

SOME THOUGHTS  
ON ÁRPÁD SZAKOLCZAI'S LECTURE  
*LIVING IN TRICKSTERLAND: A POLITICAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY OF TRICKSTER LOGIC*

November 26, 2021

IMOLA PÜSÖK

Anthropologists of religion have long been concerned with the archetypal figure of the trickster. Albeit the most thorough analyses of the phenomenon remain within the confines of religious anthropology, religious studies and literary studies, the trickster as a concept has been found to have uses beyond the study of myth and literary representations. Most recently, scholars in some way connected to the *Journal of International Political Anthropology* (most notably Ágnes Horváth, Árpád Szokolczai, and Bjørn Thomassen) have found the figure to be useful in analysing socio-political realities of what Szokolczai defines as the “hypermodernity” we live in.

My aim with this writing is to present, and to make some notes on, Árpád Szokolczai's talk, which was hosted on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021 by the Hungarian Department of Ethnography and Anthropology of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. The lecture was based on his new book *Post-Truth Society: A Political Anthropology of Trickster Logic* (Routledge, 2021), and took place online – a circumstance that made the modernity-critique unfolding in his presentation all the more ambivalent (and in this respect trickster-like) on a meta-textual level.

After the introductory note by the head of the department, Árpád Töhötöm Szabó, and the necessary reminders about existing rules and necessary consents for being (recorded) online, Árpád Szokolczai proceeded with his speech, which he labeled as an exercise in “tricksterology”, something he defined as the study of trickster knowledge. He commenced his line of thought by describing the theoretical-conceptual<sup>1</sup> and experiential backgrounds for his new book. In so doing, he named

<sup>1</sup> The concepts he used have been developed in the course of a series of other writings he has published partly independently (Analysing the Sacrificial Carnival Through Novels), partly with Ágnes Horváth, who coined the term tricksterology (The Political Sociology and Anthropology of Evil: Tricksterology), and with Bjørn Thomassen (From Anthropology to Social Theory: Re-thinking the Social Sciences). He also drew ideas from a recent volume edited by Marius Bența

four experiences as being at the core of his developing his ideas of a post-truth society. First, the fall of socialism, which he experienced in his daily life, proved not to be the wonderful, liberating event that everyone had hoped for. He explained how Ágnes Horváth likened the fall of communism to a Russian matryoshka doll, which at its core, under the multiple layers has nothingness, the void.<sup>2</sup> His second experience is related to his teaching in Cork, where in 2006–2007, Szokolczai came to the realisation that the experiences Eastern-Europeans had under communism are increasingly relevant to the modernity we currently experience around the world. He exemplified this with the five-year plan, which he realised was a socialist practice that is currently something Western universities are strongly working by. The third experience he recounts was his participation in the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. He defines the arrival at the modern (industrial and post-industrial) part of the town at the end of the pilgrim-walk through the otherwise picturesque landscapes, as a site of ugliness and decay, as if one had arrived at “Mordor”, something he and Ágnes Horváth later labeled as Tricksterland. The fourth experience he was inspired by were the events of March 2020, the start of the world-wide pandemic that has been defining our lives ever since. He argued that the instrumentalisation and permanentisation of an emergency, of a liminal situation was also what brought about the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After explaining how these four experiences have led to his understanding of Tricksterland, something that is characterised by hypermodernity (as opposed to post-modernity), permanent liminality (the permanentisation of a temporary situation, a crisis) and the absurd (as in Absurdistan, after Václav Havel), Szokolczai named five theoretical concepts that lie at the base of his new book, in which he tries to make sense of our current modernity. The five concepts he relies on were developed by scholars, who – according to the lecture – were pushed to the periphery of academic life. These are liminality (developed by Arnold van Gennep), participation (developed by Lucien Lévi-Bruhl), schismogenesis (coined by Gregory Bateson), the trickster (analysed in native American myths by Paul Radin) and imitation (as used by Gabriel Tarde). After naming the concepts, he then proceeded to present his book, which is structured into two parts. In the first, he presents seven “guides”, seven authors with the help of whom one is able to explore Tricksterland. These authors include Hermann Broch, Lewis Hyde, Roberto Calasso, Michel Serres, Sándor Márai, Colin Thubron and Albert Camus. In the second part, he explores what he

and Paul O'Connor (The Technologisation of the Social: A Political Anthropology of the Digital Machine – Contemporary Liminality).

<sup>2</sup> This metaphor seems slightly misplaced in the context of the conservative values expressed by Szokolczai, as traditionally the matryoshka dolls are associated with the family and fertility.

calls the five “regions” of Tricksterland, which include trickster art, trickster thought, trickster economy, trickster politics and trickster society.

In reflecting on the title of the lecture, *Living in Tricksterland*, he defined Tricksterland not as a place populated by tricksters, which would be impossible, but a society “infested” and governed by trickster logic. Trickster logic, as we found out later in the talk, can be characterised by an attitude of “staying outside”, of not participating. A trickster, in Szakolczai’s understanding, is always outside the community, a stranger, whose main characteristics are directly opposite to a charismatic person (as defined in the Weberian sense), and who, by “being outside”, has the ability to seize control over the community in times of crisis. Economy – which Szakolczai stresses has only existed since the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century, and only exists in connection to the stock market – is an example of trickster logic, since it asserts as a fact that humans as beings seek only to maximise profit. Economy, in Szakolczai’s understanding, means an integration of everything into one particular logic: that of the market economy. However, by divorcing the term from its Greek origins in *oikos* (household), from the Aristotelian concept of *oikonomia*, and essentially reducing “economy” to capitalism, and especially to present-day global capitalism, Szakolczai fails to address the complexities of human economic activities. Despite his insistence on proving otherwise, it is difficult to think of economy simply as activities (directly or semi-indirectly) governed by the stock market, and to define economic activities and relationships as somehow ruptured from what Tim Ingold calls *dwelling*,<sup>3</sup> a permanent and ongoing correspondence between humans and their (human and non-human) environment. I would argue that economic activities do include gift-giving, the receiving of gifts, earning a living, caring for the family and the household, and that economic activities at their core do contribute to an aesthetic of living a social life and participating in socio-cultural and ecological relationships.

Apart from how economic activities are viewed by Szakolczai, I also find his use of the trickster figure somewhat troubling. This is not because I find his definitions of the trickster to lack truth, but rather, because from an anthropological perspective these truths are somewhat distorted – in some sense even following the same trickster-logic that he so deeply resents. Much of the existing anthropological literature (even Radin himself<sup>4</sup>) stresses the dual nature of the trickster: his very essence is the duality of being both helpful to humans and a danger, both frightening and a buffoon, both knowledgeable and a fool, both creator and a destroyer. Arguing that the knowledge of the trickster (an outsider) is proliferating decay in our hypermodern society distorts what Radin understands to be one of the more important aspects of the Trickster-myths, namely, that they are a satire for their social and cultural context

<sup>3</sup> Ingold: *The Perception of the Environment*.

<sup>4</sup> Radin: *The Trickster*.

(much the same way as Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* were for their specific cultural-historical milieu), a way for a people to come to terms with socio-cultural atrophy through laughter, and to reinstate value into socio-cultural configurations.

In concluding, Árpád Szakolczai summarised his book by stating that “we live in a Tricksterland, which is animated by a trickster logic that spirals out of the foundation of social life on gift relations, reversing that movement whether in terms of sacrifice, warfare, or replacing [*sic*].” He, thus, gets to the core concept with which Calasso helps us understand our current modernity: infinite substitutability. This, in Szakolczai's understanding, is the destruction of social life in modernity, and this is what we as human beings need to counteract. How this may be done, is not clear, but he refers back to three Greek concepts (*archē*, *charis*, *logos*), which he traces back to Plato, Heraclitus, the Gospel of John and other sources. These, according to him, can lead us back to the foundations of social life, which is to be understood through the idea that “meaningful social life originally and in its essence is animated by the power of kind benevolence.”

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