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Locating European anthropology

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ABSTRACT: This commentary revisits the “Rethinking Euro-anthropology” Forums published in the journal *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*. It reconsiders three specific issues: who are the subjects of European anthropology, who are its others, and who are its authors? Noting that European anthropology does not imply a spatial fixity (there is no “there there” in European anthropology), we suggest instead that European anthropological scholarship is the outcome of diverse forms of crossborder and transborder exchanges. Yet as a project that is both intellectual and political, we further discuss some of the contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes behind this “worlding” of the discipline. By observing that E(e)uropean anthropology in particular should constantly strive to relate the locating endeavours of ethical practice, empirical evidence, historical reflection and humanistic theorising, we call for innovative forms of academic collaboration, narrative creations and belonging to/with places.

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European anthropology – the term, in addition to the category itself, evokes axiomatic ambiguity: is it referring to the anthropology of Europe as a place, or instead to the research carried out by anthropologists trained in Europe? Actually, the same ambiguity appears whatever region of the world one talks about, such as “Brazilian anthropology”, “Chinese anthropology”, or “Russian anthropology”. Yet in the European case, there are a few added layers. The first is that anthropology, as an idea, was an invention of a particular kind of western (or Euro-American) mind-set: that is to say, it was the outcome of an historically located epistemology, rather than a geographical location, strictly speaking.

The second layer of complication is that neither the precise geographical location of Europe as a place, nor its meaning as an idea are agreed upon (on the contrary). Still, geography does matter: The Cold War and linguistic diversity within the European region made it difficult to see whether there remained some common threads, or perhaps even some common humanity, when considering the weight of diverse social and ethnological disciplining within European scholarship. Anthropology carried out within the colonies and other territories of empire mostly intended to study the diversity of the human condition, as a means to either arrive at some understanding of various particular Others or, alternatively, humanity in some general sense (Kuper 1973; Eriksen 1995).

In the past, Europeans were not included in this assessment, since studying Europeans (or at least some of them) implicitly evoked the study of Self, a terrain already occupied by many other academic fields in Europe, most particularly sociology, but also anthropology’s direct neighbours, such as ethnology and folklore. Given that anthropology explicitly set itself up as studying Others who lived elsewhere (rather than others who were remnants of our own pasts, or others who lived amongst us), research within the European region was not even considered to be anthropology at all. Of course, with the provincialising of Europe, after which Europeans became simultaneously both Self and Other (Said 1998; Chakrabarty 2000; Douglas 1986; Strathern 1988; Wolf 1982; Wolff 1994), this kind of territorial carving out of the different disciplines rapidly dissipated. Once the hierarchical division between different parts of the world was challenged (one regionally specific epistemology, the European one, being the source of anthropological scientific knowledge, and the other, the rest of the world that was not yet reproducing that epistemology, being the object of European anthropological scientific attention), it became difficult to know where to draw the line anymore – both between disciplines, and between

where anthropologists study, as opposed to where they learn how to study. The new meaning of the phrase “European Anthropology” to refer to research carried out by anthropologists in the European region, rather than its more common meaning of one of the places “where anthropologists are trained to do anthropology” drawing upon Euro-American epistemologies, has created confusion ever since.

Anthropology’s addition of the European region as a field site has created different levels of tension in the region with the neighbouring disciplines of ethnology, folklore and certain branches of (especially French) sociology. While in the UK, there were a number of quite hostile moments of boundary-drawing between them, the discipline’s Francophone manifestations of this seem to have been quite harmonious (Parkin 2005). The other major sphere of influence, “Kulturanthropologie und Sozialwissenschaft” had its own highly charged political history that led to its distinctly insular circumstances (Gingrich 2005; Macdonald 2015). Also in Britain, there were some significant internal epistemological fights within anthropology itself – not to say more “unmentionable” political tensions and ego rivalries – such as the differences between Raymond Firth, David Schneider and ultimately the wider four-fields approach of US vs Euro-British socio-cultural anthropology (Ingold 2015; Eriksen in this journal). These coexistences and collaborations occurred within a personality minefield and set of discourses (socio-political, moral, reflexive) that became entangled at times (Bourdieu 1988).

Partly as a result of all this turf war (sometimes literally), anthropology and ethnography have gone through their own twenty-first century identity crises, and are affected by increasing demands from universities to produce academic work in certain forms and at a certain pace that is not necessarily conducive for anthropology. So what is there to be defended? Is there still a need to locate such disciplinary identities and relations, given the current context in which the divisions between disciplines are no longer anywhere near as clear as they used to be? Our short answer would be that anthropology has to critically engage with what is left that is distinctive about the discipline, as it lost its clearly distinctive object once the difference between here (Europe) and elsewhere (everywhere else) was questioned. And what is left, apart from a claim about the discipline’s core methodology, ethnographic research, which is a technique rather than constitutive of a discipline, as such? We suggest that perhaps what remains is a way of knowing that has developed over time – an epistemological approach that “mutated” during a certain historical and intellectual moment in parts of Europe – then spread across some parts of the world (in anthropology’s case, most particularly the USA). This stretching out was followed by a sustained, long-term and still-ongoing process of critique and refashioning,

differently-framed in different parts of the world. As this epistemological approach has encountered other people, other places, other political and economic conditions, other ideas and perspectives, it has generated constant critique, and endless re-writings.

At times, it has seemed as if the critique was so damaging, both intellectually and morally, that anthropology might be arguing itself out of its own existence. Yet such anxiety possibly disguised the creativity that was simultaneously generated through the multiple voices which critically attacked the discipline's very own underlying premise, and the new knowledge it generated. Being constantly in touch with, and attending to, other people's lives – as a basic principle of what anthropology does – has had deep intellectual effects over the decades. Such a disciplinary ethos has created a sharp, critical awareness of the regional, historical, political and conceptual limitations of the earlier epistemological approach from which social anthropology developed. Perhaps then, one of the elements that anthropologists trained in European universities can do is to bring that critical eye, informed by so much engagement with others, back to Europe; There are recent indications, even from “our” own ranks, that many have been doing so (Loftsdóttir, Smith, Hipfl 2018).

Of course, when critical engagement is directed towards Europe, it can be met with different kinds of encounters with others. Like all social, cultural and humanities disciplines with a critical approach, anthropology faces many institutional threats to its existence in terms of constraints and demands dictated by funding and critiques of the perceived “usefulness” of anthropology for something other than itself (Strathern 2006), not to mention internal tensions over ownership and impact, including the usual academic battles of hierarchy, status and where to locate the *lingua-franca* centres of power (De L'Estoile 2015). As this volume charts out, these epistemological, ideological and indeed ontological questions continue to be played out within anthropology as well as between anthropology and the institutions that house the discipline, as has perhaps always been the case, partly through what could be called “internal/peripheral” struggles between different threads of the discipline.

Anthropology of or in Europe?

One of the things that we have discovered is that any reconsideration of European anthropology is an ever-propagating sequence of questions: what is the form and the content of Europeanness? What are the colours of the variegated flags? Who covers the costs and pays the salaries? And who are those buried in its cemeteries? In the introduction, the editors explain their

aim of not being excessively programmatic, neither delineating the contour of European anthropology, nor articulating a definitive definition. Instead, they propose to study contemporary anthropologists working in the European region (there is no continent of Europe, geographically speaking) and their relationship with the different conceptualisations of the notion of “Europe”. Hence, European anthropology can be also envisioned in terms of the scholarship of transnational networks taking place in Europe, and the way this positioning gives a particular entry point to a broader global anthropology. Further, it is also important to distinguish between anthropology of and in Europe, between anthropological research done on European topics (which raises particular issues of similarity/difference and intellectual legacies – what could be called bringing the creative critique of anthropology back to the place from which it developed), and the result of having been trained in anthropology in a European university (which could be carried out anywhere).

In the “Rethinking Euro-anthropology” Forums that we organised for the journal *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* (Green, Laviolette 2015a, 2015b; Martínez 2016), we invited a series of scholars to reflect on the contemporary location of European anthropology, given that almost none of the conditions that led to the development of the discipline exist anymore. Many of the contributors to the Forums related this question to some major intellectual themes, methodological questions and/or political debates (including language, nationalism, ethnicity, and the ontological and mobilities “turns”). Over the course of just a year, the focus of the Forum itself shifted. It evolved from an original interest in opening up a debate about the diversity that is European Anthropology, to a more existential question of what makes the European context distinctive – and what should be done about such distinctions.

Sharon Macdonald (2013) reminds us that anthropology has traditionally focused upon small-scale locales, whilst historians have more often taken the nation-state as their frame. European anthropology does not imply a spatial fixity, but an intellectual project, if not a political ambition, to a great extent in tune with forms of supranational cooperation. Indeed, in the third Forum, we learn that the discipline shares many of the same problems and challenges of the European Union as a socio-political project (Martínez 2016; see also Keinz, Lewicki 2019). Viewed through such a lens, European anthropology (this time meaning anthropology of the European region) implicitly asks three things of itself: who are its subjects, who are its others, and who are its authors and agents? Should we seek out singularity on a regional basis (Nic Craith 2015)? And who would want to be part of that club in the today’s climate?

In the currently dominant socio-economic conditions of academic life, Euro-anthropology might still appear as an intellectual project against the grain. On the flip side of the debate, Jasna Čapo (2014) proposes to use the idea of Europe as a meeting platform, upon which a more transnational anthropology could exist. Could we thus relate the locating endeavour with an agreement to disagree? The need to locate European anthropology and the current reclassification of Europe as a place and as an idea (Green 2013) present *Europeanness* as a set of constitutive contradictions (De Genova 2014). And yet, despite being a space that questions its own existence, there is no lack of people willing to dedicate time, money and energy to pursuing European longevity; generation after generation. Likewise, the publication of our Forums has generated further discussions and feedback beyond the journal. Incidentally, Daniel Miller's Forum contribution attracted considerable attention in social media, mostly because of his expression of self-gratification at receiving European Research Council (ERC) funding. This led to a heated, if brief, critical debate about academic hierarchies within the European region. Certain voices were critical of the way that ERC grants (currently the most coveted source of academic research support for European universities) reproduce pre-existing privilege rather than creating new opportunities, while the less privileged live in increasing conditions of precarity – in part because of the temporary and non-renewable junior posts that ERC grants generate. Paradoxically, this debate took place through digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which have been the object of Miller's interests for several years (Miller *et al.* 2016). Such issues were, and remain, serious ones. Yet when they are discussed within social media, attention spans are short and people move rapidly on to other matters, without really resolving anything. These are questions that need some further consideration: how digital technologies have not only (a)effected the very idea of located anthropologies (European or otherwise), but also the speed at which issues come and go. Not to mention the levels of ongoing engagement with “the field” that anthropologists now have to maintain, long after they have returned to their universities to write up results and apply for more ERC grants.

In terms of institutional memory therefore, we wonder how someone like Mary Douglas would have responded to the challenges with which Euro-Anthropology has been confronted recently, as for instance the imposition of unhelpful (or at least, non-anthropological) notions of quality, value and utility (Shore, Wright 2015). In this volume, the absence of a critical engagement with Douglas's now largely overlooked *How Institutions Think* (1986) is conspicuous. Yet some important disciplinary history is being

forgotten if we fail to ponder on the possibility that the ERC, like many other benefactors (philanthropic or otherwise), as well as industry patrons, might be usefully represented as if they are institutions that “think and behave” according to their own rules. That form of reification, while it had its conceptual weaknesses, occasionally helps in highlighting the power of systems to impose certain material and even epistemological realities. Much more recently, David Graeber has pointed to much the same thing in his book on bureaucracy, *The Utopia of Rules* (2015).

In this special section, and despite the relative absence of a discussion on the power of certain institutional logic when implemented through bureaucratic and financial means, many pressing contemporary questions are addressed. For example, what is to be done to fix the current problems of European anthropology? What are the major transformations of anthropology at the moment (see Estalella, S. Criado)? And what role does European anthropology play in the local economies of knowledge (Eriksen)? Of course, some of the questions posed remain unanswered, or open. Crucially, the question of who is part of this European anthropology club remains unanswered. Several authors have preferred to respond to the question: *how do we take part* in European anthropology (Martínez), rather than what is it, as such. In other words, what do people need to do to be acknowledged as members of this anthropology club, especially from regions that are regarded as being peripheral to the key centres (whose locations appear to be a little mobile just now)?

The set of papers and commentaries also explores whether Euro-anthropology could be a “gatekeeping concept” (Appadurai 1986) for theorising about what the anthropologists working in this place do, how they think, who should represent them. Sceptically, Nicholas de Genova answers that:

No accumulation of ethnographies merely situated in Europe will ever suffice to constitute a genuine and critical anthropology of Europe. My proposition, furthermore, is that an anthropology of Europe can only be truly and adequately critical if it is prepared to unrelentingly posit “Europe” itself as a problem (2014: 295).

This commentary is in keeping with our suggestion of turning that historical legacy of a critical eye back to Europe. There are indeed signs that this process is well under way. Europe is not only being problematised from different angles (Dzenovska 2014; Gutiérrez 2016), but also the anthropology done by the scholars working in this place is increasingly influenced by training and new ways of thinking that come from a non-West elsewhere (Santos, Rodríguez-Garavito 2005; Comaroff, Comaroff 2012). Geographical

spaces are thought as being fixed, but they might be shifted through ideas and particular practices of circulation; E(e)uro-anthropology is part of these processes of slow formation, not simply producing relationships and narratives, but being simultaneously produced by them too.

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