The paradox of nationalism in constructing heritage

Gustavsson, Karin

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Karin Gustavsson, PhD Student
Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Division of Ethnology
Lund university
www.kultur.lu.se
Karin.gustavsson@kultur.lu.se

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I will start with introducing my topic generally, and then I will speak about a specific example, the cooperation between a Swedish and a Danish scholar. This specific example is supposed to illustrate a more general phenomenon. I will close with some question that may open for some discussion.

My thesis is based upon the documentations of a vanishing peasant society that was conducted in the Swedish countryside, particularly during 1920 - and 1930's. Fieldworks were organized by museums and universities in Sweden. In the summer of 1920, about 35 persons participated in fieldworks with the aim documenting the material culture in the countryside (Gustavsson 2009:107).

The fieldworkers were mostly young men, students in arts or architecture. They worked in small groups, using quite simple equipment, and they travelled by bicycle. My study is merely based upon these documentations of buildings and settlements. But all aspects of peasant culture were considered as worth documentation – settlements, cultivation, traditions and customs, dialects and place names, folklore and folk tales. Analysis and studies of the collection of these aspects of peasant culture made by ethnologists and historians are important for me (Skott 2008, Lilja 1996). The same ideas were behind the efforts that were made in all different projects that involved documentation of the vanishing folk culture. Old buildings were looked upon as representative for a national culture, just because they where old. Old manners in housing and building techniques were, so to speak, conserved from an older era and therefore bearer of witness of an old lifestyle.

In my doctoral thesis I describe and analyze the documentations of vernacular architecture in Sweden during the first decades of the 20:th century. The leading key person in this was the ethnologist Sigurd Erixon. From 1916 he was employed by the Nordic Museum, *Nordiska museet*. (*Nordiska museet* is the main institution for cultural history in Sweden, located in a huge building at Djurgården, just outside the city centre of Stockholm). In 1934 he became professor in ethnology in Stockholm.

Erixon started investigations and documentations in the Swedish countryside by himself 1912, but he had a great talent for organization and soon he managed to arrange and finance fieldworks in several landscapes. His goal was to organize and conduct systematically investigations, which he also managed with very well.

Cultural nationalism

I soon realized that this was not an isolated Swedish phenomenon. Similar projects were carried out in many European countries. Within each country, the need to explore what was defined as peasant culture was presented as strongly nationalist projects. But the contacts were frequent between key people in each country. The work was conducted similarly, using the same conceptual background in various countries. The cultural nationalism that had begun to develop in Europe during the 19th century was, as Orvar Löfgren has pointed out, an international movement, where ideas about what constituted a real “folk" were distributed across national borders (Löfgren 1989:6 ff). The Swedish arguments for why these activities were important and needed government subsidies were mainly based on a nationalist rhetoric - it was important for the nation and national self-esteem that the knowledge of people's past was kept alive. The same type of arguments was used in other countries. Every nation needed a common langue and a common past, but also a national folk culture. This national inventory was produced mainly during the nineteenth century, but elaborated during the twentieth.

Hence, there is an interesting paradox in how arguments in favour of the national imperative are used. The same arguments were used in several different countries to assert their own national interests. The same methods were also used in the documentations. What was emphasized as strictly national projects of great value to the

own nation was simultaneously in many countries.

A specific example

I will now talk about the similarities in how the practical fieldwork was carried out with examples from Sweden and Denmark, two Scandinavian neighbours who may seem very similar, but the nation-state in each country were raised in different ways. And during the 1920's - and 1930's a notion of an existing and special common Nordic culture was founded. Organizations were founded with the aim to develop cooperation between the Nordic countries in different ways.

I am investigating the relations between two key persons, Sigurd Erixon in Sweden and Halvor Zangenberg in Denmark, with the aim to analyze how their projects were strictly national and important in the process to form a national identity, and in the same time, carried on in a similar way in the two countries. Their contact was also a very concrete example of cooperation within the Nordic sphere, as I just mentioned. Erixon has already been mentioned. Zangenberg was during the same time the most prominent expert in the same field – vernacular architecture – in Denmark.

The need for documentation of folk culture was expressed in the Swedish parliament in 1919. 1920 this led to an official committee in Sweden aiming to find forms of organization for the systematic collection of a vanishing Swedish folk culture. The committee early looked towards the other Scandinavian countries, in order to learn how similar projects were managed in the neighbour countries. Where was the responsibility for the work conducted – within authorities, museums, and universities or among voluntaries? What priorities were made? How was the work funded?

Experts from the other Nordic countries were invited to the committee meetings. The committee initially looked at how the urgent task had been solved or were suggested to be settled in Denmark, Norway and Finland. What then were considered were mainly the practical aspects and questions about how the work was organized, but of course this also caused an ideological influence between the different countries (SOU 1924:26-27). Thus, the contacts between Zangenberg and Erixon can be seen as a practical and personal expression of what was on the official agenda.

I do not know how Zangenberg and Erixon learned to know one another. But they came from the same generation, and they both devoted their careers to the same phenomena. I suppose that they met in the early 1920's, perhaps at an international congress like the one we are visiting now. Perhaps in Copenhagen 1924 at an international congress for ethnologists that they both participated in? It is also possible that their friendship and collegial exchange begun by writing to one another.

They were both in leading position within this field; so rather, it had been strange if they had NOT established contact with each other. The number of professionals was small, so were the community of scholars. Therefore it was necessary to create networks that often were beyond borders of nations.

Zangenberg was educated as an architect. He had a strong interest for the old Danish folk culture and already in the 1910:s he started with investigations of farmsteads and other old rural buildings, as a volunteer. In 1920 he was employed at the open-air museum, Frilandsmuseet, north of Copenhagen. Here he became responsible for the buildings at the museum. The museum kept and exhibited buildings from all over Denmark, but also from provinces of north Germany and southern Sweden that once had been a part of the Danish kingdom. The Swedish buildings were wooden, a building construction that did not appear in Denmark. Therefore, Zangenberg needed help from Swedish experts and craftsmen when building maintenance was required. And Erixon was the foremost expert on this that Zangenberg ever could find. There is a considerable correspondence where they discuss different solutions when repairs in the museum buildings should be made. The both of them also discussed the need for a Scandinavian association for ethnologists.

In the correspondence Zangenberg and Erixon exchanged thoughts and experiences that they both used in their professional writing and tracks from this exchange can be seen in their articles and books. I the mid 1920's, Erixon worked on a series of books about old Swedish housing and furniture. His aim was to proof that not only buildings but also the furniture was of great importance to scholars, as bearers of vanishing folk culture. He asked Zangenberg a lot of questions about furnishing in old Danish farmsteads. Erixon used the facts that Zangenberg contributed in his writing (Erixon 1925).

For many years, Halvor Zangenberg was working quite alone with documentation of vernacular architecture. This he made in the summertime, the rest of the year he was busy conducting the open-air museum in Copenhagen. Sometimes a younger colleague accompanied him in the fieldworks, at some opportunities Swedish Albert Nilsson travelled together with him. He also went to Sweden several times with the purpose to study old wooden buildings in the south of Sweden.

In the summer of 1932, Zangenberg and Erixon participated in a trip in south Sweden together with scholars from Lund. For Zangenberg, this was an important opportunity to study wooden buildings in south Sweden together with Swedish experts. The scientific knowledge of vernacular architecture and traditional building techniques was dependent on both the practical fieldwork and on exchange of experiences with colleagues. This way of travelling together can also be seen as a kind of continuation of the classical way of learning by travelling.

In his work in Denmark Zangenberg was strongly inspired of how the systematically investigations of the vernacular architecture was conducted in Sweden, where his friend Erixon was the mastermind behind all activities. On his own, Zangenberg made documentations of an impressive amount of old rural buildings, and in 20 years, between 1921 and 1940, he published about 45 articles and essays about building culture in Denmark. His ambition was to synthesize his great knowledge about traditional Danish building culture in a summary publication, but he never got the opportunity to work with such a book.

But when the National museum of Denmark in 1944 at last started with systematically investigations in the same way as in Sweden, Zangenberg was no longer a part of these projects. He died in 1940, aged 59. Erixon kept on working with publishing the results of investigations of folk culture his whole life, until 1968. After his death, former pupils formed a committee that continued the publishing of Erixon's works for several years.

Creating cultural heritage

What was the result of the documentations of old rural buildings in Sweden and later on in Denmark, and what were the results of the cooperation between our two friends

Zangenberg and Erixon?

The aim with the documentations was to create collections in the archives that were complete. The word *complete* is as frequent as the word *systematic* in the descriptions of the ambitions of the documentations. When Zangenberg in 1925 published an article that was a broad description of Danish farmsteads, he started, in the very first sentence, with regretting that there still were so many gaps in the knowledge of farmsteads. There were still many parishes were no investigations at all had been made, but it was just a matter of time until the collections were complete. The article was based on a lecture that Zangenberg presented at the ethnologist conference in Copenhagen 1924 (Zangenberg 1925). As I just mentioned, his wish was to summarize all his observations in one book. Erixon managed to do this, with his Swedish material. In 1947, the monumental Svensk byggnadskultur /Swedish building culture / was published. The book with more than 800 pages is the result of more than 25 years of research. The size of the book emphasizes the dignity of its matter (Erixon 1947).

I would like to argue that cultural heritage is not a stable objective value, but a category that is loaded with value, as required, in different times and in different contexts. The purpose with the investigations of rural buildings was, as I just mentioned, not to preserve the buildings. The purpose was saving knowledge about peasant culture, knowledge that was supposed to be kept in archives for scholars to take part of so that it would be possible for future generations to learn about the past, when modern houses had replaced the old ones. But a frequent result of the documentations was that objects that had been noted by the fieldworkers later became classified as heritage. The attention that was drawn to the building by the fieldworks later led to that the buildings became part of the heritage.

Ending:

How was the understanding of what was categorized as a national heritage affected by the fact that the ideological thoughts and methods used for constructing heritage was formed in a context of national plurality? Can a national collective memory of history be expressed as cultural heritage while the presumptions are similar in several countries?

By studying the example with Erixons and Zangenbergs cooperation we can note how their personal contacts resulted in a transfer of knowledge across a border between two nations. They were both the foremost expert in their field of expertise in Sweden and Denmark. Through their work they contributed to the consolidation of what would be regarded as a national heritage of their homelands. They worked in the same way, using the same methods, the result was creating national heritage, in two different nations with different needs of heritage.

Halvor Zangenberg (left) and Sigurd Erixon at fieldwork in the province of Skåne, south Sweden, 1932. Picture from the Sigurd Erixon collection in the library of Linköping, Sweden.

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