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A Companion to the Anthropology of Europe

Edited by Ullrich Kockel,
Máiréad Nic Craith and
Jonas Frykman



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Ullrich G. Lockett,

Máiread Nic Craith,
and Jonas Frykman

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Introduction: The Frontiers of Europe and European Ethnology

*Ulrich Kockel, Máiréad Nic
Craith, and Jonas Frykman*

This *Companion to the Anthropology of Europe* offers a survey of contemporary Europeanist anthropology and European ethnology, and a guide to emerging trends in this geographical field of research. Given the diversity of approaches within Europe to the anthropological study of Europe, the book is intended to provide a synthesis of the different traditions and contemporary approaches. Earlier surveys – whether in German (e.g. Dracklé and Kokot 1996), French (e.g. Jeggle and Chiva 1992), or English (e.g. Macdonald 1993; Goddard et al. 1996) – have approached the subject through regional ethnographic case studies, mostly concentrating on Western Europe, or focusing on specific aspects, such as European integration (e.g. Bellier and Wilson 2000); the present volume is different in that its approach is both thematic and fully cross-European.

Any reader picking up this book may well do so on the assumption that the terms that frame it, “Europe” and “anthropology,” are reasonably straightforward and that their meaning is more or less clear. This must surely be why such a volume has been produced: to summarize and reflect on the engagement of an agreed discipline with its (more or less) self-evident subject matter. As editors, we have approached this project in a different spirit, considering that neither “anthropology” (or its cousin, European ethnology) nor “Europe” are intellectual *terrae firmae* – historically and conceptually, both can be described as “moving targets”: in a constant process of transformation since their first inception – and perhaps, as some would argue, so elusive that it is doubtful whether they have any reality at all outside the imagination.

The idea that “Europe” may be elusive or indeed nonexistent might strike the unsuspecting reader as rather strange. Are the origins of Europe not located in Greek mythology (Tsoukalas 2002)? Is this not the Continent that lays claim to having been the cradle of (at least Western) civilization? From where the major global empires were built and administered, and where two world wars originated? And are we not

witnessing, in our own lifetime, the coming together of diverse European nations to build a peaceful European Union (EU), aspiring to be a major global economic power? Is not this list of stereotypes, for all its brevity, full of questionable assumptions?

Anthropologists have looked critically at these and other themes for some time, and have even engaged in debates about them with other disciplines. “Europe” as a sociocultural construct has increasingly come under the magnifying glass and one cannot help the impression that the keener the gaze, the deeper the subject recedes into a haze. Part of the problem with the definition of – the drawing of boundaries around – Europe is that its frontiers to the south and east are rather fuzzy. Is Russia part of Europe, or where does Europe’s eastern boundary run? Both Turkey and Israel regularly compete in the Eurovision Song Contest, as do various former Soviet Republics whose geographical Europeanness depends rather on where one draws an arbitrary line on the map and whose cultural Europeanness is every bit as debatable, from the hegemonic point of view, as that of Turkey, nevertheless a long time candidate for membership of the EU. Turkey is also a long-standing member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which has been an important component of Europe’s defenses. But are matters any clearer in the north and west? And what about those who argue that geographically Europe is not a continent at all but merely a component in a landmass more accurately named as Eurasia? (See Hann, Chapter 6 in this volume.)

For most of the latter half of the twentieth century, “Europe” was usually conflated with “Western Europe,” while “Eastern Europe” was at best considered a debatable land. With the decline of Communism we have witnessed the fragmentation of Eastern Europe, and that concept has become increasingly fuzzy. It now appears that there could be a threefold division between East Central Europe, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe “proper” (i.e. Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia; see Burgess 1997:23).

It has always been problematic to delineate the spatial boundaries of Europe precisely, perhaps because Europe is more a conceptual than a geographical entity. Even before the emergence of Benedict Anderson’s (1983) notion of “imagined community,” it had become customary to think about Europe in terms of an “imagined space” (Said 1978), and ideas of Europe have varied considerably between different geographical locations (Malmberg and Stråth 2002; Nic Craith 2006).

And yet, in much of western and northern Europe, “Europe” is considered to be somewhere else. Looking “over one of their cultural shoulders,” Russians have always perceived Europe as on their doorstep, while the German and French perspective on Europe has been tempered by centuries of bloody conflict – for them “Europe could be just about anywhere they could live peacefully alongside one another” (Kockel 2003:53). From the traditional Danish perspective, Europe was located between their southern border and the Dolomites, and Danes crossing the German border are “going to Europe,” as do English people crossing the Channel. Irish people used to snigger at this as a typically English idiosyncrasy until they discovered, following the IMF bailout in 2010, that they never belonged to Europe either. And even the center of the Continent is hard to locate.

A large number of places, as far apart as the German Rhineland and the Lithuanian-Belarusian frontier, are laying claim to the honor, and definitions of “Central Europe”

range from “the German-speaking former Prussian and Habsburg lands” to a group of contemporary states that do not even include any of the latter. Part of that particular discrepancy lies, of course, in the way language prevalence is defined – whether it is measured according to the official language of state administration or the language spoken by the majority of the population in their everyday lives.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the concept of Europe has frequently become confused with that of the EU, and the term “Europe” is often used as shorthand when journalists make references to EU administrative and political decision-making bodies (Phillipson 2003:29). Yet the two are not coterminous. Many states, such as Switzerland and Norway, form part of historical, geographical Europe but have no representation in the European parliament.

All of this makes interesting study for anthropologists and others concerned with aspects of culture, history, and society, and so the vagueness of Europe as a concept and cultural actuality can be intriguing and inspiring rather than being an obstacle to rigorous research. However, for a book such as this, vagueness of its subject matter constitutes a certain quandary – which regions to include or exclude, whether to focus on the common perception that equates Europe and the EU, and so on. It is important to recognize that Europe is not a fixed entity, and as an analytical category it remains in historical flux.

Similarly, the discipline of anthropology, perhaps marginally more so than other fields, remains in flux. A generation ago, it was claimed (Kosuth 1991) that anthropologists were not suited to the scientific study of their own society – at a time when anthropologists were increasingly getting ready to “come home” from colonial and otherwise exotic outposts and do just that. The anthropology of Europe has, nevertheless, remained very much “in the shadow of a more proper anthropology elsewhere,” as Nigel Rapport (2002:4) put it with reference to the anthropology of Britain. Most European regions have at some stage developed the study of their own culture, usually in association with the respective project of “nation-building.” Regional and national differences have led to a proliferation of labels for these approaches, and while the designation “European ethnology” has been extensively used since it was proposed by Sigurd Erixson in the 1930s, practice in this field remains firmly focused on the local and regional, with quite limited references to any wider “Europe” of sorts. In one sense, this is a good thing because its acute awareness of the “Local” is a key strength of European ethnology; in another sense, the lack of a decidedly European perspective has made the designation a bit of a misnomer that causes confusion outside the immediate field (and often enough within it). Many of the departments and institutes of European ethnology have since the 1970s aligned themselves thematically, theoretically, and methodologically with cultural anthropology. Many of the authors in this volume would be *Grenzgänger*, scholars who cross the boundaries between an anthropology “proper” and those other approaches gathered under the label of “European ethnology.”

Rather than providing a simple, straightforward answer to the question of how “Europe” should be delineated for the purpose of this book, we have chosen a somewhat shamanic approach, beginning this exploration of the anthropology of Europe with journeys toward Europe’s cardinal directions. The chapters in the first section seek to locate Europe with reference to its various – real or imagined – geographical