

**Coming to Terms with History: Translating and Negotiating the
Ethnographic Self**
by Tracie L. Wilson

In recent decades western scholarship has witnessed a rapprochement between history and ethnography. Cultural historians, in particular, have acknowledged their debt to anthropology and ethnographers have called increasingly for the need to include and ground their work within larger historical frameworks. A small number of journals, such as *History and Anthropology*, *Ethnohistory*, *Focaal* and *Historische Anthropologie* provide contexts for this discussion and venues for scholars attempting to bridge the disciplines to publish their work. In addition, these journals were preceded by earlier publications such as the renowned *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, which continues to promote new approaches to the study of history. Today opportunities abound for scholars to draw from history, ethnography, and a plethora of other disciplines in pursuit of their research. Such freedom has many advantages and often results in insightful studies. However, such approaches are far from straightforward and, in fact, face significant challenges.

This essay stems from my experience in attempting to integrate historical and ethnographic perspectives. I have spent the last two years as an American ethnographer and folklorist, working at a German university with German historians on the interconnections of religion and law in the history of East Central Europe.¹ For ethnographers – who are essentially interpreters of cultural systems – I suspect the line between scholarly observation and everyday life is often difficult to draw and in attempting to adjust to my life in a new country and a

¹Cf. „Pathways of Law in Ethno-Religiously Mixed Societies: Resources of Experience in Poland-Lithuania and Its Successor States“, Institute for Slavic Studies, Leipzig University (<<http://www.religion-and-law-in-east-central-europe.de>>, 04.06.2012). I use the terms East Central Europe and Eastern Europe to refer to countries in the former Soviet bloc. I am aware that such terms also convey political and cultural connotations with regard to the region's relationship to Western Europe. However, I do not intend to suggest that they are any less European and legitimate than their western counterparts.

new research field, I have often felt that I am reflecting as much on and considering my observations of German, Polish, and Ukrainian (academic) cultures as engaging with the actual intended topic of my research. In trying to make sense of the new academic environment, and my tendency to think of this experience as another subject to be analyzed, I am reminded of a comment that Inta Carpenter, one of my former professors at Indiana University, once passed on when she mentioned that a colleague from another discipline had remarked that, „for folklorists everything is data.“ I believe this is likely true for many ethnographers of contemporary culture.

I was not so naive as to believe that making a shift from ethnographic research on contemporary communities to historical contexts would be without challenges. I anticipated the difficulty I would face in learning to navigate archives, especially those in former Soviet states, and the difficulty of improving language skills needed for my research, while at the same time improving my German in order to live and work in Germany. However, I did not expect that the ways in which historians and ethnographers think about research topics would be so different. Despite considerable overlap between anthropology/ethnography and some spheres of cultural and social history, and the assertion that current research trends suggest that the two fields are converging², I believe the modes in which historians and ethnographers operate are still quite different and the varied national and institutional frameworks through which they are understood create obstacles to integration that are worthy of consideration.

One major obstacle is that the status of „ethnography“ within the academy is particularly ambiguous, as the term has been used to refer to many different kinds of research and carries different connotations for different people, ranging from an innovative method with radical potential³ or a trendy buzzword to a backward, uncritical relic of the

²Cf. Volker Gottowik, Fremde (Kon")""Texte: Zum Binnenverhältnis von Ethnographie und Historiographie, in: Yvonne Kleinmann (ed.), Kommunikation durch symbolische Akte, Stuttgart2010, pp. 23-36.

³Cf. Wanda Vradi, The Strange Case of Ethnography in International Relations, in:

nineteenth century. Part of the difficulty lies in the differences between various ethnographic traditions within different countries, regions, and communities of scholarship. In discussions it is important to explain what kind of ethnography one is referring to, as it cannot be taken for granted that all scholars mean the same thing. Indeed, it is a significant challenge when one is not sure what term to use to describe a field of study or that one cannot, with any certainty, be confident that others understand what such terms refer to, in this case „ethnography,“ „ethnology,“ „anthropology,“ and „folklore.“⁴ To clarify my own use of terms in this essay, I use „ethnographer“ to refer to all researchers who use ethnographic perspectives and methods, namely participant observation, focused interviews, and study of groups or communities, including urban contexts.

With regard to history, a similar need exists to specify what kinds of historical research one refers to. Certainly some types of history come closer to ethnography or anthropology, in particular, cultural history, micro-history and some forms of social history. In the U.S., folklorists, especially those engaged in public sector work (for example, in arts agencies and museums), often find much commonality with colleagues in the field of public history. However, public history as a sub-field does not have a strong tradition in Europe.⁵ On the other hand, historical anthropology has a longer history in Europe, especially among French scholars.⁶ In the last two years, I have found

Millenium. *Journal of International Studies* 37 (2008), pp. 279-301.

⁴The field of folklore has also experienced a crisis in naming in the last fifteen years. In this case the name is especially problematic as in common use it often denotes a range of unfortunate connotations from „quaint, but antiquated“ to „backward“ and „false.“ After much deliberation in the late 1990s the American Folklore Society opted to keep the name as no suitable replacement was found.

⁵For a brief discussion, see, for example, Debbie Ann Doyle, National Council on Public History Meeting – International Public History. AHA Today. (American Historical Association), <<http://blog.historians.org/news/1308/national-council-on-public-history-meeting-international-public-history>> (04.06.2012). Study programs in public history exist at the Free University of Berlin and the University of London.

⁶This is especially true if one considers the important role of the French *Annales* school in revolutionizing historical scholarship, including individuals such as Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Georges Duby, Jacques Le Goff, and Emmanuel

this sub-field, which draws strongly from research in social theory and socio-linguistics, especially useful in helping me to bridge the gap between ethnography and historical research. Regional variation, which I consider further below, is also key to different understandings of historiography.

In the Heart of Europe

The many differences from one country and institution to the next render discussions of ethnography, ethnology, anthropology, and folklore in East Central Europe problematic. Indeed, in examining this issue, Katherine Verdery has referred to „multiple ‘anthropologies’.“⁷ In recent years, some scholars have acknowledged the importance of such „alternative anthropologies“ as sites which offer great potential and new perspectives, especially as attempts to de-center and reexamine current thinking about history and culture.⁸ Nevertheless, among anthropologists focusing on East Central Europe, some scholars from the region have the sense that their work is less valued and are frustrated by what they often perceive to be the arrogance of western anthropologists.⁹

Despite the above critiques and calls for action, changes in scholars’ assumptions and practices have been slow to take hold. And perhaps it should be no surprise that change in academic cultures, like most cultures, in fact, comes about slowly. Similarly, although awareness

Le Roy Ladurie. Other scholars central to historical anthropology include Peter Burke, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, Alf Lüdtke, and Keith Thomas.

⁷Katherine Verdery, *Franglus’ Anthropology and East European Ethnography: the Prospects for Synthesis*, in: Chris Hann et al. (eds.), *Anthropology’s Multiple Temporalities and Its Future in Central and Eastern Europe*, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Working Paper no. 90 (2007), p. 50.

⁸Cf. *Anthropologists Are Talking’ about Anthropology after Globalization*, transcribed discussion, in: *Ethnos* 72/1 (2007), pp. 102-126.

⁹See, for example, Michal Buchowski, *Hierarchies of Knowledge in Central-Eastern European Anthropology*, in: *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 22/1 (2004), pp. 5-14; Michal Buchowski, *Some Lessons from the Importance of History in the History of Central European Ethnology*, in: Hann et al., *Anthropology’s Multiple Temporalities*, pp. 18-22.

exists regarding the need to integrate historical perspectives¹⁰ there are still relatively few social and cultural anthropologists from western countries studying East Central Europe who engage extensively with historical topics and methods.¹¹

Another phenomenon that may be specific to the region is the degree to which study of East Central Europe is dominated by historians. We live in a time in which considerable lip service is paid to interdisciplinarity and many historians recognize the important role that anthropology has played in influencing recent scholarship in cultural history. However, rarely does this translate into achieving balance among representatives from disciplines. When it comes to institutions devoted to the study of the region, there is often a „token ethnographer syndrome“¹² and in the same way that dominant cultures incorporate

¹⁰See, for example, Matti Bunzl, Boas, Foucault, and the 'Native Anthropologist': Notes toward a Neo-Boasian Anthropology, in: *American Anthropologist* 106/4 (2004), pp. 435-442, as well as Hann et al., *Anthropology's Multiple Temporalities*.

¹¹Some examples include Katherine Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*, Berkeley (CA) 1983; Alaina Lemon, *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Postsocialism*, London 2000; Keith Brown, *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation*, Princeton (NJ) 2003; Bruce Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus*, Ithaca 2009; Douglas Rogers, *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals*, Ithaca (NY) 2009; Greta Lynn Uehling, *Beyond Memory: The Crimean Tatars: Deportation and Return*, Hampshire 2004; Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton (NJ) 2005. Scholars such as Yurchak, who are from Eastern Europe, but at least partly educated in North America or Western Europe, underscore the problematic nature of categories such as „western.“ Many of the above texts focus on the former Soviet Union rather than East Central Europe.

¹²I do not mean to suggest that this is necessarily a European phenomenon. Indeed, in the United States I spent time at two large research institutions with strong specializations in Russia and East Central Europe, and in both cases anthropologists and other ethnographers were largely absent among the faculty specializing in the region. Indiana University hired an anthropologist specializing in Eastern Europe when I was preparing to defend my dissertation at least twelve years after this gap in expertise had been recognized. In 2009, the administration of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign refused to grant permission for a faculty hire in the anthropology of East or Central Europe, arguing that not enough students took anthropology courses to justify such a hire and suggested instead that sociology would be more appropriate. Such examples underscore the marginal status

cultural elements of marginalized groups as resources with which to revitalize their own repertoires¹³ historians borrow concepts from ethnography, adapting them to new purposes. As with many other borrowings, by the time an aspect of culture has been incorporated by a dominant group, the group in which it originated has moved on.

The work and influence of Clifford Geertz illustrate this point especially well. I have been struck by the fact that there is so much discussion of Geertz within history circles. For some historians there is an almost automatic association between anthropology/ethnography and Geertz. Certainly, ethnographers acknowledge the central role that Geertz has played in guiding contemporary scholarship, but as Douglas Rogers has indicated, contemporary anthropologists are less likely to peddle „unvarnished“ Geertz.¹⁴

This discrepancy between history and anthropology is not surprising, as scholars in other fields who have attempted to incorporate ethnographic methods in recent years have sometimes promoted a more simplified model of ethnography.¹⁵ In addition, part of the difference may lie in that Geertz' work has been so central to contemporary anthropology that many of his assumptions have become a kind of habitus¹⁶ among ethnographers, especially those trained in recent decades. In some ways his influence has become a given and as such goes almost unnoticed. I studied folklore at Indiana University where performance approaches to the study of culture and symbolic behavior have been a central focus. Yet, until relatively recently I myself was not fully aware of the degree to which Geertz' work has shaped my own training and perspective.

of anthropology in American institutions and the lack of awareness of the field among larger populations.

¹³Cf. Roger Abrahams, *Man as Animal: The Stereotype in Culture*, Bloomington (IN) 1976.

¹⁴Douglas Rogers, *Historical Anthropology Meets Soviet History*, in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7/3 (2006), p. 634.

¹⁵For a discussion of the limitations of the „ethnographic turn“ in international relations research, see Vrsti, *The Strange Case of Ethnography*.

¹⁶Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge 1977.

At the same time, the world of ethnographic study that I am familiar with is „post-Geertzian.“¹⁷ In particular, scholarship which draws from post-modernism and discourses on globalization were at the forefront during the late 1990s and early 2000s, though they too have been increasingly questioned. For example, in recent years anthropologists have questioned the utility of the concept of globalization, or at least begun to conceptualize it in its plural form („globalizations“), suggesting alternative spheres and temporalities¹⁸ and providing another area in which historical perspectives and methods should prove useful.

In recent decades there has been a movement toward studies of colonialism and empires, another trend which has moved many historians away from a limited focus on states and so-called great figures, and toward more complex study of actors and considerations of agency and power relations. A focus on individual motivations often leads historians to ask *why* the people they study acted as they did. Although ethnographers hope to gain insight into human motivations, they tend to be much more focused on *how* than *why*. With regard to historical texts, they are also less inclined to be concerned about „truth“ or accuracy in the documents they examine, and more with what may have made a source credible to the audiences to which it spoke.¹⁹ Ethnographers are generally more concerned with identifying and analyzing processes that reveal cultural patterns and relationships, which may provide insight into motivations, but seldom make outright declarations. At the same time, some historians have stressed that bias in sources does not render them useless²⁰ and have pointed out that an overemphasis on questions of reliability obscures impor-

¹⁷Jonathan Friedman, Globalization, Class, and Culture in Global Systems, in: Journal of World Systems Research 6/3 (2000), pp. 636-656.

¹⁸Anthropologists Are Talking' about Anthropology after Globalization, pp. 102-126.

¹⁹John M Wantanabe, Email communication, April 1, 2010. For more on his discussion of applying „ethnographic sensibilities“ to study of archival texts, see John M. Wantanabe, With All the Means that Prudence Would Suggest: Procedural Culture and the Writing of Cultural Histories of Power about 19th-Century Mesoamerica, in: Journal of Latin American Anthropology 6/ 2 (2001), pp. 134-174.

²⁰Ginzburg cited in Jim Sharpe, History from Below, in: Peter Burke (ed.), New Perspectives on Historical Writing, University Park, PA 1991, p. 30.

tant information, including the dynamics or mechanisms with which individuals are intertwined.²¹ Such examples suggest that there are a range of perspectives among historians and remind us that we should not over-generalize.

Case Studies and Ethnographies, Terminology and Assumptions

As I have indicated above, terminology is another area that s academics from different fields must navigate in undertaking cross-disciplinary research. Scholars should pay attention to the terms they use, not only to avoid confusion, but also because our words not only describe and analyze our topics of study, but also play a part in creating new realities and the ways they are interpreted. Very often terminology serves to reify existing categories and promote established modes of thought and practice. On the other hand, attempts to redefine existing terms or to introduce new ones can lead to misunderstandings and sometimes the overuse of jargon. In short, this is a difficult area to navigate, but is nevertheless worthy of reflection.

The terms we use and how we use them also says something about the assumptions we hold. After spending some months working mainly among historians and hearing repeated references to the term „case studies,“ it occurred to me that this is not a term which ethnographers often use. They may sometimes use it to refer to their research in discussions with colleagues from other fields; however, the term most often used is simply „ethnography.“ For example, one might explain that the goal of a certain scholar is to produce an ethnography of human rights activist communities in Texas. Perhaps this difference also has something to do with a common understanding that an ethnography is a study of a relatively small group or community; therefore, there is no need to make this explicit. Instead, the focus is on the methods used to gather and interpret data, which are „ethnographic“ in nature.

²¹Cf. Stephen Kotkin, The State – Is It Us? Memoirs, Archives, and Kremlinologists, in: Russian Review. 61 January (2002), p. 50.

Recently I have also come across references to „isolated case studies“ in history scholarship, an expression often meant to highlight the perceived shortcomings of case studies in that they are often thought to be divorced from a broader historical and cultural context which would render them more meaningful.²² The reference to „isolated case studies“ is also intriguing from an ethnographic perspective, since although several decades ago, ethnographers imagined the small-scale communities that they studied to be quite isolated, this is far from the case today. Indeed, from my perspective, a thorough case study or ethnography could not be isolated, as scholars have become much more aware of the linkages and networks that connect people across space and time. For example, my own current research project is focused on social reform, religion, and charity in the Habsburg city of Lviv at the turn of the century. Though Lviv is at the center of my study, the city was decidedly connected to other towns, villages, and urban centers in Galicia, the Habsburg Empire, the rest of Europe, and beyond. Such ties to communities and individuals outside the city, as well as the flow of ideas and practices across space, must, therefore, also be part of my narrative, requiring me to situate my research in broader contexts. Not surprisingly perhaps, I find this perspective similar to arguments made by proponents of microhistory. As Giovanni Levy writes: „It is often assumed, for example, that local communities can be properly studied as objects of small-scale systems, but that the larger scales should be used to reveal connections between communities within a region, between regions within a country, and so on. In actual fact, of course, it becomes immediately obvious that even the apparently minutest action of, say, somebody going to buy a loaf of bread, actually encompasses the far wider system of the whole world’s grain markets. And only a paradoxical and significant distortion of perspective would suggest that the commercial life of one village is of no interest beyond its meaning on a local scale.“²³ With regard to cul-

²²See for example the discussion in Jim Sharpe, *History from Below*, in: Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*.

²³Giovanni Levy, *On Microhistory*, in: Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*,

tural interpretations and the connection between large and small scales Geertz writes that, „social actions comment on more than themselves, that where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made to.“²⁴ The statements of Geertz and Levy, on the question of the relevance of the small scale, reveal similarities between disciplines. However, Levy also draws distinctions between interpretive ethnography and microhistory referring to differences that „concern the workings in practice of human rationality and the legitimacy of making generalizations in the social sciences.“²⁵ His reference to generalizations, points to another way that the fields of history and ethnography tend to vary.

I have been intrigued by the number of times that I have heard historians stress the importance of representativeness. Based on my experience, many ethnographers stress the need to be systematic in examining a particular body of material, but the issue of whether or not those resources examined are representative is not generally a topic of discussion. I believe this distinction points to a difference in assumptions. A basic assumption for many ethnographers is that communities are unique, or at least that all communities possess unique features; and therefore, they are ultimately not representative of other communities. This does not mean that the insights gained from studying them cannot prove useful in examining other communities, but that this is something that remains to be demonstrated. For example, I was intrigued when a colleague asked about Lviv being a representative example of a Habsburg city in Galicia. I was quite surprised, as from my point of view, Lviv, as the capitol of the region, would seem to be decidedly *non-representative*. In undertaking interdisciplinary studies that combine history and ethnography, it is important to be aware of such key differences in the assumptions that accompany ethnographers and historians, at the same time acknowledging that there

p. 96.

²⁴Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London 1973, p. 23.

²⁵Levy, *On Microhistory*, p. 100.

is considerable variation even among scholars in each of these fields and the specific traditions that they are connected to. Despite such differences and possible complications, I argue that such cooperation is worthwhile and that considerable benefit can be found in combining these perspectives.

Blending Ethnographic and Historical Perspectives

Employing ethnographic approaches in the study of historical topics enables scholars to focus on practices and processes, thereby illuminating how things unfolded on the ground. Of course this is more challenging with regard to communities of people who are no longer alive, as scholars must work with the traces that remain. Ethnographic perspectives can also lead this endeavor to more rich and creative sources, drawing, for example, from material culture, as well as folk and literary narratives. Detailed study of processes and practices reveal the tensions that exist between the everyday and grand narratives both of the period and with regard to subsequent historiographic treatments. Such approaches do not do away with large-scale narratives but problematize them in potentially productive ways. For example, Pieter Judson has posed the question of how one might undertake a history of the Habsburg Empire that does not center on the nation.²⁶ Ethnographic perspectives, which ground analysis in specific practices of individuals and communities in regional contexts and which also demonstrate the situational nature of identities²⁷, can provide an important component in such an endeavor. Research which focuses on specific regional or urban contexts are another sphere for particularly fruitful consultation and collaboration across disciplines.

In recent decades, scholars have praised Jean and John Comaroff's two-volume work „Of Revelation and Revolution“ on missionaries

²⁶Cf. Pieter M. Judson, *Rethinking Nationalist Narratives of Difference in Habsburg Central Europe, 1780-1945*, Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum Geschichte und Kultur Ostmitteleuropas (GWZO), Leipzig, 18.05.2011.

²⁷Cf. Elliott Oring, *Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Folklore*, in: Elliott Oring, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*, Logan 1986; Stuart Hall, *Who Needs Identity?*, in: Stuart Hall / Paul du Gay, (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London 1996.

and colonialism in South Africa as an exemplary attempt to integrate ethnographic and historical perspectives. In her review assessing the Comaroff's research, Sally Engle Merry stresses that one of the important contributions is their analysis of how colonialism and capitalism and the inequalities that followed became accepted among the Tswana. She argues that the authors succeed in linking emerging power relations and cultural meanings to „domains of social life that fall into the category of the taken for granted and the everyday; such as practices of agriculture, housing, dress, health, and hygiene, furnishings, domesticity or healing.“²⁸ One of ethnography's strengths lies in its practitioners' ability to examine the overlooked or draw attention to those areas of life which go unquestioned or unnoticed. However, the ability to take this analysis further and to fill in the gap between these practices and larger socio-economic and political structures remains more challenging. The integration of historical perspectives can be productive in bridging this gap between large meta-narratives and the life experiences of individuals.

Contrasting Understandings of Historiography

Another factor which complicates discussions of ethnography and history among specialists of East Central Europe are differing approaches to historiography. In this case, manifestations are most clearly identified in differences between East and West. For example, East and East Central European traditions value thorough immersion in sources and extended study of topics, often over the course of many years. Scholars from the west tend to emphasize the application of theory to sources, innovation, and scholarship seen to demonstrate concepts or relevance beyond the specific example studied.²⁹ This contrast sometimes leads to frustration and friction when scholars from divergent traditions

²⁸Sally Engle Merry, *Hegemony and Culture in Historical Anthropology: A Review Essay on Jean and John L. Comaroff's 'Of Revelation and Revolution.'*, in: *The American Historical Review* 108/2 (2003), p. 468.

²⁹Cf. Marcel Detienne, *Murderous Identity: Anthropology, History, and the Art of Constructing Comparables*, in: *Common Knowledge* 8/1 (2002), pp. 178-187.

meet.³⁰ However, my (albeit limited) observation suggests that they often move in different circles. Such separation underscores another tendency, which prevails in many academic disciplines (and beyond): we tend to congregate with those who think and work in similar ways, a practice that may be comfortable and pleasant, but which does not push us to reexamine our methods and assumptions.

Within the field/s of ethnology/ethnography/anthropology/folklore the division between East and West may be less stark, or at least more complex and varied from one country and institution to the next. Within the context of the United States, ethnography in recent years has been identified as a methodology (most often associated with anthropology) and often valued for the more fine-grained, qualitative insights that can be gained, in contrast to quantitative research.³¹ In this sense many scholars from other social sciences have come to see it as an innovative approach when applied to their topics of interest and integrated with what are perceived to be more conventional methodologies.

In Europe, although there are many scholars who see ethnographic approaches as productive, the term „ethnography“ (or *etnografia*) still carries a stigma due to its association with nineteenth and early twentieth century collectors of peasant customs, etc. For researchers who stress the importance of theoretical concepts, this characterization embodies the sin of uncritical description. In contrast, ethnology has often focused on documentation and comparative analysis of far-away, „exotic“ cultures. However, within East Central Europe, the formulations and combinations of ethnography, ethnology, and folklore varied considerably from one country to the next. In the case

³⁰My characterization of East Central European historiography is a generalization and I realize that there are exceptions. For example, theoretical concepts, comparative perspectives and methodologies are also central to the approaches of historians trained at institutions such as the European University of St Petersburg, the Central European University in Budapest, and in the humanities at Warsaw University. I am sure that there are other institutions where this is also the case. This dichotomy is also blurred by many young scholars, especially those who have acquired international experience.

³¹Cf. Vrásti, *The Strange Case of Ethnography*.

of Poland, Zbigniew Jasiewicz argues that during the early years of the communist regime, the focus was on *etnografia*, which referred to the culture of rural populations. However, he asserts that *etnologia*, as a more comparative and comprehensive approach also gained increasing ground in Polish scholarship from the 1960s to the 1980s and that more and more young scholars also identified with social anthropology in the last decades of the communist era.³²

This situation is not surprising as Poland was relatively more open compared to many other socialist countries. And this may also account for why today its ethnology departments are among the most broad, integrating a range of perspectives from traditional study of rural communities in Poland to research in other countries, and on contemporary subjects such as urban ethnography. It is also significant that in the early 1990s many institutions changed their department names from *etnografia* to *etnologia* and more recently at least two departments (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan and Warsaw University) added *antropologia kulturowa* to their titles.

In a debate on the appropriateness of introducing separate anthropology programs within East Central European academic institutions, social anthropologist Chris Hann argues against the founding of parallel programs. Instead he stresses the important role that ethnography (*narodopis*) faculties can contribute to anthropology, by drawing on their traditions of historical research. He argues for a „big tent“ approach, in which many different types of scholars, methods, and orientations can be found within more expanded ethnology programs.³³ In response, several East Central European scholars describe reasons why it is not possible or practical to create faculties that include *narodopis* researchers and social anthropologists. The reasons given include fierce competition over resources and the perception that scholars in other camps (namely those in a more traditional, peasant-focused vein

³²Cf. Zbigniew Jasiewicz, *Miedzy etnografia a antropologia kulturowa*, in: *Nauka 2* (2006), pp. 65-80.

³³Cf. Hann et al., *Anthropology's Multiple Temporalities*, pp. 8-10.

of ethnography) are too inflexible.³⁴

In the above-mentioned discussion, Michal Buchowski stresses that, in the case of Poland, there has long been a tradition of integrating historical perspectives with the methods and concepts of anthropology³⁵ and indeed, discussions of a renewed convergence between history and anthropology seem to be more common in western contexts.³⁶ This focus is often met with confusion when it is raised in some East Central European contexts. For many ethnographers of the region, it is assumed that their work will also be informed by engagement with historical perspectives. Our research group has encountered such confusion when making inquiries about possible guest scholars from the region who could address the integration of historic and ethnographic methods. For many scholars the two have long been integrated. This assumption then raises the issue of what we mean when we refer to history and ethnography and the need to acknowledge that there are various kinds of historical and ethnographic research.

Concluding Thoughts

In her analysis of the incorporation of ethnographic approaches into international relations scholarship, Wanda Vradi refers to a „critical lag that exists between the two disciplines, a delay in cross-disciplinary reading practices.“³⁷ However, such delays are an inherent part of transdisciplinary research. The demands of established fields require us to spend extensive amounts of time engaged in keeping up with scholarship on our home disciplines, a task that is itself virtually un-

³⁴Cf. Aleksandar Bošković, *Between Ethnology and Anthropology: some former Yugoslav perspectives*, in: Hann, *Anthropology's Multiple Temporalities*, p. 18; Juraj Podoba, *Social Anthropology in East-Central Europe: intellectual challenge or anachronism?*, in: Hann, *Anthropology's Multiple Temporalities*, pp. 32-33.

³⁵Cf. Buchowski, *Some Lessons*, pp. 18-22.

³⁶I am aware that as I write this I am situated within a research group in Leipzig, which I also consider Central European, thereby complicating the matter. At the same time, my German colleagues inform me that the tendency of American scholars to refer to Central and Eastern Europe and to include Germany in this formulation is rather different from the practice of German scholars who do not often include Germany.

³⁷Vradi, *The Strange Case of Ethnography*, p. 280.

achievable, as there is always more that one should read, as well as the host of administrative responsibilities that encroach on academics. There are some individuals who very effectively cross borders in their research and such efforts are commendable, but we should acknowledge that working across disciplines is challenging and far from self-evident for many scholars.

One obstacle is that we live in a world with multiple systems of meaning and this applies also to academic cultures. Too often we assume that our systems and our academic languages are shared by others, and often they are not. Academic cultures are specific, not only to disciplines within specific countries and regions, but they also vary across departments, institutes, and among faculty groups. For this reason, it is productive to place ourselves under the microscope from time to time, or allow others to do so, thereby raising awareness and understanding of the specific academic cultures which we create and reproduce. I realize that this suggestion may make academics uncomfortable; however, a more clear articulation of our assumptions and practices can pave the way to better understanding of our differences and the strengths of various fields of inquiry and shed light on ways to forge more fruitful cooperation.

Beyond studying academic cultures, another means to promote productive cross disciplinary research is to create contexts that are committed to this goal, namely in the form of institutions and events. However, in order for this to be effective, efforts must go beyond paying lip service to interdisciplinarity and the inclusion of the occasional token representative from other fields. With regard to East Central Europe, there are many institutions which are dominated by historians (and sometimes political scientists) and I have the impression that they mainly talk to each other. On the other hand, although ethnographers from western countries often acknowledge a need to better integrate historical perspectives, there are few focusing on East Central Europe who study historical contexts. Such gaps make it difficult to find common ground.

Nevertheless, I am convinced there is much to be gained by crossing disciplinary boundaries. Scholars and their research benefit through exposure to other perspectives and in this way come to fresh ideas and new approaches to their topics. Such contact is also essential in helping us to reconsider our basic working assumptions, which often go unarticulated or even unnoticed, and to interrogate and re-examine our positions and practices. Although we may not come to fast conclusions or be successful in mending all fences between rival approaches, examining the ways in which traditions of scholarship diverge, are understood, and in turn, shape the academic landscapes within different countries and institutions brings us closer to productive dialogue.