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Report
The third teaching workshop

This report summarizes the two main methods I considered useful for developing the students' critical thinking and the reactions to them. It is based not only on the informal discussions with the students both during and after the course I taught and during the meetings for the short research on religious objects in post socialist context, but also on the several discussions I had with my colleagues and a senior member of my department.

The first method

As one of the main aims of my course was to develop the students' critical approach to the materials used for this introduction to fieldwork methodology, I asked them to prepare a one page text for four texts from the reader. They had to select from the text a short representative fragment, to summarize the argument, to present the experiential and textual/theoretical connections suggested by this text and to formulate questions that should be discussed during the seminar (using, thus, a scheme proposed by Prof. Michael Stewart).

The reactions to this method were diverse, ranging from approval, considering it a good exercise for developing critical thinking, to rejection, seeing it as a useless homework. From few students' point of view, choosing a quotation that is representative for the entire intellectual construction of a text is rather guesswork; summarizing the argument in a paragraph is too difficult; searching for textual/theoretical connections is hard work when one does not have a proper library and is a beginner in the anthropological matters; formulating questions is impossible when one really liked the text and found it convincing in terms of argumentation. Although this was also critical thinking, I considered it non-constructive, and tried to find contra-arguments in each case.

The second method

As the second ethnographic exercise I designed for four of my students was also challenging for myself and as they needed a bibliography on material culture approach, I proposed them a method for developing critical thinking: each of us had to find, although disposing of limited resources, relevant articles/books for a research on religious objects; each of us had to read all of them and to emphasize ideas/methods that can be useful; each of us had to actively and creatively participate to a "workshop" meant to formulate the next steps of our research. This method was more "productive" than the first one, each student considering it an useful intellectual game in whose frame details, different approaches, irrelevant thoughts and almost useless biographical resources can become a base on which a research is built.