

Paradigma “Ländliche Gesellschaft”. Ethnografische Skizzen zur Wissensgeschichte bis ins 21. Jahrhundert.

By Leonore Scholze-Irrlitz.

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The ethnographical ‘sketches’ in this volume, some already published in their earlier versions and some recently announced papers by Professor Leonore Scholze-Irrlitz, at Humboldt University of Berlin compose a colorful mosaic of the German European ethnology’s past and present. By rereading the history of ethnographic knowledge production, the author reveals how ‘rural society,’ a foundational paradigm of *Volkskunde* and later of European ethnology has been constructed from the eighteenth century to the present. In addition, it illustrates how the ethnographical approach, which has built its own knowledge structure in the past over two hundred years, may assist fruitful examinations of the rural area’s recent challenges. The author also aspires to provide methodological keys for experts of the discipline in the research of rural society and to offer public and political decision-makers on different levels an attitudinal position and a way of thinking concerning the ‘rural area’ for.

Since its establishment (1995), the author has been the leader of the Regional Institute for Ethnography of Berlin-Brandenburg, a department with special territorial and thematic interest within the Institute of European Ethnology at Humboldt University. The volume is mainly based on the empirical approach to ‘rural area,’ namely on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in several settlements of the Brandenburg region.¹ Scholze-Irrlitz’s individual research as well as her projects connected to university courses are built on strong cooperation with museums, cultural institutions and associations in the region.

1 For more details, see Scholze-Irrlitz, ed., *Aufbruch im Umbruch*; Scholze-Irrlitz, ed., *Perspektive ländlicher Raum*; Scholze-Irrlitz, ed., *Entwicklung statt Abwicklung*.

The volume comprises two main sections. Part I (“Problems of the Interpretation of the Discipline”) provides an overview of German European ethnology’s history, and Part II (“Empiricism. »Rural Society«”) turns towards the ethnography of Berlin-Brandenburg. Sections are attached to each other through the term ‘rural area,’ which is the key concept of the book. Among the definitions of ‘rural area,’ Scholze-Irrlitz emphasizes its nature of being a place of knowledge. Knowledge in this case means people’s varied experiences and the ability to build consensus from their differences whereby they create diverse social realities in a certain time horizon (pp. 10–11).

The first chapter introduces the forerunners of the discipline in the Enlightenment era, accurately presenting the milieu that promoted the publication of so-called pre-ethnographical material. The pre-ethnographical approach already carried features that later constituted the ‘core’ of the discipline. Although ethnography has its roots in cultural history, which evolved in the age of the Enlightenment, it observes its subject from a different perspective. While the latter focuses on the history of human civilisations and depicts them as branches of a linear progress, pre-ethnography emphasizes the subjective perception of social processes. The intention to grasp individual experiences deriving from different situations of social life instead of causal thinking—which became characteristic of natural sciences in the nineteenth century—created the concept of open-ended social processes.

The author proceeds with her analysis by presenting the gradually shaped principles of the discipline in the second chapter, which covers the timespan from the late eighteenth century to the interwar period. The evolution of ethnography’s paradigm happened in the historical context of the rise of modernity and was also shaped by the experience of the many ruptures in everyday life caused by industrialisation. Through its specific approach, ethnography was able to remove individual, unique phenomena from their peripheral status, placing them in the discipline’s focus of attention.

Further chapters in the first part examine ethnography’s trajectory through the Berlin-case, providing a fairly deep insight into the inner relations of Humboldt University and highlighting important methodological considerations connected to the oeuvre of the institute’s leading figures from the establishment of the chair of ethnography to the transformation of the university system after the political turn in 1989. This narrative opens with a study on the key moments of ethnography’s institutionalisation at Humboldt University in the era of National Socialism in the 1930s. Analysing the university lectures with any ethnographical content in the period, the author reveals significant details of the discipline’s self-identification and subject formation. The relationship between the discipline and society, in other words the operation of knowledge transfers between the scientific and the social realities of the 1930s is also highlighted. The analysis of the period continues with presenting the methodological approaches the Berlin school followed in its ethnographical research.

The last two chapters of the first part address the discipline's profile renewal in the second half of the twentieth century. The author presents how the 'way of life' as a new concept for empirical research emerged in the German Democratic Republic and how it served as a common ground for ethnologists and ethnographers at Humboldt University; moreover, it managed to converge the activities of the university and the academy of sciences. Finally, the historical overview of the Berlin school ends with an explanation of how this approach has been reflected in the university's educational and the research projects.

Entitled "Empiricism," the second part of the volume gives the essence of Scholze-Irrlitz' achievements in researching rural society in the Berlin-Brandenburg area. The chapters in the first thematic block connect social and ecological aspects of the rural area, focusing on the experience attached to certain physically existing places. The case study of the village Brodowin (located in the Barnim region) analyses how the industrialized agricultural production of the local co-operative (*Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft*) has been converted into bio-dynamic farming within the frames of the 'Brodowin Eco-Village' enterprise since the reunification of Germany. Scholze-Irrlitz focuses on the period of the transformation of the system and shows how different groups of interest found their common ground and decided to follow the path of sustainable agriculture. Another case study here, the Wallmow case (located in the Uckermark region) underlines the significance and legitimacy of local social and economic initiations in a region where, due to the constant dismantlement of the public infrastructure, inhabitants find themselves in a fatal downward spiral. The author's examples include a successful project of maintaining elementary education on the local level and various well-functioning forms of informal work.

Turning from the spatial to temporal aspects, namely to the experience of historical situations, a chapter highlights the role of collective memory in the construction of historical cognition. The author provides insight into the milieu of transit camps for forced and 'foreign' laborers in Brandenburg in 1941–1944. Her analysis is based on the two pillars of archival material and personal memories, narratives of the witnesses and victims. The last chapter of the monograph intends to combine the spatial focus with the temporal approach, as it argues for the necessity of methodological plurality in researching the rural area. Returning to the Brodowin case, Scholze-Irrlitz reconstructs local property relations in agriculture before the collectivisation by analysing archival material. Combining the results with present experiences of bio-dynamic farming and land tenancy policies, the author makes it visible why land owning after 1990—which has been built on the property relations of the 1960s—could ensure one's position in the new 'Eco-Village' enterprise, whereas other factors such as qualifications could not secure someone's future on the farm.

The part “Empiricism” is built on the term ‘sustainability’ as a key concept for the analysis. For the author, sustainability is a specific approach to the rural area which focuses on the practice, that is how actual potentials, problems and ambivalences are handled in order to obtain a meaningful existence in a certain place, in its social lifeworld. Therefore, case studies in the second part of the volume detail individual trajectories of rural places and pay special attention to local projects emerging from social interaction and social involvement. Methodological considerations, such as significant use of participant observation, derive from this attitude. Local experience can be described as an anchor in this context which fixes the concept of sustainability in the reality of a particular social place.

European ethnology’s special attention to the peripheries is an essential statement of the first part of the volume and gains a significant actuality in researching rural society in Berlin-Brandenburg. As Scholze-Irrlitz reveals, the rural areas where she conducted fieldwork are regarded as peripheric both in public and scientific discourses in Germany, and little attention is given to their inhabitants’ experiences or points of view. The author introduces the concept of ‘considering social as demographic’, an approach critically discussed by the sociologist Stephan Beetz for stating, on the basis of pure demographic indicators, that there are certain rural regions that suffered the most from the post-1990 transformation and arguing that they are inherently unviable with no future perspectives. In the political decision making of contemporary Germany that mainly leans on rural development studies characterized by this numerical thinking, the disappearance and depopulation of the rural area are strong assumptions. Scholze-Irrlitz argues that without widening the perspective to include the approaches of other disciplines, which are based on empiricism, such as European ethnology, decision makers lack social reality’s complexity. For this reason, they might miss the chance to promote a sustainable way of life based on the rural area’s own competencies. It is noteworthy that the author’s approach towards researching the rural area in Berlin-Brandenburg recalls one of the fundamental features of *Volkskunde*/European ethnology, for it focuses on the marginal and peripheral.

Another key concept of the discipline, i.e., thinking about social processes with an open end, inheres organically in the case studies of the second section. Through the analysis of local trajectories, the author shows that local processes do not reflect irrevocable tendencies, instead they are formed in the dialogue between the characteristics of the region, such as the historically evolved structure and organisation of settlements, agricultural and industrial facilities and various possible everyday strategies, experiences, and knowledge of the sustainable way of life. Furthermore, by revealing bottom-up initiations and their role in sustaining the

rural area, Scholze-Irrlitz challenges the central idea of developing society in a solely growth-oriented way. On that basis, the author defines phenomena that are investigated in her monograph as ‘transformation-processes’, emphasizing the possibility of an open end which depends on people’s decisions in the complex correlation of situations, and she renounces the use of the term ‘transition’ as it approaches changes focusing on patterns and regularity. Scholze-Irrlitz outlines that denying the lineal and causal nature of the relationship between cause and effect is deeply embedded in the history of European ethnology.

European ethnology is defined here as a discipline that investigates its subject in its specific spatial and social context through a qualitative methodology. It also pays attention to the historical formation and future perspectives of the various forms of the everyday culture it deals with. According to the argumentation of Scholze-Irrlitz, these fundamental characteristics make the discipline competent, even committed to mediate between scientific and social contexts and to draw public attention towards the example of successful local initiations, thus proving the viability of the rural area and the legitimacy of bottom-up approaches. The author presents an inspiring take on the manner in which ethnological knowledge may be transferred: a process built on lively and pragmatical cooperation between rural actors and the decision and policy makers on the regional level, experts in rural development studies and, of course, the ethnologist herself.

To summarize, Leonore Scholze Irrlitz’s compilation of ethnographical ‘sketches’ offers much more than one specific focus for its readers. This monograph is a rereading of the discipline’s history from a new perspective. The author highlights the role of certain periods, aspects, correlations, and persons that have not received sufficient attention so far in the evaluation of rural society’s paradigm. Moreover, Scholze-Irrlitz’s book provides a deep insight into the history of the Berlin school of German ethnology, taking a specific look at the scientific tradition of researching the Berlin-Brandenburg region. Finally, this outstanding volume is also a portrait of a researcher and lecturer who is a prominent character in the present-day research of rural regions of Europe. The ‘sketches’ demonstrate significant results of her oeuvre and also phrase a theoretically and methodologically well elaborated program in researching rural society, emphasizing the ethnologist’s social responsibility.

Literature

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