



Die Geburt der Ethnologie aus dem Geist der Tragödie

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English Abstract: The Birth of Anthropology from the Spirit of Tragedy

The future of social anthropology lies in a perspective of tragedy. Tragedy deals with the dilemmas arising from the collision of irreconcilable goods; it takes into view the inescapable entanglement of contradictory actions, examining the pathways along which intended action produces unintended outcomes. For Social



Anthropology, a „perspective of tragedy“ describes a theoretical perspective, which engages in micro-analyses of entangled courses of action and their polyvalent orientations, processes of coupling and de-coupling, the constitution of figurations and the contingent encounter of divergent logics of action. These are micro-analyses of the constitution of macro-relations. Social Anthropology is superbly equipped to study such entanglements, because it can take into view all phases and interactions of such processes. Such a perspective of tragedy makes possible a notion of critique which enables us to view not only ‚what should have been‘ but rather ‚what would have been possible‘ by attending to the precise ways in which certain situations, specific forms of order are produced.

Abstract

Die Zukunft der Ethnologie liegt in einer Perspektive der Tragödie. Mit dem Begriff der Tragödie soll eine gesellschaftstheoretische Perspektive entwickelt werden, die Mikroanalysen der Verflechtung, der Entkoppelungsprozesse, der Konstitution von Figurationen, und das kontingente Zusammenfallen unterschiedlicher Handlungslogiken in Situationen erfasst. Die Tragödie behandelt die tragische Kollision von unvereinbaren Positionen; sie handelt von den Dilemmata, und vom Ineinanderwirken verflochtener aber eventuell widersprüchlicher Handlungen, die ihren eigenen Logiken, Zielsetzungen und Wertigkeiten folgen und in der Summe etwas anderes produzieren, als sie intendieren. Die Ethnologie ist prädestiniert für die Untersuchung solcher Verkettungen, weil diese nur in Mikroanalysen, in denen alle Phasen/Stationen/Interaktionen solcher Prozesse in den Blick kommen, sichtbar sind, Mikroanalysen freilich, die sich als Mikroanalysen der Konstitution eines Makrozusammenhangs verstehen. Damit wird ein Kritikbegriff möglich, der nicht Absichten, nicht „Gesinnungen“, sondern Konsequenzen in den Blick nimmt (ohne die Relevanz von Gesinnungen zu negieren), und der Zusammenhänge in Hinblick auf die Verkettung von Entscheidungsprozessen und deren polyvalenten Orientierungen befragt - und somit auch die möglichen Alternativen, die zu bestimmten Punkten im Prozess tatsächlich möglich waren.



Ich habe mich in den letzten Jahren viel mit der Zirkulation von normativen Ideen und Modellen beschäftigt, mit Rechtstransfer, wie es manchmal genannt wird. Dabei habe ich mich oft in interdisziplinären Zusammenhängen bewegt. Die zentrale Erwartung an die Ethnologie, die mir in diesen interdisziplinären Zusammenhängen entgegen tritt, ist, dass sie das Fremde erkläre. Obwohl auch andere Fächer die Ethnographie als Methode entdeckt haben, ist die Expertise über das Fremde oft die zumindest vordergründige Vorstellung davon, was unser Fach zu leisten habe. Das reicht von kruden Vorstellungen a la „Wie ticken denn die Hottentotten, damit wir ihnen eine Verfassung schreiben können“ bis zu differenzierten und theoretisch informierten Vorsichten gegenüber dem „Verstehen können“ der Anderen.

So sorgen sich im Zusammenhang mit dem Rechtstransfer die einen um das Schicksal der Normen, wenn diese auf Reisen gehen, und die anderen sorgen sich um das Schicksal jener, die solchen fremden Normen unterworfen sind. Die einen gehen von der Idee des Originals aus, der Original-Norm, die in ihrer Umsetzung verzerrt, verändert abgewandelt werden könnte. Die anderen gehen von der Idee der Authentizität aus, eine Idee von Authentizität, die letztlich auch die Vorstellung von der normativen Integration spezifischer sozialer Gruppen enthält. Die sozialen Prozesse, die über die Sozialisation hinaus zur Geltung spezifischer Normen, bzw. zu einem normativen Konsens führen, bleiben hier auf Grund einer „Ehrfurcht vor dem Anderen“ unreflektiert.

Diese Ehrfurcht vor dem Anderen unterstellt eine allumfassende, absolute Differenz. Sie führt dazu, dass wir bei der Betrachtung des Anderen nur das Andere suchen und so nicht das Gemeinsame thematisieren können, dass doch einen Großteil unser aller Alltag, wie es Veena Das nennt, prägt. Zum Zweiten verstellt diese Ehrfurcht vor dem Anderen den Blick auf dessen Konstitution durch seine Beziehung zu uns – auf die Relationalität von Differenz.

Die Ethnologie hat verschiedene Aufgaben. Der Versuch, das Andere in seiner Andersartigkeit zu verstehen ist eine. Die andere Aufgabe der Ethnologie war immer, und das schwingt ja im Namen der Anthropologie mit, das Universale, das



Gemeinsame zu verstehen. Aus dieser Perspektive muss man nicht das Andere, sondern Differenz - als immer relational - verstehen.

Ich gehe davon aus, dass wir die Relationalität von Differenz nachzeichnen können. Es besteht darüber keine Einigkeit in unserem Fach. Man muss zwar Differenz nicht allein über ihre Konstitution in der Beziehung zum anderen erfassen; damit würde man Manches übersehen. Man kann aber, meine ich, alle Differenz auch in ihrer Relationalität beschreiben. Und dies ist der Aspekt, der mich besonders interessiert, und den ich HEUTE als die vordringliche Aufgabe unseres Faches sehe - wo sie zu anderen Zeiten vielleicht eher darin lag, die Geltung des Anderen als Anderes zu behaupten [1].

Ich erzähle zu diesem Zweck gerne eine der vielen kleinen Geschichten mit denen wir unsere großen Thesen darstellen. Am liebsten erzähle ich die Geschichte von Savitas Scheidung: Sie spielt wie viel meiner kleinen Geschichten in einem grossen slum von Bombay. 2001 war ich zufällig zu einer Hochzeit in diesem slum eingeladen. Es war ein junges Hindu Paar, deren Ehe von den Eltern arrangiert worden war. Sie heirateten nach Hindu Ritus und ließen die Heirat nicht standesamtlich registrieren.

Ein Jahr später saß ich mit der damaligen Braut, Savita Bandari, ihrer Mutter, dem Ehemann von Savita, einem Vertreter der hindunationalistischen Shivsena Partei, big man im Viertel, und einer muslimischen Vertreterin einer lokalen NGO zusammen und es ging um die Scheidung der jungen Leute. Genauer ging es um die Frage, wie mit der Mitgift der Tochter umzugehen sei, bzw. dem „Stridhan“. Mitgift ist nach staatlichem Recht seit 1961 in Indien verboten ist aber eine sehr verbreitete Praxis. Verschiedene Gesetze regeln also dann auch den Umgang mit der Praxis, so z.B. auch die Rückgabe der Mitgift.



Die schlechte psychische Verfassung der Tochter war nun zentraler Gegenstand der Verhandlung: Der Mann argumentierte, er sei bei der Ehe betrogen worden, hätte eine unfähige Frau erhalten, und sei deswegen nicht verpflichtet, die Mitgift zurückzuzahlen.

Mit dieser Argumentation war schon der erste Verhandlungsversuch im Jamaat, der Kastenversammlung zu Ende gegangen. Hier hatte die Mutter auf der Erfüllung von Hindu Familienrecht gepocht, also der Rückgabe der Mitgift, die aber vom dort tätigen Vermittler auf Grund des geistigen Zustands der Tochter abgelehnt worden war. Daraufhin hatte sich die Mutter an das NGO gewandt, der Mann den Parteivertreter der Shivsena hinzugezogen.

Die Verhandlungen erstreckten sich nun über einige Wochen. Die Mutter argumentierte nun, ihre Tochter sei allein auf Grund der Ehe in einem solchen Zustand. Der Mann sei von Anfang an fremdgegangen. Er sei also schuld. - hier kam zum ersten Mal die Idee der Schuld auf. Der Mann entgegnete, seine Frau hätte ihre ehelichen Pflichten von Anfang an nicht erfüllen können; nur deswegen sei er fremd gegangen. Sie sei also schuld.

In der zweiten Woche forderte die Mutter plötzlich nicht nur die Rückgabe der Mitgift, die sich auf einige Saris, Töpfe und andere kleinere Haushaltsgeräte belief, sondern eine einmalige Unterhaltszahlung von 13 500 Rupien - eine beträchtliche Summe für den Mann, der ein ungefähres Monatseinkommen von 1000 Rupien hatte. Die Mutter argumentierte, das sei das Recht ihrer Tochter, und es wäre dazu da, den Schaden, den der Mann angerichtet hätte, wieder gut zu machen. Streng genommen argumentierte sie nun nicht mehr im Rahmen des Hindu Rechtes innerhalb dessen die Ehe geschlossen worden war. Vielmehr wechselte sie in einen anderen Diskurs, den von Frauenrechten. Sie ließ durch einen Bekannten einen Brief an die Menschenrechtskommission schreiben, den sie diktierte.

Ich habe an anderer Stelle auf die Gerüchte vom Recht hingewiesen, die in der



Zirkulation von Normen meines Erachtens eine wichtige Rolle einnehmen. Gerüchte vom Recht verweisen uns auf die Norminterpretationen jener, die ihre Hoffnungen und Ängste über sie artikulieren; sie verweisen auf die handlungsleitenden Umdeutungen, die sowohl aus Synthesen alternativer Normordnungen anhand von Alltagsunterscheidungen zwischen Gerechtigkeit und Ungerechtigkeit entstehen, als auch vorgängige normative Orientierungen transformieren, und damit eventuell - in ihrer Aggregation - einen weiteren Wandel der Normen hervorbringen können.

Das heißt, dass normativer Wandel über dialogische Interpretationen verstanden werden muss, die uns auch auf die relationale Qualität menschlicher Handlungsfreiheit verweisen. Es geht dabei letztlich um das alte sozialanthropologische Thema, die sterile Opposition zwischen sozialer Determinierung auf der einen und einer Idee des autonomen Individuums auf der anderen Seite zu überwinden, und einen Begriff von Handlungsfreiheit zu entwickeln, der diese als zutiefst sozial hervorgebracht erfasst (vgl Laidlaw 2014).

Auf diese grundlegenden Fragen zu menschlichem Handeln, die gerade in der gegenwärtig so lebendigen Anthropologie der Moral neu debattiert werden, möchte ich an dieser Stelle nicht weiter eingehen.

Vielmehr möchte ich die Geschichte weiter erzählen und anhand ihres Verlaufs eine bestimmte analytische Perspektive vorschlagen.

Nachdem Savitas Mutter den Brief an die Menschenrechtskommission diktiert hatte, drohte ihr der Vertreter der Shivsena, strong man im Viertel, er würde sie und ihre Tochter vertreiben lassen. Dies schüchterte die Mutter sehr ein. Sie wollte die Verhandlungen abbrechen. Doch nun trat die Vertreterin der NGO wieder auf den Plan, drohte im Gegenzug, sie würde den Ehemann wegen Mitgift bezogener Gewalt bei Gericht verklagen. Sie legte auch eine Klage unter Sec. 125 des Criminal Procedure Codes nahe, demnach ein Mann keine Angehörigen im



Elend leben lassen darf, auch nicht eine frühere Frau. Sie mobilisierte die Frauen des Viertels, um vor dem Shakha (dem Orstverein) der Shivsena zu protestieren. Sie sah darin auch eine Gelegenheit, ihre Autorität im Viertel gegen die der Shivsena unter Beweis zu stellen.

Dies gelang auch. Der Shakha Pramukh zog sich aus dem Verfahren zurück. Zu gering schien ihm der Nutzen, sich hier für den Mann einzusetzen in Hinblick auf Anhängerschaft und Wahlstimmen im Viertel. Eine Wahl stand an. Dafür schaltete sich nun die Frauenvereinigung der Shivsena ein, die Mahila Aghadi, die viel in familiären Konflikten tätig ist. Sie traten für das Unterhaltsrecht der Frau ein – und wollten sich damit nun als die eigentlichen Vorreiterinnen der Frauenrechte gegenüber der muslimischen NGO Vertreterin profilieren- und als Frauen gegenüber ihrem männlichen Kollegen.

Der Ehemann, der nun mit seiner Interpretation recht allein auf weiter Flur war, willigte ein, die Mitgift zurückzuzahlen und auch die 13500 Rupien Unterhalt. Die NGO unterließ eine Klage wegen Mitgift bezogener Gewalt. Die Menschenrechtskommission von Maharashtra lehnte die Klage der Mutter ab, weil sie nicht zuständig wäre.

Wie konnte es zu diesem Ergebnis kommen, das so nicht unbedingt erwartbar war? Zwar waren die gesetzlichen Grundlagen gegeben, aber die Konstellation der Akteure hätte einen anderen Ausgang wahrscheinlicher gemacht. Ich könnte diese Geschichte auch „Laura Bush in Dharavi“ nennen, denn es war eben kurz nach dem Plädoyer Laura Bushs für die Rettung der afghanischen Frauen vor den Taliban, dass der Frauenrechtsdiskurs so attraktiv für die Shivsena Frauen wurde und eine – politische – Einheit zwischen säkularem und Hindu-recht stiftete. Die Rechtsinterpretation der Shivsenafrauen verweist nun sehr deutlich auf den Rahmen, den unterschiedliche Normensystem für einander abgeben, aber eben auch auf die politischen Dynamiken, die dazu führen, inwiefern unterschiedliche Akteure sich wogegen abgrenzen. Aber schon der Rückzug des Shakha Pramukhs aus dem Konflikt verweist auf die unterschiedlichen Felder, deren Logiken und Dynamiken in der Positionierung gegenüber Normen zum Tragen kommen: die



demokratische Konkurrenz ließ es für ihn zu diesem Zeitpunkt inopportun erscheinen, hier die falschen Normen durchzusetzen.

Diese relationalen Prozesse sind es, die man im Hinblick auf Rechtstransfer und andere Zirkulationsprozesse meines Erachtens untersuchen muss. Hier kommt man zu dem eigentlichen Thema der Rechtstransfers: wer wird in bestimmten Situationen wie dadurch bemächtigt? D. h. welche Allianzen werden gestiftet? Wie spielt eine immer asymmetrische globale Öffentlichkeit, die Medien, Fragen also des agenda settings hier hinein? Welches Gewicht gewinnen unterschiedliche Handlungsorientierungen durch die Einbettung der Akteure in verschiedene Felder? Es geht hiermit um dynamische Konstellationen, in denen alle Beteiligten in verschiedene Handlungsfelder eingebunden sind.

Insofern liegt für mich die Aufgabe der Ethnologie in einer diachronen und synchronen Zusammenhangsforschung, welche soziale Phänomene - Situationen - in Hinblick auf ihre Konstitution in dynamischen Verflechtungen untersucht. Es ist in solchen Situationen, dass das, was [Anna Tsing](#) „Friction“ (2004) nennt, also das kontingente Zusammenfallen unterschiedlich weitreichender Zirkulationsprozesse, nachvollziehbar wird. Dies gilt für alle Prozesse, weder nur für die nur die „Globalen“, noch allein für die kleinen Geschichten von den kleinen Leuten.

Insofern geht es bei dieser Perspektive auf Verkettungen nicht darum zu behaupten, dass plötzlich alles global ist, wo es vorher lokal oder autonom war, sondern darum, eine der Ethnologie meiner Meinung nach grundsätzlich inhärente Perspektive auf die historische und soziale Konstitution eines Phänomens stark zu machen für das Verständnis der Gegenwart.

Genauso wenig geht es darum, die theoretisch potentiell unendlichen Ketten nachzuzeichnen, in denen Prozesse miteinander verflochten sind, sondern erstens zu fragen, wie weit solche Verkoppelungen in Raum und Zeit reichen, und zweitens die - letztlich politischen - Schnitte in Verflechtungsprozessen zu beobachten, die durch bestimmte Institutionen vorgenommen werden (vgl. Strathern 2001)[2].



Das heißt, wir können in dieser Perspektive auch Entkoppelungen thematisieren, Entkoppelungen, die entweder auf Autonomie, oder auf Isolation aufrufen können. Die Möglichkeit der Entkoppelung kann also sehr unterschiedliche Grundlagen und somit auch sehr unterschiedliche Folgen in Hinblick auf Inklusion und Exklusion aus weiteren sozialen Zusammenhängen haben. Eine Entkoppelung als Entkoppelung zu thematisieren, und nicht als gegebene „Autonomie“, erlaubt uns, die Bedingungen ihrer Möglichkeit zu befragen und insofern erst die Konstitution dessen, was als gegeben erscheint, zu verstehen.

Das heißt: Es geht gar nicht allein um „Globalisierung“ oder Verflechtung in Zeit und Raum. Es geht vor allem um eine gesellschaftstheoretische Perspektive, um Mikroanalysen der Verflechtung, der Entkoppelungsprozesse, der Konstitution von Figurationen, und dem kontingenten Zusammenfallen unterschiedlicher Handlungslogiken in Situationen.

Mir scheint unser Fach prädestiniert für deren Untersuchung, weil wir in Mikroanalysen alle Phasen/Stationen/Interaktionen solcher Prozesse in den Blick nehmen, und in Hinblick auf deren Verkettung untersuchen können. Ich denke, solche Verkettungen sind eigentlich nur in der Mikroperspektive sichtbar, aber natürlich einer, die sich als Mikroperspektive auf die Konstitution eines Makrozusammenhangs versteht.

II. Und damit bin ich auch beim zweiten Aspekt der Kritik. Es geht in der Sozialanthropologie ja auch immer ein bisschen darum, die Welt, oder vielmehr die Verdammten dieser Erde zu retten. Es schließen sich an dieses Unterfangen unterschiedliche Fragen an. Die erste, naheliegende ist: „wer war’s?“ so ein bisschen a la Agatha Christie. Sie schleicht sich nach meinem Eindruck in viele anthropologische Analysen ein – zum Teil natürlich ethisch völlig zu recht. Empört euch!



Hier überlege ich, ob die Perspektive der Tragödie sinnvoll ist, einer Mikroperspektive auf diachrone und synchrone Zusammenhänge gerecht zu werden. Ich habe den Eindruck, wir sollten die Frage „Wer war’s“ durch die Frage „wie konnte es dazu kommen, auch wenn unter Umständen alle etwas anderes wollten“ ersetzen. Dies ist die Frage der Tragödie. Die Tragödie behandelt die tragische Kollision nicht zwischen Gut und Böse, sondern zwischen einseitigen Positionen, von denen jede etwas Gutes enthält (bei Hegel). Sie handelt von den Dilemmata, und vom Ineinanderwirken verflochtener aber eventuell widersprüchlicher Handlungen, die alle ihren eigenen Logiken, Zielsetzungen und Wertigkeiten folgen und in der Summe etwas anderes produzieren, als sie intendieren.

Mit der Frage „wie konnte es dazu kommen“ machen wir uns unabhängig von Absichten. Wir behaupten nicht, dass es keine Absichten gäbe, und auch nicht, dass sie keine Rolle spielen. Aber wir sehen mehr, und zwar auch davon, wie Absichten zum Tragen kommen. Wir machen uns auch unabhängig von Vorstellungen eines wirkmächtigen „Weltgeistes“, dem Neoliberalismus, oder anderen Gouvernmentalitäten. Nicht dass es keinen Zeitgeist gäbe: Es gibt Moden, die auch wirksam werden, darüber z.B. dass sie Allianzen zwischen unterschiedlichen Akteuren stiften, dass sie eine gemeinsame Sprache bereitstellen, wie z.B. „die Menschenrechte“, die Menschen mit unterschiedlichen Anliegen verwenden können, um ihre Projekte in einem relevanten Rahmen verständlich und legitim zu machen (vgl. Merry 2006); oder Moden, die unterschiedlichste Projekte sich selbst erklären und damit orientieren, wie z.B. der Humanitarismus (vgl. Fassin 2010). Genau wie Absichten können diskursive Moden also hohe Wirkmächtigkeit entfalten. Wie sie dies genau tun, können wir meines Erachtens aber eher verstehen, wenn wir eben die Perspektive der Tragödie verwenden.

Mit der Perspektive der Tragödie: „Wie kam es dazu“ sehen wir, wie Absichten, Zeitgeist, ineinanderwirken und Resultate produzieren, die eben nicht



unbedingt intendiert sind, nicht der einen Logik entspringen, nicht die Entfaltung des Weltgeistes bedeuten. Dem Ergebnis können wir einen Namen geben. Der Prozess, der das Ergebnis hervorgebracht hat, würde in seinem Charakter nicht erfasst: er ist durch die Kontingenz des Zusammenwirkens unterschiedlicher Handlungslogiken bestimmt.

Hier ist vielleicht auch auf die Affinität einer solchen Perspektive mit einem „neuen Holismus“ zu verweisen, wie sie ihn z.B. Tatjana Thelen und Erdmute Alber vorschlagen in ihrer exemplarischen Zusammenschau von neuerer Verwandtschaftsforschung und der Ethnologie des Staates (z.B. **). Während die Expertise für die Anderen ja insbesondere die uns zugeschrieben Rolle ist, ist der Holismus vielleicht das eigentliche Alleinstellungsmerkmal unseres Faches. Natürlich kein strukturfunktionalistischer - widerspruchsfreier - erklärender Holismus, sondern ein verstehender, der die Pluralität von gleichzeitigen Handlungsorientierungen in den Blick nimmt, - die eben nicht frei von Widersprüchen ist [3].

Mit dieser Perspektive unterscheiden wir uns allein im Erkenntnisinteresse vielleicht am zentralsten von den diversen Versionen der Differenzierungstheorie. Nicht, dass wir diesen Unterschied als einen absoluten verstehen müssen, denn auch Differenzierungstheoretiker interessieren sich für die Umwelt des Systems, und auch wir interessieren uns für abgekoppelte Eigendynamiken von Teilfeldern - oder vielleicht doch nicht? Ist unsere Frage nicht doch immer die nach den Bedingungen der Möglichkeit von Eigendynamiken, also letztlich doch wieder der Konstitution der „Autonomie“ oder Entkoppelung? Und ist es nicht genau die Aufmerksamkeit auf das Ineinanderwirken unterschiedlicher Logiken, die uns auch von allen teleologischen oder anderen Hierarchisierungen sozialer Ordnungsmuster Abstand nehmen lässt (die in den meisten differenzierungstheoretischen Perspektiven zumindest irgendwo am Horizont schweben - es geht eben immer um eine Zunahme an Differenzierung, eine



Steigerung der Systemautonomie)? Ist eben nicht genau die Nicht-Privilegierung irgendeines solchen Ordnungsmuster durch eine holistische Perspektive begründet, die alle Ordnungsmuster in diesem Sinne betrachtet, das heißt: überall nach dem strukturbildenden Zusammenfallen unterschiedlicher Handlungsorientierungen fragt?

Aber: „Wie können wir denn dann kritisieren?“ Ist die Untersuchung des kontingenten Zusammenwirkens unterschiedlicher Logiken nicht im Ergebnis „rein deskriptiv“ - eine Verlaufsgeschichte ohne Reflexion der Selektion der Beobachtungsobjekte? Müssen wir nicht, wie Toscano (2012) argumentiert hat, die Totalität in den Blick nehmen, um die Logik des Zusammenfallens unterschiedlicher Handlungslogiken zu verstehen?

Meines Erachtens ist die Perspektive der Tragödie die effektivere Gesellschaftskritik, als sie erstens nicht „Gesinnungen“ sondern Konsequenzen in den Blick nimmt, und zweitens Zusammenhänge in Hinblick auf Problembestimmungen schlicht besser sichtbar macht. Vor allem aber macht sie in ihrer Mikroperspektive die Weichenstellungen sichtbar, die Verkettung von Entscheidungsprozessen und deren polyvalenten Orientierungen - und somit auch die möglichen Alternativen, die zu bestimmten Punkten im Prozess tatsächlich möglich waren.

Vor allem aber kann diese Perspektive meines Erachtens die zwei Dimensionen sozialanthropologischer Suche vereinen, nämlich die Ordnung der Welt und ihren Wandel zu verstehen, und menschliches Handeln in seiner Bedingtheit und seinen vielfältigen Orientierungen zu erfassen.

Fußnoten



[1] Wir haben uns lange damit beschäftigt, wie wir den theoretischen Dilemmata entkommen, die sich auftun, will man begründen, wie man das Andere verstehen kann, wenn dieses Verstehen grundsätzlich als „unübersetzbar“ behandelt wird, weil durch die Übersetzung das Original, das Authentische schon den Konzepten und Kategorien des Verstehens anheim fällt. Ich denke, wir haben gute Gründe anzunehmen, dass wir einander verstehen können.

[2] Ich sehe die Aufgabe der Ethnologie weniger im Nachzeichnen der Ketten der Verflechtung, sondern in der Analyse der Schnitte in den Verflechtungsketten. Eine solche Perspektive würde dem „Sozialen“ einen wieder sehr viel zentraleren Stellenwert geben, als es Latour - mit dem diese Position manchmal verwechselt wird - täte, auch wenn das „Soziale“ durch ebendiese Schnitte selbst konstituiert wird.

[3] Ein neuer Holismus kann sich nicht damit begnügen, das Ineinanderwirken der verschiedenen systematischen Teilbereiche der Sozialanthropologie in der Empirie zu untersuchen, denn die Bestimmung dieser Teilbereiche impliziert einen Meta-Standpunkt, und ist ja an sich schon Ergebnis spezifischer Differenzierungskonzeptionen. Vielmehr muss ein Holismus heute die Pluralität der Handlungslogiken erst einmal etablieren und die Grundlage der Verschiedenheit der Logiken thematisieren, um dann ihr Zusammenfallen/Zusammenwirken in Situationen zu analysieren.

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

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The institute of anthropology was founded in November 1914 as “Sächsische Forschungsinstitut für Völkerkunde” (Saxonian Research Institute for Ethnology). It was the first anthropological institute in the sphere of German-speaking academia. Typically for the time, the director of the anthropological museum was



also the director of the institute, at least for some years, until both positions were separated in 1927.

The institute of anthropology celebrated its hundredth anniversary in November 2014 with a series of events over two days (6th and 7th November) at the institute and the museum in Leipzig. The current director, Prof. Ursula Rao (director since 2012) together with the staff at the museum, and assisted by students and members of the institute and in close cooperation with the director of the public art collections in Saxony produced an exhibition entitled “On the Knowledge of Objects. Ethnologic Constellations”. Its focus is on the relationship between anthropology and anthropologists and anthropological objects, how perspectives are generated and what kind of knowledge is produced. A second major part of the centennial celebrations were several lectures and a symposium. The lectures by Dr. Katja Geisenhainer and Prof. Streck dealt with the variegated history of the institute and anthropology as a discipline in Leipzig. The symposium focused on the “future of anthropology”. These oral presentations were complemented by two publications: an edited volume on “100 Jahre Institut für Ethnologie der Universität Leipzig: Eine Anthologie seiner Vertreter” edited by Katja Geisenhainer, Lothar Bohrmann, and Bernhard Streck, and a special issue in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (the oldest still existing anthropological journal) on “Current Debates in Anthropology” edited by Ursula Rao.

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



Lectures on history

Given the occasion, the celebrations combined critical reflections about the past and the future of anthropology. On the first day (6th November), particular attention was paid to the history of the institute in Leipzig. Geisenhainer and Streck dealt in-depth with the different periods and their academic but also political characteristics. During the late imperial period and the Weimar Republic, the academic focus was on evolutionary theory and the understanding of the cultural (pre-)history of mankind. Politically, the idea to regain colonies, which Germany had lost in the wake of the first world war, stood in the foreground. Under Prof. Otto Reche, who was a physical anthropologist and headed the institute between 1926 and 1945, anthropology in Leipzig became strongly influence by Nazism and racial ideology. During the decades of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), much of the research at the institute concentrated on economic anthropology and pre-capitalist modes of production in different parts of the world.





Politically, anthropology in Leipzig was committed to the anti-imperialist struggle. In 1994, a new era began with Prof. Streck, who established a strong focus on the history of the discipline and on Tsiganology/Romani Studies. Currently, since Prof. Rao took over the chairwomanship of the institute in 2012, ideas about the anthropology of institutions, anthropology of the future and visual anthropology and materiality are taking shape. In retrospect, one can say that theory building in Leipzig transformed from historical speculation, which mainly was deductive (during much of the 20th century) to inductive approaches based on empirical research in more recent years. It is a particularity of the institute in Leipzig that during the decades of Nazism and socialist seclusion, field research was hardly possible for anthropologists teaching and learning there. Many studies produced at the institute were based on meticulous literature research. This changed only from the early 1990s onward. This is also when more reflexive approaches to anthropology finally found their way to Leipzig.

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

On the symposium



[Patrick Eisenlohr](#)'s paper begins with the observation that in the established social sciences and humanities in Europe and North-America, the main attention is paid to "Western" or "Northern" history of ideas, epistemologies and concepts. "The rest" of the world (which of course is the most part of it) is dealt with in the context of "area studies" at many universities. This is an expression of academic ethnocentrism. Anthropology, in this author's view, has the potential and the task to intervene in the debates of the established sciences and help them (force them?) to rethink and ideally give up this anachronistic and intellectually hindering perspective on the world. In some areas, such as studies on "religion", this has already been accomplished, at least to a degree. Eisenlohr then draws on debates in linguistic anthropology and develops a concept of translation that goes beyond the concept of reference and denotation (which underlies structuralist and post-structuralist theory). He proposes an understanding of translation in line with Peirce's sign theory that includes indexical features such as, e.g., accent, and symbolic contexts of language or speech. Anthropologists could seek to translate social worlds not objectively, but adequately and therefore do anthropology that would be mindful to cultural differences without "assimilating" or "othering", but by creating space for differences that, nevertheless, exist in close (power-laden) interactions. In this way, European/North-American science could be de-centered and other field knowledge could enter the discourse without having to be commensurable.





[Julia Eckert](#) proposes an anthropological approach that goes beyond an analysis of intentions. She starts with her observations about the proceedings of a marriage and subsequent divorce between a man and a woman in a slum in India. After having followed the case over some time and observed the actions of various actors involved, like the married couple, the mother of the wife, a local big man, an Islamic NGO, and the women's wing of Shiv Sena, a Marathi regional and Hindu nationalist political organization, Eckert reflects on the relational dynamics involved. Eckert proposes to look at the case in the perspective of the antique tragedy which does not ask "Who did it?", but: "How come things developed this way?" In this perspective, actors may have various, frequently even positive intentions, but in complicated ways actions and relations develop so that, in the end, an unforeseen result emerges. Anthropologists should try to understand how this happened, bearing in mind the plurality of individual options, the structural limitations and the interrelations between these factors. Eckert argues for micro-sociological, processes-oriented, diachronic and synchronic research that can outline the complex and contingent interlacement between various actors in different social fields. In the end, this perspective offers the possibility of critique of complex social processes without ascribing, e.g., the failure of a project, to rather diffuse constructions of neoliberalism or governmentalities.



[Andrea Behrends](#) focuses on the possibilities for cooperation and co-production of data and theory in the field. She proposes to see anthropological field research as a "travelling model" that, in the context of research, is getting translated and thereby changes. Change concerns the model, the researcher and also the researched - everyone involved and his/her environment. In this way, the process of translation





could provide for more equitable relations in the field and beyond, also with regard to analysis and theory making. Behrends illustrates this approach by reference to a project by Elizabeth Povinelli, Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at Columbia University. The project comprised Povinelli's collaboration with a group of people in Australia, who have been displaced in a land dispute and began a journey, accompanied by the anthropologist, to renegotiate their relationship to their ancestral land and their current social identity. The process was documented by filming and in the course of the project, the perspectives and scenes were intensely negotiated between the anthropologist and the people.

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

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





focus on the “belly of the beast” (be it World Bank, transnational corporations, medical laboratories) and use their methodological and epistemological energies to provide critical studies of contemporary life under conditions of globalization.

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

This pro-activist and critical stance can be seen as a “hallmark” of anthropology students. But the presenters remind us that a valid critique is related to careful rethinking of our discipline’s (and other disciplines’) histories and to allow for multiplicity and polyvalence instead of simple and clear judgments.

Muslim Networks #3!

Aimar Ventsel
December, 2014



This post represents the third and final installment of our special review section on [Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series](#). First installments available [here](#) and [here](#).

Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds: [Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series](#) (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Pp. 338. \$59.95 cloth, \$21.50 paper

I wanted to review this book for one purpose: I know very little about Islam and from its title this book seemed like a good place to begin. This review should therefore be seen from that perspective. Overall, I admit, I was not disappointed.

The main argument of this edited volume is that networks are crucial to understanding Islam. As it appears, Muslim networks enforce a sense of community and help to create common identity both on a group level, and on a



larger perspective, by expanding over continents and supporting the movement of ideas or people. This collection of articles focuses on the networks that are related mainly to various facets of identity, centred around the common perception of being Muslim. These identities are related to common origin, religious group affiliation, gender or political views and stretch across time and space. Economic aspects or larger social issues were left out, but the selection of topics is diverse. Geographically the book goes beyond the Orient, discussing Muslim groups and activities in Europe, North America and the World Wide Web.

From the fourteenth-century scholarly travels via politically motivated Mosque networks and various women's groups, to aspects of modern culture like the Internet and hip hop, the reader discovers more about the importance of spiritual interconnection within the global Muslim community. These networks are flexible, in a state of constant recreation and surprisingly vital. In short, as Taieb Belghazi writes, "we encounter the idea of Islam on the move" (p.275).

The book contains thirteen chapters, a masterly analytical introduction and an afterword. A review simply cannot grasp the book in its entirety, therefore only a selected few chapters will be discussed below. As a social anthropologist, I found fascinating the view on Muslim networks presented in the Introduction by miriam cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence. Instead of looking at networks as concrete social relationships, the editor describes Muslim networks as a medium, method and metaphor defining the 'umma', the Muslim community. This approach justifies the claim that such networks are fluid, in process. In the Introduction, general network theories are avoided and the Muslim world is presented as a continuum of heterogeneous forms of identities throughout world history in a situation where Muslims were both the dominant group and/or minority. Simultaneously, the Introduction also shows how following the chapters interact with each other in order to form a coherent narrative.



The book is compiled in chronological order, starting in the Middle Ages and progressing to the twenty-first century. The first chapter by Vincent J. Cornell describes the travels of the fourteenth-century Moroccan scholar Ibn-Battuta. This chapter exposes how medieval Muslim identity differs from the modern nation state, where loyalties are defined territorially rather than philosophically. The chapter includes a brief but interesting analysis showing how medieval Muslim notables resembled mafia dons” (p.33) and how hierarchies of loyalties were structured in such states. The travels of Ibn-Battuta are also described as a process revealing the nature of Muslim networks as networks of identity and loyalty. Ibn-Battuta, as a typical medieval scholar, lived in different courts, served local sultans as an expert of Islamic law and by necessity changed his patrons. During his lifetime he travelled from Maghreb to India, and in his own way can therefore be considered the forefather of modern mobile scholars. This chapter points out how the Muslim world was held together by common knowledge and jurisprudence as a global spiritual community and how this spirituality was carried by men of knowledge or ‘*ulama*’.

As the author writes: “The solidarity of ‘ulama’ was based in part on a common education and a common epistemology” (p.43). As an expert on Quaranic law, this made possible Ibn-Battuta’s travels and activities in different regions.

The next chapter is directly linked to the first. David Gilmartin gives a detailed overview of how ‘*ulama*’ were involved in the creation of the state of Pakistan. Here the ‘*ulama*’ is shown in a different role using modern means of communication such as print media and publications in order to foster the creation of a modern nation state. The author goes back to the nineteenth century and shows how structures of the British colonial empire, separation of state from



society, and the introduction of print media, created a different environment to that of the medieval state, discussed in a previous chapter. In this chapter, '*ulama*' is shown as the network that instrumentalised colonial structures and modern means of technology in order to mobilise Muslims around the idea of a common Muslim state. Valuable are also remarks that show how, for example, the Taliban and organisers of September 11 are directly linked to the networks of political mobilisation established in the nineteenth century.

Gender in the Muslim world is tackled in several chapters focused on women in different regions and socio-political contexts. Tayba Hassan Al Khalifa Sharif contributed a chapter about the Iraqi Shiite women in the Netherlands and the meaning of the mourning ritual '*majlis al-qiraya*'; a ritual conducted by women only and dedicated to the remembrance and mourning of members of the Prophet's family. A reader unfamiliar with Muslim culture and specific characteristics of different religious schools finds in this chapter an excellent explanation of the main conceptual differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The chapter focuses on a diasporic women's network "that projects female actors as the custodians of hope" (p. 133). Through the detailed ethnographic descriptions, the author paints an interesting picture of the ritual and atmosphere in the room. It is argued that the ritual has a therapeutic meaning to participants linking their new home in Holland not only to the pre Iran-Iraqi war Iraq, but also to Iraqi history. As a whole, the chapter sheds light on how Muslim refugee communities are able to establish their group solidarity around intimate rituals, using poetry and historic narratives.

The concluding research paper on Muslim hip hop networks in the USA is rather disappointing. The author H. Samy Alim shows how different American hip hop artists use 'Islamic knowledge' and particularly the Quran to link hip hop with Islam. For someone who has conducted research on hip hop, the chapter



contributes too little to what we know about the different forms and ideologies of hip hop culture. Apart from discovering that some of the most notable hip hop artists like Mos Def, Chuck D or RZA are Muslims, the reader will not find any particular new insight into the world of American Muslims and their take on hip hop. It is shown that Afro-American Muslim artists feel part of the global Muslim community 'ummah' but the chapter does not answer the question of how.

At the end of the chapter the author poses questions for 'further research', which are related to the process of Muslim nation building with the help of contemporary urban music culture. I hope H. Samy Alim will have a chance to explore these issues in the concluding pages and present us with some new and fascinating research in the future.

In general, this book is a well-written and refreshing collection of individual research articles. These articles present an alternative reading of networks, discussing issues of a philosophical, religious and ideological nature rather than strategies or structures. All contributions are theoretically well funded, and in some chapters unexpected links are made between different philosophers and the subsequent analysis of the networks. However, the most glaring attribute of the book is how readable it is for people without a deep knowledge of Islam or the Orient. Regional histories, rituals, and the essence of different spiritual schools are all elegantly explained to create a whole text that is perfectly understandable and interesting for the non-expert. This book is therefore not only recommended to scholars of the Middle East, Islam or the Orient but also to anybody who wishes to gain an insight into Muslim culture. Moreover, anybody interested in diasporas, nation building, networks or identity construction can find in this book some solid case studies of comparative material.



Muslim Networks #2!

Christian Ritter
December, 2014



This post represents the second installment of our special review section on [Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series](#). First installment available [here](#).

Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds: [Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series](#) (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Pp. 338. \$59.95 cloth, \$21.50 paper

Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop provides a much-needed and thought-provoking challenge to obstinate preconceptions about Islam. Whereas Muslim



networks have been widely associated with terrorist groups in the popular media in the aftermath of 9/11, a fine-tuned, network-centred approach to the exploration of Islamic civilization is adopted in this eminent collection of essays. Edited by Bruce Lawrence and Miriam Cooke, respectively Emeritus Professor of Islamic Studies and Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at Duke University, the book contains thirteen essays covering a broad spectrum of Muslim collectives. It is the second volume in the wider series *Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks*, which studies Muslim believers across several continents in both historical and contemporary contexts. In doing so, its contributors overcome portrayals of Islam as a homogeneous faith, geographically fixed to the Orient, or as a pre-modern antithesis to Western society. Contrasting a monolithic narrative of Islamic orthodoxy (Asad 1986: 15), the essays illustrate how the belief system is diversely transformed in new contexts. In comparison to previous studies on Islam, *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* creates a new interdisciplinary space for intellectual exchange between the humanities and social sciences, while the authors shed light on the formation and development of religious networks. Akin to the arabesque ornaments embellishing the front page of the book, the skilful, network-centred approach evolves in numerous variations in all thirteen essays. The stories of various Muslim communities, past and present, are told in the light of faith-based connections.

The recurring motif in the collection is that of Muslim networks, which refers to both an interconnected set of social relations and a strong commitment to the Islamic faith that becomes manifest in the imagined global Muslim community, the umma.

The prime purpose of this noted collection is to correct a long-standing omission: scholars in the social sciences and humanities alike failed to recognise the role Muslim networks played in the evolution of the Islamic civilization from the 7th to the 21st century. Hence, the contributors place emphasis on both “the networked nature of Islam and the impact of Muslim networks on world history” (p. 1). The theoretical approach developed in the volume unites social scientists and



humanists in this subject-based area of research. The essays reveal a consistent trait of Islamic civilization, that is the tight-knit networks holding believers together across space and time. Depicting the diversity of Muslim networks, the collection demystifies the complexity of faith-based togetherness. Rather than focusing on static phenomena, the authors capture the movement of Islam by evoking imagery of travel and its intrinsic dynamics. Travel was integral to both the constitution and evolution of Muslim networks, ranging from academic cooperation and artist circles to trader connections, as previously observed by Clifford Geertz (1968: 41). Vincent Cornell's essay 'Ibn Battuta's Opportunism: The Networks and Loyalties of a Medieval Muslim Scholar' traces the extensive journeys of the Moroccan academic, unravelling the strong ties between members of the professional trader circle *ulama* in the 14th century. Jamillah Karim's 'Voices of Faith, Faces of Beauty: Connecting American Muslim Women through *Azizah*' imposingly portrays the networks of American Muslim women that have been bolstered by the popular women's magazine *Azizah* over recent decades in the United States. The relationship between Muslim networks and information technologies is another significant sub-theme of the collection. In 'Ideological and Technological Transformations of Contemporary Sufism' Carl Ernst explores Sufi networks in relation to the development of information technologies, from mass printing in the late 19th century to internet-based communication in the late 20th century. The last contribution to the collection of essays addresses a recent facet of Islam that emphatically exemplifies the unifying forces of the *umma*. Samy Alim's essay 'A New Research Agenda: Exploring the Transglobal Hip Hop *Umma*' examines the community that emerged from the powerful networks created by Hip Hop artists of Muslim faith.

Embedded in national and linguistic subcultures, Hip Hop became a testimony to a new global community embracing all Muslim believers.

To what extent the newly tailored network approach will provoke a paradigm shift in the study of Islam, as proclaimed by the editors, can only be answered in the years to come. It is evident, however, that the thirteen articles have given rise to



a strong transdisciplinary debate about ways of studying Islam in the social sciences and humanities. The authors broaden the horizons of their audience and foster inter-religious as well as inter-cultural dialogue in the interconnected world of the early 21st century. The essays unfold the dynamics of faith-based networks and testify that belief systems are deeply embedded therein. Despite their intellectual weight, the various accounts of Muslim networks are written in an accessible and detail-rich style, enjoyably comprehensible to all who seek to better understand how the destiny of faith is intertwined with social networks.

As the book can also be read as an introduction to Islamic civilization, I recommend it to interdisciplinary audiences and undergraduate students wishing to comprehend the development of the world religion.

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Piketty #3!

Tijo Salverda
December, 2014



This post represents the third installment of our special review section on [Capital in the Twenty-First Century](#). First and second installments available [here](#) and [here](#).

[Piketty, Thomas. 2014. Capital in the Twenty-First Century. Harvard: Harvard University Press. 696 pp. Hc: \\$39.95. ISBN: 9780674430006.](#)

Thomas Piketty's 2014 *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (translated from the 2013 French version) has clearly reinvigorated the debate about inequality, in particular in the Anglo-Saxon world. Prior to Piketty, many had already raised concerns about rising inequality, though the focus was largely on income from



labour, with the highly remunerated CEOs as the lightning rod. Piketty equally shares these concerns, yet the contribution and buzz of his book comes predominantly from his longitudinal analysis of wealth inequality - gains from investments in stocks, land, property, etc., instead of income from labour. This is a much-needed contribution to the current debate, as wealth inequality tends to be even more skewed. Yet, it also comes with many challenges, as wealth is notoriously difficult to measure due to the variety of asset classes and the incentives and potential to hide wealth (in tax havens, for example).

The main argument set out in the book is that the return on capital grows faster than economic growth, which he formulates as follows: $r > g$. For the wealthy it suffices to (re)invest a fraction of the return on their capital to equal the growth rate. The remaining part they can consume (page 564). Judging from the media coverage of the wealthiest lavish lifestyles, their yachts and mansions, it appears plausible that the return on capital is higher than the economic growth - though, we would have to assume that these expenditures are paid for by their return on capital and not by income from labour. Notwithstanding his catchy formulation, Piketty insists that it relies on empirical data and that it is not just another economic formula that bears little resemblance to reality. With data covering more than two centuries of, among others, tax records (of France and the UK in particular), he nevertheless presents $r > g$ more or less as a given in the case there are no political interventions - or world wars. It would result in an impossible state of endless accumulation. Maybe, then, he applies it as a warning: if we do not reverse the trend, we will eventually return to late nineteenth, early twentieth century rentier classes.

The future will tell to what extent Piketty's analysis can withstand critical scrutiny, as his book has provoked fierce debate. Nonetheless, it offers an interesting analysis about the logic of inequality and provides us with an



abundance of empirical data, even though Piketty is open about the fact that there remains a significant lack of adequate historical and contemporary data of, especially, wealth. Echoing Larry Summers, then, the book should be considered a (re)start of the debate rather than the end. In this review I shall address the relevance of Capital in the Twenty-First Century for social anthropology.

The abundance of data and the complexity of the book are both a limiting factor, as one is bound to discover that certain aspects are not covered and/or nuances are missing, and an advantage, as one can easily choose one or two topics to elaborate on. For obvious reasons, namely the availability of data, it has a very strong West-European and US bias, so social anthropology may add a thing or two about economic inequality elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, and with reference to the general interests and methodologies of social anthropology, one of the book's main limits is that apart from the characters featuring in novels by Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac, inequality (and the politics involved) is hardly given a face. Piketty appears to be partly aware of this since he argues, '[t]he history of inequality is shaped by the way economic, social, and political actors view what is just and what is not, as well as by the relative power of those actors and the collective choices that result. It is the joint product of all relevant actors combined' (page 20). Nevertheless, he hardly touches upon it, while, as has also be pointed out by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, enhancing inequality as well as reversing its growth is the product of actors operating in political and social contexts. Thus, for a more complete picture





additional data on, and analyses of, the actors involved are needed.

Social anthropology's contribution to the debates and analyses may also come from its ability to analyse the workings of perceptions. Inequality is not about economic calculations of differences in wealth and income only. It is predominantly about the (perceived) consequences of these differences. As Piketty says, '... there will always be a fundamentally subjective and psychological dimension to inequality, which inevitably gives rise to political conflict that no purportedly scientific analysis can alleviate' (page 2). A closer look at how actors, poor, rich and in the middle, perceive inequality, its causes and consequences, and each other would be of essential value. Though not an anthropological study per se, I would be pleased to welcome a follow up on Elisa Reis and Mick Moore's *Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality* - in other words, what views do the rich have of the predicament of the poor?

But what I especially wish to convey is why social anthropology and other disciplines need to collaborate in critically engaging with one of Piketty's main arguments - he actually states that '[t]he social sciences collectively know too little to waste time on foolish disciplinary squabbles' (page 32/33). There should be a combined effort to address the raw realities of wealth accumulation and inheritance. According to Piketty, inheritance will become increasingly more important, with its ultimate result being the creation of new rentier classes - the explicit consequence when the return on capital is higher than economic growth. This feels counter-intuitive and at odds with dominant discourses of self-made man (and woman), successful start-ups, hedge fund managers and other well-remunerated professionals working long hours; despite that they seem a minority there are, of course, also prominent heirs among the super-rich.



Yet, according to Piketty inherited wealth represented roughly two-thirds of private capital in France in 2010, compared with barely one-third capital accumulated from savings (page 403). This is an astounding figure and if true in France and other societies, it indicates that if we want to more fully understand inequality (and the directions it may take) we do have to improve our knowledge of inherited wealth.



Firstly, the social sciences, including economics, have to join forces to improve the data on wealth and inheritance, i.e. amount of wealth, kind of assets, demographics of owners, tax(-evasion) infrastructures, cross-national differences, and, last but not least, whether it is an addition to, or substitute of, income from labour. Piketty, for one, seems to even express doubts about the return of the rentier classes as of old: ‘... we have moved from a society with a small number of very wealthy rentiers to one with a much larger number of less wealthy rentiers: a society of petits rentiers if you will’ (page 420). All the same, intergenerational wealth transfer may increasingly determine who is able to afford property (at a young age) and who can afford good education for his/her children – thus contributing to successfully landing a well-paid job, and therewith to the perpetuation of income from labour inequality. Many possessing the means to transfer wealth to their offspring may not share the super-rich’ large surpluses that inequality is associated with. They contribute to inequality nevertheless, but



of a type that may be more difficult to pin down, is more widely shared and, as a result, more difficult to reverse.

Secondly, then, social anthropology should apply its skills to grasp the 'everyday' reality of inheritance and wealth accumulation - this has been largely absent since George E. Marcus's work on dynastic families. Family wealth and inheritance are often not straightforward.

In the case of the French grandes familles, Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot illustrate how their business practices are informed by ideas about how to safeguard the family wealth for future generations. Since, of course, heritage practices are not static it would be incredibly interesting and relevant to analyse how, for example, narratives change in the face of the debate Piketty has provoked. What levels of inequality (and tax evasion) are perceived as morally just? Everyone has a moral opinion about inequality, as few would nowadays accept that all the wealth be in the hands of only a very small number of people. Judging from Piketty's work as well as from new data that may surface in the years to come, anthropologists should not limit themselves to the wealthiest only. How do petits rentiers, for example, justify their position? Since their wealth and everyday (working) lives do not reflect the morally-refuted past of solely living off rents - like Thorstein Veblen's leisure class - they may not perceive themselves as part of the 'problem'. By probing these and similar questions more systemically, social anthropology may help to better understand the current state of inequality.

Surely, Piketty's book has its limits. But for those interested in (in)equality, it offers the potential to ask new questions, critically engage with its findings and stir the debate.



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Muslim Networks #1!

Shaheed Tayob
December, 2014



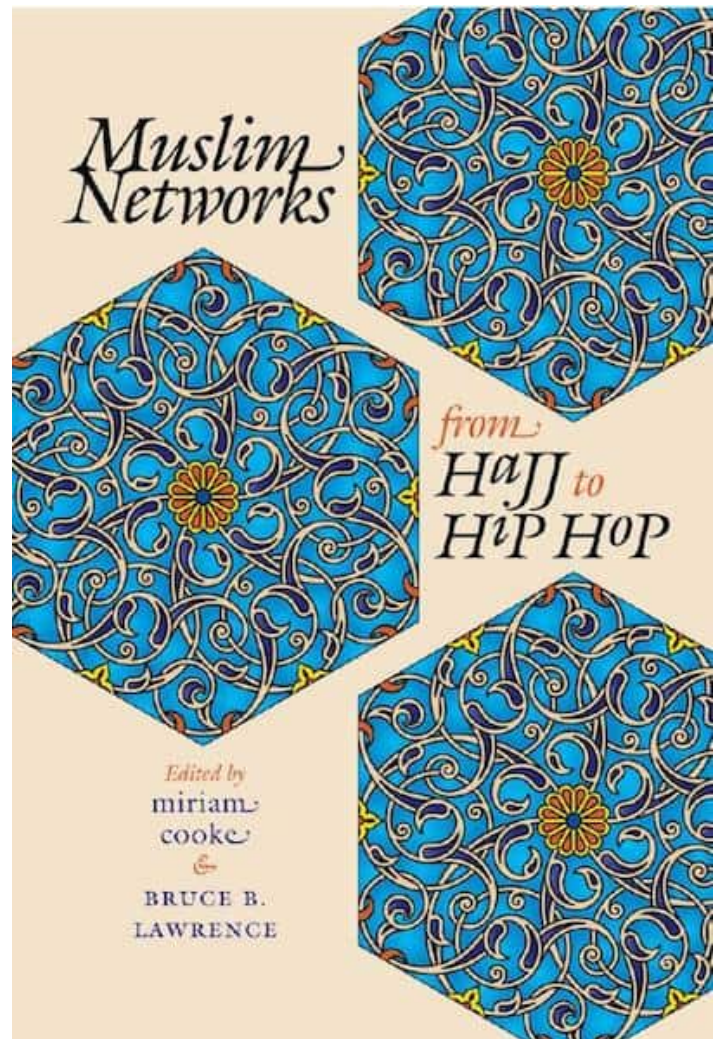
Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds: [Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series](#) (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Pp. 338. \$59.95 cloth, \$21.50 paper

From Hajj to Hip Hop is an exploration of *Muslim Networks* in a variety of locations and contexts. Bruce Lawrence and Miriam Cooke seek to apply the concept of network as “making a choice to be connected across recognised boundaries” to explore “the networked nature of Islam and the impact of Muslim networks on world history.” They also employ the concept of network as a “metaphor that privileges certain aspects of reality that are deemed to be of theoretical importance,” to Muslims in capturing the unstable, changing and “synergizing” potential of Islam. The volume is divided into three sections that bear the task of “Defining”, “Imagining” and “Tracing” Muslim networks.



Defining Muslim Networks

The first section of the book relies on author case studies to carefully tease out the theoretical implications of speaking about Muslim networks. Vincent J. Cornell argues, through an analysis of Ibn Batuta's life, that his ability to mobilise a Muslim network was due to his privileged access to Islamic knowledge that membership of the 'ulama afforded. David Gilmartin, through a case study of the formation of Pakistan, cautions against assumptions of networks as essential snapshots of Muslim politics and societies. Kurzman similarly warns against the reification of networks, suggesting that it is, in fact, the processes of reification that are a worthy object of study. His analysis of the Iranian revolution, for instance, argues that it was the appropriation and transformation rather than simply the deployment of mosques and religious leaders as centers of revolutionary activity. Zaman rounds off this vein of analyses with a case study of the "long-standing discourse of language and learning" in Islam.



He reminds us that 'ulama and Islamists, even when geographically similar are



engaged in very different language discourses. Rather than remaining distinct however, he shows how ‘ulama have forged a new language discourse in articulating contemporary Muslim concerns.

Imagining Muslim Networks

Having introduced the reader to the dynamic potential of Muslim networks, the second section presents four case studies that offer novel insights and thought provoking analyses into what networks do and what constitutes them. In chapter five, Judith Ernst tackles “The Problem of Islamic Art” pointing to its unclear reference to Islam and Muslims. Ernst highlights the various and unstable identities of artists, labor and donors in a project as clearly ‘Islamic’ as the construction of the Prophet’s mosque in Madinah, that involved a vast network of both Muslims and non-Muslims. She provocatively challenges any conception of “their” art that privileges religious identity as dehumanizing. Instead, she suggests that we pay attention to the way that Muslims and Muslim cultures have and continue to engage with insiders and outsiders.

Chapter 6 by Tayba Hassan Al Khalifa Sharif is a case study of women’s’ *majlis* performance by Iraqi Shia refugees in the Netherlands. Sharif argues for *majlis* as a therapeutic practice that connects the women from their current homes in the Netherlands, to their memories of life in Iraq and to the sacred history of the Karbala, offering thereby an argument for the networked nature of ritual and memory. Chapter 7 by Samia Serageldin tracks the rise of the “Islamic salons,” private women’s religious gatherings amongst elite Egyptian woman.

She argues that public religious practice “is as much a spiritual imperative as a form of social networking.” Jamillah Karim, in Chapter 8, through a case study



of Azizah, a Muslim women's magazine, shows how successful networking has been a source of empowerment, inspiration and voice for those normally silenced both by both the patriarchal Islamic and western discourse on Muslim women.

Tracing Muslim Networks

The third and final section presents four possible avenues for studying Muslim networks. Carl Ernst in Chapter 9 offers a sketch of the way in which Sufi orders, the guardians of esoteric knowledge, have seemingly paradoxically become engaged in publication for lay audiences. He calls for more research of Sufism's engagement with the networks that new media facilitates. Quintan Wiktorowicz in Chapter 10 shuns dichotomies between good and bad Muslims and argues instead for a research agenda that focuses on what he calls the "transnational Salafi social movement community." Gary Bunt in Chapter 11 takes the study of Salafi movements explicitly online by arguing that the increased presence of online Islam, though admittedly accessible by very few of the world's Muslims, is a rich archive for exploring contemporary Islamic discourse and expression. Jon W. Anderson in *Wiring Up* in Chapter 12 starts that work through a story of the development of online Islam. He argues that early efforts by lay Muslims quickly faced the brunt of "officiating strategies" by institutions, activists and religious leaders who combined the new technological platform with "traditional" authority and expertise. H. Samy Alim rounds off the volume with a call to examine how Muslim Hip Hop artists link their art form to Islam in various ways.

She provides an example of artists' conceptions of the shared rhythmic, poetic and informative nature of the Quran and Hip Hop as well as the transformative potential of both.



As a point of reflection I wonder what would result from an application of Judith Ernst's complication of the concept of Islamic Art to the study of Muslim networks. Commentators on the rise to prominence of the Jihadist-Salafi group ISIS have highlighted the murky alliances between the US, its regional allies in the Middle East and [fledgling groups that have formed ISIS](#). If we apply the concept of network to this contemporary phenomenon it may be unclear whether ISIS are in fact themselves the 'agents of foreign intervention' which they so violently seek to oppose, or whether the US and its regional allies are in fact nodes of a "transnational Salafi social movement community" (Wiktorowicz, Chapter 10) Restricting the study to Muslim-Muslim networks avoids such confusion, albeit at the risk of obfuscation. In this case as in that of Islamic Art the networked world that we live in may in fact defy the exclusive focus on Muslim-Muslim networks.

Piketty #2!

Patrick Neveling
December, 2014



This post represents the second installment of our special review section on [Capital in the Twenty-First Century](#). First and third installments available [here](#) and [here](#).

[Piketty, Thomas. 2014. Capital in the Twenty-First Century. Harvard: Harvard University Press. 696 pp. Hc: \\$39.95. ISBN: 9780674430006.](#)

These are wild times and people have wild luck. Fortunes have been made, unmade, and taken away due to a severe shift within the capitalist world system, which became manifest to the wider public as a result of the so-called financial crisis that began in 2008. Since then, an understanding of capitalism as a rather unsustainable way of being human has been gaining significant traction within the social sciences.

One of capitalism's most powerful guises is, however, to dress luck and fortune as



fate. In “Capital in the Twenty-First Century”, Thomas Piketty takes on what is probably the most significant twentieth century theorem in the academic ivory-tower inhabited by economists: Simon Kuznets’ 1950s theory that “income inequality would automatically decrease in advanced phases of capitalist development, regardless of economic policy choices or other differences between countries, until eventually it stabilized at an acceptable level” (Piketty 2014, 11).

Kuznets, who at the time held a chair for statistical economics at the University of Pennsylvania, is one of the most influential economists at the twentieth century, which means that a few words about him are in order. He is credited for introducing the concept of a Gross National Product (GNP), which became a standard global measurement for annual growth in national economies and was first applied by the US Department of Commerce. GNP measurement of national “wealth” has been widely criticized since the early 1970s. Still Kuznets was given a chair for political economy in Harvard and the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (often mistaken as the economists’ equivalent of the Nobel Prize for Peace because both are named after a Swedish weapons manufacturer and designer of explosives) in 1971 for his contribution to the discipline.

The Kuznets Curve, according to Piketty, was a watershed moment in economics, giving the discipline an apparatus for replacing the nineteenth century views that saw capitalism as the trigger for ever-increasing inequality, or worse, as having an intrinsic drive towards concentrating ever more in ever fewer hands and thereby digging its own grave.



An anthropological view on this may state that Kuznets' work laid the foundation for an epistemic community in opposition to the Marxian crisis theorists searching for signals of capitalism's autumn and winter stages in global economic developments. Economists now had their counter-belief: that eventually, all would be well. Piketty poignantly cites their mantra from the 1950s: "Growth is a rising tide that lifts all boats" (Piketty 2014, 11).

There is an obvious Achilles Heel to this - "growth". Indeed, much of Piketty's book is devoted to attacking Kuznets' mantra from various angles. His most powerful critique is that what Kuznets took for a rising-tide-capacity of growth was in fact a historical exception. For this he serves us a formula that may soon attain the sex appeal so far reserved for " $e=mc^2$ " - " $r>g$ ", which says that the return on capital (r) is always higher than the growth rate (g). This $r>g$ is "fundamental" among the many forces pushing for a divergence in the "process by which wealth is accumulated and distributed." Piketty is anxious to point out that this "... has nothing to do with any market imperfection, [but that] the more



perfect the capital market (in the economist's sense), the more likely r is to be greater than g ." (Piketty 2014, 24).

Exceptionally high growth rates, instead, are a force for convergence as they allow for a high return on capital and at the same time bring down the capital/income ratio - $\beta = r/g$. Growth, in other words, impacts on the "first fundamental law of capitalism", which is $\alpha = r \times \beta$ (Piketty 2014, 52-5). α here stands for the share of capital in national income, meaning that if in a given national economy the rate of return on capital is 5 per cent and the capital/income ratio is 600 per cent, the share of capital in national income will be 30 per cent. This is further reflected in the "second fundamental law of capitalism", which says that the capital/income ratio is the savings rate s divided by the growth rate g (Piketty 2014, 166-70).

It is only on the basis of these two fundamental laws that the $r > g$ formula develops its iconoclastic potential, which led to the frantic, hopeless [Financial Times](#) effort to undercut Piketty's dataset in late May 2014, - at which point the book was already an international best-seller with first indications of an influence on national economic policies.

Piketty's prediction is that persistent slow growth rates under capitalism may result in a capital/income ratio of 700 per cent at the end of the twenty-first century (Piketty 2014, 196). This is the norm rather than the exception for the period from 1700 to 2012, the furthest stretch of Piketty's impressive dataset. The book's explosive potential derives from the fact that Piketty shows how the dataset on which Kuznets Curve was founded reflects merely those historically exceptional years from 1913 to 1948, when there was a "compression of high US



incomes” (Piketty 2014, 13). Kuznets’ Curve was sustainable on empirical grounds because all industrially advanced national economies had very high growth-rates in the decades after the end of the Second World War. This was the second historical window of opportunity for the Kuznets-Curve-mantra-driven epistemic community of economists, and let them push the boat out, so to say, call for growth-stimulating measures by governments and have everyone wait, until this very day, for the tide to rise and wash away severe inequality.

Against this, Piketty pits that the slowing of growth rates since the 1970s has brought about a much higher capital/income ratio - $r > g$. To this he adds that inherited wealth has much more weight in times of slow growth, which is why future social mobility will be very limited. One may add here the question of if it was not always so: dishwasher to millionaire and other rags-to-riches stories may always be arranged for because they work so well in keeping the ‘anything goes fiction alive on which capitalism strives so much.

Obviously, there is a lot more to say about this book of encyclopedic size and weight. Among the fifty or so reviews on the book, I recommend Benjamin Kunkel’s piece in the [London Review of Books](#) and James K. Galbraith’s in [Dissent Magazine](#), which has an [excellent discussion of Piketty versus Marx](#).

Although neither Piketty nor indeed his translator Arthur Goldhammer manage to maintain the very accessible style of the initial 108 pages (equal to “Part I”), there is a lot to gain from the entire 655 text (including insightful footnotes). I personally enjoyed the richness of datasets and analysis and was often surprised by the attention to detail throughout the book; the pricing of slaves from Quentin Tarrantino’s “Django Unchained”, for example, were verified as a historically



sound in Piketty's analysis of the impact of slavery in historical US economy on the capital/income ratio (Piketty 2014, 163). Similarly, I enjoyed learning about the "Two Cambridges" debate between economists from Harvard University and Cambridge University, in which the two sides quarreled over whether "the capital/income ratio adjusts to the savings rate and structural growth rate of the economy rather than the other way around" (Piketty 2014, 231). Likewise, Piketty's discussion of the "Rise of the Supermanager" in the Anglo-Saxon world is as insightful as his account of the 2013 Cyprus crisis, in which he indicates that the "Troika" of the International Monetary Fund, European Commission and European Central Bank never really had the means to intervene properly (Piketty 2014, 314-25; 553-6 respectively).



If ours were a world of pre-neoliberal universities and without rushed Bologna-Reform degrees, I would now say that Piketty's book should soon be core reading for any Anthropology Masters Programme with a focus on economics and development. As long as Bologna lasts, university lecturers may benefit



from using Piketty's graphs, perhaps to illustrate, for example, the linkages between global population growth, changing economic output since 1700 and how global income has been split between continents over the past centuries (see Piketty 2014, 60).

Unfortunately, Piketty's book is not the strongest in its predictions for the twenty-first century, nor in the cures he suggests for preventing $r \gg g$ and maintaining $r > g$ at a sustainable level. Indeed, there is nothing much novel about his calls for a global tax on wealth in the third and final part of the book, which in many ways echo the long-held demands of the Association pour une taxation des transactions financières pour l'aide aux citoyens (ATTAC). Yet Piketty's suggestion that in an era of slow growth it is only political interventions that can maintain a reasonable $r > g$ may, however, be well received in circles that needed to be convinced that Kuznets Curve was a fiction. Others have rightly felt inclined to critique Piketty for wanting to preserve a status quo by serving an enormous pile of "facts" (see Engelen and Williams 2014). To this I would add that the issue with capitalism is not only the way wealth is distributed and redistributed but also the way wealth is generated under increasingly super-exploitative conditions under which tens millions of workers generate the global output in garments and light-consumer electronics, for example (Neveling 2014; 2015). Piketty's focus on growth (and his insistence that there was none before 1700) and how this relates to inequality may add to a somewhat worrying trend in other disciplines, such as global economic history, where the analysis of capitalism increasingly neglects exploitation and accumulation and instead equates capitalism with economic growth per se (Schenk 2014).

Harvard University Press and Belknap's decision for the book-design may well add ammunition to such criticism. The two presses deliver a book cover screaming, "here is ontological security" in the reader's face: the word "Capital"



is written in carmine letters with golden borders. The back of the inside cover shows Piketty sitting with legs and arms crossed on what looks like a university lecture room table with a whiteboard filled with formulas behind him - as if he was the “cleaner” impersonated by Harvey Keitel in Tarantino’s “Pulp Fiction” who can sort things out for all of us, and foremost for economics. The blurbs on the back of the book, finally, are printed on a golden background, implying that all is well again, now that the cleaning is done and we have regained trust in capitalism - as long as it does not come in the $r >> g$ version.

In my view the revolutionary ‘finding’ of the book is that academic mantras such as Kuznets Curve emerge if a discipline turns presentist and does not cross-reference data with longer-term developments.

In this sense, mainstream anthropology shares much with economics - think of the 1990s globalisation debate, which took centuries-old phenomena for a radically novel present. For anthropologists then, Piketty’s project to reposition “economics as a subdiscipline of the social sciences, alongside history, sociology, anthropology, and political science” (Piketty 2014, 573) may serve as an invitation to break our self-imposed chains and (re-)turn the discipline to the social sciences as well - and away from an overemphasis on the marginal, the present, and the ontic other.

Once this has happened, anthropologists and economists will have a lot to catch up on.



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Anthropology and the Persistence of Universal Europe: Translation as a Key Term

Patrick Eisenlohr
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The following paper [in German] was presented during the symposium 'The Future of German Anthropology' on 7 November 2014 at the University of Leipzig.

Throughout much of Europe, and certainly in Germany, knowledge production in the humanities and social sciences is strongly divided between scholarly disciplines and area studies. The former continue to claim universal status for knowledge derived from studying the North Atlantic world. A far smaller number of area studies scholars represent knowledge about the rest of the globalized world, usually not making claims to the validity of their knowledge in a manner transcending the specific world region they are working on. Examining the stubborn persistence of this bizarrely outdated division between the universal "West" and the particular "non-West," I argue that anthropology is uniquely suited to contribute to the final overcoming of this highly unproductive divide. In order to realize this potential, mutual processes of translation and appropriation that unfold in exchanges between different parts of the world need to be a principal focus of anthropological research. Translation, then, is simultaneously subject matter, theory, and method of anthropology. While rethinking the



contested legacy of anthropology as a discipline of translation between different ways of being in the world, it is necessary for anthropologists not to fall victim to certain Eurocentric assumptions about language and the nature of signs.

Heute möchte ich mich in meinem Vortrag mit der Ethnologie nicht als einer fest gegründeten Disziplin, sondern in ihrer sich verschiebenden Position in einem sich immer wieder ändernden System der Wissensproduktion beschäftigen. Hiermit meine ich ihre relative Lage in diesem Feld der akademischen Arbeitsteilung und dem zukünftigen Potential, das ich darin sehe.

Ein dauerhaftes Thema, und aus meiner Sicht das mit Abstand wichtigste in der Rolle und Rechtfertigung der Ethnologie innerhalb des Ensembles der akademischen Wissensproduktion ist die Rezentrierung sozialwissenschaftlichen Wissens weg vom sogenannten „Westen“[1] hin zu einer globaleren Perspektive. Dieses Ziel ist, zumal hierzulande, noch weitgehend uneingelöst.

Die Ethnologie spielt meiner Meinung nach für das Erreichen dieses Ziels eine zentrale Rolle. In der Vergangenheit, bis ungefähr in die 1970er Jahre des letzten Jahrhunderts, war das der Ethnologie innewohnende Potential zu einer solchen Rezentrierung weitgehend neutralisiert. Dies war vor allem darauf zurückzuführen, dass sich die Ethnologie meistens als die Wissenschaft des gegenüber Europa ganz anderen, fremden und nicht-modernen begriff, und somit in der wissenschaftlichen Arbeitsteilung den berühmten *savage slot* ([Trouillot 2003](#)) einnahm. Auch wenn manche Ethnologen immer wieder den evolutionistischen, hierarchisierenden, und später auch mit dem Begriff der Entwicklung hantierenden Konnotationen dieser Arbeitsteilung widersprachen – man denke nur an [Franz Boas](#)' Kampf gegen den wissenschaftlichen Rassismus



und Evolutionismus in den Vereinigten Staaten - und Ethnologen auch seit längerem in den Gesellschaften des sogenannten Westens forschen, stabilisierte die Disziplin allein durch ihre Position im Konzert der Wissenschaften nicht unwesentlich die interdependenten Vorstellungen des universalen Europas, und des abweichenden nicht-westlichen Anderen, eine Vorstellung, die eine so entscheidende Rolle bei der Selbstvergewisserung europäischer Modernität spielte.

Die postkoloniale Kritik an dieser Einteilung der Welt ist inzwischen zu bekannt, als hier noch im Detail erläutert zu werden, vor allem vor einem nicht unerheblichen Teil ethnologischen Publikum. Die Kritik ist ebenso bekannt wie weitgehend akzeptiert. Es gibt nicht mehr viele Wissenschaftler, welche offen die Vorstellung verteidigen, nach der Europa und seine Siedlerstaaten (womit vornehmlich der nordatlantische Raum gemeint ist) eine geschichtlich universale Rolle spielen, dem Rest der Welt die normale, wesentliche Form aller zentralen sozialwissenschaftlicher Ordnungsbegriffe wie Politik, Demokratie, Öffentlichkeit und Zivilgesellschaft, Religion, Modernität, Nation, Subjektivität, Staatsbürgerschaft und Sprache vorgeben, und somit dem Rest der Welt wenn nicht seine eigene zukünftige Entwicklungsperspektive aufzeigen, dann zumindest ihm doch eine Position als Ansammlung sogenannter „regionaler“ Besonderheiten oder Abweichungen von einer normalen Modernität zuweisen.

So diskreditiert dieser Standpunkt des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts in der gegenwärtigen intellektuellen Debatte ist, um so zählebiger scheint sein Fortbestehen in der akademischen Organisation des 21. Jahrhunderts in weiten Teilen Europas und auch Deutschlands zu sein.

In den Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften ist das faktische Festhalten an einem regionalen Fokus auf Europa oder dem Nordatlantik gekoppelt mit einem weitgehenden Universalitätsanspruch des dadurch produzierten Wissens nach wie vor die überwältigende Norm. Von der Normalität einer geistes- und



sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung aus etwas globalerer Perspektive ist man noch sehr weit entfernt.

Wer sich zum Beispiel mit der Geschichte Sachsens oder Niedersachsens befasst, betreibt Geschichte an sich, in seiner unmarkierten, normalen Form, während jemand, dessen Feld die Geschichte riesiger Teile der Menschheit ist, wie beispielsweise Indien oder China, eine als „regional“ qualifizierte und im Verhältnis überaus seltene, und im Routinebetrieb häufig immer noch als „exotisch“ wahrgenommene Spezialisierung betreibt. Das gleiche gilt im erheblichen Ausmaß für viele andere, und mit Ausnahme der Ethnologie für alle sozialwissenschaftlichen Disziplinen. Sicherlich werden manche einwenden wollen, dass der Fokus auf die sogenannte „eigene“ Gesellschaft und deren nähere Umgebung ein überall verbreitetes akademisches Phänomenen ist, auch gerade in größeren Ländern des „globalen Südens“ wie beispielsweise Indien. Dennoch ist dort historisch gesehen, meistens direkt durch koloniale Beziehungen geschuldet, die Aneignung und Übersetzung zentraler sozialwissenschaftlicher Kategorien auch durch die Auseinandersetzung mit den geschichtlichen Besonderheiten ihrer europäischen Kontexte geschehen und damit in koloniale Austauschbeziehungen eingebettet. Somit wurde es zunehmend unmöglich, das was allmählich als „eigene“ Gesellschaft und Kultur vorgestellt und wahrgenommen wurde, ohne Bezug auf Europa zu denken. Umgekehrt gesehen ist die normale wissenschaftliche Analyse europäischer Gesellschaften im „Westen“ in seinem mainstream sehr gut ohne, oder mit allenfalls minimaler Bezugnahme auf nicht-westliche Gesellschaften ausgekommen.

Die Frage stellt sich sofort - warum ist dieser Zustand nach wie vor die Norm? Und dies am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts in globalen Zeiten, in denen die wechselseitigen Verflechtungen zwischen Europa und anderen Teilen der Welt nicht nur eine lange Geschichte haben, sondern auch für das nicht-akademisch trainierte Auge so offensichtlich sind, in dem die Grenzen zwischen dem



sogenannten „Westen“ und „nicht-Westen“ immer verwischer werden, in dem vom „rise of the rest“ die Rede ist, und in dem es keinen Ort mehr gibt, der nicht in globalen Zusammenhänge eingebettet ist, und es keinen Ort außerhalb der Moderne gibt.

Wodurch erklärt sich der auch in deutschen akademischen Kreisen so zäh weiterlebende europäisch-nordatlantische Ethnozentrismus, nach dem faktisch national oder europakundig arbeitende Fachdisziplinen mit Universalitätsanspruch einem im Vergleich sehr kleinen Bereich von sogenannten Regionalwissenschaften gegenüberstehen, die in einer globalen Welt den allergrößten Teil der Menschheit wissenschaftlich vertreten?

Wie sehr dieser Zustand bemerkenswert, und wie extrem er aus der Zeit gefallen zu sein scheint – hier nicht gemeint im Sinne einer Teleologie der Entwicklung, sondern in Hinsicht auf seine Angemessenheit der gegenwärtigen globalen Situation gegenüber – zeigt ein kurzer Vergleich der akademischen Elite Deutschlands mit der Wirtschaftselite Deutschlands. Ohne letztere in jeder Hinsicht als nachahmungswert darstellen zu wollen, ist für viele, und vor allem für deren mächtigsten Mitglieder die Einsicht, dass Europa nicht der Nabel der Welt ist, selbstverständlich und tagtäglich gelebte Realität, während im Vergleich dazu die Arbeitsperspektiven der allermeisten Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaftler in dieser Hinsicht mehr an die Epistemologien des vorletzten Jahrhunderts erinnern. Die Frage ist, wodurch erklärt sich dieser, in der gegenwärtigen globalen Situation immer bizarrer wirkende Schiefstand, welcher immer mehr zu einer Besonderheit der akademischen-universitären Elite gegenüber anderen Eliten wird?

Hier setzt meiner Ansicht nach die Rolle und Aufgabe der Ethnologie an, denn die Antwort auf diese Situation ist meines Erachtens nicht, oder zumindest nicht



alleine, die Ausweitung der sogenannten Regionalwissenschaften im bisherigen Sinne. So willkommen und notwendig eine Ausweitung in der Vermittlung von Kenntnis in den Sprachen, Geschichtsschreibungen und Gesellschaften des Großteils der Welt wäre, diese allein würde die bestehende Ordnung nicht wesentlich in Frage stellen. Dies, weil diese Ordnung ja so stark auf der Unterscheidung zwischen ihrem Anspruch nach universal arbeitenden Disziplinen einerseits, die für das Allgemeine stehen, und andererseits Regionalwissenschaften, die sich dem Besonderen, das heißt dem nicht-Westen widmen, beruht. Es bedarf also sehr viel mehr direkte Intervention in die Debatten der europazentrisch arbeitenden Disziplinen, und die Ethnologie ist am besten dafür prädestiniert, dies zu leisten. Zumal ist sie in Europa unter allen sozialwissenschaftlichen Disziplinen die einzige, welche die Einsicht ernst genommen hat, dass es außerhalb des nordatlantischen Raumes andere, alternative Systeme und Bereiche von Wissen gibt, die ein gleiches Recht auf Aufmerksamkeit haben. Zudem bietet die ethnographische Methode aus Fragmenten auf größere Kontexte und Zusammenhänge zu schließen ein Instrumentarium der vergleichenden qualitativen sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung, welches in der Lage ist, den nach wie vor dominanten westlichen Ethnozentrismus in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften zu überwinden ([van der Veer 2014](#)).

Ethnologen haben meiner Meinung nach die Aufgabe, sich noch mehr als zuvor in die von anderen Disziplinen dominierten Debatten über die zentralen sozialwissenschaftlichen Kategorien wie Politik, Demokratie, Öffentlichkeit und Zivilgesellschaft, Religion, Modernität, Nation, Selbst und Subjektivität, Staatsbürgerschaft sowie Sprache einzubringen und diese universal zirkulierenden Kategorien unter Kritik ihres europäischen geschichtlichen Gepäcks neu zu denken.



Die Nichthintergebarkeit dieser Kategorien werden Ethnologen nicht ändern können, da diese aufgrund seit langem bestehender Übersetzungs- und Aneignungsprozesse Teil jedweder Moderne geworden sind, sie also schon seit langem überall auf der Welt von universalen Kategorien europäischer wissenschaftlicher Diskurse des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts zu Kategorien der Praxis mutiert sind, sehr häufig mit kolonialer Genealogie. Dennoch ist es für Ethnologen sehr wohl möglich, diese zu destabilisieren.

Ein sehr gutes Beispiel für das, was ethnologische Intervention in zentrale sozialwissenschaftliche Debatten leisten kann, ist das gegenwärtige Neudenken der seit dem 19. Jahrhundert gebräuchlichen vergleichenden wissenschaftlichen Kategorie „Religion“ in mehreren sozial- und geisteswissenschaftlichen Disziplinen, welches wesentliche Anstöße dem kritischen Werk von Talal Asad verdankt.[2] Seine Kritik am Religionsbegriff eines anderen bekannten Ethnologen, [Clifford Geertz](#), zog bald weitere Kreise, und hat zu einer breiteren Infragestellung der christlichen, und vor allem protestantischen Voreingenommenheit von Religion als universelle wissenschaftliche Kategorie auch in anderen wissenschaftlichen Disziplinen geführt. Als Folge davon hat eine Verschiebung religionswissenschaftlicher Forschung weg vom Problem des Glaubens, von Interiorität und der philologischen Forschung über doktrinäre Inhalte hin zu Themen der Performanz, der öffentlichen verkörperlichten Praxis und den sinnlichen Aspekten von Religion stattgefunden. Vergleichbares lässt sich über das Neudenken der für alle moderne Gesellschaften so zentralen Kategorie Öffentlichkeit sagen. Während die Kritik an einem eingebauten Klassen- und gender-bezogenen Ausschlusspotential von Habermas' Formulierung des Begriffs bereits seit längerem lebendige Debatten um „Gegenöffentlichkeiten“ hervorgebracht haben, wurde der säkulare *bias* des Begriffs lange Zeit nicht hinterfragt. Dies hat sich in den letzten Jahren vor allem unter dem Einfluss ethnologischer Arbeiten über Religion, Öffentlichkeit und Medien stark geändert, in denen die empirisch so normale Verwischung der Habermasschen rational-deliberativen Aspekte der Öffentlichkeit mit Religion, Werbung und Unterhaltung analysiert wurde, ohne dabei in ein



Niedergangsszenario zu verfallen. Auch hier ist es deutlich, dass von ethnologischer Forschung ausgehende Impulse ihre Wirkung ebenso in anderen Disziplinen gehabt haben und zu einer Neubetrachtung der Kategorie Öffentlichkeit auch in den Ländern des sogenannten Westens geführt haben.

Die Nichthintergebarkeit solcher zentraler sozialwissenschaftlicher Kategorien bei der Rezentrierung der Wissensproduktion hin zum Rest der Welt habe ich bereits erwähnt, ebenso wie die seit langem anhaltenden Austausch- und Aneignungsprozesse, die dafür verantwortlich sind. Ein prominentes Beispiel unter vielen sind Hindu-Reformbewegungen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert, die ausgehend von einer kolonialen Situation zu einer teilweisen Aneignung und Übersetzung der universalen Kategorie „Religion“ geführt haben, in deren Verlauf aus einer losen Verknüpfung sehr unterschiedlicher ritueller und Texttraditionen die Vorstellung einer geeinteren, stärker integrierten „Religion“ mit zentralen Schriften, Symbolen und doktrinären Inhalten entstand. Das heißt, die Transformationen des Neo-Hinduismus sind ohne diese moderne Kategorie vermittelt durch Kritik christlicher Missionare an vermeintlich barbarischen und götzendienerischen Praktiken, kolonialer Regulierung von Religion und orientalistischen Diskurs undenkbar, aber im Ergebnis dennoch etwas eindeutig anderes als „Religion.“ Um mit [Dipesh Chakrabarty](#) zu sprechen, dessen Buchtitel [„Provincializing Europe“](#) man auch als eine treffende Aufgabenbeschreibung für die Ethnologie in zwei Wörtern verstehen kann: „Das Problem der kapitalistischen Moderne kann nicht länger einfach als ein soziologisches Problem der historischen Transition verstanden werden..., sondern auch als ein Problem der Übersetzung“ ([Chakrabarty 2000](#): 17, meine Übersetzung). Das Beispiel der Kategorie „Religion“ weist wie viele andere darauf hin, dass diese Art Interaktion kein Transitionsprozess zur Moderne ist, wie von zahlreichen Vertretern der sozialwissenschaftlichen Fachdisziplinen immer noch impliziert wird, wenn sie bei Studien über Religion im nordatlantischen Raum über „Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft“ reden, sondern ein komplexer wechselseitiger Übersetzungsprozess.



Übersetzung ist meiner Ansicht nach in doppelter Hinsicht der große Schlüsselbegriff für die Ethnologie als Wissenschaft der kulturellen Vielfalt. Zum einen ist Übersetzung ein zentraler Teil der Dynamiken kultureller Aneignung, Differenzierung und Abgrenzung, und dies umso mehr in einer Welt, in der nichts mehr außerhalb des Modernen und Globalen steht. Andererseits ist es das klassische vergleichende Projekt der Ethnologie selbst, andere Lebenswelten und Wissensformationen zu übersetzen.

Die Übersetzungsprozesse der Moderne, deren Analyse sich Ethnologen widmen, haben selten die Form humanistischer Dialoge und Verständnisversuche im Sinne eines Gadammerschen Verschmelzen der Horizonte. Sie nehmen dagegen viel häufiger die Gestalt Bachtinscher Dialoge an, in denen sich Übersetzungs- und Aneignungsprozesse in konfliktreichen Austausch und Entgegnungen, sowie polyphoner Dissonanz vollziehen. Ich sehe in keinem dieser beiden Übersetzungsszenarien ein Modell für die Ethnologie, sondern werde im Folgenden für einen dritten, pragmatistischen Zugang zur Übersetzung plädieren, welcher ohne die Vorstellung eines humanistischen Subjekts auskommt.

Übersetzung ist ein ebenso unabdingbarer wie hochumstrittener Prozess. Seit längerem ist eine der möglichen Definitionen der Ethnologie die der Wissenschaft der kulturellen Übersetzung, und die Debatte darüber ist kontrovers und anhaltend ([Rubel and Rosman 2003](#), [Röttger-Rössler 1997](#), [Bachmann-Medick 2004](#), [Maranhão and Streck 2003](#), [Schneider 2007](#), [Hanks and Severi 2014](#)). Das Thema Ethnologie als Übersetzung hat immer wieder heftige Kritik hervorgerufen, die Möglichkeit von Übersetzung wurde ebenso angezweifelt, wie die Gefahr beschworen, durch Übersetzung Inkommensurabilitäten und Machtgefälle zu verschleiern. Gerade die postkoloniale Kritik, welcher wir viele wertvolle Einsichten zur Hinterfragung des universalen Europas verdanken, hat ein sorgenvolles und problematisches Verhältnis zum Begriff Übersetzung. In verbleibenden Teil meines Vortrags möchte ich für die Ethnologie als



Wissenschaft der Übersetzungsprozesse der Moderne plädieren. Dabei stelle ich mich auch gegen Teile der postkolonialen Kritik an solch einem Projekt, basierend auf grundsätzlichen Einwänden gegenüber dem Konzept der Übersetzung.

Ironischerweise, dies ist meine These, gründet die postkoloniale Kritik am Projekt der Übersetzung selbst auf einem bestimmten durch und durch westlichen Konzept von Sprache und Semiosis, welches es für die Ethnologie zu überwinden gilt.

Postkoloniale Kritiker der Übersetzung wie [Homi Bhabha](#) (1994) und [Gayatri Spivak](#) (1993) setzen ein poststrukturalistisches Verständnis von Sprache und Semiosis voraus, in dem wie bei ihren strukturalistischen Vorläufern Referenz und Denotation von Zeichen als deren zentrale Funktion verstanden werden. Sie rücken dabei die Perspektive weg von der Vorstellung stabiler, integrierter Zeichensysteme hin zu den andauernden Verschiebungen und Instabilitäten von Denotation. Wie linguistische Ethnologen seit längerem demonstriert haben, ist der Fokus auf Referenz und Denotation ein wesentliches Symptom westlicher Sprachideologien, welche das moderne und akademische Verständnis von Sprache grundlegend geprägt hat ([Bauman and Briggs 2003](#)), und in der strukturalistischen Vision von Ferdinand de Saussure einer seiner bekanntesten und einflussreichsten Ausdrücke gefunden hat. Obwohl poststrukturalistische Kritiker die Betonung von System und Stabilität der Bedeutung im Strukturalismus kritisieren, teilen sie dennoch bestimmte zentrale strukturalistische Grundannahmen über Sprache und andere Zeichenprozesse, welche sie die Schwierigkeiten und Unwägbarkeiten des Spiels von Bedeutungen in den Vordergrund rücken lässt, wenn es zum Problem der Übersetzung kommt. Diese Grundannahmen gilt es zu überwinden, wenn die Ethnologie ihr großes Potential als Wissenschaft der Übersetzungsprozesse, welche die Moderne antreiben, einlösen möchte.



Um dies zu verdeutlichen, müssen zwei Aspekte von Übersetzung unterschieden werden. Zum einen Referenz und Denotation, zum anderen indexikalische und ikonische Zeichenprozesse. Erstere ähneln dem, was landläufig als „wörtliche Bedeutung“ verstanden wird. In diesem referentiellen Bedeutungsmodus können Wörter und Ausdrücke direkt für ein Objekt, eine Person oder eine andere Entität stehen, also referieren. Saussures Zeichenmodell funktioniert ausschließlich auf diese Art der Repräsentation, für ihn ist Semiosis ein System von Zeichen, die aus einer Kombination von Laut und mentalem Konzepten bestehen, die auf arbiträre, aber direkte Weise miteinander verbunden sind (z.B. die Lautkombination „Baum“ verbunden mit einem mentalen Konzept). Da Sprachen nicht alle auf dieselben mentalen Konzepte verweisen, und Sprachen aus der Vielzahl möglicher grammatischer Kategorien immer jeweils nur verschieden begrenzte Ausschnitte markieren, ist direkte Übersetzung sehr oft unmöglich. Zudem sind Grenzen zwischen Sprachen und sprachlichen Registern häufig unklar, und obendrein das Produkt von politischer Geschichte und Ideologie.

Dennoch trifft dies nicht den Kern des Übersetzungsproblems. Äußerungen sind immer in komplexe Kontexte eingebettet, die nicht auf einer Beziehung der Referenz oder Denotation beruhen. Sie sind vielmehr geprägt durch ihr gleichzeitiges Auftreten mit einer Vielfalt anderer sprachlicher und nicht-sprachlicher Zeichen. Nach [C.S. Peirce](#) kann man solche kontextuellen Beziehungen gleichzeitigen Auftretens als indexikalisch bezeichnen (Beispiele sind der Akzent eines Redners, der auf seine Herkunft verweist, das gleichzeitige Auftreten von Rauch und Feuer, sowie sprachliche Register wie Juristendeutsch oder rituelle Sprachen, in denen eine institutionalisierte Verbindung mit bestimmten sozialen Aktivitäten und Personentypen wirkt). Darüber hinaus existieren sowohl im Sprachgebrauch wie auch in kulturellen Prozessen und Handlungen im Allgemeinen immer auch Bedeutungen, die auf qualitativer, bildhafter Ähnlichkeit beruhen (Beispiele finden sich u.a. in der Dichtung, Alliteration oder anderer Formen von Parallelismus, wie in der Metrik, von Themen und des Reims), also nach Peirce ikonische Beziehungen, denen häufig die Wahrnehmung einer natürlichen Verbindung durch inhärente Ähnlichkeit



anhaltet, und die deshalb auch ein starkes ideologisches Potential haben.

Übersetzungsprozesse müssen also nicht nur der referentiellen Bedeutung gerecht werden, sondern auch den Netzen indexikalischer und ikonischer Beziehungen, die den Großteil dessen ausmachen, was gemeinhin als „Kontext“ gilt. Es versteht sich selbst, dass solche Kontexte dynamisch sind, und nicht ein festgefügter Rahmen für Handlungen und Bedeutungsproduktion.

Der Begriff der andauernden Kontextualisierung ist dabei zutreffender als der des statischen Kontexts. Handelnde schaffen durch einen ständigen Strom von verbalen und nicht-verbalen Kontextualisierungshinweisen (*contextualization cues*, [John Gumperz](#)) den für die Bedeutungsproduktion entscheidenden Kontext, wobei ein solcher Handlungsrahmen von der Ratifikation durch andere und somit auch stark von Machtgefällen abhängig ist ([Duranti and Goodwin 1992](#), Baker 2006). Bei nicht selten auftretenden Dissonanzen zwischen Teilnehmern eines Kontextualisierungsprozesses tritt das auf, was [Erving Goffman](#) im Zusammenhang mit seiner Rahmenanalyse der Interaktion als *frame-breaking* bezeichnet hat. Gleichzeitig ist, im Gegensatz zu Saussure's Zeichenbegriff, auf den sowohl der Strukturalismus wie auch seine poststrukturalistischen Kritiker zurückgreifen, ein umfassenderes Peircesches Zeichenverständnis sehr offen für die materiellen und verkörperten Dimensionen kulturellen Handelns. Das Netz von Bedeutungen besteht nicht wie im Strukturalismus und Poststrukturalismus allein aus vermeintlich „geistigen“ Verbindungen von Laut oder einem anderen materiellen Zeichenträger und mentalen Konzepten, durch die ein Laut auf etwas referieren kann, sondern umfasst in seinen indexikalischen und ikonischen Dimensionen ebenso die Sphäre des Kausalen, konkreter Praxis und der Materialität menschlichen Handelns. Die Zeichenprozesse oder Zeichenpraxis, von der ich spreche, ist gerade nicht ein vermeintlich konzeptuell-kognitiver Überbau im Gegensatz zu einer echteren, substantiellen materiellen kulturellen



Praxis, sondern eben auch letztere durch und durch.

Der Punkt ist, dass es sehr wohl möglich ist, nicht auf absolut objektive oder erschöpfende, aber dennoch auf recht adäquate und angemessene Weise solche Kontexte zu beschreiben und zu analysieren. Wissenschaftler, die voller Sorgen über die Möglichkeiten und Unmöglichkeiten der Übersetzung sind, meinen damit häufig, dass der indexikalisch-ikonische Kontext von Äusserungen und Handlungen ausgeblendet oder nur zu dünn und fragmentarisch berücksichtigt wird. Gayatri Spivak, zum Beispiel weist in ihrem dreiteiligen Modell der Übersetzung ([Spivak 1993](#)) darauf hin, dass im Prozess der Übersetzung Logik und Grammatik ständig von Rhetorik unterwandert werden, und dass das Unterdrücken der rhetorischen Dimension im Akt der Übersetzung mit neokolonialer Gewalt gleichzusetzen sei. Der Übersetzungsprozess kann selber zu einer Machtausübung werden, welche das Handeln anderer beschränkt und zum Gegenstand oktroyierter Formen der Kontextualisierung macht. Gleichzeitig findet er häufig in Situationen statt, in denen eine große Ungleichheit zwischen Sprachen besteht, und in denen die Sprachen, aus denen Ethnologen heraus übersetzen, bereits durch Machtgefälle von den Sprachen, in die übersetzt wird, transformiert und überformt sind ([Asad 1993](#), siehe auch [Hanks 2010](#)).

Das Unterfangen Übersetzung fragt demnach ein hohes Maß an Reflexivität. In dieser Hinsicht wäre es nützlich, [Michael Silverstein](#) (2005) folgend, von Übersetzung als den Prozessen der Übertragung referentieller Bedeutung (ungefähr Spivaks Kategorien der Logik und Grammatik entsprechend) und von der Übertragung der sie umgebenden indexikalisch-ikonischen Zeichenverhältnisse als „Transduktion“ zu sprechen.

Letzteres auf Peirceschen Unterscheidungen beruhendes Unterfangen bietet ein feingliedrigeres Instrumentarium als Spivaks Kategorie der Rhetorik. Diese



Unterscheidung zwischen Übersetzung im engeren Sinne und „Transduktion“ ist auch wichtig, um ein vorhersehbares Argument gegen das Projekt der Ethnologie als Übersetzung zu entkräften - Kulturen und kulturelle Prozesse lassen sich nicht mit Sprache und Texten gleichsetzen (wie interpretative oder hermeneutische Ansätze in der Ethnologie immer wieder suggerierten). Das ist korrekt, aber es ist aus meiner Sicht möglich, kulturelle Praxis mit ihren performativen, verkörperlichten Dimensionen als Zeichenprozesse im weiteren, übersprachlichen Sinn zu fassen, die über sprachliche Referenz weit hinausgehen. Eben diese Zeichenprozesse sind ja auch der Gegenstand der Prozesse kolonialer und postkolonialer Übersetzung und Aneignung, die ich vorher erwähnte, und deren Analyse ich als Hauptaufgabe der Ethnologie sehe.

Auch in meiner eigenen Forschung hat sich die Analyse dieser Übersetzungsprozesse als völlig unumgebar erwiesen. Das Thema Sprache und Diaspora auf Mauritius ließ sich für mich nur vor dem Hintergrund von Aneignungs- und Übersetzungsversuchen einer Kategorie des Europas des 19. Jahrhunderts verstehen, deren weltweiter Export im Zusammenhang mit kolonialen Regierungsformen, christlich-missionarischer und kolonialer Linguistik und antikolonialem Nationalismus extrem erfolgreich war - gemeint ist der ethnolinguistische Nationalismus. Das Ergebnis war ein lokaler Widerstreit zwischen einem sich eng an einem Herderschen Vorbild orientierendem, kreolischen Nationalismus und einem einen ganz anderen Weg gehenden Hindu-nationalistischen Diskurs von „Sprachen der Vorfahren,“ der ebenfalls ohne den Bezug zum ethnolinguistischen Nationalismus des europäischen 19. Jahrhunderts undenkbar, aber dennoch irreduzibel anders ist. In meiner neueren medienethnologischen Forschung befinde ich mich in einem Feld, welches sich fast per Definition mit Aneignungs- und Übersetzungsprozessen auseinandersetzt, hier mit Medienpraktiken und Technologien in südasiatischen islamischen Öffentlichkeiten, wo zeitgenössische audiovisuelle Medienpraktiken mit einer langen religiösen Tradition interagieren, in welcher die rezitierende Stimme der Ort ist, in dem sich das Göttliche in der Welt manifestiert. Eine Analyse der Vielzahl von Medienpraktiken aus vergleichender Perspektive anzugehen führt



auch relativ schnell zu einer der größten Herausforderungen an den Übersetzungsbegriff - wie lassen sich sinnliche Handlungen und Prozesse außerhalb von Sprache „übersetzen.“ Diese lassen sich zwar allesamt innerhalb des breiten semiotischen Ansatzes von dem ich sprach beschreiben, aber werden nicht durch ihn erschöpfend umfasst. Dennoch funktioniert unser wissenschaftlicher Diskurs nach wie vor durch das Medium Sprache, was die Modalitäten diskursiver Übersetzung für jede Art ethnologischer Forschung unausweichlich macht. Der Tag, an dem man bildliche oder klangliche Kompositionen, etwa inspiriert durch den Ruf nach „doing anthropology in sound“ (Feld and Brenneis 2004) als ethnologische Dissertation einreichen oder als Berufungsvortrag darbieten könnte, erscheint noch fern.

Lassen Sie mich am Ende meines Vortrags meine Überlegungen zusammenfassen. Ich habe hier für ein breites, reflektiertes Verständnis von Übersetzung als Kernaufgabe der Ethnologie plädiert, welches selbst nicht bestimmten eurozentrischen Annahmen über das Wesen der Sprache und der Zeichen zum Opfer fällt. Die problematischste dieser Annahmen ist die Gleichsetzung einer speziellen Subkategorie von Zeichen, nämlich Saussurschen arbiträren Symbolen, mit Signifikation und Semiosis an sich. Die seit sehr langem überfällige Aufgabe, die geistes- und sozialwissenschaftliche Wissensproduktion - endlich - zu rezentrieren ist vor allem eine Arbeit der richtig verstandenen Übersetzung, und dies in mehrfacher Hinsicht. Übersetzung ist sowohl Forschungsgegenstand, wie auch Theorie und Methode der Ethnologie. Zum einen sind die weltweiten Verknüpfungen zwischen verschiedenen Weisen in der Welt zu sein, die das ausmachen, was häufig Modernität genannt wird, zu einem überwiegenden Teil wechselseitige Übersetzungs- und Aneignungsprozesse. Andererseits besteht ein innerer Zusammenhang zwischen Übersetzung und dem für die Ethnologie so zentralen Thema der kulturellen Differenz und Vielfalt.

Übersetzung und die Produktion von Differenz sind aufs Engste miteinander verbunden. Übersetzung schafft nicht Äquivalenzen. Übersetzung sollte nicht



das zu Übersetzende der Sprache, in die übersetzt wird angleichen – das ist schlechte Übersetzung, die sich zu Recht dem Vorwurf, dem Anderen Gewalt anzutun, aussetzt, sondern zulassen, dass Zielsprache und Zieldiskurs durch das zu Übersetzende transformiert wird.

Gerade in Deutschland gibt es eine lange Tradition der Übersetzungstheorie von Schleiermacher über Pannwitz zu Benjamin, die genau dies immer wieder gefordert hat. Das genau ist das Projekt der Ethnologie im System der Wissensproduktion, es geht gerade *nicht* darum, alternative Formen in der Welt zu sein mit eurozentrischer Wissensproduktion kommensurabel, und auf diese Weise „verständlich“ zu machen. Dagegen ist es die Aufgabe der Ethnologie, dazu beizutragen, dass die zentralen sozialwissenschaftlichen Kategorien im Diskurs der europazentrischen Disziplinen durch diese Übersetzungsarbeit transformiert werden, wie es bereits zum Teil mit den Begriffen „Religion“ und „Öffentlichkeit“ geschehen ist.

Ethnologische Übersetzungsarbeit verwandelt augenscheinliche Inkommensurabilität in eine Differenz, welche in der Sprache, in die übersetzt wird, nicht nur erhalten bleibt, sondern ihre transformative Kraft auch genau dort entfaltet.

[1] Ich möchte sofort klarstellen, dass ich die Unterscheidung Westen/nicht-Westen für analytisch wertlos halte. Dennoch ist die Unterscheidung bereits seit langem zu einer wirkungsmächtigen Kategorie der Praxis mutiert, die unabhängig von ihrem fehlenden analytischen Wert eine Schlüsselbedeutung in der Wissensproduktion innehat, wodurch es schwerfällt, sie nicht zu nennen. Insofern ist sie wie die zentralen sozialwissenschaftlichen Kategorien, die in



meinem Vortrag erwähne, auch Gegenstand der Übersetzungs- und Aneignungsprozesse, die das Hauptthema meines Vortrags sind, und somit als Gegenstand unausweichlich.

[20] Zahlreiche andere Ethnologen waren an dem Neudenken der Kategorie „Religion“ beteiligt. Ich nenne an dieser Stelle Talal Asad, da dessen Werk auch weit über die Ethnologie hinaus wahrgenommen wurde und dort auch nach wie vor großen Einfluss hat.

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PIKETTY #1!

Patrick Alexander
December, 2014



This post represents the first installment of our special review section on [**Capital in the Twenty-First Century**](#). Second and third installments available [here](#) and [here](#).

[**Piketty, Thomas. 2014. Capital in the Twenty-First Century. Harvard: Harvard University Press. 696 pp. Hc: \\$39.95. ISBN: 9780674430006.**](#)

Severe inequality of wealth and income are at the surface of popular and political discourse today, and since its publication in English in 2014 Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century* has played an important part in this discussion. This review considers the impact and limitations of Piketty's lauded contribution to contemporary thinking about inequalities of wealth and income.



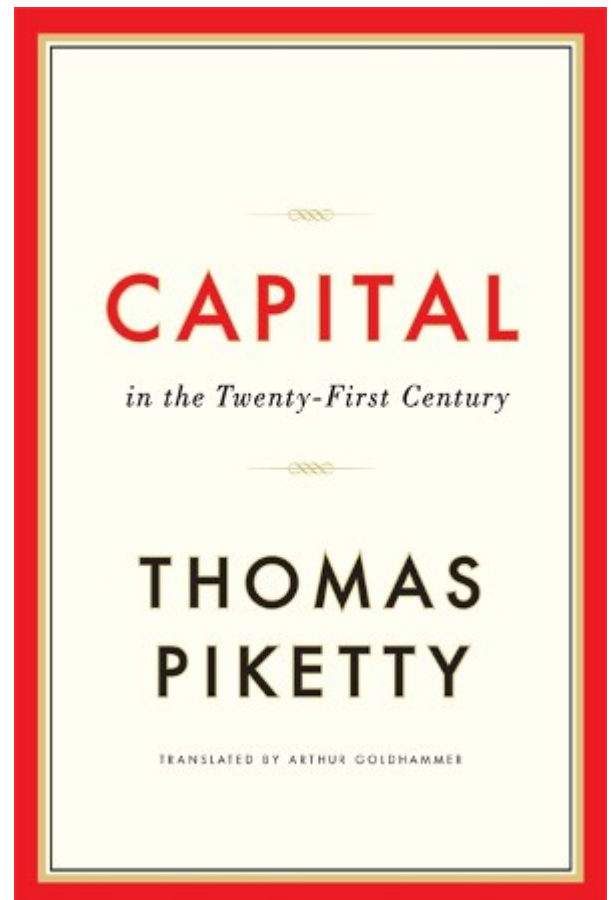
In brief, *Capital* tells a story that is shocking in its familiarity: capitalism breeds and feeds off wealth and income inequality, which are becoming increasingly extreme. With excellence and flare, Piketty takes on the dubious pleasure of reining in centuries of tax statistics and other data in order to plot the rise, fall, and rise again of income and wealth inequality, principally in Europe and the US. He journeys through the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, through the martial upheaval of the 20th century, up to the present day, before finally looking to the future. The picture, overall, is bleak.

Using the deceptively simple formula of $r < g$ (with 'r' as return on investment/wealth and 'g' as economic growth), Piketty argues that, all things being equal (as it were), the return on property and investments will always outstrip the rate of economic growth in a free market economy. This means that the 'natural' state of capitalism is to favour a small elite who, under the auspices of competition and equality of opportunity, are able to amass a disproportionately large amount of income and wealth relative to the whole population. Only the intervention of government to plan-out this natural tendency to stark inequality, or sudden and rapid economic growth, will tip the scale the other way. With slow economic growth, the already-rich get much, much richer, and labour remains divested of the wealth that it creates.

Piketty suggests that the historical anomalies of the 1900s - in particular the political and economic turmoil wrought by the First and Second World Wars, and the subsequent shift towards redistributive economic policies in some nations - led to a pause in the rise of stark inequalities.



By the 1970s, however, patterns of wealth and income inequality started to return to their former asymmetry, and are now beginning to reflect the kinds of disparities common in the US and Europe before World War One. He concludes with a warning that this inequality will continue to concentrate to the detriment of democratic society unless measures are put in place to reset the social and economic balance.



The huge amount of historical data in Piketty's analysis lends itself to a complex treatment of questions about inequality, not least because this deep statistical analysis is married to an engaged assessment of the social and political context in which the data emerge. Moving away from the stark mathematical number play of more straightforward economic analyses, Piketty's is a return to political economy in the critical vein of another rather famous economic thinker to whom the book's title very purposefully nods. One of the great successes of *Capital* is that it breathes new life into historically-, politically-, and sociologically-informed economics. In part it owes its salience to the fact that material reality, while inevitably still seen through Piketty's particular lens, is placed before axiomatic theoretical abstraction.



This is a great strength of the book, but it is not without its limitations. Indeed, it could be argued that Piketty does not go far *enough* in his consideration of the social and cultural context of his analysis. Arguing at once for the need to understand the social and historical peculiarity of patterns of inequality in our recent past, while at the same time offering a universalising and politically-charged conceptual framing for this inequality seems limiting. In part this is because it assumes the very 'natural' qualities of capitalism, as understood through economic theory, that are used to justify unequal systems in the first place. Anthropologists interested in economic systems have for decades argued that the seeming axioms of the free market are in fact a system of meaning-making that is by no means universal to human society, in the past or in the future. The recent financial crisis was proof enough of the failure of global economic systems to behave according to their own supposed rules. An even more critical, reflexive, anthropological approach might allow the book to question not only the ideological underpinnings of the capitalism that it describes, but also the intellectual means that Piketty uses to describe it.

The same critical lens could be adopted towards the data in Capital. One of the most revealing features of the mountain of data that Piketty so masterfully wields in the book is that it shows what remains to be discovered. There are still aspects and areas of inequality that remain invisible or too obscure to analyse. Indeed, it appears that one of the most important means of accumulating truly disproportionate levels of wealth among a small elite is to conceal the provenance, nature and extent of this wealth and income. If not plotting the whole map of inequality, Piketty's analysis is undoubtedly powerful in pointing us to the extensive uncharted territory that remains.

We might also be critical of his proposed solution to Piketty's portent of impending, increasing inequality of the future. Piketty suggests that global



taxation of the extremely wealthy is the answer; and while this may well be the case, it is difficult to imagine that so-called Robin Hood taxes would be politically viable or practicable in many of the world's nation-states (perhaps barring Scandinavia). This tells us something about the enduring philosophical and ideological power of capitalist thinking about aspiration and the drivers of human existence (not least among economists), and also implies that a long-term solution to this kind of economic problem is likely to involve social and cultural conditions. Changing the cultural value of accruing disproportionately large amounts of individual or family wealth may make extensive taxes on the rich more palatable (or no longer necessary), rather than the other way around. In the UK context, the geographer Danny Dorling's *Inequality and the 1%* presents an analysis of inequalities complimentary to Piketty's by considering the demographic spread of inequality and its relationship to property; but Dorling also points to the importance of understanding the cultural perspectives of those who maintain this disproportionate wealth and income if we are to make sense of what drives this particular aspect of contemporary global capitalism.

Understanding patterns of inequality is profoundly important; and understanding the ways in which this inequality is legitimized by those who perpetuate it is fundamental to changing these patterns of inequality.

Capital is a tome that seems to have been bought and written about much more than it has been read. This is partly because it is long, and exhaustive. It is also partly because *Capital* is written in a tone that, while entertaining and witty, is more serious and less accessible than many readers have become accustomed to from big-picture public intellectuals of the likes of Steven Pinker or Jared Diamond. *Capital's* popular success can be attributed partly to its timely arrival on the popular intellectual scene. In the wake of the global financial crisis, across the world normal people have now seen behind the curtain that used to mask the



often dubious inner workings of global financial systems. Those who may have previously considered themselves as the 'haves' may now have less; or they may have come to the conclusion, via people like Piketty, that they were the 'have-lesser' all along but simply did not know it until now.

Yet it is also powerful in reminding us of the extent to which the current ideological underpinnings of global consumer capitalism have become naturalized to the point that we no longer question their sanctity. The current order of things encourages us to accept with a shrug the darkest shadows of the current political and economic order as if things had always been this way, and will always remain so. Piketty's profound contribution is to provide an empirical basis and a polemic from which to revitalise popular and academic discussion around inequality - both in terms of questioning the fundamental tenets of capitalism, and in challenging the parameters by which we analyse the relationship between the social, cultural and economic attributes of inequality.

Bourgeois Knowledge

Antonio De Lauri
December, 2014



Young man: Hey, what's he talking about?

Old man: The professor is discussing ideas of justice and humanity in the philosophy of Plato.

Young man: Plato?

Old man: Plato, the Greek philosopher...

Young man: Yeah, I know, I know... Wasn't he a slave master?

Old man: Well, some sources say he owned slaves...

Young man: I see... I'm sure he had great ideas about justice and humanity!



Old man: You know, in Plato's time it was normal for someone of his status to have slaves.

Young man: Yes, that's why we should probably be sceptical about what is viewed as normal in our own time.

Old man: But isn't it amazing that we are still studying his work so many centuries later?

Young man: Well, isn't it incredible that there are still slaves in the world?

Facing legacy...

Historically, the majority of professors in the social sciences and humanities in Italy (as in France, Germany, etc....) have come from long-established and well-educated bourgeois families. Only very recently have working-class scholars begun to access academic positions to a significant extent. Yet even today humanities and social sciences departments are influenced by this weighty bourgeois legacy. I use the term "bourgeois" here not in the strictly Marxist sense but with a broader meaning that includes relatively well-off families (not necessarily very rich) whose members are educated, frequently display left-wing political sympathies and belong to groups of cultural élite, sharing their cultural capital, and indeed spending most of their time, with people of similar social status (aside from their philanthropic leanings which often bring them to the slums). Despite the fact that we are all happy nowadays to join in the neoliberal refrain that all persons are equal and class boundaries no longer exist, inter-class marriages are still a rarity in contemporary Italian society.



Although in the period following the Second World War, working-class students increasingly gained access to university education, it was extremely difficult for them to attain professorship positions due to the nepotistic and exclusivist nature of the academic system. One of the principal mechanisms that *de facto* excluded scholars of working-class origins from permanent positions was the precarious employment status of post-graduate work. The rule was - and generally still is - that on completion of their graduation (or, from the 80's, of their PhD, "Dottorato di ricerca"), young scholars were required to spend several years working - largely unremunerated - for a professor, until the latter decided that it was the time for them to be allocated a post. And who of the working class could afford to work without payment for several years? Almost nobody. Only those who were heavily economically supported by their families could survive such a punitive academic enrolment mechanism.

The past few years have seen some change, but the system still functions in such a way as to create many obstacles for those who need a salary to make



ends meet. When I completed my PhD in Anthropology, a professor told me: “The trouble with you guys is that you need to get paid”. Not to mention the difficulties encountered if you aspire to having a family of your own (here gender inequalities become particularly aggressive, to the extent that a PhD student or post-doc who becomes pregnant may easily be excluded from research groups or opportunities for future positions because considered “not reliable”)

Most professors in the social sciences that I have met have grandparents (or even grand-grand parents) who were university graduates and professionals – doctors, professors, art collectors, architects, and so forth. Both my grandmothers were illiterate; my father went to work at the age of 12 and my mother started to combine schooling and employment when she was 13 and had full-time job at the age of 15 (although studying was what she really wanted to do). I was born in 1979 and my cousins and I are the first generation of the family not only to have received a university education (a few of us also hold a Ph.D.), but to have attended high school at all. Perhaps this explains the feeling of unease that I have experienced throughout my entire academic path, my sense of being suspended between two social worlds (bourgeois academia and my own working-class background) but somehow uncomfortable in both. Although the popular knowledge I was immersed in through my family and the farsighted “beyond-class vision” of my parents – as well as their crucial moral and material support – may well have represented for me not simply the bridge between these two worlds, but the need to rise above them.



Departments all around the country are increasingly recruiting scholars of working-class origins, but mostly to precarious positions - for instance, the role of Assistant Professor, which in the past was a permanent position, is currently fixed-term. Despite its ostensible goal of enhancing the quality of Italian university and fighting its nepotistic

system, the only evident effect of the recent university reform has been the further precarization of researchers. But aside from the precarious status of new generations of scholars, what I wish to emphasize here is that this bourgeois academic dominance has historically produced a specific bourgeois knowledge, particularly in relation to social inequality. My basis for this claim - as questionable as it may be - is that the way in which scholars see the world and thus, for instance, produce scientific knowledge, is not solely a function of personal ideas and experience but is also deeply influenced by their social status. Of course many other variables can influence the work of a scholar, such as personal attitudes, individual sensibility, health, random life events (loss of loved ones, unexpected good fortune, the outbreak of war...) etc.. However, while these other factors are part of the incommensurable variety of human experience - thus bearing mostly unforeseen consequences - I believe that the bourgeois legacy in the academic system has produced - and produces - a specific form of knowledge, which has significant implications for the way in which humanitarian agencies or governance institutions, for example, address the problem of social inequality. It is needless to reiterate that this may be the case in some contexts but not in others. I here only contend that this is the predominant reality in the current Italian university scenario - although I most definitely do not believe that Italy represents an exception at the global, and particularly European, level.

Sometimes hiding behind Marxist or (today possibly even more frequent among social scientists) Gramscian screens, academics have made the issue of social



inequality - and social suffering, or marginality - a key topic that is very useful for their university careers. But while Gramsci's thinking was the expression of the highly concrete demands inherent in his political beliefs and - indeed - his social class consciousness, most contemporary re-interpretations of his intellectual production fall in the realm of aesthetics and philanthropy. This I believe to be one of the most significant implications of bourgeois production on social inequalities: that is to say, the highly factual and brutal dimension of social suffering and marginality is transformed into an issue of "representation".

Within the so-called academic ivory tower, social inequalities are aestheticized, turned into "discourse", while all the miserable and more material consequences of social suffering disappear.

And thus in the eyes of left-wing bourgeois academics, slums become "laboratories of social resistance", in which the poor are always the good poor, the migrant is always the good migrant, and so forth, in a paradigmatic extension of the myth of the good savage. Indeed, there has been a striking proliferation of such (visual, dialogical, virtual...) "laboratories", which, on purely logical grounds, make people living in slums akin to guinea pigs. In this context, the distance between the bourgeois approach of scholars/philanthropists and raw reality takes on significant proportions. Greed, cruelty, egoism, spirit of survival vanish from slums and working-class neighbourhoods, and what remains is an apologetic version of the world, explained in terms of post-modern notions of agency and subjectivity or neutralized (because transformed into aesthetics) Gramscian theories. Or at times, somewhat confusedly, in terms of both.

The very concept of "resistance" itself - especially as it has been used by anthropologists - has been reduced to a carnivalesque antagonism or an unconscious glimmer of agency, rather than a political reaction or propulsion to subvert the social order on the part of a given social class. Ironically (yet dramatically), all too often the do-good approach generously displayed by social



scientists in their “writings on the margins” disappears when they sit on the departmental committees of their universities. Moral ambiguity, corporativism and formal obedience to the institution are the other side of the philanthropic coin for the social science bourgeois. It is by no means rare to witness a gaping difference between what academics write in their books or articles and the way in which they elect to run research groups, departments, and so on. I have heard a multitude of talks, conferences and seminars on “the need to understand those at the margins” or “hegemonic cultures affecting socially disadvantaged people”, only to find myself wondering along with fellow PhD students or post-docs how a person who is not even able to have a sane human relationship with university colleagues could possibly be able to understand those in dire need.

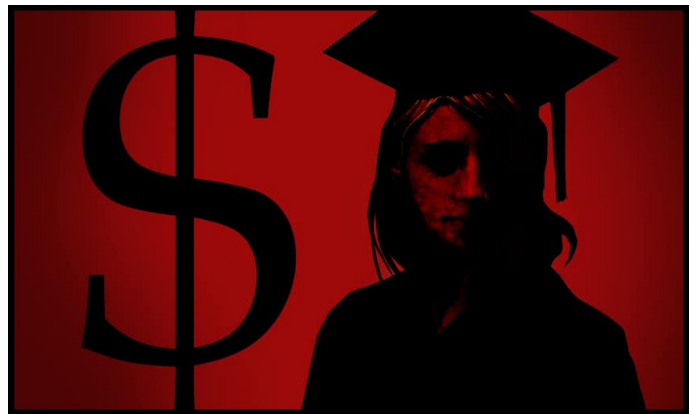
Anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom rightly pointed out in a talk in Milan in 2006 that

“We know that the person who abusively fires a colleague in their own pursuit of power does not produce theory in the same way as a colleague we trust to be honourable - even if their theoretical orientations are ostensibly the same - because they move their realities, their deep perceptions of life and of Being, into their theory. And yet we accept these divisions that separate our theories from an analysis of the very generative experiences that animate them in the academy and beyond”.

This may not be necessarily related to the bourgeois legacy, but certainly ethnography at the mercy of moral ambiguity becomes a dangerous methodological instrument in the hands of bourgeois scholars, insofar as it fosters the rhetoric of “closeness” between the scholar and the people he/she sets out to interact with.



Indeed, while the voice of the social scientist remains the voice of the social scientist, the use of ethnography to justify representing social suffering as those at the margins, slaves, victims of violence, poor people, and so forth experience it, has the potential to be highly ambivalent. The fact that bourgeois



academics have somehow become the voice of socially disadvantaged people – contemporary sociocultural anthropology is indeed at stake here – has reinforced a process of social and political expulsion. Socially disadvantaged people are located at a level of political absence and inability to communicate, which the ethnographer claims to compensate for via his/her presumed “dialogical” or “collaborative” methodology and academic production.

*In an act of intellectual honesty, in the preface to his key work *Asylum* in 1961, Erving Goffman warned the reader “that my view is probably too much that of a middle-class male; perhaps I suffered vicariously about conditions that lower-class patients handled with little pain”.*

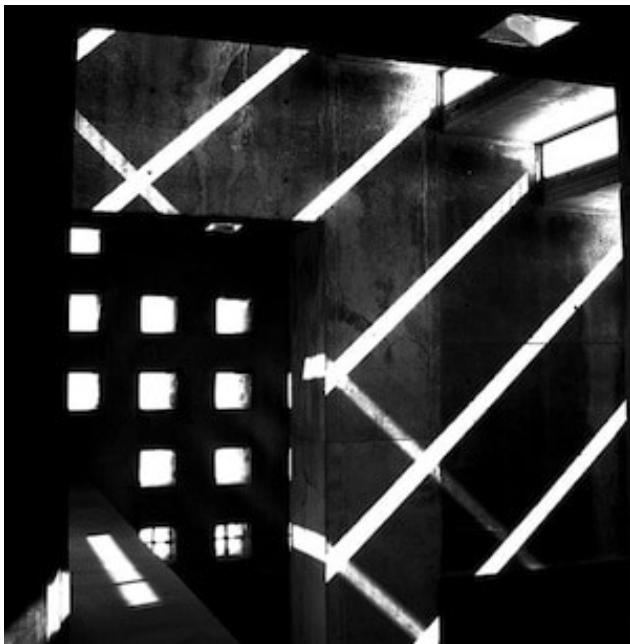
It is rare to find similar acknowledgement on the part of anthropologists that their bourgeois background and particular cultural capital might have affected the way they translated social suffering and inequalities from the “dimension of ground” (to borrow Ernesto Laclau’s expression, introduced in his *Emancipation(s)*, 1996) into academic writing. Edmund Leach addressed the issue of social class in his 1984 “Glimpses of the Unmentionable in the History of British Social Anthropology”. However, the later(doctrinaire) preoccupation of post-modern anthropology with the authority of the ethnographer both during fieldwork and in the writing process was more the disguised outcome of the bourgeois legacy within the discipline rather than an attempt to question anthropologists’ class belonging. It was never (or very rarely) social class at stake. Only over the past



few decades has the power of the ethnographer been re-balanced due to the simple fact that ethnographic researchers themselves have increasingly come from the lower classes.

The problematic issue of understanding who is absent from and who *de facto* writes history has been systematically addressed by scholars of post-colonial and subaltern studies. The main interest of these scholarly schools of thought has been to show that the Eurocentric method of historical enquiry into non-Western cultures produced a history in which the voice of the colonized was absent, marginal, or transformed in line with the needs of the hegemonic colonial order, particularly in relation to the Indian Subcontinent. However, the overall result has been a corpus of sophisticated literature produced by an élite of scholars whose dilemma was probably more philosophical than social. It is true that Marxist historians have investigated colonial history told from the perspective of the proletariat, thereby addressing the issue of the absence of working-class voices from world history. But my point here is that to a great extent this broad scholarship was produced from a privileged perspective and the issue of ensuring working-class access to the very place in which knowledge is produced was once again overlooked.

In the current technocratic and neoliberal conjuncture of the history of academia, social inequality is a conventional topic for research projects conducted by emergent project managers: that is to say, by academics. I recently had a conversation with an Italian anthropologist who remarked: “Yes, we may call it bourgeois philanthropy, or perhaps bourgeois humanism. But the truth is, with the way things are going nowadays, I do not see myself as either a philanthropist or as a humanist. We are all bureaucrats”.



The feeling voiced by this scholar is certainly not an isolated case. The fact that academic work is increasingly affected by extreme levels of bureaucracy is an issue for everybody. But it is not simply a question of bureaucracy. The university system is undergoing a process of emptying out of intellectual creativity, creating a vacuum which in turn is being filled up with supposedly universal academic standards that force scholars to present themselves in certain ways, be well-disciplined, goal-

oriented knowledge producers, fund raisers and teachers who are positively evaluated by their students. The students are themselves reduced to the status of consumers (significantly, in Italy courses and exams are structured in terms of credits and debts) who must be satisfied, otherwise they will choose another university.

A professor of history at Cornell University told me that in order to protect herself from student evaluations she strives to set the course as much as possible in line with her students' preferences and tastes. In the long run, this will lead to the "dumbing down" of university education: university professors and lecturers are (where such systems are already in place) or will be (where they have only been partially implemented to date) focused on making themselves "agreeable" to students at all costs, by decreasing the workload, giving high marks in exams and so on. The students/consumers are thus free to go to the university/grocery store where they can buy what they want. (Of course "free" and "want" are problematic categories in such a scenario).

For me, the bourgeois legacy has always represented an unheard "wake-up call" that insistently drew attention to the oncoming university crisis which is now full-blown. Largely unchallenged, the university has moved on from a past of being



the intellectual apparatus of the bourgeois system to being the preparatory institution – though with a persistently strong bourgeois identity – of neoliberal efficiency and pragmatism on the contemporary scene. And academics have played a key role in this shift, by supporting or passively accompanying the political forces operating in this direction and impeding the academic consolidation of a non-bourgeois knowledge with its destabilizing potential for the social order.

On “Patient Zero” and other metaphors of the Ebola epidemic

Lorenzo D’Angelo
December, 2014



On 28th of December 2013, Emile, a two-year-old child who lived with his family in a small Guinean village near the border of Sierra Leone and Liberia died. A few



days later, his three-year-old sister and pregnant mother showed the same symptoms and died too. Some of the people who took care of the family and attended the funerals in the coming weeks also died. Those who had come in contact with them in turn contracted the virus and unwittingly contributed to its spread. Months later epidemiologists traced Emile as “Patient Zero” of what today has become the most serious known Ebola virus epidemic.

To date, more than 16,000 people have been infected in West Africa. It is estimated that the death toll is already more than 6,000. Despite the existence of complex mathematical models that experts can use to outline possible future scenarios, it is still difficult (perhaps impossible) to predict how this situation will evolve, to predict how and when it will lead to the desired outcome of “zero cases”.

Billions of dollars have been promised by international donors, various countries have mobilized their armies, but none of this appears to be alleviating the concerns of people living in three of the most affected African countries: Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. Reaching the goal of “zero cases” is still uncertain and unclear.

However, one thing we do know is that this epidemic had a “beginning”: Emile.



Tracking down “Patient Zero” has allowed for further understanding of this epidemic: how it spread in its early stages; the strain of the virus, and if it has genetically mutated or not since the outbreak. Currently, tracking down who could possibly be infected from the confirmed cases seems to be one of the key strategies in fighting the virus: “If you can bring rigor to this contact tracing, you can drive this thing to zero. You have to hunt the virus”, said [Bruce Aylward](#), WHO Assistant Director General at a recent conference in Geneva.

The epidemiological fiction of “Patient Zero” seems to be useful to health experts in developing rapid and effective intervention strategies. However, it has little sense in socio-historical terms. And, if it has little or no sense in these terms, we can raise some doubts about the efficacy of the diagnosis and its solutions.

Where and when did this epidemic begin? In Guinea in December of 2013? Or before and elsewhere?

[Peter Piot](#), one of those who discovered the Ebola virus, called the epidemic of 2014 a “perfect storm”, that is, a combination of a: “dysfunctional health service as the result of decades of war; low public trust in government and Western



medicine, traditional beliefs and even denials about the cause or existence of the virus, and burial practices that involve contact with contagious Ebola-infected corpses.”



The meteorological metaphor of the storm has obvious limitations. It can lead us to believe that in this event, the unpredictable, the imponderable or even the inevitable are at play. In other terms, there are forces beyond human control. Moreover, it dismays us because it puts us in front of a potentially unlimited number of causal factors that - combined in random and unpredictable ways - make any explanation elusive. It can lead us to believe that, if there are any responsibilities, these are many and widespread: everywhere and, therefore, nowhere. It can deceive us into thinking that we are dealing with an exceptional event that can be addressed in purely emergency terms: once the last infected person is cured, the storm will be over and the problem solved.

The metaphors of “Patient Zero” and “perfect storm” are innervated by two very different temporal logics: on the one hand, the temporal uniqueness that repeats at every new epidemic and, on the other hand, the temporal convergence of multiple factors in an exceptional event.



They have, however, something in common: they erase the history and circumscribe our geographical horizon. This takes us away from deeper and broader causes.

Ebola means suffering; the fear of being infected, the hope of being healed; the physical pain and the mental distress of patients and their families; the hunger and anger felt under a quarantine imposed by a state of emergency. But it also means the lack of basic infrastructures and weak health services; shortage of protective equipment and drips with fluids and electrolytes for rehydration therapies. These are not the fatal result of an aleatory combination of abnormal circumstances, but the product of social inequality and structural violence generated and perpetuated by chains of social-historical forces of short and long term. In short, Ebola is - to use Paul Farmer's words - a "socially produced phenomenon".

But if Ebola is more than an infectious disease caused by a zoonotic filovirus then we must also critically rethink the metaphors by which we make sense of the dramatic experience of so many sufferers.

To retrieve the historical-geographical depth of this dramatic event is to enrich our knowledge of the details, to establish precise causal nexuses between diseases, deforestation, mining activities, poverty, civil wars, corruption and social inequalities. Implied in this approach is the idea that the points of views of those who experience the suffering and hardships of this epidemic directly should be part of our accounts, not part of the problem to be solved.



NATIONALISM, POLITICS AND THE EVERYDAY IN A PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP

Luigi Achilli
December, 2014



During the 'Arab Spring', one of the most puzzling enigmas of al-Wihdat - a Palestinian refugee camp set up in 1955 on the outskirts of Amman, the capital of Jordan - was the ostensible absence of political participation in a place historically known for being a site of political activism and irreducible resistance. My book ["Palestinian Refugees and Identity: Nationalism, Politics and the Everyday"](#) (I.B.Tauris, April 2015) analyses the reproduction of nationalism in the context of protracted exile and displacement among young men and adolescents living in the camp.

A very pressing debate that has occupied scholarly and public spheres in and



outside Jordan is how Palestinian refugees handle the tension between their integration in Jordan and their commitment to the Palestinian national predicament and the 'right of return' (haqq al-'awda). Western media and many academic accounts have been generally inclined to believe that 'Palestinian refugees from the camps' (laji'in filastinin min al-mukhayyamat) are substantially inimical to any form of integration. Refugees have been hence popularly depicted as inherently political beings, ready to fight and resist all attempts to annihilate their nationalist struggles. In a similar fashion, refugee camps have also been represented as the locus of a political agency based on the ideal of resistance.

Designed as transit centres to host and prepare Palestinian refugees for local integration, refugee camps in the Middle East have become what Julie Peteet has recently described as 'oppositional spaces appropriated and endowed with alternative meanings'.

In Jordan, there is a widely held collective opinion that camp dwellers have historically nurtured anti-government sentiments. Loyalty to the King, the Hashemite family, and the government is, by contrast, depicted as being associated most clearly with the tribes and Bedouins who are mostly comprised of East-Bank Jordanians. These representations have been simultaneously sustained by historical studies that have documented the rise of Palestinian nationalism in the camps and its challenge to Jordan's sovereignty. The result is that camps have been portrayed either as places of political instability or as the crucibles of subversive ideas and behaviour.

There is, of course, some truth in camps' reputation of being bastions of 'Palestinianness', irreducible resistance and political unrest. Since the late 1960s, Palestinian national consciousness has crystallised around the iconic figures of the camp and the camp dwellers. When the Palestine Liberation Organisation



(PLO) arose out of the havoc of the 'Six-Day War', young Palestinians in exile streamed into the resistance movement. During this period of mass mobilisation (1969-82) which came to be popularly known as al-thawra (the revolution), a triumphant narrative of awakening valorised the men and women of the camps as the embodiment of Palestinian resilience and heroism. This was the heyday of al-Wihdat in Jordan and Shatila in Lebanon, and other refugee camps that, like the former, became powerful symbols of Palestinian nationalism. Not anymore a miserable abode for a mass of poor displaced, they came to be known as 'liberated zone', the furnaces of the 'new men' of the revolution. The 'sons of the camp', the Fedayeen, embodied the archetypal Palestinian. The chroniclers of the time portrayed them standing firmly against the overarching forces of their prior submission, no longer brought down by the suffocating impotence and fear of the first period of exile.

In Jordan, the myth of the heroic guerrilla fighter from the camp resonated so powerfully in the collective imagination as to induce the Jordanian monarch, King Hussein, to publicly declare that 'we are all Fedayeen'.

Camps and camp dwellers were not simply the contents of narratives of heroism. When the various groups that together formed the PLO established their sanctuaries in the refugee camps, these spaces turned into veritable operative bases for the guerrilla fighters. Camp dwellers had become the militant and military backbone of Palestinian nationalism, and the word 'mukhayyam' (refugee camp) stood for 'ma'askar' (military training camp). Here, the Fedayeen established their headquarters and institutions: their own military police, a civil militia, a corollary of administrative, media, and supply centres, a security apparatus, revolutionary courts, and even trade union movements.



In Jordan, so deep-rooted and powerful was the presence of the PLO in the camps that the government found itself powerless against much of the militant and military activities carried out by the guerrilla groups in the year preceding the Jordanian civil war popularly known as Black September. Unrestricted access to camps favoured the setting of recruitment bases, the provision of militia training and the unfettered circulation of Kalashnikovs and other weapons among guerrillas. There are several good reasons to define the escalating and rapid expansion of guerrilla groups in the refugee camps set up in the host countries as states-within-the-state, especially in Jordan. In the country where most of the Palestinian refugees enjoy full citizenship rights, the emergence of a parallel Palestinian government has encroached on the

Jordanian state sovereignty; the consequence of this still reverberates on the very process of national identification.

Furthermore, if the heroic heydays of the 1960s and early 1970s played, and still retain, a central role in refugees' political consciousness and self-understanding, a Palestinian nationalistic and potentially explosive sentiment has also been constituted negatively by experiences of loss and marginality. Over the years, Jordanians of Palestinian origin have faced informal discrimination in Jordan at the legislative level (by having their representation in parliament, the Cabinet and the government ministries drastically curtailed) and in the field of employment (especially in the public sector, which largely excludes Palestinians from military



and intelligence services). The discriminatory practices of the government and exclusivist claims of a segment of the native population have strengthened among many Jordanians of Palestinian origin the idea of being second-class citizens and, to some extent, reinforced a distinctive sense of community.

Today in their third or even fourth generation away from their villages and homes, most Palestinians in Jordan fiercely uphold their 'refugee status' as the only recognition of their rights to be repatriated or compensated.

However, camp dwellers' consciousness in Jordan is not only constituted through the identification with a separate Palestinian entity. It is important to remember that the situation of Palestinian refugees in Jordan differs greatly from their fellows living in other Arab states. Unlike Lebanon and Syria, where Palestinians maintain a legal status as 'stateless' persons, Jordan has granted full citizenship to a large number of refugees, and with that, at least in principle, the same rights and duties as any other Jordanian native. The extension of citizenship rights has certainly favoured the emergence among refugees of a feeling of identification with Jordan, the country where they were born and the only physical home they have ever known. On top of that, in Jordan, urban refugee camps are open spaces and commercial areas that more resemble a low-income residential neighbourhood of Amman than a space of exception designed for control and surveillance. Al-Wihdat is not a closed space. Historically, refugees have developed intricate social relations and drawn complex and varying life trajectories by moving outside the camp, returning to it at a later date, or, equally plausibly, never coming back.



After the 1970s, refugees' political activism gradually terminated in apathy and indifference. Once located at the very heart of the Palestinian national movement, Palestinian refugees and refugee camps in the Middle East became marginalised in the political process. Relegating the status of refugees to the final stages of the negotiations, the Oslo peace agreements were, for refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, clear evidence of how the Palestinian Authority (PA) had sold off the right of return to secure the construction of a Palestinian state . Their exclusion by the official national project has ultimately helped to nurture growing feelings of bitterness and frustration toward political activism and militancy amongst refugees. This disengagement from political participation was furthered by other factors - most notably, the restrictions imposed upon political activity in refugee camps by the authorities after Black September, the discontent with Hamas-Fatah rivalry, and the ineffectiveness of political parties that advocated the Palestinian cause in Jordan.

At the time of my fieldwork in al-Wihdat, neither the recent political turmoil in



Gaza and the West Bank, nor the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, aroused refugees out of what they described as being their routine life in the camp. The last episodes of 'uprising' that most of my informants recollected dated back to 2004 when Jordanian flags were burned in al-Wihdat following the assassination of the historical leader of Hamas, Shaykh Yassin. Interestingly, the issue was eventually solved at an official level by camp leaders (makhatir) who put the blame on alleged agitators coming from outside the camp.

Today, in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' that has shaken governments, triggered bloody civil wars, and overthrown regimes in the Arab world, a wave of protests have swept across seemingly stable Jordan, but refugee camps remain calm.

As may be obvious by now, the specificity of the Jordanian case challenges popular assumptions implicitly and explicitly reproduced in some academic and journalistic writing on Palestinians today. These traditionally convey the idea of Palestinians' life as 'locked in a bind between repression and resistance, ubiquitously struggling for national sovereignty'. In the context of their enduring exile in Jordan, refugees have not only carried out their nationalist struggles but they have also actively pursued socio-economic integration. As I will show, camp dwellers' apparently contradictory desire of pursuing full socio-economic integration in Jordan and upholding their nationalist struggles brings to the fore the existence of forms of agency and subjectivity that cannot be fully explained by the mutually exclusive logics of 'resistance' versus 'integration'.

I argue instead that young men in al-Wihdat have genuinely subscribed to Palestinian nationalism, but - contrary to common assumptions - they have done



so by accommodating this discursive regime to their determination to live in Jordan. The almost non-existence of Palestine's state institution and the systematic purge of the 'Palestinian element' in Jordan's internal politics has meant that this process of accommodation is not generated through the types of institutions usually responsible for inculcating national values, but through the ordinary activities carried out by people in their daily lives.



In my book, I have chosen to examine spaces of everyday life to examine what type of nationalism is left, reproduced, and transformed amongst people who are today in their fourth generation away from the object of desire, their homeland. Everyday life is an accessible opening through which transformations in Palestinian nationalism can be tracked.



What we will find is that camp dwellers' assimilation into Jordanian life, the process of 'becoming-ordinary', has become the motivation for the emergence of their nationalist ethos, which is less ideological and far more affective.