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# AT THE ETHNOLOGISTS' BALL

## Changing an Academic Habitus

*Orvar Löfgren*

Revisiting – what does that mean? What are we able to recognise when we travel back to earlier periods. What seems familiar, alien or exotic? And why should we bother to revisit?

Some disciplines have developed a firm tradition of revisiting – like sociology, where a canon of classics exists, and founding fathers such as Durkheim, Simmel or Weber are constantly being rediscovered. This is hardly the case in European ethnology; there is no canon of “must read” classics. The idea of rupture, of irreversible breaks with the past, seems more common here. Still, I like the idea of revisiting as opposed to writing yet another disciplinary history. Revisiting, to me, brings forward the idea of a dialogue with the past.

Reading these articles, I am struck by the fact that they deal with an often understudied aspect of academic life. Discussions of the history of research often tend to focus on paradigm shifts in theories and methods, the making and unmaking of new “turns” in research, and less on the everyday habitus of actually doing research and being an academic. In a Bourdieuan sense, these papers present us with insights into such everyday workings, the frequently silent knowledge surrounding “the way we do research here.” It is a kind of disciplinary habitus, a mundane undercurrent of well-established routines that have to do with how to structure a paper, how to search for materials and create one’s own mini-archive in the office, but also with learning to ignore and overlook.

The articles tell us how different generations of ethnologists have acquired research skills. These ethnologists have learned to navigate in the field, in archives and later on the Internet; they can judge a book by holding it in their hands, or quickly grasp “the gist of the matter” in a given situation. They have learned what is interesting or uninteresting, important or not. Such mundane but crucial competences are rarely explored in studies of academic life. Most studies of tacit knowledge and non-verbal academic learning have focused on the laboratory experiences of the natural sciences. How do you acquire what is sometimes called “lab fingers”: learning to work quickly and efficiently but also innovatively in a given laboratory setting (Löfgren 2014)?

On the surface, the academic everyday of an ethnologist may seem less material, but as is shown here this is hardly the case. Rolls of maps, boxes of excerpts, filing cabinets, photos and styles of doing fieldwork do something to lofty theories. In their collection, *Inventive Methods*, Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford emphasise the often overlooked dimensions of “the materiality and tingishness” of methods. By using the concept of “devices” – from lists and screens to photo-images and tape recorders – they explore the surprising ways in which methods and objects are related and constitute each other (Lury & Wakeford 2012). The authors here force us to reflect on how we can become aware of such relations and mundane practices, which often rest more in the body than the conscious mind. Many of these

practices have slowly become invisible over time, and are no longer seen as parts of the theoretical and methodological baggage scholars carry with them. It is an acquired knowledge, working as reflexes rather than conscious actions. The fact that they are often seen as personal habits, or are just taken for granted and not problematised, also means that they may carry hidden charges of power and authority.

The examples in this issue are mainly from Scandinavia and although there has sometimes been talk of a Scandinavian style of doing ethnology, there are also striking and interesting local differences between national settings as well as between different universities. If we look at Europe, we can find similar differences. The phenomenologist Sarah Ahmed (2006) once asked, how does the world look from the philosopher's desk? What's on the research horizon, what seems close and noticeable, distant or alien, important or unimportant? Reading these authors, I become more interested in knowing what the world looks like from the desk of an ethnologist in Berlin, Amsterdam, Budapest, Tartu or Zagreb – whether it is today or fifty years ago.

### Who Controls the Dance Floor?

In his discussions, Bourdieu tends to focus more on the stubborn reproduction of the acquired habitus of primary socialisation, rather than changes later in life. In one of his early and now classic studies, *The Bachelors' Ball* (2007), he returns to his old home village and vividly captures a scene in which an old habitus is hopelessly contrasted with a new one. He depicts a village ball in the 1960s; the bachelors have walked from their outlying farms in order to take part, but they end up lining the wall, hopelessly out of place. Not only can they not dance, but their clothes, their clumsy body language and their ways of talking set them apart from the younger ones who take to the dance floor already self-assured in mastering the habitus of the modern world and its popular culture.

Bourdieu's text comes to mind here. I remember an ethnologists' ball in the 1960s, a Christmas party at the *Nordiska museet* (the Nordic Museum) in Stockholm, where older and younger ethnologists

were gathered. The young generation took control of the dance floor, they were ready to show off their new talents – they represented the new and modern in the discipline, while the old school lined the walls, talking with colleagues. A young woman, slightly drunk, walks up to the doyen of Swedish ethnology, Sigurd Erixon, long retired but still in a sense the old king and the Founding Father. She is in a provocative mood and asks him: "So what are you doing that is of interest to ethnologists today?" Erixon seems at a loss and begins to talk, slightly defensively, about his still ongoing atlas projects, but she cuts him short: "That's old stuff."

In the Sweden of the 1960s, there was a sharp rupture between the old and the new ethnology. I was a young student then, eavesdropping, a little embarrassed, on the exchange between Erixon and the student. At my Institute of Folklife Studies – soon to be renamed the Department of European Ethnology – the ruins of Erixon's many projects were still visible. His atlas project seemed to us students like an old ocean liner, which kept moving forward even when the engines were burned out. On the abandoned desks we found boxes of excerpts, half-finished maps and long protocols of evidence collecting dust. We never had a chance to experience the enthusiasm and the exhilarating feeling that went with the idea of a common project uniting the discipline. For us, much of the earlier knowledge was dead. We wanted to develop a new utopian project.

Many of the papers here discuss this turning point in Scandinavian ethnology, but this was not just a local thing. All over Europe the discipline was reorganised, albeit with different timetables, aims and directions. We could begin by comparing how ethnologists' balls were reorganised in different settings. What kinds of new choreographies emerged? What happened when different dance styles were confronted, and who started to line the walls and leave the dance floor to others? Some of the new styles may have been short-lived fads, or their stylish performance could hide the fact that it was the same old movements just dressed up a bit.

Reading about paradigm shifts from different corners of Europe, it is this that strikes me. Let me

just give a few examples. In a volume on “Umbruchszeiten”, a number of the authors discuss ethnological paradigm shifts and upheavals. Martin Scharfe (2012) scrutinises the metaphors of “Umbruch”, and different takes on ruptures, revolutions, discontinuities and turns. When and how is a shift visible and for whom? Some ruptures are only noticed first in retrospect.

The volume also makes me think of the strong national framing of paradigm shifts; there is no smooth process of globalisation here. Take Germany and Sweden, for example. The *Abschied von Volksleben* and the farewell to folklife studies occurred quite simultaneously, but with little contact. In Sweden, the influence of British and Norwegian social anthropology meant that material culture, as well as the study of “cultural elements”, was out. In German *Volkskunde*, the shift had a stronger political dimension, in which the Nazi past was confronted. New theoretical ideas came much more from critical theory than from Anglo-Saxon anthropology, meaning, among other things, that a traditional cultural history approach survived better, and closer ties were maintained with the world of the museums.

The importance of the national becomes even more striking when one looks at the other German-speaking countries, where the dramatic years in the German *Volkskunde* of the late 1960s and early 1970s had a very slow and gradual impact (see Bendix 2012). “The quiet and late (r)evolution” is the title of Johann Verhovsek’s discussion of Austrian *Volkskunde*. As a student in the 1980s, he read about the radical transformations and conflicts in Germany and kept asking himself: “Why don’t we have a revolution, instead of only this slow and very gradual change of research” (Verhovsek 2012: 80). A similar non-dramatic and slow process of change is depicted from Switzerland (Hugger 1994).

France is a different story again (see Bromberger & Segalen 1996). Martine Segalen’s study of the birth and death of a national folk museum, the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris, illustrates the French context and the problems that traditional folklife and folklore studies had in re-inventing themselves in a situation where new generations of

ethnologists increasingly turned to the contemporary world and new theoretical approaches (Segalen 2005). The topics proper to an ethnology of France merge today with the general topics of anthropology. There was never a strong disciplinary division of labour in France between ethnologists working abroad or at home, as there was in the Scandinavian countries and Germany. It must be added that in France there is no dedicated chair for European ethnology, even though some researchers are dubbed “européanists”.<sup>1</sup>

In Eastern Europe the big upheaval came with the crumbling of the Soviet empire. Here, there was often an invasion of mainly British and American anthropologists doing fieldwork, who sweepingly and rather patronisingly defined the local ethnologists as backward or contaminated by the politics of the past (Buchowski & Dominguez 2012; Köstlin & Niedermüller 2002).

My point is that the local dance floor – the ways in which ethnology is done – depends on an entanglement of different factors, both local and global. For an outside visitor to German *Volkskunde* departments in the 1980s and 1990s, this was very striking. To me it sometimes felt like a journey through Germany before unification. Many departments attended to their local profile, often in fierce dissociation from others. There was a Tübingen, a Berlin, a Münster or a Frankfurt style of dancing. (Small and proud nation-states, sometimes ruled by very strong professorial personalities.) These differences seem to have become much less marked in later years.

All over Europe, the style of doing ethnology has also been determined by the local academic division of labour. (Who, at a given time and place, is defined as a close and interesting neighbouring science, or as a dangerous competitor? What kind of job market is there for students?) The recent *Companion to the Anthropology of Europe* (Kockel, Nic Craith & Frykman 2012) shows how the contemporary European research landscape has changed, in the blurring of old disciplinary boundaries, for example, between European ethnology, folklore, social anthropology and cultural studies.

Reading the contributions to this issue and look-

ing at earlier paradigm shifts, I am, however, also reminded that the *tabula rasa* of the 1960s and 1970s (or 1989) maybe was not so total as it was experienced at the time. What parts of the ethnological habitus were carried on between generations?

### **Fieldwork as Habitus**

All over Europe there are silent rooms in folklife archives with neat rows of boxes of ethnographic documentations. They are biding their time, waiting for someone to enter and start leafing through the materials, which often have not been used in decades. As Karin Gustavsson points out, they represent decades of countryside fieldwork, in attempts to salvage what was seen as a dying peasant culture. Much of this material is the result of enthusiastic fieldwork expeditions, followed by time-consuming reports. Opening these binders one might be struck by the order and aesthetics of the documentation, with its painstaking details, drawings and photos.

For younger generations of ethnologists, these materials seemed dead and those great efforts wasted. What was the use of all this? But, as several of the authors here show, this era has left important imprints on contemporary ethnology. Parts of our modern habitus were forged during these intensive fieldwork decades, from the 1920s and up to the 1960s. What does that legacy consist of?

Karin Gustavsson focuses on the craftsmanship that the pioneer decades of intensive fieldwork created. These were the years when ethnology became a discipline heavily defined by doing fieldwork, with skills that were rarely taught formally but were learned in the field. A new habitus emerged, based on exploration, improvisation and curiosity – what might be waiting around the next corner: a unique farm construction, a barn with old tools, a folk singer? Fieldwork created a brotherhood of researchers. This was a male activity, a bit of a military campaign in which one had to rough it out in ways that tended to exclude women. Women were delegated to the less heroic and visible tasks of organising the materials back home in the museums and the folklife archives. At a later stage, they became part of the fieldwork campaigns. I also think Gustavsson's focus on the

role of technology is important here. What impact did the bike, the camera, the measuring tape and the sketching set have on ethnological practice?

The crisis came in the 1950s when the traditional rural culture was seen as gone, with nothing left to document or save. This was a crucial situation for ethnology. Like other fields in the humanities that had a fieldwork tradition, such as art history and cultural history, the discipline could have chosen to withdraw from the field, to become an archival science, no longer exploring a contemporary world. But by then, the fieldwork habitus seems to have been so strongly established that European ethnology was not transformed into just another historical discipline, but maintained its important asset of combining contemporary and historical studies. In a similar manner, the fieldwork habitus, with its special mindset and analytical gaze, was also used in archival study – fieldwork in the archives, as Rebecca Lennartsdotter (2011), among others, has discussed.

The meticulously gathered materials on farm buildings may appear as a dead legacy from the past (although one never knows when that will change), but the fieldwork habitus, the way of doing ethnology, is a strong legacy from the 1920s and 1930s.

These transformations of old and new paradigms are also discussed in Signe Mellemegaard's "Rupture and Continuity". Her discussion of the work of Bjarne Stoklund reminds us of the importance of bridge builders in a discipline. In retrospect, it is possible to see how important his efforts were in keeping up a dialogue between research generations – often a thankless task. We could probably identify similar brokers in other ethnological settings in Europe.

### **What's the Use of Maps?**

In "Revisiting the Histories of Mapping", Anders Kristian Munk and Torben Elgaard Jensen in a sense take over where Gustavsson stops in their discussions of the grand comparative atlas projects that developed out of the documentations of peasant cultures – the historical-geographical paradigm from the 1930s and into the 1960s. It is both surprising and refreshing to see them discuss what was lost in

the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, when new social and cultural theory vigorously attacked the old paradigm. Is there anything that can be learned from these atlas projects?

Munk and Elgaard Jensen, as well as Mellemgaard, discuss what was lost when the idea of cultural elements was abandoned for a view of culture as a system and a pattern in the 1970s, under the heavy influence of British anthropology. In those days, one had to choose – in the tough battle between two paradigms. Today we might be more open to alternating between different definitions of culture and see them as supplementary analytical tools rather than theoretical credos. In a similar manner, we might see more of a combination of qualitative and quantitative data in the future. For students of everyday life, the enormous output of Big Data provides a challenge and a possibility (see, for example, the discussion in Pantzar & Shove 2010; and Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013). There are staggering amounts of knowledge on rhythms, routines and decision-making in the everyday (sometimes jealously guarded by large corporations). When do people call home on the cell phone, swipe their credit cards, or log in to the Netbank or Netflix? Facebook contains unparalleled amounts of material on everyday life (Rudder 2014). Here is a chance for ethnologists to strike up new analytic partnerships, but also to take a critical look at how Big Data is used by those who control the material.

### **The Magic of the Everyday**

The magic of the everyday is still with us, as Damsholt and Jespersen discuss. In interdisciplinary collaborations, and in situations where ethnologists are brought in as consultants, they are expected to unravel the secrets of everyday life and make the mundane exotic and surprising. In the fast growing world of applied ethnology, it is for this skill of doing ethnographies of the everyday that ethnologists are most often hired by corporations and government agencies.

As Damsholt and Jespersen point out, “the everyday” often stands for inertia, boring routines and status quo. This becomes very striking in discus-

sions of technological change, in which the everyday is often relegated to the role of a passive backdrop, a scene-setter, but not an active actor. There is a constant talk of how innovations, from digital media to nano-technology, will revolutionise everyday life. As ethnologists, we should turn the question around for a change. How does the everyday revolutionise new technologies? Everyday life can be seen as a machinery that drastically changes the forms, functions and futures of new media, for example. It chews and devours new technologies, some of which are spat out rapidly because they cannot be integrated into quotidian practices and needs. Others are digested, tested, adapted and changed. There is a lot of tinkering going on here, as Damsholt and Jespersen show.

We still know surprisingly little about how this machinery works. One could argue that everyday life is still the black box of ethnology. We like to market ourselves as the masters of its study, but our understanding is still piecemeal and fragmented, a thought I find comforting. There is still much to be discovered (to stay with our favourite metaphor). We live in an academic world of theoretical “turns”, the material, the spatial, the affective, the practice, the sensory, the ontological... Without getting trapped in turn hunting, this search for overlooked dimensions in the study of everyday life could help us to focus more not only on “new dimensions” but on what Doreen Massey (2005) has called the throughtogetherness, and what Tim Ingold (2011) calls the entanglements, of everyday life. How do objects, people, emotions, sensibilities or activities come to co-exist?

### **The Mysteries of Fieldwork**

Another theme of Damsholt and Jespersen’s concerns researchers’ relations to “the folk”, that is the informants, the locals, the collaborators. They point to the two traditions, to the enlightenment of the eighteenth century, seeing the need to study the people in order to be able to understand and change their peculiar customs and stubborn traditions, to the romantic discovery of “the folk” in the early nineteenth century as the true basis for a national culture. Both these traditions came to shape ethnological praxis into the twentieth century. A strong

dialogue between laymen and academic scholars had been established, networks of informants created through the folklife archives, etc. This tradition of collaborating and co-authoring was sometimes seen as a problem; a real science needs to distance itself from amateurs, but as Frida Hastrup says in her discussion of ethnography as an intensive conversation, there is also a strength in this tradition. She talks about ethnography as a conversational product, an inventive and collaborative sociality.

Both anthropologists and ethnologists have been accused of mystifying the methods of ethnography. A professor in organisational studies once remarked that the quickest way to identify an ethnological dissertation is through the fact that it usually lacks a chapter on method. Ethnography is described as a mystic skill that ethnologists acquire together with their magic “ethnological gaze”, through which they discover new worlds in the everyday.

I like Hastrup’s discussion of the ethnographic process as open-ended, inventive and messy, and the ways in which she revisits the fieldwork of Eilert Sundt, a nineteenth-century scholar who has many parallels in Europe. What we see here is another analytical asset, using history and earlier studies as partners in dialogue.

Finally, there is a balancing act here in any discussion about practising ethnography. There is always a risk of fetishising fieldwork as a trade secret, which cannot be turned into textbook instructions, and then, on the other side, trying to discipline it into a set of methodological procedures.

## **Borders**

Borders are another analytical category central to much ethnological research, both past and present. As Fredrik Nilsson shows, it is a concept that has changed form and function in ethnological research. What kinds of work do borders carry out in different ethnological eras and fields? Reading Nilsson, I am struck by how culturally productive borders and boundaries are as concepts (these twin terms open up for a more flexible perspective than the single Scandinavian *gräns/grense* or German *Grenze*). Boundaries are often soft, fuzzy and porous, while

borders can be sharp, based on the modern magic of the thin line.

Nilsson’s empirical example of smugglers and smuggling is a good way of approaching questions of national borders. There is still much energy to be drawn from comparative historical studies here. What or who must the nation be protected from, in a given situation and at a given time in history: contraband, luxury goods, political pamphlets, illegal immigrants, drugs, or terrorist threats?

Like Karin Gustavsson, Fredrik Nilsson shows the potentials of the return of the material in ethnological research. His focus on smuggler’s speedboats, fancy cars and new radio transmitters as not only icons of modernity but as ways of reorganising cross-border activities is rewarding. Moving into contemporary times, we can see the intense material investments in border surveillance and border passages, gigantic sorting out machines for goods, ideas and people. Ivaylo Ditchev, writing about travelling in the Balkans, points to how closely forms of mobility interact with social hierarchy. The Mercedes with grey-toned windows is waved across quickly by the border guards, while the battered van next in line is taken apart. Lorry drivers wait in long queues and the suitcase traders travelling by bus have to get out and line up for border inspection. At the bottom of the transport hierarchy are the illegal immigrants avoiding the checkpoint and crossing over the mountains, led by local and expensive guides (quoted in Morley 2011: 753).

## **Back to the Dance Floor**

Ethnology and folklore are, like anthropology, very habitus-oriented disciplines, containing many, often silent agreements on “how to be a scholar” and a wide range of embodied skills. This collection has focused much on the Scandinavian experience, and especially Denmark and Sweden, but it provides a platform for further discussions. By focusing on the mundane ways of doing ethnology in different generations there are a number of dialogues with the past established in these papers. There are also constant navigation problems – the dangers of Scylla and Charybdis constantly change and it is not always

the best strategy to keep to the middle road.

Reading these papers, I was struck by the importance of two choices that the discipline has encountered. In the 1950s, ethnology in Scandinavia could have turned into an archival and purely historical discipline, as the fieldwork salvage operations seemed to be finished. Ethnology might have become purely cultural history. In the 1970s, the risk was the opposite. The interest in ethnographies of the contemporary world carried the risk of ethnology abandoning its old historical interests and competences. Back then, the discipline could have turned into a study of the present, a kind of cultural sociology or anthropology. Looking back, I find it lucky that the discipline kept this twofold interest in studying the present and the past. It has created analytical strategies of using the past to problematise the present and the other way around. A historical perspective is thus never a given, but is often actively chosen as part of an analytical strategy.

A discipline like European ethnology, where one can study almost anything, is no longer held together by shared materials and knowledge, but, rather, through a set of skills and analytical approaches, and this means that the discipline has to constantly reinvent itself. And in this process, a bit of revisiting now and then is a good thing.

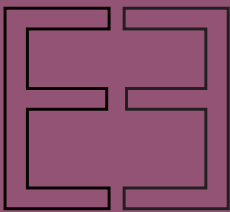
## Note

- 1 I am grateful for Martine Segalen's and Monica Heintz' comments on the French situation.

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- Orvar Löfgren is professor emeritus in European ethnology at Lund University, Sweden. The cultural analysis and ethnography of everyday life has been an ongoing focus in his research. Central research fields have been studies of national identity and transnational mobility, media and consumption.  
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The leitmotif of this special issue is "revisiting": Swedish and Danish scholars pay a visit to concepts and approaches of the field of European ethnology. In re-examining, revising, reawakening and relaunching concepts and approaches that might have otherwise been overlooked, worn out or rejected, they explore and explicate new dimensions of research that have remained tacit knowledge. In engaging with past knowledge claims, concepts and research endeavours, the volume offers original reworkings of the role of everyday life in user-driven innovation projects (Tine Damsholt and Astrid P. Jespersen), on the possible links between the historic-geographic atlas works and controversy mapping (Anders K. Munk and Torben Elgaard Jensen), understanding the meaning and creation of archival knowledge (Karin Gustavsson), and of fieldwork engagements (Frida Hastrup). Discussing the role of continuity and rupture in past and present analyses (Signe Mellempgaard) and rethinking borders (Fredrik Nilsson) are further avenues explored. Four main themes forge the connections of this volume: *reworking everyday life*, *fieldwork as craftsmanship*, *mapping connections* and *conversing with the past* create a dynamic matrix of novel takes on ethnologies for the future. The six contributions are supplemented with four comments; in commenting on the revisits, they contribute their own reflections on revisiting European ethnology.



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