



#EASAElections: Interview with Jane Cowan

written by Allegra
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Photo by Mika Federley.

Allegra: You decided to run for the elections of the new EASA committee. Can you let EASA members know a little bit about your academic path and interests?

Jane: Coming out of a commitment to feminism as much as anthropology, my early work focused on the performance and embodiment of gender, particularly in contexts of dance and sociability. I have also looked at the politics of local culture, tradition and language, nationalisms, ethnicity, minority subjectivities and 'culture and rights'. Currently, I am examining, ethnographically and historically, rights claiming and international organization responses (especially its supervisory and monitoring practices), in both the League of Nations and the contemporary United Nations human rights system. My focus is the contested emergence of 'minority' as a legal-political category endowed with rights and protections after 1919, one coincident with the establishment of a post-imperial Europe of nation-states. Although these might appear to constitute a disparate range of interests, they are actually organically connected: my research on negotiations around 'minority' in institutional Geneva became compelling for me after seeing everyday negotiations around difference 'in the field' of northern Greece. My ethnographic expertise is strongest in Greece (which I first visited in 1975); but I understand Greece through several regional frames: the Balkans, the



post-Ottoman world, the Mediterranean, Southeast Europe and Europe more broadly. Substantively, then, my 'objects' of intellectual concern involve Europe, but viewed from its geographical, political and economic 'periphery' (even if Greece is, paradoxically, symbolically central).

Allegra: What are your main motivations in joining the EASA Committee? Do you have some 'insider' knowledge of the association?

Jane: When I attended the inaugural EASA conference in Coimbra, Portugal in 1990 as a recent PhD without a permanent post, the project of creating a single association from the diversity of academic structures, traditions and histories across Europe seemed to me quite daunting. Due to many people's hard work, EASA has definitely come a long way since then. Although I've been an EASA member since the late 1990s, I attend EASA conferences sporadically. But in recent years I've become active in LAWNET conferences and panels and am currently co-organising (with Reetta Toivanen and Miia Halme-Tuomisaari) the LAWNET conference at University of Helsinki to be held this spring. Beyond the organizational framework of EASA, though, in the past 25 years I've spent considerable periods of time in Switzerland, Greece, and now Finland, as well as the UK. Through my links with colleagues in these places, I've been involved in scientific committees, as well as in many advisory boards (for large research projects), peer evaluation (of departments and individual researchers) and governance roles. For instance, I served as the anthropologist on the interdisciplinary Scientific Committee of the Swiss Network for International Studies, evaluating international, interdisciplinary proposals for research funding for 5 years; I've taken on many different roles in relation to anthropology in Greek universities and I served for 6 years a Member of the University Council elected by academic staff in my own University of Sussex. I was also an Associate Editor of *Anthropological Theory* for over a decade and have edited a number of books and journal special issues.

These various roles have taught me quite a bit about the concerns and perspectives of funding bodies, university senior managements, and national-level



professional associations as well as of colleagues teaching in diverse institutions of higher education. I have seen that, on the one hand, anthropologists in Europe study, teach, write, and research within contexts that are politically, economically, culturally and institutionally distinctive, related to each nation-state's history and current situation. Yet, on the other hand, we both collaborate across these boundaries quite frequently (in committees, working groups and research teams) and also face many common predicaments. I am motivated to join the EASA Executive Committee for the pleasure of participating in these cross-national collaborations to promote and strengthen anthropology in Europe, but also to work with colleagues to address the common challenges that face us: the continued restructuring and adaptation of higher education to neoliberal market conditions, financial, environmental, migrant and refugee 'crises', rising support for rightwing parties and ideologies and attacks on universities and the kinds of knowledge we produce and value. Recently we've seen the expulsion of the Central European University from Hungary and threats to abolish academic anthropology in Poland. Damage done to universities in other European countries, involving subtle attrition of the well-being of the social and human sciences (through long-term underfunding and over-monitoring), is less visible but similarly alarming; EASA needs to address both kinds of threats. We should nonetheless also be alert to, and where possible, grasp the opportunities to involve ourselves in initiatives seeking to challenge the new status quo and bring into being alternative futures for Europe. EASA can continue to be a forum for debating all these issues and, where relevant, should make public interventions through web-based and traditional media, publications, exhibitions, and public conferences and events.

Allegra: What are your views regarding Open Access publishing and 'public anthropology' more broadly?

Jane: For too long, certain publishers of scientific journals made enormous profits on the backs of poorly paid staff and much unpaid labour of academic editors and peer reviewers while demanding extortionate subscriptions from university libraries. This situation is changing, not least because European science funders



are dictating new terms regarding the publication of publicly funded research, but Open Access is a complex issue. Much of the debate tends to assume that all research is funded, either by funding bodies or academic institutions, although it is not unusual for young or early-career researchers to be carrying out research, or at least writing it up after formal funding has ended, without remuneration; indeed, anthropologists can be unemployed or precariously employed at any age. Even if research is 'publicly funded', the process of transforming that research into a publicly available written (visual, audio) form involves additional costs. How is the time and labour of those many individuals who participate in that transformation process—authors, editors, designers, technicians and so forth— to be fairly remunerated? How is the technological infrastructure involved in any publishing operation paid for? Where do the funds come from? (From the researcher funders? The institution where the researcher is employed? The researcher herself or himself?) Who are included in or excluded from participation in the journal, as authors and as readers, as a consequence of the funding model? Every system of Open Access has its pros and cons, so I think we need to keep the issue alive and on the agenda and continue assessing which model works best for particular publication projects in specific contexts. In general, though, I favour hybrid models which involve an element of regular subscriptions by users and, ideally, institutions. We know also, from the 'hau' debacle, that journals must prioritise decent working conditions and respect for staff as well as governance structures with the power and authority to ensure accountability. Creating a climate of trust, collegiality and respectful communication, where problems can be raised with the confidence that they will be discussed and addressed in good faith, seems to me fundamental.

In terms of public anthropology: we have already seen EASA taking a public stand on key political issues, when supported by the membership (e.g., the motion to withdraw collaboration with Israeli educational institutions operating in the Occupied Territories, voted on this past autumn). In these politically complex times, when what has been called a 'populist radical right zeitgeist' is countered by growing activism among many in left, collectivist and solidarity movements,



whether community-based or transnational, it will be increasingly important for the EASA to intervene in public discussions and debates. We also need to keep actively demonstrating, as well as explaining, the importance of anthropological perspectives and analyses for making sense of and acting upon/within the world.

As a US citizen and resident of Britain since 1986 who has just received UK citizenship, I am personally very concerned about the implications of Brexit, more broadly—not just for anthropology—though am writing this at a moment when Britain’s future relation to Europe is completely uncertain. Whatever happens, I believe that those of us living and working in Britain need to stay strongly connected with our colleagues in Europe, and would ensure that EASA continued to facilitate our collaborations.

Allegra: A new generation of anthropologists is experiencing a series of concerns related to their profession and their future. How do you see the role of EASA in this scenario?

Jane: As we know very well, the neoliberalisation of higher education continues to unfold throughout Europe, though in different ways and to varying degrees. It affects all of us: even relatively senior individuals in supposedly permanent positions have lost their academic jobs, in recent years. But young and early-career anthropologists are the most severely affected, taking on short-term and often poorly paid employment, juggling multiple jobs while being expected to publish, finding themselves under pressure to relocate for each new job or face exhausting, expensive commutes: conditions which wreak havoc with personal and family life. Along with the anxieties, various kinds of abuse and exploitation unfortunately thrive in such situations of unequal power. Younger EASA members in this position have taken the initiative, forming PrecAnthro and enlisting EASA’s support. EASA’s early career forum in Stockholm in August 2018 was devoted to academic precarity and it has begun to gather information on its extent, nature and effects for EASA members. As an EASA executive committee member, I would promote and extend these activities, in collaboration with PrecAnthro members, to better understand the variable and changing situations faced by younger and



early career anthropologists, and to support the working groups devoted to tackling specific issues that they have identified.