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Academic Playfulness or Biography of an Interdisciplinary — A Sketch

The child laughs:
"My wisdom and my love is play!"
The young man sings:
"My play and my wisdom is love!"
The old man is silent:
"My love and my play is wisdom!"
(Blaga 1919)

I was born and I grew up in Romania, where play has been a great inspirational source for writers and an ever-present theme of Romanian literature. Most often associated with childhood, the age of innocence, joy and freedom, play has been placed at the opposite end of work and seriousness, specific to adulthood. Not so, however, for the Romanian philosopher-poet Lucian Blaga, whose short poem *Three Faces* offers a departure point for my own reflections. Published in 1919, Blaga's meditation – a playful wordplay that plays out the role played by play in the human condition 😊 – invites us to consider that play, while the most important characteristic of childhood, remains present in all ages. Play is equally important to wisdom (or cognition) and love (or affection) and their synthesis makes up life. This view represents a key component of Blaga's philosophy. "Childhood", he posits, and I would certainly add playfulness, which goes along with it, "is the heart of all ages". From this perspective, play turns into a metaphor of existence, a way of being and acting in the world, extending to all areas of life including work, and I will sketch my academic autobiography in support.

Going to school was one of my favourite activities as a child. The drive was an endless curiosity and I was fascinated by simply everything the school had to offer. What a toyshop it was! One thing brought up another and, day in day out, I

was busy discovering . . . like a child, who had just started playing one game when she discovered another. Learning was play just as much as play was learning. To my challenge, I was spoilt for choice but fortunately, I landed in some sort of a disciplinary in-between-ness, which I greatly enjoyed. My witness is a double school specialization in Chemistry-Biology, not of any kind, but topped with a Romanian-English interpreter's certificate . . . a creative solution for my interests in both Linguistics and Natural Sciences. My childlike curiosity, however, seemed limitless and what followed was a radical shift. My witness this time is a double bachelor's degree in Philosophy-Anthropology, not of any kind, but topped with a teaching certificate in Civic Education, and accompanied by a one-year detour in Theatre Directing.

The reader might not be surprised by now that I later chose to specialize in yet another field – Heritage Studies, where in-between-ness is at home – but my father said, “Why are you playing around? You should work!” To my father, as to others, what I was doing was hap-hazarded, mismatching the serious work of an adult, with no itinerary. At times, it felt like playing with fire, I must admit. In-between-ness can mean uncertainty for young academics in institutions structured around disciplines. Yet, nothing was hap-hazarded. Since childhood, one thing naturally led to another, building up slowly a coherent path . . . studying theatre was training in participant observation for a student anthropologist interested in body language; it flew from older interests in linguistics, opened the door to communication studies, and melted into my current research on digital cultural transmission. Academic playfulness has been the glue on my path.

Reflecting on my work through play makes me wonder if the trajectory sketched in the previous lines is uniquely my own or does it resemble that of other researchers. After all, research is similar to a creative play animated by the joy of discovery. What drives us is a childlike curiosity. It makes us adventure into the unknown, despite the risks that may hide at every step, crafting our ways further and further through the academic toyshop of disciplines, theories, approaches, concepts and methods, seeking ways that allow us to play on this game of trial and error called research. Playfulness animates what we do. This reminds me of Michael Jackson's view on human existence as a dynamic interplay between “givenness and choice” (Jackson 2013: 5), which underlies his existential anthropology – a juxtaposition of anthropological work and philosophical thought. Tracing my academic trajectory to its roots, it appears just natural to get to Jackson's work. In-between-ness follows everywhere, so while I anchored my reflections at hand in existential philosophy, I am now winding up with existential anthropology in turn.

“Lifeworld” is one of the concepts I am engaging in my most recent research and Jackson's book with the same title is one key work. It also represents his attempt at an existential anthropology, derived from a critique of an anthropology of the social or cultural that excludes the individual (Jackson 2013: 3–4). After all, the social could

not be grasped without the experience of the individuals making it up. Therefore, for Jackson, any sociological perspective “had to be complemented with an existential perspective that encompassed the role of contingency, playfulness, unpredictability, mystery, and emotion in human life” (14). Jackson’s existential anthropology aligns well with Blaga’s meditation, and they offer fruitful entry points into studying the human condition. They also prompt us to reconsider, in the light of playfulness, not just the lives of our subjects but also our own as researchers, broadening the scope of anthropological work, of the anthropology of work and of the history of anthropology, all together. Most of all, however, playfulness teases our work; in fact, it teases the history of science in general . . . its image as a rational itinerary vanishes and what emerges mirrors the biography of an interdisciplinarian.

Literatur

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