

What is European about European anthropology?

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ABSTRACT: The elusive and contested idea that there exists such a phenomenon as a European anthropology, and not least the ongoing discussion about it, reflects and contributes to the general, no less ongoing debates about European identity, the potentials and shortcomings of the European Union and questions concerning the boundaries and processes of exclusion and inclusion within Europe. However, the subject of this special section is not merely, or even mainly, the idea of Europe. It also (and perhaps mainly) concerns the characteristics of anthropology. Indeed, I shall argue that the ongoing conversation about a European anthropology mirrors theoretical debates and controversies within anthropology itself, sometimes in surprising ways. Let us begin with language.

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How language unites and separates

The question of language always enters into any reflection over the nature and character of European anthropology. At the very first EASA conference, in Coimbra in 1990, a Danish colleague suggested, during the Forum of Members, that all members should be obliged to speak their second language at the association's events, in order to prevent the default dominance of those whose first language was the hegemonic one.

Or hegemonic ones: For years, English and French were not only the association's official languages, they were both actively used at the biennial conferences and other events. Gradually, English became the only game in town, mirroring the situation elsewhere in a rapidly globalising world.

Power asymmetries, as indicated by our colleague in Coimbra, are inherent in the linguistic practices of European anthropology. Not only does the superior command of the hegemonic language enable native English-speakers to perform better at conferences; by the same token, they also have privileged access to the major journals and the most prestigious universities. "International publications", in non-metropolitan universities, simply means books and articles published in English. This is well known, but bears repeating, not least because of the repercussions of linguistic dominance in the overall knowledge production at the global level. Anglophone anthropology is read across Europe, either in the original or in translation. The traffic in signs in the opposite direction is far more modest. This is not just an issue in anthropology: in every genre, far more translations take place from English than to English.

At this point, being a non-metropolitan anthropologist starts to look like an advantage rather than a handicap, as mentioned already in Hannerz and Gerholm's collection on non-metropolitan anthropologies (Hannerz, Gerholm 1982; see also Boskovic 2008). Majorities need not know anything about minorities, while minorities are forced to acquire the language and skills of the majorities in addition to their own. This does not in itself make them more powerful, but offers the opportunity of a broader outlook. A familiar insight from anthropological studies of responses to globalisation is that minorities appropriate foreign influences selectively and creatively, incorporating them into pre-existing structures of significance rather than relinquishing their own practices and notions, replacing them with recent imports. Perhaps this could be said of the reception of metropolitan anthropologies in the European peripheries as well; they enrich rather than replace, and are tweaked and digested rather than swallowed wholesale.

As in majority–minority relations generally, power discrepancies cannot be disregarded here either. Seen from a bird’s-eye perspective, the diversity of languages on the European continent is enriching, but this is not necessarily the way it is experienced on the ground, for reasons indicated above. Local anthropologies published in domestic languages need not be inferior in any way to those published in English, but they tend to stay under the radar outside of their countries of origin. When they are translated, and adapted to an Anglophone readership, which happens far too rarely, something is lost, and this is often precisely that which makes ethnography shine, namely the local flavour and unique ambience of the locality.

There is nevertheless no good alternative to translation, even if the Italian adage *Tradurre è tradire* – translating is treacherous – has some truth to it. Funding and institutional arrangements should be established enabling the traffic in signs to go both ways to a greater extent than what is presently the case.

European anthropology and its Other

Anthropological identity politics often emphasise the peculiarity and uniqueness of anthropology as compared to other academic disciplines such as economics or sociology. The identity politics within European anthropology often contrasts the sprawling and diverse practices in this continent with the mighty chorus of American anthropology. The distinction between *social* and *cultural* anthropology has historically been invoked to this effect, as has the contrast between social anthropology and the American four-field approach institutionalised by Boas. The splitters among us continue to emphasise these differences, while the lumpers argue that the variation within European anthropology is in fact more substantial than the systematic differences across the Atlantic Ocean – a familiar line of reasoning to anthropologists, be they cultural or social, who study race or ethnicity.

Lumpers argue, moreover, that Transatlantic connections have grown steadily in significance since the early meeting of the tribes that came about in a post-war spirit of reconciliation and bridging, through the agency of Raymond Firth and Sol Tax. Incidentally, Firth once abandoned a planned collaborative effort on kinship with David Schneider, owing to differences in approach (Kuper 1999: 150). Schneider was intent on restricting himself to studying symbols and meaning, avoiding research on who did what with whom, while Firth’s methods were founded in micro-sociology. Nowadays, the general animosity expressed against American cultural anthropology which was quite widespread, not least in certain British departments, in the mid 20th century, is rare to come by.

Yet differences between the ways anthropology is practised on the two continents continue to exist, though perhaps in other places than often assumed. The diversity caused by distinctive national histories and languages remains a defining trait of European anthropology, unlike in the USA, where diversity is expressed through specialisation instead. At a European conference in the early 1990s, I once asked a senior colleague what he thought of the event. He responded that it was really interesting, and commented on the great wealth of variation and diversity, also qualitatively, where papers ranged from outstanding to dismal. Well, I said, isn't this always the case? Not in the US, he responded; there, he claimed, everything presented was professional in a particular, almost streamlined way.

Scale also enters any comparison of this kind. The AAA has always been the world's largest national association by far, and it also has a much larger membership, more financial muscle and a better infrastructure than the EASA. All national and indeed transnational anthropologies are dwarfed by the Americans. This has implications for employment – US academic world is more fiercely competitive, but also offers a greater variety of opportunities – than what is the case in European countries. Yet the linguistic uniformity and common job market characterising American anthropology may also, as noted, lead to a reduced diversity compared to what is the case within Europe.

Much of the theoretical work in anthropology takes as its point of departure the relationship between the unique and the universal, or the locally defined and the standardised, and discussions in European anthropology about its relationship to American anthropology follow similar lines of reasoning. If we were to widen the scope further and look at other anthropologies, for example in Brazil or India (see e.g. Lins Ribeiro, Escobar 2006), I would guess that the relationship between bridging and dividing, parsing and fusing, lumping and splitting, separating and amalgamating would provide the friction necessary to ignite the spark of a fruitful intellectual exchange, while the focus and substance would differ from the relationship between European and American anthropologies. In other words: To be continued.

Frictions within

But, as the contributions to this book and other recent debates show, European anthropology does not need an Other in order to generate the kinds of differences and similarities necessary to create outlines (Bateson 1972). It may well be the case that a single-minded emphasis on the contrast

between European and American anthropology may help to create cohesion inside Europe, but the moment the Other disappears from sight, internal differences become paramount, as predicted by the classic model of segmentary oppositions (Evans-Pritchard 1940).

At least three kinds of internal faultlines and hierarchies can easily be identified within European anthropology. The centre-periphery dimension has already been alluded to with reference to language hierarchies. In this era of international institutional rankings, most European anthropologists in academic positions are, presumably, at least vaguely aware of the position of their home department in these hierarchies (and, possibly even their own rank in the department). These rankings are misleading, but have effects relevant for people's work situation, and therefore need to be taken seriously.

Secondly, as pointed out by Chris Gregory (2015: 337), these institutional hierarchies exist not only between, but also within countries, between the large and prestigious institutions, often located to the capital, and smaller research units where anthropologists tend to work in applied research and teach interdisciplinary courses. Again, as with the language hierarchy, being peripheral can be a blessing in disguise. In a small institution, anthropologists are often employed in joint or thematic departments, which enforces interdisciplinarity; and since their strictly anthropological networks are too small to be intellectually self-sufficient, they often go to seminars and events organised by other disciplines, thereby widening their horizon in ways not immediately available in large and complex anthropology departments. Besides, working in a slower, less prestigious institution may – paradoxically – make it possible to do some serious intellectual work, since the pressures of aimless competition are less pronounced.

The third faultline is not mainly institutional or geographic, but rather concerns the boundaries, scope and identity of anthropology. Since the foundation of EASA, a familiar critique has been that the association seems not only to organise anthropologists working in Europe, but to give priority to the anthropology of Europe. While this was certainly not the intention – hardly any of the EASA's founders could be defined as a Europeanist – in practice, anthropology in and of Europe are often one and the same thing. Many European anthropologists carry out their research in their home country, either out of necessity or desire. Relating to, and in some cases congruent with, the old contrast between *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde*, European ethnology and comparative anthropology, this tension continues to exist, not least in Central and Eastern Europe (Buchowski, Cervinkova 2015; Čapo 2014). While social anthropology is by far the larger discipline,

ethnology has the advantage of a historical connection to nation-building and has been instrumental in creating and shaping national heritages. This may give ethnology the upper hand in competitions for funding and political goodwill, not least in countries where ethnic nationalism is on the rise. Yet, at the end of the day, it is about time that we learn to see European ethnology and social anthropology as parts of the same intellectual enterprise. In *Argonauts*, Malinowski spoke of ethnology being in a “ludicrous” situation, the French distinction between *ethnologie* and *anthropologie* refers to two of the layers of the anthropological endeavour, and in many European settings, ethnology-cum-nation-building has morphed into cultural history or cultural studies. There are more complementarities than conflicts here, more similarities than differences, and a part of the uniquely European approach to anthropology consists in precisely the exchange, going back to the imperialism and nation-building of the 19th century, between the domestic and the comparative.

Created locally, engaging locally

Whether handmaidens in the service of nationalism or social critics, European ethnologists have a longer and stronger tradition of engaging domestically with greater society than social anthropology does. Ethnologists are involved in museum work and school curricula, they write reports to ministries of culture and submissions to real estate developers. Anthropologists have been less visible. This stands to reason since the concerned interest in domestic matters is always stronger than engagement in faraway places. Yet local or domestic engagement among anthropologists is on the rise, although we still struggle to find tools that may inflict a dent. Ranting about neoliberalism or racism in our own seminar rooms, blogs and journals is not sufficient.

Although there is a great deal of overlap, each European country has its own controversies, conflicts and channels for communicating and acting upon perceived injustices. As pointed out by George Marcus (2008), anthropologies are shaped by their national context. This does not just imply that national traditions of anthropology differ somewhat from each other, but also that the mode of engagement with greater society varies. Access to media and politicians varies, as does the potential effect of petitions, demonstrations or other calls to arms; moreover, the extent to which academics are encouraged to be engaged in broader social issues varies. In India, and to some extent Australia, anthropologists are expected to be politically engaged advocates for groups or causes; this is not the case in the

US, or for that matter the UK. There is nevertheless something unique about the continents current crises which could actually help defining what is European about European anthropology.

One may perhaps ask whether anthropologists, representing a globally comparative discipline, have a moral responsibility to be engaged with the continents crises or, to scale down, domestic issues. The answer is positive, partly because the anthropologists themselves and the people they relate to are affected by changes in society; they are scholars, but also citizens. Whether or not they work inside or outside academia (Hirvi 2016), are involved in applied research or what is still known as “anthropology at home”, anthropologists are in a unique position to analyse and criticise their own society (Eriksen 2006) and to show how things could be done differently. This is by default a result of the anthropological epistemology and the comparative imagination which so often is essential for theoretical advances in the discipline.

At the same time, certain societal tendencies are closer to home than others. In recent debates about European anthropology and its future, a recurrent cluster of issues concerns changing working conditions. When things improve, people rarely raise their voice, but in a situation of crisis, we are quick to point out that the situation is unacceptable. In European anthropology, the steadily intensifying scramble for scarce research funding is often commented upon, as is the absurd amount of energy and time devoted to research projects which are never funded (Blommaert 2016), or in the slow takeover of universities by bureaucrats; as pointed out by Francisco Martínez, “20 years ago, when people spoke of ‘the university’, they were referring to the faculty; nowadays, they are referring to the administration” (Martínez 2016: 354). The logic of new public management, whereby a research and teaching institution is dealt with politically as if it were a textile factory, is also a recurrent theme, and rightly so (see Stein 2017 for a recent critique). Both these interrelated tendencies strengthen the shared identity as European anthropologists, not least now that the most attractive research funding is pan-European.

Another related social critique with a bearing on both general trends in society and the situation of anthropological research targets neoliberalism, as when Papataxiarchis (2015) argues that “neoliberal tendencies are undermining [the] foundations” of anthropology. In the same issue of *Social Anthropology*, Judith Okely (2015) argues that the acceleration of research, aimed to increase the productivity of knowledge workers, encourages interviews rather than “deep hanging out”. In this way, the practices of proper fieldwork, which is time-intensive and slow, is being undermined.

These are some of the ways in which intellectual possibilities, the societal role of the university and the politics of a discipline such as anthropology converge: Neoliberal policies and various versions of New Public Management militate against long-term fieldwork involving participant-observation, thereby directly influencing knowledge production. Precarity and austerity, increasingly central terms in debates about European anthropology, are part and parcel not only of academic life, but of society as such. The same policies and ideological convictions that indirectly shape methodologies also shape the academic job market, nudge job descriptions towards the applied and instrumental, and are local expressions of the hegemonic values of the society in which the anthropologists live. Seen from this perspective, concerns about the politics of the discipline converge and ultimately merge with broader societal concerns. Just as the debates about the character of European anthropology converge with epistemological questions about the character of anthropology, so do parochial concerns about the conditions for our particular kind of academic work merge with comprehensive aspects of contemporary society. This is one potentially fruitful pathway for narrowing the gap between the ivory tower and the outside world. Indeed, critique of the neoliberal university on the one hand, and of xenophobic nationalism on the other, might serve as defining traits of a European anthropology in the early 21st century.

European anthropology is cosmopolitan or it is nothing

The original vision for the EASA was emphatically cosmopolitan in the sense that a main objective was to facilitate communication between different parts of the continent with different intellectual traditions and languages. While the axis between Germanic and Romance languages was initially the most important, a second line was opened suddenly and unexpectedly with the disappearance of the Iron Curtain just as the first EASA Executive, under Adam Kuper's leadership, was planning the first EASA conference, which would take place in Coimbra in 1990. From the outset, then, the new association contained in its midst a range of European anthropologies which was broader than anyone had envisioned. If anything, the EASA became a cosmopolitan community of social anthropologists – imperfect, imbalanced, at times hierarchical, yet it soon became the most important arena for the creation, and contestation, of European anthropology.

What should we make of the term cosmopolitanism in this context? The recent academic literature on cosmopolitanism reveals no shared definition of the term, notwithstanding its intellectual debts to Kant's late writings on

world society (Hart 2003). While some speak of cosmopolitans as individuals who are open to diversity and tolerant of difference (Hannerz 1996; Appiah 2006), or – less charitably – as a disembedded elite with a transnational class habitus (Calhoun 2002; Friedman 1997), others (e.g. Beck 2000) see cosmopolitanism as a political *Weltanschauung* competing with, and possibly ultimately replacing, nationalism. Nigel Rapport posits a contrast between cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, in an argument with both empirical, methodological and ontological implications, which claims that cosmopolitanism as a theoretical perspective “would liberate individuals from the collective and the categorial ... *as ascriptions*” (Rapport 2007: 225). As pointed out by Stade in a comment to Rapport, anthropologists have “made the cosmopolitan either a defining quality of a particular research method or an object of study” (Stade 2007: 227). In the former case, cosmopolitanism becomes a way of looking at the social world as composed essentially of relationships between individuals rather than bounded groups; in the latter case, what emerges is an anthropology of cosmopolitanism rather than a cosmopolitan anthropology (although the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive).

In a review of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism* (Appiah 2006), John Gray states that “[a]s a position in ethical theory, cosmopolitanism is distinct from relativism and universalism. It affirms the possibility of mutual understanding between adherents to different moralities but without holding out the promise of any ultimate consensus” (Gray 2006).

In other words, fervent missionary activity is not, according to this view, compatible with cosmopolitanism, nor is an ethical position which assumes that there is but one good life.

Both in its research agenda and ethics, and in its internal conversations, anthropology is ideally, and often in practice, a cosmopolitan project, not one of convergence, standardisation and uniformity. Nor is it a project searching for radical difference. within and outside the discipline as such. It may well be that the oxymoron proposed by Alessandro Testa (2017: 372), *cosmopolitan Eurocentrism*, captures what we do better than other attempts to generalise.

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