Introduction

On the Usefulness of Boundary Re-work

Francisco Martínez

ABSTRACT

Boundaries influence how we live, the way we do and see things – but how? What role do boundaries play in effecting disciplinary shifts or stability in turn? And who is excluded when tracing epistemic frontiers and hard notions of relevance? This theme issue discusses the porosity of anthropology's borders and the difficulty of establishing scholarly authority. We set out to reopen the conversation about the permeability of academic boundaries, exploring different conceptual, methodological and historical reconfigurations with and within European anthropologies. We also discuss how the epistemic and institutional boundaries of our discipline are changing, affecting in turn what people can know and with whom, as well as our sense of professional strength and vulnerability.

KEYWORDS

academic politics, European anthropologies, interdisciplinarity, public anthropology, research infrastructures

What are the conditions that kill off a discipline, or ensure its continued life?, asks John Comaroff rhetorically in 'The End of Anthropology, Again: On the Future of an In/discipline' (2010: 524). He then replies that anthropology has an advantage over other disciplines: our historical indiscipline. Anthropology's constitutive looseness is here meant as a particular relationship to consistency and coherency, and also in relation to our skills in exceeding our own conditions of possibility as a discipline. We might likewise wonder if our sense of disciplinary togetherness and epistemic belonging could be really defined as 'loose' too, referring to how difficult (or easy) it is to become one of us.

Self-reflexive critiques about us as an ecumenic community, the scope of anthropological expertise, the utility of our claims, and our insistence on exceeding what can be done or treated are intrinsic to the very practice of anthropology, to the point that it has been noted that our discipline has a 'propensity for crises' (Weiner 1995: 14) and is engaged in a perpetual self-invention and deconstruction of what, where and when the field is. Yet, afraid of losing its own academic

distinctiveness, anthropology also shows defensive processes of discipline formation, hierarchisation, and boundary-work, in some cases being trapped ‘inside the bounds of its own definitions’ (Wolf 1982: 18).

Hence, it is pertinent to continue these debates and ask what is the anthropologists’ authority within and over their own discipline? How far can we bend disciplines? And what are the risks of doing so? In the last years, centrifugal forces in our discipline have only increased, and the distance between the practice of anthropology and the discipline of anthropology seems to be growing too. Here, we try to render the boundary-work of European anthropology visible, as well as some of the forms of inclusion and exclusion in the discipline and the current logic of disciplinary institutionalisation. Indeed, we are aware that a discussion about European anthropologies troubles not simply the regional borders of Europe but also the boundaries of the discipline (Eriksen 2019; Estalella and Criado 2019).

We discuss the relationship of European anthropology with some of its boundaries and edges, and also as part of world anthropologies. This idea is, for instance, conferred by Čarna Brković in her contribution to this issue, foregrounding that anthropology is itself a multiple space where different ideas of what the discipline looks like coexist. A sense of identification and enculturation has to remain, still, as well as a notion of (disciplinary) home and community. Nigel Rapport, for instance, has presented the distinct academic space of a discipline as a ‘microsocial sphere’ (2008: 71). Other colleagues, such as Noel Dyck (2008), argue that what makes a discipline distinct are its specific relations of knowledge-making, more than institutionalised structures, hierarchies and mechanisms of coercion.

Sociologist Thomas Gieryn coined the term ‘boundary-work’ (1983, 1999) to describe the discursive practices by which epistemic authorities exclude what is ‘pseudo’, ‘deviant’ and ‘amateur’ from the rightful production of scientific knowledge. Based on this, we shall also explore the possibilities for boundary re-work, extending or reconfiguring what is possible to do and to imagine. In the actual context of academic capitalism, transnational research infrastructures and accelerated transformations of scholarship, it is more relevant than ever to reconsider the way in which disciplines depend on how practitioners define their own matters of relevance and evidence, as well as the discipline’s ‘ability to account for its conditions of existence’ (Strathern 2004: 5).

In this vein, and unlike Gieryn’s boundary-work (which focused on instances in which demarcations within fields of knowledge are created

or reinforced), Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer (1989) propose to study the ways in which the existing lines of division between heterogeneous participants can be overcome. Likewise, Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2002) contribute to this debate by finding properties such as permeability or durability in academic boundaries. Other authors such as Eduardo Restrepo and Arturo Escobar (2005), more critical of the institutional relations within the academic establishment, note, however, an intensification of practices of disciplinisation and uniformisation of otherwise anthropologies. They observe, for instance, how mechanisms of training, hiring, publishing, promotion and grant-writing not only reproduce existing boundaries, but also foreclose emerging practices outside the disciplinary canon and normative centre, in some cases narrowing the possibilities for research imagination (see also Boden and Epstein 2006).

This set of articles and commentaries does not intend to directly challenge the existence of disciplinary boundaries and axes, however. The question is rather about how limits of inclusion are drawn, where and by whom, what are the possibilities to re-work them, and also the advantages and disadvantages of doing so. Boundaries are devices through which forms of difference come together, hence we could also approach boundaries as fields of tension, and as a dialogical phenomenon that carries a strong learning potential and demands inventive bridging formats. Fixed, clear-cut boundaries facilitate comprehension of what makes sense and allow disciplines to generate a supportive feeling of being at home. Nevertheless, the re-work of disciplinary boundaries might open new possibilities for intervention and investigation, allowing researchers to engage in trans-anthropological debates.

Likewise, this gesture should not mean to strive towards the unification or homogenisation of different traditions and families, but to update and reconfigure inclusive platforms and connectors, pedagogical formats and modes of creating bonds (see Brković in this issue). Indeed, when approaching European anthropology, we discover that what makes it distinct is the way a space between nations is cultivated – through specific connectors, research infrastructures, and the design of common grounds and transnational meeting platforms (Čapo 2014; F. Martínez 2019).

Several colleagues have already observed how the conditions under which ethnographies are produced and theorised have changed, noticing, for instance, the multiplication of information available, shifts in the politics of research funding, new forms of collaboration in the research process, novel ways of attachment to places, a simultaneous

multi-locality of the field, and the increasing experimental combination of dissimilar things and knowledges in academia (Collier 2013; Ferguson 2012; Holmes and Marcus 2005; Marcus et al. 2008). This is important because it points out that the sources of disciplinary changes are no longer, at least not only, coming from within anthropology. Likewise, this affects anthropology's relations with other disciplines too, and the way we are comparative and collaborative, leading to a recalibration of and within anthropology (Miller 2015).

Whether Disciplinarity

As provocatively stated by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'anthropology can teach humility and empathy, and also the ability to listen, arguably one of the scarcest resources in the rich parts of the world these days. It can even be fun' (2006: 130). He is concerned, nonetheless, about our recent loss of authority in the public realm and our limitations in reaching a public beyond academia. Another Norwegian anthropologist, Marianne Gullestad, has noted how concepts related to relationships in the field, such as 'dialogue' and 'equality', generate 'a defensive anxiety' among colleagues, who claim then 'what is left for us? What is our contribution? What is our expertise?' (2010: 915).

The blurring of boundaries might be considered by some colleagues as threatening and generating something like 'halfy anthropologies' (Abu-Lughod 1991). However, many interesting discussions in contemporary anthropology have moved out of academia and the conference room. In some cases, they have moved beyond the discipline, raising concerns about the object of study and the function of contemporary anthropology, and even its integrity as a discipline (Marcus et al. 2008). Indeed, the current edges of anthropology are appearing elsewhere, set by formerly considered informants and now partners in research – or para-ethnographers (Holmes and Marcus 2005).

George Marcus even argues that old theoretical cores have been supplanted by former peripheries (2007: 32), and refers to anthropology as a 'self-consciously marginal discipline . . . pulled by its curiosities towards its peripheries and other academic communities' (ibid.: 31). Also, on this debate, Restrepo and Escobar (2005: 100) point out that 'the space in which anthropology is practiced is fractured . . . despite increasing normalizing tendencies worldwide'.

Younger scholars foreground that not only disciplines, but traditional forms of knowledge are in crisis too (Estalella and Criado 2019;

F. Martínez 2020), producing the blurring of different classical anthropological traditions into a rather hybrid one (D. O. Martínez 2016). The re-work of disciplinary boundaries is often done through and against different anthropological traditions, in some cases even questioning the value of antecedent disciplines and legacies. As a result, anthropologists have become adept at (and perhaps also addicted to) unsettling all kinds of things, including the methodologies and boundaries of our own discipline.

The progressive interweaving of fields of knowledge is not only affecting matters of relevance, evidence and disciplinary boundaries, but is also being organised by novel temporal and scholarly configurations (Biagioli 2009). Such a growing mismatch between disciplinary arrangements and academic activities (Chandler 2009), and the permeation of disciplinary boundaries and epistemic cultures, is conditioning the contours and contents of what anthropology is, and also by whom and what for. This impels us to reconsider ethnography as ‘something other than description and cultural analysis’ (Riles 2006: 64).

New scales of research and the intensive circulation of things, people and ideas (models, standards, regulations) are producing an imperative to collaborate and new knowledge-making processes, practised with new communities of expertise and forms of research that are, in some sense, analogous to ethnography. Hence the imperative to reach across expertise boundaries and observe how informants might play an important role in producing, mediating and distributing analytical representations (Holmes and Marcus 2005).

In the social sciences, there is a new push towards more experimental collaborations as well as inventive methods, developing devices for real-time, live investigation (Back and Puwar 2012; Estalella and Criado 2018). Engaging with these discussions, we propose the gesture of boundary re-work to account for the emergence of the contemporary, to widen the range of possibilities for constructing research, and to constitute new spaces as objects for a critical inquiry into the present. Nevertheless, we can also observe that boundary re-work entails both reductions and expansions, hence it has to be taken as a critical tool, rather than a final solution to all kinds of problems.

Boundary Reconsiderations

What are the specific conditions or elements that have prevented the development of a more durable and cohesive field of European

anthropology? And do we even need a European tradition in anthropology at all? In her article, Čarna Brković discusses under which conditions European anthropology can exist today as an intellectual project. She approaches the design of academic formats as generative of anthropological knowledge and as making possible different ways of inhabiting academia. In this sense, anthropological formats and concepts should not be taken as timeless, as if they don't mature, age, mutate. Hence the importance of paying attention to how formats and concepts evolve along with us, retraining ourselves and developing designs that contribute to inclusive anthropological conversations.

The 'Anthropology Otherwise' workshop described by Čarna had a strong gathering ethos, instead of one based on divisions and subdivisions. This was an important gesture of sharing, supporting and inventing anthropological formats (even if ephemeral). However, this sense of shared epistemological concerns was difficult to transpose outside the conference setting, mostly because of the actual political economy of knowledge production.

European anthropology is a project-in-the-making, future-oriented and with a transnational ambition, foregrounds Damián Martínez in this issue. He reflects on the creation, maintenance and disruption of boundaries in the field of European anthropology by examining the emergence of European anthropology as a political project and space of critique, co-related with the activity of EASA (the European Association of Social Anthropologists). Through a historical genealogy, Damián discusses how this transnational, ecumenical institution became the hotbed of the European anthropologies, pointing out, however, that the initial boundary-work of EASA excluded colleagues from Eastern Europe, especially folklorists and ethnologists.

As a microcosm of Europe, EASA has also produced a great variety of cosmopolitan impulses, notes Damián, yet for some of those trained in *ethnology* or *Volkskunde*, it has been perceived as a tool for the expansion of the British tradition. All in all, he shows how the project of European anthropology emerged as the result of tension between the aspiration of pluralistic internationalisation and the exclusive practice of boundary-work. The result, Damián concludes, is a normative space where the discussions and disputes over its own nature are articulated through the ideal of cosmopolitanism.

We might ask, nonetheless, whether the nationality of the anthropologist is still representative of a given school or tradition, and moreover, whether the fact that schools such as the British, French

or Norwegian have been better represented in the EASA executive committee (see D. O. Martínez 2016) rather mirrors their strength in the last decades, inspiring other schools instead of suppressing them.

Still, the negotiation of disciplinary designations and histories is open and the exercise of creating and maintaining a disciplinary boundary, and how experiences came to matter academically, can be considered an object of anthropological study (e.g. Savransky 2016). Likewise, anthropological tools and concepts are themselves the subject of changes and can be used to question the evaluative machinery of our own worth as academics. This is pointed out by Ognjen Kojanić and Francisco Martínez in their articles, both challenging where and by whom knowledge about Eastern Europe is produced, and overall how particular geopolitical arguments and concepts become normative – in other words, how Western anthropologists have studied the societies of ‘the other Europe’ (see Buchowski 2004).

They find, however, a transnational reality radiating from the region. Also, those at the European periphery seem to be renewing the ethnographic practice and resignifying the conceptual and methodological repertoires traditionally provided by the centre, practising therefore a centrifugal anthropology. In his article, Ognjen pays attention to spaces and peoples that have been represented as marginal, on the limen, or even outside of the disciplinary walls. He examines the way some spaces within Europe are constructed as peripheral, and thus questions the boundary of what is considered as belonging to European anthropology.

Ognjen puts the analytical focus on how knowledge-making and its circulation throughout different scales is often felt as unidirectional and generative of ‘internal peripheries’, and claims for more comparative efforts, the transgression of area studies’ boundaries, and theorising more from the peripheries too. As liminal, and intellectually constructed from the West, Eastern Europe has never had a space of difference to which to retreat and from which to mount critiques of political liberalism and European normalisation (with its corresponding catch-up discourse), which came to structure all spheres of life in the region (see Dzenovska 2018). As a result, some societies and states are seen as more European than others, as if they would remain in an unfinished belonging (Mälksoo 2006).

Concepts are constantly made and unmade; likewise peripheries – they are subject to boundary re-work, mutations and also ageing. In this issue, Francisco Martínez proposes to rethink the place of Eastern European cities in the global academe, arguing that a strict understanding

of ‘postsocialism’ as a concept might be counterproductive to study Europeanisation and the locally produced globality. Through a theoretical and methodological boundary re-work, he explores how old concepts give rise to new ones in order to answer questions and problematisations that are not always possible to anticipate.

Boundary re-work thus means to directly engage with the established framework of value, relevance and usefulness, identifying signs of silent changes in the discipline. This gesture, on its own, might not necessarily generate new contributions to knowledge, and merely allow for an addition to existing knowledge. Hence, boundary re-work can be considered an aggregation, not necessarily a replacement or refusal of existing knowledge and disciplinary demarcations.

This explorative set of articles and Forum contributions seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on how actors shape or disrupt disciplinary limits, on how boundaries are made and remade over time, on the mechanisms to prevent the shifting of frontiers, and on their importance to produce disciplinary attachments and symbolic distinctions (Bourdieu 1995). Nonetheless, several questions still remain for further research: Who is best placed to initiate boundary shifts and crossings? In which instances could disciplinary unlearning (of our own tools, concepts, gestures and manners) be productive to retrain ourselves and get along well with epistemological multiplicity? Does anthropological training provide competencies that embrace border-crossing? And should we recommend disciplinary unlearning for students?

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