

TWO WAYS TO SHAPE A DISCIPLINE IN AN “EXTREMELY SUNDERED PART OF THE WORLD”

Sigurd Erixon and Alberto Cirese Inaugurate *Ethnologia Europaea*

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An American folklorist reading the first issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* finds it natural to draw a trans-Atlantic comparison. In 1971, the long-established *Journal of American Folklore* published a special issue, “Toward New Perspectives in Folklore.”¹ This collection of articles marked a social and intellectual watershed in U.S. folklore studies: influence shifted to a new generation of researchers and to the emerging paradigm of “verbal art as performance” within a larger ethnography of communication. The immediate “new perspectives” were heterogeneous, however, drawing on a range of disciplines and theories for inspiration. In part this resulted from the different backgrounds and empirical foci of the contributors; in part it was a sending out of trial balloons to see which might float. The common impulse was to build a science from the precarious institutional base of a field generally considered to be residual.

Sigurd Erixon’s initiation of *Ethnologia Europaea* came four years earlier, in 1967. Having broken from SIEF, the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore, in the wake of a takeover by a faction of conservative folklorists (Rogan 2008), Erixon was making the last of a career-long series of efforts to craft a unified framework from a heterogeneous array of intellectual projects in Europe. The first volumes of the new journal consist largely of programmatic statements and stocktakings of the state of the

field(s). Like their U.S. counterparts, the contributors were concerned with both institutional cohesion and intellectual coherence, and sought scientific foundations as the guarantor of both. Likewise, the Europeans too sought to redefine the disciplinary subject as contemporary or at least continuous, integral rather than residual to modernity (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

The Europeans were necessarily more aware than the Americans of institutional challenges and historical constraints. In the United States, “young Turks”² such as Alan Dundes, Dan Ben-Amos, Roger D. Abrahams, and Richard Bauman sought to cast off the baggage of disciplinary history and subdue their institutional tyrants in the process. In contrast, Géza de Rohan-Csermak, the first editor of *Ethnologia Europaea*, was at 41 the youngest contributor to the first issue. Everyone participating had been affected by one and in some cases two world wars. Their concern was not with creative destruction but with the restoration and renewal of cooperative scholarly projects insofar as that might be possible. Erixon writes of Europe as “an extremely sundered part of the world” (1967: 5). Although he refers immediately to the scarcity of survivals marking Europe’s connections to regions usually studied by anthropologists, the phrase admits of many other readings.

Erixon's opening statement is a plea for cooperation. Ethnological activities are inevitably diverse, he maintains, given the "vast" scope of the field itself: that is, the vast range of social and cultural phenomena addressed by ethnologists. In the second half of the article he will endeavor to subdue that empirical panorama into order, but the diversity of scholarly practice is his real concern. Explicitly he speaks of national and regional variety, and by extension methodological and institutional differences, spread across university disciplines, museums, and archives of various kinds. Ideological diversity, clearly important both to East–West interaction and within Europe itself, is not mentioned, and neither – in 1967! – is inter-generational tension. The first elision, at least, is surely a tactical avoidance. Marxist perspectives from both sides of the Iron Curtain are in fact present in the first issue among other less apparent commitments; the political situation permitted careful relations with Eastern European scholars and a deeper interaction with the non-aligned Yugoslavians. Soon some cautious father-slaying was also evident: Hermann Bausinger's contribution to the memorial issue for Erixon tactfully challenged not the journal's own establishment but the *Theoriefeindlichkeit* of the folklorists from whom Erixon had detached himself (1968–69).

Bjarne Rogan's careful research (2008 and elsewhere) has elucidated the most urgent source of atomization in the field, to which Erixon's article makes oblique but repeated reference. "Much difference of opinion"; "a certain discouragement"; "much has been said": these hints point to the institutional vested interests, interpersonal rivalries, and factionalism that made Western Europe itself a greater challenge than the Cold War to scholarly cooperation. After laying out a massive, ambitious research program, in the last sentence Erixon pricks the balloon with an acknowledgment of human and material constraints: "In the meantime we shall have to limit ourselves to a number of such concrete tasks."

The intellectual program is likewise pragmatic. It draws the widest net possible in order to incorporate existing projects and to make a case for Euro-

pean ethnology as a division of general ethnology, addressing the continent's distinctive social development.³ Erixon's delineation of activities for the field is more aggregated than integrated, although the core is an effort to merge Swedish-style folklife studies with the compatible holistic and diffusionist tendencies in U.S. anthropology. In consequence, the next ten years of the journal are heavy on vocabularies of plowing, typologies of haystacks, and other potential contributions to the European atlas Erixon dreamed of. But room is made for new currents: considerations of *Folklorismus* (e.g. Bausinger, Weber-Kellermann), of urban migrants (Esteva-Fabregat), of ethnocentrism and empathy (Niederer), and more. In keeping with Erixon's efforts, the journal was inclusive where inclusion was feasible.

Erixon's reconfiguration was countered by another vision in the very next article of the first issue. In "Altérité et dénivellement culturels dans les sociétés dites supérieures" (1967), the Italian ethnologist Alberto Mario Cirese proposed a different style of remediation: not the integration of European research into general ethnology, but rather an autonomous principle of *découpage*, a demarcation of the field as a distinctive subject with a distinctive theoretical framework. In an explicit conception of disciplinaryity, Cirese insists that a true science has not only methods but clear goals and clear boundaries.⁴

Startlingly, Cirese's point of departure for constructing such a science is not ethnology but the far more compromised field of folklore. Naturally he dismisses the existing legitimations of the field as devoted either to romantic imaginings of the "people" or to fetishized historical survivals. Equally – and surely addressing his colleagues in the new journal – he insists that mere "disciplinary patriotism," or the desire to perpetuate one's own institutional base and formation, will not do. Formed as a Socialist militant for whom collecting folksongs was part of a progressive cultural agenda, Cirese followed other Italian scholars of the period in taking his inspiration from Antonio Gramsci's fragmentary "Observations on Folklore." Accordingly, Cirese's *Ethnologia Europaea* article defines our field as the study of "cultural

alterity and unevenness in the so-called superior societies.”⁵

Like other contributors to the first issue, Cirese is interested in the distinctiveness of Europe, which he defines in institutional and political terms. Europe is organized into centralized states with a nationalist ideology – “the will to recognize themselves as more or less homogeneous historical unities” – and integrated communications. The seeming paradox to be explained is that these same societies exhibit significant internal cultural differentiation. Demonstrating that his paradigm is implicit in existing scholarly conceptions, Cirese reveals a submerged pragmatism suggesting the compatibility of his agenda and Erixon’s. At the same time, he sweeps aside old debates by insisting that the objects of ethnology be defined according to the circumstances of their use rather than their production. Regardless of its origin, a given practice may differ “objectively and subjectively” from those recognized and sustained by the official culture, by virtue of its social positioning within a given setting.

Presented by Cirese with no explicit Marxist framing beyond the reference to Gramsci, the new paradigm would seem promising. It resonates with Erixon’s attention to social complexity and cultural contact as the hallmarks of a modernized field. Equally, it is compatible with the U.S. turn toward context and performance. As we know, however, it did not achieve hegemony. A parallel development of Gramsci would emerge in British cultural studies with Raymond Williams’ formulation of “residual” and “emergent” practices (1977); related conversations took shape around the postcolonial situation in Latin American thought and in India’s Subaltern Studies group. In the late 1970s, these lineages came to meet the theorizing from the U.S.-Mexican border inaugurated by Américo Paredes, with José Limón taking the lead in presenting the international work to U.S. folklore scholars (e.g. 1983). Nonetheless, Cirese’s program remains an unrealized potentiality, stymied by conscious rejection and even more by inertia. Heterogeneity of topic, approach, and justification has prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Still today, echoes of Erixon and of Cirese are

heard every time the state of our field(s) is discussed, most recently in a special issue of *Narodna umjetnost* drawn from the 2015 SIEF congress in Zagreb. The first two articles send us back to the future while setting important agendas for the present. Fabio Mugnaini lays out the “systematization of Gramsci’s legacy” in Italian folklore studies to argue the need for ongoing attention to the political character of folklore (Cirese’s “differentiation”). This, he insists, must be our response to the institutionalization of “intangible cultural heritage,” with its detachment of practices from persons and social situations (2016).

Immediately afterwards, Laurent-Sébastien Fournier reflects on the 2009 creation of the Association Française d’Ethnologie et d’Antropologie, an umbrella organization for smaller associations and initiatives intended to increase their representational power in the French research establishment (2016). He elucidates the dualist tension between unitarism and federalism in the French association, noting parallels in SIEF’s conjunction of folklore and ethnology and in the potential accommodation of the two global anthropological unions, the World Council of Anthropological Associations and the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. (We could add the U.S.-European relationship to that list, and Canadian scholars might make further additions.) Drawing on Georg Simmel, Fournier observes that conflicts among intimates are typically more intense than those among strangers; in our case they frequently take the guise of assigning moral weight to methodological differences. A reflexive approach would recognize these conflicts as an index of relationship, while acknowledging their costs as we face the common challenge of maintaining an institutional presence in a climate of scarcity. Like Erixon, Fournier sees cooperation as a precondition of progress, institutional or intellectual.

In Lévi-Strauss’s terms, Cirese is an engineer and Erixon is a bricoleur (1962). Cirese constructs coherence out of first principles, organizing the phenomena around them. Intellectually impressive, his article does not tell us how the move to a unified paradigm is to be brought about in practice. Erixon,

on the contrary, begins with the institutional and, more discreetly, the interpersonal challenges, coordinating existing resources to arrange a workable solution, though with little by way of a compelling vision.

In the context of university restructuring and a decline in research funding, disciplinary bricolage is inevitable. Its tactics may not be productive. Some of us will hoard our inherited intellectual resources and cling to any available institutional footing, however compromised. Others will run after the next new thing (or the last new thing). We are only human, after all, and our energies are limited. With our efforts dispersed across the “vastness” that Erixon first raised as a problem, fragmentation would seem inescapable. And naturally multiple perspectives have their advantages: this would be made clear by the postmodern critics of the normal science so dear to our colleagues in the 1960s. As a centripetal counterweight to all this centrifugal force, however, we have our learned societies and our journals. *Ethnologia Europaea*, now collaborating with its former antagonist SIEF, is prominent among them. It would seem critical that we supplement the “big tent” approach of inclusivity with actively shepherded conversations across our positions. Calling ourselves back at regular intervals to attend to one another and to rediscover the subterranean linkages between our diverse external manifestations, we can still work to realize what Cirese defined (1967: 12) as our “elementary scientific duty, that of cooperating in general scientific progress.”

Notes

- 1 Published the next year in book form as Bauman & Paredes (1972); see Shuman & Briggs (1993) for an important contextualization and reevaluation of the volume.
- 2 In Richard Dorson’s famous phrase.

- 3 Folklore and oral tradition are avoided, because of the SIEF split, but gradually make their way back into the journal.
- 4 Alberto Mario Cirese’s article is available on <http://www.mtp.dk/details.asp?ELN=500461>
- 5 All translations are mine.

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