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Cracks in the System and Anthropology

A Response to Bråten

Of truth one will be able to say that it is differently portrayed in the different planes of science, art, and philosophy. (Prado Jr, 2021 [2018]: 173)

We begin by thanking our colleague Eldar Bråten for taking the time to read and comment on our article with such thoroughness. We continue right away with a response. A key aspect of Bråten's critique is his claim that it is difficult to understand how we reason and, therefore, 'how to discern substantial arguments in texts that overflow with evocative and metaphoric prose?' In order to reply to such a concern, we choose to, first, take a step back and provide a backdrop to our anthropological thinking (and, therefore, reasoning and 'prose') and how it is situated within a longer trajectory of thought. Thereafter, we turn to his specific concerns with our approach to utopia.

Epistemic Diversity, Horizontal Universality and Anthropological Radical Openness

As Kris Manjappa (2020) has most recently demonstrated, colonialism and imperialism comprised an exceedingly violent mode of global expansion depending on forms of power which included debt, school and science. The latter concerns us here as the science – and, therefore, worldview – of Western imperialism and colonialism constitute a particular truth-producing machine. Extending typologies across the globe in a Linnéan manner and seeking to extinguish local taxonomies and cosmologies, manning expeditions so as to open these to Western imperial force and institution, exhibiting the Other in museums and Euro-American pavilions and tentatively imposing the construction of a global hierarchy of race and civilisational development across the globe were all key aspects of such science. As Manjappa notes: "Science", as a method of inquiry, is constructed, molded, and utilized by groups of people for underlying, and often unstated, political ends' (2020: 131).

However, as Kapferer (2010), Scott (2009), Comaroff (1985), Said (1993) and many others show, no hegemonic power is total and there *will* be cracks in any system. This also includes the firmament of Enlightenment thinking that was



integral to such imperial expansion of, also, science and domination. Moreover, as Gilroy (1993) has eloquently shown, even the stark and exceedingly violent slave trade with its genocides and brutal plantation economies generated forms of resistance re-humanising the black subjects, that is, producing cracks in the totality of colonial and imperial order.

With the backdrop of such colonial violence of also the epistemic kind, recent decades have seen a sustained and important critique of the privilege of assuming 'universality' in causal and explanatory circumstances. While there are many inroads into this thorny debate, a useful starting point is Diagne and Amselle's (2020 [2018]) foray into the past, present and future of universality. They challenge what they see as problematic universalism – a hierarchical and imperial form of knowledge that eclipses other modes:

We will use the term 'universalism' to mark the position of anyone who declares his or her own particularity to be universal by saying, 'I have the peculiarity of being universal.' It is then perfectly justified to ask universalism: 'by virtue of what? by what right?', and this is the question posed by barbarians (and subalterns) when they express their right to speak. (2020 [2018]: 21)

In its stead, Diagne and Amselle propose a horizontal universality – a form of thinking about what constitutes the human and knowledge that is based on exchange and being journey-like. We believe that we, as anthropologists, have a lot to learn from such attacks on hegemonic forms of knowing and claims to singular universalism (see also Santos and Meneses 2020). Indeed, one could argue, as we do, that it is in the cracks in hegemonic orders – within postcolonies and metropolitan centres alike – that anthropology has, at its best, contributed. For, as doyens of theory of science have shown (Foucault, Latour), scientific truths are, of course, only contextually relevant and valid and should always be questioned. As has been pointed out by a range of scholars (Asad 1973; Fabian 2000; Graeber 2007; Mafeje 1996; Pierre 2020), while anthropology as a science and truth-producing machine has at times colluded with imperial, statal and colonial powers in deeply problematic ways, we believe a key contribution that our discipline may continue to make is to critically interrogate hegemonic forms and, indeed, if not pry open the cracks in the system, then be attentive to non-hegemonic forms of knowledge, ways of inhabiting the world and truth.

What we are proposing is not a militant anthropology in the classic vein of Schepher-Hughes (1995) but rather a tapping into the potential for radical rethinking that Deleuze (Deleuze and Guattari 2002 [1980]) once called 'minor science': a form of nomadic production of knowledge – indeed journey-like in Diagne and Amselle's thinking – that engages and becomes transformed by epistemic diversity, not insisting on a singular, immovable truth-object when our interlocutors clearly perceive, act on and actively construe other truths.

Such a vision of anthropology also reflects an increasing understanding of our discipline as fundamentally open-ended and experimental. A case in point

here is Pandian's (2019) hopeful call for an anthropology brimming with possibility, opportunity and inclusion – traits hugely important we also believe in a planetary context of destructive climate change, rampant capitalist politics oriented towards commodifying all life, and spiralling levels of socio-economic and other forms of inequality. Building on Aimé Césaire's rejection of colonial animalification and his famed call for a 'humanism made to the measure of the world' – a position which entailed Césaire experimenting with re-inventing himself in prose – Pandian (2019: 109) calls for an ethnography that is open to flux, experimentation and, indeed, a horizontal universality.

Utopia, Mozambique and Angola: Some Answers

Inspired by such recent turns in anthropology, the overarching ambition of the special section of *Social Anthropology/Anthropology Sociale* which Bråten attacks, was to move away from stale and age-worn definitions of utopia – those relating to phantasmagoric cities or idealised states of being in esoteric political theology. Instead, we chose to define utopia as the movement from transformative will into an instance of mobilisation. But while many trajectories of this translation can be mapped throughout history – from spiritual havens to intentional communities, for instance – we also argue that there is something new in the space of contemporary politics that transcends traditional binaries/boundaries and directionalities, which a renewed take on utopia could help us ethnographically grasp.

This means that we approach utopia neither as simply reflecting bifurcated normative orders (good vs evil/bad) nor as clearly working towards some defined (and, by some, laudable) political object, project or state of (collective or individual) being. Here, it is interesting that Bråten describes our points as romantic, laudatory and even a celebration of utopia, while in our Introduction we do not ascribe a 'necessary' (positive) value to utopian mobilisation – when even such an exclusionary and antagonistic movement such as MAGA [Make America Great Again] can be considered a utopian move. We do, however, distinguish between generative and reactive/conservative forms of utopian ideology and praxis.

In line with such a view, Bertelsen therefore tentatively shows how the (neo) colonial imposition of resilience governance – what he calls the production of lesser human beings – is counteracted by motley groups (*teams*) that by their mere (rowdy, loud and mobile) presence constitute cracks in the tentatively imposed system. However, by merely treating these as proto-revolutionaries, brutes or allocating to them a class position that does not easily correspond with the sociopolitical topography of postcolonial Mozambique, one would do these an analytical disservice. For, by not letting our thought be informed by real-world perceptions of politics, society, state, life, utopia and generativity, this form of dynamic mobilisation would be freeze-framed in hegemonic yet problematically

preconceived modes of analysis – much like the riot foam that police deploy to cover the semiotics of resistance and the dynamics of protest.

In Bertelsen's analysis, such a point of view is undertaken by analysing the phenomenon of violent and wild forms of gentrification in urban Mozambique (i.e. private miniature enclaves) and linking this perforation of the urban areas of the poor to the attempted installation of new forms of urban transformation. Such urban transformation is analysed as 'resilience governance' and the article contextualises (to the degree that the format allows) how this is experienced and engaged. Crucially, Bertelsen attempted to show how *teams* (but also other forms of mobilisation) expose a problematic figure of the human that underpins resilience governance – in its form in Maputo: futureless (i.e. an end to the horizon of development), restricted, pliable, open. Bertelsen's article links this explicit context to the (problematic) celebration of such a figure in some influential contemporary thought, also in anthropology, that specifically aims to re-think what the human is or may/should be in the Anthropocene, specifically attacking problematic aspects of Anna Tsing's and Giorgio Agamben's thought. *Teams* here emerge as significant as these, both in their practices and in how they verbalise their understandings of their situation, attack the figure of the lesser human and the whole ideational edifice of resilience governance – an increasingly globally hegemonic mode of approaching the urban and human life within it.

Thus, the notion of politics that Bertelsen seeks to convey when wanting to understand the phenomenon of *teams* is, therefore, neither directly subsumable to dualistic notions of power and resistance, nor conforming to embryonic or emerging class formations. Rather, *teams* are, he suggests, oscillating between instantiating and embodying forms of micro-utopias (in part informed by a willed re-mobilisation of fragments of Mozambique's socialist past) – aspects he has also written about in several other articles (see Bertelsen and Rio 2018; Bertelsen 2019) and participating in what he calls a predatory-protective assemblage (Bertelsen 2009, 2011). Thus, while numerically marginal and without necessarily any long-lasting temporal duration as a formation, the *teams* comprise a distinct and important form of politics and a form of mobilisation – again referring to our definition of utopia here – in a postcolonial context that we, as anthropologists, might want to be mindful of if we want to generate new understandings of politics, political systems and popular mobilisation. We also believe such a re-thinking should not be limited to the urban alone and we have, in several publications, therefore attempted to re-think politics in Angola and Mozambique. For instance, in a co-authored piece (Sumich and Bertelsen 2021), a critical analysis is made of conventional modes of understanding politics in Mozambique where we attempt to go beyond conventional understandings of seeing the party-system in the country as dualistic (Renamo and Frelimo) and with some notions of what such a revised understanding of Mozambican politics might imply for anthropological understanding of politics.

For Blanes, the utopian politics that he identifies empirically in Angola appear more as a generative, practical method towards transformation – that is, the use of self-sacrifice, optimism and provocation for the creation of new symbolic and physical spaces of political faring, beyond the tightrope of ‘traditional’ Angolan politics, which was built around a violent Manichean and antagonistic framework that criminalised any form of non-MPLA [Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola] manifestation as dissent (see Blanes 2017, 2020). In Luanda, as in Maputo, the movements of confluence and convergence are not necessarily multitudinous or institutionalised, yet they are commanded by the engagement with a practical utopian mode.

In both cases, it is our conviction that what we are discussing are not self-contained utopian formulations (or intellectual projections of such formulations), but the actual context in which utopian practices emerge and dwell, and in what terms they are enabling social and political change – whether intended or unintended. The social groundings of the mobilisations we describe are evident, both in terms of abstract formulation (the political landscapes of, for example, Mozambique and Angola) and of specification (the MPLA authoritarian governance, or the state–private partnerships towards urban transformation in Maputo). Here, to conceive our approach as ‘irreal’ is difficult to understand, from our perspective.

Understanding the Urban Political: New Directions

In sum, in choosing to let our analyses be interpreted by actual empirical contexts over somewhat stale models of what, for instance, urban politics is – replete with notions of stages or modes of political organisations and quite limiting understandings of agency – we are in line with both a number of African scholars and scholars working in the region. For one, several decades ago Achille Mbembe (2001, 2006 [1992]) complicated notions of postcolonial politics and agency by critiquing the highly limiting dichotomy of oppressed–oppressor and he did so by undertaking an analysis of (especially) Cameroonian politics as revolving around playful engagements with power. This entails that the postcolonial political subject can no longer be neatly distinguished from the powers that may be, but must be seen as nefariously imbricated in a complex and ambiguous political order. Such a line of argument has also been extended by, for instance, René Devisch (1995) and Filip de Boeck (2015; Boeck and Plissart 2014 [2004]) working on Congolese urban formation. Second, another vein of analysis that has been important to our endeavours has been what one could call ‘the new wave’ of urban studies in Africa and beyond which are empirically driven critical analyses of the relations between statehood, politics, citizenship, agency, space and time, to mention some key aspects. For instance, Julie Archambault, in a recent analysis of aspiration, urbanity and precarity in Southern Mozambique, notes that as anthropologists we should not disregard the ‘the transformative potential

of urban precarity in the work of attuning one's aspirations with one's circumstances; in the work that allows people to *feel otherwise*' (2021: 304; for a similar vein of analysis, on Angola, see also Gastrow 2017, 2019).

A key inspiration for some such rethinking comes from the works of AbdouMalik Simone (2004, 2019), Ato Quayson (2014) and Felwine Sarr (2019 [2016]) – analyses that fundamentally challenge common assumptions about the terrain of the African urban, its lives and the politics that run through its order. As Sarr famously argued in his celebrated book *Afrotopia*, it is about moving away from the hegemonic moralising (Euro-) thinking about Africa and its socio-spatial manifestation in terms of 'chaos' and 'catastrophe', and acknowledging it as a 'living force', a burgeoning 'configuration of the possible' (2019 [2016]: 139).

What these formulations enable is precisely a more evident focus on the empirical, material envelopes of the utopian formations we are referring to. Both in the case of Bertelsen's and Blanes's analyses, Maputo and Luanda and their socio-spatial mobilisations are necessary protagonists.

Widening the Cracks, With Anthropology

While the scope of this debate is broad, it might be helpful for readers to grasp some of the point of this discussion by looking at Bråten's final comments. Here he designates his own reasoning as logical (i.e. universal) as opposed to our supposedly romantic, evocative and metaphorical reasoning – traits, he believes, that entail a 'migration out of academia'. While it is unclear in what way our writing does not belong in academia (according to Bråten), we believe anthropologists should not only be attentive to the realities of those generous enough to share their lives and worlds with us but also challenge epistemic hierarchies that still linger in anthropology – sometimes in the form of claims to singular universality and sometimes in the guise of policing those who should be inside or outside academia. The academia of which we consider ourselves (and Bråten) part, is one in which there has to be a fundamental openness to forms of writing, reasoning and representation. Such a stance is important, not least to work towards an anthropology recognising what David Graeber pointed out when reflecting on revolutionary potential: 'The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently' (2016: 89). Unmaking the world entails, as we see it, *both* to engage practices that do not easily translate into distinct political effects or the exercise of forms of agency deemed rational *and* to continuously work to retain anthropology as an engagement with the world that is undisciplined and attentive to its many strands of knowledges.

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