

On the Methods of Studying the Material Culture of European Peoples

THE BRANCH OF SCIENCE which has become known as European ethnology emerged as such (a subject dealing with the whole of Europe) in the last twenty-three years. For a long time research in ethnology was carried on within mainly national frameworks.

This can be explained in part by the fact that in Europe the study of one's own nation on an ethnological plane developed to a considerable extent from the idealistic world outlook of Romanticism. At the same time the interest for ethnology was nourished by ideas of national movements which in the 19th century were particularly widespread in Central and Eastern Europe. Hence, the national, isolated character of research, on the one hand, and the long years of attention devoted to folklore and folk art on the other. It was only in the 1890s that the interest in studying the material culture¹ and every-day life of the people on an ethnological plane gradually took shape.

The study of this subject on a national basis stimulated the accumulation of material and its investigation. However, due to the fact that most of the works were written in the national languages, until lately many valuable papers, and among them a number of noteworthy monographs, were practically inaccessible to scholars at large².

The protracted nature of this individualistic approach to European ethnology hindered the progress of theoretical and methodological knowledge³. Methods were developed eclectically, with elements of theory and method adopted from related subjects. Hermann Bausinger even entitled one of his recent papers „Zur Theoriefeindlichkeit in der Volkskunde“, with the accent, first of all, on German Volkskunde (Bausinger 1970: 55—58). However, the phenomena raised in this paper and among them, empiricism, brought to the extreme, have been until recently more or less typical of ethnological studies carried on in many other countries. The situation can be grasped quite clearly from the piece of advice given in 1927 by the prominent Finnish ethnologist in the field of material culture U. T. Sirelius to his student Kustaa Vilkuna: “Work itself is the best adviser” (Vilkuna 1969: 93). Back in the fifties the patriarch of studies dealing with European ploughing implements, Paul Leser, complained: “Allzuviele sind heute geneigt, methodologische Auseinandersetzungen für unfruchtbar zu halten. Ich

1. Quite recently G. Wiegmann has produced a number of weighty arguments against the dividing of “material” and “spiritual” cultures (Wiegmann 1971). Due to the fact that the study of the material elements of culture is carried on at special centres (museums) and has its own specific peculiarities, it is considered expedient to adhere to this traditional, though somewhat unsatisfactory division.

2. In the socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe this shortcoming is to a certain extent compensated for by the publication (since 1960) of “Demos”, an information bulletin dealing with ethnography and folk-lore, where summaries of books and papers are published in German.

3. This paper does not give a systematic review of the achievements of Soviet ethnographers and Soviet ethnography. Only some of the results are mentioned as comparative material.

glaube, es brächte unsere Wissenschaft ein gutes Stück weiter, wenn wir uns entschlossen, den Kampf einmal auszufechten" (Leser, 1957, p. VII).

Bearing in mind that European ethnology is still a new subject of academic teaching, which has not yet found its way into many universities (see *Ethnologia Europaea*, 1967, 4), it is natural that until quite recently numerous scholars in this field of study had first of all to rely upon their common sense, and could employ only the methods taken from other subjects (geography, archaeology, linguistics, etc.) or learned from literature on general ethnology. There is still no methodical guide for European ethnology on an international scale. In the course of the last few decades, however, scholars of many countries, and particularly of Sweden (Sigurd Erixon), have been busy with theoretical work, devising methods for this field of study. This quest was taken up by scholars of other countries, namely Germany and Britain. "The Introduction to the Study of the Every-day Life" by Sigfrid Svensson (1966), now available in German as well as in Swedish, contains a well-constructed summary of the views of Swedish ethnologists based on concrete examples. Another important event was the publication of a dictionary of general terms used in European ethnology (Hultkrantz 1960) also in Sweden. Its informative value is greatly diminished by the total absence of Soviet theoretical achievements. In the sixties more attention began to be given to problems of theory and methods in all the countries of Europe.

TODAY ONE CAN ALREADY ACKNOWLEDGE a whole range of theoretical concepts useful from the point of view of method. The most general of these are the three ethnological dimensions (historical, geographical and social) introduced by S. Erixon, which determine the chief trends of research. Other aspects include tradition and innovation (modernization), the dialectical interlacing of which plays a key role in the development of (folk) culture. As a historical and geographic category Soviet ethnography employs the concept of historical and ethnographic, or historical and cultural region (Levin, Čeboksarov, 1955: 3—17). It has common features with the German "Kulturraum", and the Swedish "kulturområde" but their content is less definite (see Hultkrantz 1960: 76—78; Wiegmann 1964: 33—53; Svensson 1973: 53—64).

For a fuller understanding of the essence of the historical and cultural region, such concepts as cultural continuity (taken in the geographical sense), relic area, cultural contact, acculturation, etc., must be considered. All these concepts had a favourable impact on the elaboration of general methodological trends in European ethnology, and the development of the historical and geographical method of research, which is at present the basic method of study of material culture.

As mentioned earlier, it was not many years ago that a more extensive study of the material aspect of European folk culture was begun. Due to the sociological and psychological trends, the endeavour to synthesize culture, etc., which gained a firm foothold in twentieth-century ethnology, the study of the history

of material culture was often looked upon as an old-fashioned retreat into the past, an offshoot of the main branch of science. Research was also impeded by the typical for the post-war period ethnological study of the modern or so-called "industrial" society. The contemporary material environment which is the result of man's efforts in industry cannot be studied, as a rule, by ethnological methods. Its problems come within the competence of several special subjects. Despite these obstacles, the scope of investigation of the material aspects of European folk culture continued to expand. Historical ethnology gives priority to this aspect of research. On the one hand, Europe has extremely rich and diverse sources, archaeological finds, to begin with, for making a historical study of its material culture. The other reason, to quote Alexander Fenton is that "for comparative purposes, material culture is less open to misinterpretation than many other subjects" (Fenton, 1967, p. 129). Besides, material objects are easier to classify and to analyze in detail (Wiegelmann, 1967, p. 192). This is what accounts for their role in ethnological cartography which is today a key method ("räumliche Methode") of European ethnology (Wiegelmann, 1967, pp. 140—145). Since the 1950s there has become evident a trend towards cooperation on an all-European scale, particularly in the field of agrarian ethnography. Certain results have been achieved. In recent years this co-operation has become more productive. There have appeared, for example, the journal "Tools and Tillage" in Copenhagen and publications partly resulting from the first international symposia dealing with specific questions of the history of material culture (Rinderanschirring 1969; The Spade in Northern and Atlantic Europe 1970; Land Transport in Europe 1973). Work in this directions should by all means be continued and expanded.

Despite these achievements note must be made of the still existing uncertainty in concrete methods of research and of a certain methodological lack of discipline. A serious shortcoming is that cultural and historical conclusions are often made on the basis of material which is insufficient, accidental, or which has not been analyzed critically.

We have already mentioned the unco-ordinated character of research in Europe as one of the reasons for the insufficient development of methods, a shortcoming which is being overcome at a very slow pace. Other reasons, strange at it may seem, include the particular exactingness of the modern scientific method in general. The simple comparative-typological method is no longer up to the mark; while investigating separate elements of material culture it has become necessary to take into account their role and functions in the integral system of culture, the geographic and climatic conditions, social and economic environment, diverse historical factors, etc. If, for example, ploughing implements are studied, note must be taken of the principles of agronomy and soil peculiarities; while investigating fishing implements, one must consider the character of the fishing grounds, the biology of fishes, etc. All this calls for a knowledge of other scientific subjects, and the ability to make a critical approach to their achievements. This is often beyond the power of some researchers, with the result that the avail-

able factors are misinterpreted or left intact, so diminishing the value of the work undertaken.

The same dual character is observed in the wealth of sources, mentioned beforehand, which creates particularly favourable prerequisites for the study of the history of material culture. In this field, besides the purely ethnological sources, there are numerous heterogeneous sources referring to the distant past, such as various archive materials, early publications of a specific character, comparatively rich iconographic materials, archaeological finds, language monuments and dialect materials. The existence of such a wealth of sources has its shortcomings. An equal mastery of all of them requires an accumulation of versatile knowledge on the part of the researcher that is practically unachievable.

As for the scholar's confinement to a definite limited range of problems or sources, this increases the danger of not being able to see the wood for the trees, which is a problem facing all modern sciences.

FOR MOST PHENOMENA OF MATERIAL CULTURE the character of early sources hinders the profound study of such a substantial question as the expression of social relations via material objects (cf. Tokarev, 1970: 3—17). Greater opportunities for this are to be found only in later ethnographic material. It is possible to make a profound historic analysis, first of all, of the typology and usage of objects, which determines the major methodological trend in studying the history of material culture.

The situation is particularly worrying in the field of source-criticism of European ethnology. The ability to make a critical approach is often lacking not only when using the materials of related fields of study, but also in considering purely ethnographic material (see Kramařík, 1967, p. 63). The working out of the principles of critically studying the sources of European ethnology is a vital need, and in this respect one fully agrees with A. Steensberg who writes, "It is important to teach our students of ethnology that conclusions will be just as unsafe as the material upon which they build, even if they happen to be well written by using the finest scientific terms and the material has been logically treated" (Steensberg 1967: 261). Anyone who has had the misfortune of working with poorly documented or even undocumented museum collections is well aware that great caution must be used before relying on them. The answers to questionnaires and the "field finds" of researchers also have various degrees of reliability. Only a careful checking and critical review of all the materials available to the researcher will make his conclusions trustworthy.

As to the traditional methods of study consisting in direct observation and interviewing the population, the first in particular can be used to perform only a very small part of the work in studying present-day Europe. The point is that actually only the pre-industrial forms of material culture, forms which developed without the interference of modern transport and communication systems, can be studied by the comparative-typological and functional method. It is these tradi-

tional forms that are the chief subject of European ethnological atlases. At present such phenomena, which in most cases are linked with the peasant environment, are becoming or have already become inaccessible in their concrete form, being ousted by the wave of mass innovations. If they do manage to survive in the new environment, their functions and links have already become altered. It is still possible in many cases to discover the objects themselves (Hansen, 1967, pp. 113—114; Gromov 1966, pp. 45—46, 77; et al.). These however are mostly implements which have become isolated from their traditional environment, and whose usage may be known at best only by the older generation (in such cases photo and film documentation should be used). More information can be obtained by using questionnaires to preserve the recollections of the population and by studying terminology. In this case allowances should be made for errors and memory blanks and the people's idealization of the past (which refers particularly to the older generation), or contrariwise, their tendency to see the past in the worst light. In other words, the accent should be, first of all, on a critical approach to the study of all these phenomena.

If obsolete implements of labour are still in use, their functions usually changed several generations ago, a fact which may have influenced changes in their construction. Such was the case with old ploughing implements in the Baltic regions. Beginning with the end of the 19th century they were used only for earthing up potatoes, i.e. for an entirely new purpose. Under these circumstances the only means of studying earlier implements and the ways of their application is by resorting to experiment: using the tool in the way and in the conditions that are known from other, earlier sources. Experiments in ethnology are still a rare phenomenon, though in archaeology their role has greatly increased of late (Heizer, Graham 1971: 175—189). However, due to the nature of the sources experiments in ethnology can have a marked advantage over experiments in archaeology. The ethnographic experiment should be used as an important methodological means in cases when direct observation is already impossible.

ON THE WHOLE the use of more precise methods of research is a major prerequisite for studying material culture. The time has come for the establishment of a reliable and sufficiently detailed base of ethnological materials on an all-European scale. For its achievement a precise, comprehensive documentation of all the elements of the so-called pre-industrial material culture should be carried out in each country. The compiling of ethnological atlases, which is widely practised in the Soviet Union and many other countries of Europe, is a substantial contribution to this aim. Steps were taken in the Federal Republic of Germany to work out general methods of documentation (Hansen 1967: 100—122; Arbeit und Gerät 1969). The continuation and expansion of this work on a general basis is a vital necessity for the progress of European ethnology.

Although in many countries the conditions for conducting purely ethnological documentation are far from ideal, as shown earlier, there still remain certain

possibilities for direct field research. Other important sources are museum collections and dialect materials. Documentation should include all language phenomena connected with the objects of study. The "Wörter und Sachen" trend of research in ethnology introduced chiefly by linguists in Germany at the outset of the century is no longer in vogue. Yet, though the stumbling-blocks inherent in this trend are well known (Granlund 1961: 45—46), the important role of language in transmitting the traditions in the sphere of material culture is unquestionable, though there also exists a purely manual tradition (Peesch 1967: 149; Bringéus 1970: 88). The language is even more important in the process of spreading innovations. It is natural that one cannot use glossary materials for ethnological studies advantageously without substantial linguistic grounding. In any case, it is difficult to expect fruitful results in a comparative-historical study of the history of European folk culture without the relevant linguistic material (Svensson 1973: 78—90).

The publication of systematized abstracts of material culture according to each European country⁴ is a prime requisite of success in the study of the history of European folk culture. A logically compiled abstract of materials serves as a firm base for the development of theoretical concepts. This material should be accessible to all, and must be published, consequently, in the principal European languages. W. Hansen has named the publication of "Realwörterbuch der volkstümlichen Sachgüter" as the final goal of documentation work carried on in the Federal Republic (Hansen 1967: 121—122). In principle one can hardly object to this form, but speaking objectively it is not expedient for the publication of materials pertaining to the many minor nations and nationalities of Europe. In the study of the vocabulary it is logical to proceed from one's own language. Hence the inaccessibility of this form to foreign researchers. It thus becomes more expedient to use a systematic abstract of materials, as testified by Paul Scheuermeier in his "Bauernwerk in Italien, der italienischen und rätoromanischen Schweiz" (I—II, 1943—1956), which systematizes all the essential aspects: typology, function, distribution and terminology. The exact period to which the materials refer is also given (1919—1935). Works of this kind can probably provide the researcher with a much greater amount of reliable and detailed material than the envisaged series of synthesizing works on the ethnology of European countries (*Ethnologia Europaea I* 1967: 66—70). The principal value of the second would lie, first of all, in characterizing the contemporary state of research.

Recalling the view of Paul Leser on the subject, research would be exceedingly stimulated by a serious discussion on the method, dealing with both the general principles and the concrete research methods. In my opinion the time has come for the holding of an all-European conference (or symposium) on methods of research.

4. In archaeology, for example, work of this kind has been carried on since the 1950s in the Soviet Union and several other European countries, which regularly publish abstracts of archaeological sources.

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