

16<sup>th</sup> EASA biennial conference [New anthropological horizons in and beyond Europe](#)

EASA2020 – R001: **Anthropological Perspectives: Past, Present and Future**. Convened by Aleksandar Bošković (University of Belgrade and Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade) and Virginia R. Dominguez (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), and chaired by Salma Siddique (University of St. Andrews) with Thomas Hylland Eriksen (University of Oslo) taking the role of discussant, this roundtable was attended by more than 70 conference delegates. <https://easaonline.org/conferences/easa2020/panels#8386>

**Wednesday 22 July, 14:00-15:45 (Lisbon/London time)**

The main idea of convening the roundtable was the questioning of the shifting role of ethnography in the changing world. The invited participants, Adam Kuper, Maja Petrović-Šteger and João Pina-Cabral, were asked to include their own experiences in the discussion of the topic, which provided for diversity of perspectives and opinions. In his introductory remarks, Aleksandar Bošković noted the importance of anthropological perspectives in understanding human behaviour and its consequences. In doing so, he is in favour of a specific approach (methodological individualism), in order to answer to specific questions relevant to contemporary world (and formulated by Ladislav Holy and Milan Stuchlik in their seminal work, *Actions, Norms and Representations*, 1983). Just as perspective in art means reproducing three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional plane (i.e., in a drawing), perspective in anthropology means presenting others (in texts, visual media, and other types of narratives) in a way that is also acceptable for them. However, this is not easy when specific issues of identity and identity construction obscure reasoning on a collective level.

In his presentation, Adam Kuper (London School of Economics) began with the paradox of the current situation of social anthropology. At the time that EASA was founded, thirty years ago, we were engaged in large and resonant debates about theory – about structuralism, and sociobiology, and postmodernism; about gender and identity; and about post-colonial development policy. But we felt that not enough attention was paid to us by other social scientists, by policy makers, and by the general public. Our current situation is very different. Out there in the world there is a real if rather puzzled interest in the great issues of anthropology. These are discussed in blockbuster best-sellers. (He noted the examples of Harari, Diamond, and others.) Unfortunately they are not written by anthropologists. And yet today a number of anthropologists are engaged in huge issues that are of cross-disciplinary interest, and which are policy-relevant: contagious diseases, and now COVID-19; Climate Change; Migration; Family, Sex and Gender; Identity and Nationalism. And the coming generation of researchers has adopted new research methods, and new modes of communicating their ideas and their results in online journals and forums, and video sites. Is a new intellectual community taking form? Maja Petrović-Šteger (Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts), focusing on her field research experience and specific narratives of her interlocutors, noted the awkward situation in which we find ourselves. The state of our politics, our economies, the planet, COVID-19 – all these prompt disquiet and have exacerbated cultural and ideological differences around the world. Anthropology, it is often claimed, is meant to have a public face. There is something like the expectation that we should act as public intellectuals who, on the basis of what they already know, offer predictions concerning the new world order and the future of our discipline (as per the call of this roundtable). This paper suggests that although our

procedures of data-collection privilege the present, they overemphasize the expert's authority and future's predictability. In that way, they assume continuous time, not rupture.

Finally, João de Pina-Cabral (University of Kent) started from the premise that anthropology and ethnography will never disappear because the person (*anthropos*) is a condition for the world to exist and, from within our collective condition (*ethnos*), there will always be someone seeking to achieve the broader view. Writing in 1963, Ernesto de Martino argued that, to move out of the imperial condition, anthropology had to adopt what he called ecumenical ethnocentrism. By ethnocentrism he meant that, since persons are irrevocably within life, and life is foundationally social, there is no veranda beyond life from which to look at the world. We have to stop fooling ourselves with the vacuous hope that logic can lift us above history, like God had done of old. Today, in order to seek the broader view, we need to unmake the two principal pillars of the modernist paradigm: on the one hand, the notion that the Greater Divide in the human condition lays between modernity and ancientness; on the other, the neo-Kantian conception of Reason as the external measuring rod that sets up the Great Divide. When one takes these aspects into account, a picture emerges of the kind of anthropology we would want to bring about in our coming postimperial condition.

In his discussion, Thomas Hylland Eriksen reiterated his call for a more public engagement of anthropologists, and for anthropology to enter more vigorously into the public sphere. The presentations were followed by an interesting exchange of views and perspectives. Perhaps this opens the space for future debates, and even an edited volume on the topic. The roundtable was recorded, see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YDZsjyUp7c>