

Panel review: «Entangled inventions of traditions? Internal and external “others” in 19<sup>th</sup> century European self-understanding », Saturday 9 February 2013, 3 Swiss Congress of Historical Sciences 2013.

*Organizer: Christoph Dejung*

*Participants: Christoph Dejung / Serge Reubi / Bernhard Schär / Kristin Loftsdottir*

*Modération: Christoph Conrad*

### **Compte rendu de: Kristin Twedt-Mottier**

In regards to questions of identity, the panel “Entangled inventions of traditions?” sought to examine the notion of the “primitive” as defined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by examining the often contradictory attitudes toward internal and external “primitives.” Additionally, the role of the middle class in the development and promulgation of scientific study of the primitive was examined. Though today there is much attempt to unite the multiple scientific fields of study in this domain, the situation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was quite different. The fields of ethnography and folklore studies were considered separate and sought themselves to justify this difference, motivated likely due to the rise of nationalism and the subsequent need to identify distinct cultural traditions to create a national identity.

In his presentation, “Modernity and backwardness at exhibitions in the colonial period”, **CHRISTOF DEJUNG** highlighted the problem of the observer versus the observed. While the first World Fairs were ostensibly to showcase progress and modernity, later Fairs also began to showcase a cultural identity based on ethnic traditions. The English Cottage at the 1867 World's Fair and the 1900 Swiss Village are illustrative of this point. This intrinsic identity, though not modern, was a way of emphasizing progress through the contrast both of modernity to the indigenous rustic, but also to the foreign primitive. This notion brings into play a temporal component with the suggestion that “primitive” peoples are lagging behind on the path to development. Moreover, the World Fairs served as a means for the middle class to solidify their status, as well as their identity, by positioning themselves in contrast with those considered primitive, both internal and external.

This notion was further elaborated upon by **SERGE REUBI** in his presentation, “Tiny and meaningful differences between folklore and ethnography.” While, initially, the two fields of study were considered as one, gradually the fields began to separate. This intentional separation was justified by claiming the two fields relied on different methodologies and means of classification. This distinction was further extended to include the objects of study relative to each field. Motivation for seeking this distinction between ethnography and folklore studies was likely for multiple reasons. Firstly, a scientific motivation to clearly separate the two fields functioned to clarify the science in an effort to help explain diversity. Secondly, political realities likely figured into the attitude, as two separate fields could more easily raise funds to support their respective projects. Lastly, a sense of “us” versus “them” allowed researchers to validate

their notion of the advanced development of their non-primitive world. However, both scientific fields used the “internal” primitive as a means to help establish the “civilized” status of the middle class.

**BERNHARD SCHÄR** addressed the role natural history societies played in the European conception of the primitive. In his presentation, “Swiss peasants and the colonial “other”,” he noted that the natural history societies promoted a sense of “civilized” identity in contrast to that of “primitive” regions by scientifically justifying Western development. These natural history societies endorsed the idea that the European region had changed dramatically, both geologically and in terms of flora and fauna, while tropical regions had remained relatively unchanged. Thus implied is the greater Western progress on the path of development intrinsic to humanity. Folklorists further underscored this identity through their comparison of artifacts from external and internal primitives. For example, the simplicity of African farming implements to the more complicated design of tools of Swiss peasants was seen as an indication of a more developed society. However, the Swiss peasants remained an internal “other” due in part to the lack of clear gender roles, which ran contrary to contemporary bourgeois thinking.

The issue of cultural and national identity in relation to the notion of the primitive was addressed by **KRISTIN LOFTSDÓTTIR** in her presentation, “Icelandic “semi-savages” and the desire for modernity.” Iceland was at once considered primitive and civilized, depending on the observer. Continental Europeans, namely Danes, regarded Iceland as a wild, savage place. An Icelandic diplomat, on an official visit to Denmark, wrote home of his surprise when discovering the attitudes of the Danes, noting that he wondered if they didn't expect the Icelanders to dress in furs. At the same time, Icelanders maintained a sense of themselves as the true holders of Nordic culture and history. This sense of a cultural authenticity was coupled with an equally strong notion of, and pride in, Iceland as a classless society. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Icelandic journal *Skírnir* was influential in promoting European notions of the “primitive” (i.e., distinctions based on skin color) while, at the same time, celebrating Iceland's cultural traditions.

The commentary provided by **CHRISTOPH CONRAD** underscored the entangled nature of these connected histories and sociologies. He noted his preference to have heard more from the viewpoint of those considered primitive in these discussions. Likewise, he indicated an interest to address in more detail the question as to what defines modernity and the notion of an obstinance to imposed “development” as a rebellious resistance. Furthermore, he emphasized that the reality of pre-World War I Europe was that of empires, thus complicating the schematic of internal and external primitives. The question of observer versus observed was again highlighted, as well as the influence of bias on the part of the observer regarding class difference and gender roles.

Audience questions addressed the question of duality of the image of the primitive, i.e. the possibility to be both “negatively” primitive, while also the “noble savage.” However, the need to be cautious with generalizations was emphasized, as traditions vary greatly depending upon culture, nation, and geography. Furthermore, the question of the use of negative characterizations was raised, citing the Irish efforts to be rid of English hegemony.

Kristin Twedt-Mottier

## **Panel Overview:**

Christof Dejung: Modernity and backwardness at exhibitions in the colonial period

Serge Reubi: Tiny and meaningful differences between folklore and ethnography

Bernhard C. Schär: Swiss peasants and the colonial “other”

Kristín Loftsdóttir: Icelandic “semi-savages” and the desire for modernity