

# RETHINKING EUROPE AS A FIELD FOR EUROPEAN ETHNOLOGY

## Editors' Introduction

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What is Europe? Where is Europe? And what constitutes Europe in the discipline of European ethnology? The publication of *Ethnologia Europaea* started 40 years ago as an attempt to create a cross-disciplinary and transnational forum, and a dialogue between different "national" ethnologies (see Rogan in this issue). In the first issue from 1967, the editor Sigurd Erixon stated: "*Ethnologia Europaea* has set itself the task of breaking down not only the barriers which divide research on Europe from general ethnology, but also the barriers between the different national schools within the continent." This did not turn out to be an easy task. European ethnology in the variegated shape it has taken in national and regional settings continued to focus on cultural themes within politically drawn boundaries. The need for European comparisons lived more in the Sunday rhetoric of the discipline than in actual research, but with a new interest in transnational processes the perspectives were widened. The processes of economic unification also gave rise to research on facets of a European culture, conditioned, for instance, by the administrative implementation of European economic and, increasingly, cultural policies.

Local, regional and national cultural dimensions do not vanish, of course, and neither do borders and boundaries, physical and mental. Processes of EU integration as well as the forces of globalization may both weaken and strengthen national and regional borders, as we have seen during the last decades. Such developments call for a rethinking of Europe as

a field of research and also a means to question ideas of and about Europe, to examine notions of European cultural homogeneity on the backdrop of felt and enacted heterogeneity. The EU rhetoric about unity hides a more complex picture, where European integration and disintegration emerge in often surprising settings and forms.

As Europeanist cultural researchers watch and experience the thickening and reorganizing of European cultures, there is now the opportunity to think about the possible transformations of European ethnology. For a small workshop at Lund University in September 2007, we assembled colleagues from Croatia, Denmark, Northern Ireland, France, Germany and Sweden to exchange ideas on what foci European ethnology might concentrate on, allowing for fantasies about the future place and purpose of the discipline and keeping in check the nightmares that the rapid transformation of higher education might equally induce.<sup>1</sup> Some of the papers assembled in this issue took their origin in this workshop (Andresen and Højrup, Kockel, Povrzanović Frykman, and Segalen), others were solicited in an effort to broaden the perspectives in terms of location and generation represented (Damsholt, Fournier, Rogan, and Sánchez-Carretero and Ortiz).

The present issue was planned to coincide with the 9<sup>th</sup> congress of the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF) in Derry, Northern Ireland, and hence it also opens with a paper by the congress' program chair, Ullrich Kockel whose

paper – employing the congress’ subtitle “liberating the ethnological imagination” argues forcefully for unleashing the creative potential inherent to the discipline and playing to the interdisciplinary strength of the ethnographic project with confidence. Ethnography’s importance is also at the heart of Maja Povrzanović Frykman’s essay, and while she is not going as far as calling for the uncovering of European indigeneity, as does Kockel, she sees in the ethnographic approach at once an avenue toward greater theoretical sophistication and a departing from confining core concerns such as identity and ethnicity. Citizenship, migration, a life beyond the European Union and post-socialism are sites of future work from her vantage point. Cristina Sánchez-Carretero and Carmen Ortiz suggest the notion of “emergency ethnology” which similarly builds on the value of ethnographic methods as an avenue toward greater theoretical relevance. To them, European ethnology need not be a quietly reflecting endeavor, rather, they stress the potential of the field to engage in crisis or emergency situations and thus actively acknowledge the field’s potential as a social force.

Jesper Andresen and Thomas Højrup give an example of how an ethnography of EU policy making could be approached, with fieldwork in different local European settings as well as in the centers of power.

A number of contributions circle around notions of comparatism and thus revisit this long standing intellectual interest in the field. Comparatism is indeed a methodological approach requiring deeper reflection not least regarding its theoretical and socio-political underpinnings. In her foreword to Andre Gingrich and Richard Fox’s *Anthropology. By Comparison* (Routledge, London, 2002), Marilyn Strathern acknowledges the necessity to reflect on strands of the comparative method, and points out – together with the editors of that volume – the problems of a classic comparative method: “It only produced knowledge like itself” and did “not invite further invention; it was hard to see how it could be added to, qualified, introduced into other contexts” (p. xv). Laurent Fournier’s assessment of comparatism as practiced in European ethnology’s past arrives similarly at this insight. He seeks avenues to

encourage a theoretically more productive comparatism engendered by institutional courage – overcoming disciplinary partitions and engaging in cooperative projects that also entail tackling supranational funding ventures for them. Such funding sources enforce comparative research design simply by requiring project participation from several countries – which in turn invites reflection on the interplay of funding policies and research design within the European Union and beyond.

Martine Segalen reports on a successful, comparative European project on a classic ethnological topic: kinship. Through this topical lens and – again – through good ethnography supplemented with historical data, she sees an opportunity to recognize transformations in other facets of European societies. Tine Damsholt likewise stresses the potential of comparatism, coupled with a broadened ethnographic sensibility in her exploratory study on “the sounding” of citizenship.

The volume concludes with an excerpt from Bjarne Rogan’s ongoing, detailed study of the cumbersome building of scholarly networks and organizations among European ethnologists, leading not only to the founding of *Ethnologia Europaea* but also – at the heart of Rogan’s interest – to the emergence of SIEF as a successor organization of earlier scholarly organizations. The internal and external, political and interpersonal allegiances and conflicts encountered in constructing and maintaining an international scholarly organization focused on European cultures perhaps constitutes a microcosm of issues faced in all other lifeworlds confronted with more or less strongly motivated programs to foster Europeanization. If SIEF’s experience should provide any predictions for the future, the strength of individual, institutional and national interests more than counterbalances whatever economic or political will there might be for a more unified Europe. Many of the barriers Erixon talked about in 1967 are still here. We would like *Ethnologia Europaea* to continue as a platform not only for European research but also for interdisciplinary dialogues in a constantly changing academic landscape of disciplines and research traditions.

## Note

- 1 We are grateful for the financial support from the Royal Gustav Adolphus Academy that made the workshop possible.