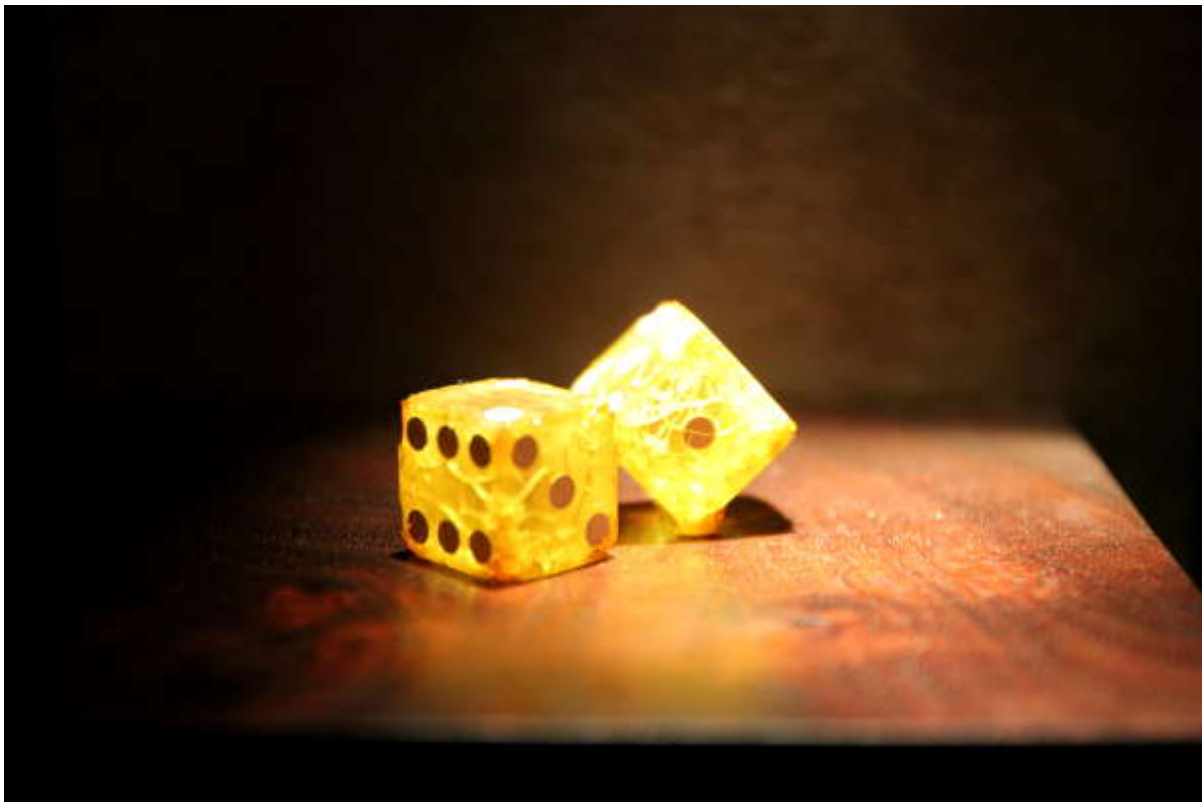




Leipzig 100: Super Model Epilogue with Savage

written by Immo Eulenberg
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In his epilogue to the series of papers of the centenary symposium, Immo Eulenberg, a native of Leipzig who had his first encounter with the city's anthropology as a child and followed its developments over the last twenty years, takes up some of the metaphors used in the papers to reflect on how an interplay of personal inclinations of anthropologists with their environment informs choices regarding emerging anthropologies, as well as on questions posed by their evolving diversity. In "War in the Depths of Humanity: A set of micro-plays on Anthropologies born(e) by Tragedies" he discusses anthropologist dilemmas in relation to social dilemmas of a shared world of common problems and contrasting approaches. He uses different periods of the Institute's history to draw this connection as a blog play of ontological actors.



War in the Depths of Humanity - A set of micro-plays on Anthropologies born(e) by Tragedies 1

Part 1

Allegorical Intro & Setting of the Play: Is there something rotten in the state of Anthropology?

I just received a mail from a dear friend and colleague in which she stridently demands that her photo be removed from an online news article calling anthropology “the most pathetic college major that doesn’t end in the words “studies”” and accusing ‘their professors’ of having “voted overwhelmingly against a resolution voicing opposition to a possible boycott of Israel” at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in December 2014. The full title is “Now America’s Most Pointless, Useless Professors Threaten Academic Boycott Of Israel”.

The photo shows her, a fair-haired young lady in some kind of ‘safari attire’, sitting in the midst of a bunch of ‘half-naked’, ‘black’ ‘native’ children with curious hairdos and ‘abnormally’ enlarged earlobes, which bear witness to their ‘primitive customs’. This photo, originally published on the website of the South Omo Research Centre in Southern Ethiopia, where she has conducted fieldwork among the Mursi for over a decade, a group famous for their enormous lip plates and their ‘enduring primitiveness’, ‘her tribe’, about which she had just presented at the AAA conference, this photo was chosen, without her consent, to represent what anthropology is. And it was used as an accessory to unleashing a -maybe





foreseeable but still astonishing- shitstorm.

I quote the voices of the thread of commentaries at some length for being such a neat illustration of what kind of issues some people have with (what they imagine) anthropologists (are) and how they feel about them:

"#who's next in your war against literacy, knowledge and education, engineers? #Any tenured professor. #Tenure = a license to steal from schools, students and tax payers. #And sweet sabbaticals. Do you suppose the prof in the picutre [sic] was looking for a husband? # "Yes, grasshopper, libtards really are this stupid." #Sorry, but "anthropological studies" are not the most useless professors in college. That distinction goes to any professor teaching "gender studies". #One thing is absolutely certain: these "Anthropology professors(sic)" serve _very_ little purpose in America, except to undermine it. So name names, fire these mongrels and make them feel unwelcome where ever they wander in this country. Don't assist them, don't serve them, humiliate them at every opportunity. Drive them out of your neighborhoods. They are a cancer to academia and America and need to be destroyed.. #Antropolgy [sic], study of dead culture...Like Air America. #Useless AND brainless. A frequently seen combination in faculty lounges these days. It almost explains the Khmer Rouge practice of taking "academic parasites" out into the country side and working them to death to salvage some social utility from them."



“#Most intellectuals ABHOR free-market capitalism because they cannot always sell their own product of labor without the help of government coercion. Clearly, intellectuals bring less benefit to mankind than others. #all these clowns in one spot, and NOBODY sent a drone? ... missed opportunities... #Just

think of the eugenics that would have done! #Don't forget Dovid [sic] (Devoid) the Progressive child. # The British Society of Anthropologists several years ago passed a resolution that Anthropology is not a science. Look it up. #Anthropologists? Who listens to them anyway? All they do is train patty flippers for McDonalds. What else can an anthropologist do? #The Communists are no longer hiding in the shadows. They are boldly asserting themselves and their policies. #They're looking for their own relevance, which is simply hard to find. #These guys are Irrelevant unless they explode #The kind of behavior to be expected of leftist indoctrination camps, aka Universities.”

... and so it goes on. Now, why might the author have chosen my friend's picture? Probably because it was fitting so well the cliché of the 'savage slot'. Why did the author not depict one of the promising young cutting-edge anthropologists studying research labs or legal organisations? What causes him to (dis)qualify anthropology as epitome of uselessness? Is there something wrong with us, or with what people think about us? If yes: why? And what is it? (Not to mention the question: Does it have anything to do with Israel?) Certainly, school book cases of othering.

There was one among the commenters who was clearly a misfit in this otherwise rather jolly casual crowd of right-leaning surfing savages bare of ingratiating 'civilised' restraint. He (or she?) expressed, as the only one, “hope we can have a



meaningful dialogue”. His or her post is easy to find because s/he is also the only one who used “I am”, easily put into the search function, followed by “an anthropologist”, which s/he also chooses as alias. Not only Anthropologist’s admission to have ended up on this site by coincidence, the whole style of his/her engagement, his/her concern that “There seems to be a very negative, and very misguided, understanding of what anthropology is and what academic social scientists do”, his/her sincere consternation, explicit and conciliatory readiness to be seriously open, vulnerable and caring demonstrated Anthropologist didn’t know the rules of the game, or was just too trapped in his/her internalised version of humanity to join the playfully raving maenad horde intoxicated by hallucinations of importance and power.

If this was an attempt at participant observation, it thoroughly failed. Nobody talked to Anthropologist in any way, let alone on his/her wavelength, in spite of his/her efforts to demonstrate relevance and belonging to the useful part of North America’s human population. In this context, it was painful to read, even if -or maybe indeed because- it sounded so familiar, as if Anthropologist had written it, first in a somehow official, than in a tangibly apologetic tone, for another of his/her kind.



“My own research focus is in North American archaeology. I work to protect cultural resources in the United States, to involve the public directly in the conservation of the past, and to understand our history and the history of Native peoples on this continent. I study how past peoples interacted with and modified their natural environments, and I try to find ways to apply that knowledge of the past to contemporary environmental issues. Ultimately, I hope this sort of work can improve our environment, our country and our larger world. I realize, of course, that such is not always the case.

I work multiple jobs. Most of my research time is unpaid. In fact, I often pay out of pocket to travel, to engage in research, and to share that research with the public. Working for twelve plus hours a day is not uncommon for me. I get by, but I’m certainly not ever going to get rich at this. I live in an apartment. I don’t own any property other than an eight year old car. I do this because I love it and because I think my work can help people. I think this includes people like those of you in the comments who take issue with my discipline, or who think that I should



be 'destroyed.'"

The only post of 'the opposing side' that could be read as something like an engagement says:

"# Both of my grandchildren went to a local community college. One is an RN(CICU) and the other has an AA in computer science and a string of computer certifications. Both are making 70+K per year. Screw four year universities, whose graduates can not find a job, and have a boat load of debt. OBTW, neither of the two had to listen to left wing indoctrination each day."

I think these are all issues we are familiar with. But apparently nobody in the crowd of non-anthropologist 'normal people' cared a fig about 'protecting cultural resources', the 'conservation of the past', 'understanding history', 'Native peoples', how they or anyone else 'modified their natural environments', or about 'contemporary environmental issues', or about the honest admission that intended improvements do not always work out. Anthropologist was clearly an outsider.

I remember that back in elementary, I was already entertaining interests similar to those of Anthropologist, and that this made me an outsider, too. That was hurting at times but ultimately not a stringent correlation and, for me, worth the price. Things got considerably better in high school and really great studying anthropology in college, i.e. at Leipzig University. Later on I switched to history and philosophy but although that was very exciting too, I never felt as much at home there and never developed that kind of community life I enjoyed with my anthropologist peers.



However, from a bird's eye view, the stages of increasing social and intellectual satisfaction were accompanied by something we could call 'socio-cultural seclusion'. Though fortunate enough to be part of a lively and professionally mixed mainly Latino+German circle of friends plus an exuberant social life along friendship networks, almost everyone was a college student, most of them from social sciences and humanities (plus a good number in medicine), and especially the times I was a student or junior scholar at the Institute saw anthropologists making up a huge faction. Almost everyone was basically 'leftist', although on different and normally rather 'moderate' levels.



Relevance of interests and activities was not much of an issue where the common ground was so solid and so widely shared, and independent of financial issues. Our 'objective' economic 'marginality' and relative income 'poverty' did not bother us very much as the wealth of the country and its remarkably reliable system of resource redistribution and social security gave us a feeling of safety and comfort, in spite of the fact that 10% of the German population own over 2/3 of all net capital but 60% own only 1%. We were content with the hope that our coming degrees would provide for a reasonable income later on.

However, I can relate very well to Anthropologist's somewhat 'romantic' and 'heroic' revelations; 'romantic' because they emphasise the importance of 'what is good and right' (and might, as Julia Eckert describes this academic species in this series, secretly want to "save the World" [at least a bit] and / or its proverbial Wretched [or at least some of them]), in an arguably somewhat naïve manner, and 'heroic' because they underline, very much in contrast to the obstreperously romping and impertinently griping lot of rightists around him and their 'savage' redneck demeanour, his/her readiness to sacrifice chances of personal material gain for these higher goods, a kind of rebel stand. That is basically how I myself survived over the last twenty years, i.e. half of my life, and enjoyed my freedom to



follow intellectual interests and do what I most ardently wanted to do.



I am well aware that this makes me part of an economically marginal cultural minority which others, including former class mates from elementary, are likely to see, at least at its present stage, as a kind of failure, and that what I am doing, as an anthropologist with special interests in some remote parts of Africa, patterns of collective violence and pagan religions, must look utterly exotic to most people.

Does that mean that I am “useless”? I don’t think so. I know how much expertise and capacities I have accumulated over the years, and that they are quite specialised does, in my view, not diminish their value. On the contrary, one of the great things I enjoy most about the extremely complex global society in which we live is how you can go for a very individual path, be it through urban jungles or outback remoteness, and be very relevant not in spite but because of the extreme specialisation your self-determined choices have given you. And I care precious little about what malignities a random bunch of chauvinist jerks on desktop mad rush have in store about it.

Some people might say I am omitting a maybe important detail: that all the



ranting and sputter was about the threatened boycott 'on Israel' (whatever that might mean). Well, I don't think so. Very little of it referred actually to Israel or that part of the article, instead most of it was bulging and blazing with apparent hatred against everything 'leftist', 'intellectual', especially 'anthropologist', and to encore with: Afro-American (look it up). Apart from that, no-one ever cared that most anthropologists (some 90%) at the AAA conference, including ourselves, had not even attended (or been aware of) the meeting.

Personally, I only learned about the whole boycott drama in the taxi from the conference back to Washington airport, which I shared with the friend on the photo, another friend and colleague from home and an anthropologist from Israel who brought our attention to the matter. For most of the five days conference I had struggled with a long-term chronic lack of sleep, a consequently fierce and stubborn flu blocking my ears and concerns of our upcoming panel on the rapidly worsening plight of 'our people' in our (neighbouring) field(s). (We were a group of friends and colleagues all based at the Max-Planck Institute (MPI) for Social Anthropology in Halle / Saale, Germany, reporting, analysing and rebelling against the evolving fate of people we know and feel close to, and who for many others, including the website zealots and direct opponents in the part of Africa we all study, are 'primitive, savage, backward tribes in need of socio-cultural re-engineering to become useful inhabitants of the planet, or to at least get out of the way for more useful ones'. Thus, all thoroughly irrelevant.)

So, already handicapped by all these factors, I had lost hours skimming the 600+ pages of the printed program for personal highlights, sometimes missing the session because I had to examine the descriptions of too many parallel sessions, and I remember to have seen something with "Israel", "Palestine" and possible "boycott", three keywords which, especially in their combination, immediately triggered the automatic skip function that had evolved over the years in reaction to the experienced near-impossibility of participating in public discourses on that topic without being immediately dragged into a labyrinth of accusations and counter-accusations, suspicions and counter-suspicions where attempts at balanced, well-meaning discussion get irreparably poisoned with extremist



partisan stereotypes.

So there was no way I would lose precious time on a lost cause like that while there were so many much more appealing topics around and so much I could do furthering my personal research and 'activist' agenda, i.e. the cause we presently care for most. I know it was similar for my friend on the photo and very possibly for many of the over 6000 participants of that conference, of which a vast -and perhaps less biased- majority had not come to the voting session.

So when our Israeli friend alerted us on our way back home about the 'boycott meeting', we were so unaware that, although she was visibly irritated by the incident, I expected, coming from Germany where that was the by far most likely outcome, a clear vote against a boycott, and had not understood that it might have come the other way round. If the vote was however indeed as reported in the article (which I first seriously doubted), this vote in favor of anthropologists boycotting Israeli academia was, in my view, something extremely stupid to do if mounting pressure against unjust and unhelpful practices was the aim of it.



As our Israeli anthropologist friend reminded us, with that carrying coal to Newcastle, the immediate victims of the boycott would be Israeli anthropologists, who in their vast majority are critical of possible hard-line, populist or reckless Israeli government policies themselves and so certainly not among the darlings of ruling and system-sustaining hawks.

But not only is collectively boycotting Israeli academics of our discipline in the name of fighting injustice like shooting at friends, it remains absolutely unclear what good it could possibly do instead of being a silly invitation for all kinds of predictable stereotypic suspicions and accusations.

But this is not the kind of dilemma I want to address here. It would require a different article that I am not inclined to invest in, due to the mentioned conditions around the topic. The only connection I will draw is the fact that, on



both sides of the widely ideological discursive conflict around Israel and Palestine, as in the similarly constructed virtual conflict between of the supposed entities “Islam” and “The West”, self-styled opponents denounce the respective Other as savage in a (although not the only) sense in which I want to use this metaphorical term here, too: as discontent of ‘true humanity’, something or someone outside (or rebelling against) the ‘right’, ‘useful’ and ‘conducive’ order of things, hard to control, dangerous, driven by passion, ‘wild’, the very epitome of The Other.

On that note, I want to return to topics closer to my main points in this paper and away from known swamps of unhealthy polemics, as this is -including in the case of the quoted right-winger shitstorm- not about Israel.

So now: Is there something rotten in the state of Anthropology?, as an anthropological Hamlet might ask... Two apologies: (1) I will have to come back to this question later. And (2): This is not only a blog but also a stub. I conceptualised and wrote it in 7 days and nights and had to leave many of the details, thoughts and figures I intended to use to ‘make it round’ for later redrafts. It is therefore more fragmentary and sketchy than it would have been with more time to perfect it. I decided to release it anyway to not miss out the chance of ‘giving light’ (dar luz), as devotees of Afro-Cuban religion say, to some thoughts I thought might be pertinent in the context of the centenary of Leipzig and German university anthropology to which this little series of papers is dedicated.

Read Immo Eulenberger’s FULL article [here](#)