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Academician Bromley on Soviet Ethnography

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FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Academician Bromley on Soviet Ethnography

[The following text derives from an interview with Yulian Bromley, Director of the Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnography, on April 26, 1984, during a visit to the Soviet Union. After an initial exchange of greetings, the interview consisted essentially of Academician Bromley talking for an hour and a half on the history and present state of anthropology in the Soviet Union, although I offered occasional queries. Bromley spoke in Russian, with Valentine Paritaky translating; the reliability of the translation was indirectly attested by the fact that Dr. Bromley only had occasion to correct it a few times. It was clear that portions of the ground Dr. Bromley covered had been treated in his published writings--including, for instance, his discussion of "The Object and the Subject-Matter of Ethnography," in the Gellner volume on Soviet and Western Anthropology. On the other hand, the present version does offer for HAN readers a convenient short historical summary of recent Soviet "ethnography" (and an indication also of why that is the rubric for the study that has elsewhere been called "ethnology". Although I took extensive notes at the time, and Dr. Bromley has had the opportunity to offer corrections, the present account must obviously be regarded as at best a summary paraphrase of his lengthy comments. For background on the history of the Soviet Academy of Science, interested readers may consult Alexander Vucinich, Empire of Knowledge (Berkeley, 1984).--G.W.S.J.]

In a sense, The Institute is the oldest in the Academy of Sciences, even older than the Academy itself, since it has its origin in the Kunstammer of Peter the Great. Officially established in 1934, the Institute's coat of arms shows the Leningrad building housing the Ethnographic Museum, where before World War II the Institute itself was largely quartered. The Moscow section, however, is now the larger. Unlike other institutes of the Academy, the focus of the Ethnographic Institute is in principle world wide, although limitations of staff mean that its practical focus is on the U.S.S.R. However, fifteen years ago, the Institute published an eighteen-volume world ethnography, and it is now putting out a popular edition in cooperation with the Geographical Academy, which will include three or four volumes on each continent-- eighteen of which have appeared already. The main work of the Institute, however, focuses on ethnographic studies (i.e., of the material, intellectual, and traditional culture) of both primitive societies and historical peoples.

In addition, the Institute includes a department of physical anthropology [anthropology in the continental European sense], which focuses on problems of anthroposociogenesis and ethnogenesis. The latter represents a unique trend in world science--one which in any case has no parallel elsewhere in scale, although it is also studied in other socialist countries. The focus is on the problem of the origin of peoples, and anthropological (i.e., physical anthropological) materials help to clarify aspects of the problem, notably by the reconstruction of human races on the basis of skeletal remains (skeletal materials are also studied in reference to criminalistics). There is also a large group working on the American continent, including especially the decipherment of Mayan.

The focus has been from the beginning largely on the peoples treated by traditional ethnography. But since there was until the 1960s no concrete [i.e., empirical] sociology in the Soviet Union, ethnographers also were active even in the pre-World War II period in regard to problems of contemporary times, among industrially developed peoples. Thus although the focus in the late 1920s and early 1930s was on archaic survivals, ethnography also treated everything, everywhere, in the manner of cultural anthropology. Indeed, when an "ethnological" department was established at Moscow State University in 1925, it included in its purview the subject matter of all the social disciplines. When the other disciplines protested, however, the ethnological faculty was shut down; and since then, "ethnology" as a word has disappeared from scholarly vocabulary. The aftermath of all this is still felt (as ethnographers, we know that a symbol has feedback on the thing it denotes, and this is true also in regard to attitudes to a particular science held by those outside).

Even so, the broader approach began to revive in the postwar years. There were a number of works devoted to rural settlements, treating all aspects of rural social life, from economy up to religion, survivals, and so on. This approach to modern "everyday culture" was very fruitful. In the 1960s, concrete [empirical] sociology began to develop in the Soviet Union--like a mushroom after a warm rain. We soon realized that our field was being actively invaded by sociologists, and the problem thus arose of delimiting the fields.

In the same period (the late 1950s and early 1960s) our interest was attracted to ethnical process, to the changes among peoples. Before, the task had been to give a description of the traditional culture of a people. The interest was historical, but produced a static picture. But given the rapid change in the contemporary world, the focus on ethnic process is unavoidable. This trend was born spontaneously in opposition to the two main prior foci-- on archaic survivals, and the more broadly sociological--because of the necessity to define the purpose of our science so as to delimit it from other disciplines, especially with respect to contemporary phenomena. There was

therefore a need for theory, and the creation of a theoretical model became the main object of our studies of "people-ethnos" (or "narodni-ethnos"--terms which are, of course, problematically polysemantic). In the 1960s a number of works were published on these problems, although the interest can be traced to the 1950s.

After this theoretical liberation, the focus was on concrete manifestations. A book on ethnic processes in the USSR was published in 1977, and will soon be translated into English; there were others on ethnic processes in Asia, Europe, Oceania, and the American continent. The Institute in fact pays much attention to ethnic process in America--not contemporary America, but early and mid-twentieth century United States, and in Canada, Central and South America. Ethnography in the Soviet Union is an historical science.

After having considered so far the object of ethnographic science, we must consider also the subject--what specifically should be studied. On the object, ethnography has been united since before the revolution: ethnography should treat all peoples, small and large, developed, lagging, in antiquity and modern times--though of course different specialists treat different aspects. As to what should be studied, there are different views, as in the United States. Three points of view are still held.

One holds that we should study folk culture, taken as a whole. This point of view is convincing, but many counter positions arise when a scholar has to view his field in relation to other disciplines (since art critics, historians of art, folklorists may all study the same folk culture). Also the concept of folk culture involves problematic shades of meaning in Russian-- narod is too polysemantic.

A second view would define the subject matter in terms of the method of direct observation. This view is held especially by archeologists, who say their method is the spade, ours is observation. But observation is not limited to ethnography. It is also practiced in zoology, sociology, and psychology. Nor is ethnography limited to observation. It uses other methods as well.

The third view would say that the subject matter of ethnography is determined by the range of problems it studies. But this neglects the problem of criteria, which is the cornerstone or cardinal problem in each science. Thus physics studies physical properties, chemistry, chemical properties, and biology, biological properties. All sciences study properties of objective reality. The question, then, is what properties or qualities should ethnography study. The answer is: those traits

of peoples-ethnoses which differentiate such communities from other communities, such as stages, parties, classes and the like.

There are two such properties or qualities. On the one hand there is the ability to unite people from within--the trend leading to ethnic identity, the specific human traits which unite peoples of each ethnos, the specific traits of culture, especially of traditional culture in the broad sense (including language), as well as the traits of psychology entangled with traditional culture. But on the other hand, these same factors also differentiate a people from others outside. In our time, traits are being levelled, except for language. But in private, domestic life, they may still be visible.

So the task of ethnography is the study of the traditional culture of peoples to detect specific traits of each people, of each culture, and to see how they differ. Flowing from this is a new trend of comparative study of cultures in terms of their individual components. Thus, we have published four books on the rites and customs of European peoples, as well as work on house-types in Asia outside the USSR. In progress are works on European dwellings, the traditional dwellings of the USSR, and food habits.

While the theoretical viewpoints indicated above are mainly my own, these ideals are being recognized bit by bit by other ethnographers as well.

We turn now from the theoretical to the concrete. The problem, however, is very involved. On the one hand, we draw attention to ethnic processes, try to create a typology, etc. But contemporary ethnic processes can not be understood without the study of urbanized culture as well, and here we must study a different set of problems, not pertaining to traditional processes. We are therefore creating a new discipline--ethnosociology-- by combining ethnography and sociology.

Everywhere in modern science, the most promising prospects appear on the margins of disciplines (biochemistry, etc.). This border discipline will study the relation between ethnocultural process and social processes. It will therefore treat two aspects: the specifics of social processes in different ethnic groups, and the specifics of ethnic processes in different social groups. Many methods are borrowed from the sociologists, including questionnaires (Soviet sociologists have done a number of mass surveys, of up to 10,000 people, in the different republics). There a number of books on ethnosociological processes --or as we call them in the Soviet Union, "national processes" (our word "nation" focuses on the ethnic aspect, rather than the state aspect).

There are also other border disciplines, including ethnic anthropology (a section of physical anthropology), ethno-demography, and the beginnings of ethnolinguistics, as well as ethnoeconomics, ethnoecology, and ethnopedagogics. In short, there is a complex of disciplines that study ethnic processes together with other disciplines.

The key problem is to catch and fix dying traits in the culture of each ethnos--the last relics of traditional culture in the process of quick disappearance. To this end we are preparing ethnic atlases, etc.

As for the organization of ethnography in the Soviet Union, each Soviet Republic (save the Russian, which has the All-Union Academy) has its own Academy of Science, each with an ethnographic unit. The same is true in the autonomous republics. Between these various ethnographic units there are a number of different forms of cooperation.

This expansion began when we started training our specialists before the war. At that time there were few ethnographers on the periphery, although there were specialists in other disciplines on the borderline of ethnography (e.g., the art critic who became interested in ethnic dance). During World War II, many scholars were evacuated to Central Asia, and in this situation ethnography was a spontaneous trend. But after the war we began to train specialists. Some republics are saturated, others do not have enough. In most republics, expeditions are on a joint basis. Every two years there is an all union conference on the previous two years work, at which we exchange views and coordinate future work. In the intervening years, there are conferences on particular problems. The meetings are held at different places outside Moscow--this year in the Ukraine; last year in Kazan.

As for our international relations, I would emphasize that for us, America is New York. Through IREX, we are involved in several programs: one on longevity, one on comparative studies of peoples of the North, one on ethnicity (i.e., ethnic processes).

Our journal Sovietskaiâ Ethnografiâ has a great number of lively discussions-- we are not, as many in the West think, all of the same cut. Discussion is a norm of our scientific life. In my opinion, the exchange of information on the tasks of science is the main problem. I recall the many interesting conferences in Burg Wartenstein, as well as the book edited by Ernest Gellner.