

LIBERATING THE ETHNOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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European ethnology is highly adept at re-inventing itself. Ethnologists draw on many other disciplines in their research, without being confined by the respective ‘purity laws’. This creates considerable hermeneutic potential, but also entails certain dangers. Many disciplines suffer from a post-modern fear of postulating cultural difference. European ethnologists should speak out against this dangerous orientation, and seek out alternatives. For example, the Central European concept of ‘from here’-ness should be explored for its hermeneutic potential. Liberating the ethnological imagination will take some time and effort – engagement with human ecology and the creative arts could be a start.

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The sub-theme for the 2008 congress of the *Société Internationale d’Ethnologie et de Folklore* (SIEF) is “Liberating the Ethnological Imagination”. The implications of this are at least three-fold:

1. that there is an ethnological imagination, and therefore ethnology is creative, not simply an unimaginative gathering of ‘facts’;
2. that this imagination is currently in a state of captivity (as Rousseau might have said: ‘born free, but everywhere in chains’), preventing it from unfolding its creative potential; and
3. that there are ways and means of breaking out of this captivity.

One might add a fourth implication, namely that such a jail-breaking would be a good thing to achieve. This is by no means as self-evident as it might seem to some – there are prisoners who prefer the shel-

ter of guarded routines to the vagaries of the world ‘outside’.

Over the years, European ethnology has become highly adept at re-inventing itself. This is not the place and occasion to revisit the various incarnations, some of which are discussed in a forthcoming book (Nic Craith, Kockel & Johler 2008). Instead, I want to consider the challenge expressed in the title. What does that actually mean: ‘liberating the ethnological imagination’? What are the sources this liberation may feed on? What could it look like in practice? What (and who) makes imaginative ethnology, and who benefits? Is ethnology worth the bother, or should we just resign ourselves to being appendages of larger units?

One question not asked here before now might be regarded as rather crucial: What is ethnology? In the 1980s, geography underwent an identity crisis during which many prominent practitioners claimed

that 'geography is what geographers do'. As a doctoral student I smiled at this and thought it a smart cop-out. Then I witnessed anthropology going down the same route. And, of course, European ethnology has been there at least since the Falkenstein symposium. In one sense the statement is true: ethnology is what ethnologists do. But there are many other senses. European ethnologists do history, sociology, geography, political economy, literature, art, architecture, and so on. It might therefore be more accurate to say that 'European ethnology is how European ethnologists do things'. The problem with this is that you will have 'real' historians, sociologists, and so on who claim from their disciplinary high horses that European ethnologists lack the 'proper' disciplinary rigour – which does have a grain of truth in it: European ethnologists can indeed be undisciplined academics. And Foucault tells us what happens to undisciplined members of any society: incarceration of one sort or another. There are subtle ways of incarceration – the creation of an audit culture, which inevitably stifles smaller subjects more than larger ones that have a bigger staff to whom tasks may be delegated, is only one aspect. Then there is – still, after all these years – Max Weber's *stahlhartes Gehäuse* (famously rendered by Talcott Parsons as the 'iron cage'), an encasement as hard as steel into which a rampant capitalism inescapably straps its subjects. Thirdly, there are snares set by some past preoccupations of European ethnology, both methodically and in terms of subject matter, which may still be vigorously defended as cherished 'traditions' when in fact they have long become fossilised, and devoid of the dynamic characterising genuine traditions. With the cat now firmly among the pigeons, let us return to the questions raised earlier.

It is somewhat preposterous of anyone to claim answers to the above questions that can fit in a short essay. Let me therefore say that what I am offering here are by no means answers in the sense of any philosophical truths – empirical, analytical, or otherwise – but tentative interpretations from a personal perspective: a vision that may be one among many. At this stage to do otherwise would only mean incarcerating the imagination once more.

Thomas Højrup (2003: 2) identifies a 'cultural-relational dialectic' that conditions ethnology: 'our concepts and values are a product of cultural life-modes' while they also 'determine the kinds of life-modes we can conceive'. This leads to an important insight: 'Ethnocentrism and *the continuing effort to transcend ethnocentrism* are therefore fundamental features of ethnology' (orig. emph.) that help us understand different life-modes and the relations between them. Ethnology, in its continuous effort to transcend ethnocentrism, needs to study the foundations of ethnocentrism rather than merely dismiss it as an uncomfortable heritage. This includes the courage to difference evoked many years ago by Werner Schifffauer (1996), who argued that anthropology ought to overcome its 'Fear of Difference'. Since the proclaimed advent of post-modernity, many disciplines have indeed become afraid to postulate cultural difference. European ethnology should stand up and speak out against this dangerous orientation. The aim is not an assertion of difference as superiority, but reclamation of a spirit of appreciation of difference and diversity, regarding these not just as elements of ad-lib performances (as post-modernists do), but as characterising the everyday life of groups and individuals, thus allowing people to be different and enjoy this diversity without having to pretend it is merely some kind of mock-difference put on for the sake of carnival or other purposes of entertainment.

The critique has been joined by some sociologists coming from and working within intercultural contexts. In his 'cross-cultural critique of modernity', Fuyuki Kurasawa reads classic authorities of his trade as representing an ideological counter-current contesting the social order of Western modernity. Rousseau, Marx, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and even Max Weber are called upon as witnesses to the existence of what he terms 'the ethnological imagination'.¹ 'Ethnological', for Kurasawa (2004: 12), designates 'in the broad and etymologically literal sense ... the comparative study of societies aiming to produce critical interpretations of the modern West'. He quotes (loc. cit.) Merleau-Ponty (1960: 150) who sees ethnology not as

a speciality defined by a particular object ... [but as] ... a way of thinking, one which imposes itself when the object is 'other,' and demands that we transform ourselves. Thus we become the ethnologists of our own society if we distance ourselves from it.

With the term 'imagination', Kurasawa (2004: 12) seeks to highlight 'the mythical character of constructs of otherness found in cross-cultural reflection'. These constructs are myths in that they represent 'related sets of beliefs and values created to rhetorically explain what Euro-American societies have become in relation to their pasts and their futures' (op.cit.: 13). The 'ethnological imagination' produces 'a critical examination of this sociohistorical formation from a distance and through a comparative perspective acquired by way of encounters with widely differing ways of being in the world' (loc.cit.). Kurasawa therefore challenges both the fashionable dismissal of social theory as imperialist and ethnocentric, and the common denial of the intercultural basis for much of the disciplinary canon. Thus attacking the twin giants of universalism and particularism, he suggests that, by cultivating the ethnological imagination in an increasingly multicultural world, we can enable social theory to respond better to issues of identity and boundaries, not just at the level of empirical detail, but also analytically, with regard to 'the West' and 'modernity'. One might say that this is all very well for Kurasawa's discipline of sociology, which would benefit from some ethnological imagination. I think there is food for thought here beyond that, not least in his use of Merleau-Ponty's definition of ethnology – which, coming from the French, embraces social and cultural anthropology along with European ethnology in most of its various guises – and the hint of a Heideggerian framework, which is also expressed in the reference to *Dasein* [being there] woven into the title of a collection of essays on phenomenological approaches to the analysis of culture by European ethnologists and anthropologists (Frykman & Gilje 2003).

By virtue of its name, European ethnology is per-

haps more liable than most other fields of research to be charged with the sin of Eurocentrism. Before we (over-)react to this charge, we ought to remind ourselves and our critics that Eurocentrism is just one form of ethnocentrism, and that, as such, it constitutes a legitimate and, indeed, necessary subject for examination, as Thomas Højrup suggests. The postmodernist response to the problem has long been to declare Europe a delusion, thus making Europeans non-existent by definition. The 'folk' – with which earlier incarnations of European ethnology have been so eagerly concerned – have been ousted, replaced by an anodyne populace. The latter implies sameness flavoured with some identity-warehouse colouring. 'Identities' projected in this way are fleeting, forever changing and unstructured. The celebration of these effectively 'indifferent' identities plays into the hands of a closet form of fascism where being different invariably means deviant, and therefore a legitimate target for ostracising. But what should we do about that? As European ethnologists, given the past of our field, how are we going to celebrate difference without once again playing into the hands of the perpetrators of 'blood and soil'? How do we generate new terms that allow us to revisit old concerns free from historical baggage?

Elsewhere (Kockel 2008), I have suggested that we might go one step further and grab the European (ethnological) bull by the horns, wrestling with a new critical understanding of indigeneity in the European context. Could we take a cue (or at least a clue) from the Native Americans? This would not be a matter of reading their culture through our categories – such as property rights – or vice versa; nor would it be about learning through communication between different cultures. Instead, like the autobiography of Black Hawk (Pratt 2001: 109), it would be about 'ways of seeing and understanding the place that sustained the life' of the people of Europe. Of course, nowadays there are no Natives (allowed to be) in Europe. As the discourse of 'nativeness' has been usurped by the political Right for xenophobic ends, Europe has lost its indigeneity. An element of indigeneity may be visible in the Central European *tuteishyi*, 'those who are simply "from here," even if

that “here” changes in relation to the “theres” which have shaped and defined the territory’ (Ivakhiv 2006: 38f.):

The *tuteishyi* represents ... a person ... who is uncertain as to whether s/he is a nationality, ethnicity, or part of some other substance (religious denomination, et al.), but who is defined by the place in which s/he remains (and moves) while empires, armies, time-zones, and global economic forces move in and out of range. ... rooted enough in his or her own space (Tarasiewicz’s forests, Maszlancko’s fields), mobile in the tracks and paths carved out through earthy meanderings in the interstices of nations and empires.

Could supra-national bodies like the European Union help empower these indigenous Europeans? And what could the role of European ethnology be in the process? After many years of soul-searching and reconstruction, European ethnology’s focus on certain keywords – such as culture, everyday, historicity, identity (Bausinger et al. 1993[1978]) – remains and, combined with its methodological pluralism, uniquely equips its practitioners to address problems associated with recovering indigeneity, in Europe and elsewhere. However, this cannot, must not be ‘salvage ethnology’ in the service of a colonial project – internal or overseas – as we saw it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but instead contribute to the subversive emancipation of the folk, as postulated, for example, by the ‘progressive patriot’ singer and song-writer Billy Bragg (2007: 13) who rejects the ‘rituals of pomp and circumstance ... designed to detract attention from the iniquities of the present by constant reference to a more glorious past.’ In this context it is worth contemplating the grammatical properties of the nouns we use in our different languages. When the German *Volk* became tainted by political abuse, the English *folk* became dubious by association. However, whereas *das Volk* is a plural, collective noun, implying an amorphous homogeneity, *the folk* can designate a rather more diverse collective whose defining homogeneity is made up of a multitude very much in the sense Hardt and

Negri (2004) employ that term. The ‘folk revivals’ of the 1970s are a good example for this. One might say that the difference is one between *die Masse* (the populace) and *die Menge* (the folk or the multitude). Perhaps, if we need such lines of demarcation at all, this also indicates a difference of focus, between sociology and certain brands of ‘cultural studies’ on the one hand, and ethnology on the other hand.

As a niche subject coming from the side-lines, European ethnology will hardly be able to conquer academia, by storm or otherwise. The scattering of graduates has ensured that there are European ethnologists working in many more universities and other research institutions than just those that offer a department or institute for this kind of work, under whatever title may be fashionable or locally acceptable. There will be obvious pressures to assimilate, to blend into whatever disciplinary teaching of undergraduate students in particular butters our bread. Where we have an institutional base, the prospect of a merger and take-over is always on the horizon. This could make anyone despondent. But it should not. And it need not, if we can liberate our own ethnological imagination a bit.

Insistence on the purification and maintenance of ‘our own’ disciplinary canon will seal the fate of European ethnology and consign it as an artefact to the Museum of Ideas That Have Had Their Day. Like those of the *tuteishyi*, the roots of European ethnology may well be strong but they are certainly not pure. That makes our field particularly suitable for interdisciplinary work. I would even claim that its concerns and methodology put it at the leading edge of interdisciplinarity. This is our strength, and we should play to it. As a small field, we pose no threat to other disciplines and research fields, but we have much to offer them. Mutual enrichment can flow from greater engagement with some fields in particular: the creative and performing arts, including fine art and digital media; creative writing, especially poetry; and human ecology. This is not an exhaustive list, nor should it be taken as exclusive of areas not mentioned – far from it. I must also confess to a certain bias arising from the fact that these are the areas we are most actively involved with at the

University of Ulster. But liberating the ethnological imagination will take a bit of time and effort, and you have to start somewhere.

Note

- 1 Kurasawa's book was published around the same time as the SIEF conference title was suggested, but it did not come to the attention of the programme committee until two years later. Coincidences such as this may lend support to the metaphysical notion that an idea whose time has come will always 'break through'.

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