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**Sarah Bracke, Robert J. Davidson and
Francio Guadeloupe**

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In light of one of the two founding editors of *Ethnography*, Paul Willis [PW], and the other longest serving editor-in-chief, Peter Geschiere [PG], retiring from their service to the journal, the current editorial team, Sarah Bracke, Robert J. Davidson, and Francio Guadeloupe, asked them to reflect on the past and future of *Ethnography* and the methodological practice that is at its heart.

Many social scientific projects, and I think that Ethnography was a social scientific project, emerge in a particular conjuncture and have the imprint of that conjuncture. What was the conjuncture when this journal emerged, and did you consider it important to have that imprint in the journal when you conceived the journal?

PW: First of all, in a way I'm very sad to be leaving. I am very proud of the journal, and I'm astonished that this little infant is going off as a strapping adult in self-propelling ways that are very exciting! Thank you, Peter! You're actually the longest serving editor, and you're a wonderful, calming, wise person, and I've benefited from that! To the new editors, I think it continues in a very powerful and interesting way, and that's fantastic!

Looking back 20 years, I have a slight hesitation, possibly even resistance, to the idea of a helicopter view of a 'conjuncture'. This goes to some of the problems of ethnography and its subject matter now and to my long experience of ethnography, which is that knowledge is always, always situated. I never had a kind of privileged view from the top of the mountain about the state of the 'conjuncture'. I can only really talk about my own institutional, shall we say micro-conjuncture, and tell how that came about, because current readers might not know. I have

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referred to the journal before in conversations with Peter and many others as a kind of cottage industry journal. It started in the 99th university out of 100 in the rankings of the time, Wolverhampton, which did not have any real research tradition, and you may not know I had been effectively out of the academic realm for quite a long time before the launch of the journal.

I'd left the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies around 1980 and worked for 10 years with the local Labour Party on the huge local impact of youth unemployment and produced a document entitled 'The Social Conditions of Young People in Wolverhampton in 1984'. Wolverhampton was an industrial town, hit a precipice, and fell down. We had huge unemployment. I worked in the local authority producing an account of the suffering of the people, 16–26, and working with the Labour politicians towards local policies. When that finished, I was asked by the Gulbenkian Foundation, which in the end resulted in the book *Common Culture*, to look at everyday cultural practices of ordinary young people as against the high art and institutional definitions of what counted as 'culture' and 'artistic' activity. Why did all this happen in Wolverhampton? It's my hometown, the place I was born, and I had the local political connections and interests to move to this issue of mass unemployment, and, administratively, I based the Gulbenkian enquiry in my local university. So after this long period outside the academy, well I was in a low status university (research wise, though among the very best for 'value-added' teaching) and wanted to try to get a voice for giving expression to the feelings, meanings, and situatedness of structural change as experienced socially and culturally by the people with whom I had been working and those like them everywhere. And, of course, within that, reflect on how to deal with and represent experiences of those who are not sharing the academy and the language and the privilege.

The journal came out of that peripheral status to try to make a platform for doing more widely what we'd done locally in the *Youth Review*, the later title of the published version of 'The Social Conditions of Young People in Wolverhampton' and for the *Gulbenkian* research. It may sound odd, because I had an academic standing from the book *Learning to Labour*, and it did open doors, of course, but I wasn't in a major institution with high level networks and a mountaintop view of how things were developing. The micro-situation entailed getting noticed and putting a great deal of time into talking with Sage and preparing the proposal for them. You know, we think it started in 2000. The real story started in 1997 getting the idea accepted. Then facing how to launch in a more academic way became another whole stage.

Of course, it's very important to mention the support and contribution of my close friend, colleague, and co-founder Mats Trondman who battled with me on the proposal to Sage which later became of course the Manifesto, the article opening the very first issue of the journal. He was in Växjö, 10 years younger, and somewhat different in views but with a similar formation and view of what the journal might aim at. He had been a youth worker from a broadly working-class background like myself and saw in my work a way of proceeding to talk about class issues which weren't statistical, dead figures but lived relations and a meaning-making which was, in its own way, comparable to the meaning-making

in the institutions. To get in that in a nitty-gritty way, you had to somehow generate a method and openness and a motive, and we shared that interest. Then, at a very early point Loïc Wacquant joined us and brought along academic resources and contacts which seemed unimaginable at the conception, and as you look at the opening issues with Bourdieu and others, we got one hell of a bang start at one hell of a high level. But the conjunctural formation was very local and in its own way about periphery and centre and differences in orders of status and power. It was rather surprising, though again, my academic external visibility to others is perhaps what drew powers to the journal, but it should never be underestimated: It was started and run from Wolverhampton University, which today is something like 128 out of 131 in the those terrible research rankings. This is my more conjunctural, micro view.

The more organic or long term context or set of influences are rather easy to talk about, and then I feel I get more second-hand and more speaking from the mountaintop, because in England, in the UK, this was the rise of Blairism and a certain kind of politics that seemed to be able to find a 'third way'. The disappearance of class or the attenuation of class as an analytic and political category seemed extremely worrying to me, and class had kind of disappeared. The gritty reality I spent so many years worrying about in Wolverhampton really didn't appear in the procedures which seemed to see the market as the solution or education, for instance, as an issue of equal opportunity for everybody at the same starting point. I was exercised with what people were doing with the results, what was happening long after the unequal race had started. Always the majority, and in Wolverhampton the massive majority, of people were suffering in their lived experience from market forces. In Sweden, of course, after the historic 1976 elections saw the Social Democrats lose power, there was also a shift to the right, though Sweden has, of course, still a much higher level of social provision than the UK but Mats would have had the same feeling that there was a shift. He was at Växjö. Växjö is a middle university. It was not as low status as Wolverhampton, but he had a sense of also being on the periphery to an extent or perhaps of Sweden being to an extent on the periphery.

So you know, we were fucking bold, we were fucking audacious! Looking back on it now, I had an English literature and cultural studies background. Mats was a social worker with a recent degree in sociology. What on earth were we doing telling the powerhouses of sociology and anthropology how to work?!? That's a more personal account of the conjuncture, or as I, through my lived experience, felt the conjuncture and the journal has, in itself, come from the periphery more towards the centre and has, throughout its time, been very aware of status differences between institutions and countries.

PG: I think that the position of anthropology in that conjuncture is quite different from sociology. If I'm right, it's a lot more courageous in sociology to launch a journal on ethnography, while for anthropology I think ethnography is, of course at least since Malinowski from the early 20th century, a kind of lifeline. I'm struck by the growing popularity of ethnography outside of

anthropology. It has become a kind of export product of anthropology and a kind of selling point of anthropology, which raises all sorts of questions. I think anthropologists wonder, 'What are the others doing with our thing?', and that is an interesting question. What's also interesting is how ethnography is doing in contexts where anthropology is very unpopular. I would say, in general, anthropology is doing quite well in the academic world and also globally, but in certain pockets, if I can say that, it's a different situation. One of the pockets is the Caribbean, where anthropology is terribly unpopular. For some time in Africa it was also unpopular, but now it is quite popular there. Such differences raise interesting questions. In cultural studies in general anthropology is not popular, I would say. In history and archaeology, anthropology is very popular. Even archaeologists want to do ethnography now (How they can do that is another question). I wonder especially for the areas and contexts where anthropology is not at all popular, what kind of ethnography do people do there? The cultural studies people pretend also to do ethnography. Often, I can understand sociologists doing ethnography. Cultural studies doing ethnography is, for me, an amazing box.

In general, I would say that if you talk about conjuncture, I love the expression 'post-Cold War' moment. I think the popularity of ethnography has everything to do with the kind of disarray and uncertainties of the post-Cold War moment. Before it was all much more fixed, and you knew what you had to do and in which position you were (or were not). In the 1990s everything started to move and shake in very uncertain directions, and that created a demand for ethnography.

Cultural studies and others have a tradition of ethnography. Where was that genealogy of ethnography coming from, the idea of doing ethnography in cultural studies?

PW: It was always a very small part of cultural studies. Stuart Hall, in the micro conjuncture of these things, saw me as a not particularly promising student to start with. I was there with a 2.2 from Cambridge, and I didn't have a PhD grant. I was teaching part-time and selling ice cream from a Mr Whippy van to finance my studies, but I was interested in getting out and meeting hippies and bike boys. You could say that I was developing an ethnographic practice within the context of our current concerns in the Centre, which were to understand symbolic forms and media forms using literary reference. Raymond Williams was very much important as well as Stuart Hall's work on popular cultural forms, and Richard Hoggart had written the book *The Uses of Literacy*, looking at the working classes' use of popular forms. I took the close-reading technique, which I'd learned at Cambridge and switched from the poem to lived forms of culture, youth culture, or, in fact, context, asking the same kinds of questions: Where does meaning come from? How do the symbols work? What would happen if you altered the arrangement or sequence of symbols? What was the meaning embedded in discourses like the poem, but carried in lived cultures and often without texts but which could be music or the bike itself.

The growth of the technique from my experience at the Centre was that there were very few of us doing ethnography as the main methodology and that it grew for me from a literary base to try to understand contemporary culture. Of course, within the youth cultural realm, Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie were also doing fieldwork, but their starting points were somewhat different. They didn't involve what anthropologists would view as structured long-term fieldwork, whereas mine did. I had much longer experiences whereas a lot of the cultural studies ethnography was a kind of dipping in and out, not in any way bad for that, because it was related to other kinds of real analytic work. In Dick's case it was of an extremely creative kind, reframing questions about meaning, culture, style and influence; and also of course with Angela, who especially over time articulated the specificity of female experience in relation to youth cultural symbolic forms and practices. But you could well exaggerate the role of ethnography, particularly structured fieldwork ethnography, in the history of cultural studies.

What is unique about the journal is that it's not grounded in only one discipline. Officially you find the journal in the sociology rankings and in the anthropology rankings, so it's deliberately taking that transdisciplinary approach, but we all know there are differences. There is also not just one difference. It's not only that there's an anthropological way of doing ethnography and a sociological way of doing ethnography. The differences are multiple and also national. How did you deal with that as editors? You receive different kinds of manuscripts and topics from all over. The topics are not what brings the journal together; it's the method, but the methods are plural as well. How did you deal with that? Did you draw lines? Did you have discussions where the anthropologist says, 'But this is not ethnography' and the sociologist says, 'Of course this is ethnography'? How did you, for so many years, edit all of these manuscripts that all do ethnography in slightly different ways?

PG: I like the question about national traditions. I remember in the 1970s we were still deeply shocked by French anthropologists often engaging in 'une sortie sur le terrain'. When I came to Cameroon in 1971, they would have an expedition, so they would go in a Land Rover from the capital down to the countryside quite far away for a few weeks, and that was a 'mission de terrain'. I was shocked, because I thought you should live there and all that, but the French had different ideas. That's very different now.

We never had, neither with Paul nor with Jan Willem, very abstract debates about what is ethnography and what is not. We never tried to define it. A kind of fixed anchor was this idea of theoretically-informed ethnography. In an article, there should be a good chunk of ethnography, of working on the spot. But it should be theoretically-inspired, so it should be about the choices people make in the field and while writing, especially about original choices. There should be a kind of new or original reflection about how you did your fieldwork. That was the main guiding principle, and it helped a lot, because we could select very quickly and very easily on that basis.

For me ethnography is a craft. I mean, you have to learn it, and it has to be done well. I got increasingly suspicious of people who not only wrote but used

other forms of communication. I'm very happy with that, but all these forms of communication have to be learned. If you do ethnography through poetry, it should be good poetry. You have to learn that. Not everybody can do that; It requires training.

I became very suspicious of self-reflexive inquiry. We got tons of that. The basic principle for us was always that if self-reflexive ethnography is only about yourself, then we do not want to have that. It should be about other people and your relations with other people, but if the self completely masks the people who are the topic of the research, then we discarded it. There is one article which I still love by Anthony Wayne Fontes about Guatemala, 'Portrait of a "real" marero: Fantasy and falsehood in stories of gang violence'. I love that article, because it's about him not knowing if the interlocutor is making up a story or if it's a real story. It's about surviving as a violent person, and his story ends very sadly. What is the story-making and what is real in the article is uncertain. I love that article, and it's one of the best articles we've published. For me it was a very good example of bringing yourself in without muting or without hiding the other.

These are the principles, but we never made a kind of attempt to define ethnography. For me, this idea of a craft is very important. Craft is not about rules, it's about learning. You have to work hard to learn it. It's not just there. It's not just a talent. Writing is very important but also who is talking in the text, not writing in a kind of report style, and not being an all-knowing storyteller are important. Hesitation, ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt about how you know things and how you dare to write things are very important. You have to learn to deal with that.

PW: In the early days, the biggest problem I had, and it was a nightmare, was sheer lack of content, lack of raw materials. We had a few stars, often thanks to Loïc coming in, which was great, but we also had material which sometimes was not so good. We acted, if you like, as real editors in very close contact, because someone might, for instance, be the only author I had to fill Issue 4. I helped to shape the articles and was textually very much on the job, and there were times when I was not sleeping properly and sweating that I wouldn't have a full journal. Then it built up over time. Now, of course, in this weird journey from the periphery to somewhere closer to the centre, we're now embarrassed with too many riches. But don't stop submitting, folks!

Looking at all of the articles and trying to take an overview, I'm very delighted to see the range of disciplines in addition to sociology and anthropology. Cultural studies is still there. Education is very important as well as health. Now, under Peter's tutelage, looking back in time as well. That's all fantastic and to be encouraged. I think method in anthropology is still really rather surprising to me, because there is still often a simple equation of ethnography with anthropology. They are encompassed and defined by the method. I remember some anthropologists when we started with a journal called *Ethnography* asking 'How can you call the journal *Ethnography*? Why not just call it *Anthropology*? They're the same'. Whereas for sociologists, they're still a bit outside of it. It's something over there, outside of

them. They're nervous of it. If you look through the journal, the number of articles we had from sociologists on micro-techniques and sequencing and the actual techniques of what you do and when is quite overwhelming. I think for sociologists you often see a gravity pull of positivism. They're worried about their big brothers, usually men, who are controlling the quantitative universe, and in the States, where I did a lot of teaching, despite the popularity of ethnography, the status and centrality of ethnography in the institution is not really there. It's not a presence in the centre, and a lot of especially US sociologists are quite worried about the method. They're always defending themselves and chopping the salami and getting down to exact techniques of how you should do it or how many case notes or how many fieldnotes or the order or sequencing of things.

I think there's a clear difference there, and I think they should both learn from each other. I am sometimes disappointed that anthropologists don't tell you how they did it face to face or exactly how long they were in the field or if there were techniques that were used to analyse or understand the field. And then sociologists should take lessons from anthropology in being more comfortable with the method and not defending it by salami-slicing their method in increasingly thin slices. On the theory side, anthropologists are self-consciousness and aware that they are somehow complicit with power, and you see it in their articles. They're worried about the position from which they speak, and that's accelerating in a way. Whereas sociologists didn't have any historical guilt about complicity with power, and currently they can sometimes be wholly unconscious of their position of power and assumed authority in theoretical matters. This is also part of why they can be so self-conscious about the scientific justification of their method, because they are trying to match the scientists in a power-neutral view of where they sit in the world. Anthropologists are often acutely aware of their power and authority. Perhaps sociologists can learn from anthropology about awareness of position in power and complicities with respect to policy and the state.

PG: I completely agree that anthropologists do not have to battle as much against quantitative prominence, but I think the consciousness of their own position of power only dawned on anthropologists quite recently. The classical anthropologists had no idea, or they were not at all interested in that. They had a colonial government behind them, so they felt very safe. Again, this post-Cold War moment was important for anthropologists to raise questions about their own position of power. I think that it's now going further so that anthropologists may overrate their own power position. If you do real fieldwork, you have to acknowledge that the others are in power, and you're at their mercy. When you start writing, you are in power, but during the fieldwork, most interlocutors know very well how to make you feel that they are in power. This question of power is uncertain in anthropology and is a kind of pendulum.

There is a growing tendency to privilege diversity in academia, particularly regarding ethnic diversity, gender diversity, and sexual diversity. In all areas one wants to see some sort of critical representation of these various diversities. I think this is a continuation of the revolutions of the 1960s, from the hippies to the Rastafari's, the

hippies of the Caribbean. From then on you have this push of more representation. What are your views on the renewal of the emphasis on diversity, and how do you think a journal like Ethnography should engage with this new old topic?

PG: We should not forget that diversity in many parts of the world is a dangerous word. It's not a popular word. That's also why ethnography is not so much appreciated everywhere. In Africa after independence diversity meant ethnic diversity, and that had to be denied at all costs. One of the reasons that anthropology was suspect was that it went back to tribal, colonial divide and rule, and anthropologists had to shut up. Africa was going to be modern, and 'We were all Africans'. In Cameroon, when I came there, if you asked even, 'What's your language?', people would say, 'Je suis camerounais'. 'I'm Cameroonian', and you shouldn't ask at all what kind of ethnic group. That was completely wrong. Diversity was then a completely wrong word. Of course, the nation-state hates diversity. There's a theoretical reason to be distrustful of diversity. If diversity means identity, then there are problems.

We should be careful of articles that take identity as given. Also, it's wonderful to talk about diversity, but the whole discussion about diversity is completely dominated by Anglophones, which is very much a pity, because there are very different perspectives. The journal is published in English, so the manuscripts have to be written in English, but be conscious that you therefore exclude a lot.

PW: For me, there's always been a question with ethnography, and I face it in my own work and in the journal, of how the Other is understood, treated, represented, and dealt with; and not least how 'we' or any particularly demarcated group are seen by the 'Other(s)'. There's always been this issue of how we represent the Other and can the subaltern speak? I see this question fragmenting and becoming more severe today, because we have further attacks on ethnography as a social scientific practice after the post-truth moment: How do we certify the validity of our results? The wider political issue, through Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, has become huge, more than ever: Can you really speak whereof you haven't felt? What you have felt has to be expressed and acknowledged. If you're the one who's feeling it, are you the only one who can speak? On what grounds can your testimony be validated? I think these are huge issues, and ethnography is going to face them more and more. In terms of diversity and representation in the journal and in the academy, we should be as open as possible and be aware ourselves that we analyse symbolic violence in others, but we never really think we're doing symbolic violence to each other and others in our gate-keeping activities.

Remember my story, even though I know I had real privilege, of coming from one kind of periphery to the centre. How do we enable that more? It is partly a question of self-reflexivity and looking at ourselves carefully in who we're publishing and who we're recruiting etc. But, of course, this has limits. Bourdieu was trying to push a project in *The Weight of the World*. Read the appendix 'Understanding'. He tried to train up people from the same background as interviewees to conduct the interviews, but in the end had to abandon a lot of them, because the interviewers didn't have the theoretical knowledge of understanding

the answers and analysing the answers and knowing how to go on to the next question and make an analysis. So it's not quite a thing of opening all of the doors, and of cultural capital being only about exclusion and symbolic violence. It's also partly about the skills Peter was talking about, including theoretical and analytical skills. In a practical way, open the doors as we can, but that's, for me, only the tip of the iceberg for the ethnographic project, whose job still should be to overcome Otherness with as much reflexivity as possible and within a wider project of crucial importance. That's not a reflexivity that talks only about you as all groups splinter and atomize further but which talks about how your resources and your positionality in the conflicts might help you to understand the experience of others with respect to the epochal change we are experiencing.

There's a kind of centrifugal force that worries me such that no one can ever speak about anybody else's behaviour. Ethnography and its practices and sensitivities and theories can try to be post-critical, post-diversity, and find common grounds for our very survival. Equally important to the centrifugal should be consideration and encouragement of the centripetal forces. How do we talk to each other? What are the meaning-makings that we absolutely have to see in Black Lives Matter and #MeToo but not in a way that fragments the universe? That's a larger political point that worries me a lot, but ethnography can be a kind of canary in the mine. It can warn us in time of the absolute imperative to find, and help to suggest, common areas of a practice and, if you like, what my colleague Mats, co-founder of *Ethnography*, calls in our discussions of such matters, a 're-naturalization of the world'. We're very good at de-naturalizing it and de-coding it, critiquing it. Where's the re-naturalization into a new post-critical common sense that can really bring together in ways that do not exclude and fragment large groups? Some are excluded certainly by race and gender and sexuality. But separately and overlappingly, many are also excluded by wrenching economic dislocations and severe marginalisations, leading some into their own types of meaning-makings, which can and should be acknowledged and understood, associated with cultural vectors and social action of extreme danger to us all. These must be examined and brought into some dialogue and control in the commons of shared meanings in varieties of relation to shared conditions of existence, present and emergent.