The Politics and Identity of European Ethnology: Example Sweden

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The public research policy in the humanities and the social sciences in Sweden during the postwar period – linked to the idea of the welfare state – is the starting point of this article. Priority has been given to particular research themes "facing society". At the same time, the general left-wing orientation and the concomitant interest in processes of modern society accounts for a genuine interest of a similar kind among many young ethnologists.

The author's personal research policy is summarized in a four-point program arguing for a more courageous stress on synthesis, for more culture comparisons – preferably through interdisciplinary cooperation, for combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods, and, finally, for a theoretical involvement in the study of human beings, not only of cultural variation.

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What role do ethnologists want to play in world affairs, if this is what they want? How do today's ethnologists perceive themselves, what is the academic identity of their profession? These two questions are obviously interrelated. However, two things should be said before I turn to my own highly personal view based on an even more limited Swedish perspective, i.e. shaped by the particularly Stockholm scope. As we all know, ethnologists do only agree to some extent about research policy, nor do they share a common academic identity. Another point in this context is the following: research politics and scholarly identities are mainly generated by external forces, e.g. only determined to a limited degree within the ethnological profession itself. In other words, research too is shaped through processes of culture.

Public research policies

In Sweden, public research policies changed considerably during the 1970s. By public policy, I mean one influenced by the state through state research councils, ultimately by the government in power, but also through leading officials in the field of higher education and research. At that time a much more active research policy was introduced. One side of this change was achieved by giving priority to certain themes of research, to ear-mark certain money for certain projects. Another means was to set up specialized "council professorships" and "council research positions", which were directly paid by the councils. Even the word "project" as an integrated part of the Swedish academic terminology was established in those days. A "project" was not any research task or piece of work (which seems to be the meaning today); it was a larger research plan, hardly less than three years in duration, preferably involving several scholars, and – not the least important – aiming at "solving an important problem".

Another key word at the time was "samhällstillvänd" (roughly "facing society", or "dealing with current social issues"), originally representing a left-wing view, but soon a widely accepted research approach. The very pronounced idea was that research should more or less directly serve general political interests. The dominating ideology involved social science research as a means for improving the welfare state, and thereby the quality of life of its inhabitants (cf. Sandström 1993).

A significant development was the establishment of DSF (Delegation for Social Research) at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in 1974, which supported research on welfare in a general sense. DSF welcomed applications, but also – by its very existence – stimulated initiatives within the subject area. In 1977 another research authority was established, FRN (Council for Planning and Coordination of Research). The purpose set up for FRN was to favour interdisciplinary research, and also, preferably, reseach about general social problems of national relevance.

The method used was not to order – i.e. to employ people to do – particular research work (which was also done using public money, named "sector research", within a variety of public institutions), but to offer money, to open up finance opportunities for specialized fields. Also in the selection and decision-making process within the research councils certain policies could of course be carried out.

Another council to be mentioned is Council of Building Research (BFR), established in 1960. Its programme is to promote technical development, building planning and related areas, but its deliberate support of social science (including ethnology) belongs to the 1970s.

What also happened in the 1970s was the union (in 1977) of two separate research councils into one, named Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR). In our discussion of the identity of ethnology, we may note that research applications from ethnologists were, from now on, dealt with by a committee also managing applications from anthropologists and sociologists. Also in other contexts, ethnology was identified as a social science, just as much as a discipline in the faculty of humanities.

There seem to be two circumstances contributing to such a profiled research policy. The primary one was the politically perceived need for certain kinds of knowledge in order to be able "build the modern society". This aimed at a scientifically constructed system, technological and economic rationality, modern thinking and modern values, and also a modern social organization. This was the basic idea. What is good housing? What technical and social qualities should modern housing areas contain? What is a good place of work in terms of ergonomics, risk statistics, personal development? Furthermore, how can visual arts, music, theatre, cultural heritage, etc. be made available for the majority of the citizens?

Many areas of expertise should be developed through systematic research, it was thought, such as those areas dealing with criminality, drug addiction, unemployment, "social passivity" , "sense of alienation in political matters" (two key concepts in the 1970s). The ever-changing structure and function of modern society represent a market for "interpreters", people who are trained to sort out, classify, define, explain, suggest perspectives. Questions to be answered come from the growing complexity of today's world, as well as from the rapid speed of social transformation. The belief in social engineering lacks optimism today, but interpreters seem to gain in popularity.

One of the most loved key words is information, particularly in the expression "the information society". The term accommodates the perception of "knowledge" as a strategic vehicle for designing change. In this sense research policies aim to stimulate scholars to choose certain themes rather than others. A feature of the public policy for more than twenty years in Sweden is to propose large projects, as has already been mentioned, including several scholars, preferably comprising people from different academic fields. The message is that publicly supported research work should first and foremost serve ends that transcend internal academic interests. Although great freedom should be given to individual scholars in choosing methods and in theory development, public grants should function as public investments. Those who profit from academic research should ultimately be those who supply money, i.e. the taxpayers.

Contributing to this thematic specialization is also, by necessity, the combination of decreasing funds and a growing number of applicants for grants. Although extra money has recently been given to research within the social and cultural sciences (under a few thematic headings), many good applications have had to be turned down. Since the number of applications

to research councils has increased so much, the quality criterion is not enough as an instrument for selection. Consequently, the particular theme or research subject will offer the final selection criterion. Once again, a limited number of themes will be favoured.

I have described some features of the public policy since the 1970s. Most active scholars in Sweden have worked under these conditions during their entire professional life. Some have gained greatly (like myself) from a public orientation which has been in line with their individual interests. Others have been less happy, but have somewhat adapted to the new situation. There are also those, of course, who have felt wrongfully discriminated and who would strongly vote no to public research interference. It is impossible to estimate to what extent the dominant policy interests coincide with interests among scholars themselves. My guess is that they do so to a considerable extent in Sweden, but still less so than many research politicians may believe.

Policy trends and professional identities among Swedish ethnologists

Individual ethnologists certainly differ in their retrospective view of character and direction of Swedish ethnology. Nevertheless, most would probably agree in the statements that ethnology has been dramatically transformed since the end of the 1960s. It is no longer primarily a historically oriented academic field, dealing with the rural past and its tools, buildings, working life, customs, and folk beliefs, all related to the traditional museums' stewardship of the cultural heritage of the nation.

Today, nobody would describe ethnology this way. Many would rather agree as follows: ethnology is the detailed study of culture and society, both historically and dealing with modern urban society, i.e. including all social groups and subgroups. However, it should be noted that this is fully in line with modern or "updated" museums. The change of ethnology and museum policy generally go hand in hand.

To the extent that material artefacts and other expressions of culture are studied, this is done to develop our understanding of humans; material objects are means and not ends of the study. During the 1980s the focus has once again shifted, although less dramatically, from "human behaviour" to "human thinking", or from external to internal. Sub-fields like historical anthropology (including mentality studies) and the history of thinking attract considerable interest among students, more so than cultural history in a more general sense. Historical studies are continuously getting started by young scholars, but there is a marked trend towards research into contemporary society. Some do both, and the theoretical orientation for the most part does not separate these two lines.

The identity of ethnologists outside Academia

The professional use of ethnology outside universities a generation ago was mainly museum work. Cultural museums were the labour market; research and museum work were integrated. Today, the educational volume only allows a minority to get employment at museums. When I myself registered as a student of ethnology some 35 years ago, we were less than five students who did so, that autumn in 1961. The number of newcomers today is more than 200. The general transformation of the subject mentioned above fortunately went hand in hand with the labor market situation for the large number of students. (The change of identity was recently pictured in an international evaluation of ethnology in Sweden, see Björklöf et al. 1995.)

One fundamental basis for the professional identity of ethnologists in Sweden seems to have become a strong belief in the anthropological perspective, being an integrated part of modern ethnology. What I mean by that is a belief in the capacity to clarify aspects of ordinary human life that are otherwise invisible or blurred by conventional thinking.

Ethnology was never integrated into political and social planning to the same extent as, for example, sociology. The role given to ethnologists, during the 70s – as today, is the one that serves "background information", e.g. how people arrange their lives, what they do and how

their interact, in the family, in the neighbourhood, at workplaces. What do they say about all this, how do they express themselves? What seem to be their thoughts and feelings? It is necessary to know something about the real contexts, "out there", in order to plan and to make political decisions. The key word is "understanding" , hardly explanation, nor prediction. Statistical tables are weak instruments to infuse understanding. Ethnographic descriptions are more efficient

Eight research themes

Eight ongoing projects may illustrate a significant trend. Two doctoral projects are financed by the Council for Social Research (SFR). "Ethnic business" is the theme of one of those, i.e. under what conditions do immigrants start their own companies (Oscar Pripp)? The other one deals with a particular kind of "home-like" ward, addressed to dementia patients. Under what conditions do the staff treat the elderly, and what is the "custody discourse" (Magnus Öhlander)?

Other projects deal with the elderly (also funded by SFR), namely, old immigrants. Under what conditions do they live and are given service? This research activity is part of a wider gerontologic programme headed by an interdisciplinary all-round person, originally trained as a historian (Dr. David Gaunt), associated with the research and development bureau of the Stockholm Welfare Office. Various subprojects are being conducted by an ethnologist, who is especially familiar with the peoples of ex-Yugoslavia (Dr. Owe Ronström)

Research for a thesis on "sex education in Swedish schools" is financed by The Committee of Research Councils. What sex education is given today, and what is the "sex education discourse" (Maria Bäckman)? The grant was given within a general programme for gender studies.

A fifth study deals with psychiatric patients, namely, those who were originally treated in closed wards, but who have been given individual dwellings in ordinary apartment buildings (Lotta Mannerfelt). The relative success of this reform, which has taken place in other coun-

tries as well, is insufficiently known. A research grant has been given by the Nation Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen).

Attitudes to mental illness, especially schizophrenia, and how it is talked about by laymen, is the subject of another project. Like all the others it is carried out in a local field, in this case an area in northern Sweden where the occurrence of schizophrenia has long been noticeably high (Dr. Lena Gerholm). Also this research work has been granted public money, although mainly carried out within the frame of a teaching-and-research position at the university.

A seventh project – conducted as a doctoral thesis – has been granted money from the National Agency for Education (Skolverket). It focuses on the significance of language and social environment in a multi-cultural area in the south of Greater Stockholm. Like all the other projects, this one also contains a "discourse aspect" (Ann Runfors).

My final example is a study of leprosy patients living in a suburb of Athens (a doctoral work financed through a university grant). The overaching interest in this study concerns the way in which leprocy sufferers in contemporary Greece construct a collective political subject and make themselves active agents in relationship to the power that society (and care) exercises over them (Georg Drakos).

All these projects deal with problem areas which have been especially supported in recent years by public research institutions. Problems of disabled citizens, immigrant and gender issues are defined as important themes. However, the projects were not chosen by the individual scholars primarily to find money. Rather, the themes chosen happened to meet a public research policy. The scholars wanted to do what they later did – which is not to say that they were unaware of the chances in money terms. Given both increased competition and shrinking economic resources, more doctoral candidates will probably come to consider this aspect.

Besides grants given by public research funds, there are also university grants ("doktorandtjänster") open for doctoral students . In the latter cases no precedence is given to any partic-

ular problem area, but the number of grants is small. Graduate students in ethnology working with historical data – roughly half of the Stockholm students – are usually limited to this source of finance.

Theoretical orientation

Two important changes from the 1980s onwards mean both a change of focus – from actions (what people do) to cognitions (what people think) – and a change in relation to the concept of culture. The postmodernist hesitancy concerning culture as a clear-cut entity, i.e. a system of consistent values and behaviour patterns, has established itself as a new theoretical outlook. Nevertheless, "cultures" are still studied, both as social contexts (characterized by their members and particular activities), and as discourses (significant ways of interpretation, evaluation, speaking).

This goes for most younger students and scholars, irrespective of their time perspective – oriented to history or to modern society. Names of inspiration – Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz, and others – do not separate the two categories of students. Although the individual student seems to be highly interested in his or her empirical subject, whether gender or immigration studies, all the students appear to be even more committed to the much more demanding task of interpreting, "making sense" of their data, applying concepts and theoretical perspectives that open up new ways, "entrances", looking at various phenomena. In addition, the original link to the museum sphere has become weaker. Ethnology has always occupied a position between ideographic and nomothetic purposes of research. My impression, however, indicates a significant move towards the nomothetic pole.

Four possible future orientations

Syntheses
Starting locally is one of the basics in ethnology. In order to discover contexts of human life one has to scrutinize the environment – to look empirically and in detail at housing areas, places of work, sports arenas, etc. Students should

be very much recommended to delimit their subjects: let is say, to business enterprise within *one* ethnic group in a local town, to *two* suburban school classes in a local area, to *one* retirement home for Jews, etc. Through such studies our information about culture and society is multiplied, the complexity of human variation is continuously illuminated.

However, at the post-doctoral stage – or preferably somewhat later – I would like to find more ethnologists dealing with syntheses, i.e. efforts to build models of separate elements – in other words, to handle questions of culture and society in more general terms. It is too easy to continue doing what you were once trained to do. Syntheses are certainly too abstract to some individuals, at least as primary goals – and I would never dream of announcing this as a general recommendation. Nevertheless, I am afraid of the strength of research traditions. There are few Swedish ethnologists who have at all tried this path, probably due to a particular mentality, rather than because of limited ability. There are undoubtedly more scholars with the intellectual imagination to prepare a full meal out of their rich ingredients.

Comparative Work
An earlier name of the academic discipline of ethnology in Sweden was "Nordic and comparative folk life research". However, the art of comparison was not much developed. For most students, it meant bits and pieces of knowledge about folk culture in neighbouring countries, and possibly in a few others. From my own student years, I remember *Volkskunde der Schweiz* by Rickard Weiss, for example. In some instances comparisons were more pronouced, particularly in folklore, where the origin of customs or narratives was sought abroad.

However, comparative work can be conducted in many ways. One may examine how differing contexts in different cultures account for variation in form and content. This line has become popular in linguistics, partly inspired by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (cf. Stedje 1982). Communication apprehension among American and Swedish students was systematically compared in a collaboration study by myself and James McCroskey (reported in Daun 1996).

Another example is my own comparison of Italian and Swedish values (Daun 1992). A third example is a more recent comparison of universal values in Estonia, Finland and Sweden (Verkasalo, Niit, and Daun 1994).

The latter study is a subproject within a broader international – psychological – study of universal values (Schwartz and Bilsky 1990). I would like to see a number of empirically and theoretically integrated trans-national studies in European ethnology too. The tradition within the humanities, at least in Scandinavia, of "one-man shows" seems to me to be too strong.

However, there are some exceptions. Orvar Löfgren has collaborated with an historian (1981) and with anthropologists (1993; 1995), Barbro Klein has worked together with a scholar of journalism and mass communication (e.g. 1993), and myself with a psychiatrist (Daun & Landell 1982), with psychologists (Daun, Burroughs, & McCroskey 1988; Daun, Mattlar & Alanen1989; Verkasalo, Daun & Niit 1995), and also with Japanese linguists (publication in Japanese), and with others. Besides these Swedish ethnologists, not many have worked closely with somebody from a different discipline or another country. One may hope that the Swedish membership of the European Union will be an impetus to international co-work.

Syntheses generally demand comparisons: comparisons of data and comparisons of processes. As a matter of fact, comparisons are continuously made. "The anthropological study of cultural variation" is indeed comparative by nature. Still, projects oriented toward synthesis or theory-building, as well as international collaborations generally, have the additional potential to open up new or alternative means of comparison.

Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods
An aversion for statistics in Scandinavian ethnology has long been an emotional support of a particular identity. Ethnology, as well as anthropology, has even been formally defined by its qualitative methods. The borderline between the sociological and the ethnological study of modern society has been explained in terms of methods. Since its academic introduction in Sweden, in the 1940s, sociology has been characterized by its quantitative methods. However, attitudes at this point among sociologists have changed remarkably in recent years. At the Department of Sociology in Gothenburg, for example, the present attitude towards quantification among younger scholars is almost "hostile" – according to Dr. Ulla Björnberg, who is one of its leading staff members.

Such changes come and go with cultural and ideological transformations of society at large. Nevertheless, there should be ground for one persistent agreement, namely, the following: many research options are better than few. Combinations of different methods, different angles, different research traditions, should always be judged as a strength. Both quantitative and qualitative methods have their strengths and weaknesses (Daun 1989; Brannen 1992). The possiblities of empirical generalization by means of quantification should be more generally considered by ethnologists, also the chance to obtain types of data that can only be discovered in survey research. The main contribution by ethnologists to surveys will notwithstanding continue to be the qualitative analysis, i.e. making sense of data presented in figures (cf. Daun, Mattlar & Alanen 1989).

Human Universals
Culture as a concept has been problematized. This certainly accounts for a social world of today which is characterized by complexity and rapid change. Stressing the point that "culture" does not determine individual behaviour is also a theoretical advancement. Single factors such as features of individual upbringing, personality variation, and situational factors, all represent incentives and restraints that channel choices of actions – in multi-factorial processes.

What has been less noticed, however, are the universals inherent in human variation. The scientific study of cultural variation has become one of the definitions of ethnology and anthropology. We may agree or not, but what varies? This not very common question brings us to an older definition of anthropology as "the study of man". It implies knowledge about humans *qua* humans, not especially the differences between different humans.

The first attack on cultural relativism to be published was the one by Berlin and Kay (1969). Their focus on colour terms is interesting, since for decades the perception of colours had been considered by anthropologists to be arbitrary. "Berlin and Kay show that although color classification does vary, it also shows remarable uniformities", according to Donald E. Brown in his book *Human Universals* (Brown 1991:11). Later studies added further evidence in this direction.

Facing cultural variation, and the intellectual fascination that goes with it, will not cease to make up the basic motivation for students in ethnology and anthropology. But "are the differences all that should be of concern to anthropology? Does an emphasis on differences present a true image of humanity?" asks Brown (p. 2).

In my own tentative writings of the 1970s and 1980s on the subject of "quality of life", I looked for universal criteria in motivational psychology. The thesis that appealed to me was the following: humans continuously act in order to satify psychogenic needs, although this is done in culturally different forms – sometimes amazingly different. The psychogenic need for social contact (need for affiliation), for example, is satified differently in different cultures. The same is true of the need for self-respect, and the need to excert influence over conditions that strongly influence one's personal life. More can be added following Murray's need theory (1938). The universal nature of these needs is indicated by individual reactions when psychogenic needs are frustrated (Daun 1974; 1978). In my own work, I tried to further elaborate this theme in a book focusing on universals, partly inspired by the Israeli psychiatrist Antonovsky and his two concepts, "coping" and salutogenesis, i.e. the origin of health (Daun & Landell 1982).

From ethnologists dealing with today's events in Europe and elsewhere, I would like to see analyses which include, not only the ordinary message that what history makes is unfathomable. It certainly is, but there is also invariance which make all humans equal. Cultural behaviour varies, but variation is not infinite. Furthermore, given certain factors – incentives and restrictions – particular patterns should be expected. Phenomena like ethnic conflicts, na-

tional chauvinism, guerrilla wars, family violence, all present their particular configurations. Still, they also express universal features, which are equally important for the understanding of historical processes in general terms. Cultural variation is just one universal – among many others – in "the study of man".

We may have to reflect on the fact that the concept of cultural variation underlines differences between peoples, in other words, cognitively separates them. This is done by means of terms like ethnic group and national culture. These terms are academic ones but they are also used in political rhetoric, as we all know, with the intention of separating peoples in a real sense – in violent political actions, some of them called ethnic cleansing. It seems to me that this political misuse should be counteracted by an equally important stress on similarities between peoples, i.e. to make human universals much more explicit in the study of culture. The recently established concept of "cultural racism" indeed necessitates some kind of reaction on our part. I see this as an educational mission.

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