

CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGICAL QUESTIONS: INSIGHTFUL REFLECTIONS ON CURRENT SOCIAL SHIFTS

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the latest trends in cultural anthropology. In recent years, anthropology has become a socially engaged discipline, grappling with the problems of the new “globalized” world. The paper dialogically engages with some of anthropology’s most recent works, which reflect upon social changes, and ways of being human by examining the intersections of techno-science with administration, neo-liberalism, and governance. It also critically looks at the latest shifts happening in higher education and the decline of the importance of humanities with a focus on the Republic of Macedonia.

Keywords: techno-science; governance; crisis of humanities; crisis in education; authenticity; engaged anthropology; humanities.

Introduction

Cultural anthropology was brought to a dead-end with the “crisis of representation”, which cast a cloud of darkness over it back in the 80s, when the rising postmodern narratives brought into question all grand narratives. This trend seriously questioned the discipline’s foundational principles of rationality, objectivity, and above all, its western imperialistic roots. Ethnography and ethnographic representation were now seen as projections and/or rewritings of the perspectives of the dominant culture, rather than genuine interpretations of the analyzed culture (Fabian, Clifford, Geertz).² However, in recent years, cultural anthropology has recuperated itself from this (almost) self-sabotaging phenomenon and has moved in the direction of a socially engaged discipline.

In order to reemphasize the importance of cultural anthropology today, this paper dialogically engages with a list of some of its most recent works that reflect upon the changes of societies and cultures through an examination of a set of specific phenomena such as the rise of techno-science, administration, governance, and the new system of ethics and values that emerge from these phenomena. These

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² Clifford, James. “Introduction: Partial Truths.” *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography*. James Clifford & George E. Marcus. Eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986: 1-12. Print.; Clifford, James. “On Ethnographic Surrealism.” *Comparative Study in Society and History*, 23.4 (October 1981): 539-564. Print.; Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Print.; Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1997. Print.

new engaged ways of doing anthropology are used as a reference point to reflect upon the latest shifts happening in higher education and the alarming decline of the importance of humanities. This paper focuses on several aspects of higher education changes in the Republic of Macedonia. Before turning to the new ways of doing anthropology and current issues comprising the corpus of anthropological work, we shall briefly look at the recent crisis of this discipline and its now, newly emerging genres.

Crisis of Representation in Postmodern Anthropology

The postmodern discourse which dominated in the eighties of the last century led to a global crisis in the reception of anthropology and brought into question the relevance of this discipline. The anthropologist was scrutinized and it was uncertain whether ethnographies informed about other cultures, or rather - *wrote a culture*. The crisis of *ethnographic realism* was diagnosed in 1982 with Marcus and Cushman's publication *Ethnographies as texts*, published in 1982 in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. These tectonic changes were to a great extent a result of social processes, both in the discipline itself and also in those societies/cultures addressed by anthropologists in their writings. These processes have mainly been marked by the terms: post-modernization, globalization, and commodification of culture. Postmodern authors were clearly epistemological anti-realists, leaning towards lingual, cultural, as well as cognitive relativism, unlike their critics, who were proponents of the more rationalist, methodological models.³ In America, this crisis was a consequence of social circumstances, namely, the deconstruction of the paradigms after World War II. The period was marked by a crisis of paradigms and totalizing theories, which lost their legitimacy upon the rise of the fascination with local experiences and reactions, and with the unpredictability of life in general. These circumstances have also influenced the terminology of the social sciences and humanities. The term *post-paradigm* was put to use. It marked the overall distrust in all forms of meta-narration and grand theories, which were challenged by the need to contextualize events and phenomena. The unpredictability of human life was used to question the previous focus on continuity and regularity in the phenomena observed.

One of the key changes that happened to anthropology at this stage was the newly created *crisis of representation*, which resulted from the distrust in the validity of everything described by the key methods of this discipline, first and foremost, ethnography. The problems surrounding the authenticity/subjectivity of interpretation are also tightly related to a debate which arose during the 1980s,

³See more in Salzman, Philip, C. *Understanding Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theory*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2001. Print. Among other things, he points out that postmodern epistemology, exemplified by the subfields of symbolic and feminist anthropology brings into focus the importance of moral responsibility and the worth of positional relativity and subjectivity, thus challenging the positivist ideal of objective, unbiased perspective.

predominantly with the publication of several works, among which, the edited volume *Writing Culture* by Clifford and Marcus⁴ and Clifford's *On Ethnographic Surrealism*.⁵ George Marcus, Michale Fischer, Renato Rosaldo, James Clifford, Vincent Crpanzano, etc, are among some of the key figures who are considered responsible for this anthropological shift in the second half of the twentieth century. The importance and meaning of anthropology have been brought into question with these contemporary post-modern dilemmas about the validity of its study. Yet, current engagements of anthropologists are a clear proof that it is a discipline of utmost importance.

In the subsequent part of the discussion we shall look into some of the most recent and deeply socially engaged anthropological works. Among the contemporary anthropological problems so skilfully vivisected by modern anthropology, high on the list are the complex themes of cultural borders, diasporas, education, migration, violence, fluctuation of capital, political fragmentation, social and moral control, neoliberal reforms, new modes of pharmaceutical industry, and information technology. By outlining and at times critically engaging with a few of the contemporary anthropological works, this text aims at stressing the importance of following cautious ways of observing these new rising questions of social change in a globalized world.

Contemporary Anthropology – An Engaged Anthropology

I will open the discussion on contemporary modes of anthropology according to the thinking of Paul Rabinow, an eminent American anthropologist. Rabinow has been quite known for his work in Morocco, which is an example of his deeply personal experience as an anthropologist entwined in the dialectics between being a participant and being an observer. Rabinow's work in Morocco reflects the author's encounter with cultural and linguistic Otherness, and with a society shaped by its colonial past.⁶ Recently, he moved into a new realm of research, focusing much of his work on molecular biology and genomics filtered through the lens of bio-politics and bio-security (Agamben, Foucault).⁷ The change of research interest marks his dedication to seeking new forms of inquiry for the human sciences. This commitment stems from his belief that the knowledge production practices and institutions are both epistemologically and institutionally inadequate in understanding the human condition in the twenty-first century. He

⁴ *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography*. Eds. James Clifford & George E. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. Print.

⁵ Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Surrealism." *Comparative Study in Society and History*, Oct. 1981: 539-564. Print.

⁶ Rabinow, Paul. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. Print.

⁷ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1998. Print. Foucault, Michael.

Sennelart, Michel., ed. *Michel Foucault: The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. New York: Pelgrave Macmillan. 2008. Print.

focuses on bioethics, molecular biology, and cutting-edge practices in life sciences and security, to call on for a new, collaborative approach among scholars that would produce new insights in the human sciences.⁸ Rabinow argues that anthropology should be the practice of studying the forms that the mutually related aspects of knowledge, thought and care gain through the continuously shifting relations of power. He is deeply engaged with the theories of Foucault, Deleuze, Dewey and embarks upon the investigation of the forms the *anthropos* is being given today.⁹ What worries him is the absence of a *logos*, of a rationality and an ontology, of a form of knowledge and a way of understanding the *anthropos*, that is, the man of today. The most distinctive innovation of the *anthropos*, according to Rabinow lies in the realm of technological developments, that is, genome mapping and bioethics. A genome is the sum of an organism's hereditary information and the new modes of genome sequencing are means of violation of the individual and the collective identity.¹⁰

The concerns with human rights, the new forms of being human or *anthropos* and the mechanisms of sciences and biotechnologies changing the meaning of life are further discussed by many other anthropologists. A breakthrough study is Kushik Sunder Rajan's *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic* (2006).¹¹ This, being a major theoretical and anthropological contribution to science studies and political economy, at the same time is also a major contribution to the studies of social mechanisms, redefining life through a new set of discourses, practices and strategies emerging from life sciences. As such, it stands as a prominent study of the social and medical interpretations of truth and violence, as previously discussed by Das. Grounding his analysis in a multi-sited ethnography of genomic research and an analysis of drug development marketplaces in the United States and India, Kaushik Sunder Rajan argues that contemporary biotechnologies such as genomics can only be understood in relation to the economic markets where they emerge. Sunder Rajan conducted fieldwork in biotechnology labs in the United States and India over a five-year period, from 1999 to 2004. Through his multi-sited research with scientists, venture capitalists and policymakers, he compares drug development in the two countries, examining the goals of research, its financing mechanisms, government regulations, and the hype surrounding these new technologies.

⁸ Paul Rabinow has been a leading figure in designing the Anthropology of Contemporary Research Collaboratory Organization (ARC). See more on this organization at <http://www.anthropos-lab.net>

⁹ Rabinow, Paul. "Midst Anthropology's Problems." *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problem*. Aihwa Ong & Stephen Collier. Eds. Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 40-55. Print.

¹⁰ Rabinow, Paul. "Midst Anthropology's Problems." *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problem*. Aihwa Ong & Stephen Collier. Eds. Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 45. Print.

¹¹ Rajan, Kushik, S. *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006. Print.

The beginning of the biotechnology industry according to Rajan can be traced back to the seventies and eighties. The new techno-science was a recombinant DNA technology (RDT), a set of techniques for cutting up and joining together DNA molecules in the lab. The RDT was followed by the rise of biotechnology companies, which in turn led to further research in the life sciences and biotechnology. Rajan argues that capitalism and life sciences are coproduced, but also puts forward the disturbing point that life sciences are *overdetermined* by the capitalist political economic structures within which they emerge. So, for instance, while labs can exchange DNA information for free, there exists an increased protection of such information as private property, both among corporate biologists as well as scientists in academia. He suggests that this could be due to the fact that the academic scientists are actually or potentially corporate entrepreneurs. This risk can be a consequence of the life sciences entering the domain of corporations. Therefore, universities employing these scientists seek to protect their intellectual property as a corporation would. Rajan delivers a lucid study of the merging of biotechnology and market forces, and consequently, of life sciences as producers of new economic values, thus introducing the metamorphosis of *life into* capital. He takes on a challenging analysis of the changes to the concepts such as “life”, “capital”, “fact”, “exchange”, and “value”. Genomics is taken to be one of the main instigators of this change, but it also reflects other, more general changes in two broad domains. The first one is in life sciences, which are becoming *information* sciences. The second one lies in the fact that capitalism is today acknowledged as the economic form, which dominates over alternative economic formations, characteristic of socialism and communism. Therefore, by combining the two, Rajan argues that life sciences represent a new phase of capitalism, and consequently, biotechnology is a form of enterprise inextricable from contemporary capitalism. Life becomes a calculable market unit, structuring the terrain on which biotech and drug development companies operate and violate life. Apparently, much of recent anthropological works question ethics in science, or the lack of it thereof, and of sciences turning into enterprises directly coming out of the logic of capitalism.

There is a clear distrust in the ethics of science and the influence of new technologies in other contemporary anthropological writings as well. These writings are based on ethnographies of various countries in relation to the global market economy as a major trigger of social shifts. To name one example, Janer Roitman's article on the bandits and traffickers in the Chad Basin, who would by most standards be labeled as violators of certain rules, reveals similar grievances regarding the power of the international market and the local reactions to it, through various forms of banditry.¹² Here again, the question of how to live is posed in relation to technology and biopolitics. Roitman talks of the “garrison-

¹² Roitman, Janet. “The Garrison-Entrepôt: A Mode of Governing in the Chad Basin.” *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problem*. Aihwa Ong & Stephen Collier. Eds. Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 417-437. Print.

entrepot” (those who cut off the roads) characterized by a range of unregulated activities including smuggling of hardware, electronics, dry goods as well as petrol, vehicles, and ivory black market trading. The marginalization of African economy has led to new forms of economic integration. Banditry emerges as a regime of living that actively reshapes existing forms of regulations, governments and ethics. Yet, Roitman wonders how much this new political subject created in reaction to the forces of modern liberalism and bureaucratization can really destabilize the sovereign.

The University and Life in Crisis

It becomes clear from the discussion above that the question of how to live, in an era of market economy and commodification of things that previously had no monetary value, is a vibrant theme in current anthropological research. This question is also often posed by anthropologists in relation to the rising emergence and strengthening of technology, hard sciences and bio-politics. In this sense Ong and Collier point to the new anthropological problems marked as “domains in which forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematized or at stake in the sense that they are subject to technological, political and ethical reflections and interventions.”¹³ This emerging phenomenon of technologies and sciences as central factors of reshaping of life, of turning it into a calculable market unit, of detaching ethics from science and merging it strictly with the enterprise interests, bring to the forefront alarming questions such as “what it means being human today?” The power of market economy logic in shaping the way we live is nowhere more visible than in the latest tectonic moves that shook higher education.

In his interview for Truthout, Henry A. Giroux states that neoliberalism as a mode of governance is detrimental for higher education and the students. It is a mode of governing which according to him “produces identities, subjects, and ways of life free of government regulations, driven by a survival of the fittest ethic, grounded in the idea of the free, possessive individual.”¹⁴ He notes that although higher education may be one of the few public spheres left where knowledge, values and learning should offer a glimpse of the promise of education for nurturing public values and critical hope, the reality of things greatly differs. He sharply observes that “too many universities are now wedded to producing would-be hedge fund managers, depoliticized students, and creating modes of education

¹³ Ong, Aihwa & Collier, Stephen. “Global Assemblages: Anthropological Problems.” *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problem*. Aihwa Ong & Stephen Collier. Eds. Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 3-22. Print.

¹⁴ Polychroniou, C. J. “*The Violence of Neoliberalism and the Attack on Higher Education*.” *Truthdig*, 27. May 2013. Web. 06. Nov. 2013. <http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_violence_of_neoliberalism_and_the_attack_on_higher_education_20130327>

that promote a “technically trained docility”.¹⁵ The fields of humanities and social sciences are facing decline as well. As Hutner observes “U.K. universities have faced steep funding cuts leading, for example, to the closure of Middlesex University’s philosophy department; and just this year Canada’s University of Alberta suspended admission to 20 humanities programs”¹⁶ These disciplines are the ones which grapple with the question of human existence and of critical thinking about what it means to be human. Therefore, their disappearance from the curricula is highly symptomatic and brings us close to the above-mentioned anthropological concerns about life turning into commodity and science becoming devoid of ethics.

A vivid example of the deterioration of higher education and the humanities can be explained by the following examples taken from the higher education changes in the Republic of Macedonia. The Law on Higher Education in Macedonia from 2008 declares “freedom and autonomy of research and applicability of international standards of quality in science”. At the same time it is open to competition and equal opportunities for everyone. Yet, the Law as a pillar of higher education contains articles (43 and 51), which define the criterion for reelection of staff, and providing financial support for a research project. The main criterion for these items is the publication in “impact factor journals.” The data bases that fulfill this criterion are Emerald, Scopus and Thomson Reuters. Publishing houses such as SAGE, Palgrave MacMillan, Columbia University Press etc. are not part of this data base and as such are very lowly ranked if at all on the point scale for reelection and promotion of staff. Moreover, the journals of Routledge, Oxford University Press, and other renown publishing houses are not in the list of impact factor journals, whose impact is dubious to begin with as it measures the frequency of citation within the data base. To this end, in November 2007, the European Association of scientific editors (EASE) has issued a recommendation regarding the impact factor journals, stating that it should be used only and cautiously for the measurement of the impact of the whole journal and not of the individual work. They recommend that journal impact factors should not “be used for the assessment of single papers, and certainly not for the assessment of researchers or research programs, either directly or as a surrogate”.¹⁷

The German foundation of sciences has issued a similar warning, to which the Macedonian Ministry of Education has uncritically responded, without taking any of these alarming recommendations into account. Metze points to the manipulation of impact factors and urges us that the “system instabilities, such as excessive self-cites and ‘title suppressions’, are currently evident and will probably

¹⁵ Polychroniou, C. J. “The Violence of Neoliberalism and the Attack on Higher Education.” Truthdig, 27. May 2013. Web. 06. Nov. 2013. <http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_violence_of_neoliberalism_and_the_attack_on_higher_education_20130327>

¹⁶ Hutner, Gordon. “The Real Humanities Crisis is Happening at Public Universities.” *New Republic*, 06. Sept. 2013. Web. 06. Nov. 2013. <<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114616/public-universities-hurt-humanities-crisis>>

¹⁷ European Association of Scientific Editors statement on impact factors. Web. 06. Nov. 2013. <http://www.ease.org.uk/sites/default/files/ease_statement_ifs_final.pdf>

increase in the future.”¹⁸ The work of the university professor is reduced to the number of publications in impact factor journals, which additionally leave very little space for humanities and social sciences. Moreover, professional advancement and dedication to academic research among the professors is strictly quantified by calculating the number of their publications in what are often bogus journals that do not undergo any peer reviews. The publication of a monography and not of journals, has always been considered the highest point of one’s academic maturity in the fields of humanities and social sciences.

Following is the case regarding rules on promotion at South East European University (SEEU), Tetovo in the Republic of Macedonia. In the document regarding the rules on promotion, 10 points can be assigned for research articles published in an International Journal with impact factor indexed by EC Thomson Reuters. Monographies are awarded from 1 to 5 points maximum, only if they underwent a rigorous peer review process, and book chapters if published by an international publisher, can receive up to 5 points maximum, but would mainly be awarded 2 or 3 points. The state and the University give financial awards to those publishing in an impact factor journal. This clearly shows an immense lack of awareness regarding the above-mentioned warnings and manipulations of impact factor journals. An engaged work by Kolozova scrutinizing the Law on Higher Education, evidences a number of extremely important recommendations amongst which is training of academic staff engaged in the committees for election, reelection and promotion of lecturers into respective academic titles. Furthermore, it calls for the decentralization of higher education whereby academics would reclaim the decision-making capacity and autonomy of introducing criteria for promotion in academic titles. Moreover, she calls on the removal of those articles within the Law on Higher Education, which emphasize the publication in impact factor journals as a prerequisite for academic progress. Likewise, Kolozova reiterates the need of realizing the significance of humanities within a society, as a mode of critical and reflexive thinking about what it means to be human.¹⁹

Conclusion

This paper tackled several domains: anthropology, biotechnology, ethics, and education. It first looked at the so-called *crisis of representation* in anthropology, which has questioned ethnography, criticizing it as a practice, and proposing that it can be under deep influence of the subjectivity and cultural conventions of the ethnographer. The importance and meaning of anthropology

¹⁸ Metze, Konradin. “Bureaucrats, Researchers, Editors, and the Impact Factor - A Vicious Circle That is Detrimental to Science.” *Clinics*, 65.10 (2010): 937–940. Web. 06. Nov. 2013.

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2972600/#b12-cln_65p937

¹⁹ Kolozova, Katerina “International Academic Standards According to the Laws on Science and Higher Education in Republic of Macedonia.” *A Study of Social Sciences in Macedonia: Trands, Challenges and Reccomendations for Policy Improvement*. Slavica Indzevska & Aleksandra Dimova, M. eds. Skopje: OSI-Macedonia, 2012:142-146. Print.

have been brought into question with the contemporary post-modern dilemmas about the validity of its study. Yet, the contemporary engagements of anthropologists discussed in this paper are clear proof that anthropology is a discipline of utmost importance in terms of detecting the content of contemporary social changes in a globalized world ruled by the logic of market economy. This has been illustrated by several examples of vivid and bold engagement of anthropology with contemporary problems, raising the question about what it means to be a human today. The current corpus of anthropological themes ranges from cultural borders to diasporas, migration, violence, fluctuation of capital, political fragmentation, regimes of social and moral control, neoliberal reforms, to the new modes of pharmaceutical industry, and information technology. All these themes are approached systematically and competently by contemporary anthropologists (Ong and Collier; Rabinow). From some of the anthropological ethnographies mentioned earlier, it is evident that anthropologists today do not approach the process of globalisation in a similar fashion as other social scientists. Instead of looking at globalization through the lens of grand narrations announcing the new world order, or through the analytical lens, which studies more the versatility of “local” reactions and resistance to global forces, these anthropologists analyse the specific phenomena through which these changes emerge. Among these phenomena, there is techno-science, systems of administration and/or control (biopolitics), as well as ethical and value regimes underpinning life. These phenomena are, according to Ong and Collier, *global* in the sense of being mobile and dynamic, moving and reconstructing society, culture, and economy. Yet, these global phenomena articulate themselves in specific situations. Ong and Collier refer to them as *global assemblages*.²⁰

These ethnographies of the contemporary were then discussed in line with the recent transformation in higher education and applied to the case of Macedonia, which can be helpful in diagnosing not only the crisis in education, but in the overall concept of what it means to be *anthropos* today. The uncritical accentuation of impact factor journals - an area greatly submitted to manipulation, the universities which produce an unpoliticized corpus of students ready for the labor market, but unprepared to critically grasp questions of what it means to be human today, are alarming. Engaged, collaborative, multifaceted ethnographies are a must if we are to come up with institutional recommendations that will trigger changes in the area of education as the core of society. The decentralization of higher education and the restoration of the lost autonomy of the academia (especially of the humanities and social sciences) is a crucial step towards critically engaging with these alarming issues. It is a step that should encourage us to fight against the realistic and overtly pessimistic vision of Muhić who states that we live in a world where the revolted man (L’homme Revolte) became the tamed man (L’homme Aprivoise) for the benefit of many and the loss of all humanity.²¹

²⁰ Ong, Aihwa & Collier, Stephen. “Global Assemblages: Anthropological Problems.” *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problem*. Aihwa Ong & Stephen Collier. Eds. Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 4. Print.

²¹ Muhić Ferid. *Domination and Revolution*. Skopje: Az-Buki, 2005: 280. Print.