

'Latent Ethnicity' or 'Patent Problematics' in National Schools of European Ethnology?

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This short comment on Tamás Hofer's paper discusses the opportunity of the association on 'latent' ethnicity with national schools of European ethnology rather than with certain academic centres of influence in the history of European ethnology. It also points out the danger of overestimation of the cultural dimension of the ethnologist's personality compared to his personality as a scientist. Finally the use of an 'ethnic' terminology in an European context is questioned.

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In Tamás Hofer's paper, presented at the *Ethnologia Europaea* meeting in Pécsvarad (Hungary, October 1995), he stresses an issue that has been crucial in the historical development of European ethnology in various European countries or even regions: the importance of what he calls the 'ethnic' or 'national' baggage of scholars in the ways they conceptualise and analyze 'ethnographic reality'. One could add to this, especially during the starting years of our discipline, the 'academic baggage' of its early practitioners in which a variety of earlier established disciplines can be found, like linguistics (philology, dialectology...), history, (human) geography, sociology etc. In many countries, national schools of European ethnology have in this perspective come into being – under various names – as parts of a 'second wave' of academic segmentation and specialisation occurring in the first half of the 20th century. This wave followed a first one that had allowed during the second half of the 19th century, the academic and institutional recognition of social sciences more generally (cf. Schippers, 1995: 235–240).

Most of these 'first wave' academic disciplines had no explicit (geographically) bordered areas of interest, while on the contrary many of the 'second wave' ones have been established as 'local' specialisations of the 'first wave' fields of

interest and they have been defined as particular domains following geographical, social or even cultural criteria (which vary from one country to another, especially in the field of social sciences and humanities). One of the origins of the diversity of national schools of European ethnology may be found in the different choices made in the various European countries among the 'first wave' disciplines to establish the scientific credibility of so-called 'national ethnology'. If there has been any 'latent ethnicity' at work here, this should, I think, first of all be sought in these various choices made among the 'first wave' disciplines. In some countries, academic national ethnology was founded by linguistically schooled, while in others by geographers or anthropologists etc. Even the personal fields of interest of individual scholars have sometimes played a role in the scientific orientations of national ethnology in the early days.

These choices among the methods and paradigms of pre-existing 'first wave' disciplines have of course also been influenced by the historical – often political – contexts of the period in which these national schools – of what has only since 1936 been called European ethnology – have been founded. In those countries where, for various reasons, national borders were perceived as problematic, the scientific

practice of national ethnology has been based on the areal and cartographic methods 'borrowed' from linguists, who had started, since the end of the 19th century, to establish the scientific credibility of their approach on the publishing of linguistic maps and atlases. In those countries where the national ethnology was mainly the fact of scholars trained in archaeology and practiced in archives and museums rather than in the university, the main area of research was more specifically directed towards 'material culture', while in other countries, where linguists and philologists played an important role in the institutionalisation of national ethnology, the research interests concerned more likely so-called 'immaterial' aspects of the national culture. These historical facts are well known today as well as the many combinations of disciplinary borrowing that European ethnologists have practiced ever since.

National ethnological schools can be considered, from my point of view, rather as the results of various academic 'borrowing' processes, than as related to any form of 'latent ethnicity'. This 'latent ethnicity' can perhaps be detected more clearly in the different *degrees of interest* shown in various European countries concerning the institutional development of national ethnology as an academic discipline on its own. Especially those countries where the national identity is a rather 'covert' category like in England or in the Netherlands, there has always been very little enthusiasm to install academically a specifically national ethnology. In other countries like France, this has also been the case during the period when the cartographic methods were considered as *the* way of doing national ethnology in a scientific manner: the mapping of regional cultural differences was 'unconsciously' (?) perceived as endangering national unity (cf. Le Bras, Todd, 1981: 13–30). The introduction of the monographic studies, based on other methods and theories, endangered probably less the national 'latent' fear for national diversity and allowed the birth of an '*ethnologie française*' inspired by general ethnology/social anthropology and 'Annales'-like history. In these different cases 'latent ethnicity' seems of more influence on the 'quantitatif' development of national ethnological in-

stitutions than on the content of their research.

Another important issue discussed by Tamás Hofer, concerns the role of the languages in which European ethnologists publish (and think?). Although most European ethnologists have, until quite recently, mainly published in their own national languages – of which some at least, are internationally read – this has never been a more important obstacle for communication among its practitioners than in neighbouring disciplines. This persistence of the use of one's own language in our disciplines, even if this language is not generally read abroad, may also be due to the groups of potential readers of national or regional ethnology. Many European ethnologists are mainly employed by national or regional administrations or governments to document and analyze aspects of their own country or region and to communicate their research results to a national or regional public in various forms (texts, lectures, teaching, exhibitions, etc.). Comparing with other regions or countries has been for these reasons only a secondary preoccupation for many, if one at all. For quite a long time, only those European ethnologists involved in international institutions like the C.I.A.P. (1928) or the S.I.E.F. (1964) have been confronted with the conceptual differences due to linguistic variety (which have led to the *International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore* published in 1960 by Åke Hultkrantz). It is mostly in these international networks, that concepts elaborated in a national context have found their way to international acceptance, leaving to the participants the often delicate task to translate them 'back home' into an acceptable equivalent in their mother tongue. These networks have during this century had several predominant languages of communication, which resulted, at least partly, from the 'demographic weight' of the different participating linguistic groups; after having been one of the last academic disciplines where German was used as the international language for scientific communication, European ethnologists seem to adopt nowadays more and more English as their *lingua franca* (although still very few native English-speakers seem to be involved in European ethnology...).

As Tamás Hofer recalls in his paper, these linguistic aspects have their importance in the way ethnologists describe and analyze ethnographic facts or build up more theoretical explanations. But on the other hand an overestimation of this linguistic/conceptual aspect can lead to a kind of scientific 'tribalisation', which may endanger the very existence of our discipline, as well as that of all other social sciences and humanities, because it will throw them back to a pre-scientific (poetic?) level. This tendency can be observed since a few years in neighbouring disciplines like social and cultural anthropology, where some practitioners have denied most scientific value of ethnographic accounts, except for their 'hermeneutic value' concerning the (cultural) personality of their author.

Although today it is generally accepted that each scholar is also an 'encultured' member of his society as well as an 'accultured' member of the local scientific community in which he has been educated, he *also* is a scholar. This means someone capable to 'de-centre' his point of view, with the help of heuristic and theoretic tools, from the one of the layman. This necessary distantiating and 'de-centrating' are of course more difficult to achieve in a study of the 'familiar nearby' than when working in a setting, which is very different from one's own geographical, social or cultural background. In this perspective (scientific) European ethnology has tried, by borrowing heuristic tools from sociology, social and cultural anthropology, socio-linguists, historians and others, to avoid the danger of becoming a sophisticated form of national or regional belly-buttonism.

Finally, I would like to put a questionmark on the use Tamás Hofer makes – in his English-written paper... – of the term 'ethnicity' as an apparent equivalent of 'national'. I suppose he is referring here to the (ab)use American sociologists, cultural anthropologists and after them American administrators and politicians have made since more than twenty years of this concept as an equivalent of (cultural) identity (cf. Poutignat, Streiff-Fenart, 1995). The links he seems to suggest between the ideas and concepts elaborated in a particular national language on the one hand and the ('latent')

ethnicity of the group (or groups?) that uses this language as its national language on the other, seem very questionable to me (as a Dutch-born, French educated ethnologist, studying European societies...).

Or does he want to suggest some 'latent' influence between the research items of particular national ethnological schools and regional or national ethnographic originals? If this is the case, the use of the concept of ethnicity is not necessary and even dangerous, because it would suggest the existence of (homogenous?) 'ethnic' groups as national or regional entities in Europe. More general, the actual (ab)uses made by politicians, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and often for demagogic reasons, of 'ethnic' terminology, should make European ethnologists particularly cautious and critical toward the use of terms like 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic', that recall in Europe and especially in our discipline some dark moments of our past.

To conclude these few comments on Tamás Hofer's interesting paper, I would agree with his idea of linking the specificity of certain schools of European ethnology to the contexts of the centres that gave birth to them. But very few of these centres can be qualified as *strictly* national, as many have extended their influence into peripheries, which have been variable in size during their history. Of course the use of a particular language has often been closely associated with these various schools, which has led to the preeminence of certain research items and concepts by most of their members also outside the national context of origin (although not always with an equal success). I also agree with Tamás Hofer on the necessity of 'contextualisation' of the relations between scholars and the facts they observe and analyze, as this is today usual in most neighbouring disciplines, but by avoiding certain excesses that can lead to scientific nihilism. Finally I would like to suggest an extremely precautionary use of the term 'ethnicity' (whether 'latent' or not), especially in our discipline where all references to the concept of *ethnie* recall better forgotten souvenirs of our past as ethnologists both inside and outside Europe.

References

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