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Was Everything Better in the Past?

The Situation of the Universities in Finland

Curiosity and Commitment. Perspectives on the Transformation of European Universities, ed. by Arantes et al., 2024, S. 113–131.
https://doi.org/10.25364/978390337430007

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Zusammenfassung

Die Studentenbewegung, die im Jahre 1968 stattfand, hatte vielleicht keinen unmittelbaren Einfluss auf die finnischen Universitäten, die dauerhaften Folgen wurden aber bedeutend. Seitdem wurden mit der Zeit etliche Reformen durchgeführt. Wichtig werden in diesem Artikel Themen so wie „Wie war es in den 1970ern an Universitäten in Finnland zu arbeiten und zu studieren?“, „Was hat sich bis heute geändert?“, „Was sind die Folgen der Änderungen, und wie gehen wir damit um?“ oder „Wie sah der Prozess der Auswahl der änderungsbedürftigen Praxen aus?“ Interviews und Fragebögen liegen meiner kulturanalytischen narratologischen Untersuchung zu Grunde und sie will die Veränderungen auf verschiedenen Ebenen aufdecken. Gleichzeitig will sie auch demonstrieren, dass viele Aspekte des Universitätslebens doch unverändert blieben. Waren die Veränderungen für Gedeih oder Verderb?

Schlagwörter: Universitätsreformen, Veränderungen, Universitätsverwaltung, Narratologie

Abstract

The 1968 student movement may have had little immediate impact on Finnish universities, yet its long-term effects were profound. Since then, quite a few reforms have been introduced in quick succession. In this article topics such as “What were the 1970s like for staff and students and Finnish universities?”, “What has changed until today?”, “What are the consequences of the differences, and how do we deal with them?”, or “What was the selection process like?” are central questions to be answered. Drawing on interviews and questionnaires and employing a cultural-analytical narratological approach, my presentation seeks to uncover the changes that have taken place at different levels, while it will also demonstrate that many aspects of university life remain un-changed. Were the changes for better or for worse?

Keywords: university reforms, changes, university administration, narratology

The Background

During the last few decades, universities in Finland have undergone great change. I will demonstrate this with the example of my own university, *Åbo Akademi University*, situated in the town of Turku, which is called *Åbo* in Swedish. Firstly, I compare the old and new practices in the university management. Secondly, I look at the effects of the *Universities Act* 2009, and, thirdly, I ponder on how the reform influenced the study of culture, mainly ethnology and folkloristics. I finish this article with a couple of suggestions for how these disciplines could develop.

Curiosity and Commitment was the title of a conference held in Graz, Austria, in October 2018. My main question concerns the relation between curiosity and commitment at the Finnish universities of today. I derive my method of analysis from the discipline of folkloristics, which studies people's ways of thinking based on their narratives. Consequently, I work with a hermeneutical perspective when I look for the meaning of the situation today in contrast to the conditions before the year 2009 when the Finnish Parliament passed a new *Universities Act* (Universities Act 2009). The new administration started in January 2010.

Despite being in Finland, for historical reasons the general language at *Åbo Akademi University* is Swedish. Finland was part of Sweden until 1809 and consequently Swedish was the language of administration and authorities. In 1640, in *Åbo*, the Swedish Queen Christina established a university called *The Royal Academy of Åbo*. After a devastating fire in 1827, this university moved to the capital, Helsinki. However, in 1918, a new *Åbo Akademi University* started to work in Turku in the same place as the old university. Mentally, many colleagues of mine reckoned the roots of today's *Åbo Akademi University* from the year 1640. *Academia Aboensis Rediviva* is a good label for the new institution (Nordström 1968). This certainly means that, for a long time, the employees regarded their university as an old and glorious institution. My main sources for the following paragraphs are Nordström (1968) and Ahlbäck and Nygård (2018), together with the *Universities Act* 2009.

Financial Matters

The new *Åbo Akademi University* started with some forty students, six professors, and a handful of staff working in three faculties. Today, some five thousand and five hundred students, eight hundred postgraduate students, one thousand and one hundred professors, university teachers, researchers and other staff work and study at four faculties at *Åbo Akademi University*. Per annum around one thousand and four hundred publications and seventy doctoral dissertations are published.

The budget is ninety-eight million euros, of which almost sixty million is state funding (*Facts* 2018).

Until 2010 the universities in Finland were at times private, at times they were private but obtained a great part of their resources by the support of the state, at times they were completely financed by the state. In 1981 *Åbo Akademi University* was the last one to change its profile from a private to a state university. This step caused heated dispute, due to the fear of influence from the state concerning how to conduct research. However, the lack of financial resources forced a radical change in the situation (Ahlbäck 2018).

As in other European countries, the aim of the Finnish governments often was to reduce public costs. Student welfare, care-taking and education are the greatest expenses and consequently the institutions dealing with that kind of service should be private, it is argued, or the number should even decrease. Accordingly, the juridical status of the universities changed. Before 2010, still being state universities, they had access to the state purse, but since that year, they are 'official-juridical' institutions, which means that they depend on the *Department of Education, Research, and Culture*, but they also have a certain degree of freedom. In this way, they resemble enterprises. As a result of this, the universities can now only obtain a limited quantity of money from the state. More and more capital has to be acquired from the private sector, that is, from industry, from foundations or from private persons. The discussion about the influence exerted by the financial supporter is relevant again. A failure in the acquisition of financial means may lead to bankruptcy. Certainly, the so-called *Academy of Finland*, a governmental funding body for scientific research, allocates resources, but evaluating national and international experts regard only a minimal number of the applications as appropriate. Today, at some universities the leaders even urge the researchers to try to find external financing. This is also true within the humanities and the studies of culture, even if these disciplines do not really need that much financial resources. The reason for this pressure is that the university receives additional state funding for assiduity.

The Board, the Rector, and the Deans

Until 2010, there were numerous board members. They were the vice rector(s), the dean of each faculty, representatives of other units and groups of the staff, and a couple of students. All members belonged to the university and the rector was the chairperson.

However, the idea of regarding the universities more or less as enterprises led to changes within the boards. Consequently, there now is a small board. The vice-rectors do not participate, and the faculties are not represented. Every participant is elected for his or her individual characteristics and expertise. An external chairperson leads the board instead of the rector and around one-half of the members must be recruited from outside the university. The connection with society and/or other educational institutions is important. A couple of students are still members.

Being the rector was a commission of trust. At that time, he functioned as a 'primus inter pares'. He led the board and carried the overall responsibility for the university. Administrative personnel helped him to run the university. This model with working methods loyal to colleagues is now gone. Nowadays, the rector works mainly with the 'foreign affairs', that is, with the *Department of Education, Research, and Culture*, with other rectors, and, moreover, he or she is in charge of financial, disciplinary, and other internal matters. He or she reports to the Board. The rector and the deans have the real power. This, of course, is fine as long as the elected persons are wise, but as soon as lust for power comes before wisdom this model of administration is disastrous.

Being a dean was likewise a commission of trust to accomplish alongside working as a professor. The faculties were financially dependent on the central fund and there were no obligations to 'produce' degrees or raise money. Now, the faculties are rather independent. The deans are more influential than before and have only a limited amount of teaching duties. Every faculty led by the dean is responsible for its own results, such as degrees, publications, citations and the amount of external funding received. The amount of state funding is related to and depends on the faculty's predictions and results, and they function as binding factors in an agreement between the university and the *Department of Education, Research, and Culture*. The dean is the managing director of his or her faculty. He or she must encourage the students and employees to adapt to a 'performance university' concentrated on the agreement between the university and the *Department*. A discipline may close if the employees and students do not perform well enough.

The Students

Until now, it was possible to conduct lifelong studies. It was possible to study for many years and then leave the university without a degree. Often, the family or somebody else close to the student paid for him or her to stay at the university. Depending on the needs of family establishment or other circumstances, the payers

formulated the conditions for a student. Some decades ago, girls who enrolled in a university often wished to find a suitable husband. If somebody wanted to obtain a doctoral degree, he or she had to marry a rich partner or belong to a wealthy family, or as was the usual solution to this practical problem, write his or her dissertation in his or her spare time (Wolf-Knuts 2018: 55–57, 80–84).

According to the Bologna reform for university studies starting in 1999, the curriculum is limited in time: in Finland a Bachelor's degree takes three years, a Master's two, and, if somebody wants to become a doctor, he or she should finish within another four years. Complicated calculations can render a student more time, for instance, if a woman gives birth to a child, if a man has to attend military service, or if somebody falls seriously ill. The same individual can have a Master's degree in various disciplines, and for prospective doctors there are scholarships, grants and even positions. The goal is to limit the duration of studies for financial reasons. Universities are expensive, and the country needs working taxpayers.

In Finland, it costs nothing to study for a Bachelor's and a Master's degree (Wolf-Knuts 2018: 57). Every student receives a monthly amount of money from the state to allow him or her to pay for his or her studies and rent. In case this money is not enough, bank loans and income from part-time work are solutions. Taking this view of university education into consideration, the authorities do not easily approve of slow students or students who drop out of their education without a degree. This is because the students' allowance consists of money paid by Finnish citizens' taxes, and, consequently, only seriously studying young people with realistic plans should receive resources.

Yet another, less ethically meaningful, perspective is that the calculation of the amount of state money for every university unit depends on the number of degrees of various kinds bestowed during a specific period. Again, the idea of the 'high-performance university' is central. However, the state does not have unlimited resources, which means that the amount of money for a degree varies from one year to another depending on how many degrees there are to pay for and how much money has been defined for sharing between the universities in the entire country. This led to the decision that the state will only pay for a specific number of degrees. The surplus number does not render the university any money at all. Therefore, at *Åbo Akademi University*, for instance, it is not popular if the number of Bachelor's and Master's degrees exceeds the agreement with the governmental *Department*. Rather the professor should try to be strategic in his or her supervision and plan for a continuous stream of degrees according to agreements with the state.

Research or Teaching?

Until this model filled with an ideal of efficiency started, researchers were rather free to work on issues they were interested in, even individually. Certainly, there has always been some relationship with industry, from which scientists obtained support, but generally, research was a matter of individual interest. Today, the researcher has to adapt to set up immense, or at least, big projects, to find suitable colleagues, preferably also from outside the country, and then again to adapt to working in such a milieu. Consequently, many fields of unsuspected knowledge remain unobserved, and many scientists complain about how difficult it is to find an opportunity to conduct fundamental research. Some even maintain that research has now become alchemy, for it does not bring any new knowledge. Financial support is not guaranteed. To run a research project without being able to trust the financing is like leading a kolkhoz: 'When it started to work, there appeared new rules that created chaos in the finances' (Salmi 2019: 6; cf. Alvesson et al. 2017).

In Finland of 2019, research is much preferred compared to teaching. It is almost impossible to receive external funding for teaching, while there are quite a lot of foundations that support research. During the last fifty years, teaching has become more and more of an issue for the teacher instead of a matter for the student. Teaching usually consisted of courses, which were certainly meant to prod slow students. However, university teachers' training developed and today the educators prefer a new interactive pedagogy. Reading a book alone is not regarded as an efficient means any more. Because of less financial resources and, consequently, a reduced number of teachers, the students have to work in a more independent way. Certainly, there is help on the Internet and the students can also help one another, but self-regulating work is difficult. Subsequently, there is an increasing need of study counsellors. The freedom in how one arranges one's studies increases; with the help of computer platforms it is possible to study when it feels suitable instead of being obliged to participate in physical lectures. This requires much more self-discipline from a student than a decade or more ago.

The Premises

Twenty years ago, almost everyone had an office of his or her own. Now, the employees are placed in narrow rooms, for the guaranteed state money is reduced and, consequently, the administration of the university buildings is privatised, but at the same time, the rental of the premises is unchanged, or has even risen. To share the office with somebody else is certainly disturbing but, on the other hand,

this also brought an advantage. People who otherwise never co-operated started to plan joint projects. In contrast to the time before the reform, entire universities were also obliged to work together. In some cases, a couple of universities even amalgamated. Mostly within the fields of science, the professors and directors accepted deep co-operation, for nowadays the apparatus and the devices are too expensive for one institution to purchase and to renew.

Creating Relevant Research Profiles and Projects

Whereas universities generally were rather alike all over the country in the wake of more co-operation and less money, the state wants the universities to create profiles. If the *Department of Education, Research, and Culture* accepts a profile, the university receives some more millions of euros as added financial resources. In 2019 *Åbo Akademi University* has two profiles of its own called *Minorities* and *Molecular Process and Material Technology*, and two profiles in co-operation with the Finnish *University of Turku*, namely *Drug Development and Diagnostics* and *The Sea*. Within these projects, it is possible to employ various experts and to enhance high-level research. This arrangement is supposed to encourage relevant high-quality investigations, above all marketable innovations, by employing either international researchers or very good Finnish scientists and scholars.

There is a demand for free and unattached research (Sevelius 2019). Still, in the 1970s an external financial support, for instance from industry or from a municipality, was called into question. However, the new *Act* was supposed to give the universities greater autonomy. This was successful only to some extent: The industry formulates its wishes, which certainly influence the work at the universities. Generally, the foundations have strict definitions and do not grant funding for just any kind of research. Today, really free and experimental research, driven by curiosity, is rather rare. In addition, the peer review institution contributes to this disadvantage. The referees guide the issues of research even more than the access to money does. The critical referee may acknowledge only what he or she finds acceptable, or what does not threaten or otherwise influence his or her own research. Publishing is a matter of fitting into the relevant current of research. The referee has a lot of power (Bal 2018). Previously, it was the scientist, the readers and the reviewer of the printed text that were the authorities.

According to their scholarly and scientific value, the research journals are ranked with the figures one to three or even four. It is worthwhile trying to publish in third- or fourth-grade journals, for articles in them render the authors' university a reward with the highest amounts of financial support from the *Department of*

Education, Research, and Culture. To publish is yet another source of financing. However, nobody asks whether it is intelligent to publish any kind of article on any kind of issue in highly ranked international journals. Again, local research topics will be missing because they are not regarded as interesting enough for international readers, not to mention the ethical viewpoint of not making it possible for compatriots to read and understand what the scholars have discovered. This, certainly, is a central question in the study of culture when it is based on interviews.

In spite of all the reforms, however, Finnish research did not improve. It is stable, but other nations, such as Switzerland, Denmark, and Austria, are winning this competition. In such a perspective on academia, stability is of no use (Academy 2018).

What then is Finnish academia like in 2019? The student has quite a lot of options on how to build his or her career. However, in many cases the project-thinking limits the opportunities when it comes to research. As a doctor-to-be one should pick a topic that suits the interests of the supervisor and, after that, one has to keep pace with the others in the supervisor's project that, in turn, follows plans that the financier accepts. After the Master's degree, the researcher at a Finnish university is dependent on his or her colleagues, who are dependent on the financial supporters. Consequently, researchers can only realise their ideas if they fit into the frames of reference of others. This was not always the case, at least not within the humanities and arts, but at that time the demand for external money was minimal.

Participating in research groups also requires consideration. Every participant's part of the work must fit into the other participants' parts in the same way as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle fit together. Consequently, the working methods must be target-oriented and result-oriented. In the project group, peace is important; otherwise, the outcome might be dysfunctional. This, certainly, is important, for research that confirms hypotheses is nice, but research that diverges from the hypotheses is triggering. It leads to more critical thinking, perhaps even to innovations, a sacred word in Finnish academia and industry.

Efficiency, Control, and Discipline

Thus, efficiency and performance seem to be central ideas. Time for research is measured (cf. Salo and Heikkinen 2018: 94–95, 100). There is a well-constructed system to take care of the students. Non-efficient students can see a student psychologist or even a psychiatrist if the teachers, professors, mentors and other available non-medical helpers are not sufficient. In this case, the university is a

care-taking institution. However, the concern does not really centre on the well-being of the students for their individual sake, but also for the presumably lost money that the university does not obtain if the student drops out without a degree.

People known for not being swift and result-oriented, but for speculating and being pensive, even if they are good researchers, they are not evident co-operators in research that requires perspectives of various kinds. To make people work in a result-oriented environment paid by result-expecting financiers leads to control. Control is partly a sign of mistrust, but it can also be associated with money. On the one hand, if control works because of unbelief, it means that colleagues do not trust one another. On the other hand, in Finnish universities nowadays there are systems to measure everything: working time, degrees, examinations, publications, in what forum a publication appeared, citations, external financial support and so forth. The university of today is a society of control. Moreover, because of this control, comparison is possible, at least if one does not demand any precision and reflection about that process. Control and comparison give birth to competition, which generally implies improvement, but which also brings forth envy and down-heartedness (Ehn and Löfgren 2004: 31–41). Sometimes envy triggers, and sometimes envy cripples. If it paralyses people, they will not commit themselves to competition. Good social relations are a prerequisite for success in the universities in Finland. The *Universities Act* 2009, section 2, paragraph 1 reads:

> *The mission of the universities is to promote independent academic research as well as academic and artistic education, to provide research-based higher education and to educate students to serve their country and humanity at large. In carrying out their mission, the universities shall promote lifelong learning, interact with the surrounding society and promote the social impact of university research findings and artistic activities.*

This is a great formulation. Interestingly enough, it mentions the verb 'promote' (Finnish *edistää*, Swedish *främja*). This means that the starting point of the *Act* is that the universities have not yet reached their goal or filled their commitment. They are still working on it. Consequently, it is worthwhile asking in what way this idea will be realised. My analysis demonstrates that the proper path to this super goal is discipline. Universities in Finland have one task above offering independent academic research, academic education based on research and roles as servants in Finland and the world. That task is to discipline people at the universities. This, certainly, is good for the individual, although he or she should have learnt it at school. Discipline is also excellent for the country. Nevertheless, one also has to ask if discipline accompanied by envy and fear of having less of everything, from students to money, promotes creativity, one of the main conditions for meaningful

research to find new knowledge. The purpose of academia in Finland has changed and this change has consequences for the eye on universities.

Independent and Relevant Research

Another central concept in the *Act* is 'independent' (Finnish *vapaa*, Swedish *fri*). Independent means not being dependent on anybody or anything, and independent research means scholarly and scientific work that does not depend on anything else than scholarly and scientific rules – in order to achieve high-quality knowledge, be it comfortable or not. However, some researchers have always been dependent on patrons. Modern research is very much dependent on financial support, on referees and editors, or on relevant trends and tendencies within both academia and the surrounding society. Probably, fully independent research has always been and remains a dream.

In the discourse on doing scholarly work, the concept of relevance is central. It seems that research for its own sake is not enough, education for doing good research is not enough, but the accent lies on the third objective for universities, namely to 'serve their country and humanity at large. In carrying out their mission, the universities shall promote lifelong learning, interact with the surrounding society and promote the social impact of university research findings and artistic activities' (*Universities Act* 2009). However, there is no definition of what relevance means, neither is there any mention of whose understanding of relevance should rule. Consequently, those institutions that dominate society will take the right to define relevance and, thereby, to decide what kind of research should receive support. Moreover, and because research is considered expensive, this process defines which kind of research is allowed. Disciplining university staff and students is a means of creating co-operative citizens who are able to 'serve their country and humanity at large'. For folklorists and ethnologists this means that they prefer to investigate recent everyday life and today's society. Some examples: vegan subcultures on Facebook, public breast-feeding, the coffee pause in the office, diabetes narratives, folk belief and tourism, or hateful texts on the Internet.

Certainly, it is possible to argue about the situation of research in Finland. There is indeed freedom to choose one's attitude because of one's ethical demands. The fast path is to surrender. The long and risky path is to reflect critically and to think about the consequences of the demands mentioned in the *Act*. Surrendering means being hostage to the dominating factors in the society. Protesting means at least trying to build a different, perhaps even, a better society.

How does the Modern University in Finland Relate to Curiosity and Commitment in the Study of Culture?

My description of the situation of Finnish universities with the example of *Åbo Akademi University* demonstrates that curiosity is hardly the main driving force for education or research. Universities have no obvious right to exist per se. Instead, they have to work in the same way as an obedient employee works for his or her master in order to fill his or her wishes and needs. The scientists are commissioned to come up with innovations, for innovations are defined as 'useful'. That means that an innovation must be of such a kind and quality that people want to buy the new product. Accordingly, financial parameters define usefulness. To fulfil this condition is difficult for an ethnologist or a folklorist.

However, curiosity is not always connected to usefulness. Curiosity drives a person to investigate something because he or she cannot withstand the need to get an answer. Curiosity means looking for knowledge, which means a kind of knowledge that was not known before. Curiosity can even be driven without any side intentions, and the new knowledge gives the explorer a feeling of satisfaction without calculation. How to utilise this formerly unidentified knowledge in practice is a problem only for those who come after and want to recognise how to use the knowledge. History demonstrates how every now and then scientists and scholars surprisingly and unexpectedly find important outcomes besides those that they predicted. When these astonishing results are refined, they turn out to be very useful, but without the first random discovery no subsequent researchers would be able to develop further innovations.

It seems that this kind of research into the blue is not at all possible today. No industry or foundation would support such an unplanned or apparently badly planned research project. Useful and, consequently, innovative research presupposes good planning, pondering every aspect, at least having a feeling of the outcome, or even knowing it. However, a student of ethnology or folkloristics cannot necessarily prepare every detail. He or she should get permission to let the research material speak. He or she should allow him- or herself to be surprised. Students of culture should allow themselves to go this way of seeking answers, for they are not immediately dependent on external funding. Studies of culture are possible to conduct in this way, for the study of culture and everyday life is comparatively inexpensive. However, researchers easily get infected in the general atmosphere that much money in big projects is extremely important, and even the only way to go.

It is not necessary that research based on curiosity should produce a useful result. Above all, the usefulness can be perceived only over time, centuries or decades later. Alternatively, one has to redefine the word 'useful'. Today 'useful' implies, above all, 'financially profitable'. For instance, one ideal of the society planners of today is that it should be possible to automatise the outcome of research in order to avoid increasing staff costs. In this way, as consumers of useful research, humans can contribute to producing new technology, new remedies, or new means of communication, but they are also at risk of soon becoming unwanted, not useful, since robots do most of what man once did.

Curiosity can be compared to playing. Sudoku, chess, all games in which various combinations of elements are a means to reach the goal, for instance victory, start with curiosity and continue because of curiosity. The question is, 'Can I learn something new this time? Can I conquer myself?'

Probably from the very beginning of science, curiosity was regarded as useful and worthy of positive support. Competition was and is obvious. However, the question asked today is: 'Can I win the great competition for external funding with my research?' So, this curiosity is not about science or 'truth', but it is about money. There is a difference between research for the sake of curiosity and research for the sake of a specific commitment. The scientist or scholar who does research out of curiosity competes only with himself or herself, whereas the researcher who works from the perspective of a specific commitment competes with many other researchers. He or she should consequently reach the goal as the top winner. Ideas that do not succeed in the competition are apt to vanish – or the researcher goes on working on his or her research plan for years without really achieving very much.

Research based on curiosity for knowledge seems freer than research based on a commitment. In this way, it is possible, for instance, to study Mongolian languages, a field that does not immediately bring any advantage to Finland, but that without doubt gives Finland a good position among worldwide experts on Mongolian culture (cf. Janhunen 2012). Commitment-based research consisting of projects with many participants is expensive. Much time is put in negotiations about topics such as, who formulated the original idea, whose name should be mentioned first in the row of authors in the published article, how the money should be divided between participants of varying competences, and, last but really not least, who is allowed to participate in the project.

Suggestions

The combination of curiosity and commitment calls for reflection. What makes the study of culture useful? Probably, the answer differs in every single case. Firstly, 'On the whole, do I really have to do useful research?' and, secondly, if the answer was positive: 'How do I create usefulness in my research?' are important questions in any discipline, also one dealing with cultural matters.

Typical for Nordic ethnology and folkloristics is the micro perspective. The research material seems to be better the smaller it is. Still, one of the aims of ethnologists and folklorists is to find cultural patterns. But how much of something do you need to demonstrate that a pattern exists? Many investigations on culture are detailed case studies (Svensson 2012: 17). Add the generally mentioned viewpoint that this kind of research finds its perspectives in studies from within and from below (Alftberg 2013: 39; Jönsson and Nilsson 2017: 67, 71). This, too, supports the micro perspective. Now the problem arises: Even if the ethnologist and the folklorist concentrate on research relevant to society, because of their research methods it is seldom possible to generalise anything from their results. Moreover, these researchers want to work with a hermeneutical perspective, which means that the interpretation of the individual researcher is central and needs explanation. Firstly, the researcher collects his or her research material, after that he or she analyses and interprets this very same material. The way of conducting research becomes subjective unless the research method is transparent. This easily arouses doubt among more quantitatively oriented colleagues.

Certainly, hermeneutics is a good starting point for the study of cultural matters, but scholars have to ask whether the external financiers appreciate it too. The strictly limited research material calls for an explanation in a serious way, for why our society should know what Mr X thinks and how Mrs Y interprets his thoughts. If Mr X is not a famous person or if he did not live very long ago (e. g. Ginzburg 1983) it is necessary to explain what is interesting about him.

Secondly, many ethnological and folkloristic studies affect ethical problems. They mostly come to the fore in the situation of interviewing. To handle ethical matters demands great confidence. They call into question how the researcher meets the interviewee, what it is feasible to speak about, and even write about, and to publish, or what the researcher should do with the material later on, if the interview for instance slipped into intimate topics. None of this is regarded as a problem big enough to convince influential communities of dominating researchers and scientists of its importance (cf. Agnidakis 2018: 13). Ethnologists and folklorists

have to influence the authorities to see that this issue is worthy of thorough research.

The reason for a sceptical attitude towards research in cultural matters is that today 'real' research must be great, fast and expensive (cf. Salo and Heikkinen 2018: 91). Probably risking the characteristics of their disciplines, ethnologists or folklorists have to adjust to this commitment-based research in some way or another. Still, few researchers are strong enough to work on their own or courageous enough to devote their time to thorough and reflexive slow science (cf. Salo and Heikkinen 2018: 90–91). Slowness is typical of ethnology and folkloristics of today, for, very often, they consist of interviews that are based on trustful narrating and listening. It takes time to build trust. Real trust is the answer to honest and serious curiosity.

However, if somebody does not want to take the risk of breaking the ruling trends it is necessary to ask the difficult question: In what way is it possible today to perform useful studies within ethnology and folkloristics? What does 'useful' mean?

Today, in some countries there is a temptation to do nationalistic and therefore income-yielding research. We saw that back in the nineteen-thirties. We would not like to see it again.[1] Certainly, nationalism is an international phenomenon. However, folkloristics and ethnology are nationally inspired and tied to the study of a culture of a specific area. Can we shape the study of culture in such a way that it works as a counter-weight to nationalism? This could be a relevant topic. Can we create such research impulses that we could answer the important and burning question why nationalism has returned today and to such an extent? Today, we too easily turn our backs on the neo-Nazis instead of talking to them in order to discover their world-view in their everyday narratives. A good exception is the professor of religious studies, Mattias Gardell, who wrote a minute study of a Swedish terrorist:

> *There is also much to do for a folklorist or ethnologist concerning the problem of unverified 'science'. For instance, what allows young people of today to regard themselves as such well educated parents that they avoid letting medical experts vaccinate their children? They really take a great responsibility for human lives, but it is not at all clear how they regard themselves and their expertise in matters of epidemiology (Gardell 2015).*

We might also work with the issue of automation. We do not know what people think when robots are predicted to perform 'everything'. Without doubt, thoroughgoing automation will influence people's thoughts about the consequences in everyday life and concerning human dignity. If we know

[1] Cf. Sevelius (2019) about the situation in Hungary.

something about the conceptions that people have, we might be able to react to them and help to create a better future in which humans still feel that their lives are meaningful, even when they have no paid work. At the same time, we must not lose the historical perspective. What was it that in bygone times gave humans their vital spark and their capacity of living? For instance, we know that it was not easy to live like the idle bourgeois women who had one main task, which was to act as a piece of jewellery for their husbands (Johannisson 2013). Consequently, we can ask: 'What does the concept of idleness mean to human beings as it is said to be the beginning of all vice?' We might also ask what an effect the computer had on our disciplines. It seems that this device started to define what is easy to investigate for it makes work convenient. Accordingly, it is also important to ask what people talk about topics that are regarded as difficult or even impossible to explore with the help of the computer – and why. The computer is certainly a good helper, but it also creates borders, and it supports indolence, both physically and intellectually.

It would not be surprising if some folklorist would change his or her direction of an 'unwanted' and useless researcher and start working at an advertising agency in order to create a nice financially juicy and appetising narrative that he or she sells to some big enterprise, for we know quite well how a good story works. This would give folklorists a clear profile and a defined position within working life.

A necessary alternative to these societally bound research topics is that we start observing ourselves. Are the research methods of folkloristics and ethnology efficient enough? We work in a way which those who play the leading role within the administration of research projects do not really understand. Our research is not valid for other cultures than our own, nor can we offer general 'truths'. On the contrary, it is our virtue to find and unveil informal and unexpected knowledge, which fills gaps in our understanding, or which can modulate it (Agnidakis 2018: 12; Daun 1974: 13; Sevelius 2018). Is it good enough that ethnology or folkloristics devote themselves to 'pluralistic, complex and individually based' perspectives? (Agnidakis 2018: 14). Generally speaking, are our theories valid? Should we start working with statistical methods, with big data instead of our individually based micro data? Or should we combine big data with micro perspectives? In other words, do we need more solid production of evidence in order to make it possible for the authorities to create a better society on the foundation of our research outcomes? This group of questions also includes problems concerning the collegial review system. To what extent does it restrain free, seminal research? Every now and then, researchers must repeat an honest and sincere reflection on this topic.

However, it is not enticing to give in and admit that we do not have a voice in the world of research. On the contrary, perhaps today the need for ethnologists and folklorists is greater than some decades ago. Rumours and 'fake news' rapidly spread worldwide and, therefore, students of culture certainly have a huge task in confuting the claims against science that are so often formulated in our time characterised by post-factual thinking, claims such as drinking silver water against all kinds of ailments, or avoiding vaccines because nature takes care even of dangerous illnesses. Those claims are comparable to propaganda. At least in Swedish, propaganda is a foul word. However, packed into the parcel of alternative facts, propaganda seems easy to accept and to live with. Folklorists and ethnologists are well aware of everyday culture and its mechanisms. They can tell why people create their world-view in a specific way, mostly in the way that makes them happy. Ethnologists and folklorists ought to know why propaganda and alternative facts are appealing to some people or some groups of people. This, I think, should now be their greatest task and might guarantee the existence of their scholarship and their expertise, even outside the small group of colleagues that constitutes their closest environment.

Was everything better in the past? Partly yes and partly no. Independent research and slow science were more frequent than today, but in Finland, money for expensive research was difficult to find. For natural science, probably everything is better today. When it comes to the humanities and arts, however, one has to state that the situation is more difficult due to the demand for big projects and a change in the approach to scholarly work. Because of the *Universities Act* and its perspective on how a university should be managed, and due to society's demands for useful research with natural science and enterprises as the ruling model, not all kinds of scholarly work are generally regarded as serious research. Consequently, ethnologists and folklorists should reflect seriously on their research methods, but, at the same time, keep the initiative to design their disciplines and develop the opportunity to do slow, well-reasoned research.

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