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fighting (yet respecting) stereotypes since 1971

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Ethnologia Scandinavica – Fighting (Yet Respecting) Stereo-types since 1971

By Katarzyna Herd

In this text, concerning 50 years of *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, I shall follow ethnological development in the context of the object of study that in itself came to influence the shape and character of Nordic ethnology as a discipline. It is no mystery nor surprise that the roots of ethnology, which were in the study and collection of material from a dwindling pre-industrial society, were acknowledged and cherished as peasant society and their complex struggles were at the core of many initial papers published in *Ethnologia Scandinavica*. I also include anglers' communities in that category, as they formed a part of the changing landscape of progressing industrialism. My aim, thus, is to trace the change from the archive-based peasant society studies, to other forms and focuses of studying society, illustrated by papers published in *Ethnologia Scandinavica*.

The selection of the articles was based mainly on the thematic focus. I scanned issues from 1971 until 2019, looking for the topics represented. I became intrigued (in a rather modern manner) by the plentiful titles including peasants and fish. Present-day issues did not seem to be as popular. It was (mostly) the problems and upheavals of the nineteenth century that preoccupied ethnologists. As my own research interests include a historical perspective and the production of history, I have been drawn to the (over)indulgence in the archives that is visible in the material. I would even risk a statement that it reflects in a way the concept of communicative and cultural memory, developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann (1988, 2011). History that can be communicated from person to person, from the actual source to younger listeners, lasts about 90 years, according to Jan Assmann. Could

one say that archives were more “alive” in the 1970s? Sigurd Erixon, one of the early ethnologists defining the subject, died in 1968. The archive that he helped to build was still represented by a living person until the late 1960s.

Spatio-temporal frames in the articles from the 1960s and 1970s are often impressive and almost intimidating to a modern ethnologist. Orvar Löfgren (1974) not only refers to a time span from 1750 to 1900, but also includes diverse locations in Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Veikko Anttila starts the saga of seine-fishing Finns in 1550s, by focusing on the period between 1885 and 1967. Alan Hjorth Rasmussen (1974) discusses peasants in Denmark, landscape and ecology within the period 1887–1972. Orvar Löfgren, in another article from 1976, goes back with the peasants to 1800 and finishes in 1970. The changes described mostly concern changing economic realities. Even Löfgren's family patterns (1974) are framed as “means of production”.

By 1978 peasants seem to be adapting to bourgeois culture, as Palle Ove Christiansen wrote about changing cultural patterns among Danish peasants since 1860s and noticed increasing consumption in peasant households. The *Ethnologia Scandinavica* issue from 1980 also contains articles about pre-industrial society. The past seemed important. It was accessible too, as Orvar Löfgren commented on the amount of material:

The Scandinavian source material for this type of historical reconstruction is superior to that of most other countries. Thanks primarily to a long tradition of zealous bureaucrats, the Scandinavian demographic data from the mid-18th century onwards is both highly reliable and varied, including

not only population censuses but, more importantly, very accurate parish registers as well as legal and fiscal records (1974:17).

Löfgren juxtaposed this with Scandinavia as an “uncharted scholarly wilderness” (1974:17) which represents his (and others’) justification for that particular research focus. The archives were there and stuffed to the brim with data. Hence Bjarne Stoklund, for example, could make an interesting remark about worries of deforestation and overcutting of royal forests in Denmark in 1570 (1976:90). Even though some of the ethnological articles resemble historical sketches, and others, in my view, read like economic history, they strove to present a different picture, with the emphasis on “different”. Disturbing classifications, questioning categories, and fighting stereotypes seems to be the unifying feature of many texts concerning peasant societies.

Orvar Löfgren wrote at the beginning of his article from 1974 that “Scholarly interest in pre-industrial family structure has increased greatly during the last few years” (Löfgren 1974:17). One wonders why. No comprehensive parallels to modern situations are given in those earlier articles. The problems of the nineteenth century tend to stay in the nineteenth century. If one has easily accessible heaps of material and one considers the field to be “uncharted wilderness”, of course, then a return to the past is easy to justify. I would argue, however, that the salient point of the historical approach was to disturb and unsettle, the ethnologists publishing in early *Ethnologia Scandinavica* tried to muddle the ancient waters and hoped to paint a more nuanced picture. Change, adaptation and flexibility

of the studied subjects emerge. The changes do not just happen to peasants or anglers. They are resourceful, able to accommodate change, like Stoklund’s pre-industrial Danish peasants: “the peasants of the woodland had adapted themselves to the ever changing conditions inherent in the exploitation of resources before the radical changes introduced in 1805” (1976:91).

Hence, phrases like “peasant adaptation” appear; change and flexibility are stressed. Additionally, the ethnologists were adapting too. By 1979, Nils-Arvid Bringéus wrote an article on cultural communication that is active, adaptive, complex and changing, while referring to the previous “research darlings” and a need to move forward:

Our measurements are always valid for older buildings, but not for newly-constructed houses. Our analysis of objects includes those made of wood, iron or natural fibers, but not plastic objects and artificial fibers. The forward limits to material research have thus often been drawn at the emergence of industrialism. [...] If we turn our attention to the symbolic function of things, the study of objects those of the Age of Plastic can be just as exciting as in pre-industrial society (Bringéus 1979:14).

We know now that Bringéus was right. Wooden houses in woodlands were abandoned and the urban jungle became the preferred setting for ethnological studies. However, it was still a rarity when the 1980 issue of *Ethnologia Scandinavica* came, marked with an interesting debate about the embourgeoisement of the peasants.

As I mentioned, Palle Ove Christiansen wrote in 1978 about changing cultural patterns in Danish peasant society. He referred to an earlier study by Sven B. Ek. According to Ek’s own article from 1980,

Christiansen misunderstood his points totally. Sprinkled with phrases like “excellent body of material” in a “stimulating article” by a “young Danish researcher”, we find an unapologetic attack and discontent with how Ek’s own work was presented. To a modern reader, this is both curious and frightening. Sven B. Ek lists “misinterpretation of details”, states that, “Christiansen’s explanation is incorrect”, complains that the young Danish researcher missed a paper by Hermann Bausinger from 1971. But the gravest sin of them all, Christiansen misunderstood, criticized and misrepresented Ek’s research, although Ek did exactly what Christiansen did, just that he did it 20 years earlier (1980:42). Ek’s conclusion – Christiansen was not educated enough in the discipline of ethnology:

But perhaps this presumed lack of knowledge is instead a manifestation of a general research problem that came about as a result of a particular set of circumstances. [...] a certain discontinuity of knowledge exists in ethnological research today and that this is grounded in some form of what we might call a paradigmatic change. [...] The Swedish university system was reorganized. Mandatory course instruction was introduced and suddenly room was made for an entire generation of young scholars and teachers. [...] they had demanding instructional duties and had to work within limited timeframes. The time they had at their disposal was mainly devoted to more in-depth knowledge in line with the new trends. If [...] a certain information gap arose between the older research generation and the younger, it is neither strange nor reprehensible. [...] The crucial thing in this connection is that the new generation of teachers, and hence the new students, accordingly came to run the risk of disinheriting itself from the estate of an older body of knowledge that might have been used for new research purposes (Ek 1980:42–43).

Poor Christiansen became an example of the growing ignorance of the up-and-coming ethnological generations. The new was approaching, though slowly, as the 1980 *Ethnologia Scandinavica* issue is just peasants on peasants and pre-industrial realities galore. The past was still the Golden Age. Yet, the ethnological gaze started to shift towards the present, which meant abandoning the villages and fisheries, shorter studies, cramped historical perspectives, and less archives. In other words, ethnology started to mature to what it is today. It fed well on historical sources, grew strong and shifted its focus, including present and future, rather than excluding the past, as Ek was afraid would happen. Even though the older ethnologist reacted with well-structured fury at the newcomer’s scholarly attempt, they both actually tried to question, disturb and muddle familiar categories and pondered on new interpretational possibilities. The New was listening to the Old, only not in the expected way.

Throughout the issues from 1980s, one sees diverse themes, as identities, communication and urban environments begin to feel more comfortable on the pages of *Ethnologia Scandinavica*. Peasants still appear, though more sporadically. In the issue from 1986, Bo Lönnqvist and Juhani U.E. Lehtonen both tackle the question of peasant identity and peasant change in two different articles. Both present historical sketches painted with rather thick brushes, going through the entire twentieth century and even further, as Lehtonen connects the twentieth century to the eighteenth. We learn that peasants had felt both the pressures and possibilities from urban environments for centuries. The change was narrated as inevitable, but seeing the process

seemed to have a soothing effect. There is talk of patterns, themes, and reoccurrences. In other words, one accommodates changes, gets used to them. The change is not new, then; it is an old trick of nature, even though it might speed up a bit when approaching the end of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the long storylines in many of these older articles in *Ethnologia Scandinavica* served the purpose of creating steady enough continuity to facilitate the break with the past. If all continues, like a long, spiral conversation (Bringéus 1979) then one does not have to fear the future. It will all be a continuity. Bo Lönnqvist remarked in his article “Social Ideals and Cultural Patterns in Twentieth-Century Finland”:

Culture is something that must be constructed and reconstructed as a continuous process. Cultural artefacts are comprised of ideologies, systems of belief, moral codes and institutions, among other things. The internalization of our values takes place through language and communication and is expressed in our system of classification (Lönnqvist 1986:19).

The continuous process reveals itself slowly. The *Ethnologia Scandinavica* issue from 1989 brings another time travel to the 1860s, on this occasion located in Western Jutland, as Ellen Damgaard gradually presented the small town of Lemvig, which was akin to Siberia, apparently, in terms of relative remoteness and, well, wilderness comparing to the Copenhagen region (1989). There were “striking similarities” between Lemvig and sixteenth-century Dutch farmers (1989:108) as they expressed more “urban” aspiration for consumption, something that Damgaard traced carefully through time. Western Jutland was not, then, a Siberia, but a specific region with

growing possibilities and access to other parts of Europe (1989:124). Damgaard questioned centre and periphery. The capital just did not understand the core position of Lemvig. The margins were a matter of perception, even in the nineteenth century.

While following the common patterns, Damgaard broke them, challenged them. This became a theme of dealing with the past. One did not have to strive just to preserve it. One could also play with it. The old was not as fragile as one might consider. As I looked through different volumes of *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, one text from a later issue (2011) made me gasp. It was Niels Jul Nielsen’s “Always on the Edge: Prostitution in Debate and Cityscape”. Obviously, hardly any peasants there, but it made me connect to the book from the 1970s that had the biggest impact on me from all the founding ethnological literature that we were presented with as PhD students. It was Jonas Frykman’s *Horan i bondesamhället* (Whores in Peasant Society). The impact was not the subject of this doctoral dissertation, but the opening lines. In the first paragraph, Frykman presented the question for the dissertation: why were there so many whores and why were they so unevenly spread? (1977:9). A brilliant question, if you ask me. But in the second paragraph, the plot thickens: Frykman stated that he was not going to answer that. Instead, it would be about the cultural and social factors behind the process. A rebellion. A protest. A break with the past.

Hence, encouraged by my previous rebellious whore-encounters, I eagerly read about Nielsen’s whores, this time in Copenhagen, Denmark. The time span was similar, 1850 to 1910. The settings,

obviously, different. The Danish capital instead of the Swedish countryside. And the style (after spending too many evenings in ethnological 1970s and 1980s) was beyond recognition compared to the older texts. No whores really, mostly space and place, though juiced up with Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger and Henri Lefebvre, so steamy reading it was nevertheless, yet I could not help but become a bit puzzled by the style of an academic argument I could recognize so well from what I have tried to master myself during the past years. Perhaps I was all too eager to jump again to the past, encouraged by the dates clearly spelled out at the beginning of Nielsen's article. However, Nielsen's analysis, though working on the older material, kept me firmly in the present. It had the taste of present-day ethnology that I have been encouraged to embrace and compose.

It is not easy to frame the old, and it is equally tricky to contextualize the new. One gets almost jealous of the pace one could write with decades ago. That pace could take you centuries and centuries back without apologizing for not focusing on an issue from the last couple of years. The possibility to draw parallels with the remote past is also something that can trigger envy. Professor emeritus Timo Leisiö, in a very interesting text from an edited collection from 2000, connects his (rather) modern material of a riddle game "back deep to the Iron Age" (Leisiö 2000:282). Even the Ice Age is mentioned in another text in that volume, as a starting point for later Viking Age performances (Bregenhøj 2000). How one would love to be able to do that. At least I would. To have the voice and authority, deep knowledge (or a substantial, well-phrased hint) of the continu-

ous cultural processes that could go back not only centuries, but also millennia! Would I dare to include 200 years and four different countries in an article 8,000 characters long, nowadays? Hardly.

Somewhere around the year 2000, a balancing act took its final shape. Ethnologists balanced the past and the present, it would seem, and the scales tipped, making space for a modern focus, and more present-day fieldwork. We have become factual, focusing more on the events nearby, in our time-frames. Alternatively, events and happenings were brought to the present with the modern analytical toolbox. Careful referencing systems meant a firm grip of the fields, authors, things done and discussed, but they also created limitations. We cannot (should not) fantasize about the bygone, or imagine connections and interpretations. We have professionalized thinking and perhaps made writing more organized than creative. It is a process though, an ongoing conversation, a spiral of communication that goes simultaneously up and down and sideways, as Nils-Arvid Bringéus showed in a neat and beautiful diagram (1979:13).

Peasant society once constituted the core of ethnological research. Tracing that research is like tracing change and tradition simultaneously, rebellion and preservation. Slowly, the disappearing peasant society evaporates from the pages of *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, not completely, but it is treated in a different manner. It helps to answer questions about the present. Other landscapes opened and with them possibilities. After all, there is so much to research and so little time. Ethnology could not stay in villages and small towns forever. It had to make the journey to the big industrialized spaces. It had to open for topics such

as migration, commodification, digitalization, and spread the networks.

So peasants did not disappear really. Nor did time-frames. Nor did diagrams. They are just not part of the current cultural communication. We might still focus on peasant cultures, and massive time-frames, and even be enchanted by diagrams again. I urge you to go to Nils-Arvid Bringéus's text from 1979. Although not about peasants, it paints a picture of a connection. Of swirling thoughts that rush to reach the new, unique and undiscovered, but including the past, relating to the past, coming from the past. I thought I knew the story, I thought I could guess what the old articles would bring, but I was surprised. The past really is, as David Lowenthal (2015) writes, a foreign country.

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