THEMATIC FOCUS: HUMAN ECOLOGY AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PLACE

Introduction Fieldpaths towards an Eco-anthropology

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Arguably, anthropologists have studied the relationship of ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ for a long time and from a broad range of perspectives. The close thematic connections between anthropology and ecology reach back well beyond Ernst Haeckel’s postulate of ecology as a distinct science in the 1860s. Social historians (e.g. Brunner 1956) have noted how the ‘old European economy’ of ‘the whole house’, where ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ were regarded as closely intertwined, has been replaced in the course of industrialisation and modernisation by increasing perceptual separation and indeed juxtaposition of the two spheres. In a sense, the culmination of that movement may be seen, for example, in the progressive ousting of an integrative *Heimatkunde* – the holistic study of localities and regions – from the German school curriculum since the 1960s. At the same time, the rise of environmental concerns and pressure groups has led to a resurgence of interest in more integrative approaches (Daun and Löfgren 1971; Knötig 1972; Anderson 1973), and there is by now a plethora of sub-, multi-, cross- and other disciplinary approaches, addressing aspects of this broad theme in one way or another. A new ecological anthropology has emerged that ‘blends theoretical and empirical research with applied, policy-directed, and critical work in what Rappaport called an “engaged” anthropology’ (Kottak 1999: 23). In recent years, many anthropologists have made significant contributions to a better understanding of the interdependence of nature and culture, from James Weiner’s ‘Heideggerian anthropology’ (Weiner 2001) and Kay Milton’s ‘ecology of emotions’ (Milton 2002), to Tim Ingold’s exploration of environmental perception and skilled practice, integrating ecological approaches in anthropology and psychology and culminating in the bold claim that ‘anthropology is not ethnography’ (Ingold forthcoming).

Postulating an eco-anthropology may therefore be regarded as yet another expression of the academic obsession with disciplinary fencing (in the sense of both ritualised sword combat and the erection of barriers to protect boundaries). However, the postulate is not aiming to establish a particular, more or less innovative sub-division within anthropology, or to merge some aspects of ecology with aspects of anthropology. Instead, it could perhaps be described as un-disciplined, in the sense that it refuses to be confined by a particular disciplinary canon that compartmentalises a world deeply connected in multiple and complex ways. The postulate of an eco-anthropology is in effect a call for a different way of looking at the world. Whether ‘culture’ or ‘nature’ – or indeed both – are ideological constructs or material reality may be an interesting question that occupies academic debating chambers, but it becomes of secondary importance, compared to the question of how their individual and mutual actuality affects our life-worlds in the ecological households in which they take place.

The postulate of an eco-anthropology can be traced as part of the programme for AJEC from the very beginning. In my first editorial as editor of AJEC in 2008, I made reference to some of the horizons of anthropological knowledge outlined by one of the journal’s founding editors, Ina-Maria Greverus, in her contribution to the very first issue twenty years ago (Greverus 1990: 25–26). Greverus’s vision included ‘encouraging and assisting . . . practical action toward the goal of transforming societal structures’. While such an ‘applied anthropology’ has grown and spread since then, its canonical status continues to be at least contested. Greverus was critical of an ‘anthropocentric ecology . . . dominated by economic rationality and . . . quantitative, measurable differences’. Instead, she called for an approach that considers ‘ecological praxis not only via the horizon of material action but also via the horizon of understanding “intended meanings”’. In that 2008 editorial, I suggested that AJEC would explore this horizon further in the near future. With this aim in view, an international workshop was held at Bristol in March 2010, under the auspices of the ‘place wisdom’ working group of the *Société Internationale d’Ethnologie et de Folklore* (SIEF).

The SIEF working group, established in April 2009, comprises researchers from across Europe and beyond. Building on research at the interface of anthropology, art, archaeology, ecology, geography, literature, performance studies and philosophy, the group is concerned with understandings of place that contest conventional divisions between culture and nature – in particular,

understandings based on ecological beliefs and practices, and the traditions from which these draw inspiration. Located at the interface of ethnology and other arts and humanities fields, the research envisaged by the group involves a significant element of practice, which takes a variety of forms including audio-visual, fine art and performance.

The workshop in Bristol sought to explore the need for, and hermeneutic potential of, an eco-anthropology. This could be, in the first instance, understood as an approach to the study of culture in its ecological systemic context. However, contributors were encouraged to transcend the rather mechanistic, system theoretical perspective by critically engaging with elements of, for example, deep ecology, the philosophy of place, or traditional ecological knowledge. Participants of the workshop came from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, and this is also reflected in this issue of AJEC, which brings together revised versions of some of the contributions to the workshop with other essays on related topics.

In the first essay, Phil Bayliss and Patrick Dillon offer a critique of dominant assumptions about human cosmologies and lifestyles, and of how these influence the nature of educational systems. Their critique focuses on how the experiences of minority cultures, particularly those that are nomadic or pastoralist, challenge some of the fundamental premises of education. The authors focus on a cultural ecological framework in an attempt simultaneously to embrace both ‘majoritarian’ and ‘minoritarian’ interpretations, and in so doing acknowledge the universal, co-constitutional qualities of the way people learn through engagement with their environment.

Victoria Walters looks at the ideas and practice of the twentieth-century German artist Joseph Beuys, examining their relevance for contemporary discussions of place and human ecology in anthropology. Her focus is on the artist’s site-specific work, through which she explores how his practice was informed by a set of methodologies that saw the emotional and spiritual life of the human being and the outer world he or she engages with as profoundly linked. Walters argues that the artist’s work points to the potential for an aesthetic of fieldwork, and for communicating its results in ways that acknowledge and highlight how anthropologists shape and transform, and are in turn shaped and transformed by, the world with which they engage.

Western intellectual traditions have come to assume an opposition between evidence-based science and unverifiable religious beliefs. Taking a lead from Native American theorists, who regard religion as forming part

of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Patricia Monaghan argues that TEK exists in European contexts, too. She examines Irish folk narratives as encoding vital data for survival in their specific region, describing human difficulties that follow from ecologically inappropriate actions, or concerning connections whose significance transcends individual health to include threats to the health of the planetary system. Thus she illustrates the case for an analysis of European folktales and folk rituals as important sources of ecological knowledge.

During the twentieth century human activities have brought about massive environmental changes in Northern Finland, and especially in Sápmi, the home region of the Saami people. Helena Ruotsala discusses the devastating impact of these changes in the landscape on people's sense of home, history and memories. Her focus is on one particular example – the plans to re-build a tourism centre in the National Park of Pallas-Ylläs. The development involves local fell landscapes being put up 'for sale'. What is left when the landscape is lost, and how do people cope with their loss?

Post-communist Europe has seen a surge of interest in 'ancient' cults and the places associated with them. Rūta Muktupāvela discusses the ideologies, beliefs and practices associated with new cult places in post-Soviet Latvia, with particular reference to the popular career of the ancient site of Pokaiņi, a remote place rich in stone assemblies of uncertain origin that have been interpreted as an ancient sanctuary of global significance as a cosmological and healing centre. Pokaiņi serves as an example of the emergence and significance of similar phenomena in post-Soviet societies such as Latvia.

Shorter research reports are normally included in AJEC between the general articles and the book reviews, but on this occasion two such reports, based on presentations at the Bristol workshop, are placed at the end of the thematic section to which they directly relate. Along with empirical grounding and praxis-oriented, holistic-ecological interdisciplinarity, a cornerstone of AJEC identified in my 2008 editorial is experimental writing, 'a renewed appreciation for the literary aspects of ethnographic textualization, for rhetoric, fiction, and subjectivity', based on 'an awareness of the historical contingency of different modes of writing' (Greverus 1990: 28). Both reports in this subsection exemplify this. Jaana Kouri describes her experience of working with villagers whose local area is the focus of her doctoral research, co-creating a 'village book' as a way of reciprocating, giving something back

to the community. Liam Campbell and Iain MacKinnon, in a reflective dialogue on place and tradition in the context of economic and social policies of modernisation, raise issues of the agency and responsibility of the field researcher.

Elsewhere (Kockel 2009) I have explored whether and how European ethnology, a subject all too often still associated with romantic images of a past peasantry, might make a useful contribution to the study of contemporary issues, suggesting that – in terms of research practice and its theoretical foundations – a cultural-philosophical approach towards an applied regional science deeply grounded in the Local would be the most appropriate and useful in this context. In the age of globalisation, assertions of the Local are frequently viewed with suspicion, as reactionary relapses into a rural idyll from which modernisation is supposed to have liberated us. However, such opposition may be just as ideologically driven as the rurality discourses that it despises. As Greverus (1979) reminded us a long time ago – and it is worth reiterating here, since this history of eco-anthropological engagement tends to be forgotten – human ecological approaches had their origins not least in the urban ethnographies of the Chicago School, which can hardly be accused of having perpetrated some rural idyll.

There is nothing in an emphasis on the Local that makes it inevitably parochial or worse. Any holistic approach, almost by definition, lends itself to totalitarian politics. It is difficult if not impossible to protect research against political abuse. However, we may yet come to realise that ‘local’ and ‘parochial’ are contradictory terms, and that when we abandoned integrative, holistic *Heimatkunde* and similar approaches because they had been tainted by ideological abuse, we may have thrown away the bath tub as well as the baby and the water. Insistence on the Local may go some way towards safeguarding an eco-anthropology. The authors in this issue, coming from their different disciplinary and personal backgrounds, are traversing the anthropological field on their various paths that ultimately converge in the realisation of the inescapably local foundations of culture and nature. We may construct either sphere, or both, in the lofty spaces of the imagination, but any imagination detached from its local anchorage can soon run wild, with potentially devastating socio-cultural and ecological consequences, as not only the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century have all too clearly demonstrated.

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