

# Sense and Sensibility

## Peasant Activity and Ethnological Description

*Palle Ove Christiansen*

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How does one understand and describe cultural life which no longer exists? That is, life which must be reconstructed by the researcher through his conceptions and intuitive sensations of those traces of the past we turn into “sources”.

I would like to base this discussion on the presentation of some example material on the rural population of the 18th century. The material comes from a recently concluded study of a Danish estate region. I want to demonstrate how it is possible to get considerably closer to people’s activities than one normally does in historical accounts. The analyses indicate that we do not, as generally assumed, have just one, but two lifestyles among the inhabitants of the same village. Through a description of the forms that feudal practice took, we can understand how the two kinds of life were reproduced in (conflictful) coexistence.

I would then like to raise the issue of whether this description – illuminating as it may be – is also enough for us to experience the existence of the rural population in those days as something living. The identification of the inner rationale of the two kinds of practice is not the same as contextualizing them as lives that can also be heard, smelt and “seen” – which can be sensed by the reader as something much more “present”.

If we are to combine these two dimensions in one and the same description, ethnology may have to break with some of the prevailing norms for scientific research and rediscover forgotten aspects of its own roots in J. G. Herder’s philosophy.

*Universitetslektor, mag. art. Palle Ove Christiansen, Department of European Ethnology, University of Copenhagen, Brede Allé 69, DK-2800 Lyngby, Denmark.*

In the latter part of the 1980s, many cultural disciplines have seen a reaction against the abstract theorizing which typified disciplinary environments – especially in materialist and structuralist forms – in the preceding decades. The questioning of these ideals has resulted in several varieties of postmodern culturalism. Some of the more radical exponents of this view of research claim that the researcher in *his* description cannot in fact represent anything but himself, and that our narrow, ethnocentric concepts are incapable of constituting real wholes – wholes which can hardly be said to exist in constantly changing living cultures.

In this paper I will take a sceptical attitude to the extremism of these views, although I am anything but a convinced champion of what

they oppose. I will do so by presenting a study of the practice and worldview of eastern Danish manorial peasants in the eighteenth century.

I will point out that the analysis presented here is necessary, but that it too is insufficient if we are aiming at a description of life in the broader sense. Postmodern cultural relativism is in some respects right, but in my view not always on the basis of convincing premisses. Theory and analytical description are conceptual tools, and give substance to creative experience (“knowledge”) in ways that no one can or should abandon in academic frustration over the limitations of our concepts.

My argument is that we must neither exclusively repress the analytical work of recent years nor put it on a pedestal, but must try to

make it – or at least parts of it – function together with the kind of empathy and presence that we are close to having lost in the trade-off.

The separation of Science and Art is nothing new, however. In what Dilthey called *Geisteswissenschaft* it was effectuated from about the turn of the century on. What we need now is not to long nostalgically for the imaginary state of affairs of a century ago, but to benefit from the fruitful as well as the bad experiences we have gained in the intervening period, and to use them in the work for better cultural research. For me this means attentive, descriptive research – neither, on the one hand, chatty ephemerality nor on the other a frigid conceptual-metaphorical scientific ideal; a research that can be both explained and experienced – by ourselves and by others.

## Two lifestyles among eighteenth-century estate peasants

For some years I have been working to *describe* how life could be organized among the villagers of the two Giesegaard estates in Zealand in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when villagers like these made up 80–90% of the population of Europe. Most of these people have left no written testimony, and there is much to suggest that they thought and felt differently from us today (Darnton 1985: 4).

Compared with present-day fieldwork and studies of literate communities, these circumstances impose great direct limitations on our research. At least in our part of the world, we must seek to overcome these problems if we want to get closer to this culturally very varied, but until the mid-nineteenth century largely anonymous part of the European population (see for example Sabeau 1984).

### *The estate/village relationship*

As in most other places, conditions of life for the villagers of the Giesegaard estates were determined by *fæste* (dependent tenancy) and marriage. One could say that the peasants as a social “estate” collectively disposed of the means of subsistence in the village; but to

achieve this individual disposal of the farm and soil, each generation *had* to enter into the tenancy relationship with the estate. And tenancy was only *granted* by the lord to people who were married or were willing to marry. When a new man made his mark on the tenancy document, he acknowledged his subordination to the lord and his obligation to pay tribute. He entered into a relationship of obedience to the lord, who in return now functioned as the legal protector of the tenant. Through tenancy, the young peasant family was, as it were, recognized as a social unit in the village.

With the resources of the village, the family could reproduce itself economically. In order to be able to do this under the auspices of an estate (which was the only way to come into possession of a farm in Zealand), the peasant had to give up his surplus product to the lord (who administered the peasants as a social category), and through the estate had to pay taxes to the King (the military and the court), and tithes to the Church (which administered grace and the sacraments). At Giesegaard, the peasants’ dues *had* to be paid in kind, money and labour. It was this extra-economic relationship, defined in terms of political obedience, that constituted the element of force. *Corvée* labour was used as manpower by the lord in his own agricultural production on a large scale. This physically moved the peasant out of the village, just as the demand for a money rent component necessarily brought him into contact with the commodity market in the town.<sup>1</sup>

Through the fragmentation of the peasant’s product we can define him structurally in relation to the other estates of society – that is (besides the King) the clergy, the citizens of the town (merchants and artisans) and the lord. The peasant as primary producer was a prerequisite of all of these in *their* reproduction. Just as he filled his own position in the organization of the village as one of the “men of the town”, he was assigned a quite specific position as a producer and a payer of taxes and duties in the larger fabric of society. This was the practice of the peasant in the social organization of the *ancien régime*.

The European system of social estates was

internally structured on the basis of patriarchal, power-based stratification and protection. It was this unfreedom that was reflected at the entirely "close" level of the village in the conditions of tenancy. These dimensions are the core elements in the feudal relationship of obligation and compulsion as we know it from most of northern and central Europe.

This outline of the principles of tenancy is necessary to understand the premisses of local life in the villages. This is the analytical complex from which a description must start if it is to take the form of a consecutive top-down account. On the one hand it will be necessary to make a closer study of the organization of the farms and the village in terms of the challenges of the ever-growing population and the limits of production in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the demands of the estate for dues from the tenants must be viewed in the context of the internal dilemmas of the village and the struggle to force a yield from the soil.

#### *Research traditions*

In international research considerations like these have raised the issue of which aspects it is most relevant to study to understand life in the hundreds of thousands of villages we speak of so freely, but with which few people really have any familiarity (Blum 1971). Despite different disciplinary backgrounds, this effort is a striking feature of the historical traditions of several countries, and of the anthropological-sociological peasant studies which flourished in the seventies.

Very roughly, I would distinguish between three main approaches. The oldest focuses mainly on more detailed specification of the political and legal oppression of people by the estates – often described in terms of drastic examples. Another school has worked in the folkloristic field. It had been particularly concerned with oral traditions of working and home life and collective mentalities. Here too an alleged overall picture is often pieced together from many scattered features. Finally, there is a research tradition that emphasizes the description of socioeconomic factors. One

way of doing this is the systematic review of source material that can reflect the everyday life of ordinary people within well defined geographical areas. The emphasis is on showing quantitative differences – for example in domestic animal stocks, amount of furnishings, marrying age etc. – between different groups, which are described in relation to the overall variations and averages for the village or estate within the specified parameters. All three traditions have given us valuable knowledge, and the third has also developed new operative techniques.

Outsiders may justifiably ask whether these three research strategies are really rooted in the researchers' clear views of what ideal descriptions of conditions are. One cannot help but reflect whether it is more the material nature of the different bodies of sources that has prompted researchers with different inclinations to attack the problem in just the way this or that source type is most easily and directly approached.

Besides the political and ideological undertones that have typified much of the research, there is also, as a common basis, the original perspective, often forgotten in the research process, of the so-called whole life of the everyday human being. At bottom, it is the description of this life and its conditions that we would all like to be able to handle.

This dilemma has been present in my own studies too. I have familiarized myself with the favourite material of all three schools of thought. As the context for my descriptions (that is, my text) I have often found it necessary to perform the socioeconomic tradition's standard analyses of conditions in the two estates studied. Even if one does not personally adhere to the view of research characteristic of this tradition, it is important to have as exhaustive information as possible about the population, the harvest yields of the farms, the amounts of production equipment, the distribution of furnishings or the reasons for the cessation of tenancies. It is quite simply necessary to know the proportions within which one is working, to be able to compare the conditions with other estate areas, and thus to avoid the private character of local history.

At the beginning of the 1970s, however, some researchers began to process the material on which several of these analyses were based in a new way. The idea was to use the techniques that the socioeconomic and demographic school had developed, but at the same time to break with it at the analytical and methodological level (see Macfarlane 1977). Correlations of separate tables for the distribution of harvest yield or furnishings in the village, where all individual characteristics were anonymously subordinated to sociological measurements, were to be replaced as an analytical basis by the possibility of "linking" the various kinds of information referring to the *same* individuals and households. These possibilities are in fact inherent in much of the European source material, but have still only been scantily exploited (cf. Stoklund 1983: 25). It has often been pointed out that such a procedure is the closest one can get (technically) to a kind of fieldwork among the people of the past. The formulation is characteristic, since it was precisely the experiences of anthropology with the description of the integrated lives of people in contemporary environments – not just an averaging-out of the external circumstances of life and demographic features – that some researchers wished to use in investigating the historical world.

These intentions were rich in perspectives, but probably also rather too optimistically formulated. Both practically and theoretically they have posed great problems, and not many of the major projects that were then initiated have so far come to their conclusion. In the following pages I will give an account of my own results with the estate-dominated village.

### *Profiles in the village*

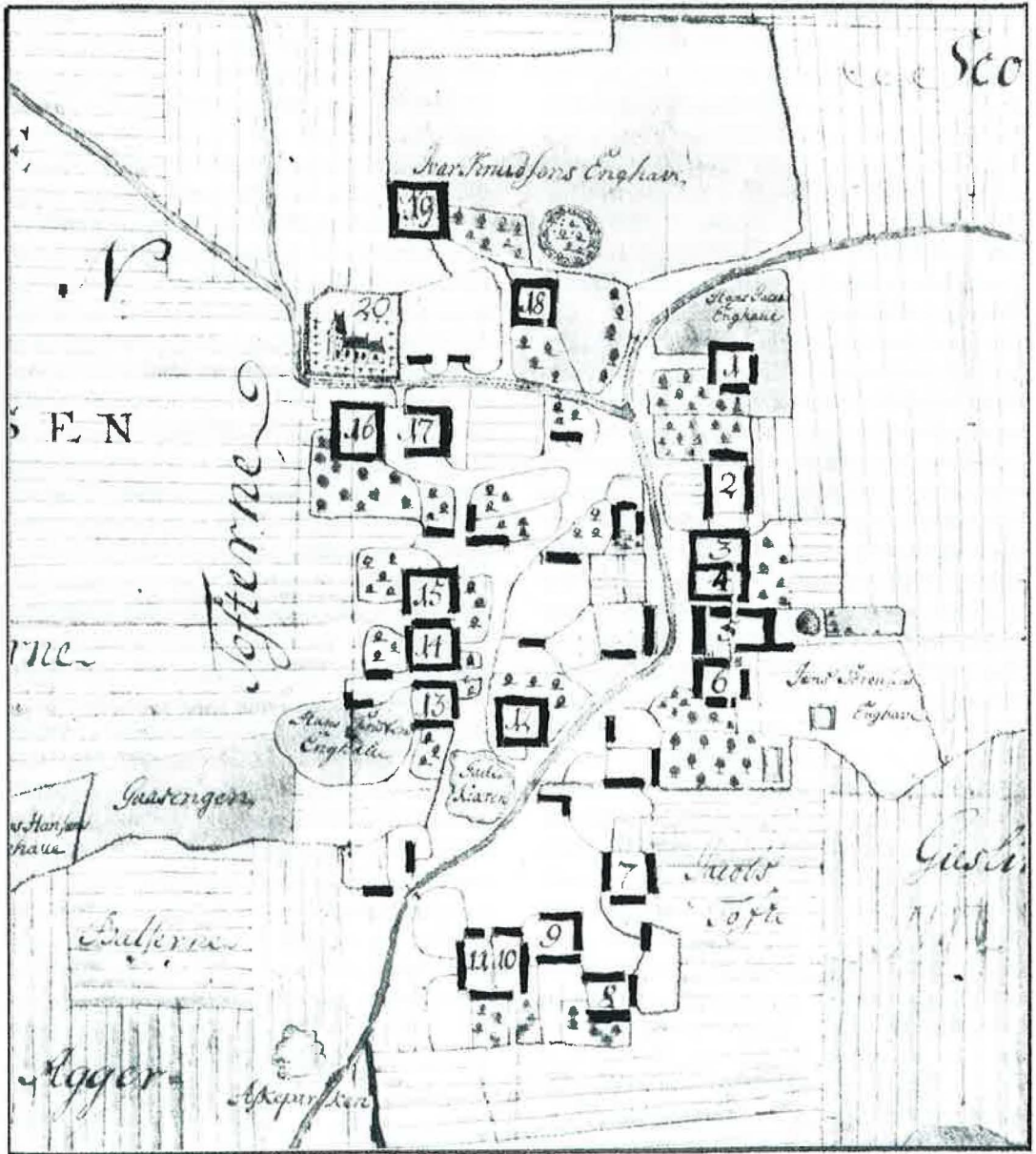
The investigation of the concept of *fæste* (tenancy) in relation to its many unpredictable empirical facets was a lesson for me in how fruitful it can be to spend time becoming thoroughly familiar with conditions on a couple of estates, rather than operating with "characteristic" examples from sources which are on the face of it better, but more scattered. As the work progressed it was as if the structural po-

sition of the village vis-à-vis the estate held the potential for not only one, but several ways of being a peasant. My surprise was prompted by heuristic processing of empirical variations which could not be directly explained in terms of the formal feudal model.

Various lifestyle features were apparently synonymous. Some peasants lived a life where they very slowly consolidated their positions, while others lived in a state of almost permanent resignation and often in poverty. These were the peasants whom Giesegaard's relatively hard corvée labour hit hard. Even without having to pay an entry fee, small cottagers might refuse to take over a fairly large tenant farm, while others were willing to pay substantial amounts to subject themselves to the lord. Some young farm labourers almost had to be compelled to become tenants by the estate. Other strong young men were apparently exempt from this pressure, while at the same time Giesegaard complained that there were not enough young people in the area!

We are faced with a kind of paradox. In the period after 1750, with grain prices rising regionally and internationally and a growing population, the studies show that the peasants expanded the cultivated areas fairly substantially, and that both their stocks and the amount of valuable furnishings increased on average. At the same time, as mentioned before, we see a tendency for both unmarried farmhands and cottagers to exhibit a very negative attitude to becoming tenants. Extreme drunkenness was widespread. To the surprise of the men of the Enlightenment, many people – even in an apparent boom period – has a very reserved attitude to "striving" (*at stræbe*), as the steward called it. They preferred to "stay merry" (*holde sig lystige*) (Klestrup 1782: 17, 18). Even though in the same period the estate intensified corvée labour, the overall rent paid by the villagers was, in relative terms, less than before if one views it in the context of increased production and better prices. The potential seemed great, yet many still drank the day away (cf. Gaunt 1977).

These features are not unfamiliar in the Danish rural history debate, but have been interpreted in very different ways. The classic



It was in the village center, many events of people's "private lives" took place. Here the children were born, here people ate, when they were not at corvée or visiting the market town, and here they were working indoors with threshing, cooking, handicraft and many other things. It was also in the village center, that feasts and drinking mostly took place (i.a. in the inn no. 5). Most of the people died in the village and all were buried in the graveyard (no. 20). The village was not really a cradle-to-grave locality. Many of the inhabitants were born here, but several originated from similar villages under Giesegaard and Juellund's estates. A few came from quite outside. The illustration shows the center of Gørslev village on the basis of a survey over the village land in 1781. The farms comprised of three or four buildings (numbered) and the cottages of one or two. (Source: Giesegaard's private archive.)

view is that the increased dominance of the estates, and in particular *corvée* labour, inevitably led to a resigned attitude among the peasants, who became increasingly defeatist in the eighteenth century. The other view is that the peasants did in fact exhibit innovative attitudes in the period, that they had enough impetus to cope with *corvée* labour, and that they were in fact keen to see state intervention with agricultural reforms (see for example Skrubbeltrang 1978 versus Kjærgaard 1980).

In my view the arguments suffer from the fact that both schools of research, on the basis of quantitative criteria and individual features, generalize one particular peasant attitude at the expense of another, the features of which are characterized as less important. They speak generally of the peasants as one class, depending on which "kind" there were most of. This represses the awareness of the economic and cultural differences. It would appear that there will be no resolution of this debate until the analytical perspective changes.

#### *Interconnections in differences*

In my own study I have tried, in three selected villages under two estates, to follow as many individuals as possible through different spheres – for example, in their everyday relations with the estate, in the church context, in their contacts with the state apparatus and with the courts. For this purpose I have transcribed, for the 1750–1800 period, all personal and residential data from the ten most informative source groups, and ordered the information such that by using name and residence one can link the same individuals and their activities in the different spheres (sources). The idea was to keep the village as an overall framework, while letting as many as possible of its inhabitants "have their say" through their individual actions. The aim was to identify *interconnections* in people's activities and "language" in the broadest sense. I was particularly interested in any *differences* in these patterns. At this level, the pinpointing of these differences has to be a hermeneutical process. In the following I will look at the results

achieved with the approximately 300 inhabitants of the village of Gørslev as an example. The village consisted of 20 farms, 34 houses – six of these with land – and ten lodger households.<sup>2</sup>

The social interconnections I was looking for can be seen, for example, in who people asked to hold their children for baptism and who were asked to be godfather or godmother. In Gørslev it was people from six or seven farms (according to the church register) who appeared at almost all baptisms, besides some of the parents' close friends or family. Formally, all farms in the village had the same status, and real godparent relationships of the type found in the Mediterranean countries do not seem to have existed. If one then examines which farms in the village (in probate documents) 1) had more than the essential bed linen; 2) had the biggest wings (in estate surveys); 3) exhibited the best building quality (in appraisals); 4) were least in arrears to the estate (in the estate accounts); 5) were rarely involved in illegal felling of trees (in court records); and 6) sowed a certain amount of wheat (in tithe lists) – which shows that they had initiative and strong horses – one can see that there is much congruence between these groups and the godfather group. The issue here is not that the others in the village thought these people were "fine folk", but that they appear to have formed part of a distinct type of village order.

It emerged that I had identified the people who in the estate steward's terminology – and probably also in that of their neighbours – constituted a group which in fact had its own name. He called them "those who think ahead".

In a very similar fashion I identified the opposite category – those who "did not make a go of it" (the same as the "merry" ones above). They had almost all received help from the estate in crises; they were often in the steward's spotlight and in trouble with the law. These people were frequent customers at the inn, and they appear to have appreciated both plenty of food and a good fight. The humiliation of the many itinerant Jews also seems to have been considered good sport. Economically, they

appear to have gone through life in fits and starts, but their life was not without merriment. However, some of them went so far that the estate evicted them from the farms – for example because they had sold the thatched roof, the horses (which they also had to use for *corvée* work) or the seed corn that the estate had perhaps given them. The steward thought they were sinking into apathy.

Finally, there was the last third, whom I provisionally called “the quiet ones” because they left only faint traces in the archival evidence. They had a profile that did not arouse attention. They kept to themselves, were not disturbingly in arrears to the estate, and managed more or less to make ends meet.

The differences identified exhibit many economic dimensions, which is understandable, since the account concerns primary producers in a world where the margin between survival and crisis was not wide. As we have seen, though, the differences were not *only* economic in nature.

If we turn to the rest of the inhabitants of Gørslev – mainly servants and landless cottagers, and a few with a little land – it provides food for thought that the same threefold division also existed in their sphere. In general they seem to have lived closer to subsistence level than the farmers, and beggary was understandably a more frequent condition during weather crises and epidemics. Here too one should be aware that before 1800, in the life of the same family in large estate areas, there could be great cyclic mobility between the roles of farmer and cottager (Christiansen 1978).

#### *A divided village. Feudal practice and the significance of rent*

If we view the village in terms of relations between these tentatively identified life patterns, it does not emerge as the whole we know from much of the material from oral tradition, nor as an (empirically) well defined *unit* in the estate/village relationship. It seems to have been very much divided. Despite a formal community of interests, neighbours had no qualms about testifying in court against one another, and thus for the estate – for example in poach-

ing cases. In crisis years it was not unusual, even for close relatives, to refuse to help one another, and then Giesegaard would have to lend a helping hand. Even when the problems were collective, for example tithe disputes with the estate, it was almost impossible to mobilize all the peasants to form any kind of common political front against the steward. What seems most extreme, however, is the situations where farmers from the “forward-looking” category had annoyed other villagers for years by letting their own pigs run loose (and into neighbour’s gardens), and where the village council does not appear to have dared do anything about it; or where people from the same group directly appropriated resources for themselves at the expense of the village as a whole. In 1792 three of these powerful farmers even organized a full-scale relocation of the house and land of a cottager family, so they could get a longer, more rational ploughing shape for some of their own fields. Instead, the cottagers, with the approval of the estate, were assigned an individual area of the village *common*.

This brings us to a central point. The inhabitants may have been tenants of the estate, but the village as such was actually autonomous. Formally, Giesegaard had nothing to do with the subdivision of fields, which was in fact the province of the village’s own political body, the *bylag* or village council. However, the estate could intervene and help tenants in trouble, and was indeed expected to do so by the ethical norms of the village. On the whole, the steward was a frequent visitor to such homes. In years with failed crops, he even recorded the number of pots and pans owned by the peasants, probably on the assumption that they might be tempted to sell them and then come and ask for help to buy new ones. Through the tenancy relation Giesegaard could interfere in almost anything of a personal nature, and if people were notably in arrears with their dues, this interference could even become very intense.

The forward-looking peasants were tenants just like the inadequate ones. But the interesting thing is that the provident ones managed to avoid direct interference from the estate. They do not seem to have been under constant

pressure. They avoided sanctions, received no help, and they also had the resources to give the steward any small bribes that were necessary.

It would appear that their view of the concept of feudal dues was different from that of the “merry” or “failing” group. For both groups the dues were very much a presence, but as an extension of the Giesegaard policy, the forward-looking peasants appear *externally* (i.e. vis-à-vis the estate) to have used fairly full and punctual payment of their dues as a means of avoiding interference in *their* administration of their farms. They may well have considered the dues a burden, but also as economic contributions that could patently exempt them from the most restrictive ties with the estate – ties which certainly existed, but which were not enforced to any great extent. This strategy required an already-stable production apparatus and the development of their own innovative features. If the estate was paid its full rent on time, it was willing to a great extent to leave people to their own devices. This was precisely what this category of peasants was interested in, if they were to lead a life that was meaningful for them in terms of accumulation and succession in their households.

This variation in the forms of feudal practice had its counterpart among the other peasants. For the ailing farming households it was a relatively greater effort to produce the necessary surplus, but the attitude to the very concept of dues was also clearly different. Those who would anyway have difficulty constantly paying their full rent would see the dues as something they should pay as little as possible – in other words, they would pay just enough rent to ensure that they were allowed to continue as farmers. The lower limit for many payments was the point where the arrears had become so high, or the exploitation of the farm’s resources so disproportionate, that the estate showed the family the road. Up to this limit it was a matter of living so that, in the here and now, they had as much enjoyment out of it as possible. The face presented to the estate was often a pathetic one. On the other hand, they could count on the help of the estate in crisis years. For the sake of the *corvée* and taxes, if for no other

reason, it was important from Giesegaard’s point of view to keep the farms running somehow, especially if there were no immediate prospects of alternative tenants. This was a clear requirement, if the life expectations of these peasants were to be fulfilled. In a report to the Ministry of the Interior of 1778 on cereal farming, it must have been this kind of farmer that the steward called those who did not “think ahead”, but were characterized by “slavish thinking, under the influence of which they ... doze off in a flood of sighs”.

These two forms of feudal peasant practice thus did not exist because of the absence of the estate in the village, but by virtue of its presence.

#### *Attitude to fate and two lifestyles*

If the peasants’ views of the meaning of rent were as different as claimed here, it is because they must have been associated with diverging views of fate. For the peasants, fate was their perspective on existence, including the purpose of their daily life. Whereas payment of full rent was what gave the “strivers” peace to realize themselves in agricultural work organized as much as possible by themselves on their constantly improving farms, the barely adequate rent (and a certain loyalty) was what enabled the other peasants to have enjoyable hours. For these people the farm and the agricultural work were hardly ends in themselves. The adequate work on the estate and in the village made possible the degree of survival necessary to “live life” culturally.

The forward-looking peasants concentrated on their work with the resources to stay “free” of the steward, and thus to improve the farm further, so they could in the longer term buy better horses, furnishings etc. This must have been a meaningful life for them. It demanded ambition, thrift and planning. For these people, it seemed that fate could be influenced by sufficient personal initiative. Their practice indicates what I call the *aspiring lifestyle* of the village.

For the peasants seen as “dozy” by the steward, the situation was more or less the opposite. They considered any thought of getting



out of their treadmill as utopian. Even if they tried to save something up, their investments would not go far on a run-down farm, and before that the steward would probably have claimed an instalment on their arrears. The work on the farm was probably considered necessary, but is unlikely to have been considered particularly meaningful. In the circumstances, they would feel that personal initiative did not lead to any tangible advantage. Fate was simply what came to you. It was not something to be sought out. When one year was by and large like the next, the purpose of life must be to make everyday existence as tolerable as possible. So one looked for merry company when money occasionally came to the house. Consumption was immediate. I will call their practice the *fatalistic lifestyle* of the village.

This lifestyle could manifest itself in very different ways. On the one hand there were those who lived more or less in a vicious circle of misfortune, illness, resignation and drunkenness. On the other hand there were those who muddled through without attracting much attention from the outside world. These are the people I called the "quiet ones" at an earlier stage of the account. However, since the difference between these two types seems to be one of degree rather than substance, I have stuck to a single lifestyle designation.

How could these two lifestyles be maintained in the long run, so distinct from each other? The answer is briefly that they were not really self-reproducing; in important respects they reproduced each other.

#### *The strivers versus the fatalists*

*Inwardly* in the village they were the preconditions for each other's existence. Within the organizational structure of the village, the strivers exploited the often poverty-stricken situation of the fatalists, although they did so with their consent. They rented parts of the fatalists' pasturage quota cheaply – the parts *they* did not have enough cattle to exploit. This way the strivers could increase *their* cattle stock beyond the ordinary size. Similarly, they often sowed some of the poor peasants' fields, which

the latter could not keep cultivated because of their lack of seed and ploughing power. They might also buy from the weaker neighbour, in order to resell it, the wood that he had been granted by the estate to make harrows and wagons from. One could say that within the hierarchy of the village the fatalists – to be allowed to live *their* life – had to stand by and watch the strivers helping themselves; just as, *outwardly*, they had to satisfy a minimum of Giesegaard's requirements and demonstrate (superficial) obedience.

This way the strivers within the communal system helped to keep the weaker peasants in their vulnerable economic position, while at the same time complaining that the fatalists, for example, did not have the implements and draught power (which required fodder) to keep up their end of the collective work of the village. However, if the strivers had been unable to use these extra means of production, they would hardly have achieved *their* level of material wealth.

Conversely, the richer farms were essential to the fatalists. At a pinch they could borrow small amounts or goods from the strivers – for example for funerals, for which one could not ask the estate for help. They may have attempted to maintain formal positive emotional relations with the strivers by asking them to be godparents to their children. This could later be exploited in a tight situation.

So the two lifestyles provided the conditions for each other in the village, while as a phenomenon they were an expression of Giesegaard's own feudal administration. The interest of the estate in the villagers was the appropriation of their surplus – in practice to as great an extent as possible. In crises Giesegaard may well have helped the weaker peasants, but in the longer term the estate wished to encourage the lifestyle of the strivers. Giesegaard knew that it was precisely from these people it got its dues in money and in kind with a minimum of administration. The steward, as a progressive man of the Enlightenment, thought that model peasants like these could stand as an example to others. But in the given conditions, they could not all be strivers.

When farms were to have new tenants, they



During the second half of the 18th century, there were repeated complains about the ineffective lives of the peasants, and the youth's habits to idle away the time. Anyhow, there were authors and travellers, who could report that not all peasants were, or needed to be like that. Rational reformers preferred to see, that young people were taught the blessing of steady work and to oppress their immediate desires. They should learn to cope with the concept of realism. That would materialistically benefit themselves as well as society. In his picture of a manor field the painter has placed a working farm-hand and a maid, whose looks probably correspond to the ideal of the person who ordered the painting. The motif of 1785 has been used as a wall decoration in an aristocratic palace in Copenhagen, built by count Moltke who was one of the rural reform initiators of the time. (Erik Pauelsen/Jens Juel. Privately owned. Elswing photo.)

were often children brought up in the strivers' households, who were recruited by the estate for the places where the farm was already best run. If there was a rich widow on the farm with a talent for rational householding, a tenancy like this could be a great economic asset. Often the future tenant had earned a little money as a servant-labourer by hiring cows or stoves out to poor people. It was young people from homes like these who refused most adamantly to be forced into the tenancy of a run-down farm, and perhaps to have to be married into the bargain to a poor widow (with another lifestyle). The badly maintained and poorly run farms got tenants with other qualifications. These were young people who had often saved up nothing for the entry fee, and were perhaps

more interested in the life of the inn than the improvement of agriculture. Sometimes, too, they suffered from some physical handicap – for example poorly-healed fractures – which put them in a weaker position both on the marriage market and as tenancy candidates.

It is doubtful whether the estates were aware of the connections between their own administration and the differences between the two lifestyles. Nor were they perhaps aware of how the survival potential of the fatalists was undermined by the activities and dominance of the strivers. Giesegaard attributed the differences to individual qualities of the peasantry. Nevertheless, the steward did point out the negative consequences of corvée labour for peasants who, because of poor imple-



As the peasant generally was ill-bred and quarrelsome, greater responsibility could not be expected of him. Therefore others had to manage and guide him, both on the estate and in society in general. The peasants were not aware, that a higher mental health required bodily renunciation. Were the peasants left to themselves, the every day life – because of their uncivilised minds and sense – would be filled with gambling, fights, competition of strength, dance and drunkenness. It wasn't those activities the respectable citizen or the nobility felt were beneficial for the country, the sexual morality or the private economy. On the other hand it were picturesque traits for a painter who wanted to describe the complexity of life. In 1778 the painter have pictured some young people of both sexes who make merry at mealtime in the field. They don't look like being animated with the idea of a well-defined (utopian) goal, but instead want to feel life and enjoy themselves. (Peter Cramer, Royal Academy of Art, Copenhagen.)

ments and weak horses, were already behind with their own farming.

#### *The cultural view of "the others"*

If, against the background of the above description, we are to try to give an account of how the two peasant lifestyles may have viewed each other, we must begin with the differences between their respective conceptions of the perspective of life. For the strivers, the ideal of their painstaking, goal-oriented efforts was to be able to develop as much as possible personally and economically. For the fatalists, the purpose of their efforts was to have a reasonably agreeable life, preferably in

the company of others. In other words, what was the very purpose of existence for the former was only a means to the enjoyment of life for the latter.

To the "striving" peasants, the fatalists must have seemed like people who did not know what was good for them, who held back the economic management of the village, and whose sloppiness attracted the attention of the estate to the life of the village. They really did not deserve help, as their condition was to a great extent their own fault. Often they squandered the help they were given anyway. Perhaps some saw them as people who did not have the qualities necessary to plan for the future, but did understand how to enjoy them-

selves, and had the ability to give the steward amusing, pithy answers. However, since they themselves depended on them in the village work, there was much indignation over their sluggishness. At times some of the fields were flooded because some of them did not clean out their fallow ditches in time, and the often late sowing and harvesting of the fatalists delayed everyone else in the village.

Conversely, the fatalists must have had difficulty understanding the point of the work-fixated life of the strivers. They must have seen them as self-righteous, puritanical individualists whose enterprise broke into the cultural rhythm of the village, and in some cases directly paralysed the village council. Through their position they were able to seize privileges at the expense of the community in general (individual cultivation of the common), and by renting uncultivated fields cheaply, to exploit poor fellow villagers without seed or enough drawing power. The strivers are unlikely to have been loved for their riches, yet many people had often still been able to go to them for small loans. On the other hand, the fatalists would have been capable of understanding the really poor people in the village. They might end up among them themselves if the arrears became too high, or some extra misfortune occurred. For this reason, and out of fear of misfortune, they were also willing to give a wandering beggar something, although they had little to give themselves.

What appeared to the strivers and the steward as (economic) "doziness" in the fatalists was for the fatalists themselves more like the very content of their lives; and what appeared to the fatalists as a lack of solidarity and breaches of cultural norms in the village was material growth for the strivers. It was progress itself.

Despite the fact that the two parties would probably have agreed that they were both peasants without any formal political power over the estate, they must in general have had a difficult time accepting each other's lifestyle. By reflecting themselves in their difference from "the others", people must however, in the Hegelian sense, have been aware of who they themselves were. The proportional representa-

tion of the two lifestyles could vary with the administrative practice of the estates and the extent of the villages' resources (especially forests). As a phenomenon, however, they were found in all the villages of the estate area.

So it was very understandable that the village was as divided as it was. In the given circumstances, it *could* not be homogeneous.

## The missing sensibility

In the above analysis I have described circumstances that are also familiar from other studies. However, I also think that I have contributed new explanations in some areas. This is particularly true of the identification of the village as a relative whole consisting of conflicting parts, and the bringing out of the "inward logic" and "outward" background of the two co-existing lifestyles. I thus hope I have demolished the clichés that even as well-informed a scholar as J. Blum (1978: 45) has considered himself obliged to repeat as characteristic of European peasant life. It would be fruitful if the construct presented here could be tested in other parts of Europe.

Not only in interpretation, but also in the descriptions I have had to present in order to interpret, I have gone further than a purely empirical scholarly tradition would countenance. I have emphasized the distinctive concepts related to dues and fate which were later made the object of analytical attention. I have claimed the right to "aggregate" the given material. This is necessary if the perception presented is to be not only a receptive adding-up of "facts", but also a creative product based on the things perceived in other words, a reconstruction.

It would be wrong to conceal the fact that I am reasonably pleased with the result. Yet something is still missing. It is necessary to unravel the "sense" of the lifestyles to understand how each of them could be maintained. Yet this is not the same as having described life in the village. The researcher often forgets to tell the reader this. Precisely as much information was given about the contextual aspect of the lifestyles as was necessary to *understand* them. With this, the pure theorist or social

scientist might perhaps be content. The presence of everyday life is disregarded. We perhaps understand the principle of reproduction, but we do not *feel* the life. The sharp concepts of science have their uses. But they can also cut us off from a deeper kind of knowing.

If one has worked intensively with the source material from a given area, one comes to “know” many of the people. If one has also done present-day fieldwork in the same localities, it is clear that one has seen human beings in one’s own time in another way than one can *document* them – even through the most thorough study of the records – from the written sources. Yet I wanted to know directly the smell of the living rooms of the eighteenth-century peasants who had their milk dishes up under their ceilings and their poultry down under the benches. I wanted to hear them on the roads in autumn, up to their knees in mud, and feel the extreme, steaming damp of the fields during the spring work. I would dearly love to witness the villagers’ loud glee in their cups, and to see them bloody and grinning in their often welcome brawls. Formally, the sources are silent about smells, sounds, feelings and tastes. Even in fieldwork-based studies today, one rarely finds descriptions that communicate such experiences (Stoller 1989). Yet through the linguistic pictures one forms from long work with the papers described, and with the visual impression of fieldwork at the back of one’s mind, one does get a certain impression of how things perhaps were. As many others have probably done, I have experienced it empathetically. But experiences like these are rarely appropriate for a scholar to talk about. I think many of our readers would be glad to see us do so.

The reason most of us are fearful of taking this leap lies in the narrowing-down of reality that has held European educational culture ever more strongly in its grip since the culmination of scholasticism around 1300. This renunciation of the dangerous, passion-associated senses in favour of rigorous intellectualization was first practiced by the men of the Church. The natural science of the Renaissance, the Age of Reason, and later the progressive positivism of the nineteenth century

furthered this pilgrimage towards a virtuous, one-sided (scientific) description of reality (Grønbech 1947). Great as the victories are that have been achieved by these intellectual traditions and their ramifications, the intentions of Modernism have nevertheless also resulted in a self-imposed corseting of research. The analogy of myth, the special kind of knowledge that is poetry, and experience itself, were shut out of the pure world of science. The view of science we see reflected throughout our own long cultural history is tied to its view of humanity – that is, the educational project aimed by church, state and institutions at their over-fanciful subjects. It would be wrong to claim that scholarship does not need reason and rules; but research cannot flourish if the formal order of the textbook cannot also be broken.

In this context it is necessary to break the order by emphasizing that we know not only through what we call concepts, but also through feeling and experience. We rarely focus on the significance of the damp, leaky half-timbered walls for rheumatic pains in a population that works with its body, on the eternal sticking of the wagon wheels in the tenacious earth, on the humiliating orders barked by the steward, or the weight of solid porridge in the gut. That would be “pop”, it would be irresponsible. Nor, unfortunately, can we *recognize* these things in ourselves, and so we are cut off from grasping whatever cultural meaning they had. I could mention, for example, the frequent fights of the fatalists. They must have expressed something more than just defiance, glee or involvement. It is as if they simply hit out when they were angry, as children react before they know guilt. Unlike people of a later age, these peasants are unlikely to have felt any guilt at hitting out at a neighbour; just as getting thoroughly drunk would not have been felt culturally as a disgrace.

In our zeal to understand we have concentrated for many years on the perfectible conceptual construct. Given our own cultural background, this is understandable. In so doing, we have come to practice a self-absorption which can easily lead to a distancing attitude to the life we claim to study. In the end this

could mean the end of the cultural study of others. Interestingly enough, the same can be said of postmodernism.

### The tradition-denying solution of postmodernism

In its very name, postmodernism turns against the objective reason of modernism, which it regards as both naive and inhuman. The belief in progress has been punctured. In the “cultural studies” of this movement there is a tendency to dissociate from an earlier clinging to authoritative epistemological foundations, and to take a fragmentary, artistic attitude to the empirical material. If all conceptions of the world are culturally determined, a clear distinction between truth and falsehood can no longer be maintained. The great narrative of history, understood as the process of evolution and devolution, then becomes meaningless. The researcher-subject, untrammelled by obligations, can piece his own mosaic together. The form tends to become more important than the content.

This has to do with the fact that the western researcher’s idea of one monolithic kind of reason has turned out, cross-culturally, to be a very relative phenomenon. At the same time, the researcher’s experience of cultures will always be partial. This means that it is a postulate that one can represent them holistically. Cultures are always conglomerates of many voices, only a few of which – or only one – the researcher hears. Realism and (local) holism are empirical and theoretical fictions. Several writers have tried to get around the dilemma of representation by focusing on so-called intensive or experimental writing – getting behind presentation and creating understanding by evocation. S. A. Tylor (1986: 125, 134) has consistently suggested that the anthropologist should use poetic means to write cultures. Before this can be practiced, though, I believe that the discipline will have to have an effective showdown with social anthropology’s own scientist past. Otherwise the experiment would primarily be a rhetorical genre consisting of the baggage of Enlightenment ideals with a

purely external form of (aesthetic) Romanticism superadded. By emphasizing writing one can easily come to turn the problem into a matter of presentation, thus neglecting the more basic challenge of better knowing.

There may be something extremist about the postmodernist arguments. The pendulum swings from the bugbear of sociological, theoretical modernism to an ideal of humanist, poetic culturalism. It is turned into an either/or problem. Although some of the criticism of modernism is justified, the reaction in my view also involves elements of resignation.

### Roots of European ethnology: Herder

It seems odd to me to renounce classic conceptual work if the background for doing so is at bottom that most theories have caused us difficulties. Even constructs which have had to be abandoned because of logical flaws or application problems remain accessible, accumulated in research environments as ideas one can associate with. Thus, for better or for worse, we are also able to see ourselves as parties to history.

So when we speak of theoretical concepts as opposed to the feelings that art has almost monopolized for the past century, it does not have to be an either/or issue. The challenge must lie precisely in reuniting concept and feeling, inasmuch as they form a unity whose parts require one another in the creative act. This construct originates with Herder (1987/1778) but is among the insights that have on the whole been repressed and which must therefore be rediscovered.

It has also been forgotten in European ethnology.<sup>3</sup> For outsiders this must appear paradoxical, for J. G. Herder himself (1744–1803) was the philosophical founder of this discipline. Ethnology later broke with the nationalistic *Volksgeist* concept of Herder’s disciples and other problematical mentality constructs. Instead it sought a new scientific approach in the synchronic social sciences, thereby falling into the arms of the very rationalism that Herder’s thinking opposed! The discipline adopted the demands of rigorous science for a distinction between reason and emotion (and dropped the

latter), and lost the historical perspective (Christiansen 1989).

It is difficult for present-day researchers to read Herder. He deliberately refrained from writing in an academic, philosophical style, claiming that the very thing that pure thought could not grant a place in science – that is, sensation – could not be grasped by its conceptual language.

To be able to understand others, we must first be capable of recognizing their features in ourselves. Herder invites us to try to cast off our “narrow ego” and take a kind of inner mental journey. By so doing we will experience that many of the restrictive norms that bear up our external life simply do not exist in the internal one. The head has no power to sum up the feelings of the body in one notion. He thinks that the “soul” is perhaps not separate from the body at all, as the Enlightenment men of the universities claimed, and to some extent still do. We must therefore acknowledge that human life is not divisible, but is one flowing unity or whole which transcends the antithesis between the bodily and the mental (feeling and reason). This unity gives reality its form. In life, the human being does something, and feels something. Herder further shows that the feeling in the individual act comes before the thought. The inner language thinks for us before we start reasoning. So perception is to a great extent dependent on our feelings, and one must ensure that perception constantly preserves its link with the “drives of the deep” if one does not want to end up as a scientific fusspot.<sup>4</sup>

This view may seem rather provocative to much of the recent ethnological concept formation and description, which has clearly focused on one part of the unity. In the light of the above, many of us practice a narrow, concept-rhetorical ethnology – a kind of research that easily becomes flat and superficial compared with what it could probably become. We have renounced the courage to experience, not only in communication, but in our very perception. To create descriptions that do not exclusively rely on the principles of thought, there can hardly be any other way than reconciling reason with feeling. This is not easy in our culture.

In the wider perspective it will involve the union of research with the rest of our life, including the necessary private experience. In this way, we will also ourselves become participants in the struggle against the narrowing-down of existence by our *own history* and *current* rationalism. In other words, a connection between the past and the present.

Such a union might perhaps fulfil my wish to go from the two peasant lifestyles to the sensual world which for the villagers must have united household life, work, village drinking and the fighting in one reality. There must be a middle way between fictional composition and the self-coercion that our narrow concept of sources has resulted in – and against which my subconscious feelings protested during my archive work.

### Sensing culture in history

On the face of it, one would think that these demands could have been met by some of the northern European cultural history tradition that flourished from the end of the nineteenth century until the 1950s. On the one hand the best of these cultural historians created dazzling works which, through their barrier-storming approach, boldness of subject matter and ability to find unorthodox combinations, uncovered more than the outward aspects of life. Yet because of their lack of reverence for source criticism and politics, it was often difficult for the cultural historians to command the respect of the universities. Although several of them outshone their contemporaries in intellectual power, in disciplinary politics they lost the battle to the men of “the breakthrough of modernism”. On the other hand, it is difficult today to take these historicist cultural researchers as shining exemplars. Often they relied so much on their personal talents and subjective judgements that they had difficulty communicating what they were doing. They had a great love of the scenic, but often despised theory – by which they meant what their opponents explicitly wanted to introduce. The cultural historians were themselves hardly aware that they were theorizing indirectly.

Some of today's culturalism has features in common with the classic cultural history tradition. The fragmented view of society, the unacknowledged dependence on theory, the many small topics, the skewed approach, and the love of "the good story" or the impressionistic reflection – we find all these in the present-day debate on how one should write history or ethnography (cf. Van Maanen 1988: 101).

Whether fifty to a hundred years ago or today, there is something odd about these modes of expression. Because of their categorical standpoints they are unable to point out new ways ahead while they gather up strands of earlier research – that is, those that can be used, sometimes in a different way from before. Perhaps we should try to shift the angle of approach.

It is here I would claim that theoretical constructs are necessary if we are to have tools with which to "think the world". I think, too, that thorough familiarity with the source material is a condition if we want to be taken seriously in the longer term. But here it is necessary to go a step further than one normally does.

It would be easiest if we first tried to work with our own imaginative powers. They are active at the subconscious level, and are used implicitly when sensing is associated with thought.<sup>5</sup> The visualizing faculty can be trained by bringing it out of the private sphere. It is of particular importance for the formulation of questions in the work with historical situations that cannot be directly seen.

As an extension of this, it would be appropriate to look at the emotional aspect that has been neglected in our studies in favour of the rational aspect. We interview people about what they themselves think is rational, and we reconstruct history so it can be understood rationally. And we stop there.

I do not think that we can penetrate, through the study of historical, illiterate peoples, to how they felt within their bodies. We can form notions of it, but these will be of a very vague nature, and this should be stated clearly. On the other hand, it should be possible to describe what I call people's "feeling of being". By this I mean people's experience of

the circumstances that surrounded their close daily life, with whose contours it is possible to become fairly familiar. I am thinking of aspects like humans/animals (physical proximity, edibility, symbolic nature), cold versus heat, sound versus silence and the colour schemes of clothes and furniture compared with the (shifting) colours of the landscape. One could also mention the differences between walking barelegged on the wet roads of the village and feeling the mud ooze up between your toes, compared with walking in slush wearing clogs – when the snow sticks like a high, uneven cushion under the clogs. This makes the walker almost stagger along like a cripple. This is how the succession of summer and winter might have been felt.

If the examples do not appeal to the reader, one could choose other aspects. The crucial point is that the imagination is used to bring out something more than the reality we know from the sources' world of things. We have to look behind the documentable "visible" order. In a study like the present one, this has to be combined with familiarity with the best source material. Otherwise one is cut off from many analytical possibilities and is unlikely to be able to "eavesdrop" on the content of the manifestations of the past. And, it goes without saying, one must not work against the sources.

These steps lie beyond what I have previously called aggregating the material. However, one cannot just naively begin on an endless, random description of the sensual world. We must find a form where these features of existence can dovetail with the material surroundings. Perhaps we could reflect as follows. We can demonstrate, for example, that X, Y and Z were the case, and we can then ask "If this was the situation with X, Y and Z (and the relations between them), what then must *also* have been the case,<sup>6</sup> if the daily chores were to be accomplished meaningfully?" If the peasant family Larsen's 4.7 m long cottage room housed seven people and had at least two milk dishes up under the ceiling and four geese and chickens under the benches, as well as wet clothes on the stove, we must imagine that the smell of the room was different from the smell outside it; and that these people in their houses



had a positive attitude to the proximity of animals. Against this background we can try to sense what the smell and the animal-human relationship were like. This is necessary if we are to try later to enable the reader himself to indulge in similar reflections on the basis of our texts. It is a construction of the past that builds not only on the individual proposition, but on the implications of propositions, and thus on a system of interrelated propositions – including the reconstructed ones.

How far we can plausibly go is hard to say. But I imagine that we should at least be able to practice a more recognizable, vital ethnological description than most of us have become used to. This requires both a deeper perception and a less anaemic kind of communication. It is hardly possible to say at this stage how much the various theoretical approaches to Herder's "sensation" can be combined.<sup>7</sup> Without proposing any definitive answer, I have still considered it reasonable to raise the issue of sense and sensibility. It is germane to the current dilemma of the discipline.

Unlike much of postmodernism, I see no reason why these kinds of "small", close everyday descriptions should not be used in a kind of interplay with the so-called big analyses. The world is not only small, and not only big. The Giesegaard peasants did not live exclusively in a local order consisting of Gørslev and the estate. In their use of their everyday implements, artifacts and materials, they were dependent on the whole Baltic and North Atlantic area (Christiansen 1992). In addition, the structure that formed the framework for their lives was not only Danish, but European. And the region where Giesegaard was located even exhibited more structural resemblances to the estate regions east of the Elbe than to those in Western Europe. For me it was fascinating to experience the large perspective this way through this "small" study.

## Notes

1. This article is based on a comprehensive study now in manuscript form, entitled *A manorial world: Lord, peasant and cultural distinction on a*

*Danish estate 1750–1980*. All relevant references will be found there in the notes to Chapter 4.

2. In 1787. The land was worked in a modified three-field system, with rye, barley and fallow rotation and oats in the outfields. The common was left as permanent, shared pasture. Each farm had between sixty and a hundred field strips within the area of the village.
3. This does not apply to the same extent to folklore. Herder introduced the concept *Kultur des Volkes*. For him, history consists of the lives of *das Volk*, i.e. communities of ordinary people, unlike the *lives of individuals* (for example of princes and the learned). See also Burke 1978.
4. Or *forstandsidiot* ("idiot of reason"), as Vilhelm Grønbech provocatively called it. He saw the *forstandsidiot* and his opposite the *følelsesidiot* ("idiot of feeling") as equally stunted individuals.
5. The maintenance of this distinction throughout the article is purely operational. The difference is in fact present in our language and our (Greek) thinking, and until the split ceases to exist in our consciousness, even "wrong" linguistic references to it may be necessary to communicate with others.
6. I thank Dr. Anne Knudsen for the articulation of this construct, and for comments on the article in general.
7. Herder's interest in including a sensual world beyond the seen in our concept of knowledge recurs in thinkers as different as Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

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