

Christopher Hann

Culture and the Limits to *Einfühlung*



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This has been the first time that I have used sabbatical terms for purposes other than fieldwork. With a backlog of materials from projects in Poland, Turkey and Chinese Central Asia, it was high time to give priority to writing. However, since my prior knowledge of Germany was almost zero, a lot of effort went into finding out how the local culture works, the sort of things one does in any new fieldwork project. Of course, there were differences. The Kolleg is an infinitely more comfortable environment than any of my previous fieldwork locations. Because it is also an English-speaking institution, the usual anthropological predicament where it is essential to learn the local language did not apply. If language is indeed the key to culture, as many anthropologists have argued over the last two centuries, then at the end of a year I have to admit that my grasp of German culture is pretty tenuous.

On the other hand the opportunities provided by the Wissenschaftskolleg and Berlin as a city have given me constant stimulus to reflect on and question basic concepts of my discipline. Although most anthropologists are familiar with the name of Johann Gottfried von Herder and believe him to be important, I suspect few have read his work. It is not easy to do so in English, since little has been translated. Perhaps he is not much read in Germany either. It came as a surprise to find that Herder is missing from the philosophy and social science section of the Kolleg library. Eventually I located two volumes of an incomplete *Auswahl* in the literature section upstairs. I take this to mean that Herder is not classified by contemporary German intellectuals as a first-rank thinker. Yet a Herderian concept of culture still dominates anthropology, in Germany as in Britain and

America. This concept has its appealing, emancipatory aspect: we should respect customs and forms of life that are very different from our own. But it also has its obverse: it is not Herder's fault that he was cited and distorted by Nazi ideologues, but anthropologists must be alert to the uses to which their concepts are put. The dangers inherent in claims to cultural uniqueness were illustrated in many Colloquia in the Kolleg this year. In my own project in South-East Poland, I have shown how both Poles and Ukrainians in a region that was once genuinely multicultural tend nowadays to an exclusive proprietorial stance to their separate national cultures. Polish extremists in Przemysl have succeeded in removing a church dome which in their eyes represented a foreign, eastern culture in a city which they want to make purely Polish.

Berlin experiences have also forced me to reflect on another Herderian concept, his notion of *Einfühlung*, for which empathy seems to be the closest term in English. This is important for many social scientists (it emerges in a somewhat different form in the concept of *Verstehen* in the sociology of Max Weber) and especially for the sort of understanding that anthropologists usually seek. But how does one feel empathy for a group when one's own culture is very different, when there is no base in common experiences? The problem of Ossi/Wessi identities within the German *Volk* turned up again and again during the year. My neighbour Wolf Biermann told everyone willing to listen that he felt no *Mitleid* for Ossis as a group, though his own life was obviously marked by decades he spent in the DDR and he certainly has maintained some friendships with individuals. In the course of the year I reviewed *Settling Accounts* by the American anthropologist John Borneman, who affects a strong commitment to the victims of the communist system and urges more radical pursuit of retributive justice. The book has some defects, but I suspect that my negative review was also influenced by conversations with German Fellows, and also with a few friends in East Berlin, about cases still going through the courts this year.

Our few contacts with Ossis began to seem like quite a lot when I talked to other West Berliners. Occasional trips outside the city to present papers were especially revealing. At the Universities in Leipzig and Frankfurt/Oder the great majority of staff were from the West. It is in some respects a colonial situation and you do not need training in anthropology to feel some sympathy with the Ossis in these places. In Leipzig I learned that a new word has entered the German language: a *Dimido* is a University teacher who only appears at his/her place of employment in the East on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays; the rest of the time he/she lives in the West, or in Berlin. Frankfurt has a new University called Europa-Universität Viadrina and claims to be proud of its many Polish students.

Unfortunately, the city also has a reputation for violence against foreigners by skinhead groups. Although there are Polish research students in anthropology and my colloquium paper dealt with Polish border relations, they were not invited to attend by the Wessis who run the Department. They talked about how marvellous it was to do fieldwork in an exciting border city, but before we had time to discuss this work they had to leave to catch the last train back to Berlin. I travelled back by car with an intelligent young man who is using his Brandenburg Scholarship to write a *rein theoretische* dissertation on the *Ethnologie des Glückes*, beginning with a consideration of Herder's question concerning *das glücklichste Volk*. He has lived in Berlin for many years, yet has had fewer contacts with East Germans than we have managed. Perhaps the question of the happiest *Volk* in history cannot be answered; but I cannot help feeling that the Ossis have been one of the *unglücklichste*.

Quite early on I realised that I shall need much more than a year to clarify my understanding of the trajectory of German *Ethnologie*, not to mention my grasp of recent German history and society. One specific point in the subdiscipline of economic anthropology may be relevant to continuing discussions in the Kolleg of 'economics in context'. It is common in Britain to credit Bronislaw Malinowski with the invention and popularisation of the concept of reciprocity, following his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands during the First World War. However, Marion Melk-Koch in her study of Richard Thurnwald (1989) makes the strong claim that he was the real innovator. I mentioned this in correspondence with Sir Raymond Firth, Malinowski's closest colleague, who also knew Thurnwald. In earlier published work Firth has credited the German with being the originator of the idea of the 'embeddedness' of the precapitalist economy, a metaphor later taken over by Karl Polanyi and the substantivist tradition in economic anthropology. But in the case of reciprocity Firth is not prepared to give all the credit to Thurnwald. The fact that Malinowski himself apparently did so, in a note to Thurnwald in which he referred to him as 'my Master', is unpersuasive, since we know from other cases (notably Frazer) that Malinowski had a habit of flattering even those to whose whole approach he was firmly opposed. According to Firth 'it was rather a case for parallel thinking'. However, there may be common points of origin, for Malinowski studied in Germany (Leipzig) before his move to England and his fieldwork, and ideas of mutual aid were common currency in a number of disciplines at this time.

Fortunately I shall be able to continue this and other incomplete lines of enquiry in a second year in Berlin, an opportunity for which I am immensely grateful to all concerned. Lurking in the background is the prospect of taking up a Directorship at a new Institute of the Max-Planck-

Gesellschaft, to be located somewhere in the *neue Bundesländer*. This has been a long time in gestation and at the time of writing it is still by no means clear that it will come to fruition. I hope it does for, quite apart from the obvious selfish attractions of better research conditions than any British university can offer and the opportunity to shape the direction of an Institute from its inception, it seems to me that this Institute should be able to play a useful role in the wider context of the discipline in Germany and internationally. It is clear that the Nazi period caused a break, and that the field has lacked coherence since the passing of Thurnwald's generation. This is reflected in the plethora of names under which anthropologists work, including *Volkskunde*, *Europäische Ethnologie*, *Völkerkunde* and *Kulturanthropologie*. I have heard plenty of negative comments about a 'state of disarray' and 'crisis'. Yet I also see signs of creative vitality at all levels, from the programme for the forthcoming EASA Conference at Frankfurt/Main to the student presentations at the *Forschungstagen* to which Georg Elwert and his colleagues kindly invited my wife and I at the Institut für Ethnologie of the Freie Universität. In Britain too there has been talk of a crisis in anthropology for at least a generation, and yet somehow the discipline seems to survive. Indeed it seems to prosper, even though the 'anthropological turn', as Wolf Lepenies has called it, is perhaps less marked in Britain than elsewhere. Anthropological concepts and methods have had a major impact on historians, rather less on adjacent social sciences. There has been less communication in recent years with biological anthropologists, and perhaps one of the tasks of a new *Institut für ethnologische Forschung* could be to rejuvenate the sort of dialogues about social evolution that were central to nineteenth-century definitions of the subject.

All this remains to be seen. Meanwhile, what have I accomplished during my first year in Germany? Well, my project on Greek Catholics in Poland (supported by the British ESRC) was smoothly completed, much aided by the easy communications. By taking the night train from Lichtenberg I could be at the Polish-Ukrainian border in good time for lunch, and so I made more field trips than originally planned. I also achieved better dissemination, publishing articles in more languages and countries than would have happened without the networks that opened up from the Kolleg. (A fair sample of this work is the piece in *Slavic Review* 1998.) All this took up more time than expected, so less progress was made on other fronts. I saw my edited volume on *Property Relations* through the final stages of production at Cambridge University Press. I caught up with book reviews and finished articles about Central Asia, one of them a joint work with Ildikó Bellér-Hann. It became clear that the book from this project must be her work in its entirety. We did not make much progress with our

joint monograph following our earlier field research in Turkey: completion of this work, provisionally entitled *Modern Lazistan*, has top priority for next year.

It will be a privilege to stay a little longer in Grunewald, though the opportunities for inter-cultural experiences must be more limited here than almost anywhere else in the city. From an anthropological point of view, I would prefer to see the Kolleg located in Kreuzberg or Prenzlauer Berg (where we spent much of May Day, though without witnessing any of the violence that later made media headlines). At the same time we benefited fully from the marvellous location and facilities of the Kolleg. We mapped the forests as far as the Havel on our bicycles. For a while the children came with us on rides, walks and runs around the Grunewaldsee and Teufelssee, but as the year went on they became increasingly autonomous young adults and more reluctant to join us. They had some inter-cultural experiences of their own, having to put up with a little (mild, perhaps mostly affectionate) teasing at the John F. Kennedy Schule on account of their British accents. It has been an important year in their education, in all respects.

To use the term culture in yet another sense, we much enjoyed sampling the city's cultural menu in the fields of music and drama. Within a few weeks in June we heard Alfred Brendel at the Philharmonie and Bob Dylan at the Waldbühne: classics of incommensurable musical cultures? The latter's performance was briefer and somehow less satisfying than that given by Wolf Biermann when receiving his Deutsche Nationalpreis (Erste Klasse!) from Helmut Schmidt at a ceremony in the Staatsbibliothek in May. Watching a video of Biermann's 1976 Köln concert, part of the splendid German language and culture programme laid on by Eva Hund, was another highlight.

Space prevents me from mentioning the names of all the many Fellows and family members who contributed to making this year so enjoyable and rewarding in every respect for us. Nor can I list the names of all the staff who coped so well with such a diverse and demanding group of visitors. We can only say thank you, with heartfelt *Einfühlung*.