



An Anthropologist in the Archives

Allegra

December, 2018



Is it Christmas already?! This week, Allegra is collaborating with [the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies](#)* to celebrate and create the biggest possible buzz for the much anticipated Erkkö Inaugural Lecture by dear Allie and mentor,



Prof Jane Cowan.

[The Inaugural Lecture](#) will take place at 4pm on Tuesday 27 November 2018 in the Main Building's Small Festive Hall at the University of Helsinki. The lecture is free and open to the public. It will be followed by a (festive!) reception in Jane's honour.

To precede and accompany the Lecture, we'll be posting a list of essential readings and an interview by Pekka Rautio with Prof Jane Cowan on Monday 26 November.

On D-Tuesday 27 November, the lecture will be live streamed on Allegra and available to watch as soon as possible via our website thereafter.

We'll use this opportunity to highlight some of the fantastic projects Jane has collaborated on in the past this Wednesday 28 and Thursday 29 November, and finish the week *en beauté* with a dive into Allegra's bottomless archive around topics very close to our collaborative heart and central to Jane's work: bureaucracy, international governance and international institutions, and human rights.

An Anthropologist in the Archives: Reading letters to the League of Nations on minorities and Macedonia

The 1919 Paris peace conference following the Great War finalised the dismantling of the Ottoman, Hapsburg, Hohenzollern and Romanov empires and established the 'New Europe' in which the nation-state became the normative political form. According to interwar scholar Jakob Robinson and his colleagues, the new political order detached almost 100 million people of the three great pre-war empires of Central and Eastern Europe and transformed 25-30 million of them into national minorities.



In this lecture, professor Jane Cowan considers the process of ‘making minorities’ from the vantage point of letters sent to the League of Nations on minorities and Macedonia and the encounters that they generated. She explores how these letters (treated by the League as ‘petitions’) were read by League of Nations civil servants, state diplomats, civil society advocates and allies and the European press. The authors penned their letters to make political claims and to seek individual and collective justice, yet many of those reading and responding to the letters held very different visions of justice.

Jane Cowan’s lecture will convey a sense of the drama that unfolded in the League Secretariat offices of the Hôtel Nationale as claimants asserted who they were and what they wanted.

Cowan probes how they used or resisted categories like ‘minority’ within this subject-making process and how their readers responded and why. She also explores some methodological aspects of entering a historical archive as an anthropologist, one who has spent significant periods of time in the Balkans, especially in Greece, since 1975. Jane Cowan’s experience ‘on the ground’ and her anthropological training causes her to read archival records in a distinctive way. Although the League archives are full of claims about ‘the Macedo-Bulgarians’, ‘the Greeks’, ‘the Albanians’ and so forth, portraying them as separate peoples with unambiguous loyalties and clear boundaries, Professor Cowan’s forty years of work in the Balkans alerts her to the complex, always situated politics of identity, and the shifting ways that an individual may describe herself from one context to another, one audience to another, and across time. Inspired by Michel Foucault’s project of ‘a history of the present’, Professor Cowan asks how our taken-for-granted notion of ‘minority’ arose out of the still fluid and contested identifications of the interwar period.



*The Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies is an independent institute of advanced study within the University of Helsinki. It provides a top-class, international research environment for scholars in the humanities and social sciences. The Collegium promotes innovative interdisciplinary cooperation, both within the Collegium and at the University of Helsinki. Collegium fellows are recruited annually in a highly competitive fellowship call to work on their research projects.

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