
Decrypting human futures in times of crisis

EASA 2016. Anthropological legacies and human futures. 14th Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, 20–23 July 2016

In Milan the climate was very warm, welcoming and suitable for a conference venue: good air conditioning means that people will stay at the venue even during the hottest part of the day. This was truly the case at the 20-year-old University of Milano-Bicocca, where more than 1550 conference delegates filled the university building to near capacity. The conference was located at the former Pirelli industrial complex, just outside the city centre, but with good connections via trams and subways to the city centre. Some cues could be observed at the espresso machines during the breaks, but otherwise the organisers could be praised for a well-managed event. The surroundings, with a mixture of nice architecture and good functionality, were inspiring, with diverse business, housing and shopping complexes successfully joining the old and the new. For example, the surroundings also provided a perfect place for an experiment in walking ethnography, which was organised in one of the conference laboratories.

The subthemes of the conference were power, economy, kinship, religion, knowledge and forms of expression and work. A striking feature of the conference seemed to be a focus on analysing and rethinking anthropologically oriented research in the changing world, a world where people are virtually all the time online and on the move. One word quite often heard was that of crisis: this is the term used within the contexts of doing academic research and explaining the role of research as a means of understanding ‘crisis’. The word must also be put in parenthesis because it seems to serve many interests in recent socio-political-economic developments around Europe.

In the beginning of the opening session, we heard the local *Le Voci di Mezzo* group singing in Italian. This group has reshaped local traditional singing and, at first, it seemed to provide a nice, calming atmosphere, but it also delivered several messages: the songs they were singing were projected onto a canvas (and translated into English). Some of the lyrics, i.e. those for some of the old protest songs, also surely resonated with some members of the present audience, such as ‘we want [a fair] salary for our work’.

In his opening words for the conference, the president of the EASA, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, also emphasised the theme of crisis. Social anthropology in Europe is facing a situation where in states are cutting costs and research funding, but also directly interfering with academia. Dur-

ing the conference, we could also follow developments in Turkey, where, after the recent coup attempt, the state has been clearing academia of people seemingly critical of the state, forbidding teachers from traveling and shutting down universities. Eriksen pointed out the need to make it clear to society just what it is that anthropologists do, so that even an economist would not only dismiss anthropological research as ‘fascinating’ but seeing further purpose for it. He pointed out the role and potential of ethnography.

In his keynote address, which was also streamed to additional auditoriums, since the main hall could only hold 900 people, the Princeton/EHESS (Paris) University professor Didier Fassin discussed broadly the role and development of critique in and for anthropological research, i.e. from the viewpoints of Marxist critical theory and genealogical approaches (to see a recording of the keynote, go to <http://www.easaonline.org/conferences/easa2016/>). As an inspiring conclusion, he suggested that research has to allow flowers to flourish. If isms and turns come, they are to be considered as reflecting the need to renew research, to innovate. We need to let the turns turn (i.e. material, mobility, textual), not simply try to reject them. We need to see them as productive ways of advancing science and affecting society. This seemed to offer a reply to the conference theme, the role and value of mainstream and more marginal lines of thought in anthropology for decrypting human futures.

An example of the crisis theme was also provided by the panel on the current refugee crisis. Speakers looked for the local responses to asylum seekers. Interestingly, many participants noted that the administration, officials trying to cope with the situation as well as local communities seem to be taking a rather ‘pragmatic’ approach to the situation. Some participants suggested that if a local shopkeeper is happy to receive asylum seekers as new customers, then he/she is also viewing asylum seekers from the standpoint of economic ideology (cost/benefit). As researchers, we should be aware of the way that “pragmatic” approaches are not a sign of integration to some local community as such, but can reveal those ways that asylum seekers become instrumental-

ized in the process of realizing diverse private and public interests. Some participants asked why this whole question was not put in the context of European border policies. So the question of contexts arose again.

Another strong theme of the conference was suggested in the plenary session focusing on themes of kinship and gender. This topic seems interesting since it combines legal, institutional and individual experiences, i.e. the principles and practices of equality. This has to do with the kinds of complexities of situations as when the mother of a child is actually legally his father (as put by Marit Melhuus). Unintendedly, this wording resulted in the audience laughing, but then some in the audience quite rightly pointed out that these things can be serious issues for some people.

Other plenaries focused on contemporary capitalism and inequality in society, while on the last day the topic of anthropology in interdisciplinary settings was discussed. Perhaps as a sign of the length of the conference, only 400 people participated in the last plenary and the corridors of the building were rather silent in Bicocca at that point.

Questions of power were put into focus in many panels, for example when the entanglements of coping and resistance and the precariousness of living in peripheral regions were discussed. Many panels reflected one of the main themes of the conference: work. Papers discussed everything from visions of the future ranging from industrial workplaces to shop-floor reflexivity on work, from Nepal to Bosnia-Herzegovina. In another panel, participants discussed voluntary work among Roma, suggesting the need to understand the legacies of post-socialism. In one of the panels, participants discussed, for example, sex tourism, women working with male refugees and in prisons, thus offering a strikingly different perspective on gender and work.

Also, one panel focused on the precarisation of academic work during a lunch break session. Here, problems related to fixed-term and part-time contracts and problems of social security among young researchers were discussed. Also, Hylland Eriksen took part in this event and suggested ways in which the EASA might provide support

to young researchers, while at the same time understanding that it actually has very limited resources to affect the situation. It was clearly recognised that the approximately 150 researchers in attendance also have a huge amount of power at their disposal if they were to take action. As a means of lifting spirits, some voiced the opinion that we do not need universities anymore: we can do our research independently. And we should not be ashamed to say that at times we have to rely on social benefits to survive. It could, however, be asked whether or not this idea of hero anthropologist (working even without any salary) might also increase the gap between anthropologists and the rest of the society: Is your topic translatable to wider audiences? Even if this event was important, one could not avoid the feeling that the situations do differ quite a lot from one country to another and it was not always clear if people were discussing the same problems.

During one lunchbreak session, the new editors of *Anthropological Theory* invited participants to discuss the role of theory in research, including in a global setting. The background idea for this journal was that in an ever-changing and complex world, we need to be ever more precise and sharp in what we do. In the case of the new editions of the journal, this means balancing between philosophical and ethnographic considerations in articles. As ever, the strength of research lies in the way ethnographic concepts are drawn tightly from fieldwork, and thus form the basis for the critique of earlier theories.

Networking is an obvious part of conferences. Diverse networks are active also beyond organising conference panels, as they can also organise summer schools and develop e-seminars for the

development of papers. All of this also requires outside funding to work. There were also numerous book launches and drinks every afternoon, including the SIEF launch of the Göttingen Biennial Conference next March. The launches and network meetings provided a fruitful way of networking with people with similar interests.

All in all, it seemed that panels focusing on current topics attracted many listeners, but also such themes as mobility and materiality continue to be attractive. In a panel focusing on materiality and its movement, it was noted, for example, that Vietnamese migrants use things made of paper (replicas) in order to maintain contact with the deceased and even give them passports so they can be mobile. We also heard about pilgrimage objects, mass-produced small items, which come to have a certain degree of agency, both for killing and healing, as people travel between Europe and Africa. Participants also discussed how the Chinese send luxury goods from Japan to China and thus provide a basis for depicting Chinese people in Japan as parasites, whereas the Chinese see this economy as a gift to Japan on a national level. It does seem that such matters are interesting to follow and may well also provide avenues for interesting ethnographic studies. But the question remains, is this only 'fascinating' from the standpoint of an economic commentator?

This short review can only provide a glimpse into the huge programme. All in all, one could say that the topics and themes in EASA 2016 were quite similar as those focused on in the Ethnology Days 'Moving Knowledge' conference organised in Turku in the spring of 2016.

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