

CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL ROLES OF WESTERN ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND INDIGENOUS ETHNOLOGISTS

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In this paper I will address one of the central questions of this workshop –“how has the social role of the researcher changed in the past thirty years?”– focusing thereby on my own discipline, anthropology. More precisely, in trying to answer this question I will compare western “anthropology” at the one hand, and indigenous “ethnology” at the other. There are fundamental differences between the two: we are talking here of two distinct scholarly traditions, which have had fundamentally different trajectories, resulting in different orientations and the use of a different methodology. I hope that my analysis may raise similar issues regarding historiographical traditions pertaining to South-Eastern Europe, both those produced in the West and in the region itself, the obvious question being: Is there a similar clash between the Western historians *of* the region and the indigenous traditions of historiography *in* the region? And, what can we learn from that?

As far as indigenous ethnology in the region is concerned, there is a long tradition of ethnographic production which goes back to the nineteenth century. At that stage (proto-)ethnographies – such as those of the Serbian scholar Vuk Karadžić – played an important role in defining the nation, establishing its boundaries in cultural terms, and defining the unity of the nation. These ethnographies were also instrumental in drawing the geographic borders of the nation, and justifying territorial claims which the new nations in South-Eastern Europe had. In order to define the nation, the new nationalist elites looked away from the urban centres – which during the long periods of Ottoman and Habsburg rule had become mixed and cosmopolitan in character, inhabited by artisans, traders and officials coming from various parts of the empires – but at the countryside, which was considered the repository of native folk institutions which had survived foreign rule.

Ethnographers thus played a crucial role in discovering “our own way of life” which they found mainly among the rural peasant populations. East European ethnology was thus very much linked to the discovery of the (national) Self, i.e. the noble primitive within, who had managed to keep his cultural traditions intact in the face of foreign rule. This type of scholarship served wider

political interests and played a role in the nationalist and territorial designs that developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ethnographers and social geographers, such as Jovan Cvijić and Tihomir Djordjević, were for example closely involved in the creation of Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference after World War One. They were hired as experts in the “Ethnographic Section” which advised the Yugoslav delegation with respect to the drawing of frontiers of the new state.¹

On the other hand, the rise of Western anthropology as a discipline was very much linked to the colonial encounter: a completely different context but nevertheless as political as the former. Instead of discovering the Self, its objective was the discovery of the colonial Other, in order to facilitate and legitimate colonial rule. Yet, as soon as the process of decolonisation set in, most anthropologists were forced to give up their traditional fieldwork sites in the former colonies. To use John Cole’s phrase, they came “part-way home” and started doing community studies in Europe, often at the fringe and periphery of the old continent: the Mediterranean and the Balkans.² Greece was a particularly popular destination, but also some socialist countries that followed an independent course such as Yugoslavia and Romania.

As a growing number of western anthropologists started to carry out fieldwork in South-Eastern Europe, they clashed with the other scholarly tradition of indigenous ethnology. The latter, although producing sometimes excellent ethnography, had important drawbacks. It was encyclopaedic and positivist in character, resulting in detailed ethnographic surveys and descriptions of specific communities and regions. Research strategies were based not on periods of prolonged fieldwork, i.e. participant observation of the individual researcher such as in Western anthropology, but on short fact-finding missions by groups of researchers from the urban centres to the villages, usually focusing on material culture and not interested in the mindset or worldview of the peasant.³ Theoretical reflection was largely absent among the practitioners of this scholarly tradition, for instance on how political power and national(ist) designs were implicated in ethnographic representations. Most ethnographic work was traditionalist and inward-looking, and the horizon of most ethnographers was limited to the ethnic group to which they belonged. A comparative approach was usually lacking. All these drawbacks were noticeable in the former Yugoslavia during the 1980s, when I started to do fieldwork: the profession was compartmentalised along ethnic lines. Within the context of “brotherhood and

¹ See: Joel M. Halpern and Eugene A. Hammel, *Observations on the intellectual history of ethnology and other social sciences in Yugoslavia*, in “Comparative Studies in Society and History”, 11 (1), 1969, p. 17-26.

² John W. Cole, *Anthropology comes part-way home: community studies in Europe*, in “Annual Reviews in Anthropology”, 6, 1977, p. 349-378.

³ For an instructive account see: Longina Jakubowska, *Writing about Eastern Europe. Perspectives from ethnography and anthropology*, in Henk Driessen (ed.), *The Politics of Ethnographic Reading and Writing*, Saarbruecken/Fort Lauderdale, Breitenbach, 1993, p. 143-159.

unity”, the ethnologist’s primary (i.e. socially sanctioned) role was to document the cultural make-up of his group. I remember, for example, how a prominent Albanian ethnologist from Kosovo, specialised in the “national” costumes of the region, was unable to advise me on the costumes of non-Albanians living in the province. Then, during the nationalist euphoria of the 1990s, ethnologists were once again mobilised to “rescue” or trace the religious traditions and cultural make-up of the nation, which was deemed to have eroded during forty years of communism. Instead of seeing the ethnologist’s role *under* and *after* communism as essentially different, however, I believe there was a great deal of continuity in what was expected.

On the other hand, Western anthropologists working in the region spent prolonged periods of time doing fieldwork and participant observation. They were criticised by their indigenous colleagues for their lack of preparation, their ignorance of indigenous ethnography and historical background, and their “slash-and-burn” approach, using their fieldwork to come to sweeping generalisations and then move on to another region. Even though this criticism is understandable and partly justified, Western anthropologists can rightfully claim to have been more outward-looking, holistic and comparative in their approach. They also have had certain advantages compared to indigenous ethnologists in that they could tackle certain taboos more easily, such as the issues of local politics and ethnic relations. They also have been able to provide a nuanced analysis of every-day life under socialism, countering the cruder versions of Cold-War thinking about “the authoritarian East” in the West. For example in the former Yugoslavia, Western anthropologists carried out major research on the effects of urbanisation and modernisation in the 1960s and 1970s, and on the problems and obstacles that occurred in the course of these processes. In this way they helped to understand and alleviate the consequences of social and economic change.⁴ More recently, Western anthropologists have studied the consequences of post-socialist transition, primarily describing these processes from the point of view of the rural classes.⁵

During the 1980s and 1990s, a certain degree of rapprochement occurred between the two traditions. There were collaborative projects. Western scholars started to take the indigenous ethnographic traditions more seriously, and scholars from the region (such as from Greece and Yugoslavia) started to study in the West. The latter contributed to the introduction of Western oriented anthropology in existing research institutes, the most well-known and successful of which is probably the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb. Nevertheless, differences and frictions between western and indigenous ethnologists and anthropologists have continued. Scholars from the region,

⁴ Andrei Simić. *The Peasant Urbanites. A Study of Rural-Urban Mobility in Serbia*, New York and London, Seminar Press, 1973.

⁵ Chris Hann, *After Communism: reflections on East European anthropology and the “transition”*, in “Social Anthropology”, 2 (3), 1994, p. 229-250.

especially in the former Yugoslavia, were almost inevitably affected by and drawn into the processes of ethnic polarisation that accompanied the break-up of Yugoslavia. As they had just freed themselves from the political imperatives of the Communist period, they now had to write ethnography in the national key. As soon as the war started, they saw themselves documenting the suffering and victimisation of their own nation, for instance in the “Ethnography of War” that was produced in Zagreb.⁶ There were strong political pressures to do so, making the writing of alternative ethnographies (for instance describing the suffering of Others) difficult, certainly at the beginning of the 1990s. There was no work done across the newly established ethno-national and political boundaries. At most what these texts showed was that there was variation in how refugees and other categories of victims tried to cope with their experiences and give meaning to them through ritual and narrative.

Most Western anthropologists, on the other hand, have tried consistently to counter the essentialising and homogenising messages of nationalism, particularly when the wars in Yugoslavia broke out. They did this by deconstructing the nationalist rhetorics that were dominating public discourse in the region, by documenting the realities of interethnic coexistence and hybridity that the newly established national states tried to eliminate, and by unraveling the roots of the war in other than ethnic or nationalist terms.⁷ There was another trend, however, in Western scholarship and journalism, and also present in some anthropological accounts of the war, which resorted to culturalist explanations of why the violence in the former Yugoslavia had occurred and why the transition towards liberal democracy had not worked out as expected, the underlying assumption being that cultural patterns and traditions determine political possibilities and outcomes.⁸

Many anthropologists doing fieldwork in the region in the last two decades have had to cope, in one way or another, with the problems that the transition has caused. As a result of this, anthropologists have been involved in policy oriented research and other forms of applied or “instant” anthropology: they have done work for the UN, for the OSCE, the Worldbank, for NGOs and other international organisations active in the region, dealing for instance with refugees or post-war reconstruction. I myself have been involved in an official

⁶ See especially Lada Èale Feldman, Ines Priza and Reana Senjković (eds.), *Fear, death and resistance. An ethnography of war: Croatia 1991-1992*, Zagreb, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, 1993.

⁷ See for instance: Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way. Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995; Loring M. Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict. Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995; Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, London, Hurst, 2000; Anastasia N. Karakasidou, *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood. Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia, 1870-1990*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

⁸ See for instance: Mattijs van de Port, *Gypsies, Wars & Other Instances of the Wild. Civilisation and its Discontents in a Serbian Town*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1998.

(academic) inquiry into the dramatic fall of the UN Safe Area of Srebrenica in July 1995, commissioned by the Dutch government. I also have worked as a consultant for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague. Although I believe that such activities may carry benefits to the region and may help to allievate suffering, they also have possible downsides: they tend to have political implications, and for instance carry the risk of reinforcing hegemonic practices by the West objectifying and mastering the East. The only remedy to this problem is always to be aware of the fact that our work – also if it is purely “scholarly” – may have (un)intended political consequences and implications.