ETHNOLOGIA NATIONUM
Or, The World as We See It: "strange, but interesting"[1]

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What actually constitutes an academic discipline? Being incorporated by academic institutions, described by journals and handbooks, delineated through historiography and reputation? Most importantly, I think, a scholarly field is represented via its practitioners – the active community of scholars themselves. They shape the field, renew it and eventually pass the scientific baton on to younger generations by enthusing and inspiring students. They should create the "charisma" of a discipline that draws students into the field of study.

It was in the late 1990s, as a historian, that I first heard about "European ethnology". I had started working at the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam in the department of *Volkskunde* (Folkloristics). In 1998 – rather late in the European context – this department was renamed *Nederlandse Etnologie* (Dutch Ethnology). I was still puzzled. What did that imply? Was it a specifically Dutch version of ethnology? If so, how did it relate to the international discipline of European ethnology? I was determined to understand this better. My colleagues made the practical suggestion that, for an initial immersion into that renamed field, I check the few handbooks available and browse through the many volumes of a journal that was being published in Copenhagen. I was told that the journal started due to an old scholarly feud between folklorists and ethnologists within the then *Commission internationale des Arts et Traditions Populaires* at Unesco. Comprised mostly of Scandinavians (the name of Sigurd Erixon, the leading ethnologist of the time, was mentioned in that context),

the publication continued after the schism as a journal for the ethnology following; most of the folklorists regrouped as the international society SIEF in Athens in 1964.[2] That they had split up, I was told again, was not all that surprising, as Nordic ethnology was known for its modern views and approaches after having reinvented itself by breaking the chains of traditionalist "folkloristic stances".

However, the volumes on the shelf displayed an archaic Latin name as an equivalent for the field of European ethnology: *Ethnologia Europaea*.[3] And again, I thought, what does that mean? I took the first volume from 1967 off the shelf and looked at the first page. To my surprise, the very first lines mentioned a short historiographical contribution by the Dutch professor August Bernet Kempers, dealing with the *Volkskunde* in the Netherlands.[4] As it was published in this very first volume, it felt reassuring that research done in the Netherlands was indeed a part of European ethnology. This was confirmed by the fact that Bernet Kempers later became a professor of European ethnology himself.[5] The browned pages of the first journal volumes also made clear that those issues dated back many years. The various historiographical and discipline-focused contributions, relevant in a time frame of establishing, defining, and distinguishing European ethnology as a reinvented discipline, had lost the topicality of their time.

I continued my perusal of the numerous volumes in the library, and volume 19 drew my attention. It showed the date 1989 on its back, the extraordinary year in which the Berlin Wall was torn down

and distributed as concrete souvenirs of the obsolete Iron Curtain. Not only for that milestone event, but also in a broader historical perspective, 1989 can, to a certain extent, be perceived as a symbolic fault line in (European) history. The crumbling of the Eastern bloc not only resulted in a reshuffling of states and alliances, it also set in motion a new decade of accelerated Europeanization. The concept and idea of a large, strong, and rich European Union became increasingly taken from outside as a preferred safe haven for migrants coming from outside that new political unity. In later years, the rapid expansion of the Union and creation of open nation-state borders facilitated large-scale East–West migrant movements *within* its territory. Not only parliamentary decisions but also the actions of mobile citizens were transforming Europe into a multicultural political unit.

In a seemingly prescient coincidence, the first issue of that 1989 volume was devoted to the role of nationalism within European culture (Löfgren 1989a). How current could a scholarly journal be? The issue was the result of a Budapest workshop that had been held a year earlier under the title: *National Culture as Process.* Interestingly ethnologists from Sweden and Hungary, across the East–West divide, seemingly already a sign of a softening border, convened there for an interdisciplinary research project on the formation of national cultures. The issue exudes a sort of prophetic topicality, considering the two Germanys at the time were just about to clarify anew their views on the concepts of nation, nationalism, and nationality. German reunification triggered a long-term social, cultural, and political process across the continent that reinvented and reapplied nationalism and national identities, now connected to the process of a rapidly evolving Europeanization (Brubaker 1996).

The issue editor and author of the introductory contribution, entitled "The Nationalization of Culture", was an ethnologist from the Swedish University of Lund, Orvar Löfgren. My colleagues said that he was an interesting and innovative scholar, well worth watching. And so he was. Trained as a medievalist, I found this all to be new and fascinating

literature. Löfgren addressed one of the core themes within European ethnology, perhaps *the* core theme in folkloristics' earlier days: the idea of national folk heritages and characters, as part of the formation of nation states and of political and ideological nationalism in Europe (Baycroft & Hopkin 2012). Löfgren and his Swedish and Hungarian colleagues addressed the issues of "national culture" and "national identity" as renewed key concepts relevant for the developments on the continent. Cultural confrontations due to immigration at the local level on the continent began to increase more at the time, and there was much discussion about the nature and remaking of national cultures as a specific cultural tradition and about the threat of the disintegration of such national traditions and identities (Löfgren 1986a) – a threat that had not been discussed and debated for the first time and "probably not the last either…", as Löfgren asserted. From his position as an ethnologist, he called upon the discipline to pay more scholarly attention to the practical everyday organization of cultural loyalty within nationalism instead of the mere politically oriented ideology of nationalism. "What types of cultural meanings and expressions are actually shared on a national level and how do individuals come to share them?" he queried (Löfgren 1986a: 74). Some years earlier, at another colloquy on nationalisms, he had brought up similar preliminary questions. In the mid-1980s, the first large-scale rethink and re-examination of the concepts of national character and national identity were being undertaken (Löfgren 1986b: 112–113). "Nationalism is back" was the simple and obvious observation (Galema, Henkes & Te Velde 1993: 5). Hence, not only in Europe's everyday life or politics, but also within academia, scholars were trying to figure out how nationalism and collective national identities could be better understood. Initial fears of submersion in a generalized European culture, ethnic mixing and shifting boundaries formed the refrain of populist parties and movements (Dundes 1986: 36).[6]

Ideas of an essentialist form of national identity or of a culture as a monolithic concept of the nation – issues often too essentially present within former

Volkskunde – became outdated as seminal works by Benedict Anderson and John Hutchinson transformed the study of nationalism (Anderson 1983; Hutchinson 1987; Leerssen 2006).[7] In particular, Anderson's *Imagined Communities* functioned for ethnologists and cultural historians as a tool for dismantling the static and homogenous house of ideas around nationalism. Löfgren elaborates on this in his article and describes how national culture and identity are in continuous need of deconstruction while simultaneously being in continuous states of reconstruction. However, he warned that this is a fragile construction, one requiring ample reaffirmation in situations of uncertainty and anxiety. Expressions of nationalism, symbolism, or national rhetoric – meant to symbolize the essence of the nation, its inhabitants, or proper norms of national behavior and virtues – form a cultural register of that nation, which, at the same time, work as a strong source of cultural and social identity (Löfgren 1989b: 17–23). It is both fascinating and alarming that we can see all of this happening around us again today. At the time, Löfgren's article made me fully aware of these cultural dimensions and processes related to the re-emergence of the national. It provided me with a state-of-the-art overview, inspiring and relevant for my own work.[8]

Europe's preoccupation with the nation and its people, and the various communities in and outside the Union, has only become stronger. The relatively stable post- (cold) war situation has definitely come to an end. The recent Ukraine-Crimea crisis of 2014 and the refugee crisis of 2015 has made this all the more explicit, all now situated in the political contexts of neo-liberalism, (neo-)nationalism, and populism (Gingrich & Banks 2006). The resurgent myths of nationalism, often cultivated and stimulated through their ideologically and politically construed versions, are blossoming again, taken as the populist new voice. It is an explosive mix and hence a major threat to the Europeanization process, to Europe at large, and subsequently for peace in the whole region. Populist expressions of right-wing nationalism in Russia, Poland, Hungary and Turkey are manifest. Catalan and Scottish independence

referenda and a UK choice for "Brexit" in June 2016 are other geopolitical results. These populist measures – which include holding referenda – were described in *The New York Times* as "a battleground for all Western democracies where anti-immigrant hostilities are building" (Nationalism 2016). The two states from which the participants of the 1989 Nationalism workshop hailed are also having their bouts of nationalism. In the center of Europe, Hungary has experienced the self-fulfilling prophecy of the 1989 article on myths and symbols of the past (Sinkó 1989), having broadly embraced an anti-European mentality under the aegis of its ethnocentric president Viktor Orbán. Even immigration-friendly Sweden has become a battleground as a result of this development, which has created fertile ground for patriotism and consciousness of "Swedishness" (Löfgren 1991).[9] And so, an urgent need to research the cultural dimensions, social organization, and ethnic identity of the national still remains.

While local and regional identities are often better researched from an historical perspective (Hobsbawm 1992; Meyer 2003; Jensen 2016), present-day discourses on nationalisms in Europe call for additional research and analysis that need to be presented in the appropriate journals. Some projects have already started.[10] They can build on the foundation laid by Löfgren and associates. As he said in 1989 – and as we can say again today – such projects on nationalism and national culture will "not be the last either". Löfgren made clear that little is known or studied about what is actually shared on a national level and how it is shared. National sharing involves the trivialities of everyday life: the routines and habits of a nation. But these are difficult to describe or articulate. What is visible and what is known to all (Löfgren 1989b: 13–14)? For Löfgren, modern nationalism was like a cultural paradigm: "The national project cannot survive as a mere ideological construction; it must exist as a cultural praxis in everyday life" (Löfgren 1989b: 23). Therefore, the practice of *ethnologia nationum*, the ethnology of nations and nationalism, remains as a thematic field within European ethnology highly important to foster.

I would like to finish this comment again on a per-

sonal note. When I was asked to join the executive board of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore in 2004, one of the first questions I posed to the sitting board, ignorant of its troublesome past, was why *Ethnologia Europaea* was not connected to SIEF. Why was this highly acclaimed academic podium not a SIEF journal? When I suggested to my fellow board members that we should turn *Ethnologia Europaea* into a SIEF journal, they looked away, shrugged their shoulders or cleared their throats. The president then explained to me with a somewhat heavy voice that this was out of the question because of a long and unpleasant history that involved all kinds of delicate and subtle issues that had occurred in the past, related to specific "nationalism" within the field. I got the impression that the situation was seen as a deterministic result of history. Nevertheless, I often wondered and suggested how good it would be to have the journal available for members. Only after more than ten years – I was about to leave the board again – did the journal editors and especially SIEF's current president, unhindered by the past, embrace the idea and successfully push it forward. In 2015, *Ethnologia Europaea* entered into the society as SIEF's flagship journal thus "uniting" the various nationalisms in a scholarly way. A promising win-win situation.

Notes

1 Quote by Orvar Löfgren, from the clip of his ethnological sensation, September 2014: http://www.siefhome. org/videos/ethno_sensations.html.
2 See on this "war": Rogan 2014.
3 On the naming: *Ethnologia Europaea* 44:2, 15, note 5 (2014).
4 Mentioned on the first contents page: Bernet Kempers 1967.
5 He was the first (endowed) professor of European Ethnology at the University of Amsterdam, in the years 1969–1984.
6 Comments given in response to the public discussion held at the colloquy in Nijmegen on "National Character" in April 1985.
7 The idea that all nationalism is cultural nationalism is later further developed by Leerssen 2006, see also his database: http://www.spinnet.eu/cultural-nationalism.
8 For example for my article on one of the major elements of Dutch nationalism, published later in the same journal: Margry 2014.
9 Cf. the popular translations of such concepts: https://sweden.se/culture-traditions/10-youtube-clips-about-swedishness/; cf. Ehn 1989.
10 Ethnologists in München and Amsterdam are independently working on new expressions of nationalism in Europe: http://www.volkskunde.uni-muenchen. de/veranstaltungen/tagungen/neuer-nationalismus/ programm-neuer-nationalismus/index.html, accessed October 28, 2016; http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/ acee/?page_id=126 (on Dutchness), accessed October 28, 2016.

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