

THE OUTSIDER'S GAZE AS PART OF THE METHODOLOGICAL TOOLKIT?

Reflections on the Research Project the “Musikantenstadl”

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Under the slogan “you research us”, a Turkish sociologist and a Romanian art philosopher were invited by the Austrian Academy of Sciences to get to the bottom of the success of the musical television event “Der Musikantenstadl”. The article discusses the experiences with the concept of the “outsider’s gaze” from the point of view of the (native) project coordinator. The first section discusses the classic principle of social anthropological field research: “We research you”. The author reflects on his own field research practice in the Middle East where being an outsider played an important role with regard to the reliability and quality of the investigation results. The second section summarizes the “conscious exotisation” through an outsider’s perspective as applied in the research project on the Musikantenstadl.

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Investigating the Musikantenstadl from an Outsider’s Perspective

What is the *Musikantenstadl*? This phenomenon showcasing popular Alpine culture is quite familiar to most people in the German-speaking countries of Europe. But even without ever seeing it, most readers are likely to have an idea what it is about.

First, there is the successful television production from Austrian Television (ORF) with Karl Moik, the originator, creator, and presenter of this program, which has been broadcast at more or less monthly intervals since 1981. Most German speaking television viewers (including those who do not watch the program) have heard of the Musikantenstadl. It was originally shown on a Thursday evening, but today Stadl fans can make themselves comfortable in front of the television at peak viewing time and watch the *Volksmusik* show at 8.15 p.m. on a Saturday evening, entranced by Karl Moik’s presentation.¹ Volksmusik

here is not the same as folk music; it is a mixed program with both popular and traditional songs. The shows are mainly live, direct broadcasts from the hall, tent, or similar type of venue in which the Musikantenstadl takes place before an audience.

Second, the Musikantenstadl is also a live show that is held in more or less well-known towns and villages, mainly in German-speaking regions. This is the form favoured by the die-hard fans who travel to the various event locations. For these locations, the organization of a Musikantenstadl is an effective marketing tool and also a boost to tourism, not just for the duration of the event. For the fans, the live settings hold the chance to see their favorite musicians, to see the event first hand – yes, and maybe even to be filmed by the camera and appear, however briefly “on television”. A special feature of this Volksmusik program is the *Auslandsstadl* (the Stadl abroad) It was established as a kind of cultural exchange and

as an opportunity for fans of the program to travel abroad with the fan club. Travel agencies also offer longer trips with the “Stadl family”, for example, “Karl Moik and the Sea”, a seven-day themed cruise on the Baltic Sea including “Musikantenstadl en route” each day.

Third, the Musikantenstadl is also available in the form of the newspaper *Stadlpost*, published ten times a year, providing the fans with all kinds of background information. If you want to know how Volksmusik star Hansi Hinterseer spends Christmas and what kind of snugness is most important for him at this time of year, this is the place to get informed. The *Stadlpost* is now also available on the Internet under the address <http://www.stadlpost.at>, and includes an online forum with active discussions on topics affecting the Stadl world.

Fourth, the *Musikantenstadl*® is trademarked. From Stadl bread to Stadl wine, there are countless Stadl products and they all use a standardized labeling, sometimes including a portrait of Karl Moiks. These Stadl products have their price, but they are exclusive and of good quality.

And finally, fifth, the Musikantenstadl is a bit like the Vienna Boys’ Choir, Lipizzaner horses, and the traditional chocolates *Mozartkugeln* (cf. Luger 1990: 72–96): It is a synonym for Austrian culture abroad, whereby the Austria represented by the Musikantenstadl is purportedly rural, down-to-earth, and natural instead of urban and elitist. It is “Austria’s business card for the world”, as the executive producer of the Musikantenstadl, Ursula Stiedl of ORF, once said. It is something that the Alpine republic identifies with, like a collective identity marker – to the joy of those who love it and the horror of those who hate it. Musikantenstadl is not just a keyword hiding many different associations; it is a *piece of popular culture*, constructed out of the confluence of the mass-medium television, the twentieth century Volksmusik recording industry and nostalgia for a *Volk* construct contained within this repertoire. And it has been highly disputed since the start of its existence.

It is in this context – the Musikantenstadl as a synonym for Alpine popular culture, as an Austri-

an business card, and as a disputed piece of culture – that the Musikantenstadl was chosen as a site for cultural research. From July 2004 to December 2006 a project was launched at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW: Social Anthropology Unit) with the title *Alpine Populärkultur im fremden Blick: Der Musikantenstadl im Lichte der Wissenschaften* [Alpine popular culture seen through the eyes of a stranger: The Musikantenstadl from a research perspective].² The project was based on examining, through outsiders’ eyes, the public spectacle Musikantenstadl with its roots in multiply mediated Alpine culture. It has become more common in cultural and social anthropology that in addition to the dominant “we study you” situation, a “we study ourselves” (as perhaps more customary in European Ethnology) or “you study yourself” option is added. In the project discussed here, the variant “you study us” was central, resulting in a methodological paradigm change. Researchers with an outsider’s view from Romania (Mădălina Diaconu) and Turkey (Zeynep Baraz) were included for the deliberate “exotisation” of the perspective on the Stadl.

In the conception of the research project, it was assumed that a view from outside would highlight other and new perspectives, insights, and interpretations that might exceed those of Austrian researchers encumbered by implicit understandings and a native cultural identity (see the discussion in Altheide 1996: 2). It is this implicitness of culture that makes it difficult to recognize special features and to differentiate these from the “unimportant” or less marked aspects within one’s own cultural environment. Given the Musikantenstadl’s high visibility as a mass mediated event, with a tradition of more than twenty years, made this methodological option all the more important. For Austrians it is almost impossible to view the Stadl separately from an equally visible public discourse on the aesthetics and politics encoded in the repertoire, the performers and staging typical of any given Stadl evening.

My research-based interest in social science methodology in general and in particular the development of new ethnological methods of data collection formed the main link to this research project. In au-

tumn 2004 when I was invited to take on the coordination of the research project, I had mixed feelings: On the one hand, the task did not really seem to fit with my academic background because my regional area of expertise was the ethnography of the Arabian peninsula. By this point, I had already spent more than two years of my life carrying out ethnological field research in the Middle East. In the course of this, I made acquaintance with popular religious pilgrimages, local conceptions of spirits and demons, with taboos and rituals and their significance for religious and daily actions. So it was a quite different situation that I should suddenly find myself dealing with the Musikantenstadl, a media event within my own culture. On the other hand, I saw in my biography diverse situations in which I had been confronted with elements of Alpine popular culture that had preoccupied me, both emotionally and mentally. And then there was also the opportunity for me as a social anthropologist to confront completely new areas of research. In the end, the deciding factor for accepting the offer was the long-held wish to cooperate with others in research projects instead of being a “lone ranger”.

The experiences gathered in the areas of project organization and interdisciplinarity and their linkage to the methodological inclusion of the “outsider’s gaze” are the subject of this article. Based on my work in the Middle East, I will first focus on dimensions of being an outsider inherent in ethnographic practice (Gingrich 2006a: 25). I will begin with reflections on my own field research practice in which my non-native status of the researcher played an important role – with regard to the concrete research options and the reliability and quality of research results (cf. Steinke 2003: 319–331). From there I will move to the research project *Alpine popular culture seen through the eyes of a stranger* in which the principle of the outsider’s view was defined as a central part of the methodological inventory. Through an account of my experiences as a project coordinator responsible for content as well as administrative issues, this article³ will reflect on the lessons gathered through the “method” of the outsider’s gaze (in the sense of “you study us”). Advantages as well as dif-

ficulties and dangers connected to this approach will be discussed. The paper then proceeds to a theoretical conceptualization of this distancing and examines the possibility to operationalize it as part of the methodological toolkit. Finally, the results of the investigation into the Musikantenstadl phenomenon⁴ will be discussed along with an account of the enormously high media reception of this research project.

Ethnological Field Research in the Middle East

Ethnography is a methodological core competence of cultural and social anthropology. Basically, ethnography consists of extended local observation in the actors’ community. The participant observers or ethnographers usually bring a certain prior understanding “from without” and participate in the events to be investigated as “professional strangers”. This type of external gaze is detailed and exact, because the process as a whole focuses on the trivialities of everyday life as seen through the eyes of external novices who often tend to see the forest instead of the individual trees (Gingrich 2006a: 25).

Continuing this metaphor – grasping the forest by combining the individual trees – within the framework of my own field research practice, I would add that the “professional stranger” (cf. Agar 1980) tends to have fewer prejudices against the individual trees and considers them generally with less bias than do many locals. In an unfamiliar situation, it is easier to be cosmopolitan and more impartial. It is a central ethnological principle to be open for everything and to take each cultural phenomenon seriously, even if it appears irrelevant at first, because everything can be significant in seeking coherent explanations. In the field, the ethnographer does well to withhold his own value judgments. I do not go into the field as a missionary who tries to convert. Rather, I seek to understand *how* people think and in which contexts and in which “necessary relationships” (Oppitz 1993) this occurs. To be at home in the research context is thus a bit different: At home I feel compelled to debate the culture, to criticize and denounce social and political conditions. I might like to attract people to my ideas – and as I see it, at home there

is also a certain obligation to keep up a position of the responsible citizen; striving for a society based on equality and not lapsing into apolitical behavior that would accept everything as it is.

When working in the Middle East, however, particular local cultural norms and values will hold a special significance: As a polite person, I will respect the opinions of others. If someone makes a statement, I ought to agree or make no comment if I really do not agree. It is not prudent to get into an argument straight away with the other party. Living empathy is easier in such situations than at home. "Empathy" is the ability to put oneself in another's position. There is a difference between cognitive and affective aspects of empathy, the former concerns the ability to understand the "intellectual world" of another person, the latter comprises the feelings and emotions of another person. My working assumption is that mustering empathy and the attendant understanding of the feelings of others is particularly difficult within a context roughly labeled as "home" in the sense of the socio-political field of public, national interaction – a context, in short, within which the Musikantenstadl phenomenon is situated. To illustrate what is meant by this, I would like to include an example from my own ethnographic research.

Between 1997 and 2001 I was dealing extensively with local shrines in the peripheral areas of the modern-day Arabian Republic of Syria (Fartacek 2003a). Always situated in unusual locations such as mountain peaks, strange trees or holy wells, in caves and rocky crevices, these holy shrines are connected to ancient myths and legends and linked to mythological persons. In pre-Islamic times, these places were untouchable refuges and sanctuaries for asylum seekers who were under "divine protection". Although customary law has lost its meaning since then, local shrines are still places for discovering the truth and seek rehabilitation and reconciliation. Interestingly, the places of pilgrimage in the Syrian border area are often visited equally by members of different ethnic and religious groups. As an ethnological field researcher, I documented these holy places and carried out interviews with pilgrims from very different backgrounds. Most of my conversa-

tional partners were deeply religious individuals. Through conversations, I tried to find out *how* my interview partners thought and which views of the world were behind their indexical everyday language expressions. In the course of the research process, I developed great empathy and a kind of "understanding" for the views and explanation models of my interview partners. I experienced a real fascination for these popular religious conceptions and was subsequently keen to emphasize the positive aspects of these local belief systems in lectures and discussions. To subject my own behavior during the research process to a methodological-critical reflection and, if necessary, to adapt it, I maintained a research diary (cf. Flick 1995: 191). In the course of the research, it became obvious that my enthusiasm for the popular religious pilgrimages was to a large extent linked to the location and the research situation and that I would probably have had a completely different approach to this subject in "my homeland" of Austria where there certainly also are pilgrimage sites to be found. I do not remember whether it had ever occurred to me to investigate the cognitive world of pilgrims in Austria or even to make a pilgrimage to the famous holy site of Mariazell. To be honest, I feel somewhat startled about people who carry out pilgrimages there. The Cult of the Virgin Mary and the organized bus trips from other European countries seem suspect to me. It would not have occurred to me to connect the places of pilgrimage along the Syrian borders with the Austrian Mariazell – the clientele is too different, as is the social function of pilgrimage and the worldviews through which the sites are classified as holy. While comparative research on these phenomena might indeed be productive, I am left with the recognition that in one's home context, one's research tolerance is different than in a foreign land. This estrangement facilitates, I would argue, greater impartiality and a higher degree of empathy. Hence, the status as "professional stranger" in ethnographic field research offers a methodological potential which we were able to use successfully in the project *Alpine popular culture seen through the eyes of a stranger*.

It is not only the ethnologist who usually confronts

conversation partners as a “professional stranger”. The ethnologist, in turn, will normally be shown more tolerance by the host group, as his behavior is judged less strictly. In particular in the Middle East, where relational alliances play a major role, the outsider is viewed as impartial by the locals, even if he is awarded the status of the guest family when there is doubt. The stranger must be helped and if he behaves “incorrectly”, more tolerant procedures are applied, he is forgiven more easily, and the most naïve questions are not taken badly – for he is interested in something but does not know exactly what (cf. Fartacek 2003b). This can be illustrated with my effort to collect ethnographic data on the conception of the blessing power of God, the *baraka*.

If one asks a pilgrim in the Middle East for reasons for visiting local shrines, one repeatedly hears the “simple” answer: *min shan al-baraka*! Because of the *baraka*. For a researcher from Syria where “every child knows what *baraka* is”, it would be difficult to expand the answer. The interested foreigner from Austria, however, who still has problems with the language, will be entitled to ask for further explanations. This foreigner can also ask such naïve questions and one will patiently explain to him what *baraka* is – a blessing power that is originally given by God and manifesting itself in particular places, objects, and persons. The *baraka* can be transferred from these carriers to “normal” people by carrying out specific rituals. *Baraka* improves both the material and spiritual situation of the people. It is a therapy for illness or infertility, and it offers protection from demonic influences, black magic and the effect of the evil eye. It is also helpful in the resolution of personal or collective problems.

I think that the “professional stranger” can in fact learn more here than a person accepted as a local. In the best case, such a question would be considered naïve, in the worst case (which can occur in particular if the person inquiring is a Syrian who belongs to a different ethnic-religious group), a question of this nature could be interpreted as an attack on one’s own beliefs.

It is important to note in this context that in colloquial Arabian language use, existing norms and val-

ues are usually formulated as descriptive rather than normative expressions. Desired perceptions, for example, “it is important to be tolerant in questions of religion” are formulated as actual states, such as, “with us, there are no difficulties and followers of all religious communities make pilgrimages to this shrine”. This situation must also be taken into account when formulating questions or interpreting the answers in ethnographic data collection (Fartacek 2003a: 202). To master the dialectally “restricted” language code plays a key role in the present context as, in contrast to “elaborate” literary language, it brings emotion to the expression.

This “ask what and how locals could not ask”⁵ is particularly relevant if the research process is conceived as a hypothesis-generating dialogue with the interview partners in the sense of Grounded Theory (Strauss 1991). The invitation to further explanation arises “naturally” in such interview situations. In general the conversation partners make an effort to explain everything to the “professional stranger” – and these explanations enable the researcher to interpret and obtain additional understanding, which usually exceeds what the locals (can) see themselves in an everyday context or what – if asked by a “native” – they might not wish to divulge.

From an epistemological perspective, the unfamiliarity of the researcher plays a particularly important role for creating structural coherences. In the Middle East, this understanding is equivalent to an emic perspective. In the course of my ethnographic field research a parable was told to me many times, which originally comes from the tradition of sufism; it makes different viewpoints the subject of discussion. These can be outlined through the metaphor inside/secular versus outside/sacred (Fartacek 2003a: 155).

According to the story, there are basically two different types of viewpoints: the view of the worm on one side and the view of the bird on the other. According to the tradition, the worm sees the things lying before him, very large and clear – however, he cannot recognize what is hiding behind them. This is the view of the “normal” person in society. In contrast, the bird comes from unfamiliar surroundings,

looks down on the world from above, and sees everything in context. He recognizes what is hidden behind the individual objects that are before him. He can see what, how, and where things are connected and he can create reciprocal relationships between the things for he has a multi-dimensional or complete view. The view of the bird is the view of the outsider, and also the view of a pilgrim, who at his place of pilgrimage, at the peak of the holy mountain – also metaphorically speaking – lets his gaze run over the secular world below (cf. Baumann 2002: 163–187).

The view of the outsider (or the person who is not immersed in the everyday world) is also confirmed here as being able to recognize and interpret the coherences and reciprocal relationships of everyday life. Thus this view is not so distant from that which Andre Gingrich addressed with the metaphor “coming from outside, you see the forest better than the individual trees”, referring to “the ethnographic, external gaze”. Unfamiliarity can become the key to grasping an emic perspective – in particular if it concerns the formation of structural coherences and “necessary relationships” (Oppitz 1993).

The Stranger’s Gaze in Action

The theoretical and methodological conception of the Musikantenstadl project sought to utilize the “external gaze” of non-native researchers as an intrinsic component of the investigation. With the project completed and published it is possible to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. Were the non-native researchers actually more impartial in their approach than Austrian ethnologists could have been? Are there indicators to measure whether non-native researchers achieved quantitatively and qualitatively different results? Was the approach of asking naïve questions – or, as Mădălina Diaconu summarized it critically, to have a “jester’s licence” (2006: 228) – productive? And in particular: did the design actually allow a “view from above” that enabled a better recognition of coherences? I will try to provide some answers to these questions below.

From February 2005 to January 2006⁶ – during the phase of intensive data collection – project

group meetings were held approximately every 14 days. The overriding aim of these group meetings was to encourage dialog between the members of the project group and to discuss the common points as well as differences between the individual scholarly approaches on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to discuss the external (represented by the foreign project team members) and internal perspectives (represented by the Austrian project team members). In addition, we addressed upcoming practical questions of data collection and data interpretation and tried to come to a basic consensus in the explanation of central concepts, such as “identity” or “(popular) culture” as used within the different research settings as well as the different disciplines involved. Evidence for the outsider’s gaze not just in fieldwork but also in these team meetings emerge in Mădălina Diaconu’s reflections. She writes about her efforts to render the Musikantenstadl less “demonic”, removing it from the hotly and critically rejected space it held in aspects of the Austrian public discourse. She noted horrified cries of many of her interview partners who could not fathom seeing the program in a harmless, “just-so” fashion – a stance she also found represented among the native members of our team during informal conversational situations during or outside of the team meetings. The native–non-native dynamic thus was a productive component in the field as much as in the analytic group settings, and continually pointed out to me as coordinator the necessity to examine my own, far from latent, sentiments about our object of research.

Whether scholar or sausage stand owner – I suspect there are hardly any Austrians who are indifferent to the Musikantenstadl phenomenon. In this context – working with a nationally known media event – the “external gaze” was advantageous. Examining the data assembled, it is obvious that Mădălina Diaconu and Zeynep Baraz were much more impartial than I or likely most other native researchers could have been. Diaconu and Baraz did participant observation on the stage set during the live recordings, interviewed Karl Moik and other individuals involved in the production; they interviewed individuals who held definite opinions about the Stadl

and visited small town festivals and musical events where popular music similar to the Stadl-repertoire was performed. Unperturbed by public valuation of musical taste traditions and their social, political and regional associations in Austria, they could document behaviors, elicit narratives and commentaries without interference from their own aesthetic socialization.

As project coordinator I was in turn grateful to be removed from such ethnographic immediacy. My emotional stance toward the Musikantenstadl had always been negative. I grew up in the country side of Upper Austria, most of my relatives live in the countryside of Salzburg and my leisure activities as well as my West-Austrian roots continue to draw me to the mountains. From a young age I was thus confronted by a mass-mediated *Volkskultur*, of which some elements are indeed reappropriated in rural settings. As a city dweller, preferring urban heterogeneity, the distance from an at once real and staged “folk scene” has grown, and encountering it brings about a sense of being unable to “defend myself”. My association with the Musikantenstadl was and remains profoundly shaped by these biographical components – which I share with many other Austrians; the Stadl embodies “sociability”, if not quite “folkish sociability”, a small inn environment that smacks of beer table politics, a bit of camaraderie, a bit of Carinthian sentimentality, and a bit of the feel of a Sudeten-German voluntary association.⁷ Added to all of this are the parameters of a live television show, applause on demand, public acclaim, and an odd enthusiasm. Despite the intensive engagement with the phenomenon as coordinator of the Stadl project it is hard to suppress the negative associations inherent for me with the Stadl and similar phenomena which I tend to avoid at all costs.

The more open I was when confronted with the pilgrims in Syria, the more prejudiced I might have turned as an investigator of the Musikantenstadl. The interest in the subject and the understanding of interview partners, in their sensitivities and emotions, might have hindered the withholding of my value judgments: This ethnographic stance would have been hard to muster and likely not have been

convincing to many interview partners. Without doubt many interview partners would have sensed my inner ambiguity and might have closed up or even sought to get me to reveal my own views.

The question of how I might have dealt with facing comparable mass mediated phenomena in the local popular culture of the Middle East arises. Would I have struggled with my prejudices in similar ways? On the basis of my Syrian research experience I would assume the case to be quite different and the Stadl project with its two non-native researchers would seem to confirm this stance. Lack of familiarity is a positive condition for field research, especially so for grasping the cultural context of a media event. It enables the interview partners to provide more differentiated explanations and more authentic explorations. The researchers in turn can approach the research site and its context from a distance, free of the stress the same event brings for the native scholar. This became evident in many commentaries by Baraz and Diaconu as they prepared for the fieldwork. “What is up with them (the Austrians)?” they would ask, “Why are they so hysterical?” “The Musikantenstadl is not that unusual and could be found anywhere in the world”, noted Baraz, and Diaconu maintained that the demonization of the program common among a sizable segment of the interviewees should be abandoned and the understanding of the phenomenon should, instead, be nurtured.

Both Baraz and Diaconu brought in addition to an “external gaze” also the knowledge and perspectives of additional disciplinary specializations, namely sociology and philosophy. Diaconu’s remarks on the aesthetics of the Musikantenstadl (2006: 155–228) in particular led me to ask whether my prejudices could be assuaged through the addition of specialized knowledge – from aesthetics, philosophy, and media studies. “Understanding” could be accrued through assembling an outsider’s perspectives in multiple senses of the term. Appropriate specialized knowledge further increased the emotional distance to the Musikantenstadl and related phenomena of Alpine popular culture. At the same time, this knowledge contributed a beneficial component in the meetings

with the interview partners; it furthered the non-judgmental atmosphere and improved the understanding between researcher and researched. The Stadl project was thus not just improved, but perhaps made possible in the first place through the inclusion of a both ethnographically and disciplinarily “external gaze”: Data collection, interpretation, and analysis profited from the greater impartiality warranted through this methodological choice.

Ethnographic work in the Middle East appears to differ from that in Austria on one fundamental point: the interested foreigner was received more warmly in the Middle East than here at home. I still shudder when I remember Zeynep Baraz’ descriptions of the village festival in Hollabrunn that she participated in as part of the research (Baraz 2006: 131ff). Her commentaries provide a vivid impression of how one is treated as an “inquisitive Turk” in the Alpine republic. Although the gathering was probably not composed of stereotypical right-wing extremists, people nonetheless made it quite clear to the researcher from abroad that she had no business being there. Initial contact is, as most ethnographers will know, not always smooth, but if one is greeted at a village festivity with comments on how one may not simply sit at any table, one needs a very thick skin. Similarly, the rejection letter from the management of the Viennese Senior Citizen Society reproduced by Mădălina Diaconu (2006: 156) shows that the process of data collection was not always easy for the researchers. In response to her friendly request of whether she could visit a Sunday club in connection with our research project, she received the answer that there was no interest in helping her if there was not to be any remuneration, and that she ought to “use a professional institute for an individual sample composition”. Both incidents raise the question of how the two researchers were perceived – as foreigners or migrants. It is furthermore likely that judgments concerning the place of origin of non-native researchers in this “you study us” modality of research prove to be highly significant and could constitute a theme of reflection on the research findings.⁸

Nonetheless, the research design featuring non-native researchers yielded the ethnographic dimen-

sions we had hoped for: Because the researchers were seen as outsiders, their questions about the Musikan-tenstadl seemed less absurd to the conversation partners. Zeynep Baraz and Mădălina Diaconu were thus told “more”. They were also able to ask “naïve” questions – questions that it would not befit an Austrian to ask. Possibly, the fact that the researchers were outsiders was also a reason why Austrian television (the ORF) was so benevolent and supportive from the start. Fears that the Musikantenstadl might have been critically exposed would have been completely understandable, but nothing of the sort was presented to us.⁹

Entry into the field and contact with main protagonists particularly on the set was smoothed through a further project team member, the Viennese economist Wolfgang Fellner. His social competence paved the way to the decision makers at ORF and was also instrumental in securing the open interview with the program’s host, Karl Moik. The combination of foreign and native participants in the project as a whole is thus highly recommended. In addition to establishing contacts, participation by natives in the analysis of data is relevant as a source of synergy and, more pragmatically, to clarify linguistic and paralinguistic elements which may benefit from a native understanding. This was particularly relevant in our project, as we realized when working through fieldwork materials in team sessions. Both foreign researchers speak excellent German. They did, however, have problems understanding some of the jokes and innuendos that form a part of Karl Moik’s Musikantenstadl performance. Significantly, Zeynep Baraz and Mădălina Diaconu rarely chose to focus on gender relations in their contributions on the Musikantenstadl (cf. Baraz 2006: 119–154; Diaconu 2006: 155–227; Baraz & Diaconu 2006: 229–248) – which again may be attributable to their non-native status. In project discussions or when watching the recordings of the Stadl together, I sometimes had the impression that the non-Austrian researchers did not catch the sexist double standards of some expressions and consequently did not really comprehend why so many interview partners described the presenter Karl Moik as “bawdy”.

Such differences in registering Stadl performances point, however, again to the prejudiced nature with which natives might study Karl Moik and his show. The latent sexism is precisely one of the elements irritating to parts of the Austrian viewing public. The fact that even migrants who have a perfect knowledge of German and a high level of education feel at least partly excluded from understanding this “insider humour” à la Moik is in itself a noteworthy result of our research project. There are associations that can be used effectively to exclude the meaning of folklore, traditions and regional dialect from anyone who has only been in Austria for a short time; refugees, migrants, new Austrians, or other “threats from below” are effectively excluded in this way (Diaconu 2006: 221–224; cf. also Gingrich 2006b; Gingrich & Banks 2006; Köstlin 2002; Dundes 1985). This is partly explained by the fact that in discussions, both researchers tended to emphasize music as the focal aspect of their investigation of the Musikantenstadl (and less with the presentational style of Karl Moik, that is, *what* he said and *how* he said it). As a result, it is possible that important data on political and identity-forming aspects of the Musikantenstadl were not taken into account.

An interesting and somewhat paradoxical component of the team research experience was the differential value we placed on the selected method: Both foreign researchers were, in general, pleased to investigate the Musikantenstadl in the context of Alpine popular culture. Both, however, were somewhat skeptical about the value of their “outsider’s gaze” in the project – even though they had been invited to collaborate mainly because they could bring this “external gaze”. Both researchers often pointed out that their view was not so exotic, since they were also shaped by their (western-influenced) higher education and had lived in Austria for several years. Zeynep Baraz pointed out that she had seen such popular television programs as a child in Istanbul and had almost grown up with them. Mădălina Diaconu went as far as to criticize the degree of culturalism in the research design – both in terms of assuming a primordial cultural understanding and in the differentiation between “foreigners” and “locals”. As

the research progressed, I became aware that it was maybe only really clear and indisputable for us native ethnologists coordinating the project that being a foreigner could be something positive in the research process. “We” saw unfamiliarity as a crucial and essential key to understanding the culture. Numerous discussions followed in different team meetings in which I tried (with only partial success) to convince the two foreign project team members of the usefulness of the “external or outsider’s gaze” – sometimes using examples from my field research practice as detailed in the previous section. We succeeded, eventually, to relativize each other’s understanding: The “external or outsider’s gaze” must not be misperceived as “understanding nothing”; conversely, a background of migration, being both foreign and socialized into aspects of the researched culture, as well as the academic culture, relativized the outsider’s perspective of the foreigners.

The Outsider’s Gaze in Cultural Analysis

The objections of the foreign researchers with regard to classifying their own outsider role on the one hand and the “devaluation” of the Stadl by the native researchers on the other hand, necessitates a redefinition and differentiated conceptualizations of outsider status.

The types of outsider experience described by Schäffter (1991) form the basis of the following considerations. He assumes that networks of reciprocal dependencies are close-knit; therefore being an outsider can be a conflict-prone situation in the here and now, rather than at a distance. Estrangement is a quality experienced in relationships (and not a characteristic of people or things). This experience intensifies with proximity and closeness. From this perspective, the Musikantenstadl can be seen as a cultural contact zone between country and city dwellers, purportedly “ordinary people” and the “intellectuals” or – using the Sinus Milieus typology¹⁰ – between the *traditionals* and *quiet peaceful Britains* and, on the other side, the *precarious*, *pleasure seekers*, *post-materialists*, and *experimentalists*.¹¹ Which perception of reciprocal outsider status should be expected in encounters such as those necessitated

by our project – the Austrian and foreign researcher with the Stadl recipients, the foreign researchers with the Austrian researchers, and so forth? To answer this question it is important to clarify the restrictions from which the cultural, social, and individual identities derive their “singularity” and contrast them with the “others”.¹² Schäffter (1991: 11–42) identifies four types of outsider understanding. These are discussed in more detail below:

(1) “Outsider position as a sounding board for oneself”: This type mainly appears comprehensible as a result of empathy or affinity emerging when one finds oneself in a new environment. The motto is: “I am not strange – look, the stranger is just like you!” Zeynep Baraz’ comment that she had already seen programs similar to the Musikantenstadl as a child in Turkey is reminiscent of this type of understanding.

(2) “Outsider position as a counter-image”: This type results from the structuring of social reality with the attendant possibility of wielding power and control. In constructing an inner coherence, based on singularity, it is possible to exclude the stranger as “abnormal”. Such an understanding of the other contains within it the danger of a primordial culture relativism – a problem expounded by Mădălina Diaconu. It raises the question of degrees of distance that then permit to be defined as “outside”.

(3) “Outsider position as completion”: The more complex the sensory system, the less probable it is that selective interpretation models of a dual order can be sustained. Self and outsider are continually redefined by the interaction of assimilation and accommodation.¹³ With the prerequisite of compatibility with the self, being an outsider has the instrumental function of an external range that helps to develop the new impulses and offers reasons to learn (Schäffter 1991: 22–23). Applied to the research project *Alpine popular culture*, this would mean that the “external gaze” is used for completion – providing a complete picture of the “Musikantenstadl” phenomenon in the process. Such an approach would be problematic because

it looks for an “objective reality” which it surmises in the sum of all different perspectives. To reduce the perceptions of the foreign scholars or the perception of an economist to “usable enhancements” (for social anthropological work), would be problematic for both from ethical and epistemological points of view.¹⁴

(4) “Outsider position as a complement”: This type characterizes an organizing structure containing different individual perspectives, in which the “internal and external” are not treated as separate areas, but are understood as moments in a structuring process in which self and the other mutually qualify and define each other (Schäffter 1991: 25). The world is constructed as a “poly-contextural” universe in which different knowledge is linked to local and social constitution processes. This results in the necessity to accept and be sensitive to mutual differences. The “external gaze” in this type does not ask how “abnormal” or threatening the unknown is. Instead it focuses on the constant swing between internal view and external view.

A social science method that uses the “outsider’s gaze” as a research tool, must probably conceptualize the situation of being a stranger in this “complementary” way. It is consequently recognizable as the result of a practice of differentiation in mutual interaction, though it is never completely definable. I consider it unavoidable and vital that the “constant reflection of the outsider’s experience” was adhered to in writing in a research diary. This is useful for a critical reflection of one’s own conduct in the research process and also for the subsequent interpretation of the collected data.

The Role of the Project Coordinator as an Outsider

For potential, future research projects intent on working with the component of “the external gaze”, it will be useful to think through a methodologically necessary dilemma I frequently encountered in my role as project coordinator: To what extent and in what capacity should I involve myself with the ethnographic data collection carried out by the

two “foreign” scientists? This question arose in part due to time constraints (the coordination involved a great deal of administrative legwork), but mainly due to the methodology and the research theory it built on. While I did not want to withhold ethnological expertise from the two foreign researchers, it also did not seem appropriate to provide concrete research instructions, develop questionnaires and interview guidelines and point the researchers on their path under the motto of sending out one’s “research bees”; furthermore, such a stance would have undermined the “external gaze” which, ultimately, also manifests itself in the ways in which participant observation and interviews are conducted. I tried to find a middle ground, providing the researchers with as much space as needed and, at the same time, to be available for advice and, if desired, a more active involvement in the research process.

The position was, however, not always easy. I often felt a certain pressure from other researchers. I was flooded with good and well-intended advice and special tips on the meaning of the Musikantenstadl; often I was met with consternation because I did not follow these hints myself and instead thanked these voluntary advisors with the words: “I will pass on this information to Mădălina Diaconu and Zeynep Baraz!” Reproaches such as: “Why didn’t you ... ?” can be answered better when one is in the field and has sole responsibility for ethnography and data analysis from start to finish.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the methodological concept of the “external gaze” is an excellent approach to become familiar with such “contentious” cultural phenomena as the Musikantenstadl from a scholarly perspective. The “external gaze” enables unusual and varied results that are not restricted to monocausal answers, and that accentuate the complexity of the construction of a social reality. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of our research project – without a social anthropologist in the field – the focus of social anthropological questioning was not a primary objective in the research goals; it would be interesting, even desirable, to tackle such cultural phenomena which

arguably exist in every national public culture with foreign ethnologists as part of the team. As ethnologist and team coordinator, I would like to conclude with some observations on the results of the *The Musikantenstadl project*. From a cultural and social anthropological view, I would find it interesting to further investigate the aspects of instrumentalizing “homeland folklore” as discussed by Mădălina Diaconu (2006: 223ff): How is the emphasis of a common historical tradition and the production of dialect, costume, and music a means to exclude, in a “gentle, inconspicuous way”, newcomers to Austria? Does the safe world of the Musikantenstadl actually suggest a “real” Austrian identity that is separated from Brussels, and also free from asylum seekers, migrants, and “new Austrians”? How does Austrian chauvinism differentiate itself from the “larger neighbor” Germany, which was mentioned by interview partners in one form or another in almost all interviews held by Zeynep Baraz? And: What role do the “threats from above” play – EU integration and possible fears connected with US hegemony – in fostering attachment to a program like the Stadl?

One surprising insight gained from the economic research component of the project concerns the extremely high target group orientation employed by the Musikantenstadl producers in designing the show. Seen from that perspective, the Musikantenstadl does not need to please everyone. The only important thing is how well it is accepted by the targeted population groups. From a series of interviews that Wolfgang Fellner carried out with decision makers at ORF, it became clear that they themselves are also not necessarily great fans of this program. The ORF is funded in part through a public learning contract and there is relatively little leeway in program development. There is a relatively high demand for formats such as the Stadl and everything aired must be in line with the recent market evaluation, otherwise the ORF would inevitably lose market shares. The producers of the Musikantenstadl thus see very limited scope for negotiation, as they are also committed to the principle of maximum coverage. Seen from outside, it almost looks as though the fact that you “must join in” with the Musikantenstadl does

not only refer to the applause and swaying to the music by the audience, but also to the fact that the public broadcaster simply *must* provide programs for this type of audience. From this economic perch, we have the open market and neoliberal politics to thank for the product Musikantenstadl. These interviews (Fellner 2006b: 91–109) show that the primary concern is for viewing figures and associated advertising incomes.

I find it refreshing that in the first and second decade of its existence, the Musikantenstadl kept its distance from nationalism (cf. Gingrich 2006a: 29). However, if I look at this in connection with Fellner's explanation of the decision structures in ORF, I cannot quite abandon the suspicion that the Stadl's emphasis of the transnational and the avoidance of direct nationalistic references is more due to an increase in profits and productivity than due to host Karl Moik's view of the world.

The project results show that it is the social and economic uncertainties of modern life that make the Musikantenstadl successful. Particular social value judgments that may be rare in everyday life of the present, are, according to the results of the research project, retained in the Musikantenstadl: loyalty, security and stability, willingness to help, sociability and protection, family ideals and a harmonious private life with a classic role distribution between men and women, links to the homeland, and last but not least, performance of one's duties. The social norms and values discussed here are particularly important in those population groups that are the target groups of the Musikantenstadl. This is documented in studies of media research as well as the qualitative interviews that were carried out as part of the research project. In the so-called *Stadl family* (to quote Karl Moik), the fans find what is important to them and what they consider to be threatened by present-day globalization influences (cf. Barna 2004: 71–80).

However, the motivation to see the Stadl or to participate in live events cannot be exclusively explained as "returning to the safe world". From an ethnological perspective it became clear to me that for many people, the Musikantenstadl represents a way around their problems. To indulge in some "time out of

time" occasionally and to enjoy the ritualistic routine of the Musikantenstadl, to take refuge in a safe, parallel world and "switch off" for a while, offers the chance to dull everyday worries and problems. The Musikantenstadl helps to combat stress. When seen in this way, the Musikantenstadl is not just the *result* of western globalization. It can also be interpreted as a (subjective) *strategy* that helps people to overcome the negative effects of globalization.

"The politicians should not argue so much, they should listen to more *Volksmusik* – for music brings people together!" Such apolitical expressions, as often uttered by Karl Moik in "his" Stadl, awake in me associations with the old Marxian notion of religion as "opium of the people". Apolitical is not unpolitical, instead it is perhaps more of a dangerous political substratum. Researching this tangent further is ethnographically challenging. The two "foreign" researchers avoided any comment that would have given any clue as to their personal political disposition. From the institution in charge of the program, I got the impression that a critical confrontation with this cultural phenomenon is undesirable. Working ethnographically with the national media company was a new experience which also holds challenges for research ethics, rather unfamiliar to me compared to my previous field research on popular religion in the Middle East.

What was an additionally new and unfamiliar component for ethnological research in the framework of the Stadl project was the high degree of public interest. We were almost overrun with queries and all project team members made an effort to accommodate journalists asking for interviews. More than thirty newspaper articles appeared in the local press during a period of just three months, and some of these included detailed reports on our project or research results, followed by detailed reports in the most popular weekly and monthly magazines, as well as different radio pieces. This great success in scholarly communication was, without a doubt, also due to the innovative methodological procedures. For ethnology and social anthropology, the "external gaze" offered a unique opportunity to engage the public in dialog.

Notes

- 1 It was only during the research that the media announced that the contract between ORF and Karl Moik would not be extended from 2006. Moiks "departure" and his last "Stadl" – the New Year's Eve "Stadl" on December 31st 2005 – occurred during our project period. In September 2006, a new series of the Musikantenstadl began with the Austrian pop singer Andy Borg as the presenter, and this has brought high viewing figures for ORF.
- 2 This was a follow-up project to the Wittgenstein research cluster Local Identities and Wider Influences which was established at the Social Anthropology Unit. The present research project was funded by the two Jubilee Funds of the Austrian National Bank (ÖNB) and the municipality of Vienna (MA 7). Prof. Dr. Andre Gingrich, Chairman of the Social Anthropology Unit, was the project leader. The Austrian social anthropologists Mag. Dr. Susanne Binder and Mag. Dr. Gebhard Fartacek were responsible for the coordination of the project contents and organization. Scientific colleagues: DDR. Mădălina Diaconu (born and raised in Romania; main research areas: Art philosophy and anthropology of senses) and MMag. Zeynep Baraz (born and raised in Turkey; main research areas: Media sociology and migration research). The two "foreign" researchers were supported by the Viennese economist Mag. Wolfgang Fellner who provided media-economic data on the Musikantenstadl and enabled close cooperation with ORF.
- 3 For helpful comments on various aspects of this article, I thank Regina Bendix (Göttingen) and Andre Gingrich (Vienna).
- 4 The full project results have been published in Susanne Binder and Gebhard Fartacek's book *Der Musikantenstadl: Alpine Populärkultur im fremden Blick* [The Musikantenstadl: An Outsider's Gaze of Alpine Popular Culture] (Münster, LIT Verlag, 2006).
- 5 For a sociolinguistic perspective on how to, conversely, achieve the capacity to ask in locally appropriate ways in extended fieldwork situations, cf. Briggs (1981).
- 6 At this point, it should be mentioned that the budget for the research project was very tight due to cutbacks by the Austrian National Bank through whose competitive research division the project was funded. As a result, the foreign project colleagues could only be employed for 12 months (at 15 hours/week) instead of 2 years as originally planned.
- 7 Germans who were forced to leave their former homelands in Poland, Bohemia and Silesia after World War Two occasionally refer to themselves as "Sudeten-Deutsche" after the mountains located in those regions. These associations have a difficult history and an often problematic political positioning, and the stereotypical ambience of such groups is – in some corners of the public imagination – of a kind with the Stadl.
- 8 The contributions assembled in the volume *Inspecting Germany* (Hauschild & Warneken 2002) pursued an agenda quite similar to our project – non native scholars were to provide their insights on German culture, through the at once alienating and revealing mirror of the outsider's gaze.
- 9 This is all the more surprising as the Belgian film maker Nathalie Borgers had recently done a revealing, highly critical documentary of the main tabloid paper in Austria, entitled *Kronen Zeitung – Tag für Tag ein Boulevardstück* (Kronen Zeitung – Day by Day a Boulevard Play). The film-maker at first had the complainant support of her "victim" which explains the freely provided information from the individual editors (including Hans Dichand). Borgers' methodological process resembles that of the investigative journalism of the German author Günther Wallraff.
- 10 Sinus Milieu is a term used in marketing research, derived from the notion of "social milieus" introduced by Émile Durkheim. Our project adopted the term not least because it is a frequently used concept in marketing a new product – here for instance the Stadl – to viewers or buyers.
- 11 For a methodological critique of this artificial classification, see Fellner (2006a: 61–69; cf. 2006b: 77–118), who following Schüle (2002) highlights the necessity of connotative theories in the context of autopoietic reality.
- 12 In this context, identity is defined as a component of social "reality" and not as a part of an (unchangeable) human nature. It is the result of the characteristics of social situations, interactional conditions, and available cultural knowledge. One and the same person or group "owns" not just one identity but several identities, for example a cultural, regional, national, ethnic, religious, and gender identity, or identities based on occupation and economic and social situations. A person or group can simultaneously have hegemonic and minority positions. Identity is conceptualized as the result of processes of internal and external attribution with both cognitive and emotional components. Finally, both local and transnational processes are relevant for the production of affiliations and dissociation.
- 13 In the sense of Piaget, *accommodation* is the modification of a cognitive schema to new experiences. In contrast, *assimilation* is the integration of an object of human experience in a cognitive schema.
- 14 It is common for types (1), (2) and (3) that confrontation with the foreigner is not conducted in a partnership dialog because foreignness plays an important role in developing and sustaining identity.

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