

Different but Somehow Congruent: The Crisscrossed Paths of Transformation of Folklore Studies in Europe

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In May 2021, the Ludwig Uhland Institute in Tübingen celebrated the 50th anniversary of renaming itself from Folklore Studies/Volkskunde to Empirische Kulturwissenschaft¹. It was the first of the German university institutes to separate itself from the term “Volk” in its name. The initiative for the renaming came from students, assistants, and professor Hermann Bausinger, who had critically examined the National Socialist past of the subject in advance. The German student movement and the reading of Critical Theory also influenced the discussion of the “farewell to folk life,” (*Abschied vom Volksleben* 1970) as it was proclaimed in an anthology published in Tübingen in 1970. The call for critical reflection on the history of the subject has been anchored our habitus ever since. Today the numerous written and auditory documents of this period of upheaval again offer the possibility of a critical re-reading of the same (cf. Bürkert & Jöhler 2021).

Anniversaries make it seem like you can pinpoint a change to a specific day. They cover up the process of transformation with its conflicts and setbacks. This

is why I do not like to use Thomas S. Kuhns term “paradigm shift,” as he describes it as a “revolution” or “evolution” of “conceptualization, observation, and apparatus” (Kuhn 1962, 57) to capture the changes in our discipline that were ongoing around 1971. Rather I would like to speak of a nonlinear transformation process whose “latency period” (Bürkert 2015) goes back to the 1950s and continues in part until today. I agree with Ingrid Slavec Gradisnik (Slovenia) in this issue when she prefers the term transformation to the term development, which implies linearity and purposefulness. In contrast, the process of transformation in our discipline is characterized more as “complex and crisscrossed, and identified with innovations, but also with standstills, dead ends, obstacles, and detours” (Slavec Gradisnik, p. 131).

Such complex and crisscrossed transformation periods are described in this issue about folklore studies in Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, Finland, and Turkey. Moreover, it is precisely these winding paths described here that makes reading these histories of knowledge so worthwhile. The studies are able to trace these detours because they follow actors and practices (cf. Davidovic-Walther et al. 2009), rather than the sequences of theoretical and methodological paradigms often narrated linearly in textbooks. It is analytical categories such as milieu of knowledge, formats of knowledge, and the specific knowledge practices in folklore studies/ethnology (cf. Kaschuba et al. 2009) addressed here from a microlevel-perspective. For example, Rita Grīnvalde’s (Latvia) contribution provides insight into the genesis of two folkloristic publication projects that were pro-

duced in a similar environment in exile, but nevertheless had very different levels of outcome and conflict. It becomes very clear here that knowledge production is dependent on the different interests of the actors involved and the political and structural conditions that significantly shape the work and its output.

The articles here provide rare insights into the everyday life of knowledge production, which for a long time remained hidden behind the Iron Curtain for the Western scientific community. They provide concrete examples to show how the discipline was politically promoted, and how the ideological constraints that this promotion entailed were dealt with in teaching and research. Of particular interest here is Kaisa Langer's (Estonia) contribution, which vividly shows how students have dealt with censorship and the pressure to address certain politically desired research topics. There have been far too few such glimpses into classrooms as central sites for the formation and transmission of knowledge stocks and knowledge practices (cf. Bürkert 2016). Sources such as seminar syllabi or even minutes of seminar discussions do not fall into the currently lively discussion about preserving and managing research data. Most university archives are not interested in these sources either. Here, it is often the archives of the individual institutes that collect—often unsystematically—these sources that provide valuable insights into everyday teaching practices and, thus, into the negotiation of political contexts in the classroom and students' research papers. What is astonishing in the Estonian case is the very conservative attitude of the students with their idea of folklore as the science of an archaic past that can

best be demonstrated in peasant culture. This attitude at the same time was resistant against the soviet regime. Students at a low level resisted the research mandate imposed from above to deal with contemporary working-class culture, and only recurred to it in the use of a doctrinaire rhetoric made up of Marxist set pieces. On the one hand, this shows how ineffective a research program is if it is purely politically motivated and does not have grassroots support in the classrooms. On the other hand, the *longue durée* of the romantic-nationalist movement of the 19th century becomes clear here, which maintained its influence on the world of ideas of what folklore should be and achieve in soviet-occupied countries, too. The pervasiveness of the understanding of folklore as a science in the service of a *völkisch*-national search for origins becomes also astonishingly apparent in the other articles. This is similar in Western Europe, where nationalistic-romantic ideas partly shape—at least popular—conceptions of folklore studies until today, which is precisely why a consequent renaming of the subject and its associations still seems necessary (dgv 2021).

More over this issue proves the value of an international history of knowledge of this special discipline formerly known as folklores studies. For “beyond national ties and bloc affiliations, a remarkably independent international development took place, which connected the nationally integrated folkloristic-ethnological disciplines” (Schmoll 2015, 48f.). The common pages in the article by Ingrid Slavek Gradisnik (Slovenia) are particularly striking. Her analysis of the conflict between scholars such as Slavko Kremensek, who wanted to evolve new theo-

retical and methodological concepts, and scholars who worked in a more positivistic style have many parallels to the German debates from the 1960s onward (cf. Birkalan-Gedik, Schmoll & Timm 2021). Kremensek accused his colleagues—very similar to Utz Jeggle (1970) in Germany, for example—of adhering to “positivist, often nationalistic and even politically biased ethnographic traditions” (Slavec Gradisnik, p. 141). The heated discussions and mutual accusations, some of which were based on misunderstandings, as Slavec Gradisnik (p. 142) shows, are strikingly reminiscent of the discussions that took place, for example, in Detmold in 1969 at the congress of the German Folklore Society. There, too, was a heated discussion about the future of the discipline, and the young scholars fundamentally questioned how museum scholars and traditional folklorists embedded their research methodologically and theoretically (cf. Bürkert 2021a). Kremensek began publishing his critical and innovative thoughts in the early 1960s (cf. Slavec Gradisnik) before the discussion in Germany reached its peak. It would be interesting to find out to what extent his German and other colleagues in Europe were aware of his work and if the scholarly exchange had been carried out here at any level.

Estates with first-person documents, especially correspondence, of scholars are significant sources when it comes to tracing questions of exchange and networks between scholars, as well as interconnections between politics and academia and between folkloristic practice and folklore studies. These sources are not always considered as research data, and they are often given little importance. However, they are of immense importance for the

historical ethnography of academic practices and their impact on society. They even allow to draw conclusions about past work routines and the understanding of self-efficacy of scholars in and beyond academia, which are challenging to reconstruct via historical studies of published research. In particular, the effects of folklore studies in the local region, the role of scholars in the development and shaping of local folkloristic practice, such as museums of local history, preservation of historical monuments, and the work of associations can often only be accessed through such first-person documents. The lack of attention paid to these sources in the history of knowledge means that the relevance and social impact of the subject are often underestimated. The sphere of influence of folklore studies is often a local one, but one closely networked with local actors who shape how folklore is lived and popularized.

Therefore the question of the design and transformation of applied or public folklore as presented by Hande Birkalan-Gedik in the case of Turkey is also very prolific for an international debate. Here we see again that there is a profound difference between public folklore on the one hand, which produces knowledge *for* and in collaboration *with* agents from the broader public, and applied folklore on the other, which popularizes knowledge in a particular way often politically motivated. Here it is necessary to think again more carefully about the different connotations of the terms cultural brokerage and knowledge transfer in different historical and political contexts. They often cannot be used congruently, as the discussions at the end of the 1990s between German and American experts have already shown (Bendix & Welz 1999; Bürkert (2021b).

The questions ticked on in this issue make it all the more worthwhile to continue to exchange views on the specific terms of knowledge production and knowledge transfer in an international network. The contributions have shown that it is helpful to adopt research categories from other national contexts and where the situational contexts lead to new perspectives on existing analyses. I very much hope for the possibilities to meet up again soon in workshops, having vivid discussions, and to share our sources and analytical thoughts on our different but somehow congruent knowledge histories in our discipline of many names.

Notes

- 1 The official, yet not literal translation is Ludwig-Uhland-Institute for Cultural and Historical Anthropology.

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