Rethinking Euro-anthropology: part two

Initially intended as a set of direct responses to a Forum debate on the current state of European anthropology (as published in the last issue), the text that follows has instead become a follow-up, second part. The first one opened the debate, demonstrating amply that ‘Eurocentrism’ does not mean, and perhaps never has meant, anything coherent or all encompassing, but is instead distinctly diverse. Inevitably, the current harsh economic and political conditions in many parts of Europe made their appearance in various guises in what people had to say, but that did not entirely dominate the conversation; there were also commentaries on intellectual, moral and future-oriented concerns. Yet, rich as the last Forum discussion was, the contributions of this second Forum debate shows that they only scratched the surface of the themes that are on anthropologists’ minds just now.

A prominent theme in the commentaries below is the interplay between anthropology, ethnology and folklore that criss-crosses the European region in a variety of different ways. This is both discussed as an area of tension and division in the past, and as having the potential for new kinds of alliances in the future. Almost all the contributions emphasise a need to widen our horizons in one way or another, while also ensuring that anthropologists do not lose their commitment to core principles, particularly ethnography and recognition of value in thinking otherwise. And as in the previous Forum piece, there are also some statements that moral or political positions should be taken: Besnier suggests we cannot stand by and watch Palestinian academia be choked off while Israel enjoys the privileges of the ERC funding that Miller mentioned in the first Forum piece; Buchowski suggests we have a moral duty to actively pursue a post-hegemonic anthropology; and de L’Estoile suggests we should stop thinking exclusively in English. That last one certainly presents an intriguing challenge: many anthropologists think, speak and write in several languages, but it is likely that most are committed to thinking anthropologically in the language in which they were trained. This points to another layer of linguistic links and separations between different parts of Europe, as well as different disciplinary branches. Ethnology, folklore, anthropology: their relations differ according to the language in which they are written, spoken and taught.

We have now collated 27 commentaries in these past two issues of SA/AS. We warmly invite any readers to respond to one or more of them; we will publish a selection of them in following issues. If your comment is very brief and could do with being aired more quickly, do feel free to post it on our Facebook page (http://tinyurl.com/nhc8qd3) or tweet it tagging our account @SocialAnthropo1. We therefore leave the next step of this Forum in your hands for the time being.
Moving between anthropologies in and on Europe

I am writing this while on the cusp of moving between European countries, between anthropological traditions and institutional structures, each with their different ways of being in and conducting research in and on Europe. Trained in British Social Anthropology at a time when reading lists only rarely contained texts about research carried out in Europe and when choosing Europe as a site for fieldwork, for first fieldwork especially, was risky, not least for securing a post in an anthropology department, my own anthropological fieldwork has primarily been conducted in Europe. Today, fieldwork in Europe has become unremarkable and indeed more PhD students trained in the UK conduct fieldwork in Europe than in any other continent. Yet, as I move to a Chair of Social Anthropology in an Institute for European Ethnology in Germany, I feel acutely aware of the different traditions and expectations of anthropological work, even for research in and on Europe – and for the exciting potential for drawing on both.

Forged and constantly reiterated in a UK anthropological training, in debates and in the structure of UK anthropology departments, is a comparative perspective that insists on reflecting on how things might be otherwise through examples from elsewhere. The practices of Europe and its constituent bits, and also its theorising, are thrown into relief by insights from other places. Sometimes these might be examples from other parts of Europe but they are just as likely to be from further afield, sometimes indeed, in the kind of anthropology that often prevails, as distant and different as possible.

In Germany, as in many other continental European traditions, a division between working within or outside Europe operates, typically with different departments, and different disciplinary organisations and conferences, devoted to each. Völkerkunde, Sozialanthropologie and Ethnologie are the various names of the discipline focused outside Europe; Volkskunde, Europäische Ethnologie and Empirische Kulturwissenschaft for that focused within. This doesn’t mean that comparativism across distant parts of the world doesn’t exist in Germany, but it is less ingrained and pervasive, and less likely, perhaps, to be a prompt for theoretical daring. In taking up a title of Social Anthropology in an Institute for European Ethnology, I hope, together with my colleagues who have supported this, to be able to encourage more broaching and troubling of the inside vs outside Europe divide. Mobilising such comparativist analysis matters not least in order to examine how that division is made and remade outside as well as inside, and in collaboration with, the academy, and how it works inside and outside Europe, in numerous arenas and with political effects.

From the German anthropological tradition of European Ethnology, I am especially excited by the collectively conducted research that departments/institutes often carry out in particular localities, including that in which they are situated. Typically, these marshal small armies of students and researchers to collaboratively work on specific projects, and over the years build up deep, long-term knowledge. In the case of ‘my’ institute – I’m still getting used to saying this – that locality is Berlin itself. A long and strong tradition of Stadtforschung, urban research, conducted in and often