Anthropology: a prototype

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Over the past four years streets have become deep sites of learning in Spain. I mean this in a number of senses. First, in the wake of the economic and financial meltdown of 2009, thousands of Spaniards took out to the streets on May 2011 and reimagined the city as a political experiment. The movement that became known as the *Indignados* or 15M movement took residence in plazas and public spaces all over Spain in the shape of popular neighbourhood assemblies. These assemblies met weekly in the open air and laid out the conditions for learning and inventing politics anew.

The assemblies became an inspiration for cultural practices elsewhere. For example, throughout 2011-2012 members of various guerrilla architectural collectives in Madrid, joined by digital artists, designers and educators, met in the open air to discuss the conditions for learning in the city. Convened every second Thursday via Twitter (hashtag #edumeet) there was no agenda to the meetings, nor indeed expectations of attendance. Some meetings were attended only by a handful of people, who would then take the conversations indoors to a nearby bar; other meetings would pull in audiences of over thirty people. Attendants discussed the role of the university, the nature of autonomous education, and the possibilities that new technologies opened-up for relocating how and where learning took place in the city. In an unprecedented event, in 2012 an entry on #edumeet was included in a special issue that Spain's most prestigious architectural journal, *Arquitectura Viva*, edited on up-and-coming architectural studios (edumeet 2012).

Another example concerns the work of free culture activists in Madrid, in particular the activities and programmes carried out at Medialab-Prado, one of the country's leading hacklabs. For a variety of reasons, including the debacle of the public university model under the politics of austerity, Medialab has become a congenial and hospitable environment for academics. It has hosted academic conferences and seminars, offered technological and infrastructural support, and occasionally contributed in kind towards the organisation of academic events. But importantly, academics' partnership with Medialab-Prado has also exposed their (our) work to the material epistemology of free culture hackers: the use of free intellectual property licenses; documenting and curating publicly accessible, editable and shareable archival registries of our projects; or using, sometimes even participating in the development of open-source prototypes whose aim is to interrogate and 'white-box' the interfaces holding material and social practices together (versus the 'black-boxes' of mainstream intellectual proprietary technologies).

So what about anthropology? How has anthropology come to inhabit these prototypes – between and betwixt the street and the academy, amidst novel alliances with architects, designers or digital activists, equipped with the cultural infrastructures of hackers?

There are of course as many answers to these questions as there are anthropologists in Spain. But I wish to essay here one programme of action and research. This outlines a view of anthropology of/as prototype as both a theory of relation and a modality of collaboration.

As a theory of relation the anthropology of/as prototype sketches a figure of complexity that is 'more than many and less than one' (Corsín Jiménez 2014). Unlike the partial connections of fractal complexity, where part and whole mirror each other as self-scaling devices – 'more than one and less than many' – thereby avoiding a model of political plurality based on difference as a multiplicity of identities (Strathern 2004); unlike such figure of complexity, prototypes may be thought-of as designs that are always less than 'one', for they keep referring back to – they are sourced on – the conditions of their own openness (that is, they are open-sourced). At the same time, the existence of a source code enables prototypes to proliferate and reduplicate not through the multiplicity of number and identity, but through edits, extensions or bifurcations. They index towards a plurality not of 'many' but of 'many more than many'. The prototype, then, as more than many and less than one.

This brings me to the modality of collaboration. More than many and less than one, anthropologists working with/as prototypes have often found their ethnographic projects re-functioned as infrastructural projects where ethnography becomes one of the many 'sources' open-sourcing the collaborative enterprise. We may think of these collaborations as 'anthropological experiments' for our contemporary (Marcus 2014). Yet more than their experimental vocation, when ethnography joins the source code of a prototyping project it becomes in effect a member of a community whose interest lies not just in 'doing things together' but in sourcing this material epistemology out (becoming less than one) for others to learn from it (becoming more than many).

The culture of prototyping is of our times, of course. But there may be a lesson for anthropology in the cultural momentum that drives its techno-material hopefulness. We have long known of anthropology's commitment towards the making explicit of *cultures of learning*. Yet the notion of anthropology-as-prototype offers perhaps some valuable insights into the *infrastructures of apprenticeships* holding our field/s together.

References
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