ICPA 2016: 18th (FAKE!) International Conference on Political Anthropology

Henni Alava
May, 2016

My heart skips a beat, more than once. Finally, a conference in the one place I wanted to return to since my happy childhood years – a place in Asia I, as an 'Africanist' have not had professional opportunities to go to, nor as a PhD student with small children, had the resources to fly to for a holiday. In searching "political anthropology conference 2016" via Google, I am in disbelief and gleeful

reading that the location of the ["18th International conference on Political Anthropology"](#) is none other than Hong Kong. The fragrant harbour. The world's absolutely coolest city. The girl that was born in Hong Kong, now hidden deep inside under years of research on and in Uganda, soars with excitement. I am going home.

I immediately post the news on Facebook, adding after that the "topics of interest for submissions" are a bit vague:

- Anthropology and the human environment
- History of Political Anthropology
- Researches about Political Anthropology
- Anthropology and fields of Political Anthropology
- Archaeology and sustainability anthropology
- Ideas about race, culture and peoplehood
- Evolution, ecology, and environment
- Indigenous and minoritized groups
- Food, health, and society
- Identity, heritage, and globalization
- Sex, gender, and sexuality

Vague, yes. But I shrug it off with "whatever, it's Hong Kong", and rush home to care of my children.

The following morning, colleagues commented on my Facebook post expressing interest to also submit papers. At breakfast, I told my older son that if this works out, I'd take him with me. Once at the office, I took to writing an abstract, revelling in how perfect a place for a conference, as well as timing. The conference would take place in December 2016, just around the time I would be defending, thus it would be in parallel to announcing the results of my PhD thesis on mainline Christianity and politics in Northern Uganda.

250 words and a catchy "political anthropologicy" title. Done. Perfect.

The submission form was as one might expect, with detailed instructions on abstract length and style. The requirements were somewhat unusual, though I thought maybe things were done a bit differently at Hong Kong versus Northern Europe universities. To submit my abstract, I was required to register with a system agreeing that I "understand and accept terms and conditions, plagiarism and ethical policy, copyright transfer statement and Privacy and Legal Policy."

Fired up about all the places I could visit after the official conference program had concluded, I didn't bother to click the boring-looking links. I clicked to agree, my mind wandering with thoughts about skipping some of the program if it was not that great since it would be boring for my son to sit day-in-day-out playing on my phone as I listen to presentations.

I paste the title of my presentation in the submission form, my abstract, and quickly conjure "about four" key words. But before I click submit, "Welcome to the World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology" flashes on my

screen. It is an automatically generated e-mail from the conference organisers, and a faint smell of rotting fish begins to linger.

Huh? With a tremor of trepidation, I go to the conference website and start clicking around. The final program will be announced shortly, but there's a list of names and universities belonging to the conference organising committee. The day before, I had wondered why I didn't recognise any of the names. I reckoned the big-shots skirted around such meagre responsibilities, and as I'm not a real political anthropologist, just an ethnographically-oriented multidisciplinarian meddling with the stuff of political anthropology, it was no surprise I didn't recognise the smaller shots.

Again, I resorted to Google and was relieved that the names were actually affiliated with universities. But why were they based in the psychology department? Or to be more precise why were they "powered by their passion for teaching life sciences", as one of the listed scholars indicates on his website? Why was their research based in technology studies, or health information management and why on earth would these people be organising an anthropology conference?

This isn't the conference of my dreams, on a dream topic, in a dream location. My heart sank.

It's a hoax.

How dumb could I have been?

The conference claimed to create a special issue for the best papers and it occurred to me to search for its title: "Advances in Political Anthropology". It wasn't even a journal. Surely, had I not been so enthralled with the prospect of traveling to my dream city, I would have realised this hoax sooner.

However, I am not the only one who has been fooled by these false conference averts. In 2013, [Martha Harbison](#) [posted on the emersion of a new genre of academic hoaxes; from faux journals to faux conferences](#). Harbison's piece was inspired by [an article in the New York Times](#) about a conference arranged for entomologists. Various entomologists had been approached to contribute as

keynote speakers or panel presenters, their egos smothered with the organisers describing their research as prominent or ground-breaking. Whose wouldn't be – it's what we all want to hear. But as it turned out, getting a spot as a speaker had nothing to do with entomological prestige: everyone willing to pay the exorbitant conference price was secured a spot in the limelight.

One of the first people to initially raise alarm about events like the above-mentioned entomology conference was a [Jeffrey Beall](), a research librarian who runs a list of fake open access journals, known as ["Beall's list"](). There is now an [on-going debate]() about whether only those conferences that gather fees but never actually take place deserve the title 'fake', or whether also scientific meetings that do take place but demand high prices from presenters, should also be considered 'fake'. Mr. Beall takes a strict stand, arguing that any kind of phoniness, for example using people's names on websites when they have not given their permission, makes the conferences a fake conferences, even if they are actually held.

One conference organiser in this 'real but somewhat phony' category (an Indian publishing house) responded to Beall's blog by [threatening to sue him for 1 billion dollars in damages](). However, it never went to court. Later, [the same publishing house took to charging scholars a fee of 419 USD if they pulled their manuscripts from the publishers' review process]().

It appears that scholars in medicine, technology, IT and life sciences have already experienced the phoney conference phenomenon some years ago – as far as I am aware, this is the first such conference dedicated to the sole purpose of advancing the field of political anthropology. Flattering? I'm not so sure. But our colleagues' experiences in the bug sciences shed some light on some of the peculiarities of

"case 18th ICPA Hong Kong". For instance, a plant pathologist interviewed for the NYT article quoted above explains, he had accepted to serve on the committee of a newly founded journal, only to later find his name and picture used on bogus conference websites on topics he wasn't even a specialist on. Maybe that's how all these random scholars' names found their way onto the Political Anthropology conference website.

I realised that I regularly received invitations to random conferences from somewhat 'shaky-sounding' organisers that look unprofessional, and I instantly

send them to my email trashbin. Considering that there are entire blogs dedicated to tracking bogus conferences, it seems likely ICPA 2016 will not be the last of its kind. Perhaps Allegra should start a phoney anthropology conference tracker of its own? I could volunteer to help run it: I have a bone to pick with their organisers.

> *A scientist quoted by the NYT said he felt he had been duped. I feel for him as* [*Martha Harbison's words*](#) *ring in my ears: "The key to not falling for a hustle is that age-old piece of advice that so many people choose to ignore: If something seems too good to be true, it probably isn't."*

Recovering from a sense of mild humiliation, it occurred to me that what is perhaps most interesting about these hoaxes is the simultaneous effort and lack of effort that is put into them. Surely, while these crooks are at it, the nice websites, the detailed instructions and admission guidelines and the generic conference descriptions could be followed up with at least a half-hearted attempt to actually convince the crowds of conference-thirsty academics?

In the ICPA Hong Kong case, for instance, it is striking that the Conference Committee is so utterly void of political anthropologists. After all, it wouldn't take the conference organisers (whether or not they actually do arrange an event resembling a conference or not) all that long to Google for them. Had they done so, I imagine I'd have submitted the paper, had it accepted, paid the 450 USD "early bird fee" (yes, it's super-expensive, but Hong Kong is.). As a result, I'd maybe have had the honour of turning up on the Conference Committee of an entomology conference.

And, most importantly for my homesick soul, I'd be booking my tickets to Hong Kong, right about now.

My heart is broken.

REDUX: Responsibility and Scholarship in the Current Political Moment – Graduate Conference | 25-26 September 2015

Alison Hanson
May, 2016

Anthropology today is in a moment of creative rupture, redefinition, and profound possibility.

Our collective intellectual energy is directed toward contemporary social and political issues with a new sense of urgency. From recent debates over the AAA vote to boycott Israeli higher education institutions to task forces examining racialized police violence to collaborations around issues of climate change and conservation, many of us feel anthropological knowledge is uniquely situated to address contemporary social and political issues. As da Col and Graeber (2011) write in *HAU*, anthropology has a long history of public engagement, responsive to both local conditions and real world politics of the time. Yet, what might it mean to be an engaged anthropologist? How does engagement expose the necessity of responsible collaboration, reflexivity, and ethnographic

representation as ethical and political practices?

In September 2015, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Colorado, Boulder hosted a graduate student conference on Engaged Anthropology to collectively and critically reflect on the ethical and political possibilities of engagement. Our impulse stemmed from a graduate seminar at Boulder on "Ethnographic Theory" focused on new directions in anthropological scholarship. Most conference participants were graduate students in the process of developing their dissertation projects having just returned from preliminary summer fieldwork. Many of us had questions about the responsibilities we as scholars have to our field site and communities, ourselves, and to the discipline. Around 50 graduate students, faculty, and community members attended to hear panels and participate in discussion over a two-day period. We invited Dr. Laurence Ralph from Harvard, whose ethnography *Renegade Dreams* (2014) inspired many of us in the Ethnographic Theory seminar, to give the keynote address and a workshop on responsibilities of fieldwork and writing. To conclude the conference, Dr. Carole McGranahan from the University of Colorado led a second work on engaged scholarship. Gathered in the anthropology library, surrounded by ethnographies written over the span of a century, the participants took seriously the questions of what it might mean to again make anthropological knowledge relevant beyond the discipline's borders and how to build engaged practices into our graduate student work.

Collaboration was a key practical theme that emerged during the conference.

A few panelists meditated on how to collaborate in meaningful and ethical ways within the context of ethnographic research, offering models of community based participatory research and solidarity. This animated discussion among participants about how collaboration offers potentials to gain different kinds of knowledge and reach new publics. Collaboration enables us to work interdisciplinarily and to translate anthropological knowledge in ways that are useful beyond the academy. It also implicates a responsibility to assist the community in their social and political struggles. However, there was also concern with how collaboration may be used to obscure power within the research process and the politics of representation. It became evident that we need to define how we use the term collaboration and what we mean when we label interlocutors our "collaborators." As an ethical and engaged practice, conversations in this conference pushed us to think of collaboration as a nexus that is not inherent in ethnography, but rather requires ongoing and active negotiations throughout the research, writing, and knowledge dissemination processes.

Woven within papers and throughout conversations were questions of how reflexivity and positionality supports engaged scholarship. This opened to vulnerable conversations about graduate students' experiences and challenges in the field, and provoked a critical examination of the commonplaceness of reflexivity in ethnographic work.

Often, reflexivity in anthropology comes through writing; however, this conference suggested the need to think beyond and incorporate reflexive practices throughout the research process.

Panelists prompted us to think about the nuances that situating our positionalities offers as a method, a lifeway, and a responsibility. Key reflexive responsibilities discussed in papers included the importance of self-reflexivity while in the field,

recognizing our positionalities as always multiple and in flux, personal responsibility for honest and critical engagement as native scholars, and responsible reactive positions with field sites enmeshed in conflict. Another panelist suggested reflexivity alone does not make research ethical, suggesting we need to take responsibility for the politics of our location in the US academy by entangling reflexivity with other ethical and political practices. Speaking to the mutuality that develops within dedicated research, graduate students and faculty alike reflected upon what representations and positions are interpersonally negotiated between researcher and research subjects.

One panelist discussed how to move beyond tamed understandings of reflexivity into nuanced applications of self-reflexivity as a responsibility to both the research and her subjects. Exploring how within engagement to one's fieldside and oneself, reflexivity implicates the responsibility to practice self-care in the field. This conversation is surprisingly absent within anthropology (although see Kimberly Theidon's SSRC paper on self-care), and is important to address vulnerabilities of the research project.

As ethnographers, our craft is to write and tell stories.

Writing as praxis opens possibilities for engagement both within and beyond the academy. As was discussed in Dr. McGranahan's workshop, it is important to identify who are our publics – which are always necessarily multiple and heterogeneous – and the most appropriate ways to reach them. It is also useful to think about the forms of writing – are our political commitments best expressed through theoretical discourse or narrative, in journal articles, blogs, or policy briefs? One participant elaborated on Brecht's model of crude thinking to suggest writing crudely as political responsibility, while another suggested the need to write critically and affectively. Another panelist suggested the visual as a way to think outside writing, offering film as a different way of seeing and engagement.

Yet as anthropologists have discussed since *Writing Culture* (1986), we have to always contend with the politics of representation in ethnography. This of course

implicates collaboration and reflexivity as discussed above, but also means historically contextualizing and destabilizing categories. There was vibrant discussion during Dr. Ralph's workshop about the ethics of anonymity, particularly in a moment where the imagined distance between the subjects and readers of ethnography has all but vanished. As well, a number of participants were concerned with how to research and represent topics that are overdetermined and sensationalized by the media. Dr. Ralph suggested that with such subjects we can either tell sensational stories, which often leads to problematic representations, or write against the dominant narrative by telling stories of the everyday and the mundane. Ethnography has been recently engulfed in critique, with some outside the discipline calling it unethical in its method. Speaking back to this debate, the participants explored ethnography's power to speak with multiple audiences and effect social change through careful attention to the ethics and politics of representation.

In a concluding workshop led by Carole McGranahan, she asked, "what does engagement mean to you?" There was no common answer all participants shared, nor did we work toward constructing one. Instead, the heterogeneous nature of answers from scholars whose field sites range from digital-scapes of the Tibetan diaspora community to right here in Denver, Colorado, allowed for breathing room as we continue to ask what engagement means. As nascent scholars, engagement does not mean one action or one method. It includes a variety of proactive and reactive actions to fulfill responsibilities we bear witness to in moments of inequality across landscapes of environment, gender, class, race, and access.

As the conference wrapped to a close, the atmosphere of the room was vibrant and we felt a new energy for growing as anthropologists. It has inspired us to carry these productive conversations forward in our respective research projects and collectively through graduate student colloquia. The initial call for this conference was to engage as emergent scholars in a discipline contending anew with intimate entanglements of engagement, ethics, politics, and research. For those of us organizing this conference, actively separating one from the other is

unfathomable. The conference opened spaces of dialogue for us to question what engagement means in a variety of political climates. In so doing, this helps us to redefine and reimagine what engagement looks like at different scales, and where our commitments lie to our interlocutors, to our field site, to our discipline, and to broader publics. The Engaged Anthropology Conference asked us to question how do we navigate our entangled positions? How do we maintain a responsibility of representation from field site, to field note, to public prose? And what does engaged anthropology mean to us? At our conference and then two months later at the AAA conference, we witnessed thirst for further discussion of these questions.

> *Anthropological scholarship must be responsive to real-world politics. While the possibilities for how we respond shift over time, so too do our responsibilities. Anthropologists have always been engaged, and now is a moment to reimagine what that means.*

This post was first published on 24 December 2015.

"Snapshots of Change" – How Focusing on Change Affects

Perspectives on Research Material

Thiruni Kelegama
May, 2016

Ever since the multiplication of protest movements that have gained prominence since 2011, the issue of change and its assessment has become a recurring topic in scientific research. The link between protest and change has been influenced immensely by researchers' own interests and political engagement in claims and movements. By placing the notions of "change" and "social transformation" at the centre of this ambitious workshop, the aim of "Snapshots of Change" was to critically reflect and discuss how we methodologically and theoretically deal with the notion of "change" in qualitative research. Studying change is linked to reflections on how to name the transformations we are observing or are

interested in. More than anything, the words used to label change matter as they are value-laden, often referring to the direction towards which the named process is expected to move.

> Notions such as development, transition, evolution, progress, rupture and revolution have often a strong normative dimension as they convey teleological presuppositions imbedded in grand narratives linked to liberalism, democratisation, developmentalism or socialism for example.

By questioning and transgressing such notions, the workshop "Snapshots of Change," organized in October 2015 at the [University Research Priority Program Asia and Europe](#) at University of Zurich, succeeded in highlighting areas for future research. The workshop was convened by [Yasmine Berriane](#), [Aymon Kreil](#), [Dorothea Lüddeckens](#), [Melek Saral](#) and [Thiruni Kelegama](#), and brought together 12 presenters from all over Europe, 6 discussants and 10 poster presenters, all engaged in 2 days of intensive discussion about change from various perspectives. The presented reflections on change were based on a broad range of qualitative data: besides interviews, ethnographic fieldwork and biographies, workshop participants also presented insights in tracing change through objects like souvenirs, photographs, diaries, written documents, and digital sources.

In this conference report, rather than repeating the content of the workshop (which is accessible in the URPP bulletin [1]), we start from the perspective of our own research topics on state formation in northeastern Sri Lanka (Thiruni Kelegama) and on urban transformation in China ([Madlen Kobi](#)). By referring to some key concepts raised in the workshop, it is our aim to emphasize the impact that the workshop had on our perspectives and future dealings with change in our own research.

Enacting the state in northeastern Sri Lanka (Thiruni Kelegama)

Working on a dissertation that is an ethnographic study of development, resettlement and militarisation in northeastern Sri Lanka involves a significant interest in temporality, or that of 'change'. My thesis looks at the processes of state formation and demonstrates how the state gets reproduced in the margins. By looking at state formation undertaken in postwar Sri Lanka, I thereby engage with the changing relationship between state, territory and nation. My field site of Weli Oya is located in northeastern Sri Lanka, a space that is often demarcated as a frontier in the country's three-decade-old protracted war between the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government security forces. Weli Oya is a key site for the oldest state led development programme in Sri Lanka, which involved developing the existing jungle into inhabitable land with irrigated rice fields and subsequently establishing settlement schemes. Such programmes also contributed to the long history of spearheading ethnic grievances in the country. In my research, I engage with questions relating to what kind of development and what kind of change — visible and invisible transformations — take place.

*This was reflected in one of the key questions of the workshop: How does one **not** take for granted the simple fact that change is an imminent part of all social processes we study?*

By challenging the acknowledged functionalist and structuralist assumptions of a rather static society, the workshop posited a socio-anthropological point of view, thereby replacing the former with a more dynamic and multivocal perspectives on society and social change. A presentation by Irene Bono (University of Torino) approached the nation in Morocco from the perspective of one individual in order to explain larger social processes, demonstrating how the linearity of change can be reproduced. By reconstructing life situations through the analysis of objects of one informant through "biographical fieldwork", she used these "traces" not to

underline the hegemonic timelines, but to approach the fragmented parts of individual histories that could be deemed discreet. Bono's work provided a new lens with which to look at aspects of my own research: how to understand a present view of past events, with the aid of ideas, traces, and experiences of one individual.

While this workshop helped explore alternatives to a linear timeline, or a teleological history or phenomena, I also learnt of the different ways in which change can be narrated. It is here that wording of informants, media, and literature came into prominence in the workshop, as public discourses serve to remind us that change is considered part of everyday social life, and hence is part of most individual and social narratives. In Rivka Eisner's (University of Zurich) example of social change in postwar Vietnam she emphasizes that narratives refer to different paces of change. Change could be either fast or slow.

> *Narratives as performances dealing with the past are not accounts of credible memories and exact facts, but are rather perceptions of change imbued with psychological, physical and emotional aspects.*

This approach helped me return to my ongoing research with a new perspective: how do I take into consideration the life stories and narratives that form part of a history of Sri Lanka that I am telling? This question was followed by a reflection on the methods we, as researchers, use for assessing change. Youssef El Chazli (University of Lausanne) demonstrated how digital traces can help us amalgamate additional views on trajectories and past events. His paper focused especially on Facebook data in order to approach the motives of becoming an activist, concluding with how "explicit traces" on Facebook produce "in vivo" complementary data, which can be triangulated with conventional ethnographic methods. El Chazli's approach helped affirm that sometimes one needs to move beyond narrative data when it comes to an exact account of events. Further, I was inspired to not only take in the direct accounts of history that were transmitted to me, but to highlight the importance of digital voices, re-echoing a modern take on

postcolonial approaches and working with archival data to unearth the voice of the subaltern.

Urban transformation in northwest China (Madlen Kobi)

If social change is fluid, flexible and embedded in everyday experiences, in what ways is it possible to accurately represent social change in our written academic publications? This was the main question that the workshop triggered for my own data analysis. As my research deals with the obvious and fast transformation of urban areas in oases cities in Southern Xinjiang (China) literally "in the making," the relationship between material and social changes is the main focus of my inquiries. Many discourses explaining urban transformation deal with the built environment: taller housing is often connected to more anonymity, destruction of old town housing can be interpreted as a symbol for the loss of culture, and recently introduced urban elements like new residential compounds or squares are associated with the unification of urban spaces all over China. From the workshop contributions, Daniele Cantini (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg) made me think about the causalities of the ethnographically documented changes. Through a shifting of his own data, Cantini pointed out that the researcher is creating chains of events in order to explain change and to name causes and effects of social events.

> *But what if change is actually inherent to any social process as is the predominant credo of social anthropologists after structural-functionalism?*

There is no reason for a particular emphasis on "change," but transformation is happening in manifold and diverse ways as an inherent aspect of everyday social activities. It makes therefore no sense to explicitly focus on change, if change is not the exception, but a regularly used discursive tool helping actors to explain

social realities.

Change is expected to happen on a linear scale from cause to effect. This aspect was frequently discussed throughout the workshop as I reflected on the temporality of change. Can we only explain social change when narrating past events and bringing together the stories of research participants? And is there a chance to anticipate social change? When we look at the unexpected protest movements in the MENA region, social change was not predictable. However, retrospectively, researchers find traces that pointed to this change long before the first protesters publicly articulated themselves. In another example, Sophie Feyder (University of Leiden) showed how she constructed a chain of historical events through the photograph collection of Ronald Nglima (Johannesburg) from the 1950s. Feyder exemplified that photos can provide snapshots into the historical period when they were taken, but rather than showing actual change, they are useful to announce change in a kind of retrospective reconstruction of the snapshots. Although through memories, objects and narratives, research participants and researchers seem to be able to reconstruct moments, we could not have predicted them. I observed a similar phenomenon in the handling of my own research data: By relying on the discourses of my research participants that fundamental changes are happening, I collected my data in light of their articulated perception of social change. I, myself, tried to explain urban transformation as something emerging along a linear timeline. Thanks to the inputs from the workshop, I now question the often simplified assumption that change exists in the context of urbanization. I realized that linear change is something that we, as researchers, create, but it does not necessarily have to stand in the centre for explaining everyday lives.

Besides general thinking about the causal embedding of change, the workshop provided awareness of written text – academic or non-academic – as always a "snapshot of change"; as in writing, we necessarily follow a linear advancement of description and analysis. My longterm ethnographic fieldwork in China provides an embodied method of making change perceptibly accessible through revisits of the same places as well as through first hand information of how respondents

perceive change. While in the dusty streets of the oasis city Aqsu in Southern Xinjiang, in talking to real estate managers to immigrated taxi drivers, change is verbalized in discourses and visualized in the transforming cityscape. In my view, the difficulty comes with guaranteeing that this instantaneous experience gained through embodied fieldwork and the accompanying interview data will be properly represented in the written and read texts.

If change stands at the centre of our analysis, then we have to be careful of the mentioned chain of events that we create since data is easily instrumentalized for emphasizing exactly the transformation aspect. What would happen if we would analyze our data without putting "change" at the centre of it?

The constructive nature of social change

"Social Change" has become a buzzword in the social sciences, however, rarely debated and approached from such an in-depth perspective as this workshop. While analyzing their own research material through the lens of "change," workshop presenters highlighted the diverse methodological and theoretical implications that such a focus brings. Inspired by these insights, participants experienced how thinking profoundly about change can also affect our own research projects in the above outlined diverse contexts of state formation in Sri Lanka or urbanization in China. Theoretically, there is still potential to overcome the commonly practiced linear approach to narrating change and to revitalize the debate of whether change really exists and when it does, how to separate it from other social processes. Methodologically, the challenges lie in the difficulty to assess narratives and traces in order to reconstruct change and in the representation of everyday social changes in static written texts. In the end, change seems to be something that can only emerge from looking back. But an analysis of narratives rather shows us something about the present and the people's perspectives (and expectations) on past events from their standpoint today rather than about changes actually happening. Although rarely thinking

explicitly about change, placing it as the focus of analysis was a rewarding exercise. Thus, from a socio-anthropological perspective we would conclude that change exists, however, as a construction created by the researcher's assemblage of actions, events, narratives and structures at different scales.

[1] Asia & Europe Bulletin. 2016. University of Zurich: University Research Priority Program (URPP) Asia and Europe. (forthcoming)

Featured image by *Jakob Montrasio* (*flickr,* *CC BY 2.0*)

Looking for #Events? Follow us this way!

Allegra
May, 2016

You know us well! We, at Allegra, are always on the look out for exciting anthropological events from around the world. Which is why we have cooked you up a very special menu this week, one that is all about events.

But first things first: if you'd like an upcoming event of yours to be featured on Allegra, do get in touch with Andrea at andreak@allegralaboratory.net or Aude at audef@allegralaboratory.net. We'd be delighted to add it to our next monthly events list as well as our calendar. You just organized an event? We hope all went well! If you feel like writing a short report, do let us know as well!

Our first post this week is one such report. Thiruni Kelegama and Madlen Kobi, from the University of Zurich, tell us all about their thought-provoking workshop about change and social transformation, topics at the core of contemporary research in HSS. Drawing from a variety of perspectives based on rich and

diverse data, they reflect upon the ways in which these notions are dealt with in scientific qualitative research, both methodologically and theoretically. They challenge us to rethink the often expected linear pattern of the processes of change while emphasizing the fact that any and all accounts of social change we have access to remain "snapshots of change".

Great change is under way within the world of anthropology itself as increasing numbers of scholars are aiming for a more socially and politically engaged practice outside the realm of academia.

Reporting from the "Responsibility and scholarship in the current political moment" graduate conference, [Alison Hanson](#) and [Sara Stiehl](#), from the University of Colorado Boulder, discuss the ethical and political stakes of such public and engaged endeavours while stressing the need for collaboration with non-academic professionals.

Following on from this, [Henni Alava](#), from the University of Helsinki, will take us down the rabbit hole into the dark world of academic hoaxes, faux journals and fake conferences. An enlightening and cautionary tale about the tricks and traps of pseudo-academia.

And last but not least, we'll conclude this Allegra week with yet another one of our monthly events' post! No thematic focus this time but opportunities to further explore the topics of this week's posts with an eclectic array of conferences, call for publication and workshop.

[Featured image](#) by [David Amsler](#) (flickr, [CC BY 2.0](#))

Rethinking Political Agency in the Middle East | Workshop Abstracts

Allegra
May, 2016

Over the next two days, Allegra will be busy reporting on the international workshop *Rethinking political agency in the Middle East: Engaging political anthropology* which is taking place in Fiesole at the [European University Institute](). The workshop intends to bring ethnographic research in the Middle East into conversation with anthropological debate on political agency. To know more about the ideas that are feeding this discussion, have a look at our previous post [here](). And to give you a foretaste of the conversation about to unfold, below

is the list of abstracts. For those interested in the topic, you can get some soundbites of the workshop on Allegra's Twitter account by following the hastag #PolAgency today and tomorrow!

Alessandro Monsutti

Beyond the Middle East: The Moral and Immoral Economy of Migration among Afghans in Europe

The current mass influx in Europe of people fleeing violence and poverty is framed in public discourses in terms of 'crisis.' This narrative tends to obscure both long and recent social, political and economic dynamics that have led to such a situation. Forced displacements of populations – be they Palestinians, Afghans, Iraqis, or Syrians – that marked the broader Middle East have to be situated in the *longue durée* of colonisation, decolonisation and the Cold War. Afghans have consistently constituted during the last decades one of the single largest groups of asylum seekers in European countries. They are embedded in a subtle mix of competition and moral economy. On the one hand, trying to find protection in Europe is conceived as a school of life where only the fittest will succeed. On the other hand, mobility and dispersion are seen as a means to spread risk; it represents a kind of social, economic and political insurance. Mobile people are invested in the double mission to prove their individual value and prepare a better future for their community. Twenty-five years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new hierarchies have emerged in a global landscape of exclusion. Can transborder mobility be conceived as a political act, a subversion of the state order of things, a way of contesting the growing level of inequality that characterize today's world?

Antonio De Lauri

Systems of dependence, atomization and the absence of political action among Pakistani brick kiln workers

Moving beyond the isolated-victim paradigm typical of most modern slavery discourses, this paper takes into account the "voice" of both the bonded workers and the kiln owners in order to understand the social nature of debt bondage. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the Pakistani Punjab, this paper explores how, under conditions of extreme dependence, workers ends up to (paradoxically) think at their future in individualistic terms. Brick kiln workers generally recognise a significant absence of freedom over their whole life, due to cycles of debt. Such a perception of "absence" is, however, very rarely translated into participation in concrete action for labour rights or into the production of any political commitment to collective social emancipation. Indeed, in the Pakistani Punjab there seems to be a profoundly rooted overlap between the absence of freedom and the absence of social and political action (unless it is promoted by external actors such as NGOs or, to a lesser extent, labour unions) aimed at subverting the dynamics of bondage. In this paper, rather than addressing such an important topic in terms of (the lack of) social class consciousness – something that may be useful but is somehow alien in the Punjabi brick kiln context – I focus on the relationship between "free choice", dependence and atomization. I will show how dependence may be seen as a social system of survival in conditions of poverty and, simultaneously, as a social mechanism that enables human exploitation.

Deniz Gökalp

International State-Building in Iraqi Kurdistan: Contention, Protest and

Government Retaliation

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of state failure and political contention amidst international attempts to introduce neoliberal reforms to liberate and democratize a region following a military intervention. It is based on the findings of a fieldwork and sociological analysis focused on the international parallel state-building in Iraqi Kurdistan. As the two dominant Kurdish political parties in northern Iraq have been forced into an uneasy collaboration to convince the international community of the possibility of an independent democratic Kurdistan with safe and open markets, the unequal distribution of economic resources, competition for rent, nepotism and privileges granted to the foreign businesses have introduced new dynamics of oppression and resentment into the Iraqi Kurdish society. Concomitantly, in the relatively peaceful environment of Iraqi Kurdistan, the optimism associated with the American occupation and the increasing popularity of the western discourses about human rights and democracy have opened an imaginary political space for the freedom of expression. Political and social issues such as the two-party domination, tribal conflicts, corruption, and political and gender-based violence that plagued the region since the 1990s started to be discussed in the increasingly diverse media outlets whilst street protests have become a part of the routine politics practiced by ordinary people including industrial workers, university students and women. Drawing on the insights extracted from the literature dealing with the international state-building experiences through military intervention and the recent revolutions and political turmoil in the Middle East, this paper provides a provisional examination of the wide-spread political contention and the government retaliation against it in Iraqi Kurdistan.

[Julie Billaud](#)

Marriage "shariah style": decolonizing public life and ordinary ethics in the UK

In England, the visible presence of Islam in public has triggered popular anxieties around identity and the place of religion in the political and social life of the country. The British government's current policies toward refugees and Muslims reflect the broader upsurge of nationalism and islamophobia noticeable across Europe. In this presentation, I use ethnographic data collected during 12 months of fieldwork in London to document the various ways in which 2nd and 3rd generation "post-migrant" Muslims contribute to the emergence of a new public culture which is neither anchored in Western liberal tradition nor in reading of Islam imported from 'the Middle East' or elsewhere. I use the examples of a Muslim speed-dating event and other Muslim matrimonial services to unpack some of the social dynamics through which moral categories dictated by the shariah are transformed into cultural and identity labels visible in public space. In counterpoint to recent studies on Islamic morality that focus on the "ethical formation" of the subject through the pursuit of virtuous dispositions (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Agrama 2010), I envision young British Muslims' quest for the "good ethical life" as a decolonizing project which involves finding a balance between values that are not all necessarily dictated by faith. These embodied practices reveal the fragmented and ambivalent nature of modern subjectivities based on the coexistence of contrasted motivations, objectives, identities and de-territorialized moral imaginaries. It is this "moral flexibility" grounded in "ordinary ethics" which, I argue, best characterizes Islamic modernity. As Ghassan Hage suggests in a recent article published in *American Ethnologist* (2016), and in light of the practices that I describe in this paper, the rise of racist right-wing politics in Europe could be interpreted as the last reaction of a "dying domesticating colonialism".

Latif Taf

Turkish-Kurdish Conflict, Nationalism and the Role of Diasporas

Based on the findings of multi-sited qualitative research with and amongst Kurdish communities in Turkey, Germany and the UK, the chapter challenges the conventional concept of diaspora by highlighting experiences of diaspora conditions, whether living in the so-called homeland (Turkey) as internally displaced or international migrants in Europe. Set against a long history of repression and various forms of statelessness, the Kurdish population's insecure relations with existing nation states (whether Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran or 'host societies') means that depending on where they live, Kurds have become nationalists as they focus their attention on the establishment of a safe and livable homeland. In recent decades, large numbers of Kurds have migrated from rural peasant conditions to become middle-class urban dwellers, and these migrants are especially influential as late-coming, but internationalising nationalists. While some Kurds favour plural democratic approaches, others think that Kurds need to become stronger nationalists if they are to escape from the hegemonies of existing nation-states. From tribal, local nationalism to the collective, constructive and plural nationalism has taken place with the help of the PKK movement in Turkey and Syria.

Luigi Achilli

Arab Spring in Jordan: a soft breeze or a prelude to the perfect storm?

In 2011, the Arab Spring has stormed over Jordan leaving the country apparently unharmed. Many political commentators and scholars of the Middle East have sought to solve this puzzle. But what if a political change has actually occurred?

The lack of a sustained protest does not mean that nothing happened. Lured by the spectacular clarity of political demonstrations and acts of violence that have dramatically upset other Middle East states, scholars and political analysts have, with few exemptions, missed the reverberation of the Arab Spring in Jordan. In particular, the Arab uprisings have given rise to al-Hirak— an array of locally based popular youth groups encompassing mainly, but not only, activists from tribal areas of Jordan. Unlike established legal opposition, many Hirak protesters have fiercely criticized the Hashemites, demanded the monarch's abdication, and called for the regime's end.

Even though al-Hirak did not generate the massive levels of mobilization seen elsewhere and vanished into a number of isolated and spontaneous protests, the political transformations it prompted may have introduced minute displacements in the way people imagine the state. This imagination may eventually pave the way for radical transformations in the near future. With my presentation, I will investigate the impact of Arab Spring in Jordan, its demise, and the new forms of political agency that it has elicited.

[Martyn Egan](#) **(EUI RSCAS)**

Bourdieu in Beirut: Wasta and Political Agency

The presentation will draw upon my research into the phenomenon of wasta (the use of connections to obtain scarce goods or services) within the Lebanese context, and will attempt to establish a specifically Bourdieusian approach to

political agency within the Middle East. I will attempt to demonstrate how the ways in which agents use wasta to achieve concrete goals in their social reproduction strategies represents a form of political agency specifically adjusted to structural aspects of the Lebanese state. Moreover, variance in mastery over the use of wasta can be related to Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and to the specific demands placed upon agents, which differ according to their location in Lebanon's social space. Analysis of wasta as a form of political agency thus provides an opportunity to transpose Bourdieu's own approach to overcoming the structure/agency dilemma to a contemporary Middle Eastern setting, providing a framework for understanding certain kinds of agency without falling back on culturalist explanations, and yet still rooted in an understanding of the historical trajectory of the state within the region.

Mjriam Abu Samra

Assessing Palestinian Youth Political Agency: Historical Achievements and the New Challenges of the Arab Spring

This paper focuses on Palestinian transnational student movements in different periods of the Palestinian struggle. It aims to analyse how Palestinian transnational student activism has contributed to the development of the political vision and discourse of the struggle in different times of Palestinian history, investigating the changes in the student movements' roles, contributions and strategies. This historical excursus serves to address the current weakness of the Palestinian transnational youth mobilisation and examine some of the recent efforts to revitalize youth political engagement in *shatat*. Taking the Palestinian Youth Movement as a case-study, this paper aims at highlighting the impact of the Arab revolutions on contemporary Palestinian youth's articulation of political

discourses and goals.

While the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) was the first Palestinian popular organisation established in the post-Nakba period, with solid grassroots bases, its role changed in the 1980s. Indeed, the PLO centralized structure and the gradual shift of its political vision formalised by the Oslo accord, negatively impacted on student contribution to the struggle and youth lost the role of "vanguard".

However, the recent Arab revolutions have impacted on the strategies of contemporary Palestinian youth, which have articulated their discourses, vision and demands more "radically". The most significant example of this re-founded political agency is the experience of the Palestinian Youth Movement.

Paul Anderson

Order and Disorder: The Politics of Everyday Life among Traders in Pre-Conflict Aleppo

This paper analyses the everyday practice of traders in Aleppo in 2008-09 as a form of civil and political life and agency under conditions of authoritarian rule. Many residents of Aleppo experienced authoritarian rule in this period as a "lack of order", which they were conscious of themselves as embodying and reproducing in their own "chaotic" (*fawdawi*) navigations of urban, bureaucratic and political space. Conditions of disorder and informality were frequently understood to be one way in which the governing regime sought to reduce urban residents to non-citizens, and subjects of authoritarian power (Anderson forthcoming). This is in contrast to analyses of everyday life in the Middle East, such as Asef Bayat's, which posit informality as a mode of resisting or

encroaching upon the state. Against this background, this paper analyses everyday practices which sought to perform spatio-moral "order" (*al-nizam*) – in shops and in relationships with customers and trading partners – as enacting a kind of civil agency. I document urban merchants' conscious attempts to embody "order" and "civility" and theorise them as "performative and moral dimensions of citizenship" (Holston and Appadurai 1998), noting that they enact membership in an alternative moral and political community to one regulated by a state-centred bureaucratic order. While few urban merchants sought to enlarge the space for such forms of citizenship by taking part in uprisings against the Syrian regime in 2011, nevertheless, enactments of spatio-moral order may be relevant to understanding the forms of civil life and agency that emerge in Syria cities after the conflict.

Featured image (cropped) by *AK Rockefeller* (flickr, *CC BY-SA 2.0*)

#Review: The Politics of Humanitarianism: Power, Ideology and Aid

Nichola Khan
May, 2016

Humanitarianism is a chimera, arguably an infection, but certainly an ethos and organising principle of our age that intersects with transformative moral-political modes of inquiry and praxis. [This edited volume](#) enlists an array of controversies that the humanitarian megalith entails, via contributions from anthropology, law, international relations, development and migration studies. This diverse coalition provokes shifts away from recursive academic scripts of 'saving lives' and 'helping those in need' toward a different, more complicated kind of political and ideological commentary that sees contributors critically unpack the constitutive relation of humanitarianism in diverse contexts, and create new understandings that are tentatively shared.

Its success lies in the balance achieved between the imputed certainty in humanitarian discourse and intervention, and the uncertainty produced by

richly textured critique and combinations of interpretation across a range of not always complementary perspectives.

De Lauri introduces ways humanitarian-'ism' embodies 'beliefs, practices, categories, discourses and procedures' (p.1), alongside institutional forms of governance, power and liability invoked through varied applications in business, bureaucratic and military responses, and historical bifurcations of the world into those who aid and intervene and those who receive their loaded gifts.

Four dimensions keep humanitarianism in good health. First the sympathetic impulse, and its bolstering by high-profile ambassadors and agencies, reinforce the myth that the best possible way of life is the European or American one, and promote over-simplistic solutions to 'underdevelopment' that anaesthetise people against empathy and responsibility (p.4). Second 'humanitarianism functions as an employment outlet for a huge number of graduates and professionals from donor countries' (p. 5). The large-scale mobilisation of 'experts' from donor countries to the Global South is closely tied to the wild-market model of the global economy, and it uncritically juxtaposes the 'immobility' of populations of the Global South with unchecked 'narratives of multitudes of people invading the Global North' (p. 5). Third the political-economy of humanitarianism as a multi-billion dollar business links to the privatised military industry in re-creating the political 'need for intervention' (p. 8). Fourth are hierarchies of humanity and moral certitude generated by a 'humanitarian culturalism that permeates both military and civil interventions'. (p. 8) Last, De Lauri emphasises that critique can be an important 'means of imagining the world in other ways. (p.12)
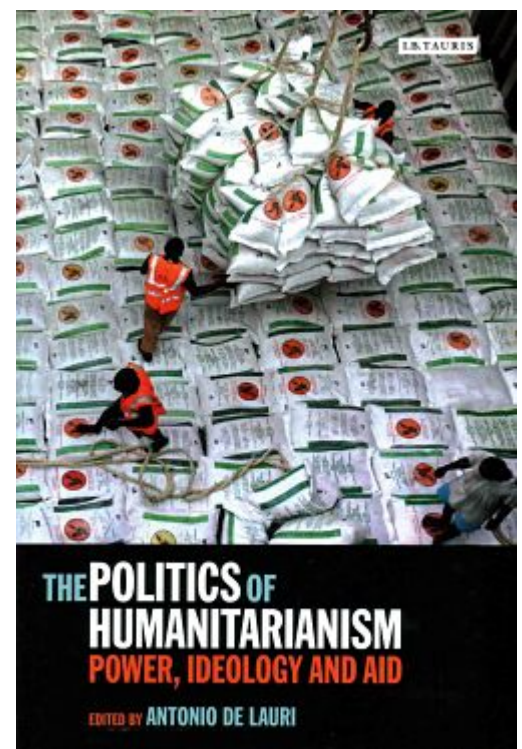
Inspired by a critical gaze that balances the poles of hyper-subjectivism and systemic explanation, the book tracks across these dimensions as it also keeps in plain view humanitarianism's self-reproducing, cynical and utopian impulse.

Certainly 'helping ideologies' have long saturated stubborn asymmetries and concerns with humanitarianism's deserving subject: from an orientalist view of regions and nations existing in permanent underdevelopment, to modernist queries about their progressive incorporation into the technological, secularising, and liberalising mission, and regional developments of war, states of emergency, and refugee crises as either forms of circular repetition or descent into chaos. More positively, as a lens through which to comprehend the contemporary world era, humanitarianism augurs possibilities for a power vacuum, with risks and potentials, and for the suspension of hegemonic orders of politics, class and gender. As a response to crisis, this book invites us to approach humanitarianism as a means to turn unpredictability, interruption, and violent loss into opportunities for reflection and new world-making by raising critical questions about ways that power, diverse actors' intentions, and bald instrumental profiteering can become re-imagined, reframed, and transformed.

The book's eight chapters reveal some diverse adaptations and critical perspectives on the ideology and politics of humanitarianism.

These encompass the genealogy of intervention, humanitarianism's workings as a moral pretext, a theatre for specialists, a dark tool of women's rights, of violence and 'infantilisation' in provincial politics, in local and international allocations of international aid, and the management of refugees.

To illustrate, Pandolfi and Rousseau examine how the hyper-mediated context of humanitarianism's response to a global *pietas* produce violent, forced forms of humanitarian intervention across borders, and unanticipated consequences. High performance principles akin to business practices align humanitarianism closely to militarisation in processes that leave 'war and peace, torture and rescue,

destruction and development' indistinguishable (p. 23). Next, Nader and Savinar argue that 'for-profit' ideologies lead Western powers to use humanitarianism as a deadly pretext in partnership with high finance, state governance and geo-politics. Building on arguments about philanthropic imperialism, notably by Alex de Waal, they complicate understandings of humanitarianism's ideological underpinnings through examples from Libya, Palestine, Uganda and the 2010 Haitian earthquake – where political and relief interventions incredibly caused more devastation than the disaster itself.

De Lauri and Billaud's chapter interrogates the utopian promises of a rhetorical return to normality in Afghanistan. The absolute reversals this shift entails (from war to peace, women's oppression to freedom etc.) assume the carnivalesque character of political theatre, wherein humanitarianism in action works generatively and deceptively to engender confinement and alienation, and to reveal 'the irreducible dead ends of the reconstruction project' (p. 62). Women's rights discourses, enshrined in international charters and treaties, also concern Grande's chapter.

Rather than serve social and communitarian needs, Grande shows how they become tools for power and greed – again constituting a kind of reversal – that produces 'the perfect conditions for a market economy', and serves to atomise targeted societies in the Global South (p. 77).

Protection is a key humanitarian discourse, enshrined in the doctrine of the UN Responsibility to Protect. In Quaretta's chapter, Christian evangelisation and colonisation play out in discourses of 'protection' in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where 'saving children' and 'children's rights' constitute infantilising and political forms of intervention that provide people with aid and support in a collapsing state.

Drawing new meaning for long-term 'emergency' programming amid concerns about Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Lewis reveals how donor aid shifted towards overtly militaristic agendas in Yemen, including counter-terrorism

programming, secret bombings and military campaigns designed to undermine Islamic values and securitise international interventions (p. 139). Finally, Hoffmann analyses the humanitarian management of refugees in the post-colonial context of Syria. Here Iraqi migrants become subsumed within discourses of 'protection' serving the normal basis for state sovereignty and a form of government reliant on the systematic exclusion of non-citizens, and the constant production of refugees.

Thereby this volume complements growing studies on variations of the 'international community', 'international humanitarian project', 'humanitarian establishment', 'humanitarian industry', 'strategic frameworks' and 'humanitarian architecture'. What it adds to recent works, for example by Allan, Allen, Redfield, Donini, and Schull, who also plough the non-humanitarian uses of human rights and humanitarian advocacy and action, is in the way as a collective endeavor it offers a much needed way to scale out from state and nation, to the international and global and back, and thereby to question what is and is not intelligible about the impacts, outcomes and cultures of the humanitarian project (Apthorpe 2014: 357) [1].

> *"That is, while the individual chapters each provide fresh insights, the collective ethics of rewriting, rethinking or cajoling the humanitarianism landscape into new critical forms is more dynamic and replete with contradictions, aporias and fundamental questions about the very basis of humanitarianism."*

In sum, this book comprises a singular and important contribution for those wanting to understand how humanitarian interventionism works in ways the violent shattering of some worlds produces dreams and strategies for others.

1. Apthorpe, Raymond (2014) Review Article. Anthropology and humanitarianisms across borders: a growing field of study. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 20, 357-361.

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De Lauri, Antonio. 2015. *The Politics of Humanitarianism: Power, Ideology and Aid*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris. 240 pp. Hb: £56. ISBN: 9781780768304.

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Featured image (cropped) by *Stephen H. Padre/Bread for the World* (flickr, *CC BY-NC-ND 2.0*)

Rethinking political agency in the Middle East #project

Allegra
May, 2016

This week Allegra focuses on an exciting new feature incorporated into our beloved website a while back: namely Projects! What this feature entails are collaborations – events, even research ventures – in which our website is centrally involved in. We are very pleased to introduce the second such project, namely the workshop entitled *Rethinking political agency in the Middle East: Engaging political anthropology* which will take place in Fiesole at the European University Institute this week, on 19-20 May 2016.

This workshop will be realised with the conference grant that two of our Allies – Luigi Achilli and Antonio De Lauri – were recently awarded by the Wenner Gren Foundation. Below is a closer description of the event, with ample coverage to come.

The workshop intends to bring ethnographic research in the Middle East into

conversation with anthropological debate on political agency. The last decade has witnessed renewed concern with "agency" in anthropological debates and publications. This reflects a critical engagement with a Foucauldian work on "subjectification", which has sought to problematize the idea of agency as the capacity of a free agent to translate his/her values into actions (Candea 2011; Keane 2003; Laidlaw 2001, 2002; Mahmood 2001, 2005; Verkaaik 2010; Yurchak 2006, 2008). These authors warn against romanticising resistance by misattributing it to forms of agency that cannot be reduced only to conscious or unconscious moments of opposition to domination. We understand political agency as not simply the capacity to act politically against overarching forces and practices of domination, but rather as to the ability to effect change (Mahmood 2005). We believe that such an approach can offer new insights into the nature and experience of the political in a region where the complexities of political change often left authors recognizing as effective only those actions that are conducive toward freedom and liberation from subjugating forces (Wedeen 1999).

Political agency represents a crucial analytical frame both to observe contemporary social and political transformations as well as to define the role of anthropology in the interpretation of our age.

Over the past decade, a conspicuous body of ethnographic research in the Middle East has produced highly sophisticated and nuanced analyses of the role played by urban masses either as participatory agents in the political reforms and revolutions or as mediating forces against such actions (most notably Allal 2012; Beinin et Vairel 2011; Bouziane, Harders et Hoffmann 2013; Brahimi 2011; Catusse et Vairel 2010; Dorai et Puig 2012; Harb el Kak 1998; Ismail 2006, 2013; Wedeen 1999, 2008). However, as Altorki argues, "theories of contentious collective action and revolution are available, but anthropologists have not, in the main, worked in these areas" (2015). In addition, lured by the spectacular clarity of political demonstrations and acts of violence that have dramatically upset Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, many Middle East scholars and political analysts have, with few exemptions, missed the complexity of political change in the region. As

several scholars have argued, much of this literature continues to share a narrow understanding of political agency (Bayat 2013).

This conception produces a set of interrelated problems. First, although "resistance" – as an ideal form of action – is surely an important facet of political agency, its centrality may lead to overemphasise the significance of this dimension in political change. A further interrelated problem with this notion of agency is entailed in the unspoken presumption of what a person's actual or ultimate goal is. By taking for granted the universality of a desire to act and assuming that this may be inspired only by a genuine yearning for freedom and equality, this approach recognises as effective only those actions that are conducive toward this end. In making this assumption, however, such an approach denies "dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance" (Mahmood 2005, p. 14).

With this workshop, our first aim is to bring together a group of junior and more established scholars who have been seeking, in diverse ethnographic sites and in hitherto isolated fashion, to bring the theoretical insights of recent anthropological work on political agency to bear on the study of political change in contemporary Middle East.

There is a number of reasons to combine these two bodies of literatures. The recent political turmoil in the region provides a wealth of material for contemporary debate and fine-grained ethnographic comparison: about the nature of political change; about the comparability of post-colonialisms; about the performativity of power and the exercise of sovereignty; or the new kinds of structural dependence that emerge when nominal "independence" coincides with the orthodoxy of neoliberal economics.

Our second aim in holding this workshop is to bring together scholars whose research on political agency and change in the Middle East has sought to develop alternative ways to thinking about political action and political subjectivity, and whose work has thereby come to envisage forms of agency that cannot be fully

explained by universal approaches of force/power relations such as "pouvoir-savoir" and sovereignty. We feel the urgency to set up an organic and ground based political anthropology of the Middle East so as to test and expand existing accounts of political agency that have sought to go beyond the limitations of the Foucault-Agamben canon (Yurchak 2008, and comments by D. Boyer).

The main goal of the workshop is to investigate alternative ways of approaching political change (and stasis) by looking at forms of agency ignored by much of the literature in the region. Yet, through the workshop, we "un-bound" the very idea of "Middle East" by exploring connections and investigating phenomena that transcend geographical boundaries.

Workshop participants

Antonio De Lauri (University of Milan-Bicocca)

Luigi Achilli (EUI)

Deniz Gokalp (American University in Dubai)

Latif Tas (SOAS, London)

Alessandro Monsutti (Graduate Institute, Geneva)

Mjriam Abu Samra (University of Oxford)

Paul Anderson (University of Cambridge)

Martyn Egan (EUI)

Julie Billaud (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology)

Follow the development of the debate on Allegra.

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LIVING FICTIONS

Andrea Pia
May, 2016
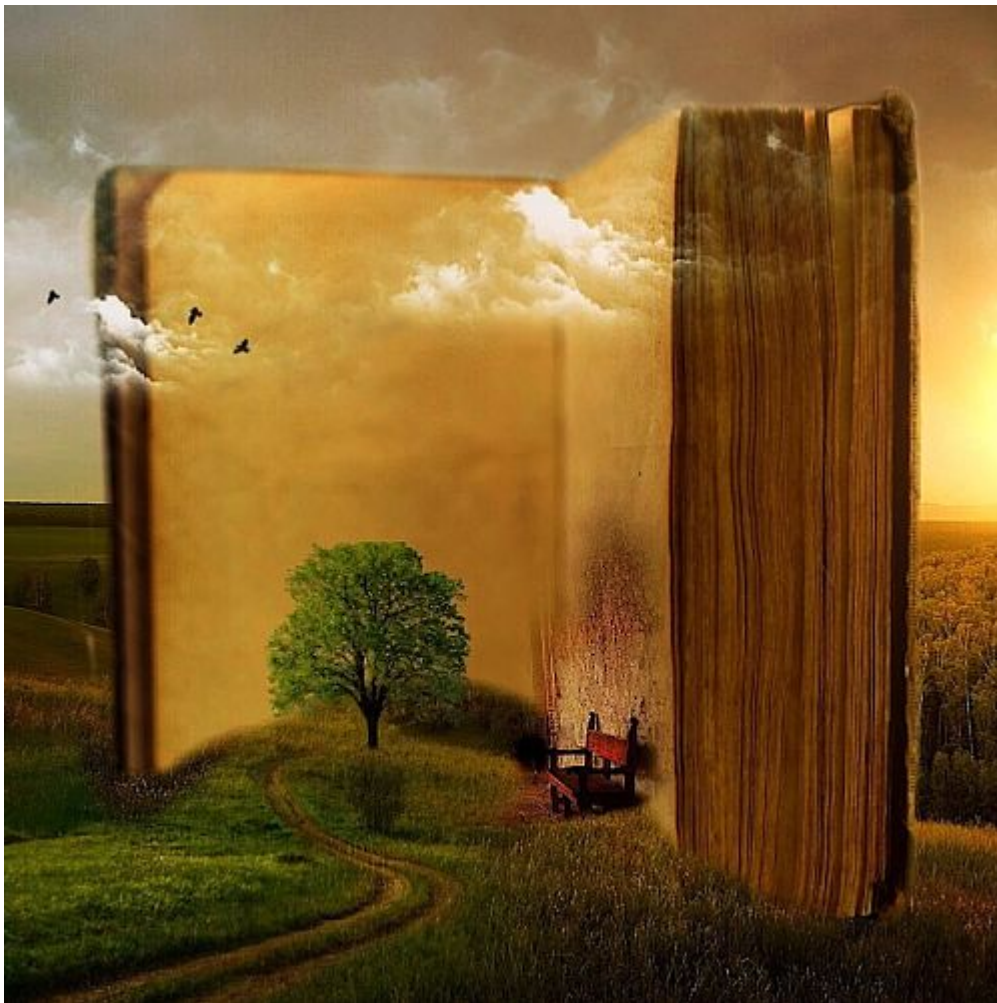
The theme of "living fictions" comes from a presentation I gave at a recent meeting of the [EASA Anthropology of Law and Rights network](#) and builds on its participants' very insightful comments[1]. The theme has been further developed through a reading group of [Annelise Riles](#)' work on legal technicalities that the authors of this thematic week and I have decided to organise in preparation of our Allegra gig.

Fiction is here intended in both its technical sense of legal fiction – i.e. legal statements universally understood to be non-factual but which are nonetheless taken to be valid or useful (Riles 2005, 2010) – and also in the more anthropological register of technical systems of valuation (Latour and Bastide 1986).

In this latter, anthropological, sense we emphasize how these fictions can be seen as expert narratives and canonised schemes of appraisal (materialised in the form of text, accounting devices, and information systems). Using anthropological methods, we can see how these fictions allow social actors to perceive new connections and select specific patterns of relations, actions and their relative distribution of rights and obligations as metaphorical infrastructures (Ricoeur 1975; Elyachar 2010) through which ordinary life can be "run" and projects for its improvement can be envisioned. Where these infrastructures become sufficiently routinized, it may no longer be meaningful to even qualify them as "metaphorical" infrastructures.

Think of your (hypothetical) PhD in anthropology as exactly the kind of fiction we are talking about. Often materialised in a text-based support, your PhD is a bundle of institutionally backed assumptions, only partially based on demonstrable facts, that produces the *irrefutable* statement of your successful transformation into the type of legal person who meets the eligibility criteria for exercising the office of a "lecturer" in a higher education institution. In other words this means that you can now be potentially seen as someone who takes up the rights and obligations towards others constituting the social role of a lecturer in our societies. It is upon the fictionalized pattern of relationships, or social infrastructure, that we can then "run" that specific human project that any university ultimately is. Unsurprisingly, when it comes to human interactions, a lot of other stuff works like that. This week is a glimpse into how such fictions may become politically interesting to the Allegra reader.

Here we qualify fictions as "living" to bring into view the fact that such techniques of valuation are prone to be taken up by social actors in often unexpected and unintended directions.

Moreover, insofar as fictions are purposive schemas through which we construct meaning and perform order, they are also alive in another important sense: we invest intellectually and emotionally in them. In fact, living fictions are not at all

unconscious: we more or less collectively decide to adopt such fictions because we believe they afford something to us; they solve ethical challenges for us, and organise our life. They improve and enhance our collective experience of being together in ordered and meaningful ways.

These types of living fictions achieve many things. They can be endearing, as when we give a legal-medical definition of brain death that allows people to retain hope in and affections for inanimate bodies (Lock 2002). They can be relieving as when we work around bureaucratic fictions so as to make sure that our ethical image of ourselves and our inconsequential projects can be kept alive regardless of their plausibility/effectiveness. For instance, any well-meaning politician will pride herself on protecting the interests of her constituency by virtue of having been elected, regardless of whether categories such as constituency or interests have any factual and consistent underpinning in real life. Fictions may even be enchanting, as when technical mastery over legal, fiscal or scientific knowledge is thought instrumental in the delivery of social change. Andrea Ballestero's recent paper on Costa Rican regulators' brainy devotion towards processes of technical valuations of the country's price of water is a good example of this form of enchantment (2015). But fictions can also be enraging, as when we are allowed to

disregard other people's demands/needs because we selectively put "technical" limits to the boundaries of our individual responsibility to and emotional labour for others, thus causing the subject of such self-justifying acts of dismissal to feel abandoned or rejected. Think of welfare bureaucrats who need to fictionalise their destitute recipients as legally non-conforming social parasites in order to lessen the emotional burden attached to the experience of catering to marginality (Dubois 2010).

Above all, the fictions we live by maintain a non-heuristic relation with truth. They are not used to discover or describe social facts, but contrived to make some of them happen. In an important sense, they can't be invalidated, nor rebutted. They are irrefutable.

In this thematic week, we move from these premises to explore how living fictions are deployed across many different fieldsites in an effort to uncover their political life and the processes of elite capture and technocratic governance that hinge upon their propagation and iteration. Taken together, the overarching point we would like to make with these interventions is that while fictions may in fact be integral to projects of human interdependence and to long term solidarity across generational and class divides, they are also prone to hijacking by technocratic and marginalising regimes of governance that disqualify alternative patterns of responsibilities while promoting pacified visions of social order and citizenship that further entrench inequality. Insofar as we collectively consider them to be useful and *irrefutable* means of organisation, such fictions are indeed difficult (but not impossible) to counter.

On Tuesday, Geoffrey Hughes will look at an emerging legal fiction in Jordan: "Divorce before Consummation." The story of divorce before consummation exemplifies how the information infrastructure of Jordan's government Sharia courts can produce new forms of individual and collective voice, subverting dominant gender roles and age hierarchies. These procedures sit uneasily with an alternative legal code that figures matters of birth, marriage, and death not as the

prerogative of individual subjects but rather as part and parcel of ongoing exchanges amongst agnatic kin groups. Focusing on the courts' promulgation of this novel legal category—a category itself predicated on the existence of the courts as an alternative legal system to "traditional" law—we see how its legal fictions not only produce the grounds upon which these agnatic kin groupings can be challenged but also produce the grounds upon which the courts themselves and the government they represent can be criticized.

Agustin Diz's Wednesday post considers the legal fiction of corporate legal personhood as it plays out in an indigenous context in Argentina. There we will explore the ways in which indigenous leaders, negotiate, confirm and undermine the corporate veil as they attempt to establish legally and administratively defined Indigenous Communities. In this case, we see how the imposition of a legal fiction allows Guaraní leaders to engage in an unexpected political tactic that involves the reproduction of the corporate person through documents. Although this is an unintended consequence of the legal recognition of indigenous settlements, it is argued that this is the kind of phenomena that anthropologists are particularly well suited to investigate in contexts where fictions are lived in the everyday.

On Thursday, Andrea Pia will look at the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to fix the widely popularised governmental fiction of the so called "harmonious society" and its ideal inhabitant, the "civilised citizen", through a crafty rearticulation of the means of law. Here I will show that the process of thinking of legal techniques as means to re-establish party-sanctioned ethical living in the unruly Chinese countryside draws directly from (Chinese) legal anthropology. It operates to refashion opposition from one constituted of valid counterclaims to one that lacks a particular kind of legal tuition. Interestingly, pedagogical powers are ascribed to the process of schooling citizens in the ethical boundaries and inner workings of the law. Here I will also argue that a version of this theoretical position is currently haunting recent works in western legal anthropology, and that we should move to bring back into the ethnographic gaze what lies outside of legally encoded fictions of government.

Finally, Fridays is a snapshot from Andrea's ethnographic work in China where a video game on border control shows to be a reservoir of interesting facts and considerations about living fictions in the abstract and those governing Chinese migration. This thematic week will further spill over to May 13th. Then, Giulia Zoccatelli will explore how the creation of new legal fictions — as the one that reified the legal persona of the drug user in China and made it instrumental to the public health management of epidemics — can become conducive of enduring forms of everyday violence and social marginalisation.

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Turning cool kids into outlaws – Legal fictions and the management of heroin abuse in post-reform China

Giulia Zoccatelli
May, 2016

Cool kids.

On a rainy afternoon towards the end of my fieldwork in Qilin, southwest China, I sat with one of my informants, Jiao Hua – a round, charismatic man in his 40s – to hear the story of how he ended up spending the last 25 years hooked on heroin.

"You see, it is not easy to explain now why we originally began using drugs", Jiao Hua explained to me that day.

Jiao Hua: *At the time when we started, our understanding of what we were doing was really limited. It was not like today that everybody knows that drugs are harmful, that everybody knows what their consequences are. To be honest with you, when I first began using heroin, I didn't even fully realize that doing drugs*

was illegal. When we were using it we weren't hiding. If we were on the street preparing our dose, often the police would have stopped by and would have stood there looking at what we were doing. They would have asked, "What is this thing that you are doing?" and stayed there watching us and asking questions.

Me: *Really?*

Jiao Hua: *Really! Here, in this city, since drugs became so widespread in a matter of so little time, this happened very often. It happened even at home. You were at home with your friends and if police knew what was going on, they would have come knocking on the door. So we would have let them in and offered them a cup of tea and would have allowed them to look at us while we were preparing it, warming it up on the spoon. . .and then shooting.*

The story Jiao Hua recounts here is not unique, but rather resonates with numerous examples that I gathered from other long term heroin and methadone users in Qilin. Similarly to Jiao Hua, many other people I met during the 13 months I spent in the city described to me how they began using drugs amidst a general atmosphere of sympathy and curiosity.

"You see at that time, it [heroin] was a very new thing – nobody had ever seen it", Jiao Hua would have explained me when I asked him why he thought this was the case.

"You sometimes heard about heroin, about opiates, these sorts of things, but very few people actually knew what heroin was, they didn't even know what it looked like. So they were curious, so to speak. And this is why when they heard that there were people using drugs in the city they were rushing to come and see what opiates were, how they were supposed to be used."

At the time of my fieldwork, some thirty years later, the situation for long-term heroin and methadone addicts like Jiao Hua had changed dramatically. Since the introduction of official regulations to control drug use in China at the end of the 1980s, addiction had rapidly moved out of the realm of exotic consumptions

and started to fall instead into the category of public security issues, to be regulated via arrests and the confinement of addicts into China's always expanding network of forced labour and forced detox centres.

In the wake of these changes a concurrent and equally radical shift occurred in the social perception of addicts, turning them from cool teenagers engaged in interesting, albeit risky, pastimes into becoming dangerous deviants whose bodies and habits had to be policed in order to preserve the health and safety of China's population.

Set against this background, in my contribution I will go to the roots of the shift that led the sympathy Jiao Hua describes around drug use between the 1970s and the 1980s to turn into fear, social stigma and sometimes open violence against addicts. Doing so will help me adding an ethnographic perspective to the discussion we proposed in this thematic thread. As we shall see, the key factor in explaining these shifts was in fact the introduction of a legal fiction in the world of Juao Hua – the one that allowed people like him, who had previously been legally invisible, to become members of a specific legal category, i.e. the one of drug users (*xishi renyuan*).

A bit of context.

In order to understand fully how this happened, we need to first of all take a step back to turn for a minute to the broader context where Jiao Hua's story took place – i.e. the county level city of Qilin. Tucked away among rice paddies and fruit plantation, close to the main route that connects Yunnan's capital Kunming to Vietnam, at the time of my fieldwork, between 2011 and 2012, Qilin was a fast developing urban centre, with broad streets flanked by palm trees and magnolias, a gigantic government building and a multitude of shiny new and half-empty skyscrapers. Things however hadn't always been this shiny throughout Qilin's history.

"[When I was a kid] Qilin was nothing more than a small, backward (luohu) township", once described to me by Yu Mi, one of my interlocutors, when talking about the context in which he grew up in the late 1970s.

"Officially, it was already a county level city (xian), however it looked much more like a small town (zhen). How shall I put, it didn't even look like a township really, it was so backward that it actually resembled a rural village (cun)."

Accounts similar to one of Yu Mi were common to hear in Qilin. Living out of farming for most of its recent history, Qilin had in fact just recently become the centre of attention of southern Yunnan developers, mainly due to the strategic position it occupied in the centre of a vast flatland crossed by the always growing number of commercial exchanges across Southeast Asian countries.

The same roads that were now making the fortunes of Qilin had in the recent past played a key role in favouring the emergence of yet another issue that made the city famous over the years. Moving across the same routes that now brought goods and commercial deals to China, since the late 1970s a huge tide of opiates hit the streets of Qilin, allowing for people like Yu Mi and Jiao Hua to get in contact with drugs and plaguing the city with an unusually high incidence of heroin abuse – with one in 200 of its inhabitants being now reported to be a regular injecting drug user.

The massive inflow of injecting drugs in Qilin, and in southern Yunnan in general, between the 1970s and the 1980s was the end result of the wider changes that affected opiates' trafficking routes in Southeast Asia during that period. Following the drastic relaxation of the diplomatic and commercial relationships between China and Southeast Asian countries, which followed the end of the Maoist regime, traffickers from the Golden Triangle consistently began to turn to China as a viable route for reaching the ports of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Tianjin, from where refined heroin was then shipped across the globe. Before the late 1970s, heroin had usually reached the shipping hubs of China and Hong Kong via the adventurous journeys of small Thai fishing vessel (Chin and Zhang 2007).

The rising tensions among Thai and Burmese drug cartels and the launch of Thailand's war on drugs in 1984 had however made the traditional southern route a dangerous one to run. Consequently the cargo routes leading north, toward newly opened China and India, became new favourites instead.

Such structural changes in the journeys of heroin across Southeast Asia produced a sea change in the social landscape of the cities and villages that stood close to the new trafficking routes in China, as they made long-gone protagonists like opium and its derivatives – heroin and morphine – to reappear in the country. By turning opiates into markers of a bourgeois lifestyle since the beginning of Mao's regime, the Communists had in fact been successful in the previously unthinkable enterprise of wiping opium and its derivatives out of China. Often emphatically celebrated as the only effective war on drug ever undertaken in the world, Mao's campaign combined police repression, border controls, propaganda and grassroots mobilization and produced the indisputable result of drastically reducing the availability of opiates in the country, making their use to remain confined to a restricted group of users. In the wake of these facts,

a thunderous silence descended on issues related to drugs, fitting for a problem deemed to no longer exist in the country.

It is to the enduring silence produced by Mao's war on drugs that we now need to turn in order to explain the curiosity around drugs Jiao Hua describes in the bit of interview reported at the beginning of this article. This is even more so as it is to this very silence that Jiao Hua, and many others among my interlocutors in Qilin, kept on going back in order to explain why they started using drugs in the first place.

"You see", told me Jiao Hua in this regard, *"at that time I was just stupid, I didn't understand anything. How can I say it? I didn't just start because friends made me do it. I started because at that time my knowledge about drugs was really not enough (bu gou)".*

Albeit, as I have described elsewhere (Zoccatelli 2014), things were probably a bit more complex than this – calling into question issues like the frustrated consumerism in the country's most remote borderlands, the increased individualism of China's youth and the weakening of the traditional social circles of family and work units – the lack of a public discourse around drugs is indeed to be accounted among the key factors that led thousand of teenagers in China's borderlands to turn to injecting drugs between the 1970s and the 1980s. But not just that. Silence and the widespread perception of drug use as a problem that no longer existed are also at the bottom of the stunning lack of official regulations around drug use, which characterized the first decade of newly reformed China. Specific official attempts to legally regulate drug trafficking, smuggling and consumption in China were in fact only enforced starting at the beginning of the 1990s. A brief account of how these regulations came to be implemented is helpful here in order to understand the shift that led young people using heroin to turn in the public imagination from cool teenagers into dangerous outlaws.

Outlaws.

When one looks at the sequence of events that led China to adopt official measures to regulate drug use in the country, one key fact becomes immediately noticeable: how their implementation was deeply entwined with the concurrent emergence of another pressing public health issue – the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country. In 1985, China's public health authorities disclosed the news that a first AIDS-related death had been registered in the country. Following this news, health authorities established the implementation of a series of public health controls in areas and among people deemed to be at risk of contagion, in order to be able to scientifically locate possible hotbeds of the epidemic. In 1989, a round of tests among local injecting drug users came back wit the result that 146 people had been found to be HIV positive in the border town of Ruili.

The news of Ruili's contagions proved critical in radically transforming China's

public discourse around AIDS. Up to that moment, China's authorities had in fact treated AIDS exclusively as a disease of foreigners – or "capitalism-loving people" (　　 *aizibing*), following a wordplay widely used in the Chinese media, which punned the almost identical-sounding scientific name of HIV/AIDS (　　 *aizibing*). The news that HIV/AIDS had instead already started to spread among China's citizens led the country's authorities to turn their attention from the outside of the nation to its inside. Whereas before selective visa releases and controls on national borders had been the key interventions enforced to keep AIDS under control in the country, after Ruili, the new priority of China's government became that of drawing new – this time internal – borders around the epidemiological sub-groups considered to be most at risk of contagion. This with the aim of keeping them, and the risks they bore, isolated from the healthy part of China's population. Among the groups addressed by this new set of measures was the constantly growing number of people who since the previous decade had started turning to heroin in the country.

The new attention that rose around the public health risks related to drugs caused the until then almost entirely unregulated sub-group of people with a history of drug use to become the objects of a growing number of technical and legal interventions. First reified into members of the epidemiological category of Injecting Drug Users (IDUs), people like Jiao Hua and Yu Mi ended up becoming full-blown legal personas at the beginning of the 1990s, when the government launched what it defined as China's new "battle against drugs". As part of these initiatives, in 1990, China enforced the "[Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on the Prohibition against Narcotic Drugs](#)", which banned the sale, smuggling, possession and use of narcotics. The Decision for the first time addressed people using drugs as part of a specific legal category – indeed, the one of "people who use drugs" (*xishi renyuan*) – and established the need to deal with them through the use of corrective measures, mainly implying their confinement in forced detox centres (*jiedusuo*) for a period of up to 2 years and in forced labour camps (*laojiao*) for 3 years, in the case they were caught relapsing.

Marginals.

The consequences of these new legal interventions were still very noticeable during my fieldwork. Besides populating the world of addicts with new, invasive technologies to regulate their lives and behaviours, the fact of being turned into members of a specific legal category also contributed to produce some subtler and less immediately visible changes in their lives. Among these, a key place is occupied by the radical shift in the social perception about them.

> *Linking addicts directly to the spread of widely feared diseases like AIDS and stressing on the need to control what were now deemed to be publicly dangerous movements and behaviours, had in fact the result of making the joyful atmosphere of curiosity and coolness that Jiao Hua described around his initial approach to heroin to fade away and to leave space instead to fear and moral contempt for drug users' lives.*

The social stigma that ensued from these changes has been long lasting and its effects remained tangible in my fieldsite. Almost everyone among my interlocutors in Qilin was unemployed, reporting to have lost their job and to be incapacitated to find a new one as a consequence of the regulation that requires the lettering "*xishi renyuan*" (i.e. person who uses drugs) to appear on the ID of all the people caught at least once under the effects of drugs. As the lettering is permanent, and cannot be deleted even after years a person had stopped using drugs, unemployment related to social stigma was also prominent among people who reported having quit heroin and were now only enrolled in the government sponsored methadone treatment program. The only rare exceptions I encountered were among people working in lower paid jobs, like rubbish collection and small-scale transportation. Social discrimination was even graver in other fields of life. Stories about denied access to healthcare for instance abounded in my fieldsite and were mirrored by the data emerged from large-scale quantitative surveys,

which denounce how social stigma and discrimination are still "highly prevalent among the public, including among many health-care professionals" (Han et al 2010: 47). As a way of conclusion it is thus worth reporting here one of these stories, the one that Gu Bao, a woman in her late 30s, told me one day when I met her by chance while she was seeking treatment for one of her fingers, which as a consequence of heroin injecting had started to become gangrenous.

"When normal people get sick, they just go to hospitals and get treated", Gu Bao told me that day.

"[...] But not us. Especially with these blisters, no one in the hospital wants to help. Because they immediately understand you are a drug user and they know we probably have AIDS. It doesn't matter if you go with your parents; it doesn't matter if you offer to pay a lot for it. I did it all, but they just turned me away. When you are one of us it's like this. People first are disgusted by you. Then disgust turns into fear. And then fear turns into hatred".

Conclusions.

The words of Gu Bao are useful to take us back to where we started, as they are a lived testimony of the power of legal fictions to transform the lives of the people they address. At the beginning of this thematic thread we described legal fictions – and the new social categories they create – as metaphoric infrastructures (Ricoeur 1975; Elyachar 2010) that allow for the world to be made legible and for certain aspects of it to become more easily manageable. The introduction of legal measures to deal with drugs in China did precisely this – they allowed to inscribe the risks related to HIV/AIDS into a newly created category of people and to make possible the management of the epidemic through the control of their bodies, behaviours and movements. The stories of Gu Bao and Jiao Hua, among others, are concrete examples of the grassroots and long-term impact of these regulatory acts. They show how, once they get routinized, legal fictions turn into much more

than functional metaphors to deal with technical issues. Instead, they become full-blown truths that dictate how people live and interact.

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Will the Next Margaret Mead Please Stand Up? The SAPIENS-Allegra Competition to Discover New Public Anthropologists

Allegra
May, 2016

The anthropologist is a peculiar creature. We study the world, yet too often do not

share our insights with the world.

Our work explores some of the most exciting and relevant issues that face humanity. We study our collective origins, the origins of violence, economic injustice, health disparities, our relations to family, constructions of "race," education systems, how cities organize themselves, how we talk, climate change, emerging digital worlds, and so much more. But all too often we conclude our research into these vitally important topics with texts that are accessible only to a narrow group of academics.

To encourage anthropologists to write about their work for a broader audience Allegra and SAPIENS have partnered to launch a competition for more engaged types of anthropological writing.

We invite submissions for timely and engaging articles that are accessible yet authoritative, exciting yet not sensationalistic. In particular, we welcome narrative-driven submissions that will appeal to a broad, adult college-educated readership, while demonstrating how anthropology contributes to a shared understanding of our world.

The contribution that most aptly fits these criteria will be awarded 1.000 USD, and 500 USD each for second and third prize. The best pieces will be published in 2016 in SAPIENS and Allegra.

For examples of successful writing about anthropology, consider the work of a handful of anthropologists have successfully made their work accessible

today—ranging from [Graeber's "Debt, the First 5,000 Years"](#) to [Gillian Tett's "Fool's Gold"](#), to T.M. Lurhmann's regular columns in the *New York Times*. What unites the most inspiring and memorable anthropological accounts are not a common theoretical framework. Neither is it a shared subject. Instead, they are bound by the potency of their narratives.

You might also consider this recent [piece](#) in the *National Geographic* or a more personal essay, like [this one](#) in the *New Republic*. As illustrated [in this piece](#) in *The Atlantic*, even the topic of museum dioramas can be turned into a dramatic story that tackles an essential question: What do dioramas reveal about humans' relationship with nature?

Anthropologists, more than other scientists, hold a pivotal role in improving our common understanding of our increasingly complex world. However, too often we hide our message behind a veil of obscure jargon, murky narrative, and muddled theoretical convolutions—all to the great detriment of our discipline. As experts who investigate the complexity of our contemporary world, we are ideally positioned to become its narrators. Now, let's start writing!

Rules

- Anyone who holds a degree in anthropology (undergraduate or graduate), or is currently enrolled in an anthropology degree program, may enter the

competition

- The subject may cover any branch of anthropology.
- Contributions can be single authored, co-authored or written by a collective of individuals.
- Authors must be able to vouch that their text is solely their own work and has not been published elsewhere.
- Texts should be no more than 3,000 words in length—and include no references, notes, or other scholarly apparatus.
- Follow the SAPIENS Style Guide.
- We encourage the use of photography (no more than 5 pictures can be used to illustrate the text) and other multimedia formats such as sound files and videos. Sketches and drawings are also welcome. All images should be uploaded on flickr and a URL link should be provided. Sound files should be uploaded on soundcloud and short video clips on youtube and URL links should be provided. Keep in mind that the use of multimedia is not a guarantee of originality.
- Texts must be submitted as a double-spaced Word document. The first page should provide your name, address, and e-mail.
- By your submission, you are agreeing to Allegra's and SAPIENS's Terms of Use policies.
- The deadline for submission of entries is **July 1, 2016**. Texts must be submitted electronically, to submissions@allegralaboratory.net
- Submissions will be read anonymously and adjudicated by a panel selected by Allegra Lab and Sapiens editorial team members.
- The result of the competition will be announced in **October 2016**.
- If a winner or invited, you are agreeing to work with Allegra and SAPIENS editorial staff for online publication.
- Questions concerning the competition should be directed to submissions@allegralaboratory.net.

Featured image by *John Curran* (*flickr, CC BY 2.0*)

Fictional #Fictions between China and Arstotzka

Andrea Pia
May, 2016

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QP5X6fcukM

One interesting way to (momentarily) close this thematic week about living fictions (one that could also speak to many other thematic weeks here on ALLEGRA, e.g. smugglers; being like a state; borders) would be to introduce a

videogame I played with a friend during my fieldwork in China. The game is called "Paper, please!", and to put it simply to you, is an intentionally low-fi but intelligently thought-provoking indie game that puts the player in the shoes of an immigration official belonging to an imaginary, soviet-type state. Your job, as the short video above shows, is to determine who may enter and who may not in the People's Republic of Arstotzka. As a border official, the player is not only confronted with the byzantine regulations presiding over Arstotzka's highly politicised immigration system, but also challenged by the incentives structure regimenting the country's bureaucracy and the shortage economy crippling its citizens' livelihood. At one point in the game, the more people you refuse to allow into the country the more resources you will have to feed your starving family.

One interesting aspect of the game is that the laws specifying who is entitled to enter the country and who's to be considered a citizen of Arstotzka keep on changing, becoming increasingly abstract and contradictory.

Before long, your immigration booth is jammed by people complaining about the idiosyncrasies of this legal system and of its fictions. Some of them will try to hurt you.

Now, I found myself playing "Paper, please!" because of an accident that happened during my Yunnanese stay. Early on into my fieldwork, a protest broke out in the Township, blocking its main thoroughfare. Lured by the gathering of so many people in front of my temporary accommodation — a hotel in the Township centre — I exited my room, only to be later taken by the police, had my passport and camera confiscated and be confined to my hotel room for a few days. "It's for your own safety" I was told by an otherwise very nice and apologetic local policeman. Thus, with plenty of time on my hands and with little else to do but to wait for my passport to be released, I decided to befriend the hotel manager's nephew, a 13 year old kid who for some reason happened to be staying at the hotel at all times, and pass some of my confinement time together. I was teaching him basic english and he was eager to show me some of the video games he spent

his days playing.

One day we ended up playing a videogame of my choosing, "Paper, please!". "It is good practice for your english" I told him. Little that I know, the kid would get so much into it that he barely left my room for the following two days. "Don't you ever have to go to school?" I once asked him, bordering on exasperation. "I can't go to school now, my parents still live as migrant workers in Kunming, and I used

to go to school there. But then, because of my parent's rural *hukou*[1] *(nongye hukou)* I had to come back here to stay with my uncle. If you are born in the countryside you can't study in a public school in the city". I was surprised by this story, and felt sorry for him. I tried to crack a joke to cheer him up.

"Well it's really like in the game isn't it?" – "If you don't have the right papers you don't get into the city" he replied with a smile.

At one point in "Paper, please!", the player is given the choice to conspire with a group of home-bred terrorists (or freedom fighters, depending on the player's point of view) by smuggling sympathetic individuals and resources into Arstotzka. Their goal is to bring down the regime. Now, guess what choice my friend made.

[1] A *hukou* is a record in the PRC's system of household registration. It identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes identifying information such as name, parents, spouse, and date of birth. It is the basis for resource allocation and the provision of services and subsidies for selected groups of the population.

On Chinese Pedagogical Legalism (and its Anthropological Ghost) fictions

Andrea Pia
May, 2016

"You have already been incredibly faithful towards the man. And you have been following all the relevant rules for establishing a co-operative. Now, what you need to do is to try to save your relationship as kin. It is not only about the business you are putting together. You need to understand that respecting the law also means respecting the particular circumstances in which your business

partner appears to be. What I ask you to have is another pinch of faith and to fix this. Forget about this mandatory entry payment, put the money up yourself if you must, and go ahead! If you're not convinced try out the administrative court, see how it goes there. What I need to tell you is that the result we can get here is in both parties' interests. Do not ruin everything here, insulting each other and losing temper. What could you expect from your co-op if you establish it on unstable grounds?"

This was Master Du at his best. An extremely witty, vastly respected Yunnanese speaking party cadres who had been, throughout my fieldwork in South-West China, an omnipresent figure of extrajudicial dispute resolution. Once he had finished, the old man allegedly responsible of defaulting on his financial commitment towards a joint co-op project gave a contrived nod and promised he would pay his dues. In turn, the opposing party, who only a minute before was vehemently rejecting any possibility of reconciliation, promised he would not press charges. That day I was asked by Master Du to keep him company as he went through a long day of "mediation" (*tiaojie gongzuo*). His duty "making sure that people here live harmoniously with one another and have respect for the Law". Out of five cases he sat through only that day, he successfully persuaded parties to reach an agreement four times. "I have a 90% success rate" he usually boasted to other mediators "and I do more than one thousand cases per year". "Do they ever go to court?" I asked him one day, out of curiosity – "To court?" he replied, baffled "Why would they? The court doesn't care about what happens next, they are simply after establishing compensation. The way I see it is that the law has to be a tool, whereas virtue needs to stay at the core (*deti fayong*). What is requested of us is that we usher people back into harmony (*wei qunzhong kaiqi hexiezhimen*) and that we preserve good relationships".

Here you have one Chinese fiction many mediators I met in rural Yunnan currently live by, the unexamined and unprovable assumption that plaintiffs always entertain a relationship that they would be better-off preserving, even in the face of plaintiffs asserting the contrary. In such fiction, keeping good

relationships is what any civilised (wenming), law abiding, harmony-craving Chinese citizen would recognise as her own moral responsibility.

That this was one foregrounding fiction of local dispute resolution was not simply down to Master Du's style of mediation. Chinese mediation prescribes that mediators ought to guarantee basic moral values and social stability (*shehui wending*) (see Huang 2015: 15) . What the Chinese mediators I met practically did was to fill the purposely under-defined category of social stability with their own ethical sensibility for and expectations of what a stable social order would look like (one with good relationships among kin and villagers).

My contribution to this thematic week on living fiction will slightly depart from what has been previously discussed by other contributors to address the question of how such living fictions may be vehicles of larger projects of governance. In what follows I will argue two points. First, that the current Chinese government has been rethinking the principles underpinning the country's legal system to pursue a reframing of the relationship between state officials and their services-demanding public. This is a shift from justice as a service applicants can simply have access to, to a moral gauge they need to be schooled in. For reasons that will become clear in a moment, I term such reframing "pedagogical legalism".

In contemporary China, people experience pedagogical legalism through everyday encounters with street-level bureaucrats. Pedagogical legalism works by allowing the latter to present as unproblematic and self-evident certain aspects of the law, in particular those mediating the relationship between the state and its citizenry or among citizens. As they rhetorically "naturalise" certain rights or obligations to applicants, Chinese state officials also produce particular narratives – or *fictions* – that make a normative set of relations and behaviours irrefutable.

This implies that performing and behaving in accordance with these fictions is ethical and civilised, while not doing so, or worse ignoring that one should, is backward and uncouth. The only problem is that it is never quite clear what counts as correct behaviour–nor is its definition open to public scrutiny.

My second point here is about the unlikely theoretical contiguity of Chinese pedagogical legalism and recent strands of legal anthropology. Legal anthropologists, both in China and the West, have been fascinated by modes of inquiry into the study of government and policies that have a lot in common with Master Du et al.'s understanding of how the law is supposed to work in their own country. That is, legal anthropologists have been interested in studying situations in which legal techniques of governance get overshadowed by questions of ethics and moral conduct that are in turn assumed to explain (and thereby provide a fix to) social conflict. My opinion is that while theoretically ground-breaking on several levels, these concerns for evaluating the political usefulness and undergirding ethics of legal fictions are ultimately unfortunate as they effectively deaden our sensibility towards the complexity of social conflict. To avoid belabouring this point, let me start with a brief genealogy of pedagogical legalism in China.

A new taste for the law

I begin by making a very long story short (if you are interested read [Philip Huang](#)'s riveting [*Chinese Civil Justice: Past and Present*](#)). Since the 90s, China has been undergoing a process of legal reform aimed at expanding legal services to its population and addressing widespread public and private corruption. Specifically with Xi Jinping's administration, the intent of the reform has been two-pronged: to clamp down on the many cases of gross official malpractices and blatant illegality that had been gathering media attention; and make the legal system more accessible to the country's citizens. In the context of China, a widespread post-colonial narrative of cultural and moral deficiency of the Chinese character has come to identify the countryside and its inhabitants (as opposed to the civilised urbanites) as the country's subgroup most in need of legal tuition.

This narrative is epitomised by the mantra of "sending the law to the countryside" (*songfa xiaxiang*), the idea of bringing the law to the rural populace via the

establishment of popular tribunals and legal training sessions for its country-bred officials (e.g. Balme 2009). The hope is to raise standards of accountability for lawbreakers and, more prosaically, to inject the countryside with a dose of civic concern. The political steps taken by Xi's administration in this direction, however, depart consistently from the course taken during the 90s. Then, the idea had been that a *procedurally* strong legal system would have addressed widespread official and private misconduct (Brandtstädter 2013: 333). In the last decades the emphasis has shifted away from legal adjudication and towards *non-adversarial* solutions to social conflicts. In this respect, the Chinese State has begun to resuscitate the "dispute resolution services" that were popular under Maoism (Minzner 2011).

Theoretical grounding for this legal move has arguably been provided by some of China's most prominent legal scholars (Zhu 2000; Zhao 2011). In recent years these scholars have argued that Chinese culture is already endowed with indigenous legal resources (*bentu ziyuan*) that could work as effective antidote to the present state of widespread illegality.

> *If Chinese society shows very low levels of compliance with the law, this has to do with the fact that its citizens have lost contact with the traditional precepts of Chinese customs (xiguanfa) and their emphasis on social obligations and social harmony.*

The Chinese legal anthropologists [Zhao Xudong](#) has written extensively about this. He describes customs as a source of control and compliance that is ordinarily tapped by Chinese citizens, especially by those living in the countryside (2003, 2011). He calls such sources "folk" or "village rules" (*xianggui minyue*). One characteristic of these rules is their do-ut-des morality, or morality of reciprocity (*lishang wanglai*) and conservative ideology (*shehui hexie wei mubiao*). According to Zhao, Chinese rural villages, alongside the people who grew up in them, are largely governed via this set of informal rules, the preservation of which village residents are *assumed* to have a stake in. The corruption of Chinese society is in

the beholder's eye: what might appear as backwardness and corruption to a proponent of the legal reform are, in fact, "reasonable" or even "ethical" ways of accommodating conflicts at the grassroots level.

> *Now, the argument that Chinese legal scholars make in relation to the country's legal reform is a simple one: a focus on human contexts where formalised techniques of order and control get entangled with ethical considerations and moral values may be used to produce fixes to current political problems.*

It may help fix the perception of unruliness and impunity in the general public, by showing that ordinary Chinese people *do* care about social order and fairness. It may also make state laws more responsive to the need of Chinese citizens, by incorporating such grassroots values into the legal services the state provides to its citizenry. Chinese customs needs to be discursively embedded as fictions into the country legal system (legalism) so that this informal normative order made of traditional precepts may become the default criteria of "good" Chinese citizenship (pedagogy). A definition that is unfortunately not open to outside contestation.

"Pedagogical Legalism" in Legal Anthropology

I contend here that this particular move advanced by Chinese scholars and taken up by Xi's administration has indeed been in the last years an object of election for western legal anthropologists. Here I will pause only briefly on the work of [Annelise Riles](#) and [Andrea Ballestero](#), who have recently produced quite original and challenging ethnographies of law and legal technicalities (Riles 2010, 2011 and Ballestero 2015). Both these authors have explored the ways in which anthropological attention towards legal techniques of governance, including fictions (credit swap regulations in Japan; the implementation of the human rights to water in Costa Rica) may uncover the unexpected human, ethical and potentially hopeful orientation of technical processes of governance. They are doing so in a political climate spurred by recent disillusionment towards

neoliberal laws and regulation. The fallouts of the 2008 Financial Crisis and the attempted privatization of state water provisions in South America have in fact being met with forms of interclass mobilization and resistance which asked for viable and fairer alternatives, but also for exemplary punishment and scapegoating. New laws and institutions have to be sent "to the bureaucrats".

In such a climate, Riles and Ballestero are mindful of the dangers of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. By focusing on local agents (as I did with Master Du) such as backdoor legal office workers in the Japanese Central Bank and on state regulators working on the price of water in Costa Rica, Riles and Ballestero have been able to show, in a similar vein of Zhu and Zhao, that what might seem as corruption and moral bankruptcy to opponents of neoliberal regimes of governance are in fact complex material and symbolic processes mediated by legal techniques that appear reasonable and even ethical to their users.

Legal techniques, here the examples are the legal fictions of the "credit swaps" (Riles 2011:24) or a "right" formula for the price of water (Ballestero 2015: 268) mediates and are in turn mediated by the "mundane practices" and "ethical positions" of those who work with them (Riles 2011: 246). That is to say that such fictions are constituted by "ethical" sets of relations (Ballestero 2015: 275) that, by obviating the need for time-consuming political negotiation (Riles 2010: 9), are assumed instrumental to achieve social order.

Riles and Ballestero argue for an interpretation of socio-legal relations that dovetails on three counts with Zhu and Zhao's understanding of Chinese law. First, both set of authors describe ethnographic contexts in which legal techniques are seen as harbouring a potential for greater equilibrium, harmony and stability in social relations. Second, they describe ordinary legal professionals and participants to processes of governance as in possession of "resources" to solve complex societal issues. Third, they seem to be persuaded that more than through wider forms of collective bargain or political mobilisation, it is by discovering the potential ethical agency of fictions that positive transformations

into processes of governance can be whisked into existence.

In so doing, these authors make the case for a fixing of legal regimes of circulation and allocation of wealth and resources that is also a fixing of our perception of how these seemingly unfair processes unfold in time. This is a legal pedagogy that sees a transformative potential for concrete ethical alternatives to morally bankrupt regimes of governance hiding in legal details. Insofar as they are constructed in relations to human agency and concerns, legal fictions can even be made better by relying on those "indigenous resources" available to people like Master Du who work out legally mediated systems of relations every day. Whereas the above Chinese anthropologists may be said to work against the moral disaggregation of the traditional Chinese society, Riles and Ballestero may be seen as working against the moral disaggregation of the so called "market commons". I don't believe that such a reading is necessarily wrong – ethnographic evidence does give credence to both Zhu/Zhao and Riles/Ballestero's approach. What I am wary of is what such an approach may end up sidelining.

Conclusion

If you are asking yourselves what gets sidelined by all the above, these are the positions of those who don't have a class interest in thinking and working with legal instruments. Think of this. During my ethnographic work in the Yunnanese countryside I have recorded many, often fraught, encounters between street-level bureaucrats and ordinary citizens (e.g. Pia forthcoming). In these occurrences the bone of contention is always the management of some common good such as land, water or public infrastructures. Villagers usually complain that state agents are making decisions on common goods without consulting them. In turn, bureaucrats complain that villagers are too greedy and oblivious to how the legal system works. For instance, when one day swaths of cropped land were flooded by the breaching of a faulty irrigation canal, villagers staged a mass protests against the local government and its lack of supervision. The local bureaucracy, Master Du

included, was genuinely taken aback by this, and commented that according to regulations the upkeep of the canal was villagers' sole responsibility. If this simple fact of law didn't go down very well with them, and if the law is ultimately a repository of moral values, then it would only mean that villagers were intentionally acting as immoral hooligans (*liumang*) who wanted to pressure the government for unwarranted compensation.

Here's Chinese pedagogical legalism retrofitted to exculpate local state officials. The injunction to acquaint oneself with the moral values of the Chinese "legal system" is at the same time an instrument for the moral diminution of unruly mobs (pedagogy) as well as an argument for the legal repackaging of liability in support of a new cohort of unaccountable state officials (legalism).

A similar reframing goes on when pedagogical legalism becomes a way of doing legal anthropology. Be they Occupy Wall Street activists, water-as-a-common campaigners or Chinese protesters, pedagogical legalism is a theoretical position and policy provision that represent critics as mere ignorant, people who need to be schooled in how the system, its inner morality and its legal fictions, work. Moreover, pedagogical legalism seems to prioritize the ethical concerns, sensibilities and fictions of those who work on regulations and laws *viz-a-viz* those who don't. Chinese and Western scholars are increasingly concerned about how top-down projects of law-making, the designing of its complex technicalities, could be made more robust and watertight from the point of view of its critics (i.e. Chinese society has no concern for legality, Big Banks are parasitic, water services in south America may be transformed into running for profit) while at the same time made efficacious from the point of view of their effects. Their attention has thus shifted towards the ethical considerations and agency of the ordinary actors of the legal sectors. The main take-away here is that law is presumably better understood if one looks at how insiders deal and complement fictions. My contention here is that such narrowing of focus on "getting the fiction right" might end up neglecting important questions about political participation and may lead to adopting an overly optimistic view of what the law can really do to

effectively address inequality on the ground.

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