

ANTHROPOLOGY AT AN INTERSECTION. A REPORT FROM ‘RELATIONS AND BEYOND: THE CONFERENCE OF THE FINNISH ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY’

The Conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society, held in Rovaniemi, a few kilometres south of the Arctic Circle, marked my return to the realm of face-to-face scholarly gatherings since the start of the pandemic. Taking part in the fervent exchange of ideas and copious discussions was a riveting experience. All this transpired within the cramped hallways of Arktikum, a peculiar architectural amalgam of 1930s totalitarian art deco and utopian glass domes, a seemingly unsuitable venue for an assembly of roughly 300 anthropologists. Yet, despite the spatial constraints, the deft conference team pulled off a remarkable feat, orchestrating a successful affair. It was an environment teeming with off-script encounters and incessant confabulation. After several years of screen-mediated anthropology, the intensity of it all felt intoxicating.

The panels showcased the vibrancy and vigour of the discipline in this moment. While some of the papers were firmly placed in the ‘suffering slot’, content to describe the predicament of research participants, many others examined how people find creative ways to resist structural and intersectional factors that form those predicaments. Here, I’ll mention a few that I found especially inspiring.

Elena Palma talked about riverine practices in Alto Bio-Bio, Chile, where a group of Mapuche-Pehuenche women have taken up white-water rafting. Such an activity is

usually associated with the commodification of nature, combining watersports and ritual communication with the nonhuman inhabitants of the river in order to represent and respect the river’s interests in a context of state-sponsored large-scale extractive projects in the area.

Dienke Stomph delivered a paper on her research, which explores how the practice of Capoeira Angola—one of the original tactics of resistance against plantations—could be used to decolonise human–soil relations in Dutch agriculture. Maroonage—the escape from slavery and plantation—becomes a map for the anthropologist to find routes out of the Plantationocene, and a way to engage with the soil revitalisation practices of Dutch farmers.

Isabel Bredenbröker and Adam Pultz Melbye outlined their fascinating plan to queer the ethnographic artefacts in museums by creating a multitude of representations out of them. Based on the unique material characteristics of the objects, more specifically, they explore how to amplify and condense different frequencies of sounds and use a genetic algorithm that helps in the curation process of these sonic representations.

The three keynotes of the conference were delivered by anthropological heavyweights Piers Vibetsky (who delivered the Westermarck Lecture at the conference), Marilyn Strathern (one of the keynote speakers), and Tim Ingold (the second keynote speaker). I won’t go into

these lectures and talks here, but we hope to publish them in a subsequent issue of *Suomen Antropologi* in future.

The last day of the conference was opened by a roundtable discussion featuring Florian Stammler (chair of the organising committee), Vibetsky, Strathern, and Ingold. An audience member—Ivan Tacey from the University of Plymouth—seized the moment to interrogate the panellists on a pertinent matter. Namely, Tacey asked why all of the anthropologists on the stage had conspicuous ties to Cambridge, undermining the panel’s—and, by implication, the conference’s—representativeness of the diversity of contemporary anthropological scholarship. The question was met with a round of applause from the audience, indicating a resonance with many of the participants.

Whilst Strathern accepted the question as germane, and argued that the discipline should reflect the reproduction of job opportunities within itself, Ingold and Vibetsky appeared to deem the criticism irrelevant, downplaying their ties to Cambridge anthropology. Moreover, Vibetsky closed with a quip: ‘everywhere else is welcome to become their own invasive species, so maybe Finnish anthropology will colonise the world in its turn.’¹ Given the emphasis on decolonising knowledge structures and anthropology itself, which was evident in so many papers at the conference, this was a rather surprising retort.

I do not think—of course, and probably neither does Vibetsky—that the aim is to replace one colonial structure with another, nor is it possible as long as anthropologists on top of academic hierarchies are unwilling to thoroughly examine their position of privilege and power. Maybe this could happen—please allow me to push the metaphor a bit further—if we had the anthropological equivalent of

Roundup to kill off all of the outdated scholarly traditions from the old colonial centres of power.

For me personally, an ideal candidate for an anthropological Roundup is the concept of intersectionality, which brings me to another exchange during the discussion that I personally found the most intellectually stimulating. It started with Strathern’s remark on the limitations of anthropological concepts, based on a comment she had heard during the panels. The comment was about how our concepts limit the possibilities of our understanding, upon which Strathern remarked that concepts can also be ungainly and downright ugly (her example, ‘Euro-American’). She continued, arguing that these kinds of concepts—which she called ‘horrible hybrids’—are important in pushing the limits of our thinking.

A few minutes later, Tim Ingold remarked that intersectionality is the ‘ugliest word I’ve heard for a long time’ in the social sciences, going on to describe the concept as ‘absolutely ghastly’ and ‘dreadful’. He seemed to call for an increased sensitivity to the use of concepts in general, claiming that ‘we are careless and clumsy about the way in which we recycle words and phrases often without thinking about what they really mean.’² At first, I interpreted Ingold’s remark as a double-voiced comment on Strathern’s call for ugly concepts, both agreeing to it in principle and disparaging of intersectional analysis. After discussing this with my partner, also an anthropologist working as an equality and non-discrimination expert, I came to agree with her take on the discussion, which was that, while Strathern made an epistemological point regarding anthropological analysis, Ingold seemed to merely state a preference, disregarding his position in the hierarchy of the discipline. We indeed need ungainly concepts, but merely expressing an

aesthetic judgement will not advance our analytical thinking, let alone help to dismantle the colonial structures of anthropology.

Thus, the conversation left me rather perplexed. In a discipline in dire need of decolonisation, which needs to be more representative of the multitude of social worlds it explores and reflect on its privilege, we had a panel full of white, entrenched, Cambridge-educated anthropologists. Furthermore, one of those panellists uses that platform to come up with three synonyms to characterise the disagreeability of a concept, which—and the whole panel was an indexical icon of how much this is true—the discipline desperately needs to move forward. Add the symbolic dimension—given the lack of monitor speakers on stage, the panel members could hardly hear the audience questions, while the questions rang clear and true around the rest of the auditorium—and the setting was complete.

It is high time for the ‘turn’ to intersectional anthropology from the peripheries.

HEIKKI WILENIUS
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
heikki.wilenius@helsinki.fi

NOTES

- 1 ‘Invasive species’ was a riposte to Tacey’s characterisation of Cambridge anthropology replicating itself around the world as ‘rhizomes or seeds blowing in the wind’.
- 2 Moreover, while Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to describe a subject’s experience as ‘intersectional’, the word is not novel to the English language, as Ingold claimed. The Oxford English Dictionary dates the word ‘intersectional’ back to a mid-nineteenth century book on architecture.