

Towards an Anthropology of Europe

A European Science Foundation 'exploratory workshop'
Litomyšl, Czech Republic, 1-5 September 2004

A Report for the EASA Newsletter

The week previous to the EASA Conference in Vienna, thirty three anthropologists from all corners of Europe met in the town of Litomyšl, eastern Bohemia¹. They were convened there by Andrés Barrera, Martine Segalen and Peter Skalník to take part in an 'exploratory workshop' sponsored by the European Science Foundation. The theme of the workshop is identified by a long title, descriptive of its aims and contents: *Towards an Anthropology of Europe: Studying Europe Using Anthropology's Methodology. A Multi-university Teaching Course and Research Programme*².

The initiative to hold this academic meeting is related to long standing pursuits by a network of universities collaborating in organizing student and teacher exchanges under Erasmus/Socrates, intensive programmes and research seminars, and conference workshops. However, the forwarding of a proposal to the ESF to hold this workshop is more directly linked to efforts aiming at setting up a coordinated course and concurrent research agenda on *The Anthropology of Europe*, by a number of colleagues teaching in Departments of Anthropology around Europe. The overall aim of such pursuits being "to open avenues for a more comprehensive and systematic account of the anthropological, ethnological and cognate literature produced about local, regional and national societies in Europe; which would make possible (along the way) to work out a coordinated long-term research programme" as it is stated in the original proposal.

Thirty papers, on a wide range of topics, were presented during the three full days that the workshop lasted for. The presentations and subsequent discussion on each individual paper were grouped in 'working sessions' under three main headings:

¹ The venue of the workshop is a beautiful historic town, Litomyšl, placed on the valley of the river Loučna, a tributary of the Elbe, by the Maria Theresa highway that links Prague to Vienna. Therefore, a town historically and geographically at the heart of Europe.

² The full programme and a detailed report on the workshop are available at the European Science Foundation webpage: <http://www.esf.org/> 'exploratory workshops' funded in 2004.

- a) *Towards an Anthropology of Europe: the teaching dimension;*
- b) *Towards an Anthropology of Europe: the research dimension;* and
- c) *Cooperation in Teaching and Research in the European Arena.*

Each of these working sessions leading up to a ‘concluding debate’ where issues of more general and substantive concern were reconsidered in an open discussion, with contributions from all participants in the workshop. Thus, it was a tight and intensive schedule, which prompted vigorous and passionate scholarly debate all through; at times overflowing into the leisure parts of it, which were also fully enjoyable, thanks to the generosity and care of our local hosts.

It would be arduous and tiring to make reference to each of the papers presented, and all the issues raised in them. Besides, paper abstracts are already available for consultation elsewhere (at the ESF webpage mentioned in the footnote). Furthermore, the proceedings of the workshop will be published in full, hopefully in a year’s time or so³. Nonetheless, it has to be mentioned that there was heated debate in regard to the opportunity and feasibility of construing an Anthropology of Europe, rather than merely continuing with the regular business of doing Anthropology in Europe. Debates touched on issues like whether Europe is an appropriate object of study; and whether such an ‘object’ of enquiry could be dealt with by applying canonical Anthropology’s methods and research tools.

Obviously, the convenors (as well as many of the invited participants, some of whom have already made substantial contributions in research and teaching along these lines) are of the opinion that Europe certainly is an appropriate and legitimate object for anthropological enquiry. Moreover, they are convinced that Anthropology is compelled to turn its gaze to the near and the familiar (besides its continuous attention to the far and detached); and that anthropologists should not stay aloof from having a say on contemporary issues, contributing (surely from its unique or distinctive outlook in

³ Proposals are being prepared for the publication of most of the papers presented at the workshop, with some additional contributions from colleagues who were invited but could not attend the meeting. There is a proposal for an special issue of the journal *Ethnologie Française* with a selection of papers on the ‘teaching side’; and another proposal for an special issue of the journal *FOCAAL. European Journal of Anthropology*, with a selection of papers on the ‘research side’ of an Anthropology of Europe.

theory, in method and epistemology) to public debates and policy formulation on issues and areas within their professional expertise and scholarly concern.

Thus, participants were confronted with fundamental problems such as: how can Anthropology take account of European Societies and Cultures?; what and how can Anthropology contribute in explaining and interpreting Europe as a historical and as an 'emerging' reality?; or, what in this regard would an anthropological approach yield that other Social Sciences or disciplines within the Humanities cannot deliver? Issues of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, the scientific method, the status of Anthropology among akin disciplines within the Humanities and the Social Sciences, cropped up here and were passionately debated.

On a more pragmatic level, and inspired by a contribution of Alexandra Bitusikova very much to the point, there was some discussion on how Anthropology can effectively face the challenges set by the Bologna Declaration, and the governmental policies that spring from it. Thus, it was debated what institutional and academic niche will be reserved for Anthropology in the ongoing reworking of the European Higher Education and Research Areas. As it has already been pointed out, we are luckily not departing from nil. For relevant and challenging new research work is being done, as it was shown by contributions from several participants. And initiatives of different sorts have already been taken, in terms of making appropriate arrangements for institutional cooperation in developing teaching-training programmes on a regional or pan-European scale. Although as it concerns Anthropology we are probably in need of a more decisive push in terms of furthering cooperation and collaboration Europe wide, carried out in more systematic and comprehensive ways.

Precisely, as an outcome of this meeting it was decided to take steps for extending and strengthening cooperation among a wider network of Europe's educational and research institutions, along both lines of teaching-training and research pursuits within Anthropology, broadly defined. Consequently, it was agreed to convene two meetings, in a year's time or so. One in Siena (convened by Fabio Mugnaini), dedicated to set afoot and start implementing joint teaching-training programmes in Anthropology among one or several sets of departments/universities. Another in Paris (convened by Martine Segalen), dedicated to develop specific research projects to carry out in

collaboration, again by one or several sets of research institutions. To this specific end, a proposal has been forwarded to COST (European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research), for a four years long 'COST Action' programme on the theme: *Anthropology in Europe. Devising and Implementing a Teaching-Training and Research Agenda*. This COST grant would eventually allow us to take all our projects decisively ahead and to a fruitful culmination.

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