Olga Supek-Zupan

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE AND BACK

The possibility of a Marxist approach in ethnology

Summary

This essay in methodology of cultural analysis is written primarily because there is an acute need felt in Yugoslav ethnology for explicitly stated theoretical and methodological views. The traditional common-sense distinction between those ethnologists »who theorize« and those »who do field-work« is refuted here, and proved to be completely unfounded theoretically. It is pointed out that scientific research must be a continuum, an identity of substance uniting discrete parts of the research process. Thought and practice, that is, the work at the writing desk and the work in the field, are mutually determined in all phases of cultural analysis.

The author has deliberately restricted her present discussion to the theory and practice of scientific research itself, and thus these terms are to be understood primarily as methodological. The time sequence implied by the title (»from ... to .. and back«) relates only to the actual process of scientific work and succession of its phases in time. In no ways should it be understood as a principle or characteristic of cognition. Also, the author has chosen to leave for some other time the discussion of the relation between ethnological theory and social praxis.

The first part of the paper deals with several theoretical problems that stand in the focus of Marxist anthropologists' disputes today, such as: concentrating the research on man as a creative being and his relationship with the social and natural environments; the problem of infra-structure/ /super-structure, dialectics and determinism; the relation of subjective and objective, emic and etic concepts; »objectivity«, values and the criterion of truth; the ontological and social unity of theory and praxis. In connection with these unsettled questions, the ideas of the French Marxist-structuralists and of the American cultural-materialists are introduced. Both groups are hardly known in the Yugoslav ethnological circles.

The second part of the article represents an attempt to operationalize some of the theoretical conclusions from the first part, as well as to emphasize their importance for Yugoslav ethnology and methods of research. For one thing, an ethnologist who is concerned with the current cultural processes should consider his »field« to comprise not only the locality which he studies intensively, but also the global societal structure of which »his« locality is only a partial realization. Of course, for more complex projects interdisciplinary cooperation will be necessary. For another thing, to get into different levels of reality (factual, normative, imaginary) of the people or the cultural process under study, the method of participant observation should be introduced along with the usual one of frequent, but short, »visits« to the field. This method will also make it easier to distinguish the emic and etic aspects of reality.

Among other things, it is emphasized in this part of the article that theoretical concepts must be generative, i. e., capable of being modified and reconstructed while the fieldwork is still going on, in order to better explain the facts which are being discovered. The practice of most Yugoslav ethnologists to work with firmly structured questionnaires often yields insignificant result in terms of theoretical improvement.

Finally, the concluding section offers an illustration: a description of the methodology and strategy of an empirical research project. The object of that study was community life in a small area of Detroit, Michigan. The work is by no means exemplary.Rather, it is the most recent research experience of the author, in which she took part as a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Michigan. It served as a basis for a posteriori thoughts on methodology and theory, some of which are developed in this article.