

## Summary of the doctoral dissertation

The doctoral dissertation is entitled: *Traveling as a Process. Constructing an experienced world by travelers to the Chernobyl zone*. At work, I took up the issue of traveling to the Chernobyl zone, contaminated by a major accident of a power plant in Ukraine.

The Chernobyl zone is a special area located on the border of Belarus and Ukraine. It gained disgraceful popularity on April 26, 1986, when in one of the nuclear power plants in today's Ukraine, near the 50,000-strong town of Pripyat, an unsuccessful experiment resulted in a serious accident and melting of the core of the fourth nuclear reactor. The violent and tragic physical reaction led to the leakage of radioactive material into the atmosphere, soil and nearby waters - bringing dangerous contamination to the surrounding ecosystem. The tragic failure was caused, inter alia, by design errors in the reactor, organizational and procedural reasons also related to the safety culture in the then USSR, insufficient supervision of nuclear safety,

The USSR authorities, forced to decontaminate the area and secure the reactor's ashes, decided to displace the inhabitants of nearby Pripyat and other towns - initially for three days, but the contamination exceeding the permissible norms prevented the return of most of the inhabitants forever. During the forced evacuation of citizens, the authorities decided to cover the reactor's ruins, the so-called sarcophagus. The construction of the reinforced concrete cover consumed huge financial resources and destroyed the health of the people working on it - finally, with the aforementioned expenditure, it ended at the end of 1986.<sup>1</sup> For nearly thirty years, the heavily contaminated areas were legally visited only by people involved in radiation research or disaster recovery. Apart from people with appropriate passes, there were cases of illegal incursions into the Chernobyl zone. They were looters or autochthons forcibly displaced from nearby villages. The aim of the former was to plunder the property of the inhabitants, while the latter to return home to settle there again. Citizens who returned to their homes shortly after the catastrophe are commonly referred to as samosels. Initially, the services tried to evacuate them again, but they could not part with the house, and eventually the decisions on evacuation actions were abandoned. People who have returned to their homes live there to this day, often living below the subsistence level.

This area is still treated as the difficult legacy of the USSR. On the one hand, people would like to forget about it, on the other hand, there are people interested in discovering it. This state of affairs is evidenced by the increasing departure rates. Information from the official website of the Ukrainian State Agency for the Management of the Exclusion Zone indicates that travel to this place continues to grow in popularity. Initially, before 2014, the organizers of the trips aimed at

---

<sup>1</sup>In 2016, another cover, the so-called The "ark". The object's task was to cover the old sarcophagus, which, after a long time of exploitation, leaked dangerous radioactive compounds. The restructuring and the imposition of a new structure allowed for the safe deconstruction of the previous one.

disseminating knowledge about one of the world's largest nuclear accidents and its consequences. At present, the intention is similar and equally responsible, but the forms of visitation are changing. The fairly wide range of trips includes: trips - i.e. package tourist offers from travel agencies, expeditions - that is, projects organized by groups of enthusiasts and explorers. In addition to the aforementioned, there are also other ways of visiting this place, for example a lonely visit, but this activity requires obtaining appropriate passes in Ukraine or Belarus. In addition to such methods of visiting, there is also another, even more unconventional - intrusion into the contaminated area without permission, practiced by various daredevils under the threat of punishment. AND This information confirms the belief that the requirements set for contemporary travel force the search for new, unconventional ways. The Chernobyl zone has become a popular destination, therefore the title of the dissertation also includes the concept of travel in the context of the trial. In the scientific literature in the field of humanities and social sciences, this phenomenon is recognized: "(...) a more or less voluntary practice of leaving home to go to some other place. Such travel may have a material, spiritual or scientific purpose "(Clifford, 1997: 66). Travel is a form of spatial mobility in which people change their: (social) environment, geographic location, culture and natural surroundings. Exploring a new space is associated with changes in the field of human experience, which in turn depends on the activities and practices that he undertakes there. Interested in the changes taking place in travelers going to unconventional space, I undertook to explore the phenomenon of traveling and constructing the world by going to the Chernobyl zone.

The doctoral dissertation consists of four chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to Chernobyl and its legacy. I started by presenting the most important facts about the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences. One of them was the decision to deport Pripjat, which was then a kind of bedroom for employees of a nearby power plant. It was also the most modern elite agglomeration of Ukraine. After the efficient evacuation carried out in 1986, Pripjat is still referred to as a ghost town. Vegetation has taken over the entire space that was once exploited by man. Today, wild animals feed freely in a forested city, you can easily encounter walking horses, foxes or moose. This means that nature successively taking over this space equalizes what humans have previously subjected to urbanization. There are also villages within the Chernobyl zone established by the authorities immediately after the accident at the power plant. There are both ruins decaying in high vegetation and well-kept houses of samosels who returned to them after the catastrophe<sup>2</sup>. The Chernobyl zone in its essence is very ambiguous. In this part of the work I also included an attempt to confront her image in the cultural and social context. Soon after the disaster, Chernobyl was exploited on various levels, ranging from science to pop culture. You can talk about different goals of authors dealing with this

---

<sup>2</sup>It should be mentioned that not all of them returned to their homes. Some were forced to settle on other properties. This was caused, for example, by the destruction and burying of radioactively contaminated houses in the ground.

subject. Some focused on informing the public, while others set themselves the goal of creating cultural texts that would help to deal with the Chernobyl tragedy. There were also those whose purpose was to use the disaster and its effects in the context of commercialization. Successive profitable productions were created that actually distracted from understanding the true essence of space after the catastrophe - they simulated it. Jean Baudrillard, creator of the concept of simulacra, he stated that: "It is about substituting the signs of reality for reality, that is, an operation, where instead of a real process its operational double comes to the fore" (Baudrillard, 1996: 177). Treatments to which "truth" was subjected<sup>3</sup> about Chernobyl, led to a situation in which new questions about the space of the catastrophe arose. One of them is the question of how to properly define and, therefore, how to value the ambivalent space, which after 1986 became the referent of the trauma of many generations?

In this part, I also opened the way to an attempt to interpret space - heritage, which is difficult to define unequivocally due to internal ambivalence. The multiplicity of interpretations sheds light on the subject and opens the way to a scientific discussion on the space after the catastrophe. This may help explain why it is attracting more and more visitors. Travelers to the Chernobyl zone choose this destination to experience its uniqueness live. I also present the numerical statistics of travelers in the Chernobyl zone.

**In the second chapter** I present the methodological assumptions. An important element in the dissertation is the analysis of the phenomena accompanying travelers during subsequent trips to the Chernobyl zone. One of the reasons for the interest in the experiences of travelers is the willingness to find answers to bothering questions. Unknown to me were such issues as: Why do people choose the Chernobyl zone as their destination? What do travelers discover in the Chernobyl zone ?; For what purposes are they returning ?; How important are the first trips to this place and what are the returns? How do they feel there when they are there for the first time, and how do they feel there for the second time and during subsequent returns? How do they function there? Who are they there and who do they think they are ?; What are their experiences and experiences? Quite simply, colloquially, they became the starting point for scientific reflection and posing a research problem. Although the most common practice when creating a research problem is to ask a general question relating to the entire substantive dissertation, I formulated the research problem as follows: The process of acquiring experience leading to identification. In this context, looking at social reality in terms of a process required a special research apparatus and an appropriate paradigm. Moving towards the interpretation of phenomena during their lifetime, I was also a direct participant in them. In my research, I adopted the assumptions of the interpretative paradigm. I found that thanks to the aforementioned perspective with the theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology within its scope, it will be

---

<sup>3</sup>The concept of "truth" in the context of the Chernobyl disaster is very difficult to unravel. To this day, not all the circumstances and consequences of the tragic event are clear. The lack of reliable information on the part of the USSR authorities opened the way to various interpretations, including those deviating from reality.

easier to analyze the circumstances that determine the basic social process - acquiring experience process, the consequence of which is identification. Following directives, using tips or finally using grounded theory in research allowed me to distinguish significant factors influencing the process, on whose scientific synthesis I have worked so far. In the course of the research, I found information presented by the respondents or elicited in the course of the qualitative research. They originate from the concept of social creation of the researched realities, therefore they focus on the points of view of research participants, their everyday practices and knowledge about the subject of the research. For some travelers, trips to the Chernobyl zone are a common practice of moving to a familiar environment where they undertake various activities. Being there with various types of subjects, I was able to observe their spontaneous response to the surrounding space, I also learned about experiences and individual points of view while experiencing the journey. Personal declarations made in their language made it possible to understand what the surrounding space and other people meant to them. In empirical research, I used participant observation and an in-depth interview with the list of information I am looking for. Thanks to the triangulation of techniques and treating them as complementary, fully dependent on each other, I reduced the risk of errors and strengthened the reliability and accuracy of my research.

**Chapter three** this is the first part of the proper preparation of the mid-range theory arising from the directives of the methodological path I have chosen. In practice, this means that the content of the mentioned part includes all the circumstances influencing the process of acquiring experience in the Chernobyl zone. When I gave the floor to my interlocutors (while creating an atmosphere of trust), I allowed them to be specialists in individual experiences and stories. I also decided that the presented reflection should concern both participant observations and in-depth interviews, because in my research they have become fully complementary techniques, and therefore also dependent on each other. The advantage of this form of presenting conclusions was that the participant observations were treated as an additional superstructure confirming the statements of the respondents, and vice versa, when they would become a context around which one can move during individual interviews with interlocutors. With the help of quotes from interviews and excerpts from participating observations, that is, "data from life", it was possible to prepare a chronological account with valuable conclusions and useful scientific argumentation. I have also compared the problems discussed in this section with various concepts in the field of social sciences. All the references I have presented have become an important background for the conclusions that I reached in the course of synthesizing the mid-range theory in the next chapter. My goal was to understand the meanings attached to actions by active individuals. I found that this procedure would open the way to the next levels of sociological analysis.

**In chapter four** I presented the internal logic of the process of acquiring experience, the consequence of which is the identification "in" the space of the Chernobyl zone and "with" social groups residing there. This part is also the closest to the emerging data. In order to explain the process of acquiring experience, I have described the analytical categories together with their internal logical

consistency obtained in the course of progressive conceptualization. I have also attempted an abstract approach to social reality while theorizing and searching for relationships with other analytical categories. Apart from the generated categories and their properties, I present the theses on the social reality of travelers going to the Chernobyl zone.

Going through the peculiar elements and circumstances related to experience and construction, I explain the concept of identification used in the context of my work. As a result of in-depth analyzes of traveling to the Chernobyl zone, I prove that it takes place in the spatial and social dimensions. In addition to indicating examples relevant for the analysis, I also present a graphical diagram of the basic process on which I worked during the empirical research in the field. At the end of this part, I present conclusions that open the possibility of conducting further empirical research in the unconventional space of the Chernobyl zone

#### Bibliography:

1. Baudrillard J. (1996), Precession of Simulacres, [in:] Postmodernism: Anthology of Translations, Baran i Suszczyński Publishing House;
2. Clifford J. (1997), Routes ,. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London.