

66. Reconfiguring ‘Uncertainty’: Ontological Insecurity, Partial Knowledge and Reasoning in a Changing World

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In contrast to older anthropological work in which uncertainty emerges as a sort of “rest category” of social experience, more recent studies acknowledge uncertainty as an indispensable part of daily lives and of the diverse styles of reasoning and decision-making. Much of this work, however, remains either descriptive or limited in their theoretical and topical scope. Within recent anthropological theorising and other social science discourse, ‘uncertainty’ on the one hand had been discussed in terms of ‘risk’ understood as a historically specific type of understanding and dealing with uncertainty. On the other hand ‘uncertainty’ has been scrutinized in relation to the partiality of ‘expert knowledge’ in the knowledge production in the fields of science and technology. Apart from risk and danger, other types of uncertainty have been largely disregarded in anthropology as have been uncertain knowledge practices as understood by lay people. The notion of ‘uncertainty’ therefore is still undertheorised in anthropology.

This workshop invites to discuss these issues in relation to the shifting contexts of knowledge acquisition and usage in contemporary world and asks what an ‘anthropology of uncertainty’ could contribute to wider debates in the field. What are the types and forms of uncertainty to be found in today’s local moral worlds? What are its sources and how do the changes in the globalizing/localizing world contribute to it? What are the mundane and profane practices and strategies by which these uncertainties are dealt with both individually and communally? And how should these questions best be approached methodologically, conceptually and theoretically?

Fractal data and shifting scales of relevance: sources of conceptual uncertainties in anthropology?

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This paper will present a reflexion on the problematic concerning "scale(s) of relevance" (French: *échelles de pertinence*) in anthropological data and analysis. These "scales of relevance" seem related to what the author has labelled as the "fractal nature" of ethnographic facts which is often a source of uncertainty, or as the workshop convenors have named it, of "ontological insecurity". The fractal nature of ethnographic facts frequently makes "discrimination" (*stictu sensu*) between "sameness and otherness" literally uncertain as the content of enclosing categories ("generalisation" from the particularity observed to the "fact" described) is "shifting" according to various (historic, academic, national) contexts. As in other cases of empirical data production, the improvement of observation techniques and heuristic tools seem to pump up complexity and consequently uncertainty. The paper will present some examples based on the anthropology of time and space as well as on so-called “ethnic categories”.

Aware of the deconstructive aspects of uncertainty, the author will suggest some possible ways to reduce it by a more explicit acknowledging of the properly anthropological dimensions of various scales of relevance. According to the scale chosen, uncertainty can appear or vanish.

Uncertain personhood and the problem of Materno-foetal agency

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Childbirth is often a source of uncertainty for mothers and their families; however this uncertainty is often rooted in medical diagnostic procedures and the decisions they involve. This paper looks at the shifting contexts and trajectories of maternal personhood and agency, and suggests that uncertainty is rooted in the emerging foetal personhood and agency established with the help of medical diagnostics. The paper draws on the idea of dividuality (Strathern) applied in the Western context (Italy) by exploring the inherent uncertainty of the pregnant body, expectant mother or materno-foetal unit. In the case presented partibility and “dividuality” are the result of an orchestration of individual and collective interests not necessarily explicit in nature, and in this they differ from Strathern’s case of Papua New Guinea. The paper argues however, that the notion of partibility and dividuality are useful in the western context in order to deal more effectively with “uncertain personhood”. The uncertainty surrounding maternal and foetal personhood in pregnancy and childbirth is explored through medical categories such as the materno-foetal unit and through the “practices of the self” employed by birthing women and health practitioners.

Cesarean section on request: a strategy against the uncertainties of vaginal delivery?

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Cesarean section on request is regarded as a rather new phenomenon in German obstetric care. Its pros and contras are emotionally discussed by supporters and opponents. In an empirical study, which we are carrying out at the university hospital Großhadern in Munich since February 2003, we try to find out what motivates first time mothers to prefer cesarean section to vaginal delivery. First results indicate that their motivations for a section delivery differ from the arguments which experts put forward. Instead of medical risk factors women are more concerned about the uncertainties which they see associated with the experience of birthing. In our presentation we describe the different levels of uncertainties which our informants connect with vaginal delivery in a clinical setting and discuss to what extent these uncertainties are supported through their social worlds. We then analyse the strategies which women who opt for a cesarian section on request employ to deal with these uncertainties and the strategies employed by those who want to deliver vaginally.

Contingency, control, and holding on to a world

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In the context of modern life, extensive social and cultural changes and along them, the problem of uncertainty as an aspect of social experience, have assumed an increasing importance. Illness is an area where fragility and unpredictability of life are

of great importance. Aspects of contingency are often conceptualised as “suffering” in medical anthropology, but are also preliminary discussed within the domain of “anthropology of uncertainty”. In this paper, I ask on how do people try to find continuity in the contingency of everyday life. How do they make sense of diseases and death in the context of an emptying social and cultural periphery? My focus is on the area of North Karelia which has been my field work site for one year. I will concentrate on women’s agency and their attempts to *retain a grip and a hold on to a world* which seems to be falling apart. I argue that this “holding on” takes place by adjusting the concepts of time and space accordingly, by acting, and by memorising the shared past. Ernesto de Martino, an Italian anthropologist, writes of *la crisi della presenza* in terms which could give theoretical tools to open up the concept of uncertainty.

Ontological Security and the Revival of Buddhism in Cambodia
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This paper deals with the revival of Buddhism in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge destruction. Having worked with Hindu revitalisation in Malaysia, I will look at similarities and differences regarding these two countries and religions. The data I have this far points to a central concern with the problem of securing survival not only physical, but of a distinctively Khmer universe, in a politically and physically volatile world. Beyond this is the intriguing question of ontological security and Buddhism's role in both cultivating acceptance and understanding of the inherently uncertain nature of life, but also the role of the institution of Buddhism and its various practitioners in providing various kinds of 'magical' protection. In this paper, I will engage in exploring theoretical possibilities for dealing with these issues.

Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar: Dealing with new uncertainties
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When people in Madagascar convert to Seventh-day Adventism, they adopt a new ontology and a new morality both of which are largely incompatible with traditional Malagasy notions. Moreover, in almost all cases, the Malagasy Adventists are but a small minority within their kin group. This situation leads to a number of insecurities which are located both at the practical and the conceptual level. On a practical level, the Malagasy Adventists are uncertain as to how to lead their lives, in particular as they continue to live in a society which is not governed by Adventist rules. On the conceptual level, conversion to Adventism leads to uncertainties about who the Malagasy Adventists feel they are – Are we truly Malagasy people? – and of what constitutes kinship. Thus in contrast to the great majority of studies on New Churches which emphasize that such churches offer new security to those who feel marginalised by the effects of globalisation and a new anchor of identity in a time of rapid social change, my research shows that conversion to Adventism entails a number of new ontological insecurities which converts to Adventism are challenged to deal and live with.

States of Uncertainty and Uncertain States: The Problems of Personhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Uncertainty is an integral feature of everyday life in Bosnia-Herzegovina: the state-building projects of the war and post-war period have come to constitute overlapping fields of social interaction that seem permanently “in transition” and provide little that is reliable to guide people to act both effectively and morally. This insecurity may be the most acute with returning refugees who are forced to navigate this complex institutional and moral terrain.

Drawing on sixteen months of fieldwork with returnees in Bosnia, my paper will explore the sources of such uncertainty in the relationship between the practices of personhood and practices that authorize state power. I argue that when the lived experience of large labels of personhood (Serb, Yugoslav, worker) is stable, it is often because the modes of knowing and objectifying the self are embedded in governing practices that legitimize state power (such that the world-as-experienced is a tight fit with the world-as-represented). My paper will show that the profound social and moral uncertainty in Bosnia results from the multiple and contradictory state-building practices of domestic and international authorities. One result is that none of the existing labels of personhood remain predictable as overarching guides for acting across governmental and moral fields.

Gambling - contingency and power

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In gambling, the state, commercial providers of games, and gamblers uphold strict order in the games, where the most important thing of all – the outcome of the game – must be uncertain. An analysis of gambling therefore promises a unique perspective on connections between uncertainty and control.

In order to get a clearer understanding of “uncertainty” I shall analyse the concept of contingency and relate it to the Danish gambling environment where I did my fieldwork. While some researchers have embraced contingency using it as a catchword for our (modern) existence, where social life is supposedly contingent and not predetermined by God, grand narratives or subjects, others have maintained determinism and necessity as aspects of social life. A similar distinction between contingency and necessity can be observed in the narratives of gamblers and other lay people. By contextualising the narratives of gamblers, the interconnections between contingency and power are highlighted and hopefully better understood.

