

DOING EUROPEAN ETHNOLOGY IN A TIME OF CHANGE THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A DISCIPLINE (IN GERMANY AND IN EUROPE)

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Sciences change and develop, but rare are the disciplines that experience such shifts in paradigm as is the case in ethnology, Volkskunde, in German-speaking countries. This is linked to its history (and its involvement in national socialism), but it is also possible to explain with the profound changes of the research field – from a peasant society to the globalized everyday of the 21st century. We may ask ourselves, if in this regard the “special German path”, “German Sonderweg” has come to its end or if the discipline – together with its national sister discipline such as European ethnology is moving towards a common European future. This piece represents an attempt to shed light on the problems as well as possibilities of such a project. In any case Slovenian ethnology also has an important role in this endeavor.

Keywords: *history of German Volkskunde, European Ethnology, postmodern society, Europe.*

Znanosti se spreminjajo, pa vendar so le redke discipline doživele takšne paradigmatične spremembe kakor etnologija narodopisje (Volkskunde) na nemškem jezikovnem območju. To je povezano z njeno zgodovino (in njeno vpletenostjo v nacionalsocializem), mogoče pa jih je pojasniti tudi s korenito spremenjenim raziskovalnim poljem – od kmečke družbe h globaliziranemu vsakdanjiku 21. stoletja. Lahko se vprašamo, ali gre pri tem »posebna nemška pot« h koncu? In, ali gre disciplina skupaj z nacionalnimi sestrskimi disciplinami kot evropska etnologija k skupni evropski prihodnosti? V prispevku gre za poskus osvetlitve težav, a tudi možnosti pri takšnem projektu. Vsekakor ima pri tem pomembno vlogo tudi slovenska etnologija.

Ključne besede: *zgodovina nemške Volkskunde, evropska etnologija, postmoderna družba, Evropa.*

The development of discrete scientific disciplines – this we know from our own experience – is influenced to a certain extent by coincidence, but of course it is also shaped by structural changes in the research landscape. Right now in Germany there is enormous pressure to internationalize, for example. At the same time, the discipline and its departments are under increasing pressure to cooperate with other departments due to reforms as part of the Bologna Process, that is, the introduction of new Bachelor's and Master's degree programs, and due to the now dominant form of funding research, which is in large interdisciplinary projects, so-called “Collaborative Research Centers”.¹ This cooperation especially affects the field of our more or less small discipline – cultural anthropology or European ethnology or *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft* (Johler and Tschöfen 2008).

With these developments, the geography of *Volkskunde* in the German-speaking countries is undergoing a decisive change. Although I would guess that in the coming years, the number of *Volkskunde* departments will remain at large constant, I suppose that their role in the academia will change. This can be attributed to a “loss of the distinctive image” of the discipline, as some of the older members of our field believe, which has turned *Volkskunde*

¹ I was involved in the interdisciplinary Tübingen Collaborative Research Center for War Experiences (SFB 437) from 2005 to 2008. Cf. for the results: Schild and Schindling (eds), 2009; Johler et al. (eds.), 2010. In 2012, the new Collaborative Research Center *Bedrohte Ordnungen* (Threatened Orders) started.

into a “discontinued model” (Brückner 1992). I am personally not of this opinion, though it is obvious that the era of German *Volkskunde* as *German Volkskunde*, this special sort of academic development, is in fact *over*. This became evident when in recent years most departments in the German-speaking countries, in a kind of grand “clearing out campaign”, gave up the name “*Volkskunde*” and replaced it with European Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology, or Popular Cultures (Bendix and Eggeling 2004). Another indication for the end of *Volkskunde* is that we have lost either completely or to a great extent some key basic elements: the close cooperation with museums, for example, the importance of folklore as a sub-discipline, and the emphasis on “long” history as a field of study, going back as far as early modern times. And as a side note: through the political revolution of 1989, German *Volkskunde* also “lost” the ethnography of East Germany (Johler 2005).

Some things disappear. Such is life, and such is academia. I believe, however, that a European Ethnology that focuses on the present time has a future in the German-speaking countries as a small discipline with, I must admit, a rather weakly defined “cognitive identity”, precisely because it studies the complex cultural processes I mentioned at the beginning. Sometimes, however – and this is the greater difficulty – the scholars themselves also disappear before the questions that they asked have really been answered. The German-Hungarian ethnologist Peter Niedermüller, for example, asked in 2002 the right question in my opinion. He asked whether the comprehensive transformational processes of the last decade require only a modernized version of European Ethnology, or whether indeed a completely new European Ethnology was necessary, one that had yet to be “invented”. Because, he argued, “modern” sciences are methodologically and theoretically ill-equipped to produce knowledge about a “postmodern” society. The “new” European Ethnology that Niedermüller calls for aims, for this reason, directly at this “self-radicalizing modernity” (Niedermüller 2002).

This brings me to the point in this paper in which the larger cultural processes of the present time are connected with the metamorphosis of the discipline and which, depending on its effects, can cause an upswing or a serious crisis in the field. For now, the only thing that is certain – from the point of view of European Ethnology as it is practiced in Germany, at least – is that we will have to make more of an effort regarding the content of this field in the future.

CRISIS AND UPWARD TRENDS IN THE GERMAN *VOLSKUNDE*

That the current transnational processes also restructure the academic landscape – that they create winners and losers in academic globalization, so to speak – has been frequently stated. To paraphrase roughly the Viennese anthropologist Andre Gingrich (1999), globalization and with it the second modernity not only weakened the nation-state but also made the “national” disciplines “unattractive and outdated”. Instead, internationally institutionalized

social sciences that compare the “local”, the “transnational” and the “world” transculturally and interculturally – like Social or Cultural Anthropology – moved into the “center of public and academic discourse”. And while social and cultural anthropology are having a worldwide boom, (national) *Volkskunde* finds itself in a crisis. Its “transition” to a European Ethnology is in the eyes of Gingrich still for the most part open and unclear (Gingrich 2000) – a fact, incidentally, that European Ethnology has in common with the “European Sociology” that Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash have formulated as a future project. The main question from Beck, Giddens, and Lash – “Does sociology still exist? Has it come back?” (Beck et al. 1996) – is also easy to apply to (national) *Volkskunde* whose “crisis” has become unmistakable and repeatedly noted of late, particularly in connection with the fall of the “Iron Curtain” and the German reunification. Tamás Hofer for instance has lamented the absence of a “critical revolution” in Hungarian *Volkskunde* since 1989 (Hofer 1999) – and this can also be confirmed for its sister disciplines in Eastern and Central Europe (Köstlin et al. 2002) – but at the same time, has drawn attention to a pivotal change, which is of great significance to German-language *Volkskunde*: English has replaced German as the academic language in Hungary; and furthermore its neighbors (Germany and Austria) no longer set the orientating framework for the field, but rather the “Far-West” (the USA) and the North (Scandinavia). For in fact German-language *Volkskunde* has modernized, but – as Berlin ethnologist Wolfgang Kaschuba (1999) showed in his “Introduction to European Ethnology” has hardly Europeanized, or to be more precise, has hardly become European at the institutional level, so these current developments in the various types of *Volkskunde* in Europe after 1989 amount to a certain international isolation and with it, a continuation of the “German *Sonderweg*“ in this academic field (Johler 2001).

A GERMAN *SONDERWEG*?

Actually, talk of a *Sonderweg* (a special path) in German *Volkskunde* is nothing new – not in Germany itself, where Thomas Nipperdey once described the field as a “curious German *Sonderwissenschaft*” (a science peculiar to Germany, cfr. Korff 1996), and it is not new in an international context: Tomas Gerholm and Ulf Hannerz for instance called it the “*Volkskunde/Völkerkunde* split” (Gerholm and Hannerz 1982: 22) when they spoke about the division of the ethnological fields that is known in other parts of Europe but is unusual in the international arena. And at the same time, they used the German language when they compared the “fairly isolated *Volkskunde*” (Gerholm and Hannerz 1982: 24) which does without a “wider comparative perspective” regarding content as well as its institutional structure when studying one’s own culture, while in other countries there has been a customary integration into a “world order of anthropology.” That is why it takes little imagination to position German *Volkskunde*, characterized as such, on the map clearly outlined by Gerholm and Hannerz:

It seems that the map of the discipline shows a prosperous mainland of British, American, and French anthropologies, and outside the archipelago of large and small islands – some of them connected to the mainland by sturdy bridges or frequent ferry traffic, others rather isolated. (Gerholm and Hannerz 1982: 6)

The *Volkskundler* Gerhard Lutz from Hamburg also spoke of a “*Sonderweg*” for German *Volkskunde* as early as the 1970s and saw its origins in the complex, contradictory relationship of German *Volkskunde* to cultural anthropology, or rather to European Anthropology. This is not the place to outline the highly divergent and moreover hardly clearly defined contents that have been associated with European Ethnology since then, nor can the emergence of “European Ethnology” in the differing scenarios offered by the various national schools of European *Volkskunde* be described here in detail. But what remains to be emphasized is that European Ethnology, which was first conceived in 1937 by the *Volkskundler* Sigurd Erixon in the Swedish context as “regional European Ethnology” (Erixon 1937), has demanded the attention of German-language *Volkskunde* in several waves, each of which had their origins outside the discipline: In the early 1950s in connection with the Congress of Arnhem, in the 1970s in the discussion over the naming of the discipline, and in the 1980s and 1990s in the ethnological challenge of an “Ethnology of Europe,” that is to say, “anthropology at home.”

To understand the unclear use of European Ethnology in German *Volkskunde*, it is worthwhile to take a look at the 1950s as Gerhard Lutz (1970) did – that is, when the first attempt to establish a European Ethnology was made. For at that time, Lutz tells us, German *Volkskunde* reacted with rejection and a lack of understanding to the challenge from foreign colleagues to see itself as “Ethnology” and thus to integrate itself into the international academic landscape; and in an “almost psychopathological sense of the word” – Lutz summarizes – this wish was “repressed” and the “matter” itself soon “hushed up” for one reason: In the eyes of German-speaking *Volkskundler* at this time, ethnology stood for non-European *Völkerkunde*, or cultural anthropology in the classic sense, thus seen as a field dedicated to describing the “primitive”, and the treating of this as an equivalent to European *Volkskulturen* was fiercely rejected. Recently, my Tübingen colleague Bernd Jürgen Warneken has shown in an analysis supported by substantial sources that this strictly disapproving attitude itself was already controversial early in the history of the academic field. He has rediscovered the comparative, “non-völkische *Volkskunde*”, a non-national *Volkskunde* of the turn of the 20th century, supported by Jewish-German researchers, and maintains that it even shows a future perspective for the present day, because the convergence between *Volkskunde* and Anthropology that can be noted in many places does not mean “a break with the history of the discipline, but rather a linking up with its best tradition” (Warneken 1999: 196).

However, such a linking up with Anthropology – and this was especially clear in the attempts in the 1950s – does not just mean a stronger integration of both academic

fields, but rather aims most of all at an internationalization of the discipline. European Ethnology was initially a loose, communicative integration project of the various national disciplines of *Volkskunde* in Europe; at the present time it has to define itself within the framework of an anthropological/ethnological “world order.” A key word – and for the moment not necessarily a concept – in this regard is certainly “Europe.” And that German *Volkskunde* has hardly reflected on that up until now can be seen as a continuation of the “*Sonderweg*” – a *Sonderweg*, though, that is definitely shared by many other *Volkskunde* disciplines in Europe: Martine Segalen for instance has stated – in clear contrast to the social anthropological studies of British provenance which she presents – a lack of interest by the “*ethnologie française*” for the “*ethnologues européennes*” (Segalen 1997), and even less so for Europe. According to Segalen, one could indeed ascribe to this fact something of the perceptiveness that is particularly well developed in the national schools of Ethnology – as Europe is at the moment nothing more than an “ideal type” at best; however, one could just as well see this deficiency as an ethnological “lack of interest”, with which the current European unification process, the “new Europe”, will be overlooked.

DIFFERENT ETHNOLOGICAL “SPECIAL PATHS” IN EUROPE

Gottfried Korff convincingly explained that in the 1950s the internationally agreed upon introduction of European Ethnology is to be seen in the context of the early European unification process itself and thus, “10 years after the ‘völkisch’ (the national) disaster,” as an attempt to end the „German *Sonderweg*“ in Europe with regard to *Volkskunde* (Korff 1996). German *Volkskunde*, however, as I have already mentioned, took a different path – that of a decided modernization and in connection with that the de-nationalization of the field. In retrospect and most of all from a comparative point of view, however, these efforts at innovation, as noted by Tamás Hofer, were shaped by a “Germanness” of the debate:

When in the 1970s traditional ethnology in many parts of Europe moved closer to the social sciences and established new contacts with (mostly English speaking) anthropologists, the German ethnologists were already immersed into their own critical revolution and were constructing their own new theoretical research frame, mostly of home-made materials. The original impetus for the German reform (or revolution) in ethnology came from a negation of German nationalism. Because of the success of the reform-movement, however, contemporary ‘new ethnology’ in Germany is making less use of ‘international’ anthropological inspirations than most other European countries. (Hofer 1996: 95)

Hofer aptly labeled this unwanted continuation of a *Sonderweg* as a typical “latent ethnicity” for the “national schools of European Ethnology” (Hofer 1996) and thus confirmed the findings of Orvar Löfgren, who found that the efforts in Sweden to introduce an European

Ethnology, although started at the same time, developed completely differently than in Germany and has led to highly different results – a circumstance which allows Löfgren to speak of ethnological “tribes” in Europe, which are shaped by different “styles of doing *Volkskunde*” (Löfgren 1996).

Consequently, the stated diversity of contemporary European Ethnology is to be explained by divergent national academic traditions, but also by the current “cultural background” of national academic output. However, one is currently not only able to observe the national *Sonderwege* in European Ethnology but also in the clearly internationally organized field of Anthropology. In this regard, Tomas Gerholm and Ulf Hannerz asked whether the “plurality” of national practices in Anthropology, which actually fundamentally contradicts a universal “world order of anthropology”, exists precisely because of the dependence of these anthropologies on their respective cultures – and that there is a yet to be defined “unity” of the field within this very “diversity” (Gerholm and Hannerz 1982). Since then, answers to this question have been given in particular in the “postcolonial debate.” In this debate “local knowledge” is no longer seen as backward and its producers, the national anthropologies, no longer as irrelevant – on the contrary: the voices of these national anthropologies are understood as an expression of “cultural diversity” and their academic interpretations as well as their theoretical concepts seen as necessary local adaptations of anthropological meta-theories shaped by the national context. Local and/or national “self knowledge” – and with it the for European Ethnology so characteristic “License to talk about oneself” (Lindner 2000) – gains in this way an increasing importance in the global anthropological community. And thus, in the national *Sonderwege* of European Ethnology appears to lay a specific opportunity for the discipline. Though to be sure: on its *Sonderwege*, European Ethnology will not be able to solve its problems of content.

AND THEREFORE EUROPE?

Orvar Löfgren presented an overview how Swedish European Ethnology orientated itself increasingly more internationally and anthropologically in the early 1970s and how, in doing so, however, it also became more Swedish with regard to its geographical area of research. In this rather paradoxical situation, as Löfgren summed up, the prefix “European” which was adopted from Sigurd Erixon amounts just to rhetoric and no longer had any meaning in regard to content. And in fact, a new interest for Europe was not established in Sweden until after the “political turn” of 1989 and thus a European Ethnology has once again come up for discussion and – as in other parts of Europe – has become a topic (Löfgren 1996).

As this last example should illustrate, the existing diversity of the represented positions, like the incredible diversity of *Sonderwegen* of the ethnological and meanwhile also anthropological disciplines in Europe may be an actual expression of that attitude which Ernest Gellner referred to with regard to the founding of EASA in 1989 as an – arguably not

unproblematic – “particularistic love of culture in contemporary Europe” (Gellner 1993). However, the different anthropological and ethnological traditions in Europe should – as Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1991) pointed out on the same occasion – be seen less as an obstacle than as an intellectually active and also epistemologically productive field. What needs to happen is the development of a “network of perspectives” in a “European ethnological dialog” (Segalen 1989) and thus the discovery of a “unity” in respect to content within the disciplinary “diversity”.

“Unity in diversity” – this phrase borrowed from EU-propaganda (McDonald 1996) is more than a play on words, it indeed refers to a central problem. For European Ethnology reflects the history and present day of Europe from the nation-state segmentation to the division of the continent in “East” and “West” to the European unification process – and is as such positioned (perhaps even stronger than Anthropology) “among the powers”. The communication and translation project “European Ethnology“ suggested here – which must also be indirectly understood as institutional reaction to the currently emerging “European Research Area” – can only withdraw itself with great difficulty from this not wholly unproblematic involvement. As this European Ethnology is also effectively inspired by this Europeanization process, it is also subjected to a crucial change right now in its categorical basis – exemplified by terms such as “territory” or “people-hood” (Borneman and Fowler 1997).

Europe as a “master symbol” is politically fiercely fought over – and a European Ethnology which deals with this “Europe” is inevitably involved in these discussions. But Europeanization which not least was made possible by the “political turn” of 1989 is also very much part of a transcending process of trans-nationalization. A “new” European Ethnology has yet to position itself toward it with regard to content. In doing so, it must not see Europe as isolated, but rather understand itself institutionally as “cumulative microstructuring of the global ecumene” as an “ethno-anthropological” discipline, that is to say, one which makes the “simultaneity of the asynchronous” (of nationalism and transnational processes, for example, or of the “first” Modernity and “second” Modernity) a central issue and in so doing, knows how to use the resources of the “old” European Ethnology that was *Volkskunde*.

So, I have arrived at a different answer than Peter Niedermüller. As a reminder: in the face of current transformations, Niedermüller had called for the establishment of a genuinely “new” European Ethnology. This would devote itself: one, to research on “complex societies” while, two, limiting itself to its “own society” and, three, to an “expanded present time”. The research should, four, foreground the “cultural construction” of late modern and “glocally” constituted European societies, which, five, should be examined by methods of discourse analysis and an ethnographic approach (Niedermüller 2002).

This new European Ethnology has for various reasons never been discussed. I view these five points with some skepticism. Most of all, however, I do not see sufficient evidence to justify a call for a “new” European Ethnology. At the same time, however, I see it as indisputable that current transformational processes are profoundly changing not only our field

of research, but also our academic discipline. For the *Volkskunde* of the German-speaking countries, as I have argued, this means – to put it somewhat dramatically – its end, the end of a long, in many ways also successful *Sonderweg*. This “end” is evident not least in the fact that an increasing “anthropologization” of the research, and of our understanding of the discipline, can be observed at the current time. Thus, German *Volkskunde* understands itself, much like some “sister disciplines” in other countries – to use the term coined by famous Croatian ethnologist Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin – as an ethno-anthropological discipline. It is “anthropological” because it has its place in international anthropology, and it is ethnological – and this appears to me to be a specific feature in Europe – because it will still be focused on it “own”, perhaps on “European” society (Rihtman-Auguštin 1999).

Thus, I am arguing for a further, perhaps even indeed a new *Sonderweg* – “*Sonderweg*” of European Ethnology. I have tried to characterize this European Ethnology as a communication project, a “network of perspectives” (Johler 2003). As such, it shows, perhaps, a convincing European “unity in diversity”. I admit, of course, that the shared European “umbrella” I am asking for is not without its own problems, since it clearly stands within the context of the more or less well-liked political process of European unification. This can be an opportunity or a risk, but it is clear, at least from the perspective of a European Ethnology in the German-speaking countries just in the process of finding itself, that such a common “umbrella” over the disciplines is urgently necessary, not least in the face of the present pressure to internationalize.

But one other thing is also clear: This “European” European Ethnology is not very well positioned at the moment. It has no real intellectual center and the number of shared projects and networks that go beyond concrete research topics is limited. Our only flagship at the moment seems to be the “*Ethnologia Europaea*”, but also the SIEF and the EASA. But of course the old, but modernized national schools – like Slovenian ethnology and the Ljubljana Institute – have been in this regard the spearhead in the past and could be the spearhead in the future with others. And that would be – in my mind – a good as well as a realistic vision for us: In the current times of change we do have an urgent need for new centers of ethno-anthropological thinking in Europe.

CONCLUSION: BIRTHDAY WISHES

Jubilees – such as the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Institute of Slovenian Ethnology – allow us foremost to take a proud look back. One can be proud of one’s own past and the scholarly achievements of the present. But just as important is a look towards the future. The future of our discipline is, however, certainly European. The road that we must take – as argued from a German perspective in this paper – is a “European dialog”. This dialog does not have to be completely reinvented, but rather can be based on – as a look at Slovenian *Volkskunde* reveals – a long tradition, renowned representatives as well as important research projects.

From the German (and also Austrian) view, a synopsis of Slovenian Volkskunde (similar to that for Croatia; cf. Jöhler 2003) would be just as important as the continuation of the historiography of *Volkskunde* that had started together (Jöhler and Fikfak 2008) or the implementation of collective European research on the present (Jöhler 2012).

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EVROPSKA ETNOLOGIJA V ČASU SPREMEMB. SPREMEMBE DISCIPLINE (V NEMČIJI IN EVROPI)

Na razvoj posamičnih znanstvenih disciplin do določene mere vplivajo naključja, seveda pa tudi strukturne spremembe v raziskovalni pokrajini. Tako je, npr., trenutno v Nemčiji opazen silen pritisk k internacionalizaciji. Hkrati gre za reforme, ki so del bolonjskega procesa, discipline in njihovi oddelki pod naraščajočim pritiskom sodelovanja z drugimi oddelki, tj. pri vpeljavi novih diplomskih in magistrskih programov, in prevladujočo obliko podpore raziskovanju, tj. v velikih interdisciplinarnih projektih v t. i. sodelovalnih raziskovalnih centrih. Sodelovanje posebej prizadeva polja bolj ali manj majhnih disciplin – kulturne antropologije ali evropske etnologije ali empirične vede o kulturi. S takšnim razvojem je geografija Volkskunde v nemško govorečih deželah v procesu odločilnih sprememb.

Trenutne spremembe se vpisujejo v daljnosežnejši razvoj. Le redke vede so doživele takšno spremembo paradigme kakor Volkskunde na nemškem jezikovnem obmoju. To je povezano z njeno zgodovino (in njeno vpletenostjo v nacionalsocializem), mogoče pa jih je pojasniti tudi s korenito spremenjenim raziskovalnim poljem – od kmečke družbe h globaliziranemu vsakdanjiku 21. stoletja. Lahko se vprašamo, ali gre pri tem "posebna nemška pot" Volkskunde h koncu? In, ali gre disciplina skupaj z nacionalnimi sestrskimi disciplinami kot evropska etnologija k skupni evropski prihodnosti?

Prispevek skuša na podlagi ozadja strokovnega razvoja v evropskem okviru osvetliti težave, a tudi možnosti za takšen evropski projekt. Po avtorjevem mnenju so možnosti za »evropski etnološki dialog«, pri čemer ima prav slovenska etnologija kot posredovalka med različnimi strokovnimi izročili pomembno vlogo. Za to pa – in za sklep prispevka – moramo okrepiti skupne projekte.

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