

# Historizing the Present?

## Construction and Deconstruction of the Past

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Kaschuba, Wolfgang 1996: *Historizing the Present? Construction and Deconstruction of the Past*. – *Ethnologia Europaea* 26: 123–136.

The aims of this contribution are first to give a short review of the conditions of development of the ethnographic disciplines – especially of the German variant “*Volkskunde*” – and of their shaping as historical sciences. Second, it’s an attempt to balance the new orientations of historical research as they have crystallized in the last two decades. Third, the present role of a “cultural history” is discussed which seems to be ambivalent: on the one hand it is characterized by growing public attention to the ethnological interpretation of the cultural and the historical process; on the other, it is characterized by problems of the current scientific as well as sociopolitical position finding. In an ethnological understanding “*Historizing the Present*” should mean to reconstruct that specific “ethnic paradigm” which influenced social as well as scientific self-images in past and present – and to deconstruct the ethnic discourse as a phenomenon of “politics of identity”.

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The title of my paper indicates that the following reflections will not only deal with the field of history itself, but will also look at its significance concerning the scientific as well as social orientations at the present time: How do we use and make use of the horizon line of history? What special kinds of tasks can the “ethnological viewpoint” take on in this process?

The search for answers follows three steps. First, I give a short review of the conditions of development of our discipline, – especially of the German variant, “*Volkskunde*”, and of its shaping as a historical science. Second, I make an attempt to balance the new orientations of our historical research as they have crystallized since the “*Abschied vom Volksleben*” (1970). Third, I look at the present role of a “cultural history” which seems to me ambivalent: on the one hand it is characterized by growing public attention to the ethnological interpretation of the cultural and the historical process; on the other, it is characterized by problems of the current scientific as well as sociopolitical position finding.

### Traditions: the heritage

Among younger colleagues and students today, the acceptance of European ethnology as a genuinely historically orientated discipline can in no way be assumed. For the majority of them the tasks of the subject primarily and most obviously consist in the observation and analysis of phenomena in present-day culture: lifestyles, gender roles, migration experiences and xenophobia, graffiti and computer-communication. This may be connected with a generally growing fixation in human-scientific discourses on topicality and novelty. Perhaps this view also results from the view transmitted to us in a “postmodern” way that not even history offers a fixed and secure platform for looking at the present and the future. Running counter to the usual thinking in historical lines of development today is the perception of a fragmented present that appears to be in conceptual disintegration, and obviously no longer arouses any curiosity about its prehistory.

For my generation, however, the subjects assembling around the “flag” of European ethnology are still in origin all historical disci-

plines. Volkskunde, folkloristics, ethnography and other national subject indicators developed as historically operating philologies and cultural sciences which assumed a special role in the 19th century, marked as it was by great political and social transformations. This was to protect the consciousness of the past, the “cultural heritage” of European ethnic groupings, nations and regions. To throw fresh light on the ideological role-seeking and so amend historical images is amongst the most essential tasks of European ethnology. For me, therefore, it must maintain its character of a historically orientated cultural science in the future also.

It is, of course, not only the interest in the subject matter of the past itself and in the design of new images which consideration of the field of history suggests to us. It is much more recognition of the fact that essential concepts and methods had been developed for our subject in this special 19th century context, and that they bear this stamp still and hence can be grasped by us securely in the knowledge of the historical traces in their use; for ethnography and ethnology emerged as institutions of a historical “mental foundation”, whose function was to preserve collective traditions and to group them in terms of pictures of national origins and futures. In this process the different European countries took very different paths according to the national-state situation and the colonial-political clustering. Orvar Löfgren has thoroughly elaborated this point here in his contribution. But the basic tendency remained a common one: to outline social portraits which were ethnically coloured, impregnated with tradition and provided with national and state features. To reconstruct the “own” with an eye to language, origin, customs and the “popular mind” (*Volksgeist*), to differentiate it internally and externally from the “other”, and thereby to document historical continuity and authenticity – this was the mission of earlier scholars. And it was this mission that laid the foundation stone for the fact that out of the reconstruction of history there often developed something different, specifically the construction of myths of cultural unity and ethnic-national community.

The example of German Volkskunde makes this especially clear. Before the national-state

unification of the Empire in 1871, what was dominant was the internal identity search for “Germanic” derivation and archaic origins, for historical continuity and contingency in the thinking about and feeling for the “German popular spirit”, for national undertones in disparate regional cultures. Then, with the establishment of Germany as a European superpower and with the growth in imperial and colonial ambitions, it came about that within Volkskunde too, external horizons and questions of cultural differentiation became the focus of attention. The comparison of European cultures and mentalities turned into an international competition in levels of civilization and status. And with the natural-science based expeditions to Asia and Africa, the booty from which was presented by the “animal and peoples’ shows” of Carl Hagenbeck to wondering audiences at home, physical anthropology and research into cultural regions also became popular and promoted branches of investigation.

These few examples again emphasize the extent to which the early developments of our scientific traditions flow from period-related social orientations and political interests and show why in this process the working field of “history” had initially been the main point. Historical research had to be the point of departure for ethnographic studies because history was considered the underlay and foil of culture. On the one hand the field of history embodies the central research area in which the development and character of culture was to be reconstructed (by culture being understood mainly handed-down systems of experience and interpretation or group and community practices respectively). On the other hand the present embodied to a certain extent the field of activity of history. Lines of continuity as well as ruptures could apparently be read from the time table which “aimed” at the present, and consequently the past was declared the prehistory of the present. Onto the difference between tradition and modernity there could be fixed – according to one’s position – “cultural loss” or “social progress”.

That European ethnology here attached particular importance to the idea of tradition and continuity and turned its face somewhat away

from cultural innovations and social transformations indicates again its particular sociopolitical role as a “science of legitimation” of conservative values. For long, it could not, and did not want to separate itself from this role. The coinciding of the thematic and methodical canons gave firm encouragement to this fixed orientation. Research fields like dialect and language, traditional costumes and folklore, popular superstitions and material culture gave greater emphasis to the “solid” than to the “fluid” component parts of culture. Methodological approaches like *the participant observer* or interviews with key informants had been used in such a way that they opened out above all local, static and therefore rather narrow social horizons as transformation processes effective for all society. The glance at local worlds and mental statements of the “people’s spirit” again underlined the supposed community providing the fundamental motives of culture and tradition.

Besides, it cannot of course be ignored that one of the strengths of the subject was established by this concentration on narrower thematic as well as spatial segments of society, and by its ability, to make an empirically saturated analysis of detail, to turn to experience systems of everyday life, to be interested in deciphering symbolic activities and symbolic meanings. As in a prism, there are reflected in so many of the “classic” research fields, from play to ritual, from symbol to myth, those historical orders of value which we consider in present day discussions of human sciences to be basic structuring principles of social relations and cultural practices, namely, principles of social recognition, respect, justice, legitimacy. It is a matter of anthropogenic ideas of social identity and moral integrity which continue to crop up in popular patterns of culture in pre-modern as well as in modern societies. The Berlin sociologist Axel Honneth speaks in reference to this of “intuitively given ideas of justice” which characterize human activity throughout history and were always connected with the “gaining of social recognition”: “individuals meet each other in the horizon of reciprocal expectations, as moral persons and to find recognition for their social attainments” (Honneth 1994, 86). In fact the

canon of the old-style Volkskunde lay very much in the area of these cultural meetings and the striving for social recognition.

But the ability to keep on analyzing details and symbols remained epistemologically and methodologically very much underdeveloped. This was because it tended to serve an affirmative and static cultural concept as a tool and was rarely employed in a critical and process-orientated study of socio-historical developments. So Volkskunde/European ethnology for long lacked a connection with new discussions in the social sciences, which were much concerned with new forms of socialization in modern times. And the fact that today, facing the hermeneutic and semiotic change in the human sciences, we can still from time to time profit from this older style approach to ethnological interpretation, should not let us forget its epistemological deficits and defects.

### The turning point: “Abschied vom Volksleben”

With this comment I have already anticipated the following paragraph. Certainty regarding the subject matter and methodology of the old-style Volkskunde, re-assuring because limited in approach, finally disappeared after 1945, after the ‘brown’ flowering of the national science of races. The German development – or rather mis-development – undoubtedly influenced other countries and their discussion of the subject and contrariwise German Volkskunde sought for new shores at home. With the subject of the “ethnos” now becoming problematic, with the scepticism about history as a linear progression, and with the gradual turning of attention to present-day topics, there disappeared those apparently fixed paradigms and concepts that had previously formulated and described “culture and society”, namely origin, character, custom, community. There followed a hesitant and difficult process of consolidation and new formulation of the scientific identity. This set in above all in the late 60s and is still proceeding. In this context I shall mention only a few of the stages and catchwords.

First of all it seems to me a vital point that it was primarily scientific and sociopolitical pro-

cesses outside the subject that heralded the "Abschied": the late but intensive social confrontation with the epoch of national socialism, for instance, that "feeling of unease for culture" of the post-war petit bourgeois worlds, the anti-capitalist concepts of cultural and social analysis in the wake of the "Critical Theory" of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, and discussions about Marxist concept of history and society. Later, studies in the perspective of "everyday history" were added that *ran counter to* the established political historiography, the implementation of a gender history or new forms of a history of mentalities. All these together granted a new and central importance to the dimension of culture and its symbolic patterns within the scientific scenarios of history and society. Nevertheless, as already during the foundation period, the specific share of the subject Volkskunde/European ethnology had not been particularly esteemed even in the process of its "modernization".

At present, there is (again) intensive discussion about this new adjustment of the Volkskunde-ethnological perspective that has taken place since the end of the 60s. Retrospectively, catchwords are applied and are established: the 70s as a phase of "sociologization", the 80s as a period of "historization" which then – broken in post-modern times – led to the linguistic and ethnological or cultural-anthropological change of recent years. Often this labelling had to be undertaken with somewhat critical intention, the tenor of the criticism being that through these external influences and orientations, the subject would have increasingly lost its centre and identity. Anyone wanting to transform "Volkskunde" into "European ethnology" would gamble away the inheritance and the credit of the subject.

Now one may like to argue in a sophisticated way about the benefits of such inheritances as well as about such styles of nomenclature and evaluation. I should also like to do so here – but only briefly and in broad outline. In fact it seems to me that this level of discussion on catchwords and labels for a historical orientation of the discipline is not particularly illuminating. As a result, complex social processes with which the science had also been involved,

in spite of itself, are reduced to narrow subject discussions – as if science could ever be independent of its sociopolitical and epistemological options. Whoever thinks of science as being so "free", thinks naively. The "Abschied" of that time was really determined to a great degree from outside. But the associated circumscription of the "Volkskunde" image of society and history to social- and cultural-scientific backgrounds was overdue. It was really this that created the conditions whereby, instead of the old faith in the familiar language of objects and facts, there came in a new setting of problems concerning "the understanding", that questions relating to social practices and points of view in history have been freshly and more sharply formulated and that today we too can finally consider new research subjects and perspectives without prejudices, and self-critically.

Whether through this "revision of the subject" too much or too little has gone by the board is another question, the clarification of which must be left for a careful and critical retrospective evaluation. However, there appears to be no nostalgia for a "paradise lost" of the old Volkskunde – if there were, the subject would be led back to the former sidings.

The "Abschied" gradually opened up new perspectives for the subject, without totally losing sight, thematically and methodically, of the old shores. And this seems to me characteristic for European ethnology to this day: its oscillation between historical and present-day orientations without finding a final and fixed balance, its scepticism towards the traditions of our discipline which have been frequently challenged but not entirely got rid of, its permanent search for possible methods of approaching the horizons of everyday life which always orientate themselves afresh in an interdisciplinary way and get lost occasionally in this process. However, security in theme and method have not yet arrived, but rather questioning and uncertainty. At all events – so it seems to me – it is a thoroughly "productive uncertainty", that has kept the subject under constant tension and movement, perhaps preventing repeated canonization and encrustations. And this seems decisive to me as the "hand of write" and imprint of the subject, namely the capacity for

change and for a critical self-reflection, just at a time when not only society is involved in serious transformation processes but science itself has to be capable of being transformed.

For all that, this widening of the horizons in many of our historical research fields, however, has not only opened up prospects of an “unclear” historical expanse, but has also provided quite concrete, positive research balances, and views of what is in many respects really “new history” (Jacques Le Goff). I think for example of the area of the history of the everyday, in which the interplay of the material conditions of existence and human ways of shaping and perceiving co-existence have been investigated in a new way, with culture being visualized almost as the “soft ware” of this process. Or I think of historical anthropology, which has created for us a completely new understanding of, for example, historical individuality or of popular religiosity as social practice. Or of gender history, drawing through times and cultures a new “micro-physics of gender and power”. And I think finally of a cultural history of “modern life” through which there were particularly opened up new ways of considering the adoption of and the ways of handling technology.

Such examples make it clear that many areas of ethnological research cannot be seen, and have not been seen for long, as “own” territories. An interdisciplinary opening up of the spectrum of topics, and also the theoretical and methodological approaches which in isolated cases can hardly be distinguished from those of history, sociology or historical demography, are much more characteristic. Here and there one is working with methods that focus on micro-historical approaches, on case study concepts, on hermeneutic procedures of source interpretation, through which the research process can be comprehended as “interaction with the field”.

This interdisciplinary widening out is stimulating, and quite indispensable for an intelligent elaboration of historical themes. And it still has not – although this is a basic argument of the critics of the “Abschied” – led to the loss of a perspective of its own, its own “hand of write” of the discipline. I need not here prove this argument theoretically or methodological-

ly, although this could also be possible by looking at a style of questions that were characteristic after as well as before, as also at attempts at approaches. A sufficiently clear indication of the before and after identity of the discipline seems to me to be marked even more by the increasing interest of the public in this particular “ethnological view”. Our way of looking at history and culture has become much taken into account and very marketable in the meantime. It is present in museums, the mass media and publications, exactly because it illustrates, presents and analyses “in a different way” past worlds in the eyes of the public, just as it is doing, for instance, for historical science or the history of art. This is certainly not yet a proof of quality as far as the content is concerned and one may value its success, or not. But at least it shows that the identity of the discipline has changed and in doing so has not become weaker but rather stronger.

A personal anecdote can be used as an illustration: in the mid-80s I worked at the Tübingen Ludwig-Uhland-Institute, sited, as is well known in a real castle. This castle is also a source of attraction for Tübingen citizens and tourists. One Sunday morning somebody knocked at the Institute door, I opened it, and a man was there saying a friendly “hello”, and asking: “Please, could you explain to me what dialectic is?” This took me by surprise and I have forgotten, probably fortunately, my answer. But I remember exactly what I thought then: ten years ago the man would only have asked me what a dialect was. So on this Sunday morning, the “Abschied” was for me complete. The question proved to me that the “cognitive identity” of the former Volkskunde had changed and that this was to be seen “outside” – even if perhaps not yet completely understood.

## Reconsidering history: new conventions?

What can really be considered the theoretical and methodological basic concept of ethnological historical research today is surely subject to debate. And although I especially esteem the multiplicity of opinions and methods, I nevertheless would like to try to sum up in five points

what in my opinion has characterized the new self-identity of European ethnology in its relationship with history in recent years:

1. European ethnology above all asks for the *characteristic and the significant* that distinguishes human existence within historical “life worlds”, according to the specific unmistakable shape of culture within its temporal and spatial stamp. Of primary importance is the question of the particular interpretations and explanations that the “historical subjects” themselves, through their symbolizations and traditions, place at our disposal. With this is connected a concept of culture which not only sees cultural practice as caught up in a respective rule system of norms and traditions, but also to be understood as an active “life” that can be given shape and argued about. The cultural organization of such a “life” is always subordinated to the ambivalence of obligation and liberty, of individual need and collective reason. It is not the cross-section or the sum of cultural information that are decisive for our image of a historical society but the reconstruction of “characteristic” patterns of behaviour and processes. Our analytical view must lead into the deeper cultural strata of meaning and historical logic, and must elaborate above all “the particular” through micro-historical studies and case analyses of the “life” world, in order to illuminate “the general”.

2. Thus European ethnology makes history “*subjective*” in a double sense. On the one hand it asks what meaning the members of historical “life worlds” attached to their own activity and in what symbolic patterns they expressed the “sense of life”. History and culture appear consequently as a process shaped by “historical subjects” whose rules within the historical here and now had always been newly negotiated and determined and whose logic can only be explored from inside as the “emic” version of the sources. On the other hand it does not accept any simple factuality of data and issues whose historical meaning is already “objectively” determined, but is rather based on competing interpretations and explanations in history itself. Every historical “life world” can thus be understood as an area for discourse, in which the power of interpretation and definition is

unequally spread and in which different systems of argumentation and evaluation consequently stand opposite each other. This polyphony, this multitude of voices of history, has to be wrung from the sources.

3. The practitioners of our subject have reached an agreement – at least I hope so – that its glancing into history should always contain a *comparative perspective*. Historical phenomena have to be observed at different times and in different cultures in order to be able to investigate, compare and explain them in context. This is because for the dimension of the cultural, it is especially relevant that modes of operation and meanings of social practices and rules, of values and symbols, can only be explained adequately in relation to other systems of effects and interpretations. The comparison within society between its groups and genders, as well as that between different societies and different historical epochs is thus indispensable for a hermeneutic approach.

4. This demand for a comparative perspective applies not only to the research subject but also to the *methodology* of research. Access to the landscapes of history has to be sought through very different sources and varied methodological ways of approach. It is not the handicap of a fixed methodological approach that should determine the research subject, but rather the subject and its specific situation with regard to sources that should lead to the relevant methods and steps of analysis. In this way a theoretically and methodologically pluralistic, interdisciplinary alignment of the subject is addressed, based on the combination of multiple hermeneutic procedures, and not respecting disciplinary limits and terminologies. European ethnology cannot be understood as a closed structure of theories and as a disciplinary canon of methods. Rather must it be open for all those analytical perspectives that are of use in the decoding of historical systems of communication, symbols and meanings.

5. European ethnology is concerned with the specific place and outlook of history, and also the position and viewpoint of historical research. It assumes that we are the ones who formulate the questions directed at history, and that in this way we consequently draft historical imag-

es and interpretations of society based on the findings of knowledge of the present. So we are “strangers” in a historical world and this “strangeness” has to be turned into methodological reflections. It is, therefore, a problem of how to reveal those points of view and interpretations which influence and lead our view to the sources. This includes the problem of the textualization of our research; the demand for a new transparency in our scientific text production, which is now as much discussed that I shall not refer to it any more. To bring such self-reflexive considerations into the dialogue with history on a standing basis is one of the most important demands which should be formulated for an “ethnological view” of the past.

These standpoints embody for me the essential basis and steps forward in our ethnological research; they mark a conception of “cultural science”, which seeks to make historical subjects, their internal meaning, their inner worlds, especially their cultural “practice”, come alive and speak.

At all events I am quite sure that our subject has not only gained new opportunities and claims for attention since the “Abschied” from the “Volkskunde” niche, but also faces completely new problems and risks. With the simultaneous scientific rediscovery and the political revaluation of culture, the danger of the immediate harnessing of cultural knowledge for political reasons has also increased. Like “nation”, “popular culture” and “tradition” earlier, today concepts like “region”, “multiculture”, “authenticity” have again become catchwords in political discussions, which to a great extent are outside our possibilities of control and influence or which we often observe from a distance. Many of those historical images which we are painting in a more three-dimensional and coloured way crop up in political simplifications and points of aggravation where social, national and ethnic conflicts arise. They are used to legitimate their historical meaning and provide justification. The reference to cultural traditions and the demand for the restoration of a supposed historically passed on autonomy embody high moral qualities in the field of European legitimational policy today (cf. Kaschuba

1995). Lucien Febvre’s statement that it should be the “social function” of history writing “to organize the past for its function in the present” (Febvre 1988) is still valid.

The impression is, therefore, ambivalent. On the one hand our research results are received more broadly and consequently get caught up in the maelstrom of sociopolitical interests and currents. On the other, we have to ask ourselves if our research into historical culture with its love of detail, its revalorization of what was previously insignificant, its always amusing anecdotes from the realities of cultural life, and its “culturalistic” argumentation, did not also at the same time become more distant from policy, more toothless, and consequently likely to encourage such “misuse”. To be more specific: to what extent does the cultural history we have so successfully managed in the past years mean a *depolitization* of the image of history? And – secondly – where does historical culture research stand today in a direct connection with political discourses and legitimization interests, in which it finally must take up a *position*? I would like to turn in conclusion to these two questions.

## Culture in history – with politics left out?

As everybody knows, the confrontation between politics and culture is an old dispute in the debates which have been carried on since the beginning of the century, between the advocates of political history and historicism on the one hand, and the representatives of a new cultural history on the other. This took place not only in Germany but did so with special intensity there, namely following the models of “cultural historians” such as Jacob Burckhardt, Karl Lamprecht or Wilhelm Dilthey, who in this dispute had been finally forced aside to marginal positions - with negative consequences for historiography as a whole. To a certain degree, the fundamental lines of this controversy appear in the discussions of the last two decades about a “new cultural history”, above all in the context of efforts first made by Anglo-Marxist historical research and then by the history of the everyday and by historical anthropology,

which together have contributed to an immense "cultural change" in the concept of history.

The development began in the 1970s with either a rejection or a critical revision, implemented by young historians and ethnologists, of the dominant historical concepts at that time. There flowed from this three directions in particular: first, the "classic" policy and institutional history, which considered history to be structured according to "events" and according to "politics and budgets"; second, the counter-arguing of social history which looked for structural conditions of social and political activity, and consequently for possibilities of shaping historical development, as well as seeking increasingly for answers to it using the research methods of the social sciences; third, a Marxist inspired concept of history, in which the strata and class profiles of historical society are constructed and declared to be the decisive political power fields of social development. Opposing these more politically than economically focused concepts is the effort to explain this story in the first place as an association of human developments and experiences. With Reinhardt Koselleck's twin concepts, "experience area and expectation horizon" one position in history had to be newly measured; this clearly began to move "the humanum" into the central focus of the historical image, taking the "human sense of proportion" and its conceptual modes as the semantic key for unlocking the door to the past (Koselleck 1985).

After Antonio Gramsci's older concept of "cultural hegemony" and Edward P. Thompson's process and practice orientated class concept, there followed a second step towards the formation of theory. Through this the "broad" concept of culture, which was essentially formed by Raymond Williams (1977), attained its new epistemologically key position: culture as "the whole way of life", as "lived" culture, always with the implication of creative power and no longer only the "prison of *longue durée*" (Fernand Braudel) in the shape of archaic popular traditions or modern-elitist epistemological doctrines. Above all, the Early Modern period and the discussion located there between a "self-willed" popular culture and an elite culture orientated on the power of knowledge,

became an experimental field for different versions and ways of viewing historical sources. Local and case studies at the "concrete place" of history made fresh examinations of the field of the past, in connection with names such as Emanuel LeRoy Ladurie, Georges Duby, Natalie Zemon-Davis or Carlo Ginzburg.

In a third step, and related to it, the history of the everyday and historical anthropology had been discovered as spotlights of a kind that would at least illuminate the historical actors completely in the round and with sharp profiles. As the concrete "place of history" and at the same time the "place of analysis" the perspective of the everyday promised precise insights into inner historical worlds and attitudes whereas historical anthropology pursued mentalities and conditions of thought of "historicity in history". Both forms of approach were characterized by micro-historical procedures, by attempts to reconstruct complex historical "life worlds" and above all by the methodological reflection according to which the supposed familiarity of the researcher with the historical field would be no more than a chimera of classical historiography. To a much greater extent, the historian is approaching history and its sources as a "stranger". He is, in fact, moving around in a "strange field" and in a strange culture, the rules and grammar of which he has to reconstruct with much effort - as an already clearly "ethnologically" coloured metaphor of thinking and speaking.

Finally, the fourth step towards an approach to history which really can be defined as ethnological, was marked by the fresh assessment of historical identities. The dimensions of gender, the religious concept of the world or the environmental connections, appeared as "authentic" patterns of order of historical worlds, as identification systems of social activity established by history itself. Historically orientated gender studies and cultural anthropological as well as ethno-methodological source analyses served as examples for a new kind of careful movement in the historical terrain, in order to be able to read the signs and symbols of cultural understanding there. In this process the knowledge has been essential that the adjustment the sphere of the cultural could be successful not



primarily through the fixation of "cultural" research subjects but only through theoretical and methodological concepts of cultural analysis.

With these fundamental changes in the concept of history and culture, many of the rigid paradigms and patterns of order of traditional historiography were, in part, annulled. The tightly conceived political understanding ranging over the history of norms, institutions and states was broken open; schematic class and stratification models were rejected as inappropriate for explaining historical self-images and activity patterns. Consequently the benefit of these revision was a more open view of historical actors and the life contexts come upon and shaped by them.

But of course, there also was and there remains a deficit account. I want to confine myself to only one point here, but it is a central one. What is it that has replaced that "classical" central question of socio-historical research relating to economic distributions of resources and social relations of power today? The question has often been schematically applied, and for long seemed to be indispensable to us as a key to explain the conditions and possibilities of social development at all times and places. Can we simply renounce this "Who to whom?", this question about who holds the power in history? And if not, this is what I plead for: can gender, generational and mentality history offer us an equivalent perspective instead? But obviously not, because the questions they raise reflect primarily the perceptions of the historical actors, but hardly, or at least not systematically, the general political-social structural conditions. So how can political power and systematically generated social inequality in history be made a subject of discussion for the future?

This question is still hardly answered in the "new cultural history" and it will not be easy to find a conceptual answer to it, for in the last few years the setting up of discourses in history in line with directions critical to modernization and subject-orientated, has still not brought about decisive openings-up and widenings of our historical horizon. Rather has it resulted at the same time in a fundamental relativisation of all standards of social and political views to

history so far. The intriguing question of whether there would not be a history any more, can thus be understood as the helplessness of a public facing the disintegration of that fixed framework of interpretation of history which in any case always made the coordinates of political power and cultural hegemony the subject of discussion. This "hard" framework of interpretation of social and political profiles is replaced in the meantime by "soft" culturalistically characterized contours.

Now it probably would be wrong to conclude from this once more that politics and culture really are a pair of opposites, and that it has actually been the cultural-historical change that made history writing "un-political". This presumption can clearly be refuted by the research results in the spheres of gender history, the history of the everyday and the history of social movements, all of which have rather led to a decisive politicising of the dimension of historical experience.

The problem clearly lies at a completely different level. It is our topical questions relating to history and our cultural understanding which are in a manner of speaking orientated "further from politics". Our level of interest in historical knowledge has changed. With the subjects, "life worlds", modes of thinking, with a "changeable" and "interpretable" conception of history, the area of the past occupied another place in the understanding of our present. History is increasingly "incorporated" into our present, it is at the same time both strange and close to us, like an often-visited holiday country. With this the shaping of its image is more than ever subordinated to the ideas of the present. And this is a present whose participants, in relation to global relation systems, confusing layers of problems and complex information worlds seem to increasingly withdraw themselves into "eventful" and "lively" niche worlds (cf. Schulze 1993). History is then taken along, into the niches. Its images should be "unproblematic" and should be "compatible" with the images of our present, for which, increasingly, a "politics left out" principle is valid.

If this observation is right, then the disintegration of critical, political historical images would be a symptom of the present-day renun-

ciation of that historical horizon which has formerly always marked a decisive boundary line. Accordingly, "historical reality" then ceases to exist, because the ambiguity of the texts as fully arbitrary versions is misunderstood, and because the method of deconstruction from manufactured historical images to the technique of intentional indefiniteness of the past has been chanced upon. Then at least history would be no longer a "compatible" part of the present but an extra-territorial terrain, a useless no-man's land, "no place".

Of course this cannot be followed by a plea for a return to the simple policy and the base-superstructure-models of the old form of historical writing. I also personally support rather categorically the standpoint of "the culture" as a decisive source of benefit to our knowledge.

But if questions concerning domination and social inequality also have to have their systematic place within our "culturally" understood concept of history, then this can only mean the demand for a more decisive conceptualization of the cultural explanations for social seeds of conflict and power relations in history. And what lies closer, likewise to try for ourselves this conceptualization in the centre of the system of meanings of "culture" itself, in that field of cultural constructions of difference, strangeness and otherness which can be read as a long historical chain of *cultural* attempts at present legitimation of social domination and inequality. It is exactly here that the present time with its xenophobic, racist, fundamentalist cultural patterns is also showing us how little we were able to recognize their traces in history hitherto.

### Ethno-logy: a late "coming out"?

To these reflections we can straightaway add the second question, on the present-day political interest in using of the historical-ethnological research. I also want to refer to this only in one point, which is, as it were, imposed on us like a pseudo-programme. European ethnology finally has to argue more decisively under its own "label", that is, to make explanations with its own historical basic concepts of *ethnos* and ethnicity. For today its leading concept of the

ethnic again serves in public discussion as a pointer to an alleged historical assurance of common origin, of common cultural tradition, of a sense of community. A historical idea that seemed to be under scientific control has in this way acquired new political relevance in recent years.

In the field of political discourse the concept of "ethnic identity" has long since become an effective formula, a central instrument of national legitimation policy (cf. Taylor 1993). This applies to Western European immigration and asylum policy as well as to East European efforts towards a new orientation after the breakdown of the socialist state structures. Ethnic tradition and homogeneity seem to offer compensation for missing political values and concepts of integration, and to provide the most plausible possibility for mobilizing "national energies", whilst being at the same time the morally least scrutinized argument in the struggle for "cultural recognition" in the international arena (cf. Kaschuba ed. 1995).

But in the scientific discussion, too, we find with increasing frequency a new viewpoint and a positive evaluation of this "ethnic paradigm", which has been also created by the cultural sciences at one time. I would like to single out one voice which, in its position, is very symptomatic but also especially striking, and pulls together and sharpens up many similar modes of argumentation. The Italian social scientist Dario Durando published an article first in *Diorama Letterario*, then in *Telos* under the heading "The Rediscovery of Ethnic Identity" (1993). His starting point is the observation that following the upheavals in the European mosaic of states after 1989 a "new kind of perception of the world" is developing. Against the background of the "globalization" of culture, the disintegration of national profiles in the European system and an "ahistorical universalism" of the post-modern, this would have given the last push to the breakdown of the great collective concepts of a collective identity which, like "Fatherland" and "proletariat", built on a "mythical-symbolical" basis. At present only limited horizons of experience and self-realization at the levels of welfare, hedonism and individuality would be available.

Durando then calls in Ferdinand Tönnies with his "concept of community", and Oswald Spengler and others, to explain the absolute necessity for establishing common collective images, even in modern as well as in post-modern societies. For him only one solution begins to appear: "Ethnic differences as sources of identity". He writes: "Cultural specificity is *ethnic* in character and must be approached in the context of an organized opposition to universal standardization. Here the anthropological and biological component of ethnicity is secondary ... What is important is something else: *the sense of ethnic belonging*, ie, an ethnic identification generated by a specific system of cultural production, cemented by a common language among the members of an ethnic group ... In other words, ethnic belonging is the ultimate form of generalized interpersonal solidarity and therefore the utmost instance of the 'communitarian' and organic type of link described by Ferdinand Tönnies." And further: "The specific line of development of a trans-modern approach can be seen as constituted by the rediscovery of ethnicity: the 'ethnic' ... revolution as a global alternative to the crisis of the old order and to the threat of a new 'post-modern' order that would obliterate all differences." For ethnic communities unite in a band, "in which biology and history combine" (p. 24-27).

In this way, Durando circumscribes the idea of ethnic identity as being at the same time an anthropogenic constant of historical existence and also an actual remedy, with ethnicity, treated as if as a variety of the historical "self will", now being directed against post-modern tendencies towards uniformity, levelling and the fragmentation of the social identity. His conclusion that in the teeth of globalization of culture, the only chance of protecting identity, or recovering it, is by recalling ethnic belonging in the sense of the mature historical mentalities and identities. A future Europe can only be conceivable and manageable as an alliance "of ethnic belongings".

Thus far Durando, who is still garnishing his identity model with variants of regional spatial orientations and cross-border cooperation, but keeps insisting on its ethnic core. With this

form of argumentation he and other scientists again bring into play that concept of ethnic identity, whose description and justification should have been very familiar to us. Indeed the old biological variant of the "blood relationship" is no longer given special emphasis (which is already appearing again in the fashionable wrappings of "biopolitical discourse"), and the main discussion is with the "more serious" dimension of history and culture. But this goes along with a concept according to which in this historical process there always had been developed a quasi natural model of an ethnic consciousness of community on the homogenizing and integrating effect of which every "socialization" would have built and must also be built in the future.

Here it is not taken into account either that this identification of the concept of "ethnicity" with the historical image of "ethnic community" has long since been decoded as a scientific and political creation of the 19th century. Nor are there reflected the particular historical circumstances and consequences of this "far-reaching invention". The ethnic argument has nearly always proved to be in history an extremely aggressive identity concept, because it could be strategically fitted into any racist, nationalist or hegemonic objective. These things are so familiar to us, that I can leave it at this outline (cf. Gellner).

We could, of course, console ourselves with the thought that Durando and his colleagues have not read the "right" enlightened ethnological literature (and his literature list supports this impression). But this would be too simple or too convenient. If we take the view that ethnicity as a concept of identity might be a "perilous idea" (Eric Wolf) which should not be further propagated, we should have sought more vigorously to prevent its application, scientifically as well as politically, or at least we should have done this long before now.

But this did not happen, at least not decisively enough, and surely not because of indolence or through being surprised by the "ethnic revival" in recent years. In this relation our own insecurities appear to be much more expressed, about whether the question of ethnic identity as a "construction" is not only an intellectual fig-

ure, which in everyday life is opposed to a popular “principal of life”, which unconcernedly appeals to ethnic feelings of community, despite all scientific warnings. It is surely not by chance that in the face of such counter-arguments we mostly concede immediately the general necessity and legitimacy of group identities as being indispensable for stability and orientation in a “world in transition”. How such idea of identity will look then, without ethnic components and constructions of differences, is in general not further detailed by us.

A part of this insecurity certainly derives from the fact that the social and cultural sciences find the loaded idea of “community” difficult anyway. This has good socio- and scientific-historical reasons even in a subject whose German precursor once first of all declared the “village community” and then the “popular community” to be historically leading social models. Only with the socio-scientific opening up did the change of paradigms from “community” to “society” become finally possible. But clearly it was in fact more a quick change of the concept than a careful revision of it. The question of how social relationships within society are also developing symbolically and emotionally has been investigated almost only within the close relational figures of the family, the relatives and the social group, but hardly at the level of bigger social formations. This problem was frequently avoided on the ground that it was a question of the criticism of ideology.

Now the boomerang returns to a certain extent, striking the centre of the identity of the subject. The question of how to deal with an “ethnos”, placed not far from history but in the midst of the present, cannot be absolutely avoided by an ethnology. Therefore we ask again with Durando: how shall we interpret such “processes of ethnification” today? As a conscious strategy of the generation of conflicts through cultural arguments, or as a major route towards a collective finding of identity that has to be followed with confidence from the historical point of view, but in the face of cultural tendencies of globalization and uniformisation?

In an essay entitled “Hereditary Loyalties, Prevailing Unities” Clifford Geertz was also looking recently for a way out of the dilemma.

There he also stresses the necessity for the “formation and maintenance of collective self-images” occurring always over “the inclusion and exclusion of the social ‘We’”. Mostly - according to his summing up in a survey of international postwar development - these images of integration and difference assumed the form of ethnic conflicts. “The immediate motive for the intense general interest in such conflicts is naturally the outbreak of violence and the threat of violence around the phenomena of collective identity and its demands - for recognition, autonomy and for the different kinds of dominance and material advantages” (Geertz 1994, 392). This is how he described the maelstrom effect.

Now he tries on his side to escape this “ethnic principle” by dispersing it in a system of different loyalty commitments which are only supplied from outside with the unifying mark, “ethnic”. The actors themselves move within very different ideas of social affiliation and commitment, which are of course “essential” in its core and consequently are not challenged as “accustomed loyalties”. But only a small number of these ideas of loyalty are really based on “ethnic” agreements. The other level on which politicians and the media operate with the catchword of “ethnic unity” is considered by Geertz on the other hand as a strategic form of the policy of identity, which has to be clearly distinguished from loyalty consciousness. He sees the advantage of this divided concept which should break open the apparent plausibility of nationally and ethnically “coded” discourses, as lying in the possibility “of discovering” through it the constructed “essence of social unities and to break them down into the disparate components of which they are structured” (Geertz 1994, 395). Thus above all the specific ability of ethnology to observe and interpret micro-social processes and symbolic practices could come to a useful application.

This position is certainly not new, except for the attempt to introduce into the debate new so to speak “consciousness sharpening” concepts. But the article again indicates in a compact form a - as it seems to me - reasonable way out of the self-built trap of the “ethnic paradigm”. Geertz also pleads for an ethnological term of

reference, which undertakes the decoding of the argument of ethnicity as its most important purpose. He votes for the support of a policy which does not base itself upon a "primordial consensus" but upon "respect for the opponent". And this is in the hope that "anthropology with its sense of the particularity, the detail, the specific feature" can play "perhaps a helpful part" in this project (p. 403).

However, this cannot mean intervening in the ethnically based conflict scenarios of the present time by making efforts at negotiation and explanation. That surely is also one of our tasks, although with the chance of an extremely limited result. It seems to me almost to a greater degree - maybe in contrast to Geertz - that there is here also a central task for our historical research, for the ethnicity argument is not in the last analysis as effective today because it comes along with the patina of historicity and the demand for authenticity, and because the "construction" of the ethnic in the area of history seems to have become an irrefutable "reality". Therefore, the attempt at deconstruction has to begin there not on the excrescence but on its roots.

If ethnicity is a question of the "passions of the collective identity" (Geertz), then European ethnology has to try to show how this passion has been learned in Europe and what deep, often inextinguishable traces it has left (and not only here). Contrariwise it is necessary to elucidate how other, less painful forms of the experience of shared identity and collective self-images in history developed, to which ethnology, acting on behalf of the nation, had paid much less attention than in former times.

Such research would seem to me to be a useful "historizing the present" ie not to disguise the view to the present day with historical facades, but to open new ways for it from the past into the present. This would be an important step towards a critical cultural science which thinks energetically about the social effects of its researches.

But at the same time systematic criticism of the "ethnic paradigm" also meant a self-critical consolidation of the history of the subject, so far achieved only as a beginning. Otherwise the young generation in our discipline could hardly

acquire that serene harmony of the designation, "ethnology", which, to our astonishment we are registering again today. And it would be more clear to them why this has to remain a historically "thinking" discipline, but of course a discipline which had to learn out of its own past that the search for the right questions directed to history and culture has to stay in the programme. This would not be the programme of any arbitrary science but of a discipline with the firm principle that its central paradigm should be consideration of not creating any more "ethnological paradigms".

*Translation: Evelyn Riegel – with very helpful remarks by Alexander Fenton*

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