

What Comes Next in European Applied Anthropology?

Dan Podjed and Meta Gorup

Applied Anthropology Network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) started its activities in 2012 and has since then grown to 120 members. The newly established network has already tackled some of the crucial issues in Europe related to applied anthropology, and has so far identified at least three key challenges: (1) how to increase employability of applied anthropologists, (2) how to deconstruct stereotypes about their activities (within and without academic settings), (3) how to boost self-esteem of younger colleagues at the beginning of their applied career.

To address these challenges, EASA Applied Anthropology Network designed an event with a somewhat high-flying title 'Why the World Needs Anthropologists', taking place in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in November 2013. In addition to the EASA Applied Anthropology Network, the event was organised by VU University Amsterdam, University of Ljubljana, Tropenmuseum, Dutch Anthropological Association, and Institute for Innovation and Development of the University of Ljubljana. Sponsor resources were provided by Slovenian company Metronik, Slovenian Research Agency and Dutch foundation Vamos Bien! The success of the event went beyond initial expectations – it attracted almost 200 anthropologists from all over Europe as well as representatives of other scientific disciplines, managers and designers.

Anna Kirah: Focus on People

The event featured three keynote speakers – top experts who intertwine anthropological knowledge with practice. The first speaker, Anna Kirah, the chief experience officer (CXO) of Norwegian company Making Waves, presented her rich experiences in design anthropology. She started her career in the U.S.A., where she participated in research and development of Boeing's aircraft 787 Dreamliner. She continued at Microsoft where she researched customer experience

with the operating system Windows. She now lives in Norway, where, among other things, she is working towards making the airports more passenger-friendly. In her speech, Anna Kirah presented some excellent cases of how companies can apply anthropological knowledge for the development of more user-friendly products and services, which, in her opinion, have to be created by employing a people-centred approach.

Jitske Kramer: Be Proud of Your Professional Title

'I would like to start my speech with a confession', said the second speaker, Dutch anthropologist Jitske Kramer from organisation HumanDimensions, which operates in the spheres of diversity, intercultural relations and organisational change in companies. A short pause followed, the audience was still. 'I am actually proud of being an anthropologist.' With this assertion she summed up the core of the event and endeavours of EASA Applied Anthropology Network. European anthropologists employed outside the academia and 'traditional' anthropological institutions (museums, institutes for the protection of cultural heritage, research institutes, etc.) would rarely introduce themselves using their professional title – contrary to, for example, sociologists and psychologists who knew how to mark their territories both in profitable and non-profitable sectors. Hence, it is crucial to change the perception of the value of the title 'anthropologist'. In order to promote our discipline and boost self-esteem of its representatives, we should refer to our professional title with pride in any situation.

Simon Roberts: Erase the Boundaries within Anthropology

The third speaker was Simon Roberts, who founded one of the first British companies employing ethno-



graphic research in the business sector, Ideas Bazaar. He then worked at Intel Corporation where he formed a multidisciplinary lab developing products and services for new markets, collaborating with companies such as Unilever, Novo Nordisk and BBC. Following that, he worked at the innovation and strategy consultancy ReD Associates. At the end of 2013, he co-founded the growth consultancy Stripe Partners. He started his career as a business anthropologist after his PhD when he had to decide, as he explained, between two worlds: ‘more interesting’ applied one and ‘more boring’ academic one. There is no need to clarify which world he chose, but he added that such a sharp distinction between these two fields predominantly only exists in our heads, whereas in reality anthropology has always been somewhere in between – that is, between applicability with its professional practice and academic approach, on the other side. (It reminds us of what Kurt Lewin, one of the pioneers of social psychology, said: ‘There is nothing so practical as a good theory’.)

Hesitant Initial Moves Due to Ethical Concerns

The event in Amsterdam concluded with a panel discussion about new fields in European applied anthropology. The guests Wayne Modest (the head of curatorial department at Tropenmuseum), Rajko Muršič (professor at University of Ljubljana), Marina de Regt (assistant professor at VU University Amsterdam), Nadia Moussaid (journalist and editor at BigCity At5 TV station) and Gregor Cerinšek (researcher at Institute for Innovation and Development, University of Ljubljana) shared their opinions on the topic. The debate reached its peak when the panellists touched upon ethical questions. This has been a persistent concern in discussions about applied anthropology, which partly implies that Europe has not recovered

from the ‘post-colonial hangover’, and indicates that the first steps towards applying anthropological knowledge are hesitant. (Taking into account the past negative experiences this caution is fully valid.)

Next Stop: Italy!

Anyhow, EASA Applied Anthropology Network’s event in Amsterdam showed that the interest for applied branches of anthropology is growing in Europe, and developmental potential is – particularly among the younger generations of anthropologists – extraordinary. To encourage this atmosphere even further, the Network is already preparing a new event which will connect individuals and institutions in Europe, and stimulate them to exchange their experiences.

The next event in the emerging series of Why the World Needs Anthropologists symposiums will be held in autumn 2014 in Padua, Italy, and will focus on the visibility of applied anthropology. World-renowned speakers will explain how applied anthropologists can reach the broadest audience, how they can establish initial contact with companies, NGOs and governmental institutions, and, not least, how it is possible to share applied knowledge in academic settings.

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