

Workshop 26

Ethnographic Practice in the Present

(Invited Workshop)

Convenors:

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Fieldwork is often hailed as the distinguishing feature of the discipline of anthropology, and anthropologists are well aware that it is a method which generates theoretical insights that could not have been generated in any other way. But as the grounds for social life are shifting, so is our ethnographic practice. How then is fieldwork defined within anthropology? And no less importantly: how do we de facto conduct fieldwork today? For at the same time as there is an anxious debate in the discipline about emerging methods such as mobile and multi-local fieldwork, there is an obvious shift towards more flexible forms and methodological pluralism. Importantly, traditional fieldwork - with one year of more or less uninterrupted participant observation in a village or an urban neighbourhood as a unit - is still there, but it is being complemented by other strategies in a wider methodological repertoire including the notion of polymorphous engagements. This invited workshop will present critical papers on past and present ethnographic practice in relation to questions of mobility, time and place, as well as to the local and the global. Contributors will discuss demarcations of 'the field', also with respect to the possibility of studying temporary and travelling fields, and circumstances that shape ethnographic practice from research interests and agendas, research councils' politics and other funding issues to departmental milieus, and different generations and traditions in European anthropology.

Ethnography and Memory

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Among the epistemological conditions of ethnography is memory. This assertion will be defended by examining the role that remembering plays in fieldwork, in the making and interpretation of recorded texts and documents, and above all in anthropological writing. Special attention will be paid to

the significance of memory for understanding autobiographic elements in producing knowledge.

Fieldwork as Free Association and Free Passage

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Free association, as a psychoanalytical practice, entails being open to what ever comes into the person's mind, namely random ideas and images, through a non-directed process for constructive analysis. There can be similar processes in approaching anthropological fieldwork with adaptation for its physical mobility. The anthropologist does not arrive as innocent. S/he brings the flotsam of prior representations and alternative knowledge which affect his/her initial experiential understanding. An additional meaning of free association entails being open to different individuals and events, and moving freely between different locations; again without preemptive and rationalised controls. Drawing on the author's and other anthropologists' fieldwork, the paper pursues the practice and potential of free association linked to a) prior ideological representations, iconic images, texts and memories evoked by place and landscape and b) chance encounters to be systematically developed, unmapped movements between place and topic, and free passage from preconceptions to the unpredicted. The most fruitful approaches in fieldwork, it is argued, are those which let the fieldworker follow what beckons; often towards what emerges as the subjects' core concerns, rather than adhering to some preordained positivist agenda. Free association continues when the accumulated field experience is re-interpreted and analysed through writing up.

Fieldwork in the Age of Mechanical Accountability

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There has been a demand for new, flexible forms of fieldwork, as well as for a retention of relatively traditional ethnographic modes, to try to tackle the 'shifting grounds' of social life in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Concurrent with the social changes that set reconfigured ethnographic challenges, and concurrent with calls for more flexible approaches, have also been a number of other shifts in public culture in many countries. Some of these can be characterised as a move towards greater 'visible accountability', and towards standardised mechanisms for producing and regulating this. In the academy, these may extend to 'research governance', and entail a setting out of codes for undertaking research, together with a barrage of forms, committees and other forms of scrutiny to try to ensure that they are enacted and can be both predicted and evaluated. In anthropological terms, these might be seen as constituting a 'strong model' (Dresch 1999) of research practice. My paper will explore the implications of this strong model of mechanical

accountability for undertaking fieldwork by drawing on my own experience of conducting an ethnography of a public institution itself engaged in putting the model into operation, as well as on my unavoidable but probably illicit 'fieldwork' in the world of university committees.

Ethnography at the Crossroads: Engaging with Translocal Organisational Cultures

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Doing fieldwork in and among translocal organisations invites a number of methodological challenges. Even more so, if the theoretical question involves looking into the kinds of relationships and 'partnerships' that are formed between organisations as part of an attempt to engage in what is commonly referred to as 'corporate social responsibility'. The paper discusses the challenges of studying the 'corporate social responsibility' movement by doing ethnography in and among translocal organisations, with a particular focus on the problems associated with fields that are discontinuous in both time and space. To begin with, it is not easy to determine where the field starts and where it ends. The organisations involved are often dispersed across national boundaries, and the actors tend to be highly mobile. The analytical field seems to appear in a number of different localities, only to evaporate again as easily as it emerged. The field of corporate social responsibility, it seems, is 'here, there, and everywhere' (cf. Hannerz 2003). For the anthropologist, this is much frustrating as it is positively challenging. Some degree of continuity begins to appear as one lets go of the idea to identify the field in space, and instead sets out to study culture by exploring linkages and connections between a variety of sites, people, and ideas (cf. Marcus 1998). The field of 'corporate social responsibility' may be studied by the anthropologist positing herself at the crossroads of such linkages and connections. While this methodological stance enables us to track processes of meaning-making that may be translocal, it also invites questions regarding the 'thickness' and density of ethnography in practice.

An Emerging Pedagogy for the Design of Multi-Sited Fieldwork as Dissertation Research

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I select three dissertation projects which I have supervised over the past few years as indices of the emergence of new forms and norms in the conduct of anthropological research at the very beginning of careers.

These projects are particularly interesting for the ambition of their aims, the difficulty and challenge of their objects of study, the skill in the ways that they were conducted, and for the interesting ways in which each of them both succeeds and fails.

Unlimited Universes and Other Limitations: Fieldwork in the Anthropology of Medicine

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I will discuss two different fieldwork experiences in the anthropology of medicine. The first was about the social, clinical and scientific responses to the AIDS epidemic as observed in urban Brazil since the mid 1980s. The aim was to understand how agents and subjects of biomedicine located on a peripheral setting made use and contributed to the production of biomedical knowledge. The second is about the implementation of European medicine in colonial settings (1840s-1910s). The aim remains the same, yet the interaction with the subjects is mediated by documents and memories. In the first project I travelled from a 'home' (New York at the time) to a 'field site', stayed there 1,5 years on a row adopting the local ways and went back home to sort it out. Yet it hardly replicated the rupture-in-triangle (going to one place, being there, coming back). It was not about one place, but many: I travelled daily between the different worlds involved in the local responses to AIDS (on the sciences, clinic, activism and policies). And it was not really about place: international agents (people, know-how, symbols, funding lines) shaped local action as much as the actual 'local actors'. My field expanded into issues like international AIDS conferences, donor agencies, North-South research protocols. There would be no closure unless I changed my topic - which I did, moving to the early times of tropical medicine and colonialism, and, again, having to reinvent the terms of the fieldwork experience...

Dilemmas of Ethnographic Practice: A View from Russian Anthropology

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The paper will address the issue of the recent shifts in ethnographic practices by analysing the tradition of field research and its contemporary transformations in Russian anthropology. Russian anthropology followed a rather curious line of development of fieldwork paradigms. From the dominant in the 19th century image of ethnographer as local folklore and customs collector, in the early 20th century it gradually moved toward the understanding of anthropological field practice that was closer to the one forming in the West. However, the movement was interrupted by the establishment of the reactionary regime in the Soviet politics. As a result, the Malinowskian tradition of fieldwork was never institutionalised in Soviet academia. As long-term studies in remote places were conducted par excellence by exiled scholars, the association of this type of ethnographic practice with social outcasts rather firmly dwelled in the Soviet academic imagination. Soviet anthropology developed a different type of

ethnographic field research paradigm. Instead of the intensive long-term immersion in the studied culture, what was worked out was a system of recurrent short-term expeditions, which meant the shaping of a different sort of relationship between the ethnographer and the studied “other”. (The “other” was kept at bay, never too close, but at the same time the relationship was continuous – it was marked by perennial mutual re-acquaintances which kept the two parties together.) This field research paradigm came under criticism in the 1990s, when anthropologists began voicing a desire to revive the tradition of classical long-term studies – paradoxically, at the same time that Western scholars began reflecting on the inadequacy of classical field approaches in the face of globalisation processes. The paper will analyse the effects the described field paradigm has had on the production of anthropological knowledge in Russia by the end of the 20th century, and consider its advantages and disadvantages by drawing parallels with the ways field practices have been recently developing in the West. It will discuss contemporary trends in field research and its main dilemmas in Russian anthropology.

Ethnography in Motion: Shifting Fields on Airport Grounds

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Ethnography today is changing fast from its traditional forms both from within the discipline and through the appropriation of fieldwork by other social sciences. Both developments have forced us to rethink our methodology and find new ways to capture the present. This is a present that moves, that makes itself felt on shifting grounds that host floating images and fragmented realities. In order to follow these movements ethnographers have to devise flexible forms of fieldwork which generate ‘openness’ and reflection on their informants’ part, and which may take them to the mobile grounds of their action wherever it takes place, in my case to an airport. The new Athens international airport has been built on the grounds of a closed community of Arvanites, whose cultural and linguistic past have traditionally been looked down upon by the neighbouring Athenians, stigmatising them even in their own eyes. Despite the first negative reactions to the airport, which took their fields and vineyards, thus disrupting their sense of identity, the locals are now appropriating the airport’s cosmopolitan and polyglot environment and see afresh their own bilingual past. For an ethnographer with a long history of involvement in the area, airport allusions and intimations show new ways of interpreting local identities.