

Contemporary Czech Ethnography: Theory, Practice, Emphases

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Zdenek Salzmann has contributed this, the first of what we hope will be a series on contemporary anthropology of the East European nations.

Let me first define the topic of this report with greater precision than the title permits. I am concerning myself here with Czech ethnography that is, a discipline as it is represented by the publications of ethnographers in the Czech Socialist Republic (Bohemia and Moravia). I am not concerned with writings of Czech ethnographers residing and working outside their native country and I have excluded Slovak ethnographic scholarship which, though closely related, would merit a separate study.

The Term "ethnography" itself, as it is employed in the context of Czech scholarship, calls for a comment. According to the authoritative Ilustrovaný encyklopedický slovník (Vol. I: A-I EPrague, 1980]), published by the Encyclopedic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, the term národopis and its synonym etnografie refer to "culture-historical science that deals with the material and spiritual culture of nations, nationalities, ethnic groups, and the like", studies the evolution and function of dwellings, dress, subsistence, commercial exchange, tools, weapons, and social institutions, and] concerns itself with the collecting, description, comparison, and evaluation of both partial and general expressions of human culture" (p. 607). Etnografie is terminologically distinct from folkloristika [folkloristics, folklore studies], whose aim, according to the same source, is to examine the manner in which "collective consciousness is reflected in individual kinds and genres of folklore," be they oral traditions, rituals, folk theater, folk songs and music, folk dance, or the like. Nevertheless, for the Czechs the two fields are very closely related. This linkage is clearly evident from the identical designation of the two major centers of Czech ethnographic research- the Institute for Ethnography and Folkloristics of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and the corresponding department [Ústředí] of Ethnography and Folkloristics of the ancient and best-known Czechoslovak university, The Caroline University [Karlova univerzita] in Prague.

The Institute for Ethnography and Folkloristics publishes the Journal Ceský lid, currently in its seventieth volume (1983), which by virtue of its sponsorship is the premier Czech Journal in the field.

Because all scholarly activities in socialist Czechoslovakia must be institutionally sponsored and approved, they are highly centralized, and this is true in full measure also of Czech ethnography and folklore studies. It therefore does not come as a surprise that the functions of the director of the Institute, head of the university department, and editor in chief of Ceský lid all rest on the same individual, Dr. Antonín Robek, a trusted and highly positioned member of the Communist party who for some years now has been the virtual czar of Czech ethnography and folklore studies.

Although Robek's professional career as an ethnographer dates back to 1951, when as a young student of twenty he translated from the Russian S. P. Tolstov's article "Fundamental tasks and paths in the evolution of Soviet ethnography," his rise to administrative and ideological eminence did not occur until after the political events of 1968. Untainted by the spirit of liberalization that characterized the latter half of the 1960s and culminated in the "Prague Spring," he was entrusted with what was euphemistically referred to as "normalization" of Czech ethnographic and folkloristic scholarship. This was accomplished by a succession of personnel changes - for example, by his assuming effective control of the Journal Ceský lid, as of the final 1972 issue, through replacement of an editorial board of seasoned ethnographers with a relatively inexperienced colleague (several years later he took over the duties of editor himself).

The scope of Czech ethnography and folkloristic research can be gleaned from the latest comprehensive bibliography, covering the year of 1975 (Vera Trkova Lcu-H.J., Ceská národopisná bibliografie 1975 [Prague, 1977]). The work contains 626 entries, and although some of them refer to publications omitted from bibliographies for the previous several years, eventual addenda for 1975 should roughly compensate for the additional references. The arrangement of the bibliographies provides us with a ready if somewhat mechanical guide to the topical interests of Czech ethnographers and folklorists. The largest number of contributions is in the area of ethnography and folklore of cities and industrial regions (54), followed by folk prose (46), folk architecture and conservationist concerns (43), and customs, superstitions, and folk medicine (26). Remarkable is the relative paucity of publications dealing with social relations (6).

In general there is emphasis on material culture, the urban and industrial scene, and folklore in its various manifestations, but a glaring gap in what in the United States is referred to as "social anthropology." In this respect, however, Czech ethnography is not unlike the ethnography of other European countries, excepting only Great Britain and France. In contrast to the United States, where virtually all projects in sociocultural anthropology and folklore are chosen and carried out on an individual basis, Czech ethnographers and folklorists, especially those employed by the Institute, are primarily engaged in collective, or team, research enterprises. The most important projects of the last decade have centered on the ethnographic study of the working class (thus far 9 volumes in a series published by the Institute), the period of Czech National Revival (5 volumes), and the socialist transformation of the rural sector (2 volumes).

There is one other subject that in recent years has been receiving special attention, especially on the pages of Ceský lid- the new settlers in communities of the border regions from which the former Sudeten German inhabitants were expelled immediately after World War II. The problems of readjustment that these new settlers experienced are particularly interesting in the case of Czechs repatriated from countries to which they had emigrated more than a century ago, especially Volhynia and the Banat, which today are in the Soviet Union and Rumania.

In addition to the definite shift in concentration from survivals to topics more consonant with Marxist conception of what ethnography ought to deal with, there is a strong bias in favor of historical rather than synchronic studies. Among the twenty or so articles by Czech ethnographers published in Ceský lid in 1981, ninety percent are historically oriented, ranging in time from the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) to the end of World War II.

There are several reasons for the neglect of the contemporary scene. Recent studies of the peasantry and the proletariat, covering the era of Austria-Hungary and the First Republic (1918-1938), generally strive to show the economic hardships with which the large majority of the working class had to cope. In one of the "editorials" with which Robek introduces the contents of each issue of Ceský lid, he takes up the subject under the title "Existential certainties of the socialist way of life" (my translation; Ceský lid 69:129-130 [1982]). Robek's contention is that "in his study of the past of villages and cities, the ethnographer frequently encounters to his surprise materials that give evidence of the fact that the old capitalist society offered practically no existential certainties.... Ethnographic and folkloric materials depict the wretched situation of old

people--for example, retired peasants, deplorable relations between social groups and classes, Land] fear of diseases and other social and natural catastrophes." in the study of the contemporary socialist village," Robek continues, "one obviously does not meet with these phenomena. full employment, occasionally even a palpable shortage of labor force, tends to obliterate the memory of those phenomena of the past, which the socialist society has done away with."

Now there is little doubt that members of the former lower socioeconomic classes have been faring better under socialism, but to suggest that their situation could not bear further improvement is far from justified. The best evidence for this assertion is the multitude of jokes that constantly circulate among Czechs of all stripes and offer an incisive, if sub-rosa, commentary on the political and economic shortcomings of their present condition. Jokes of this kind unquestionably constitute legitimate folkloric material, but anyone who might wish to collect and analyze them would be engaged in treasonable activity. The preoccupation with the past on the part of ethnographers and folklorists thus parallels a similar trend found in the works of other social scientists as well as novelists who, apprehensive of frank assessment of the present, escape from it by choosing their topics from the presocialist past.

One of the departments in the Institute for ethnography and Folkloristics in Prague is charged with research concerning the socialist village. Whereas studies of villages and the peasantry by prewar ethnographers were characterized by concentration on the traditional features of village life and for the most part neglected the social dynamics of rural communities, the contemporary Marxist approach calls for the rigorous application of the "basic methodological principles of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, including the materialist conception of society, historicism, and the recognition of the complex nature of the social system of any human collectivity" (*Ceský lid* 68:43 L19813)

It may now be of interest to offer an illustration of how the ethnographic study of the lifeway and culture of the Czech village during the period of building a developed socialist society is conceptualized by the research team of the Institute's Department of the Socialist Village. According to a fairly detailed outline of an ongoing research project (*Ceský lid* 68:43-50 C1981]), the main goal is to identify empirically both general and specific features that characterize the formation of socialist lifeway in Czech villages, to elucidate those factors that play a significant part in the transformation, and to provide the administrative authorities with

orgány] with basic data concerning the process. The communities already chosen for the study and those yet to be selected (as of 1981) must include both villages that are ethnically homogeneous and heterogeneous, located in the interior as well as the border regions, and in other ways representative of the demographic, economic, and sociocultural structure of the Bohemian rural sector.

Because in its development socialism inevitably confronts the lifeways of the past, it is necessary to establish first a data baseline for the Presocialist era, against which the nature of post-1948 changes can be assessed. Gathering of data makes use of the standard methods applicable to research concerned with culture change: examination of documentary sources of every kind, from minutes of meetings to newspapers to family chronicles; structured interviews to elicit objective information as well as subjective views concerning a given topic; direct observation supplemented, whenever possible or appropriate, by sound recordings, photographs, or film; and questionnaires. Given the proposed scope of the field research, the work is to extend over a period of several years, possibly as long as a decade, and to take the form of short-term periodic visits to the villages under study.

The project has been divided among the team members into the following subject areas: (1) the village as a residential environment and the housing standards of the villagers during the period of building socialism; (2) social life in the village during the period of building socialism and the role of tradition; (3) the role of the family and nature of family life in the village during the period of building socialism; (4) family and family life in ethnically heterogeneous localities; (5) intergenerational family relations in ethnically heterogeneous localities; and (6) nonprofessional expressions of oral traditions (folklore). Each of these subject areas is assigned to one particular member of the research team, but care is taken that team members consult each other periodically lest their individual research contributions become disconnected from one another.

The results of the field research, already in print or to be published in the form of papers dealing with individual topics as they relate to specific communities or regions, will eventually serve as the basis for regional and topical monographs. Not until these have been completed can one expect a synthetic work that would provide a comprehensive account of the various aspects of the socialist transformation of Czech villages that the Institutes Department of the Socialist Village is currently studying.

Several comments come to mind as one examines the approach the Institute has taken to this major research undertaking.

One of the stated goals, namely, to provide the administrative organs with data concerning the process of socialization, suggests that the research findings may well be used in part as a basis for directed culture change (applied anthropology) by the ultimate sponsor of the research - the state. This admission takes on special significance when one considers the following statement made in the discussion of methodology: "One of the problems that arises as one conducts Field] observations is the undesirability of interfering with the process being studied. To avoid this, it is appropriate to make use of concealed [utajené] observation which, if one studies a village age in depth, can be carried out only in the initial phases of the research. In cases involving certain complex questions, the effects of observation can be mitigated by falsifying the actual research goals [navozením fiktivního cíle výzkumu]" (p. 46). The suggested procedure is in conflict on several counts with the standards of professional ethics developed by the American Anthropological Association to guide field-workers in this country. One also notes the lack of explicit interest in the larger socioeconomic context in which a great many members of village communities today function: with agricultural work becoming highly mechanized, more and more villagers have been freed to accept industrial employment in nearby towns to which they commute on a daily or weeklies basis. Clearly, the once sharp dichotomy between the rural and urban sectors has been effectively bridged, and the consequences cannot but be strongly felt in both material and sociocultural aspects of village life; yet, this important effect of socialist transformation is neglected in the fairly detailed-research plan, which among the objectives of its study singles out room furnishings and sports activities.

Just as in the other social sciences, theory in Czech ethnography has taken a sharp turn since World War II. The darkest years in the discipline's postwar development were unquestionably those of the Stalinist period in the early 1950s, which produced its share of sycophantic articles and books. Modern Soviet ethnography was characterized as "having outdistanced, in its development, all ethnographic schools of the whole world, taking as its fundamental point of departure the brilliant thought of J. V. Stalin- that 'every nation, whether large or small, has its qualitative particularities, its specific features, which belong only to it and which other nations do not possess'" (Otakar Nahodil and Jaroslav Kramarík: J. V. Stalin a národopisná věda [Praha, 1952], p. 9). "Ethnographic work," the authors continue, "that is guided

by this thought cannot but follow the correct and progressive path in complete contradistinction to any harmful bourgeois tendencies of nationalistic and cosmopolitan character" (p. 10). As for the other side of the coin, "Antihumane and unscientific goals that 'Western bourgeois ethnography set for itself mean that bourgeois ethnography as a science has for all practical purposes been liquidated" (ibid., p. 95; incidentally, one of the authors of these statements has since chosen to make his home in Western Europe).

While these and similar pronouncements were the exception rather than the rule. they were made by ethnographers who came to wield considerable influence in the discipline, and if they were meant to bludgeon serious scholarship, they had a measure of success, at least for a time. The situation has long since stabilized, especially after the relatively bloodless purge following the "crisis situation" of 1968, which did not affect Czech ethnography to any significant extent. Apart from the programmatic exhortations of those whose task it is to keep Czech ethnographers on the correct ideological track, published research has been on the whole quite solid, though markedly lacking in methodological or theoretical innovation. Historically oriented, as it is supposed to be, the present Czech ethnography, together with the other social sciences, maintains its focus on subjects reflecting the new socioeconomic order and orientation- especially the proletariat as the bearer of the most progressive characteristics of cultural and social life, the process of the formation of an emancipated working class, and the nature of socialist transformation of the Bohemian countryside.

These are without question topics worthy of attention; what is to be regretted is that they are offered in a marketplace of ideas where the consumer has but one line to choose from.