

# Who's afraid of 'Teutonic professors'?

## *The hermeneutic tradition in German ethnology*

### VOLKER GOTTOWIK

The author is working as Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter at the Institut für Historische Ethnologie, Liebigstrasse 41, 60323 Frankfurt/M. His doctoral dissertation was published under the title *Konstruktionen des Anderen* at Reimer Verlag, Berlin 1997. He is currently doing research in Indonesia.

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In his well-known essay 'Blurred Genres', Clifford Geertz points out that the word 'hermeneutics' frightens people, because it conjures up 'images of biblical zealots, literary humbugs, and Teutonic professors' (Geertz 1980-1983: 21). To exorcise the menace represented by the 'Teutonic professors', one may want to call them by their names: Herder, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas for example. As a matter of fact ethnology in Germany decided to exorcise the menace by ignoring it, so that hermeneutics had no direct influence on theory building in our discipline.

The traditional domain of hermeneutics is philology, the interpretation of classical and biblical texts. But from the beginning of this century hermeneutics also gained ground in the historical sciences and in sociology, most prominently represented in Max Weber's *Verstehende Soziologie* (Weber 1921). In contrast to the historical sciences and to sociology there was no hermeneutical approach in German ethnology: a term such as 'Verstehende Ethnologie' for example was never coined. There were initial impulses towards such an approach, but the very few representatives of our discipline who tried to free ethnology from the dominant naturalistic and scientific paradigm stand outside of mainstream ethnology; others emigrated, such as Franz Boas, who, being a young Jewish intellectual, saw no chance for a career under Adolf Bastian at the 'Völkerkunde Museum' in Berlin.

German-speaking ethnology during that period of time had a strong historical orientation.<sup>1</sup> Its leading representatives in Berlin, Vienna and Frankfurt am Main hold the position that hermeneutics, being applied to the interpretation of texts, would have no relevance for the reconstruction of the history of illiterate people. They relied heavily on a 'salvage paradigm' (Clifford 1987), which was to characterize German ethnology from Bastian to Frobenius to Haberland.

Eike Haberland, one of the most influential ethnologists in post-war Germany, used a telling metaphor in his inaugural lecture 1967 at the Goethe University in Frankfurt/M. Attempting to describe the situation in Africa at the end of the sixties, he compared the continent to a burning house, saying that we might not be able to extinguish the fire, but should try to rescue as much as we can (cf. Uni-Report 1991). Haberland belonged to the last generation of German ethnologists to be educated before or during the Second World War. Scholars from this generation were convinced that, for a rescue operation in Africa and elsewhere, an attempt to come to terms with epistemological or ethical issues would be an irresponsible waste of time.

The generation of German ethnologists to which I belong was educated in an 'atheoretical idyll' (Stagl 1981), since up to the seventies and early eighties the discipline maintained a strong empirical orientation without any epistemological interest.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the hermeneutic philosophers of the 'Teutonic' tradition mentioned at the beginning were – perhaps with the ex-

ception of Johann Gottfried Herder – not on the curriculum.

Against this background it was a surprise for us to encounter some of these 'Teutonic professors' in anthropological textbooks edited by North American or British colleagues; these textbooks were about rationality, fieldwork methods, understanding foreign cultures or the textual representation of the other; and they had titles like 'Symbolic Anthropology', 'Interpretive Social Science', 'The Anthropology of Experience', or 'Writing Culture'.

In these textbooks we discovered as ethnologists in Germany that German philosophers of the above-mentioned hermeneutic tradition have something relevant to say to us. So we had the paradoxical situation, that we first read for example about Dilthey or Gadamer in English before we came to the idea of reaching for the original text.

Even when the situation in German ethnology began to change, an interest in theoretical issues developed very slowly. This was pointed out in an M.A. thesis by a student in Tübingen, who examined the response which a theoretical approach such as interpretive anthropology has received in Germany; one of the findings of this thesis was that up to the year 1992 not a single article was published in German ethnological journals and magazines which deals with the work of Clifford Geertz (Gratz-Meskini 1992).

Why was the most influential representative of an interpretive or cultural hermeneutic approach largely ignored by German speaking ethnologists, at least until recently? Here I want to stress only three points which are able to cast light on the present situation of ethnology in Germany.

First, Geertz's work is difficult to classify in terms of location or geography. His perspective is comparative insofar as he is trying to find global structures in local details. Geertz brings his interpretive approach right to the point, when he says that the place of investigation is not the object of investigation (Geertz 1973). Such a comparative perspective, which analyses the same phenomena in Southeast Asia and in the Maghreb, hinders his reception in Germany, where a strong geographical division and subdivision characterizes the discipline.

Second, Geertz's style is, in a good sense of the word, essayistic; but the essay as genre is not widely accepted as an appropriate scientific form in German academia. Despite the influential articles of Lukacs (1911) and Adorno (1958) about the essay as genre, there is still a 'petit bourgeois resentment' (Bude 1989: 535) against an unorthodox writing style which ignores bibliographical references and the beauty of footnotes. Because Geertz constantly borrows ideas and notions from other social scientists, linguists and philosophers, a widespread objection against his interpretive approach in German ethnology runs as follows: too much theory – too little data.

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Uni-Report. 1991. *Bundesverdienstkreuz für Eike Haberland*. In: *Uni-Report*, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt a. M., 1 April, p.5.

Weber, Max. 1921. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss einer verstehenden Soziologie*. Tübingen.

Third, the process of translation and publication of Geertz's work in Germany is generally unsatisfactory. Many of his influential essays are not translated at all. In this case his pretentious English writing style hinders the reception of his work in the original in Germany. The translation of other essays is often inconsistent and partly unfortunate; in the first German collection of his essays, the central term 'interpretive anthropology' was not translated as *interpretative Anthropologie* – which would have been obvious – but as *deutende Ethnologie*, which only contributes to the general confusion about semiotic, symbolic or interpretive anthropology. (As if to add insult to injury, the first hardcover translation of his book *Works and Lives* repeatedly mis-spells his name in the first pages.) Finally, German ethnologists have represented Geertz as the 'paragon of influences, external to the discipline' (cf. Stellrecht 1993).

Against this background, it is interesting to see that colleagues from other social sciences took care of further translations of Geertz's essays (cf. Habermas & Minkmar, eds. 1992). Especially since the beginning of the 90s, the literary and the historical sciences have increasingly discovered Geertz's interpretive anthropology as powerful paradigm. So, for the first time in many years anthropological theory has been taken up by almost all other social sciences in Germany – except ethnology. This has become especially obvious from a series of articles in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, one of the leading daily newspapers in Germany. Here scholars from sociology, literary sciences and historical sciences have engaged in a controversy about 'thick description', the notion of understanding and the representation of the other (cf. Bachmann-Medick 1992, Ellrich 1992, Fuchs 1992, Habermas 1992). This very exciting controversy widely took place without any participation of German ethnologists.

The impact of interpretive anthropology is apparently greater on the historical and literary sciences than on German-speaking ethnology itself. Literary scholars have discovered interpretive anthropology as a paradigm which is able to show how to read a text as the expression of a social or cultural practice; scholars of the historical sciences have found an interpretive approach attractive, because it allows them to analyse a past epoch from the perspective of the historical actors. Both sciences may claim interpretive insights without any sort of tricky empathy into the minds of dead poets or nameless members of a widely forgotten past. These reasons which make Geertz highly recommended in the literary and historical sciences make him suspicious in German-speaking ethnology. And – as I would say – for good reasons!

In contrast to classical philology and the historical sciences, an anthropologist is in principle able to lead not only a discourse *about* the other, but also *with* the other. However, this peculiarity of the ethnographic research process disappears widely in Geertz's conception of an interpretive anthropology: Geertz compares a foreign culture with a text, which the ethnographer somehow tries to read while looking over the native's shoulder (Geertz 1974). By reading culture as a text, the ethnographer may discover meanings and structures which have remained concealed from the natives themselves. This conception leads to a privileged position for the ethnographer (cf. Phipps 1989), which opens up

to Geertz from the text metaphor and the connected paradigm of reading.

The privileged position of the reader over the author goes back ultimately to a semiotic theory (cf. Noeth 1985: 50), which in the first instance lays down the meaning of signs, actions and texts according to their use or effect. Such a pragmatic theory of meaning leads away from the question: What does the text mean? And, concomitantly, to the question: What does it do with the reader? The interaction between reader and text becomes here the object of the examination.

Against this background the question seems relevant, how the natives themselves read the text *which is their culture* and how they respond to the ethnographer's text about them. Their readings might open up areas of meaning which are not necessarily accessible to the ethnographer and other western interpreters. Here too, referential meanings are uncovered, which the ethnographer had not seen or intended and which may strike him as strange. Nevertheless, based on the pragmatic theory of meaning with its indifference towards the author's original intention, there is no theoretical evidence to reject indigenous interpretations as inappropriate. Geertz however shows no interest in these interpretations.

The hermeneutic or interpretive tradition in cultural anthropology – represented by Clifford Geertz in this context – owes much to Wilhelm Dilthey: his hermeneutic circle is adapted, his concept of empathy rejected. However, this concept of an empathetical understanding of the other is not replaced by the notion of dialogue – as advocated by Gadamer (1960) and Habermas (1983) – but by a pragmatic theory of meaning. This move is nothing but another way to exorcize the menace represented by these 'Teutonic professors'. □

This text was originally given as a paper in the AAA Annual Meeting in San Francisco on 23 November 1996, in an invited session of the American Ethnological Society entitled 'German anthropology today', organized by Tullio Maranhao.

1. The historical orientation of German speaking ethnology is itself the result of incisive historical events: Germany lost its colonial territories after World War I and German ethnology subsequently its field of application. In contrast to North America and Australia, ethnology in Germany could not be applied to "natives at home", so that the self-understanding of the discipline was frequently to be a *historische Hilfswissenschaft*, providing the historical sciences with data about the former German colonies, in particular about the life of the natives before any contact with the West.

2. German ethnology's compromise with Nazism, mainly through providing a pseudo-theoretical legitimation to *Rassenlehre* and eugenics, led in post-war Germany to a certain anxiety to go beyond a mere collection of data. It is only recently, that *Völkunde* and *Völkerkunde* have begun to work up their entanglement with Nazism (cf. Gerndt ed. 1987 and Hauschild 1987). The co-existence of *Völk- und Völkerkunde* has a long tradition in German academia. As *Völkerkunde*, which is just a somewhat out-dated synonym for *Ethnologie*, could be seen as a *historische Hilfswissenschaft*, the understanding of *Völkunde* was frequently to be a *philologische Hilfswissenschaft*, providing Germanistics, the study of German language and literature, with data about the oral literature (fairy-tales, songs, etc.) of the German people. As a consequence of the '68 student revolt the curriculum of *Völkunde* was redefined and the most important institutes changed their names into *Empirische Kulturwissenschaften* or *Europäische Ethnologie*. Nowadays these different names are used at the same time and at the same place: as for example in Frankfurt/Main, where exists a *Museum für Völkerkunde*, an *Institut für Historische Ethnologie* and an *Institut für Europäische Ethnologie*.

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## Repercussions from the Église Saint-Bernard

On 23 August last year, riot police raided Saint Bernard's church in the Goutte d'Or district of Paris, and evicted more than 200 undocumented workers, many of them Malians, who were seeking sanctuary and some of them on hunger strike. (A fair proportion of them actually had residence rights but lacked the documentation to prove it.) It was no doubt this drama which stimulated a *table ronde* entitled 'Républiques et coutumes' organized in Paris on 4 June by Catherine Quiminal for the Association Française des Anthropologues (AFA), and focused primarily on the issue of undocumented workers or *sans papiers* in France. Emmanuel Terray was the senior speaker, and he contended that this issue, far from being marginal, was at the heart of today's political economy. Many of those represented in the Paris collective of *sans papiers* comprising over 30 different nationalities, with whom Terray has undertaken field research, are, he said, model citizens and workers, finding employment in restaurants and in the cleaning and garment industries. He argued that they help make the French economy more competitive by making possible 'delocalization on the spot', i.e. providing the same cost advantages as a business can gain through exporting jobs overseas. (According to one press report, there are up to one million *sans papiers* in France, in addition to some four million legal foreign residents.) Terray argued in his presentation that the French authorities at ground level were resorting to a policy of intimidation and that there was a gap between what the law said and how it was applied in practice.

Another speaker, Jean-Loup Amselle, said that, though a 'racism of purity' still characterized the *Front National*, the abandoning of racial categories by biologists had resulted in what he called a new form of racism based on the idea of lineage, which might well find some support in the Human Genome Project as popularly interpreted. The extreme right-wing political authorities in Toulon in the south of France (according to another paper, by Edouard Conte) seek to eliminate all reference to place of birth as legitimation for citizenship; in their publications they flatter Provençal and Alsatian regionalism, and also revive anti-Jewish caricatures of the 1930s with the effect that Arabs in the south can sometimes hear themselves described as 'filthy Jews'. A *Front National* slogan goes: *Être français, ça s'hérite ou ça se mérite* ('Being French is inherited or merited').

Terray and some of his AFA colleagues spoke at the meeting against the popular perception that Europe's living standards are menaced by a tidal wave of immigrants seeking the benefits of health care, education and government aid. It is true that economists tend to be more positive about the overall effects of immigration than politicians, as well as perhaps less convinced that it can in practice be reduced. It is also true that migrants tend to be pre-selected in terms of ambition and willingness to work. But the reaction of the settled majority in countries such as France is clearly a social fact which has to be taken account of and studied, just as is the dream of so many poor people in North Africa, Latin America and elsewhere to build up personal links with a Western nation through emigration by a family member. One of the less publicized immigration routes is by Moroccans across the Straits of Gibraltar, with the result that the 60,000 Moroccans officially resident in