

A SNAPSHOT OF HELSINKI ANTHROPOLOGY IN INTERESTING TIMES: LOOKING FORWARDS

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Green was invited by the editorial team of *Suomen antropologi* to write something for their Jubilee Edition about Finnish anthropology, perhaps about her experience as an outsider, having worked in anthropology departments for a couple of decades in the UK before coming to Helsinki in 2012. She gladly agreed to write a piece, but argued that she would find it difficult to compare UK and Finnish anthropologies. As a specialist on borders, location, space, and place, it was hard to imagine what she could say about that difference without creating, rather than reflecting, that difference. She suggested, instead, that she could both consider where Finnish anthropology is currently located and look forward—that is, where Finnish anthropology might be headed. She added that she preferred to do this collectively, together with other colleagues, to provide a range of views and suggestions from a small selection of those currently practising anthropology in Helsinki. The colleagues Sarah contacted were selected to reflect a range of experiences of anthropology in Helsinki—both long term and more recent, and across a range of potential perspectives. Furthermore, given the exceptionally precarious times in which we are living (early 2025), she suggested that our team effort could also consider how to draw on the skills that anthropology provides in order to intervene in some way. The editors readily agreed.

This brief reflection piece is the outcome of that collective effort, and, in a sense, represents the middle of a conversation rather

than its beginning or end. The beginning took place many years ago and is perhaps as old as anthropology itself (What is anthropology's place in the world?); the end is yet to come: the text is a heading, not an objective or a target, or whatever language might be currently fashionable in terms of things we ought to achieve as successful scholars. Instead, this piece is an act of collaboration between us, and was constructed quickly, rather like a snapshot. It captures a moment in which we are all attempting to juggle too many demands upon our time; a moment in which the disruptions, uncertainties, injustices, and brutalities occurring, wave after wave, layer after layer, in different parts of the world, both within the academy and beyond it, impinge on our thoughts and our work in a variety of ways. It is also a moment in which colleagues express their continued willingness to serve as witnesses, as well as do what the discipline makes possible at its best—render what has been witnessed as meaningful in a way that can make people think differently. Each of the fragments below provides one of these witnessed moments, making things meaningful and providing food for thinking otherwise. The effect of bringing them together as both a collage and collective work, makes explicit the way anthropology has always been a collective effort, one that works best in conversation and in relation to others. Given the subject matter of the discipline—which is nothing if not a study of relations and conversations—that is hardly surprising.

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SARAH—FROM THE INSIDE OUT

It seems a bit too obvious to say that we, here in Finland, are living in interesting times given our geographical location. There are approximately 1340 km (or 844 miles) of a shared border between Finland and the Russian Federation. It was something people did not talk about much when I first arrived in 2012, except to note that there was a fast train to St. Petersburg from Helsinki's central train station: an Allegro train, one of those fancy new trains made by the same Italian company that made Pendolino trains. Since 28 March 2022, there has been no train to St. Petersburg. The train was replaced by a Ukrainian flag, which now flies above the railway station (and still does as of March 2025). No signs or placards explain the flag; it's just the flag, flying in pride of place above the main entrance to the station.

I walk past that flag every day as I go to work at the university. I've noticed that as Helsinki and Finland changes, the texture of that train station and everything around it both absorb and reflect what is happening like a sponge. As more diverse people begin to arrive, those milling around the station become more diverse; as an economic downturn looms, more people who have seen trouble begin to loiter there, and the number of people blaring their religious messages increases; as the infrastructure of the town and the country changes, the shape of that place changes: behind the glass Sanomat building (advertising the transparency of the press), Oodi, Helsinki's main city library and general meeting place, popped up to mark the 100th anniversary of Finland, a magnificent monument to an open, free, liberal, and democratic approach to civic engagement.

Oodi opened its doors in December 2018, during one of the high points in the city's and country's existence.

Yet, at the same time, the changes going on in universities marked by the radical transformation of the structural, economic, and conceptual location of higher education in the country had already been implemented two years earlier. People at the University of Helsinki had been shocked, not only by staff layoffs—people who, until 2010, had been tenured and unsackable—but by the removal of departments, the merging of degrees, and the reshaping of what university education and research was to be about in future. Two things can happen simultaneously and usually do: Oodi and the reconstruction (or destruction, depending on your point of view) of intellectual integrity.

Anthropology made it possible for me to move to Finland, to Helsinki: I moved at a time when my own discipline and the world around it was changing radically. What I found here was an incredibly intellectually strong group of people, from the students to the researchers and the staff, who showed me how to be truly dedicated to scholarship and a discipline without shouting about it—flying the flag without a placard. Now, this same group of people is also demonstrating immense courage in the face of the interesting times in which we live. I look forward to honing the toolkit that anthropology offers and putting it to new kinds of work. I could not be in a better place for that task.

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MATTI—INSTITUTIONAL MELTDOWNS

For a long time, Finnish anthropology was a small scene, situated outside the academic mainstream. This manifested as a sense of a tight-knit community with a particular set of interests, but also a high degree of disciplinary boundary work. Many of us Helsinki-based anthropologists, for example, learned to think of ourselves as outsiders among the human sciences—an identity strengthened by overseas visitors who would regularly comment on our ‘timeless’ research interests and the apparent absence of fashionable topics or ‘policy relevance’ in Helsinki anthropology.

Something of this alternative orientation still persists around Finnish anthropology. In the national context, anthropology is probably best known through the work of *AntroBlogi*, the popular science online publication that doles out unexpected insights and sociocultural curiosities. Internationally, Finnish anthropology is known, for example, through the Finnish Anthropological Society’s journal, which as Keith Hart has written on the Human Economy Facebook group back on 16 Nov 2017, seems to enjoy a reputation as ‘one of the most obscure journals in the world’; and Savage Minds bloggers claim to be an ‘excellent but obscure’ journal (Golub 2014).¹

What has changed, though, is that Finnish anthropology has not just grown in numbers and institutional recognition. It has also been thoroughly uprooted from the old department ideal. In Helsinki, anthropologists are now scattered across several buildings and floors in buildings in a new, departmentless arrangement, which was at first promoted under the idea that traditional disciplines are ‘silos’ to be extinguished, then under the idea that disciplines need to be spatio-administratively

blended together to produce ground-breaking innovations. The current view is... well, probably that those unruly disciplines will go away if you ignore them long enough. Similar developments seem to have occurred in the few other universities where anthropology is taught in Finland, although less emphatically because most of them enjoyed less autonomy to begin with.

This leaves anthropology with a less clear sense of identity, but also with less cause for boundary guarding—I would not even know where to draw them!—and hopefully more affinities. Finnish academic anthropology, at least, now shares various ‘cumulative mess trajectories’ (Bowker and Star 1999: 39) with both its domestic cognate disciplines and overseas counterparts: we are caught in the same neoliberal adjustments that call for new adjustments. I am not saying this state of affairs defines Finnish anthropology. But, I do think its excellent but obscure view into legal, bureaucratic, or political vagaries may be one of Finnish anthropology’s key contributions to our times.

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LALLI—SMALL GREEN SHOOTS FROM THE RUBBLE

Recent political events around the world seem to have increased the speed at which runaway late-stage capitalism moves along a polycrisis trajectory. Following an era of welfare, with its soft power played out through salaried labour, public services, and social programmes, harder forms of power have returned with a vengeance.

Current ‘solutions’—what is done in practice—do not seem to address the systemic causes of our problems so much as distribute security in a differentiated manner. No wonder, of course, since an economy driven by an endless need to generate profit relies on hierarchies. The rift grows between those able to isolate themselves from risk—in gated communities and through the privatised provision of life’s essentials and luxuries—and the precariat superfluous to mechanisms of accumulation and left out—out of a ‘proper job’ (Ferguson and Li 2018), out of health care, out of education, and, in effect, out of fully realised citizenship.

Globally, colonial and imperial projects are very much alive, not only as perceptual vestiges, such as racial classifications, but as real-life impositions of such perceptions, separating those worthy of a dignified life from those relegated to lesser humanity. We can see this in Ukraine and Palestine or in the competition over land and its resources in many parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In other words, the idea of ‘society’ as something shared and operating in tandem with ‘the state’ is in question, not only in those parts of the world where this ideal was never fulfilled, such as former colonies and frontiers, but also at the core areas of global capitalism. Instead of cohesion arising from the material engagements of jobs and welfare, the convergence of

techno-capitalism and political authoritarianism offers us totalising and flattening visions of national and cultural identity.

It is a despairing situation, but also a situation that heightens the importance of anthropology as a field of enquiry capable of providing detailed knowledge on alterities and alternatives and to continue finding the sprouts of radical hope amidst the ruination of the present. For us anthropologists working in Finland, such a critical stance is still possible and, to me, our duty as well.

The current forces of societal erosion are not new to the racialised, minoritised, and pauperised populations subjected to colonial and imperial forms of power for a long time, who have created ways of surviving and aspiring in precarious conditions, even amidst rubble and waste (Chalfin 2019). There are knowledges to be learned and co-produced through anthropological engagement with such solutions, along with the associated social, material, and moral relations, and how these entail visions of habitable futures.

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SANNA—DISAGREEMENT AS PART OF THE TOOLKIT

I think anthropology is distinctive in its ability to embrace uncertainty and ambivalence. At the same time, the urgent need (or the feeling of it) to find ‘solutions’ to a variety of contemporary challenges sits in tension with anthropological knowledge, which often complicates rather than simplifies phenomena. Although anthropology might not be straightforwardly problem-solution nexus²-oriented, it might still deal with contemporary ‘problems’ and debates in a distinctive manner. One of the promises of anthropology is that it does not take problems at face value. Instead, anthropologists can recognise and problematise ‘problematic problematizations’ (see Räsänen, forthcoming). We can question a received framing of issues and debates one researches or participates in, and through this questioning, can make an intervention, either conceptually or ethnographically.

Methodologically, this might mean re-thinking the relational dynamics in ethnographic research, where the ethnographer is supposed to suspend or downplay their own opinions in order to learn about and gain access to others’ perspectives. This is especially true when studying politically controversial topics, when remaining somehow outside of the debate might be required in order to stay ‘inside’ the field to conduct research and maintain relations with participants. However, writing later about such debates and analysing them might mean that those who took part in the debate might be surprised and disappointed upon learning that the anthropologist does not align with their perspectives after all.

This ‘problem’ has led me to think that maybe anthropologists should experiment with and embrace debating and even disagreeing as

a part of the ethnographic process and creating anthropological knowledge. Surely, this is not also unproblematic. At the same time, I would be curious to see what it might mean to use disagreements and provocations as part of the anthropological toolkit. This kind of approach involves a risk of losing (or never gaining) access to the field. Alternatively, it might create access to those who have stakes in the debate and who recognise that every solution to a problem will have its flaws such that the only solution is to keep the dialogue going, even if it means tolerating differences in viewpoints.

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HEIDI—MAKING A CASE FOR SLOW RESEARCH IN AN OVERLY FAST WORLD

I see Finnish anthropology as located somewhat on the margins of the traditional Anglo-American powerhouses of the discipline, but providing a vibrant intellectual environment well-connected to other parts of the world. In Finnish society, anthropology occupies a relatively marginal position, relatively unknown to the public. Even amongst many scholars in other fields, anthropology often seems to

be viewed as a discipline limited to the study of exotic small-scale societies, even though ethnographic research methods have become widely used in other fields as well.

However, amidst the current grave challenges facing the contemporary world, anthropology is needed more than ever as a way to create more nuanced understandings in highly polarised geopolitical environments. Anthropology has traditionally highlighted the importance of empathy and the ability to question one's views by emphasising the need to explore the world from an unfamiliar perspective and by finding ways to make the familiar strange. Methodologically long-term, in-depth ethnography as the traditionally defined research approach of the discipline emphasises the need for a high level of personal commitment from the researcher, and the ability to open oneself to new ways of knowing, feeling, and experiencing the world. In the contemporary world, where the general orientation often seems to shift towards fast results, limiting time for reflection and gaining knowledge, anthropology is particularly important because it prioritises the need to carefully listen and take seriously people's diverse views, recognising that it takes time and care to arrive at its conclusions.

Anthropologists in Finland could try to find new ways of making anthropological research known to the public. For example, political scientists are frequent media commentators in Finland, often on topics that could greatly benefit from including an anthropological perspective in discussions. We need to rid ourselves of the reputation that our knowledge can only contribute to small-scale issues and highlight the uniquely positioned insights that we can bring to extensive global developments and pressing challenges.

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MAIJA—UNDERSTANDING FINNISH KIDS OTHERWISE

Finnish society seems to be suffering from a crisis of confidence regarding childhood and education. After boldly raising highly independent 'free-range' children for decades, there is now increasing concern around issues such as screen time, bullying, and loneliness. Finland's renowned education system is also facing 'plummeting' academic outcomes (Terävä 2023) and struggling to adjust to a diversifying population, issues that are reflected in heated public and political debate.

The wealth of Finnish research on children reflects the importance given to these concerns: developmental psychologists and educational scientists carefully examine educational outcomes and physical activity levels, students take part in biannual school health studies, and individual growth and development are tracked from birth onwards through the *neuvola* (child health) system. Much of this research is underpinned by a concern with ensuring that children are in the process of *becoming* satisfactory adults (Qvortrup 2009) and tends to examine specific pre-determined measures of their health or academic ability. As such, factors like cultural background or gender may be included in analyses but *how* they actually shape children's lives and experiences is not typically considered.

Anthropology, of course, has the tools to do just this; it encourages us to see children as active participants within their own vibrant

social worlds and to examine these in all their messy, imperfect realness. For example, my recent research highlighted how children in Helsinki primarily learn to avoid and disengage from conflict with their peers, rather than engage in it (Sequeira 2023). The conflict strategies promoted by adults tended to teach children to respect individual autonomy—highly valued in Finland—by encouraging them not to impose their will on others. These strategies also, however, led to misunderstandings with non-Finnish peers, who had very different expectations for what ‘appropriate’ play and effective conflict management looked like.

Building these deep understandings of children’s lives enabled me to critically examine and problematise the common assumptions and ‘taken for granted’ knowledge and logics that underpin educational institutions and childrearing practices (Fleer 2003). Such insights—unlikely to be picked up without long-term ethnographic engagement—have real potential to contribute to effective policies that address multifaceted contemporary challenges and promote healthy, happy childhoods.

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PEKKA—VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Social and cultural anthropologists have a slightly smug reputation. Perhaps this emerged as a response to their often tokenistic position in multidisciplinary research projects. Stereotypically, anthropologists would take care of the margins: the Indigenous, the minoritised, or those who do not fit into neat classifications. The exceedingly qualitative research orientation, preferably accompanied by long-term ethnographic fieldwork, often sets anthropologists apart from researchers using surveys and structured interviews. Anthropologists take considerable pride in this. In an increasingly multidisciplinary research environment, dominated by sizeable consortia, anthropologists in Finland have historically been less proactive in initiating expansive research networks or securing leadership positions in major funding applications. Rather than striving for mainstream recognition, many anthropologists have embraced a form of intellectual seclusion, taking pride in the strengths of their own disciplinary community.

I have been teaching an ‘Orientation towards working life’ course at the University of Helsinki for mostly third- and fourth-year undergraduate students for the last four years and noticed the students’ ambivalent orientation towards anthropology. Nowadays, they begin

their anthropological studies enrolling in the BA in Social Change programme, which includes political history, economic and social history, and global development studies as well as anthropology. The students develop their academic identity in relation to these disciplinary communities and choose their specialisation later.

For anthropology students, this is not always a smooth ride. During the courses, we often discuss the sense of marginalisation, occasionally even outright exclusion, from their fellow students. Discussions of a future with an anthropology degree express a familiar dilemma: the choice between a precarious career in academia or finding a new direction beyond it. Translating anthropological expertise into something valuable outside the disciplinary community did not seem to be a feasible alternative for the students. At the same time, they love anthropology and are proud of their developing expertise.

In reality, anthropologists are everywhere and more than ever before. Anthropologists are scattered around the University of Helsinki, other universities and research institutes, nongovernmental organisations and other organisations, and various other professions. Many lead research initiatives focused on anthropological themes, even if their work is not explicitly labelled anthropology. Most, if not all, take pride in their ability to imagine radically different societies, futures, and solutions. Most of us learn about this informal community after graduation, often coincidentally. We should work more to make it visible and make it known to our students.

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SAMULI—BETWEEN EXPERTISE AND ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF GENOCIDE

The genocide unfolding in Gaza has raised the question of how scholarly communities should position themselves in relation to such deep-cutting breaches in the already-crumbling liberal world order—often approved by political and academic partisans of that order. Across Euro-American anthropology, the events in Gaza have elicited starkly contrasting responses and reactions. Scholarly associations, such as the European Association of Social Anthropology (EASA), have aligned with the demands of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS). That said, even high-profile anthropologists have been sacked from their jobs for being too vocal on the subject. Student-led protest encampments have shaken campus life across the continents, often with the tacit or explicit support of faculty, including within anthropology. In Finland, there has been less concern regarding job security or freedom of expression amongst the academic community when considering whether to participate in these protests, and, overall, the debate has been calmer than in many other places.

More broadly, the situation has raised questions about how anthropologists should approach pressing global events—whether in their roles as researchers, public intellectuals, experts, or members of the university community. In Helsinki, members of the anthropology community have expressed their support for student-led protests, with students and faculty taking active roles as organisers, facing a university administration that dragged its feet.

In Finland, anthropologists form an important component of the small Middle East area studies field. As such, a healthy portion of

the topical expertise sought by the media has come from scholars with an anthropological background. However, such commentary structurally restricts scholars from providing any intellectual depth or context, in a media atmosphere sorely lacking it. Whilst there are currently several Palestinian social science scholars working in an anthropology-adjacent research centre at Tampere University, these voices have remained absent from the media. This is in part due to the reluctance of the Finnish media to interview scholars who do not speak Finnish inside Finland.

One sphere where anthropological voices could make a stronger impact is in discussions on coloniality and the crisis of the liberal world, which have gained prominence in response to the genocide. The online media platform *AntroBlogi* has been a trailblazer in this regard, providing research-based public commentary extending beyond the narrow confines of daily foreign news journalism.

Anthropology in Finland has emerged as an engaged discipline, taking part in public debates on both the immediate developments in Palestine/Israel as well as the broader political, cultural, and intellectual questions they raise. One is still left to wonder whether there could be wider platforms for public insights from scholars specialised in topics such as coloniality and decolonisation, even if they are not experts in the region. Likewise, greater efforts might be needed to amplify the public voices of scholars with roots in the region, but with professional ties to Finland. Overall, recent years have brought to the surface pressing questions on anthropology's relation to the public sphere in times of genocide as well as in relation to adjacent cracks in the liberal order.

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NOTES

- 1 The reference was based on a false assumption and has later been amended: the piece under discussion was, in fact, published in the equally excellent but obscure Norwegian journal *Antropolognytt*.
- 2 I am writing this as someone who has been and is researching emerging technological phenomena here in Finland. Thus, I am often exposed to a kind of techno-solutionist discourse and ethos which assumes technological development is a solution to societal problems.

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