



Towards anthropological self-deconfinement

Ruy Llera Blanes
June, 2020



While we now seem to be approaching post-confinement, and after the closure of campuses and improvised conversion to online teaching, there has been much discussion regarding the long-term effects of the COVID19 pandemic on the university system, in particular regarding teaching and research, and more generally in the labour infrastructure. Will the multiplication and flexibilization of teaching and research methods actually diversify and improve our research? Or will this online transition become a pretext for the 'cheapening' and subsequent



precarization of labour, following the same neoliberal austerity logics of the financial crisis of the late 2000s? Will this lead to the final transformation of teachers, administrative personnel and researchers into a [precariat](#)? For anthropology, adding insult to injury, we face additional methodological impediments imposed by bans and restrictions on travel and circulation, with a serious impact on our research designs and planning. More than in other moments of crisis and uncertainty we have experienced in the past, this seems to be a highly challenging moment for anthropology. How, then, will we process the de-confinement as a discipline? I argue that this extraordinary moment poses a fundamental struggle - individual and institutional survival in the current scientific landscape - and at the same time a unique possibility for a disciplinary refashioning - from a marginal yet critical intellectual elite to a civic, engaged, grassroots discipline. As I develop below, there is a potential for an anthropological self-de-confinement through a reframing of our 'critique' and our 'publics'.

Will this online transition become a pretext for the 'cheapening' and subsequent precarization of labour, and lead to the final transformation of teachers, administrative personnel and researchers into a precariat?

Regarding our struggle: while we might agree that it is still too early to discern an overarching structuring movement regarding the future of our discipline in the age of post-confinement, it is worth looking at some indicators in the academic landscape. In what follows I discuss examples from the university and research environments in Portugal and Spain, which I have navigated in recent years as researcher. I start with the research funding environment and the place of anthropology in this landscape, and then reflect on the current and possible social roles of anthropology as an academic discipline in the current situation of confinement and post-confinement.

One interesting institutional development has been the speedy response by national funding bodies in terms of creating a fast-track funding scheme for



COVID19-related research. This was the case of the National Science and Technology Research Foundation (FCT) in Portugal, which launched several micro-calls for research related to [AI](#), [gender](#), and [biomedics](#). By “micro-calls” I refer to funding programmes of 2 million Euros in total for the funding of 55 research projects, as is the case of the RESEARCH 4 COVID-19 initiative. In Spain, the Ministry of Research and Innovation (MICINN) has also sponsored urgent COVID-19 research, albeit focusing exclusively in [microbiological](#) and biomedical research.

Both cases reveal an interesting institutional reframing, marked by the urgent establishment of research initiatives in response to unexpected societal developments, overlooking traditional and most likely unnecessary bureaucratic procedures along the way. But in the process, they continue to ignore the labour situation of the majority of early and mid-career researchers in both countries, who are the driving force behind this research but continue to survive on fixed, short-term scholarships. For instance, in Portugal, while funding for COVID-19 projects is emerging, the National Union for Higher Education (SNESUP) submitted [a request](#) to the Portuguese Parliament for a 90-day extension of 1-year contracts for researchers and lecturers. This is telling of how politicized and bureaucratized scientific research is today, determined by a near-sighted, nationally and ideologically determined scientific policy - in Portugal and elsewhere - and should be understood within the wider framework of isolationism and divisionism that has marked the international community's response to the pandemic.

These urgent responses perpetuate a classic bias: the emphasis on ‘hard sciences’ in the search for answers and tools for societal problems, and a subsequent sub-bias towards quantitative results.

Furthermore, as anyone familiar with these environments can easily anticipate, these urgent responses perpetuate a classic bias: the emphasis on ‘hard sciences’ in the search for answers and tools for societal problems, and a subsequent sub-



bias towards quantitative results. As a token, take this poster of an event organized on 10 June by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) to discuss “The Social Impact of the Pandemic”, which includes demographers, economists, journalists, climatologists and economic sociologists. Apparently, despite the existence of dozens of anthropologists working in CSIC’s laboratories and research centers - from the [Centre for Human and Social Sciences](#) in Madrid to [the Institute of Heritage Sciences](#) in Santiago de Compostela -, the main research institution in Spain seems uninterested in what social anthropologists have to say on the subject of social consequences of pandemics and health issues.



Poster for a CISC event-found on the CISC website

You might ask: if there were any anthropologists in the CSIC event, would it have made an actual difference? In this respect, instead on focusing on what the public administration and institutions can or should do for anthropology, I would rather



focus on what anthropology can do for society in this particularly extraordinary context, and more broadly on the role of our research *in* and *for* society – especially in a time in which scientific and empirically based knowledge is increasingly becoming an obstacle to [populist governance](#). For instance: after decades of anthropological deconstruction of race as an ideology, racism and xenophobia are becoming increasingly normalized in political rhetoric. To say the least, this implies a serious case of irrelevance of the anthropological discourse, decades after Lévi-Strauss’s [pivotal text for UNESCO](#). Recently, the Spanish Anthropological Association (ASAE) denounced a [text published](#) by the famous biologist Javier Sampedro in the mainstream newspaper *El País* where he argued, in the framework of COVID-19’s victim toll, against the anthropological deconstruction and for the biology of race. [In their response](#) the ASAE explained that “races don’t exist, but racism does”.

The continued anthropological irrelevance regarding its own core issues is as much a product of scientific hegemonic ideologies as it is of our own ‘confinement’ in circular, self-referential critical discussions about anthropology.

My point here is that, while the ASAE’s denunciation was necessary and to the point, the continued anthropological irrelevance regarding its own core issues is as much a product of scientific hegemonic ideologies as it is of our own ‘confinement’ in circular, self-referential critical discussions about anthropology, placing our institutional statements as reactions against external attacks instead of proactive interventions and engagements. The invitation is thus for anthropology to de-confine by recuperating its longstanding activist trajectory – ever since Franz Boas and Margaret Mead – into a [militant stance](#) that brings us closer to a social, grassroots ‘[fifth estate](#)’ that counteracts the exercise of inequality that stems from either the state or private enterprise.

Here, I would like to highlight cases of disciplinary mobilization against implicit or explicit violence stemming specifically from the situation of pandemic, and



more generally from processes of social and political injustice and emerging necropolitical rule in 2020. One example for this comes from Portugal. The Portuguese Anthropological Association (APA) has [recently denounced](#), through the work of anthropologist [Cristina Santinho](#), the particularly difficult situation experienced by refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal during the confinement, considering their individual situation of isolation in hostels and precarious legal status and their condition as targets for increasing xenophobia and racism. The work has been of combating the invisibility of refugees and migrants and their situation in the current context, and is performing a critical review of the work of official Portuguese institutions such as the Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR) in their response to the situation. This has allowed for a public exposition of a situation beyond the official hegemonic narrative of Portugal's hospitality in such cases.

The invitation is for anthropology to de-confine by recuperating its longstanding activist trajectory.

Another example comes from Brazil, where both individual anthropologists (e.g. [Carlos Fausto](#)) and the [Brazilian Anthropological Association \(ABA\)](#) have exposed the effects of the pandemic on indigenous communities in Brazil, denouncing the role of local, federal and national government in the unfolding of a structural health vulnerability among indigenous communities in Amazonia. In their [statement](#), the ABA used anthropological and medical research to explain specifically how ongoing industrial and artisanal (*garimpo*) mining in the states of Roraima and Amazonas have produced an environmental disaster that has had long-term consequences in the health and livelihoods of local Yanomami and Ye'Kwana communities, making them particularly vulnerable to the virus.

While this might seem another case of anthropological "[band aid](#)", [savage slot](#), [exonostalgia](#) or third-world charity (in the worse sense of the term), in fact it highlights Brazilian anthropology's activism within a highly polarized cultural politics battle towards the recognition and defence of indigenous and Afro



communities in the country. In a moment in which COVID-19 intersects with Black Lives Matter, this is no longer a case of moral self-complacency for bourgeois anthropologists. And in fact, while one could argue about the practical relevance of institutional press releases, in this case ABA's public positioning has had the merit of standing in opposition to the Brazilian government's brutal neoliberal policies regarding indigenous and disenfranchised communities. As a result, the Brazilian minister of education Abraham Weintraub has [openly expressed his hate](#) against sociology, anthropology and philosophy and his choice of using public funds for other disciplines.

The moment of crisis might also be one of opportunity in terms of what we anthropologists do with anthropology. Perhaps it is time to self-deconfine from our Marriott or Sheraton gatherings, or from our university campuses, and do something with our knowledge and ethnographic experience. This implies refashioning 'critique' from an intellectual exercise of conceptual deconstruction towards a civic counterpoint, using the grounded, shared knowledge we produce with our interlocutors in our ethnographies to combat any form of discrimination.

Both cases from Portugal and Brazil show an anthropological work that has used ethnographic insight and formulated 'critique' not for its own heuristic purposes but as a method to counteract violent and oppressive consequences of the pandemic and state social, economic and health policies by challenging their narratives.

In sum, while anthropology and anthropologists are facing dramatic, trying times in terms of struggling for dignified labour and research conditions, the discipline's subaltern position within political and media science policies continues to render anthropology as a 'useless' knowledge, especially in times of COVID-19 crisis. In response, we can either continue to complain about the situation in the department corridors (or now Zoom chats), or instead mobilize



towards making an actual difference with our knowledge and networks. While this dilemma is not necessarily an either/or situation, the moment of crisis might also be one of opportunity in terms of what we anthropologists do with anthropology. Perhaps it is time to self-deconfine from our Marriott or Sheraton gatherings, or from our university campuses, and *do something* with our knowledge and ethnographic experience - both in the settings where we conduct our research and in the academic environments in which we are inserted. In my view, this implies refashioning 'critique' from an intellectual exercise of conceptual deconstruction towards a civic counterpoint, using the grounded, shared knowledge we produce with our interlocutors in our ethnographies to combat any form of (health, political, economic) discrimination.

Featured Image: Margaret Mead Stamp by [John Curran](#), [Flickr](#), (CC BY 2.0)

Image: CSIC event poster- found on the [CSIC](#) website

The grassroots movement Union of Refugees in Portugal (UREP) has set up a [fundraiser](#) to help their work in support of refugees in problematic situations

Here is a [link](#) to know more and support the indigenous struggle against COVID-19 in Brazil, and another link for an [Avaaz petition](#) for protection of indigenous communities promoted by Sebastião and Lélia Salgado