

EASA20 Lisbon, Plenary A

Introduction 'Doubt and Determination in Ethnography'

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Welcome to the Plenary Session on "Doubt and Determination in Ethnography".

I will start by saying some brief words of introduction to the topic. We will then hear the two papers followed by a comment by our invited discussant. After that, I will be giving the word to the forum and we will have plenty of time, I hope, to engage with your comments and questions.

Thirty years after the first EASA conference, when European anthropologists, for the first time since the Second World War, could again circulate freely across the continent, we find ourselves grounded; 'at home', so to speak. The pandemic has forced us to change the mode of our conference and, at the same time, it encourages us to reconsider the conditions of possibility of the ethnographic gesture. Ever since the early 1900s, when figures like Rivers and Seligman paved the way for the Malinowskian revolution, doing fieldwork in far off places became a routine enterprise. Given the means available to the average young academic in the wealthier countries of the global North, anyone could just get-up-and-go and do their fieldwork in the remotest of places; coming back safely, give or take the odd malarial attack, to report their undertakings. Yet, these days, this has suddenly become impossible. Are we confronted with a radical change in the conditions of possibility of the ethnographic gesture, or is it just a passing blip? It is too early to know; but I want to suggest that the present hiatus should encourage us to look afresh at what ethnography means. Besides: events developing in countries like Russia, China, Turkey and India suggest that perhaps the ethnographic freedom of movement—good as it was—was an aspect of an imperial moment that might be passing.

In 1964, facing the postcolonial conjuncture, Ernesto de Martino warned us against succumbing to 'an insidious Western apocalypse characterised by a reduced (...) familiarity of the world, the shipwreck of intersubjectivity, the dangerous loss of the hope of basing a common future on liberty and human dignity, and not least, the risk of alienation that is inevitably carried by the fetishization of technique.' (2016: 71) Against this, he proposed anthropologists should adopt what he called an *ecumenical ethnocentrism*; that is, 'a unifying *ethos* that, in a deliberate manner, continuously drives the sciences of the human towards the humanity that we are, here and now, in this our historical conjuncture.' (2016: 69, 68) By conjuncture, he meant the dynamic condition of presence, where certain factors combine spatiotemporally to create particular effects, for example, specifiable configurations of power. De Martino, therefore, calls us to reconsider the 'them-out-there' versus 'us-in-here'

assumption that founded modernist ethnography and the way it depended on a view of 'us' as complex and 'them' as simple and, therefore, on the notion that 'they' were there before 'us' but that 'we' were the ones who could tell what was actually the case, since 'their' simplicity clouded their vision. This is, after all, in its more basic formulation, the basic framework behind Mauss' theory of the person and the self, that so deeply marked anthropology to this day.

Instead, now that most people, anywhere can read our ethnographies, our central question has shifted. We are newly reminded that identity cannot be the opposite of alterity, since alterity is the abiding condition from within which personal presence itself emerges; in turn, asymmetry is not the collapse of symmetry, as the latter is always incomplete; and intersubjectivity is not the meeting of self-identified subjects, but to the contrary, the condition for subjectivity to emerge at all. Our fundamental situation as living persons is entanglement—so the problem today is no longer that 'they' make no sense, as it was for Lévy-Bruhl and Evans-Pritchard. Our central problem, now, is how can each one of us make sense at all when faced with our internal plurality. Our presence is both singular and plural at all moments of the process of personal emergence.

Following de Martino's call for adopting a 'unifying *ethos*', I suggest that we can no longer afford to root the ethnographic gesture in a critical encounter with a supposedly radical alterity, as atomistically parsed into so-called 'cultures'. Rather, the truly radical encounter with alterity lies within the ethnographer's own conjuncture: ethnographers are foundationally *amidst*, as Heidegger would put it. Their world starts where they are but does not end there, for the history of ethnography—the canon of our discipline—scaffolds the ethnographer's vision. The history of anthropology helps the ethnographer to exercise critically an *ethos* of ever-broader ecumenical embracement.

This means that ethnographers have to redraw the very framework of their analytical dispositions—for there is no longer any external measuring rod. Ethnography is an encounter between persons, including the ethnographer. However, we now know that 'the bringing together of many persons is just like the bringing together of one'—as Marilyn Strathern warned us. There is no ultimate material reduction in ethnography because there is no stepping out of history, no external measuring rod. We return to de Martino's warning: ethnography starts from the ethnographer's conjuncture and always moves by relation to it. Ethnographic evidence is based on personal experiences and on relations that are *indeterminate* because they involve emergence, and that, therefore, are ultimately *underdetermined*.

Yet, we are social *scientists*. As Lévy-Bruhl discovered, our subjects (and ourselves as subjects) are not bound by the laws of logic. But our ethnographic analyses, as scientific statements, are unavoidably bound by the critical apparatus of scientific writing. That is the one important way in which ethnography deviates from other kinds of writing—otherwise it would be a kind of fiction and a not very successful one at that. We are an integral part of the

great game of science and technology that has now irremediably changed our planet. This challenges us for, unlike our everyday endeavours, ethnographic narratives call for the establishment of determination. This is the aporia I proposed to our two panellists, and our panel discussant. I asked them to consider how doubt and vagueness coexist with determination in our ethnographic accounts. Their responses were marvellously creative; they are indeed fascinating, as you will see. My hope is that they can lead us to a discussion that is not limited by epistemological considerations but that opens up to a debate on this weird critical conjuncture which, at the moment, is ours.

I will now pass the word to the speakers who will present their papers: Stephan Palmié, of the University of Chicago and Anne-Christine Taylor, of the CNRS in Paris. The debate that follows will be introduced by our invited debater, Ashley Lebner of Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada.