



# 100 years of (socio-cultural) anthropology in Leipzig - An introduction

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The institute of anthropology was founded in November 1914 as “Sächsische Forschungsinstitut für Völkerkunde” (Saxonian Research Institute for Ethnology). It was the first anthropological institute in the sphere of German-speaking academia. Typically for the time, the director of the anthropological museum was also the director of the institute, at least for some years, until both positions were separated in 1927.

The institute of anthropology celebrated its hundredth anniversary in November 2014 with a series of events over two days (6th and 7th November) at the institute and the museum in Leipzig. The current director, Prof. Ursula Rao (director since 2012) together with the staff at the museum, and assisted by students and



members of the institute and in close cooperation with the director of the public art collections in Saxony produced an exhibition entitled “On the Knowledge of Objects. Ethnologic Constellations”. Its focus is on the relationship between anthropology and anthropologists and anthropological objects, how perspectives are generated and what kind of knowledge is produced. A second major part of the centennial celebrations were several lectures and a symposium. The lectures by Dr. Katja Geisenhainer and Prof. Streck dealt with the variegated history of the institute and anthropology as a discipline in Leipzig. The symposium focused on the “future of anthropology”. These oral presentations were complemented by two publications: an edited volume on “100 Jahre Institut für Ethnologie der Universität Leipzig: Eine Anthologie seiner Vertreter” edited by Katja Geisenhainer, Lothar Bohrmann, and Bernhard Streck, and a special issue in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (the oldest still existing anthropological journal) on “Current Debates in Anthropology” edited by Ursula Rao.

*The presenters at the symposium, Prof. Patrick Eisenlohr (Göttingen), Prof. Julia Eckert (Bern) and Dr. Andrea Behrends (Halle), as well as the discussant Dr. Katharina Schramm (Halle), were so kind to make their papers available in German, with English abstracts, for online publication. In this brief introduction, I will highlight some key topics of these presentations and of some of the contributions to the special issue on “Current Debates”.*

## **Lectures on history**

Given the occasion, the celebrations combined critical reflections about the past and the future of anthropology. On the first day (6th November), particular attention was paid to the history of the institute in Leipzig. Geisenhainer and Streck dealt in-depth with the different periods and their academic but also political characteristics. During the late imperial period and the Weimar Republic,



the academic focus was on evolutionary theory and the understanding of the cultural (pre-)history of mankind. Politically, the idea to regain colonies, which Germany had lost in the wake of the first world war, stood in the foreground. Under Prof. Otto Reche, who was a physical anthropologist and headed the institute between 1926 and 1945, anthropology in Leipzig became strongly influence by Nazism and racial ideology. During the decades of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), much of the research at the institute concentrated on economic anthropology and pre-capitalist modes of production in different parts of the world.



Politically, anthropology in Leipzig was committed to the anti-imperialist struggle. In 1994, a new era began with Prof. Streck, who established a strong focus on the history of the discipline and on Tsiganology/Romani Studies. Currently, since Prof. Rao took over the chairwomanship of the institute in 2012, ideas about the anthropology of institutions, anthropology of the future and visual anthropology and materiality are taking shape. In retrospect, one can say that theory building



in Leipzig transformed from historical speculation, which mainly was deductive (during much of the 20th century) to inductive approaches based on empirical research in more recent years. It is a particularity of the institute in Leipzig that during the decades of Nazism and socialist seclusion, field research was hardly possible for anthropologists teaching and learning there. Many studies produced at the institute were based on meticulous literature research. This changed only from the early 1990s onward. This is also when more reflexive approaches to anthropology finally found their way to Leipzig.

*Consequently, dealing with the discipline's history and, at the same time, thinking about appropriate locations and methods of anthropological research became a central aspect of the work at the institute. Some of these issues, particularly the question about the methods of anthropology and the task of the discipline in the 21st century lay at the heart of the special issue edited by Prof. Rao and the presentations and discussions at the symposium.*

## **On the symposium**

[Patrick Eisenlohr](#)'s paper begins with the observation that in the established social sciences and humanities in Europe and North-America, the main attention is paid to "Western" or "Northern" history of ideas, epistemologies and concepts. "The rest" of the world (which of course is the most part of it) is dealt with in the context of "area studies" at many universities. This is an expression of academic ethnocentrism. Anthropology, in this author's view, has the potential and the task to intervene in the debates of the established sciences and help them (force them?) to







rethink and ideally give up this anachronistic and intellectually hindering perspective on the world. In some areas, such as studies on “religion”, this has already been accomplished, at least to a degree. Eisenlohr then draws on debates in linguistic anthropology and develops a concept of translation that goes beyond the concept of reference and denotation (which underlies structuralist and post-structuralist theory). He proposes an understanding of translation in line with Peirce’s sign theory that includes indexical features such as, e.g., accent, and symbolic contexts of language or speech. Anthropologists could seek to translate social worlds not objectively, but adequately and therefore do anthropology that would be mindful to cultural differences without “assimilating” or “othering”, but by creating space for differences that, nevertheless, exist in close (power-laden) interactions. In this way, European/North-American science could be de-centered and other field knowledge could enter the discourse without having to be commensurable.

[Julia Eckert](#) proposes an anthropological approach that goes beyond an analysis of intentions. She starts with her observations about the proceedings of a marriage and subsequent divorce between a man and a woman in a slum in India. After having followed the case over some time and observed the actions of various actors involved, like the married couple, the mother of the wife, a local big man, an Islamic NGO, and the women’s wing of Shiv Sena, a Marathi regional and Hindu nationalist political organization, Eckert reflects on the relational dynamics involved. Eckert proposes to look at the case in the perspective of the antique tragedy which does not ask “Who did it?”, but: “How come things developed this way?” In this perspective, actors may have various, frequently even positive intentions, but in complicated ways actions and relations develop so that, in the end, an unforeseen result emerges. Anthropologists should try to understand how this happened, bearing in mind the plurality of individual options, the structural limitations and the interrelations between these factors.





Eckert argues for micro-sociological, processes-oriented, diachronic and synchronic research that can outline the complex and contingent interlacement between various actors in different social fields. In the end, this perspective offers the possibility of critique of complex social processes without ascribing, e.g., the failure of a project, to rather diffuse constructions of neoliberalism or governmentalities.

[Andrea Behrends](#) focuses on the possibilities for cooperation and co-production of data and theory in the field. She proposes to see anthropological field research as a “travelling model” that, in the context of research, is getting translated and thereby changes. Change concerns the model, the researcher and also the researched – everyone involved and his/her environment. In this way, the process of translation could provide for more equitable relations in the field and beyond, also with regard to analysis and theory making. Behrends illustrates this approach by reference to a project by Elizabeth Povinelli, Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at Columbia University. The project comprised Povinelli’s collaboration with a group of people in Australia, who have been displaced in a land dispute and began a journey, accompanied by the anthropologist, to renegotiate their relationship to their ancestral land and their current social identity. The process was documented by filming and in the course of the project, the perspectives and scenes were intensely negotiated between the anthropologist and the people.



*This kind of translation, of course, is tied to a high level of trust and intimacy between researcher and researched. Behrends also highlighted settings, such as the research among repressive and sometimes brutal state organs, in which*



*options for collaboration and translation are limited.*

The discussant [Katharina Schramm](#) stresses that useful perspectives in anthropology have emerged from a reflexive and post-colonial critique of the discipline's past. She emphasizes, in agreement with Eisenlohr, that structural power-differences still underpin the knowledge production. She also endorses Behrends focus on collaboration, but asks if this is enough to legitimate anthropological practice. One thorny problem in this regard is that power-differences certainly underpin every form of collaboration. Schramm endorses Eckert's proposal to investigate concrete, complex, plural and contingent practices of actors and their interlacement within various social and political fields. Finally, Schramm argues that it is time that anthropologists ultimately get out of the "savage slot" and focus on the "belly of the beast" (be it World Bank, transnational corporations, medical laboratories) and use their methodological and epistemological energies to provide critical studies of contemporary life under conditions of globalization.



*From my perspective as a lecturer at the institute, I can confirm that the occupation of the presenters at the symposium with methods and questions of valid critique are fully in line with the concerns of many of the students of anthropology in Leipzig today. There is an urge to learn about "our world" and "apply" anthropological knowledge to make a difference.*

This pro-activist and critical stance can be seen as a "hallmark" of anthropology students. But the presenters remind us that a valid critique is related to careful



rethinking of our discipline's (and other disciplines') histories and to allow for multiplicity and polyvalence instead of simple and clear judgments.