HOUSEHOLD STUDIES "À LA MODE"?
Liv Emma Thorsen's Anthropology of Peasant Familial Labour

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The article by Liv Emma Thorsen published in 1986 echoes the topics of that decade, which was characterized by the project of building an anthropology of Europe by establishing some common questions and references. After decades of material culture studies in relation to museums, collections and exhibitions, those researchers who – depending on their particular institution – called themselves ethnologists, European ethnologists, or Europeanists turned to more general topics, in order to reconnect with the larger domain of anthropology, dedicated to "other" cultures. Researchers like Liv Emma Thorsen studied their own cultures, treating the peasant as the inside "other", whereas anthropologists dealt with the "other" outside of their own cultures. But in producing research on their own societies, ethnologists endeavored also to set their work in a comparative framework, thus participating in what has been for a long time a far-reaching goal, the construction of an anthropology of Europe.[1] Later on, ethnologists were accused of having "primitivized" Europe and European societies, inasmuch they were working on villages or on marginal cultures, but in the years of their writing they were partaking in a very vivid domain, investigating for instance the family through the lenses of the domestic domain, its role division or the devolution patterns. Thorsen's paper, which is also exceptionally well written, with a rich ethnography and a longitudinal perspective, fits perfectly to the discussions of those years, each study of this kind bringing more material to build upon.

I must confess that there might also be some nostalgia on my part, considering the fact that the rural household as a socio-anthropological domain is no longer *à la mode*. Thorsen echoes directly my own interests concerning the organization of farm production and reproduction as it involves the sex roles division of tasks and responsibilities. (And I may add that re-reading the paper, I was not displeased to discover that my own work was quoted, though I swear I did not know it when I made the choice!) Thorsen's article is also representative in that it reflects the specific moment when anthropology met history through the study of family, and specifically *l'histoire des mentalités*, which was at its pinnacle in that decade. As a matter of fact, one may notice that the references quote Ariès, Le Goff, and Nora, but do not mention the anthropological works of those like Meyer Fortes or Jack Goody, which could have offered another perspective.

The paper also seems indicative of the development of *Ethnologia Europaea* in those years, with more papers in English than in German, thus opening itself to a larger audience. It testifies to the focus of the journal in the 1980s and 1990s before it moved to other topics, when it became more attuned also to the questions of general anthropology or cultural studies. However, if this article (along with a few others) is a good testimony of what often interested ethnologists and anthropologists then, namely,

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the effects of technical changes within the domestic group, it also opens new perspectives. The village is at the center, but the analysis is not stuck to the concept of "traditional society". Quite to the contrary, it analyses the consequences of an important episode in the system of food production in Europe, and as such, offers an interesting opening to the study of processual changes implied by "modernity".

The article is innovative in many ways, for example (1) interviewing three generations of women, (2) developing the notion of material culture by applying it to modern machinery, and (3) introducing the concept of "gender", which was only then beginning to be discussed in anthropology, when examining the various relationships between men and women in connection with the various modes of production.

With a fine grained ethnography, the author describes the conditions of work on a Norwegian farm in a small community. Thorsen focuses her attention on the division of work roles. By following three generations of women, the author can show the evolution of mentalities and the conflict of values among the youngest generations when, at the same time, technical modernization and the penetration of new ideas about what should be a woman's role, collided. Thus the author combines successfully different threads of topics that then moved to the core of discussions in the Europeanist social anthropology in the 1990s. The author renovates the theme of material culture, which was the staple of ethnology until the 1970s, in order to settle itself as a scientific discipline, departing from folklore and its romantic flavor. But in doing so, the researchers had forgotten the cultural and social relations transiting through the technical gestures and implements. The paper also reveals the expansion of the new developments introduced by *l'Ecole des Annales* and its *histoire des mentalités*. Changes regarding what is "natural" for a woman in each generation is framed in the concept of *mentalités*, which helps understand the conflicts regarding the sexual division of work when new modern implements enter the farm.

After a theoretical presentation of the concepts of ideology and mentality, the article starts with a general description of the diversity of traditional farming techniques throughout Norway, and of the rigid role division. However, the author explains that there were some variations in this pattern when men were away from the farm to go fishing or if they were employed in forestry. Generally, before commercial farming developed, the female work domain was inside, the male work domain outside. Then the paper describes the consequences of the introduction of the first technical changes, from family production of dairy products to industrial dairies followed by the introduction of mechanical cutting machines at the beginning of the twentieth century, and after World War II of the tractor. The author very interestingly points out that the workload for men was alleviated, whereas the female domestic chores (cooking, washing) was still done without the help of technical implements, these machines arriving only two decades later.

The core of the ethnography delineates the consequences of the acquisition of the milking machine, a technique that impinges on the traditional feminine domain; with its mechanization, the task moves from the feminine to the masculine domain. This acquisition was generally motivated by the fact that men would find it tedious to milk the cows by hand in case their wives were unable to do it. The cowshed, a traditionally feminine space, became masculine as soon as machinery entered it. Thorsen goes on analyzing in a very innovative way the interweaving of time, work, and childcare in farming families and the new conflicts of values the young mothers were confronted with, as new patterns regarding the importance of mothering emerged.

Thus briefly summarized, this paper can be seen as illuminating numerous topics that will be developed further on in other contexts, a new approach to material culture, the opening of the field of gender studies, the discovery of the growing importance of the child.

As a long-time member of the editorial board of *Ethnologie française*, and its director for the past ten years, it is interesting to reflect on the trajectory of both journals. They have followed the changes in the discipline, and the new contexts of its production, and over the years, their contents have evolved enor-

mously. But the mid-1980s, from which Thorsen's article derives, appears in retrospect to be the end of an era. The decade 1990–2000 marks a shift away from studying questions associated with rural societies to analyzing the various facets of modernity, new family patterns in urban areas, sports, politics, contemporary rituals, and in the 2000s the local effects of globalization and *metissages*, while producing a continuous quest about the nature and meaning of the territory called Europe and its identities, the reconfiguration of patrimony, offering a fresh look at ethnographical museum presentations, etc. Symbolically, the change in this journal's contents is manifested by the new cover. After some years with a cover illustrated by the abduction of Europa, since 2005 each issue benefits from a special cover page, some of them being particularly striking (if not shocking: I am thinking of the issue of 2006, 36:2 showing tourists the day after the tsunami sun-bathing among the remnants of the wreck).

The shift toward cognitivism (already present in Thorsen's paper as she talks of the "cognitive structures of the peasant mind") and cultural studies, à la Löfgren and Frykman, has been very present in the pages of the journal for the past 15 years. As a matter of fact, Liv Emma Thorsen's work is an interesting example of a shift in topics while continuing to pursue the same strands. In a paper published in *Ethnologia Europaea* (2012, 42:1, 5–20), "A Supreme Elephant: Movement, Materiality and Mentalities", she examines the "insides" of the process that brings an elephant from former Portuguese West Africa into a Swedish Museum of Natural History. The topic is new, but we see that materiality and mentalities which were dealt with in the 1986 paper are also discussed, an old topic in new garments!

I am in a position to admire the various editors' work, because I know the amount of energy and time which are required to publish a journal, not only to define the grand orientations but to tackle the daily tasks and thousands of details that make a scientific journal worth of that qualification, both within the country and as assessed by international committees (without mentioning the consequences of digitalization, the fast disappearance of the paper issues, the fall in the number of subscriptions which require a new economic model).

Congratulations and happy birthday, *Ethnologia Europaea*, and long live!

Note

1 Cf. Martine Segalen: Quelles Europes pour quelles ethnologies? Le cas de la revue *Ethnologie française*. In: Francis Demier & Elena Musiani (eds.), *L'Europe: Une autre nation?* Nanterre: Presses de l'Université Paris Nanterre, in press.

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