

# EDITORS' NOTE: STUDENT PROTESTS, HISTORICITIES, AND GENRES

We are excited to once again introduce a new issue of *Suomen antropologi: The Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*. This special issue, guest edited by Dmitry Arzyutov (University of Oulu) and Karina Lukin (University of Helsinki), is entitled 'Entangled historicities in the Eurasian North'. The special issue consists of Arzyutov and Lukin's introduction, as well as articles by Lukin, Art Leete (University of Tartu), Otso Kortekangas (University of Turku) and Victoria Peemot (University of Helsinki). In addition to the special issue, we include a book forum, curated by our former long-time editorial secretary Ville Laakkonen (Tampere University) on *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber and Wengrow 2021), with contributions from Khalil 'Avi' Betz-Heinemann (University of Helsinki), Matti Eräsaari (University of Helsinki), Linda Hulin (University of Oxford) and Veronica Walker Vadillo (University of Helsinki), and Tuomas Tammisto (Tampere University). Last, but not least, Ilana Gershon (Rice University) contributed a thought-provoking essay on artificial intelligence and genre.

Before introducing the texts in this issue in more detail, we want use this space to discuss some goings-on at the journal as well as a few topical issues in anthropology and universities in Finland.

Since publishing our last issue, two new editors have joined our team—Suvi Rautio from the University of Helsinki and Henni Alava from Tampere University. Suvi and Henni are both impressively accomplished anthropologists. Suvi conducted research for her PhD on village community-making in rural China (2019). Guided by stories of her own family history, Suvi is currently working on a postdoctoral project on the transmission of memory and loss among Beijing's intellectual class during the Mao Zedong era. Henni has conducted long-term research in Uganda on the politics of religion, silence and hope in the post-civil war era (2022). She is continuing her work on trauma, silence and hope through an examination of paediatric care for chronic pain in Finland in an ethnographic study of families, medical practitioners and children impacted by chronic pain. We are delighted that Suvi and Henni offer their insights and intellect, expanding the expertise of our editorial team. More personally, we studied as post-graduate students with both Suvi and Henni, have worked together and formed communities with them, and are thus thrilled to continue working with both scholars in this capacity.

## STUDENT PROTESTS IN FINLAND

At the time of writing this in late September 2023, students at several Finnish universities and high schools are occupying their institutions to protest proposed austerity and anti-immigration policies from Finland's new government. In June 2023, the chair of the right-wing National Coalition Party, Petteri Orpo, formed a coalition government with the far-right True Finns party, the conservative right-wing Christian Democrats, and the liberal Swedish People's Party. Over the summer, racist writings from True Finn ministers as well as their connections to far-right extremists emerged in media discussions in Finland and internationally, ultimately leading to a government crisis when the Swedish People's Party refused a vote of confidence for one True Finns minister given their racist writings. Prime Minister Orpo avoided the collapse of his newly formed government by issuing an antiracist statement, to which all coalition party members should be committed. The credibility of the statement has since been considerably undermined by a True Finns member downplaying the importance of the statement and their subsequent refusal to distance themselves from their racist writings.

All of this serves as backdrop to the current student protests. Since avoiding an early collapse, the government can now begin implementing its policies, policies described as one of the most right-wing agendas in Finnish political history. This agenda is based on austerity politics and balancing the state budget through sweeping cuts to social safety nets and security. That is, instead of increasing state revenue generated through taxation, for example, social programmes will be gutted.

Students at the universities of Helsinki and Tampere, our home institutions, have occupied university buildings to protest the proposed cuts. The students protesting note that cuts to housing subsidies will directly impact their livelihoods by lowering students' income. Students also demand that student mental health services must be protected, and oppose any possible tuition fees and racism within the government. Soon after the occupation, researchers from the Centre for Research on Ethnic Relations and Nationalism (CEREN) in Helsinki publicly expressed their support of the students' demands. The anthropology teaching and research communities in Helsinki followed suit, issuing a statement of support of their own—and collected food to donate to the occupying students (Forde and Eräsaari 2023).

It is easy for anthropologists to support these students' demands. The cuts to the housing subsidies alone are unfair, since they affect many

low-income households, and from the students' perspective, contradict other government plans. With a reduction to student incomes, students must find further wage-based work to finance their studies, increasing the time it will take for them to complete their degree programmes. The government, however, funds universities based on the proportion of students graduating within specified time limits. Thus, the government demands students graduate as quickly as possible, whilst making it harder for them to do so in practice.

Furthermore, student mental health services should be a priority, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit students and school children especially hard. Currently, there is an increased need for mental health services for students. We know from previous periods of depression and austerity measures that cuts to mental health services cost more money in the long run than any short-term 'savings' achieved. Hence, a government proclaiming 'debt control' should know that cuts to student mental health results in a debt we cannot repay.

Finally, opposing the tightening of immigration and racist policies is crucial to anthropologists and our discipline. First, anthropology, despite or because its own complicity in colonialism and racism, has for its part dispelled racist notions and shown that racism has no scientific basis. Second, anthropologists are ethically committed to the unity of humankind and antiracism. Finally, anthropology in Finland is a highly international field of study. The tightening of immigration policies hits many of our international students and colleagues hard, individuals who work on fixed-term contracts, already precarious conditions, whilst contributing to research and teaching here in Finland.

Statements of support and donations of food are important, but only go so far. To our minds, we need to concretely support the students protesting. Universities, through their leaders and boards, could (and, in our opinion, should) unequivocally demand from politicians and the Ministry of Education that students are, for example, given leeway with degree completion times—and that the funding of universities should be de-coupled from such goals. Given that students must work in order to fund their studies and make a living to simply survive, it is unfair and counterproductive to expect them to graduate in a short time. More broadly, strict 'in-and-out' degrees do not nurture the broad-based learning we advocate for nor the pursuit of knowledge, both of which should be the basis of higher education.

In addition to trying to change existing structures, universities as institutions need to creatively approach how they support students in

increasingly precarious situations. That is easier said than done, and just one of many problematic results of austerity—namely, attempting to achieve more with less. Nevertheless, we must figure out how we use existing resources to take better care of our students.

## ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

In the first piece in this issue, Dmitry Arzyutov and Karina Lukin introduce the special issue they guest edited and its central topic, indigenous historicity in the Eurasian North. The articles in this special issue focus on how the Khanty, Sámi, Nenets and Tyva continue to and have conceptualised their pasts, and how their historicities interact with the dominant conceptualisations of the past in Russia and Finland. Arzyutov and Lukin use the term ‘historicity’, rather than ‘history’, which, following François Hartog’s definition, they understand as a tool for comparing different types of histories and ways of existing in time. This project is necessarily interdisciplinary, and, thus, the authors of this special issue represent various discipline-specific backgrounds, such as ethnology, folklore studies, history and indigenous studies. As the guest editors note, this project aimed at understanding different histories—and, indeed, historicities—has also been influenced by historical anthropology and by authors such as Eric Wolf and Marshall Sahlins, whose works are critically examined. The various historicities analysed in this issue, as the guest editors note, have been situated within long-term encounters with each other within both peaceful and conflictual contexts. Through these encounters, the diversity of meanings of the past have been shaped and developed amongst and between indigenous communities, state agencies and communities of scholars. Accordingly, the articles in this special issue are based both on field work and archival research.

In the opening article of the special issue, Karina Lukin examines Nenets epic songs by focusing on two texts collected at the beginning of the twentieth century, examining the songs from two perspectives. The first context involves the collection of them, and specifically dissects the processes that influenced that collection, namely Finnish nationalism and Russian imperialism, which resulted in the ‘folklorisation’ of the Nenets song. ‘Folklorisation’, as Lukin argues, is based on ideologies of modernity hindering historical interpretations of the Nenets. In the context of the collection, the Nenets and their historical narration were situated at the margins or beyond historical knowledge. Second, Lukin interprets the songs themselves as meaningful acts, through which the Nenets have

narrated their historicity and agency through the poetic means of the singers. As Lukin shows, the songs have both criticised Russian imperial administration and its relationship to the Nenets as well as resisted Finnish 'folklorisation' of the songs as 'things from the past'. Instead, the Nenets singers have asserted through poetic songs a past that is not unchanging and static, but something that recurs through relationships with the other-worldly, ultimately repeated and regenerated through the very act of performance.

In his article, Otso Kortekangas examines how a Finnish geodeist and self-taught ethnographer working in the early twentieth century framed Skolt Sámi notions of their past through his examination of their toponymy. Kortekangas specifically does this by analysing Nickul's early publications and his international correspondence. As Kortekangas notes, Nickul argued that the Skolt Sámi had a moral right in naming their own territory, whereby Skolt Sámi names should remain in cartographic representations. In Nickul's understanding, the Skolt Sámi toponyms did not simply reflect the topography, but revealed relationships with ancient events, beliefs and livelihood practices and were, thus, a way to understand the 'mental imagery of the Sámi'. Kortekangas notes that even if Nickul was in contact with international scholars who studied Sámi linguistics, he was essentially self-taught and his project represented one that paralleled scholarly debates of indigenous historicities of the era. However, Nickul's interpretations bear striking similarities to the ways in which anthropologists examined and classified, for example, indigenous place names in North America.

Art Leete for his part analyses the so-called Kazym War of 1931–1934, namely, the armed uprising of the Khanty and Forest Nenets against the Soviets. As Leete notes, the rebellion is well-covered in archival sources, scholarly research as well as popular writings. Indigenous narratives of the uprising also continue circulating in the local communities. In his text, Leete examines the various means by which the uprising is examined and narrated, demonstrating how indigenous history sometimes reproduces and adopts a dominant discourse about the uprising, by largely rejecting official narratives and by establishing an autonomous discussion of events. As Leete notes, indigenous scholars and intellectuals also rely heavily on the official archival sources, but incorporate indigenous oral accounts into their work to a much greater degree than other scholars. According to him, the multiplicity of sources available on the Kazym War have rendered indigenous understandings of it hybrid knowledge which emerged through a colonial encounter. However, the indigenous narratives remain quite independent of the dominant discourses.

Next, Victoria Soyán Peemot investigates the relationship between Tyva pastoralists and their home landscapes. Here, the focus lies on the Soyán kinship group's construction of a Buddhist stupa in 2019, viewed as a means of engaging with the past and reinforcing their community–homeland connection. Peemot's research reveals how the community has remembered and interacted with their past, particularly during the socialist era when the state neglected human–nonhuman relationships. Peemot uses the concept of *storying*, especially related to landscapes, to examine the collective memory amongst Tyva pastoralists' interactions with the environment. The construction of the Buddhist stupa serves as an act of resilience and a way to protect their current seasonal grounds from potential chromite mining operations. Peemot also discusses the Soyáns' relationship with landscape within the broader context of memory politics under Putin's regime, noting that after a brief period of democracy in the 1990s, Russia reinstated state control over narratives of the past, clashing with indigenous narratives amongst groups like the Soyáns. The Soyáns' engagement with their traumatic past and their active sharing of these stories are thus interpreted as acts of resilience.

## BOOK FORUM AND A KEYNOTE LECTURE

The theme of history and historicity continues beyond the special issue co-edited by Arzyutov and Lukin with a book forum curated by Ville Laakkonen on David Graeber's and David Wengrow's book, *The Dawn of Everything* (2021). In his introduction, Laakkonen introduces the essays in the forum and reflects on the work of Graeber and Wengrow. Laakkonen focuses specifically on the generative aspect of the book, and its main argument that humans have always been socially creative and have experimented with different forms of social organisation. In short, things do not have to be as they are. This, as Laakkonen notes, is a welcome glimpse of hope in an era characterised by multiple overlapping crises.

Matti Eräsaari discusses in his essay the 'mission' of *The Dawn of Everything*, particularly how it challenges popular 'grand narratives' of human histories, and, indeed, even 'historicities', referring to Arzyutov's and Lukin's special issue. More so, Eräsaari discusses the intended audiences of the book.

Khalil 'Avi' Betz-Heinemann examines in his in-depth essay how the book by Graeber and Wengrow focuses on possibilities: on the ability to do differently and how this also grants respect and agency to our ancestors. In addition, Betz-Heinemann notes that focusing on our collective ability

to organise ourselves in various ways serves as a form of 'emergency preparedness' in the era of multiple crises Lakkonen mentioned.

A key part of the appeal of *The Dawn of Everything* stems from its archaeological discussion. We are incredibly pleased, then, to include in the book forum an essay from two archaeologists, Linda Hulin and Veronica Walker Vadillo. As maritime archaeologists, Hulin and Walker Vadillo analyse the book with 'a view from the water'. This is particularly apt, since Graeber and Wengrow mention coastal and maritime archaeology in their book. As Hulin and Walker Vadillo point out, the fluctuation of oceans is an important factor in discussions on the seasonality of social organisation—a key theme throughout *The Dawn of Everything*. Hulin and Walker Vadillo also point out how waterways serve as important conduits of contact, rather than obstacles, making them central to discussions about human social creativity.

In the last piece in the book forum, Tuomas Tammisto discusses questions of egalitarian social organisation. Here, Tammisto argues that rather than such questions being archaic baselines of human existence, let alone 'simple' social formations, egalitarianism should be viewed as the result of a great deal of effort and creativity—and, accordingly, as major social and cultural achievements.

Finally, we close out this issue with Ilana Gershon's essay, reworked from a keynote conference lecture delivered in May 2023 at the University of Siegen, on the kinds of anthropological approaches that can be applied to studying ChatGPT and related technologies based on large language models (LLMs). Applying the concept of genre as used in linguistic anthropology to LLMs, Gershon frames LLM-based software as genre machines. By examining the figures of personhood associated with artificial intelligence (AI), Gershon contends that anthropologists are well placed to understand the changes to participant structures in the workplace. Another change brought about by new kinds of AI software is how genre and style, presumably rooted in human creativity, are structured in new ways. Gershon also discusses the role of the generic, based on the work of Scott MacLochlainn (2023), noting that ChatGPT and associated technologies seem to be especially apt at producing generic versions of a genre, for instance. Genericness can, thus, be useful when authorship is problematic, and, hence, AI-created content will be accompanied by 'new forms of non-authorship', Gershon argues.

TUOMAS TAMMISTO & HEIKKI WILENIUS  
Editors-in-Chief

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