

# Obituary : Lorenz G. Löffler 1930-2013

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# OBITUARY LORENZ G. LÖFFLER 1930-2013

**Text:** *Heinz Käufeler, Ethnologisches Seminar Zürich*

Shortly before the end of 2013, Prof. Lorenz G. Löffler passed away in Romanshorn on Lake Constance. An inspiring teacher with an extraordinarily latitudinarian attitude and critical mind, Löffler founded the *Ethnologisches Seminar* of Zürich University in 1971 and left a strong impression on generations of students and anthropologists well beyond his retirement in 1995.

Löffler spent his childhood and youth in Germany's dark years in Thüringen. In the early 1950s, he studied Asian Languages and *Völkerkunde* in Jena, Leipzig, and later *Ethno-soziologie* in Mainz with W.E. Mühlmann. In 1955/56 he conducted fieldwork among several groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in East Pakistan (from 1971: Bangladesh), in a region that, much to his chagrin, was all but inaccessible in later years. Material culture, ecology and economy, kinship and linguistics were among his research interests from the outset and he published important contributions on these topics. In later years his work also included questions of political anthropology and the increasingly important field of the anthropology of gender, in which his contributions may be considered as seminal and pioneering.

As demonstrated by his major ethnography, «*Ethnographic notes on the Mru and Khumi of the Chittagong and Arakan Hill Tracts: a contribution to our knowledge of South and Southeast Asian indigenous peoples mainly based on field research in the Southern Chittagong Hill Tracts*», published by Harvard University Press shortly before his death, Lorenz Löffler was an «old-fashioned anthropologist», in the sense in which this label has recently become popular as a self-designation for scholars who confine themselves assertively to the core of the discipline: small indigenous peoples and a focus on classical topics such as material culture, ritual, kinship and language. At the same time Löffler has contributed decisively to the pro-

cess of turning the marginalized and compromised German-speaking anthropology of the post-war period into a modern, worldly and open anthropology within the social sciences.

This was made possible by a rare combination of ethnographic meticulousness and sociological imagination, paired with a critical, at times even playful, theoretical curiosity, which characterized Löffler's approach and attitude. He transcended the limited capacities and means of his institution by giving space and scope to students' energies, still quite abundant in the wake of the late 1960s in Zürich. In addition, Löffler gave the freedom and opportunity to teach at his institute to a number of people promoting the project of a renewed anthropology in various directions – some of which were not necessarily to his own liking. All of this gave anthropology in Zürich during the Löffler years a specific aura of «hip dissidence». To this day, this spirit continues to animate many, such as the current city councillor responsible for the Zürich police, who entered politics by way of radical social movements and who has recently explicitly mentioned this intellectual genealogy in an interview.

There was potential for trouble in such a setting, and trouble materialized in the context of the «Zürich Youth Movement» in 1980, when Löffler became a suspect in the eyes of the local authorities because he refused to cooperate with them. Based on the principle of academic freedom, he decided not to hand over to the judiciary film material of the actions of radical youth that had been recorded by students during a course in visual anthropology organized at his institute. Thus, by a strange twist of fate, Prof. Löffler came to be seen as a «radical» or at least a «fellow traveller» with the radicalized youth and he was attacked and vilified accordingly. This, on the other hand, has contributed to the consolidation of the aura mentioned above.

In academic circles, Löffler was highly esteemed internationally. He was one of the very few German anthropologists of his generation to publish in French and English language international journals and to engage in current debates – at times quite caustically. Within German «Völkerkunde», on the other hand, he seemed to prefer a rather marginal position. This, and maybe even more so the fact that he was able to build up a new institution in Zürich without obligations to any specific tradition, gave him considerable leeway and unusual room for manoeuvre.

Lorenz Löffler himself always kept his distance from the radicalisms of the «'68» and «1980's» varieties, as well as from the trends of Marxist and radical feminist anthropology fashionable in those years, particularly because they were, in his mind, *not critical enough* in many respects. He was, however, a pronouncedly engaged intellectual with regard to the topics where his knowledge and experiences forced him to take a stand. Thus, he took an active part in the international movement for the protection and rights of indigenous peoples, which gained momentum from the late 1980s onward.

To us, to his students, he left a lasting impression and bequeathed a spirit of, as it were, «constructive subversion», which can probably unfold best from marginal positions. Nevertheless, some of us have made successful careers in later life: former students of Löffler can be encountered in high positions in many different spheres in Switzerland, and are present in the academic world nationally and internationally. I am confident that even many of the non-smokers among us recall the often smoke-filled, but in general very inspiring, seminars with Löffler fondly and will think back to these days with nostalgia.

