

Responses

The Power of the Individual and the Power of the System: A Response

Jiří Woitsch

*Institute of Ethnology
Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague
Czech Republic*

It is no coincidence that only researchers from countries in which ethnology could not always develop freely in the twentieth century contributed to this particular issue. In these countries, it is now time for a truly critical reassessment of the recent history of the field. The results should be incorporated into our knowledge about the development of the ethnological paradigm in Europe. In the “laboratory” of Central and Eastern Europe, new theoretical approaches and types of sources have emerged that in recent years have somewhat escaped otherwise far more advanced research, for example, in German-speaking countries (Eggmann, Johler, Kuhn & Puchberger 2019).

The six texts of this special issue, which deal with the history of the field in Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Slovenia, and Turkey, seem to me to be strongly influenced by the approach—quite beneficial in research on the history of ethnology in Western Europe (Kuhn 2015)—that emphasizes the contribution of prominent personalities to the thematic and theoretical-methodological formation of ethnology. This power of personalities, I believe, can lead to the neglect, or rather an underestimation, of other circumstances. Therefore, we must ask whether these exceptional individuals really influenced

the research mainstream or whether in their time they created only marginal niches of research freedom (Luft 1994), a fact that we can identify and appreciate only after a considerable time lag. Moreover, in the context of oppressive regimes, more than elsewhere, we must look for how these individuals and their works were situated in a complex web of scientific as well as purely non-scientific interests and competencies. Were they really that unique, or rather did they only make use of the temporary and often hidden favors of the regimes in which they lived and worked? Furthermore, how far could the power of these regimes reach? For example, could it include researchers working in exile? Do we not overestimate the exceptional personalities operating in totalitarian and semi-totalitarian regimes and their “power” over the development of the field at the expense of recognizing the precise limits on their work set by political structures? It is, of course, possible that the same people would have asserted themselves in a free science environment, and in addition to Hermann Bausinger and others, we would be talking today in a pan-European context about their contributions to changes in the field. However, I am afraid we will never again be able to test that premise.

The situation in the states of Central and Eastern Europe could have been even more complicated, for the greatest darkness of totalitarian power could be hidden in the shadow of exceptional individuals. Further research will certainly reveal this, and it may turn out that it does not apply to Aleksei Peterson, Karlis Strauberg, Matti Kuusi, Eduard Laugaste, or Slavko Kremenšek. However, it surely applies to many others, including entire institutions

Cultural Analysis 19.2 (2021): 155–170
© 2021 by The University of California.
All rights reserved

and research specializations. If something like this happened in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, there is no reason to doubt a similar hitherto hidden connection between state power and scientific research in Turkey, Finland, the former Yugoslavia, the Baltic states that were incorporated into the Soviet empire, and elsewhere.

Katherine Verdery has recently discussed the extreme surveillance of ethnological/anthropological research in Eastern Europe, based on her own experience (Verdery 2014, Verdery 2018). Simultaneously, she drew attention to the fact that the very nature of the work of an ethnologist/anthropologist in the field often appeared to the security forces to be the work of a “spy.” Moreover, let us be honest, even if we follow all the ethical rules, we often are such spies trying to reveal the hidden: we are trained to do this, we are equipped to do it, and we simply know how to do it. Therefore, switching parties can be tempting, and this may not be the case with non-democratic states.

Following on this, let me point out that important texts by David H. Price (Price 2007a, 2007b) and especially his monograph *Cold War Anthropology* (Price 2016) have only recently fully revealed the connection between American anthropology and CIA intelligence activities in the global south during the Cold War. A complete uncovering of the connection between the work of anthropologists and espionage is, in the “West,” still hampered by the unavailability of some archival sources. However, it must lead us to the question of whether something similar could have happened on the other side of the Iron Curtain, where the archives of other power institutions besides Soviet (Russian) ones are open to researchers.

Thus, nothing is stopping the study of the relationship between ethnology and (secret) state power.

This brings us directly to the story about the remarkable development of Czech (Czechoslovak) anthropology in the 1960s. If we would build this story on the idea of the power of individuals and use only the archives of research institutions, focusing on published texts and possibly personal memories, we would have a classic narrative about the abilities of several individuals, especially Ladislav Holý and Milan Stuchlík, who prevailed despite the existing regime. Unfortunately, this is what happened in the Czech Republic, and shortly after the Velvet Revolution, a myth was created (Skalník 2002) about enlightened individuals who in the late 1950s and 1960s refreshed the “stale” environment of Central European nationalist ethnography with British social anthropology and initiated remarkable research in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. After the Soviet occupation in 1968, they were either wholly silenced or emigrated.

However, the complete opening of the archives of the Communist Party and especially of the secret police and intelligence services in the Czech Republic after the year 2000 revealed a completely different background to the rise and fall of Czech anthropology, in which “the power of system” plays a role (Olšáková 2016). The whole story was started in 1960 by a letter from the leading person in Soviet ethnography, Sergei Pavlovich Tolstov, addressed to the leadership of the Communist Party, which advocated, among other things, for the development of research in non-European areas. This research was to legitimize a strengthening of the role of

Czechoslovakia (and, by analogy, other states within the Soviet sphere of influence) in International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) and to de facto take control of the entire organization. As documented by a large number of archival documents, the key motivation of the whole event was scientific and, at the same time, ideological and economic expansion into the newly decolonized regions of the global south. The older research tradition, economic ties, and good reputation of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in the so-called third world, as well as the spontaneous and until then repressed interest of some researchers in working on non-European terrain, were used for this purpose.

Furthermore, the results were not long in coming: anthropological research outside Europe inspired by “Western” scientific approaches became a vital part of the state’s research plans of 1964 and 1967, new university curricula (e.g., African and Ibero-American studies) were quickly built from the ground up, a vast amount of anthropological literature of “Western” provenance was imported, and generously funded research began, especially in Africa. The openly declared goal was “to find a way to social progress” by understanding the cultural specifics of native ethnic groups. This new research specialization established and supervised from Moscow quickly became an excellent opportunity for many scientists (although their own political beliefs may have been different). However, that is not the end of the story. As the archives of the Czechoslovak intelligence services show, all ethnographers working abroad were under the supervision of Czechoslovak intelligence and the KGB, research re-

ports served as (unconscious) sources of data for the secret services, and last, but not least, several researchers were most likely paid spies (Petráňová 2017).

The whole chapter in the history of Czech ethnology and anthropology, which was a clear product not of the power of individuals but the power of the oppressive system, ended in the 1970s as a result of a change in USSR science and power policy (Vít 2003). The assessment of “anthropological espionage” as less effective than espionage camouflaged by trade and diplomacy should also be noted.

What lessons can be learned from the whole story that has been outlined here? In further research on the history of ethnology in Central and Eastern Europe, I believe, we must take into much more substantial account not only the power of individuals but also the socio-political contexts and “the power of the system.” This may be a banal statement, but if we systematically ignore the (often disgusting and certainly not always credible) archival sources arising from the activities of secret services and similar organizations, our picture of the history of the discipline cannot be complete. I doubt that the remarkable Latvian exile activity described by Rita Grīnvalde would escape the attention of the KGB; I doubt that the foreign expeditions of Estonian ethnographers presented by Indrek Jäätis would not attract the attention of the secret services. Furthermore, I would find it extremely interesting to look at the influence of the Soviet and Finnish secret services on the development of Finnish folklore studies, so remarkably described by Eija Stark, and I would not rule out “intelligence games” around Turkish folklore research and its popularization interest-

ingly presented by Hande Birkalan-Ge-dik. No, this is not paranoia, looking for spies behind every ethnological research project; this is a call to expand the sources we draw upon in our study of the history of ethnology, which is in many ways still in its infancy.

Works Cited

- Eggmann, Sabine, Johler, Birgit, Kuhn, Konrad J. and Puchberger, Magdalena (eds.). *Orientieren & Positionieren, Anknüpfen & Weitermachen. Wissensgeschichte der Volkskunde/Kulturwissenschaft nach 1945*. Münster: Waxmann, 2019.
- Kuhn, Konrad J. "Europeanization as Strategy. Disciplinary Shifts in Switzerland and the Formation of European Ethnology." *Ethnologia Europaea* 45, no. 1 (2015): 80–97.
- Luft, Robert. "„Als die Wachsamkeit des Regimes nachließ“. Zur Beschäftigung mit der Vergangenheit des eigenen Faches in der tschechischen Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1989." *Bohemia Zeitschrift* 35, no. 1 (1994): 105–121.
- Olšáková, Doubravka. "Etnografický výzkum jako státní úkol i mocenský problém. Přehledová studie k hlavním plánům vývoje československé etnografie 1952–1989." In *Etnologie v zúženém prostoru*, edited by Jiří Woitsch and Adéla Jůnová Macková, 125–147. Praha: Etnologický ústav AV ČR, 2016.
- Petráňová, Lydia. "Vyloučen z KSČ a tím ze všeho, takřka i ze života. Ota-
kar Nahodil na Filozofické fakultě UK v Praze." *Národopisný věstník* 79, no. 1 (2017): 5–24.
- Price, David H. "Buying a Piece of Anthropology, Part One: Human Ecology and Unwitting Anthropological Research for the CIA." *Anthropology Today* 23, no. 3 (2007): 8–13.
- Price, David H. "Buying a Piece of Anthropology, Part Two: Our Tortured Past." *Anthropology Today* 23, no. 5 (2007): 17–22.
- Price, David H. *Cold War Anthropology: The CIA, the Pentagon and the Growth of Dual Use Anthropology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Skalník, Petr. *A post-communist millenium: the struggles for sociocultural anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe*. Praha: Set Out, 2002.
- Verdery, Katherine. *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.
- Verdery, Katherine. *Secrets and Truth: Ethnography in the Archives of the Romanian Secret Police*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014.
- Vít, Jakub. "V roli exportéra „věci komunismu“: Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1962." *Soudobé dějiny* 10, no. 1–2 (2003): 29–57.