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Book Review: The Ethnographic Imagination

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'Euro-Media Research Group' – the authors elaborate a comparative European perspective which manages to take the different historical, social and national contexts into account and, furthermore, demonstrates the divergence of American media society. *Television Across Europe* primarily addresses students of media and communication sciences, of film and television theories and of European studies. Due to its descriptive, understandable and detailed style the book can be recommended as an introduction to the comparative European discussion of media. To attain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, however, additional texts and theoretical concepts seem necessary to me. As I see it, the heavy emphasis on empirical, quantitative examples will not be too useful for students at the beginning of their studies and the total lack of explanations below many images makes it hard to put them into context. Yet the didactic design of the individual chapters is remarkable: each has a detailed introduction, explanatory transitions between greater areas of topics, emphasis through keywords, suggestions and questions concerning further research and bibliographies intended to guide advanced studies.

Researchers who already have an advanced level of knowledge concerning the subject matter will probably not have much use for this book, as its conception as a text book precludes deeper theoretical analyses – even though the many examples of quantitative research may prove to be incentive to further comparative research. Thus the importance of this publication for the field of cultural studies, rather, lies in its well-made didactic design and its application of a culturally comparing perspective.

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Paul Willis, *The Ethnographic Imagination*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. 153 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0-7456-0173-1 (hbk) £50.00; ISBN 0-7456-0174-X (pbk) £15.99

In *The Ethnographic Imagination*, Paul Willis, renowned for his classic study *Learning to Labour*, makes a strong claim for the centrality of ethnographic method to contemporary social science. Using a title that harks back to C. Wright Mills, the author pays homage to Raymond Williams' seminal work in cultural studies. According to Willis, who moved into cultural studies from literature, the establishment of the field of cultural studies similarly involved a move from textual approaches to a multi-method approach which includes ethnographic fieldwork.

The Ethnographic Imagination is divided into two parts. The first part, 'Art in the Everyday', constitutes the more abstract and theoretical section of the book. The chapter headings in Part I give an indication of Willis'



Marxian approach: 'Life as Art', 'Form' and 'The Social'. For Willis, ethnographic method entails a dialectical relation between fieldwork and theory. According to Willis, the everyday life of ordinary people needs to be viewed as a source of creative cultural production just like art. For him, subordinate or oppressed groups in particular use the material of everyday life in constructing their identity and making up their world. He makes a distinction – indeed an opposition – between literary texts and what he terms the 'sensuous' material of everyday life. Ordinary people express themselves not so much through language as through forms such as style, music, objects and artefacts. He views culture as a type of production embedded in a particular social system. What interests him is the fine balance between human creativity and social structures that define limits on cultural production.

In Part II, 'Ethnography in Postmodernity', Willis adapts a Marxian approach to the study of a cultural realm transformed by globalization. In Chapters 4 to 6, he explores the effects of commoditization and the electronic mediation of culture on creativity in everyday life. In Chapter 6, he focuses on the loss of the male wage and the accompanying crisis of masculinity and the family. He argues that any collective community which may have existed in the past has been lost in the era of postmodernity. Individual identity is now constructed primarily through the sphere of consumption. But this is equally the sphere of production, specifically of creative cultural production not unlike artistic work. Willis claims that, rather than simply apeing what the market offers, individuals use cultural commodities to create new symbolic forms, generating new meanings of local relevance. According to him, the consumption of cultural commodities does make a sense of community possible. Willis suggests that this raises the potential for the de-fetishization of commodities in postmodern society.

In concluding this work, Willis suggests that ethnographic studies of commodity culture make possible the study of new types of public sphere in contemporary society. At a time when the field of cultural studies is in danger of turning exclusively to discourse-oriented approaches, *The Ethnographic Imagination* is a useful reminder of what the field has gained from ethnographic research. At the same time, the opposition Willis makes between textual and ethnographic methods is a bit stark, particularly in view of the fact that in the field of cultural anthropology, ethnography has come to be identified increasingly with textual strategies. Few anthropologists, for that matter, would share Willis' definition of ethnography.

In this book, Willis makes a laudable attempt to adapt a Marxian approach to the study of postmodern consumer society. One of the problems with the book, which stems in part from the approach, is the abstraction and density of its prose. A related problem is the high degree of repetition and the dearth of in-depth ethnographic examples. For a work that purports to be on methodology, Willis' ethnographic examples are few and far between, being mostly drawn from his own previous work.



Although he claims to have avoided empiricism and essentialism, Willis' emphasis on experience and the material, as opposed to language and the textual, does raise the question of whether he has succeeded on this count. Nonetheless, *The Ethnographic Imagination* constitutes an important and timely plea for ethnographic research in the field of cultural studies.

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Walter O. Weyrauch (ed.), *Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. 298 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0-520-22185-0 (hbk); ISBN 0-520-22186-9 (pbk) \$24.95

Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture, edited by Walter O. Weyrauch, is an authoritative collection of Gypsy and non-Gypsy scholars examining the Romany legal system. By covering a broader spectrum of issues concerned with the Gypsy culture and its relation with the host societies, this book constitutes a valuable contribution in several fields of study. Due to its focus on the procedures of autonomous lawmaking it is an engaging and compelling read for scientists and professionals from different disciplinary and professional areas. Scientists from the fields of cultural and social studies (i.e. political anthropology, anthropology of justice, Romany studies) and professionals such as lawyers, social workers and administrators will find this book, which is based on thorough and reliable research, essential reading for their work.

More specifically, the volume under review brings together 11 essays, whose leitmotiv is the discussion about the autonomous lawmaking of different Gypsy groups, namely the Rom-Vlach Gypsies, Romanichals and Kaale living in Canada, Finland, the UK and US. The discussion is developed around the legal functions of *kris* – a kind of communal court – and the blood feud systems (the latter being popular among the Finnish Gypsies). In order to understand more deeply the Gypsy strategies of autonomous lawmaking, all the contributors contextualize the main issue within its cultural and social reasoning. They describe extensively the relationship between Gypsies and non-Gypsies not only in moments of conflict but also in wider social interference. All the contributions are committed to the alleged Indian origin of Gypsies in Europe and the US. Hence, they often attempt to present cultural practices (religious rituals, etc.) as the heritage of Indian culture (see pp. 98, 151, 209–10, 246, 262). Nevertheless, since they are based on recent research which is often anthropologically oriented, they are less dogmatic in this direction, stressing the historical dimension of the social interaction between Gypsies and host societies in Europe and America.