

Workshop 43

Learning and History

(Invited Workshop)

Convenors:

Charles Stafford, London School of Economics and Political Science

c.stafford@lse.ac.uk

Christina Toren, Brunel University

christina.toren@brunel.ac.uk

One of the most fundamental issues for contemporary anthropology is how human beings come to have knowledge of themselves in the world. At stake here is not just what people know but how they come to know it. One highly influential perspective – expressed in Fichte, repeated in Hegel, and later repeated in Marx – holds that human self-education (or self-realisation) is, to a significant extent, a product of our ongoing struggle with our own history. An element in this, crucial for Marx, is that labour – the human effort of transforming the material world, and engaging in social relationships to that end – significantly defines who we are and what we know. Marx was discussing alienation versus non-alienated labour and the place of imagination in the process of self-realisation: that the architect has to imagine the building before he builds it. Marx was convinced that humans had the potential to become fully conscious of themselves and thus consciously able to determine (by and large) their own society and be less at the mercy of history. Implicit here is the idea that learning itself is an historical process.

Self-Realisation and Symbolic Orders

Mike Rowlands, University College London

m.rowlands@ucl.ac.uk

The aim is to study the potential for realities other than the present reality, for futures that might alter the symbolic order that practically grounds social being as an unwitting acceptance of it as reality. Close attention will be paid to material acquisition and surrounding as much as to statements about them and verbal expressions of long-term past and future. That self-realisation is a process compels us to consider the conditions that promote or obstruct it. Anthropologists need to consider what these are in various settings and, through their juxtaposition, help us see how the alternatives generated relate to specific conditions and practices. Such practices may be anything from the telling and hearing of histories to the making and unmaking of fortunes.

Anthropologies of History and Self-Realisation

Stephan Feuchtwang, London School of Economics and Political Science

s.feuchtwang@lse.ac.uk

This is an experimental paper reviewing other people's studies of China, rather than my own fieldwork. It aims to set out the possibilities of an anthropology of history and self-realisation using the anthropology of China as an example. Among the scales and units of self-realisation in China, older generations can and do recall several scales of collective self-realisation that built up neatly to 'the Chinese people'. The time-scale of realisation was beyond the lives of the individual subjects. One of the challenges to an anthropology of historical self-realisation is the contention that globalisation in general and China's market reforms and opening to the global economy has diminished longterm self-realisation, compressing anticipation into a constant 'present'. Has disillusion with Maoist mass mobilisation politics and the generation gap between the children born during the period of marketisation (in the eighties and nineties of the 20th century) and their parents and grandparents in fact reduced serious thought about self-realisation beyond the living? Has it reduced self-realisation to the small scale of conjugal domestic life? I will answer these questions provisionally by reviews of an ethnography by Liu Xin that seriously argues a 'yes' answer to the first question and an ethnography by Yan Yunxiang that argues for the diminishing of the scale of the self to the individual and conjugal unit in China.

Living History: Learning Personhood. Education, Ethics and Exchange in Bermondsey, Southeast London

Gillian Evans, Brunel University

astanga66@bopenworld.com

This paper argues for analytical caution about an idea of 'selfrealisation', which makes domination the artefact of a) unexamined processes of social reproduction and b) an analysis that posits the potential of a different future as the point of investigating such processes in the first place. Taking a developmental perspective, the paper gives an ethnographic analysis of the reproduction of social class position. The disposition towards work, in this case - making good, is contrasted with its opposite: the disposition against work that leads young men towards inclusion in the 'underclass' as they consider involvement in a criminal firm. Acknowledging that explanation of political economy requires a historically specific explanation, the paper situates childhood learning at the centre of an analysis of disposition as desire arising out of the lived history of particular exchange relations.

Fiddling. Fishing. Forging. Memories and Practices of Steel Labour in Endcliffe, Sheffield

Massimiliano Mollona, Goldsmiths College, London

m.mollona@gold.ac.uk

This paper explores the different notions of 'economic agency', 'labour' and 'technology' that are constructed by the workers of a small tool factory located in an ex-working class district

of Sheffield. The article combines Marx's (1976) [1857] seminal study of the capitalist labour process, and his focus on notions of consciousness and alienation, with the anthropological tradition that stresses the historical and experiential nature of skilled practices (C. Toren 2002; P. Harvey 1997). Drawing on the author's 18 months experience of work in the factory, the paper shows that the workers' knowledge and practices of labour are rooted in the history and politico-economy of the neighbourhood. Historical memory – of past labour practices; social institutions; working-class politics and landscape – constitutes a fundamental part of the workers' consciousness and understanding of their labour. On the other hand, the social skills and informal knowledge through which some of the workers perform illegal and informal labour outside the factory and in the families, also play an important role in the workers' understanding of 'what a good job' is. By comparing the labour practices of two generational cohorts of workers – endorsed with different memories of labour and different socio-economic backgrounds – the article challenges the taken for granted assumption of the alienating condition of modern factory production. For instance, H. Braverman (1974) claims that modern factory production creates a chiasm between the workers' actions – incorporated into the predetermined movements of the machines – and their knowledge – externalised into universal market numerals and standards of production. In contrast, the article highlights the existence, on the same shop-floor, of standardised, linguistic and disembodied knowledge – associated with 'alienating' technologies of production – as well as of implicit, non-linguistic and embodied knowledge associated with skilled 'techniques of production' (M. Mauss 1979). The article also shows that these two forms and consciousnesses of labour are rooted in the social and political history of the neighbourhood rather than contingent on the technical system of the factory.

Learning, Labour and the (Re)Production of Social Difference in a Tribal Village, Central India

Peggy Froerer, Brunel University

p.froerer@lse.ac.uk

In a Hindu/ Christian 'tribal' village in central India, the process of formal schooling – or the exclusion from it – acts as a powerful vehicle through which people come to be aware of themselves and their material, gendered and ethnic distinctions. Education, and the status that accompanies it, is also manifested in the kind of labour in which people participate, during the course of childhood and into adulthood. Through a comparison of Hindu/ Christian children's formal and non-formal educational experiences, this paper shows how children come to be aware of fundamental social differences, and how this growing awareness serves, in turn, to transform the manner by which they will one day reproduce themselves.

Determining Self-Realisation

Christina Toren, Brunel University

Christina.toren@brunel.ac.uk

This paper will discuss why an understanding of human auto-poiesis as an historical process at once denies and confirms the idea that self-realisation is possible.

Learning, Economic Agency and Self-Determination in China and Taiwan

Charles Stafford, London School of Economics and Political Science

c.stafford@lse.ac.uk

This paper examines ethnographic data from rural China and Taiwan on learning and economic life, focusing in particular on economic agency as a mode of acquiring knowledge, including knowledge about oneself. Of particular interest in the Chinese and Taiwanese cases is the salience of complex numerical knowledge – which, in addition to being of practical use in economic transactions, is felt to say something important about the universe and one's position within it. This ethnographic discussion leads to a reconsideration of the ways in which self-knowledge and self-realisation have been conceived, or misconceived, in anthropological and philosophical accounts.