings I followed my informants around Novi Sad and between Novi Sad and other places. I went shopping with them and visited concerts and public lectures that my informants were interested in. I also visited parents of some of them usually for several days or a weekend. I went regularly to the American corner, a small cultural centre sponsored by the American Embassy in Belgrade, where I also volunteered. I visited NGO organizations where some of them worked and helped with translation and other works. I frequently visited houses of some of my informants and I also hosted them and conducted numerous semi-structure interviews.

In the following section I will explain some of the fieldwork strategies that I used in more details. Most of them emerged during my fieldwork and became integral part of the research itself revealing the very paradox of the cosmopolitan location I wanted to investigate in the first place.

How I did it: problems of insiderhood and implicit discourses

My initial idea was to focus on the Exit festival of Western popular music and to use it as a case study for my research. However, that was not that easy for several reasons that I will briefly describe. When I arrived in Novi Sad, I made contact with a lecturer at the Novi Sad University Department of Sociology who had conducted some research on Exit. He introduced me to some of the Exit team members and I arranged to have interviews with them. However, my proposal to volunteer in the organization was not accepted and I had to rely on individual interviews. I found that inadequate and it was clear that I was not going to be able to take 'anthropology of organizations' approach and follow the production of the festival from beginning to end. Initially, I found this frustrating and I had to change my research focus expanding my topic and widening my research network. I befriended a few people from the festival organization, which helped me to expand my social network and meet different people, as some people from Exit used to work in different NGO organizations. They introduced me to their friends and my social network started to expand.

However, there were still some difficulties, which emerged for two different, but related reasons. One was my position as a 'native'. The second one was a simple lack of a socially recognisable job. I had to place myself socially: as a 'native' and a person with certain social roles in a certain town. It was diffi-

cult to meet people without having a regular job or other regular social activity as virtually all of my informants were studying or working. This is not unknown for anthropologists working in urban settings (see for example Ferguson 1999) and I tried to solve it by gaining access to different locations where I was able to participate regularly in the lives of my informants. These included occasional volunteering in the NGO organization of some informants where I helped with English translation; regular visits to three rock bands' practice sessions, and participating in the conversation classes in the American Corner, a small cultural centre sponsored by the American Embassy in Belgrade. These activities made my time more structured and provided me with the opportunity to meet my informants on a regular basis and expand my contacts.

But it was not enough to place myself physically; I also needed to position myself in relation to the more abstract and particular others my informants were comparing themselves to. That I was born in Serbia and I spent most of my life there, was clear to my informants, but many people found it rather odd that someone from Serbia, doing her PhD in Britain, would come to do research in Serbia. Furthermore, I had never lived in Novi Sad before and most people wondered why on earth I was renting an apartment in Novi Sad if I had my own place in Belgrade; why did I not just commute, it is 80km away and it would be cheaper?

There are several reasons for this questioning on the part of my informants. One reason in very fact of doing anthropological fieldwork in an urban setting and the second one relates to my own social identity as a 'local'. I will only briefly address the first one, as it is not crucial for my main argument here. The very word 'fieldwork' is usually used in relation to manual workers, like electricians when they go to work on the electric supply in 'the field', or for tax inspectors when they go (physically) to check on companies. It can also be used by archaeologists or geologists, but it always involves a longer or shorter visit to the field, not a prolonged period of 'life in the field'. In addition, as I did not have any questionnaires and did not want to conduct structured interviews, I was frequently dismissed. Furthermore, some of my informants felt uncomfortable about the relative informality of ethnographic fieldwork, the way that it is not marked by a clipboard, a tape recorder or a particular time or place where it occurs, although I made clear to my informants that I was doing a PhD research and never used any material I was told not to. All this made people I met highly suspicious of the kind of work I might be doing.

Anthropology is not a common practice that people in Novi Sad regularly encounter (as it is not for most people in the world) and most of my informants understood anthropology as a discipline that study remote ethnic and "racial" others, or in the Serbian variant "socially remote" peasants, which reveals clear social hierarchy between those who study and those are studied. This is more or less common response to anthropological investigation by people who are not usual subjects of the discipline and I in the next section I want to focus to the fi-

eldwork challenges that were specific to the research I did becoming the very part of the research itself.

My relationship to the people I encountered in the field was clearly marked by my social identity as a 'local', but also as someone who had an experience in 'the West'. Most of the time people assumed that I knew what they were talking about, even if they did not explain it fully to me. When they were not sure if I shared a particular experience, they would usually ask, "Were you here during the NATO bombing?" or, "Were you here in 2000". As my answers were mostly positive, they would usually continue with, "well, then you know", or "what more can I tell you?" Sometimes my informants found my questions rather rude, it seemed that I was trying to make a distinction between myself and them, pretending not to know things I should know from simply being 'a local'.

But, although I was understood as being a 'local', and thus not a foreigner, nor someone from 'the West', I was also someone with experience of the West and was frequently talked in discussions about the 'situation' in Serbia and Serbian 'collective position' in the world. Sometimes, I was asked about certain things in 'the West'[1] (politicians' behaviour, or working habits, for example), but these questions were virtually never direct; rather, they were often rhetorical. Thus, when people discussed the situation in Serbia and compared it with 'the West', questions addressed to me were usually phrased as "is there anywhere else in the world that has … this kind of behaviour" [trains not being on time, clerks being rude, government cooperating with mafia, etc]. These ideas were drown from the reservoir of the firmly entranced Occidentalist ideas (Carrier 1995) and a specific cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997) that my informants assumed I share simply by being Serbian. People used to simply say 'Pink and all that', or 'Pink culture', or 'those Mafiosi', or 'these *sponsoruše'*, drawing from a well-known repertoire that anyone who had lived in Serbia in recent years would recognise.

Research on former Yugoslavia has also stressed the impression of internal homogeneity and consensus about the questions of Serbia's relative position in the world regardless of the particular evaluation of the relationship as positive or negative (cf. Jansen 2006). As Jansen explains

"people's narratives constructed around a set of catchwords and phrases can then be seen as mechanisms by which they position themselves, consciously and unconsciously, in relation to dominant discourses in confusing times" (Jansen 2006: 436; cf. the approach by Živković 2000).

The homogeneity of these ideas was very strongly expressed and difficult to challenge. There were certain 'story lines' (Hajer 1995) that "make some sen-

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[1] Here the term 'West' is understood a fairly homogenous and stereotypical concept, mostly referring to a set of assumed ideal practices, beliefs and material and structural conditions existing in north-western Europe, north America and wealthy, mostly Anglophone, areas of other parts of the world.

se of order in discursive praxis possible, because when an actor uses a certain story line, it is automatically expected that the addressee will respond within a similar framework" (Jansen 2006: 439). This kind of practice happened quite often during my fieldwork, but was not restricted just to talking. People also expected that I should be able to understand certain situations and accidents by connecting them to a wider and shared discourse about commonly understood ideas about state, culture, or 'Europe', to mention but a few.

Regardless of some other disadvantaged identities ascribed to me, like being a woman and from the Serbia 'down-south', which was considered to be a less developed and less sophisticated part of the country, more often I was simply a 'local' and people assumed that we understood each other, even when things were not said explicitly, or when there were only a few hints about the ways certain situation, or incident should be interpreted. A similar attitude, commonly called 'half-talk,' has been mentioned in ethnographic research on the former Soviet Union. Thus, Boym writes that

"There used to be a saying among Soviet intelligentsia – "to understand each other with half-words." What is shared is silence, tone of voice, nuance of intonation. […] This peculiar form of communication "with half-words" is a mark of belonging to an imagined community that exists on the margin of the official public sphere. […] Communication with half-words secures the unspoken realm of cultural myths and protects the imagined community from outsiders and, in a way, from its own members" (Boym 1994: 1).

I would similarly argue that this occurred during my fieldwork. But the distinction between a private spheres where ideas could be freely exchanged, as suggested by Boym (1994) and the outside world of 'official discourse' was not so simple (see critique by Yurchak 2006; cf. Jansen 2006). In my view, my informants did not dwell on my 'insiderhood' in order to distance themselves from the official discourse, but would rather speak in 'half-talk' because the issues they were about, were understood to be so widely shared and self evident that they did not require 'full-talk', as it were. Thus, my biggest difficulties in terms of social relations occurred when I was challenging some of those assumptions or when I simply asked for further explanation. I think there are two reasons for this; one is related to the shared 'cultural intimacy' described above, and the second one relates to the power inscribed to anthropological research in general and the ways my informants understood my own access to it. Some of my informants felt that they were exposed to critical judgment from outsiders (journalists and politicians, but also historians and anthropologists) who did not know much about the country and who pronounced on the character of Serbs as if they were some kind of 'exotic species' (cf. Živković 2000, 2001). In other words, my informants complained that they were treated as the Other – the usual subjects of anthropological research (as well as of journalistic sensational reporting) - while they claimed to be (however ambiguously) 'proper' Europe-

ans and consequently should not be the subjects of anthropological studies at all.

There have of course been similar problems of access and social distinction raised in the anthropological studies of elites (see for example Marcus 1993, Lotter 2004), but the difference here was that people were concerned about their 'national' reputation, not their social status (similar complaint about 'objectification' is raised in some other post-socialist ethnographies, cf. De Soto 2000). Asking questions like someone who is an outsider clearly resembled the practice my informants condemned and made me look like a 'fake outsider'. Similar experiences are recorded by other 'native anthropologists' (Messerchmidt 1981; Bakalaki 1997), whose questions and interest in local affairs was taken as "expressions of [the anthropologist's] difference from them, indications of asymmetry in morality or social hierarchy" (Bakalaki 1997: 511). In my ethnographic context there was also an implication that by asking some questions I was pretending not to be 'native' anymore and not to understand 'the situation' now I had 'exited', while the idea of 'exit' from the country was one of the key issues for my informants (on hostility between those who went and those who stay in a different, but applicable context see Grünenberg 2006).

Thus, my "methodological problem" was not simply a technical question of "access" encountered by many anthropologists around the world. My informants found my questions rather rude, as it seemed that I was trying to make a distinction between myself and them, pretending not to know things I should know from simply being 'a local'. Thus, the problem of access, was part of the very problem I tried to understand anthropologically, revealing the hierarchy of places and symbolic geography that was central for people with whom I worked. There was a deep concern amongst virtually all of my informants about Serbians' collective 'position in the world,' their reputation. Bakalaki (2003), following Augé, (1999) writes that many peoples who have experienced colonial domination or semicolonial westernization (Greece included) were very reflexive "over the nature of their society and its relations to other more developed societies" (Bakalaki 2003: 211). People in Serbia, in my experience, share that concern. It is a common practice among people of various social backgrounds to discuss Serbian social standing amongst the 'world's nations' in everyday conversation and in all possible circumstances. Different kinds of daily encounters (from shopping to paying bills) are commonly used as an indicator of the Serbian 'situation' and Serbia's position in comparison with the more developed countries of the West (or 'less developed' countries of Africa). For example, if a clerk in a post office was rude and non-interested in the customers, or if people drive carelessly, common commentary was that the reason for such practice is a failure of the Serbian state and Serbs to follow the rules of the modern/Western state. Here modernity is understood as

"the progressive approximation of statehood, technology, science, and especially lifestyles, aesthetic values and levels of consumption perceived as

characteristic of 'Europe' — a term referring to the wealthy Western European countries, but also used as a gloss for the developed world generally" (Bakalaki 2003: 110).

The specific features of modernity achieved in socialist Yugoslavia and Serbia have been contested, but there was a clear consensus about modernity as progress (in all social spheres: from consumption to aesthetic values) and rule of law (cf. Bakalaki 2003). A common idea among people in Serbia was that before the 'fall of the 1990s', Serbia (in socialist Yugoslavia) achieved a certain level of modernity, which although probably not as good as that of the West, was still much better than the situation in the 1990s. Understanding of the nature of socialist modernity varied, as well as the explanatory tools people used to describe why things went wrong in the 1990s but the commonly held opinion was that Serbia's 'collective position' in the world changed for the worse. These discourses were strikingly homogenous (cf. Jansen 2005) and people from various social backgrounds shared similar concerns and ideas about 'Serbian collective belonging'. The same applied to my informants who shared the same anxieties about Serbia's collective position in the world. [2]

That does not mean that I am arguing that there is a singular native's point of view that would simply represent 'the Serbs'. But, as Bakalaki writes about Greece, Greeks tended to represent their society as homogeneous when juxtaposing it to the more affluent societies of northwestern Europe (cf. Herzfeld 1986, 1999), thus generating a "national level of cultural identity" (Bakalaki 2003: 210). I would argue that something similar applies in the Serbian context. People are highly concerned about their 'collective' position in the world and about a perceived threat to Serbia's membership in 'the family of modern/European nations'. These widely shared concerns and ideas were made into a repertoire of common knowledge that was highly predictable and difficult to challenge. My aim was not to investigate or challenge the homogeneity of those concepts, but I tried to describe how they were expressed ethnographically and for whom they were significant and in which circumstances. Thus, in order to establish a basic rapport with my informants and to bring to the surface things that people seldom explicitly talked about, I realized that I needed to build on my own experience of growing up and living in Serbia, simply in order to be able to talk to people in a meaningful way and to be able participate in the life of the city. I realised that I should start by using my knowledge of the region, instead of behaving as 'someone who had arrived from nowhere'. To this end, I introduced my fa-

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[2] There were also people who rejected ideas of 'the West' as something *good* and as something to aspire towards. However, as the Milošević government was highly anti-Western, most of my anti-nationalist informants also adopted a contrary, pro-Western position in a simple binary logic (cf. Radović 2007, 2009). However, most of them were not naïve believers in 'Western paradise', but were sometimes rather cynical in their attitude: claiming that they will become critical about the West (in a way Western left is critical about Western countries) once they live in Western-like Serbia.

mily and friends from Belgrade and other parts of Serbia to my new friends in Novi Sad, connecting them with each other and participating in the networks I already had. This is similar to the position of 'non-local' anthropologists who frequently have to establish fictive bonds of kinship in order to be able to do fieldwork (Kaufmann and Rabodoarimiadana 2003). What I find unique in my ethnographic experience is that I not only needed to establish those bonds, but that I simultaneously had to use my own position as 'insider/outsider' and share it with my informants.

Locating myself in this way and using these strategies I was able to meet people on a regular basis and participate in their everyday activities varying from daily use of public transport to shopping. I conduct long semi-structured interviews that included not only life and family histories, but also elaborations on different ideas about culture, state, and the relationship with the West, and various other topics. Travelling with my informants, but also visiting the American Corner and helping my informants with visa applications helped me to explore topics which might otherwise have seemed difficult to investigate ethnographically, such as the concept of the state and its transformation. Further, by spending time with people attending concerts, sitting in bars, or going shopping, I was able to ethnographically explore the 'urban' as a metaphorical space where cosmopolitanism occurs and investigate the relationship between ethics and aesthetics as it occurs in music and was connected with the idea 'urbanity'. Finally, I ended up using the Exit music festival as an ethnographic example of an event where these different issues come together: music, politics and aesthetic appreciation. As a result, I was able to explore different issues that emerged during my research in different guises and were important for my informants and their understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

Conclusion

Problematizing the idea of fieldwork that basically stem from the idea of travel, many anthropologist in the 1990s, objected to the "hierarchies of the fieldwork sites", as they are called by Gupta and Ferguson (1997b) pleading for the deconstruction of the dichotomies of traditional anthropology "insider"-"native" versus "outsider"-"foreigner", based on the deconstruction of the concept of culture as holistic and bounded whole. However, this deconstruction did not cancel the "hierarchy of places" that still makes implicit discourse operating both in academia and in "the field" making the issue of location equally important for anthropologists and for their informants.

I did my fieldwork in a place that is usually imagined, both in academic writing and among people who classified themselves as such, as being less 'European' than 'Europe proper', in a region that is understood as more 'European' than the rest of the country, but whose 'European-ness' is still contested (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, Bakić-Hayden 1995, Jansen 2005). The dis-

tinction between 'Europe' and its 'outside' was a very powerful explanatory tool that people use in a wide range of contexts in order to make more general points about the 'situation in Serbia'. The issue of location, especially my own location, became very important for my research and I got caught together with the people I studied in the complex processes of positioning and othering, through which my informants understood and made sense of their 'place in the world. Understanding of these processes could be an important contribution to a wider anthropological discussion on power and *othering* that can be gain through the anthropological studies of the Balkan.

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Терен нативне антропологије: Проблеми лоцирања, припадности и имплицитних дискурса

Кључне речи: хијерархија локалитета, антрополошки локалитети, други и различити

Проблематизујући идеју антрополошког терена насталу на старој модернистичкој идеји путовања, многи антрополози су деведестих година прошлог века писали против „хијерархије места терена“ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b) залажући се за деконструкцију дихотомије традиционалне антропологије засноване на опозицији између позиција инсајдера-„домаћег“ и аутсајдера-странаца, пре свега кроз деконструкције концепта културе као холистичке и јасно омеђене целине – као ствари. Међутим, ова деконстуркција често није била довољна за укидање „хијерарихије места“, која још увек представља имплицитни дискурс који оперише и у академској антрополошкој пракси, и на „теренима“ којима се антрополози баве, чинећи тако проблем места (локације) и лоцирања подједнако важним и за антропологе и за њихове информанте.

У овом раду желела сам да истражим неке од проблема такозване „нативне антропологије“ и антропологије уопште кроз анализу двоструке позиције нативних антрополога, као инсајдера и аутсајдера. Фокусирајући се тако на једну врсту антропологије код куће, покушала сам да одговорим на неколико питања: која врста антропологије је антропологија код куће, какви антрополози су нативни антрополози и какви могу бити субјекти истраживања настали у нативној антрополошкој пракси. Базирајући се на теренском проучавању пост-социјалистичке транзиције и космополитизма у Новом Саду 2005. и 2006. године, у овом раду сам анализирала неке од проблема *лоцирања* и комплексних процеса позиционирања и подругојачења (othering) кроз које су моји информанти разумели своје „место у свету“ и друштвено-политичке промене које су се око њих дешавале и у којима сам и сама морала да учествујем захваљујући својој двострукој позицији. Процеси позиционирања кроз које се ове праксе реализују важне су за проучавање друштвених процеса идентификације и конструкције места

(location-building) као једне од кључних тема антропологије уопште, као и за контрукцију места и терена саме антропологије.