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## **DELIVERY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC MATERIAL. THE WORK OF ETHNOLOGISTS IN THE CONDITIONS OF “PROJECT INTERDISCIPLINARITY”<sup>1</sup>**

The paper problematises the new conditions in which the humanities are operating, with special emphasis on the requirements imposed upon the institutional foundation and perception of disciplinary identity by the tendency of *projectification*. The analysis is more narrowly focused on the change in the perception and performative aspects of ethnology in the context of “project interdisciplinarity”. While in such a mosaic common field of various disciplinary claims and goals, it is primarily represented by the symbolic capital of its “famous” ethnographic method, the general ethnological insight, in final outcomes, often left deprived of the key disciplinary strongholds, together with the complex, although somewhat idealistic model of *humanistic ethnography*. Consequently, the trend leads to the reduction of the professional work of ethnologists to the “suppliers of material” for further analytical procedures and the *later* finalisation of the scientific product.

Key words: ethnography, interdisciplinarity, projectification

INTRODUCTION: AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF INSTITUTIONS. Institutes like ours<sup>2</sup>, which have somehow managed to survive for decades in a more or less radical conversion of all kinds of (social,

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<sup>1</sup> This work has been supported by Croatian Science Foundation under the project *Transformation of Work in Post-transitional Croatia* (IP-2016-06-7388)

<sup>2</sup> The paper was presented in the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Institute of Ethnography in Belgrade, while the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb celebrates the same anniversary this year (2018).

political, scientific) “regimes”, but in a mode of operation based around long-term, “slow” work and research, already represent a sort of historical leftover designated for dismantling within the business aspirations and austerity-based national strategies of all our regional, and especially European, governments. Due to the enforcement of the contemporary criteria for scientific achievement, as that of *applicability*, *excellence* and *mobility* (see Bagarić 2017, Petrić 2013), and the substitution of regular, long-term public financing with, preferably European, project-based funding, the “old” scientific institutions, together with their notorious tendency towards stable employment of scientists, have become the potential enemy of a *healthy scientific economy*. In the pandemic witch-hunt for “public sector parasites”, especially humanistic scientists happen to match perfectly the idea of the ineradicable fiend of the *socialist mentality*, surviving through those safely nestled in the sinecure of the public institutions. Furthermore, in the competing political strivings of the transitional societies, the increasing interests in the territory of “outdated” institutional activities usually translate the goal of its *commercial restructuring* in terms of bare ideological platforms (Žitko 2011). This enforces the constant reorganisation of internal relations in the academic field also along the lines of the all kind of contextual conflicts and deals, and through the growing differences in the systemic positions depending on class, gender, age, etc., with the threat of the final elimination of its subjects which varies according to the criteria of the stakeholders’ “use value” (more in Prica 2017).

The result is an environment which suggests that the consolidation of common interests, or even the battle for the survival of the humanities, would be performed also as the prefiguration of existing disciplinary and institutional authorities, primarily in the frame of *projectification*, which has become an independent, “satellite” structure for the trans-institutional precarious performance of scientific activity. The continuous concern for the development and articulation of specific disciplines in the humanities – once considered as the domain of institutions – is thus increasingly being subjected to the modus operandi of short-term, “mosaic” programmes with a strict or even dominant administrative drive, with strongly suggested methods and

hypotheses preferably to be confirmed. In such an environment, the relationship with the external funder implies also a tacit form of scientific alias existential obedience, while the role of rooted institutions tends to be reduced to providing the basic infrastructural support, including the human resources.

On the other hand, in conditions marked by the structural crisis and “the aberrations of the humanities” (Bagarić, Biti, Škokić 2017; Petrić 2013), as well as increasing precarity, especially among young researchers, the benefits of unimpeded scientific work in existential security, together with the general advantages of “slow science”, are more and more rediscovered (see Mountz et al. 2015). The frequent references to the “vintage values” of scientific work indicate that we are witnessing the bitter results of its post-institutional, or even “post-scientific”, stage, marked by the nostalgic reminiscence on the identity of the humanistic field in its designated ideal from the 1960s.

Accordingly, such circumstances demand a new frame for reflecting on the disciplinary status in the humanities: usually considered in terms of the autonomous *horizontal* growth, the shift would now imply (re)inventing such an interdisciplinary frame in which acting from the position of the *identity of the discipline* should be replaced with the priority of consensus on integral *identity of humanities*, including its inherent, dialogical interdisciplinary quality and striving for the possibility of social change as its neglected, or even deserted purpose.

“PROJECT INTERDISCIPLINARITY” AND THE LIMITS OF *HUMANISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY*. In the meantime, however, the idealistic concept of interdisciplinarity as a field of translatability and the incorporability of various approaches within the frame of common humanistic subject, has been replaced by the more pragmatic practice of “project interdisciplinarity”. The latter can be described as the frame of juxtaposition of various disciplinary and methodological interests, mixing quantitative and qualitative approaches, and with the inclination to *hierarchization of knowledge*, both on the basis of “objectivity” of methodological outcomes (preferring quantitative

results), and on the basis of the locality of the research position, latently or blatantly preferring *central* to *peripheral* insights (more in Buchowski 2004; Prica 1995).

For the very ethnological contribution, it means that it tends to be positioned at the level of *local insights*, the purpose of which is to provide illustrations and examples, and at the end, the confirmations of the provided hypothesis with the help of fragmented textual evidence of the *authentic human experience*. While in this “disciplinary market” ethnology is primarily represented by the symbolic capital of the ethnographic method, its professional contribution is often deprived of the key epistemological strongholds, failing to reach the full disciplinary frame, together with the complex model of *humanistic ethnography*. Consequently, the trend leads to the reduction of the work of ethnologists to that of *suppliers of material* for further analytical procedures and “later” finalisation of the scientific product. Moreover, the “literary” elements, arbitrariness, incompleteness, and other supposed deficiencies of the ethnographic contribution, put it in an *a priori* lower rank towards more *objective* findings, preferably the knowledge obtained by quantitative methodologies.

Such a displacement from the hypothetical *core of interdisciplinarity* can be detected in the inherited marginal status of ethnology, the epistemological position of “belonging nowhere” within the *discourses of the humanities* (e.g. in Foucault 2002). However, it has maybe more to do with the contemporary status of ethnography *belonging everywhere* in the same domain: the ambivalent methodological position which can easily reproduce the hierarchy of “primary insights” and elevated instances of knowledge. And while, in its recent scientific history, ethnologists have undertaken a lot of ethic-epistemological efforts and self-denials reworking its “positivist quilt” – using various uncertain tactics of verification and translation of immediate research experience in order to make plausible and unbiased models of its (re)presentation – now the ethnography, in its “raw” descriptive form, easily ends up to be the groundwork for final analytical readjustments. Mostly by (crypto)quantitative interventions suited to criteria of *applicability of results*, ethnographic fragments are

subjected to the interpretations with a significant loss of credibility – the impact of implied theoretical frame and situational context.

Therefore, the fate of experience-based, documentary, descriptive ethnographic discourse, the standard-bearer of the qualitative approach and the safeguard for humanistic-scientific identity, leaves behind an untranslatable, not just scientific, but also authentically human(istic) surplus. Knowledge obtained through field research is thus becoming the battlefield for positioning and verifying the academic subjects through which human experience cannot be truly evoked but rather “smuggled”. Instead of naively seeing it as “unreducible” within the different forms of knowledge and scientific discourses, there are now more and more indications to see this “surplus of life” as *useless* or even undesirable, while condemned to an indifferent and helpless space in which common humanistic interest operates today.

On the other hand, the problem of the “proper” humanistic ethnography lies also in the heavily reachable requisites of its materialization.

The numerous demands which, during past decades, have been placed before ethnographic “writing culture”, most of which succumb to the uncertain procedures of authentication, have been summarised in probably their most elaborate form in the famous *Manifesto for Ethnography* by Paul Willis and Mats Trondam (2002). Keeping in mind that direct and sustained social contact with other people does not make it easier to subsequently describe the irreducible human experience, but rather places trust in the author’s presentation of their “unique sense of embodied existence and consciousness” (“the human condition from the inside”), the manifesto also indicates the position of ethnography compared to the autonomous discourse of anthropological and social theory. Understanding and presenting experience plays a central role in both empirical work and theory; therefore, “ethnography and theory should be conjoined to produce a concrete sense of the social as internally sprung and dialectically produced” (Willis & Trondam 2002, 395). The idea of *humanistic ethnography* inherently implies that it is theoretically informed “in itself”: rather than referring to the application of the existing “overfunctionalist, overstructuralist,

and overtheorised views”, this stands for the “positive development of reflexive forms of social theorizing, allowing a voice to those who live their conditions of existence” (Ibid.).

“For us, though, theory must be useful theory in relation to ethnographic evidence and the ‘scientific energy’ derived from the effective formulation of problems, rather than theory for itself. It must be of help in understanding social phenomena in relation to ethnographic evidence. So, we are not interested in ‘grand theory’, ‘pure’ scholastic reason, or ‘abstracted’ empiricism. We seek to promote ‘theoretical informedness’, ‘sensitizing concepts’, ‘analytic points’, all means of teasing out patterns from the texture of everyday life, from ‘pure’ descriptive ethnography. These may sometimes be gathered and mobilized for more connected theoretical contributions, but although we do, in general, see ourselves absolutely within a broad project of the reflexive understanding of contemporary society, we do so primarily from a basis within the ethnographic observation of continuity and change” (Willis & Trondam 2002, 396).

The *theoreticity* of ethnography is, thus, not something separate from, added or opposed to its primarily descriptive character. Therefore, ethnography is not subjected to procedures of radical rewriting within the framework of other discourses or various forms of “interdisciplinary” adjustments, as “we do not want to provide ethnographic evidence simply to exemplify or adjudicate between opposing and pre-existing theoretical views” (Ibid., 398).

On the contrary, “we argue that theoretically informed ethnographic writing has a crucial role to play in reshaping ‘theory’ and in finding accommodations between, as well as forging new lines and directions from, social theorists” (Ibid., 396).

The identification, recording and analysis of “common” human praxis must strive to accommodate its openness, unpredictability and its potential to “surprise”: it must produce knowledge which is not preconceived, as well as create a base for

further refinement and reformulation of one's initial theoretical positions<sup>3</sup>.

Standing for the experience-based cognition of the complexity of the cultural situation, the ethnographic material is thus not simply a common repository of rudimentary findings which can be freely dismantled and organised in autonomous linear narratives, in accordance with the established concepts (or *policy recommendation*), as to be the final instance of evaluation of majority of project-based scientific politics.

The precondition for a purposeful humanistic ethnography is, therefore, the abolition of the hierarchy of knowledge in any form of apriority, but the question that remains, nevertheless, is whether such a "perfect" ethnography is even attainable, and if it is, what is its immediate social purpose.

RESETTING ETHNOLOGICAL SUBJECT FROM THE PERIPHERY. If we agree that the fundamental purpose of humanistic ethnography – "changing the social within the social" – is not exhausted within the scope of its academic ideal, i.e. the methodologically adequate description of the potential for social criticism and change embedded within everyday praxis, then post-colonial criticism has raised the most uncomfortable question of its socially engaged

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<sup>3</sup> "However, the nitty-gritty of everyday life cannot be presented as raw, unmediated data—the empiricist fallacy, data speaking for themselves—nor can it be presented through abstract theoretical categories – the theoreticist and idealist trap, the lack of interest in empirical findings. (...) Ethnography is the sensitive register of how experience and culture indicate, as well as help to constitute, profound social and structural change, but that change and continuity in change have to be conceptualized in ways not contained in ethnographic data themselves. The trick is to bring that 'registered experience' into a productive but unfussy relation to 'theory', so maximizing the illumination of wider change. (Theoretically informed ethnography) seeks to establish analytically productive relations between theory and data, the two most important poles or dimensions of the dialectic of surprise, so escaping the usual banishment of theory to the ghettoized 'theory section' devoid of aha effects" (Ibid., 399).

potential. As perhaps the most sophisticated procedure for dealing with the effects of rational discourses, whose biased politics of representation had the effect of shaping and reinforcing various forms of hegemony, post-colonial criticism subscribes to the critique of those forms of anthropological “scholarly activism” which remain trapped within the confines of academism.

Thus all the types of engaged ethnography within the scope of western anthropology, including their innovative, corrective and even *militant* variants, keep staggering on the ground of policies of representation and advocacy. On the other side, we can recognize the different kind of “activist” impulse characteristic for the so called national ethnologies of continental/European scientific traditions. Performing their social agency through the *carnavalesque* notion of *folklore*, as the mechanism defying the hegemonic relations through tacit forms of cultural resistance, this theoretical narrative, nevertheless, has somehow ended up in the normalising effects towards models of resistance in consumer societies, reducing it to “rebelliousness” through consumption and fetishization of popular culture (see more in Prica, 2001).

So, if we are now faced with the question of the place and the responsibility of ethnology within the global neoliberal crisis of the humanities, we ought to ask ourselves how and to what extent is it affected with a certain passivistic quality brought about by its own (post)paradigmatic crisis.

One of the significant consequences of the epistemological and academic restructuring of the discourses of humanities and social sciences from the end of last century, is that ethnography (as the former disciplinary “property” of ethnology and anthropology) has been inaugurated as an independent methodological domain radiating to the entire interdisciplinary field. As the *document of human experience*, ethnography – tactically amnestied of its manipulative, positivist epistemological status – suddenly appears as the guarantor of the empirical authenticity, either of “old” disciplines like sociology or historiography, or new academic paradigms striving for a synthesis of the entire humanistic field, as cultural studies.



However, as has already been stressed, the introduction and legitimisation of ethnography as a common humanistic field has not automatically resulted in any “interdisciplinary idyll”: for its methodological, theoretical and teleological potential, it means that it can be susceptible to various kinds of reductions and appropriations.

Set free from the epistemological and textual constraints, most of which have been permanently *put on hold*, ethnography has found itself at the centre of the reappointment of disciplinary authorities, especially in the post-socialist transformations of European hierarchies of knowledge (Buchowski 2006).

Such a *transitional* environment, performed through the prolonged processes of *Europeanization*, proved particularly beneficial for the reproduction of scientific and social subordinations, while in the euphoric rejection of previous “ideological dictates”, it has abolished also the tradition and practice of the – allegedly unavoidably parochial and instrumentalised – national ethnologies (Prca 2004, 2006).

The ethnological heritage of Southeast Europe was particularly liable to losing the equal position in the newly established field of *European anthropology*. Ignored for the theoretical and interpretative efforts developed during the period of socialist modernization, the interest shifts entirely to the documentary abundance of its exciting *domestic terrains*. The position of the informed and theoretically refined population of “ethnologists in transition”, in the espoused conditions has mostly been reduced to the provision of insider insights and collecting material from primary cultural sources.

There is, thus, a justified analytical impulse to recover the frozen potentials of the neglected ethnological heritage, especially of the ex-Yugoslav space. Beyond the routine and reductionist critique of its ideologically distorted or “parochial” practices, the modernist turns and various forms of critical writings, here also brought about important outcomes. Contrary to the well-established notions of the post-socialist moment as the beginning of their liberation and “normalization”, the eclectic interpretational interests as well as the

early deconstructive impulses from the beginning of the 70's, has made a strong platform for dismantling the concepts of nation and identity, performing also as the process of *anthropologization* before the explicit translation and legalization of the local ethnological traditions within recognisable (western) anthropological terms, as the opportunistic outcome of its post 1989 adaptations. Moreover, the imperative of urgent ethnographic documenting of cultural phenomena in light of global changes has encouraged exactly a regressive shift in former self-reflective forms of writing, evoking the positivist discourses from the beginning of the last century.

Today, it is up to us primarily to consider the systemic conditions for the peripheralisation as the production of global cultural-economical inequality, where disclosure and subversion of the politically opportune academic forms plays one of the crucial roles.

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