

# FLUID CLASSICS

## Ethnographic Challenges in Everyday Fields

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*Ethnologia Europaea* editor Marie Sandberg, in her correspondence preceding this issue, outlined an intriguing theme, to write and comment on the revisiting of “classic” ethnological research and methodology, as they might be “spurred by current challenges and questions in our scholarly field. To be sure, such visits can take many forms and shapes; be it as a way of counter-balancing recent aspirations, as drawing inspiration, as a learning experience, or in order to highlight or even abandon previous approaches and concepts.”<sup>1</sup> On this stimulus, the authors of this volume draw, in many fascinating ways, from the approaches and material of mostly Swedish and Danish folklorists from the nineteenth century up to post-war times. To pick out some examples: They rediscover a relational rather than individualising understanding of the everyday and a knowledge of the complexity of cultural change in folklife studies (Damsholt & Jespersen), trace “classic” attempts for conciliating concepts of historical continuity with those of social, as well as scientific, change (Mellemegaard), reflect the concept of ethnography as emerging from the conversations in heterogeneous fields back onto public discussions that accompanied traditional folk research (Hastrup), and reveal the abundance of meaning in ethnological photo archives, which had been missed out by the field researchers themselves in their explanatory notes (Gustavsson).

From a German perspective it appears curious to see how Scandinavian colleagues draw this

lively and affirmative, and still critical, continuity from folk-life studies into present-day European ethnology, instead of going through tedious rituals of problematising what and whom to accept as the “classics” of our discipline (and even more so of German-speaking *Volkskunde*). Yet, talking of “revisiting” suggests that we are visitors in a house which we have previously left, where we are not – or no more – at home. Beyond that, this house of past ethnology is largely painted to hold a rather wooden view of peasant and underclass life worlds, accentuating everyday inertness and resistance to change (for example in the way that Damsholt and Jespersen put it: “that the ethnological idea of everyday life’s inherent inertness is a legacy of the ways in which everyday life was shaped as an object of study within political practices of improvement”). In this way we commonly assume our scientific forerunners to have worked within a rather conservative and immobile mindset, gathering data for the sake of constructing historical continuities, preserving dying cultures, or intervening into familiar everyday practice, each depending on the ideological agendas of their time. Nonetheless, all authors in this issue show both respect and creativity in their attempts to reveal the inspirational sides of folklife research by turning it upside down, viewing it from new angles and with different eyes – all based on our shared desire for more fluid, emergent ways to explore practice and meaning, and especially cultural change, within contemporary everyday fields.

However, even when traditional folklife literature does support this static image of “classic” folklore research, how can one be sure not to construct a picture of our “classics” that follows our wishes to create an opposite to our today’s aspirations and that obscures yet another side of the past research of everyday life? Naturally, as ethnographers we know that we cannot look at what is our own without resuming a distanced position. Nevertheless, it is my impression that by constructing a dichotomy of “past” folk culture research and “present” everyday ethnography we again render ourselves homeless, by disconnecting ourselves from the diverse and border-crossing discursivity of our discipline, that reaches from our present stand-points, via the post-war generations of ethnographic critique, to ethnological and folklore research in its various strands before the First and the Second World Wars.

Based on these observations, my following remarks aim firstly towards loosening the juxtaposition between the “classic” and the “experimental” by exemplifying traditions of ethnological rethinking and methodological critique from the 1970s that have become “classics” in their own right. Secondly, the researchers of the past were (as we are) bound to describe their findings within the social and cultural frames of their time and are indebted to the paradigms and mindsets of their scientific environments. However, I want to argue that any understanding of everyday culture demands curiosity and a sense for the miscellaneous and the ambiguous within lived culture. They escape and contradict dominant scientific norms, whilst they charge ethnographic field research with specific qualities and challenges. Whatever the scientific results may be, folklorists and ethnographers must have a rapport with their everyday fields that allows them to engage in, and with them, against the grain of established science.

Thirdly, due to global economic and political transformation, we are subjected to rapid changes of our social and cultural worlds, which should be taken into account more distinctly as ethnographic challenges and as a new frame of reference for present ethnological rethinking and methodological reflection.

In this light I want, fourthly, to encourage not only any rethinking of ethnological traditions in their heterogeneous and discursive settings, but also suggest interdisciplinary revisits outside the box of European ethnology. These could include classics of cultural theory and methodological reflexivity that support creative processes of context- and subject-oriented, ethnographic understanding.<sup>2</sup>

### **Classics In-Between**

Signe Mellemegaard, in her article on Bjarne Stoklund, emphasises the post-1968s and 1970s, with their rising social and societal consciousness, as a period of changing paradigms as well as intense reconsideration in European ethnology. To widen this scope a bit further, this is also the era of the discovery of “the subject” and the individual self, of the politicisation of the private, when traditional family and community ties were considered questionable and identities became fragmented: “Our aim is our way”, to search, to engage in open-ended processes rather than in procedures with fixed results. Ideas of participation and empowerment started to dominate practical social efforts, seemingly stabile cultural systems got deconstructed. All of this had to find its echo in ethnological objectives and methodology that could grasp the everyday in its fluidity and subjectivity. Looking again at the debates in European ethnology from the 1970s into the 1990s, it appears that any reexamination of ethnographic classics was tightly linked to the need of reacting to the conditions and the changes in post-war societies and everyday cultures of the twentieth century. Beyond this, the necessity to face the involvements of the ethnographic and folklore sciences in nationalism, racism and, in the German and Austrian case, blood and soil Nazism, and the critique of the governmental and colonialist blind spots of the cultural and social anthropologies demanded a theoretical and methodological outreach towards social and political contexts of hegemony and ideology, which by no means could be kept within national and disciplinary in-groups.

If we look at the debates that were initiated at the later Institut für Empirische Kulturwissenschaft in

the small university town of Tübingen from the early 1970s, Hermann Bausinger's rethinking of German *Volkskunde* resorted in a fundamental claim for contextualisation: The subjectivations and objectivations of the everyday, like material culture, everyday practices or narratives, should be carefully interpreted within the social and historical fabric of culture whilst rejecting any "narrowing fixation" (Bausinger 1980: 9) and having regard to the situational and processual conditions of a "smooth" research methodology (Bausinger 1980: 18).<sup>3</sup> Bausinger is deeply rooted in the discursive concerns of the 1970s and 1980s, just as Utz Jeggle with his early and persistent attention to subjectivity, emotion and memory in ethnographic research, and his calls for an empathic and self-critical reflexivity (Jeggle 1984).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, these (re-)affirmations of ethnographic sensitivity and curiosity in European ethnology are of unbroken – classic – relevance for today's ethnographic work. They are part of the same debates, for example, that were conducted within British cultural studies with Paul Willis, who encouraged cultural interpretation to be drawn from the social relations in ethnographic everyday fields and from the subjectivity of the researcher and the researched, from the contradictions and uncertainties of the research process, and from the ethnographer's skill "of being surprised" (Willis 1980: 90). Or think of American cultural anthropologist responses to postmodernism, like multi-sited ethnography or, in the writing culture debate, the consequential experimentation with the translation of multi-voiced everyday realities into ethnographic representation, all of which were taken up in European discussions and ethnographic practice from the 1990s. As I will point out below, the observations of "partial truths" (Clifford 1986) and "dispersed identity" (Marcus 1992: 315), of fragmented and flexibilised life-contexts that are ubiquitously interwoven with hard-to-grasp power relations have certainly not lost any of their relevance, nor have the questions of ethnographic understanding, translating and responding to the views and voices of everyday actors within today's changed life-world conditions.

All of these, and many other approaches, could be

recognised as our inspirational base for a confident and creative restart of European ethnography into a new century, rooted in a self-reflexive ethnographic tradition of rethinking and adapting to changing cultural backgrounds. I say "could", as it seems that these flexible and dialogical, context- and subject-sensitive approaches to the everyday are (despite being, like especially participant observation, deeply engrained in our passed-down methodology) in the present disciplinary understanding widely left in a liminal grey-zone between an inflexible classic heritage and new responses, which are as future aspirations often introduced from outside the discipline (see Eisch 1999; Timm 2013).<sup>5</sup>

### **The Ambiguity and Multi-Perspectiveness of Everyday Culture**

With their assumed difficulty to recognise, and to handle, their own diversity and critical potentials, past and present European ethnologists seem to share a defensive impulse to prove themselves as acceptable in the greater scientific world. Looking at our approaches and objectives towards everyday culture this seems hardly surprising. Ethnography as a science brings out what (as, for example, Zygmunt Bauman has impressively shown) the philosophy of modern science, in unity with progressive ideas of education and governing, attempt to eliminate – or would, at the very most, set aside safely enclosed within the arts and in literature (Bauman 1991):<sup>6</sup> That is to say the common and commonplace, the uncertain and ambivalent, the subjective and emotional. The everyday represents what falls between the clear-cut categories of rational cognition. Accordingly, ethnographers ask for opinions instead of reason, for subjective experience and biased memories, which they pick up in the streets and find expressed in gossip or fairy tales, urban legends or moral panics, and in the media. They enter the ambiguous worlds of superstition, or go along (critically deconstructing whatsoever) with everyday mythologies. They look with shining eyes at material objects that fall short of having any aesthetical significance or acceptable societal relevance, no matter if it is peasants' tools or industrial mass products: The eth-

nographic objectives of everyday culture populate the shady zones between the realms of hegemony and resilience, the “third spaces” of changing perspectives and oscillating meanings. “Normal science does not seek out the unpredictable,” writes Signe Mellemegaard; “(...) in periods when normal science predominates, science is largely unconcerned with the general public and research is almost exclusively addressed to academics from within the same field. However, folklife research has always held the public’s interest (...)” Contemporary ethnographers, just as folklorists, are tied into this irritating, ambivalent insignificance, they love these fields or they lose them by trying to screw them down, to fixate them, in normative scientific black and white categories. And what is worst: It is our own pre-scientific, fleeting and ordinary everyday lives that we are constantly thrown back at. There are no exotic worlds to be deciphered, no monographs to be written in (or against) Malinowski’s classic tracks. Taking it strictly, how could European ethnology, as it moves about on the warped grounds of everyday life and far off from any lasting foundations, with ever-changing backgrounds and unreliably subjective personnel, ever produce anything classic?

I would like to take up Tine Damsholt’s and Astrid Jespersen’s observation “that there is an inherent dilemma or paradox entangled with the ethnological study of everyday life,” but shift it from an “entanglement of investigation and intervention” towards an even more fundamental paradox of ethnography: Being distant researchers and observers on the one hand, ethnographers are, on the other hand, and quite un-scientifically, themselves parts of their own fields. Scientific reflexivity finds itself enmeshed into the immanent reflexivity of the everyday, as the ethnographic objects of investigation are subjects with their own awareness of the web of culture and its strands of meaning. It is the reflexive movement between observation and participation that is at the core of the ethnography of the everyday. Any ethnographic understanding (even when looking at material objects) is derived from this dialogue between the researcher and the researched other, with their emotions, experience and cultural symbolisms. It

emerges from this movement between subjectivities, and is shaped through difference and heterogeneity, whilst being embedded into shared everyday contexts.

Instead of risking that the ethnographer’s subjective bias, over-identification or fears, distort ethnographic research results, the Zürich school of ethno-psychoanalysis (with Fritz Morgenthaler, Paul Parin and Goldy Parin-Matthèy in its first generation) has, from the 1950s on, utilised the methods of psychoanalysis: the attitude of evenly suspended attention and of “listening with the third ear” – which seems so close to the sensitivity of participant observation – and the projective mechanism of transference and counter-transference, that allows images, scenes and stories to evolve and to be interpreted within an associative dialogue between the analyst/researcher and the patient/researched.

Especially Maya Nadig and Mario Erdheim have opened up this method for (European) ethnologists who are not trained in psychoanalysis (Nadig 1986; Nadig & Erdheim 1991). By no means does ethno-psychoanalysis impress any theoretical dogmas on our fields and interpretation, nor does it act therapeutically. Instead, notes and texts from observations and encounters in the field are read as expressions of their cultural fabric of meaning. They are interwoven with associations, emotions and irritations that are individual and subjective, and that are, just as inevitably, linked to varying aspects of the researched culture. They are brought out through the research dialogues of fieldwork, in an emergent process that is never complete, that depends on situative encounters as well as the subjectivities and different cultural backgrounds of all involved. However, they are never contingent, but follow the social and cultural codes of the everyday.

### **Over-Powered Fluidity**

I want to point out this seemingly peripheral method because I believe that a subject-sensitive approach that follows fluid signification processes in everyday culture could be suitable to get a grip on the vast cultural changes that we witness in our present time under late capitalist and neoliberal conditions. An es-

sential aspect of ethno-psychoanalytical approaches is their sensitivity to power structures that culture tends to blind out as taboos, but are held in anxieties or rituals and can be reexperienced and interpreted as they are mirrored within field research relationships. Increasingly, power cannot be described only in dichotomies of up and down, but it creeps into every private pocket of everyday life. Foucault, and subsequently the various branches of governmentality studies, have alerted us to intensified power regimes that exploit the individual subjectivities of the everyday by inscribing themselves into private relations and self-awareness, shaping notions of self-responsibility and morals whilst constantly switching roles and perspectives. However, a Foucaultian approach denies the individuals' voices and responses to be heard, and it does not lend itself to a bottom-up perspective that could give insight into the everyday milieus that are targeted by new power regimes.

I believe that these changes, which were noted already in the 1970s by Foucault and also Richard Sennett (Sennett 1974) and have become increasingly manifest from the late 1990s, provide a distinctive chance, as well as an important challenge, for ethnographic studies of the everyday. However, it feels like a puzzling occurrence that what European ethnologists recognise as the key principles and strengths, and especially the paradigms from the 1970s, seems to become compromised and turned against themselves. For example, as culturally and socially engaged researchers, we might wish for a wider visibility of the marginalised and their needs in society, and now find this positive attentiveness turned into ever more sophisticated public vigilance and control. Or, we work towards more ethical consciousness concerning our personal responsibilities and the empowerment of people and communities, and feed backhandedly into neoliberal regimes of self-government. We take pride in individual authenticity only to discover that self-realisation has become an ideology that has widely replaced social solidarity. In these ways, the recognition of the fluid contexts of everyday culture might well translate into the pressures of flexibility, whilst self-awareness and self-reflectivity (as Bourdieu has warned us) can

tilt into a narcissistic, omnipotent ego, which haunts itself as well as others with the duty to constantly optimise his or her potentials (Bourdieu 1993). We all know these effects from our own post-Bologna university contexts, where we find ourselves caught in constant assessing, appraising, auditing, evaluating, reviewing and ranking of each other and thus, with best intentions of open and non-hierarchical cooperation, get inescapably entangled in the multiplication of academic power pressure and fears of failure, and the subjectivation of competition.

### **Reconnecting to Structure**

Of course, in Bourdieu's, as well as in Nadig's and Erdheim's sense, all of this takes its effect also on the relationships with our fields (Bourdieu 1993; Nadig & Erdheim 1984). Therefore, a critical rethinking of our own position as ethnographers becomes even more pressing, in order to avoid to fall for the academic blind spots of our own power contexts once again, and to construct ourselves as superior researchers and authors simply by trying to perform within scientific norms and expectations.

I would like to argue for a collective recollection of the specific qualities of the ethnography of everyday lives that have been passed over from classic folklife and everyday research, and that have been repeatedly rediscussed and renegotiated within the history of our discipline. These potentials of ethnography result from an inevitable conflict between scientific norms and the inherent heterogeneity and ambiguity of everyday fields, which have led to a creative polarity in European ethnology: On the one hand we can draw from a flexible methodology that enables us to decode (and de-mythologise) the practices and symbolisms of everyday culture following situative and polyvalent contexts and changing social and economic backgrounds. In fieldwork we can create cultural understanding through the dialogic movement between reflexive distance and empathy (as it is expressed in the seemingly paradoxical methodology of participant observation). Whilst on the other hand, especially in these times of fluid or fragmented life worlds, cultural research needs the folklorists' ability to stabilise and root ethnographic

knowledge, to ground it in the lived experience and collective memories of the everyday actors, and to locate it in tradition and history.

It cannot be a solution that we methodologically only stew in our own juice (and some of the old folklorists might have done a bit too much of that). Our ethnographic involvement into everyday contexts can bring forward a sensitivity for the significance of the marginal and subjective, and a critical view for changing life worlds. However, stating fragmentation on an everyday level needs a background idea of what belongs together, of contexts and interrelations – meaning a way of recognising structures, no matter in which fluid, interchangeable and processual ways they might be realised in the field. It seems that following postmodern critique and neoliberal turbulence, ethnographic studies have now difficulties to raise themselves onto analytical and reflective levels, at least without subsequently disconnecting their empathic and associative insights and conversational findings from interpretation.

Therefore, I add – maybe in the way of a postscript – another recommendation, to take a look into the classics of cultural theory which can, from outside of our discipline, supplement the potentials of ethnography in methodological and especially interpretative and analytical terms. I have already mentioned psychoanalysis that provides us with a long-standing (however, in cultural science and ethnology rather hidden) legacy of associative cultural reflection.

A very similar approach of emergent signification, following everyday sign contexts, is offered by cultural semiotics, and especially by the pragmatic concept of the infinite triadic process of semiosis as it was first described by Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914). Irene Portis-Winner has referred to Peirce's semiotic process of one sign defining another associatively in relation to its situative, practical and symbolical contexts of everyday perception and communication, as "an open construct that permits the widest kinds of interpretations" (Portis-Winner 2006: 347). Furthermore, the complex analytical body of grounded theory is built on Peirce's pragmatism. But, although we are familiar with the methodical mechanism of triangulation, present ethnography

seems rarely to get itself into this fluid and context-sensitive way of analysis on a more theoretical base.

Quite complementary, creative conceptualisations of culture, mythology and memory are offered by the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics and especially by its founder Yuri M. Lotman (1922–1993), who is still to be discovered for European ethnology from behind the former Iron Curtain (see Lotman 1977, 1990; Schönle 2006). Drawing from Russian literature, but also from folk narratives and from the spatial or discursive sign processes of the everyday, Lotman offers an exceptional approach to the anthropology of borders (Eisch 1996). He correlates geographical and ideological or mythological borderlines, cultural peripheries as well as narrative plots as expressions of a dynamic anthropological mechanism to strive for order and closure by drawing borders and differential divisions, and to cross them towards dialogue and change. In this way Lotman offers a holistic analytical concept to understand, for example, practices or discourses along geographical borderlines, and to integrate them into a more overarching anthropological theory (see Fredrik Nilsson in this volume). Lotman's "semiosphere", as the all-including realm of cultural codes and "texts", is fundamentally heterogeneous and changeable, a concept that nonetheless allows for self-protecting or hegemonial needs to create continuity, history and memory. Within this theoretical body the border, as a metalinguistic term, offers itself as an ever ambiguous, peripheral third space where attempts for dialogue and translation, as well as for demarcation and distinction, are constantly creating new cultural languages and constellations.

In that way, culture cannot exist at all as long as it is not on the move – and ethnography has, as ever, the best potentials to move along with it.

## Notes

- 1 E-mail by Marie Sandberg to the commentators of this issue of *Ethnologia Europaea*, August 17, 2014.
- 2 Many thanks to Marion Hamm and Jochen Bonz for ongoing discussion and shared text work that inspired many of the following considerations, as well as to the contributors to the symposium "Subjektorientiertes Deuten. Kontext und Praxis der ethnografischen Feld-



forschungssupervision" ("Subject-Oriented Interpretation. Context and Practice of Ethnographic Field Research Supervision") in Bremen, June 20–21, 2014.

- 3 German: "anschniegssam".
- 4 Quite in accordance with Bjarne Stoklund (see Signe Mellemegaard in this volume) the Tübingen school would strictly argue for the historical contextualisation of contemporary cultural research, furthermore they would suggest to complement a historical perspective with the recognition of collective and biographical memory and the deconstruction of mythological imageries of history.
- 5 Elisabeth Timm has only recently pointed out how in the context of practice and emergence theory the ethnographic wheel seems to be reinvented, whilst subject-sensitive ethnographic reflexivity is overturned by high-handed novelty claims (Timm 2013).
- 6 Marion Hamm points out how within the cultural sciences as late as in the 1960s, and after decades of ethnological work on folklife culture, "Raymond Williams, one of the father figures of cultural studies, changed the notion of culture by inserting the everyday" (Hamm 2008: 7).

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