

Expulsion of the Anthropological Demons from the Ivory Tower

Report on the Second International Applied Anthropology Symposium in Padua, Italy

Meta Gorup and Dan Podjed

In the beginning of December 2014 the Italian city of Padua hosted the second international symposium 'Why the world needs anthropologists', which was attended by more than 200 visitors from Europe and beyond. At the event, annually organised by the Applied Anthropology Network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in collaboration with various institutions, the speakers and the audience tried to find out how to establish cooperation between academic and applied anthropology.



Figure 1: The lively event in Padua, Italy, was attended by more than 200 visitors from different parts of Europe and beyond. (Photo credit: Rikke Ulk, Antropologerne.)

From Risky Business in Afghanistan to Open Ecosystems

The event was opened by Vanda Pellizzari Bellorini, Padua mayor's advisor, and Simone Borile, president

and director of University Campus CIELS, who welcomed the crowded auditorium at the Cultural Centre Altinate/San Gaetano in Padua city centre. The participants then embarked on a journey which took them from risky undertakings of Antonio Luigi Palmisano, Italian professor of social and economic anthropology at University of Salento, through daring business challenges of Rikke Ulk, anthropologist and CEO of Danish consultancy firm Antropologerne, to getting acquainted with open ecosystems which help improve user experience, which were introduced by Michele Visciòla, co-founder of Turin-based company Experientia.

Diverse insights into the practical work of anthropologists continued during the heated panel discussion, which was moderated by Dan Podjed, coordinator of the EASA Applied Anthropology Network. Apart from the three keynote speakers, the discussion featured Desirée Pangerc, applied anthropology lecturer at University Campus CIELS and Italian army lieutenant, and Peter Simonič, observer and initiator of political change and assistant professor at the Faculty of Arts of University of Ljubljana.

The international symposium was a result of collaboration between Slovenian, Italian, Dutch and international institutions. Besides the main organiser, the EASA Applied Anthropology Network, this year's event was organised by University Campus CIELS, University of Ljubljana, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, VU University Amsterdam, and Slovene Ethnological and Anthropological Association KULA. The symposium was sponsored by the Slovenian Research Agency.



Advocating for the Rule of Law

In addition to his successful academic career, the first speaker, Antonio Luigi Palmisano, has acted as advisor at numerous international and civil missions in Africa, Latin America and Asia. He explained that anthropologists in conflict zones can play a crucial role in mediating between government authorities and ethnic groups with their own legal systems. From 2002 to 2004, Palmisano worked in Afghanistan where he operated as an intermediary between the government and minorities, and aimed at reconciling peoples who have for decades lived in midst of armed conflicts. He considered himself as successful at his tasks, also because establishing dialogue and mutual understanding is simpler than we usually imagine it to be – however, his undertakings were frequently hindered by the “higher” aims of the capitalist system, which is supported by lawyers’ lobbies. He emphasised that anthropologists should fight against the existing system and encourage democratic and legal state in the regions where such arrangements seem to be utopic at the moment.

Anthropologists Can Make Sense of the Business World

The next speaker took the symposium in Padua to a rather different sphere. Rikke Ulk is CEO of Danish company Antropologerne, which has carried out consultancy for numerous Danish and international organisations, among others in the field of healthcare, education, technology, employability, energy and food. While transferring her anthropological knowledge and skills into business practice she learnt that ‘the world needs anthropologists because we make sense, we care, we have a vision, and we engage people’. To successfully engage people into the analyses, good communication is crucial; however, asking the right questions is of similarly vital importance. Rikke Ulk believes that companies can contribute to improving our living conditions, but only if their questions reach beyond their desire for profit – and anthropologists are the ones who can help them with asking the right questions.

Open Systems Enable Experimentation

The third speaker was Michele Visciòla from consultancy Experientia, which strives for improving user experience in the fields of technology and innovation.



Figure 2: Rikke Ulk, CEO of Danish consultancy company Antropologerne: ‘The world needs anthropologists because we make sense, we care, we have a vision, and we engage people.’ (Photo credit: EASA Applied Anthropology Network.)

Although not formally trained as an anthropologist, Visciòla fully understands the importance of anthropological approaches and ethnography in enhancing user experience. He stressed that ‘technological innovation is “simple”’. It is difficult, though, to create connections that really work in a given technological ecosystem. Our role is to create conditions which allow ecosystems to collaborate.’ In his view it is only open systems that enable experimentation and they are therefore crucial for future technological development.

Where Are the Boundaries of Autonomy?

The concluding discussion, moderated by Dan Podjed, coordinator of the EASA Applied Anthropology Network, opened a number of burning topics. The guests stressed, for example, that anthropologists are always employed by somebody, be it the state, an international mission or a multinational corporation, which in either case influences their work and the level of their autonomy. They also emphasised some of anthropologists’ weaknesses, which become particularly visible outside the academic sphere: their reactions are often slow and their answers complicated, while customers expect quick, direct and precise an-

swers. It is therefore very important to collaborate with experts from other fields who can offer fresh insights and help in adjusting anthropologists' approaches. As Rikke Ulk summarised: 'Anthropology is and should be an open ecosystem ready for inclusion and experiment'. Desirée Pangerc drew attention to the fact that anthropologists often give an impression of being inaccessible intellectuals while their crucial tasks actually consist of establishing contacts between people which can enable collaboration and mutual understanding. Peter Simonič stressed the anthropologists' key role in local contexts. They can provide valuable insights and, in doing so, help people understand their environments and encourage new initiatives for positive change.

Next Steps in Ljubljana, Slovenia

The second international symposium, 'Why the world needs anthropologists', showed that numerous European anthropologists have already left the academic ivory tower and that their numbers keep growing. European anthropology has slowly but persistently been expelling its demons from the past, which are preventing the discipline's development. It seems that anthropologists' interest for applying anthropological knowledge outside the academia is growing. The next step, however, will require that anthropology convinces others about its usefulness – and this is precisely one of the important goals of the next symposium, which will take place on 27 November

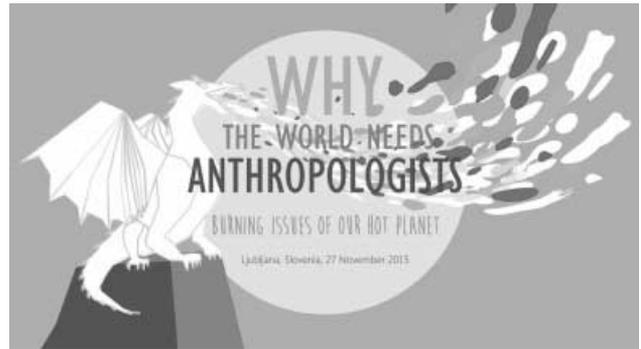


Figure 3: This year's symposium, 'Why the world needs anthropologists', will take place on 27 November in Ljubljana, Slovenia. (Graphic design: Tanja Lozej.)

2015 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Bringing together a number of world-renown anthropologists, among which Genevieve Bell and Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the symposium will address burning issues of our hot planet and the ways in which anthropologists can improve the current circumstances often caused by human recklessness.

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