

Land Reclamations

Boundary Work as Production of Disciplinary Uniqueness

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon social anthropology over the anthropologies of the South and its neighbour discipline, European ethnology. It departs from a description of my personal professional experience during the last thirty years to discuss how the disciplinary capacity of influence (and shadowing) is linked to political decisions, the definition of what is scientific, and the instrumental use of rankings and evaluations.

KEYWORDS

Anglo-Saxon anthropology, contemporary ethnology, disciplinary hegemony, EASA, European anthropologies

The following reflections are an overview of the boundary work of social anthropology in the second half of the twentieth century, presenting critical ideas regarding the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon social anthropology. For a long time, I have perceived the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) as the colonial project of a powerful neighbour-discipline claiming and invading a new territory (Europe) after the loss of its original object of interest (the colonies). Originally, social anthropology was a discipline without significant theoretical tools for the new chosen object, the so-called complex societies. Moreover, it was a discipline that arrogantly ignored the other discipline, European ethnology, which was already researching these objects of study. This, I argue, was part of a boundary work: the empirical and theoretical attainments of European ethnology were overlooked systematically even if it had developed a tradition of research on everyday life and cultural phenomena in Europe for more than a hundred years. Therefore, the application of the concept of boundary work (Gieryn 1983) to these debates captivated me.

This position may sound too critical for some, but I talk from my professional experience in two fields that were colonised by social anthropology. When I studied *Europäische Ethnologie (Volkskunde,*



European Ethnology) in 1980s West Germany, there was a pronounced spirit of critical cultural studies focusing on the everyday, inspired by a historical view, and the search for politically engaged and empirically solid research on complex societies. German social anthropology (denominated *Ethnologie* or, then, *Völkerkunde*), however, was a neighbour-discipline with scholars who showed little interest in European societies and rather searched for the exotic.

I then went to Denmark and became involved in Life-Mode Analysis (Højrup 2003), a theory that takes inspiration from and aims to overcome Hegel, Althusser and Marx. Life-Mode Analysis systemised theoretical tools regarding everyday culture and economy in modern, complex societies and focused on the impact of statecraft on these issues. This is a theory with strong theoretical reflections. Nevertheless, it has not yet been received in social anthropology.

Some years later I started to work in Spain and entered the field of social anthropology. In Spain, I observed certain complexes of inferiority among local anthropologists, rooted in the fact that British and American social anthropology dominated debates and development of the discipline here.

This biographic experience is the background of a sceptical perception of social anthropology (also EASA) and its attempts to make Europe its object of research without taking into account and learning from empirical data and theoretical concepts worked out in the neighbour-discipline of European ethnology when the tools within social anthropology were still focused on tribal societies. I will now explain in detail some of these considerations.

1. The Influence of the International Context

As noted by Damián Martínez in his article in this issue, the fall of the Berlin Wall was crucial for a strategic reorientation of EASA, an example that also shows how the international context influences our work (Boserup 1990). If we go back one step further in the history of disciplines dedicated to the study of culture, one can observe that social anthropology as the discipline traditionally focused on the study of non-European societies experienced a crisis after the Second World War when the colonies claimed independence. In those countries, anthropologists were no longer welcome. The discipline had to reinvent itself. One of the strategies applied was to start studying the self instead of the exotic other. Nevertheless, when social anthropologists

started to carry out projects in Europe, in a way they maintained their conceptual frame. Their objects were ‘exotic’ small villages in rural Spain, the Alps and so on, before they began to study in the cities. The context of the Cold War made it easy for them to ‘colonise’ Western Europe. The Spanish anthropologist Honorio Velasco (1989: 13) stated accurately: ‘Europe and the Mediterranean start to emerge as the land of anthropological conquest’.

The Spanish case is a good example that illustrates the hegemonic influence of Anglo-Saxon social anthropology while the earlier tradition of cultural studies in Spain was widely ignored. It is significant that Julian Pitt-Rivers with his *The People of the Sierra* about the little mountain village of Grazalema published in 1954 is considered the starting point of modern anthropology in Spain. Oscar Lewis and George M. Foster are some other social anthropologists who discovered Spain and initiated this new era in Spanish anthropology.

This ‘making British’ of Spanish anthropology was reinforced by Carmelo Lisón who did his PhD in social anthropology at Oxford University. He managed to install the discipline at the University of Madrid, pointing out the scientific character of social anthropology by marginalising folklore studies – another perfect example of boundary work. Without any doubt, Anglo-Saxon anthropology became dominant in Cold War Spain even if there have been critical voices bashing its colonialism (Moreno 1975; Narotzky 2010). Like in Spain, social anthropology in most European countries played and plays a role as junior partner in the hegemonic Anglo-Saxon debate.

2. Language as a Crucial Element of Boundary Work

It should be kept in mind that since the Cold War, an era of Anglo-Saxon hegemony, the use of the English language became in many ways the chauvinist precondition for participation in scientific discourses. European ethnology, in contrast, was carried out in different national frames, or to be more precise, in different regions each with a specific language. Scandinavian and German-speaking European ethnology, for example, developed their own, yet interconnected debates, which – due to the limited expansion of the language they used – could not spread across the globe. In the hegemonic discourse it was and is expected that the academic debate is carried out in English.

This is a funny opinion in cultural studies, if one takes into account that culture deals with diversity, which is expressed in different

languages. Instead of demanding English as the only *lingua franca*, it should be supposed that anthropologists speak and interchange in several languages (in order to be able to recognise diversity from an emic perspective, the richness of different languages/cultures and to foster tolerance). Furthermore, those European ethnologists like the Scandinavian Orvar Löfgren or Jonas Frykman who published in English were rarely taken into account in social anthropology.

3. Boundary Work via Ignorance

Adam Kuper's work is a clear example of the ostracism of European ethnology and non-Anglo-Saxon anthropology by the hegemonic social anthropology in the second half of the twentieth century. His publications do not contain even minimal references related to European ethnology or Spanish anthropologists (see Kuper 1992, 1996; Kuper and Kuper 1996). Even after 1989, Kuper kept on ignoring them or disqualified Eastern European studies, confirming that 'their work had little theoretical content' (Kuper 1996: 192). As a European ethnologist, I am still amazed at the fact that Anglo-Saxon social anthropologists whose theoretical apparatus was not yet prepared to analyse modern complex societies, but instead 'had ideas about kinship, gender, ritual, classification, taboo, totemism, witchcraft, systems of exchange, patron-client relationships' (Kuper 2014) in non-European societies did not meet with more modesty and the aim to learn from each other. That they were able to exercise hegemony over another discipline traditionally dedicated to this object within a short time was a question of power and influence. This capacity of influence is materialised in the support from 'Brussels' that Kuper proudly mentions (1996: 192) and from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. On the other hand, it is linked to the rankings and evaluations coming up in the 1990s as instruments to measure scientific quality. These rankings suggest that scholars publish in journals, which are listed in rankings like Journal Citation Report and mostly publish in English, fortifying the hegemonic project.

4. Unscientific Work?

The prejudice that European ethnology is an 'armchair anthropology with a rather low theoretical profile' (Schippers 1995: 236) has

been spread in social anthropology. Depictions of this type produced an image of European ethnology as an infra-scientific discipline. The uniqueness of social anthropology was thus established through the demotion of European ethnology and especially folklore studies. Anglo-Saxon social anthropology was able to promote the myth that it was the only discipline in the field of humanities and social sciences able to work out ambitious theoretical concepts.

But is it appropriate to disqualify European ethnology in that way? If we have a look at the very beginning of the discipline in Germany, we can see that already Wilhelm H. Riehl (considered the founder of German *Volkskunde*) did not do armchair anthropology but conducted intensive empirical research and explored the areas he described – doing fieldwork as social anthropologists claim. Furthermore, he worked with a concept of Western societies that differentiated several social groups and their cultural patterns, albeit based on politically conservative ideas (Riehl 1861).

Both in a methodological and theoretical perspective, his works do not fulfil the criteria we apply today. But this early example shows that there was a discourse about these aspects of research from the beginnings of the discipline. Since then, there have been debates about how to analyse and understand cultural phenomena; of course, of different scientific quality. It should also be mentioned that in the 1970s an intensive debate on political responsibility was carried out, dealing with the role of the discipline in the Nazi era. As a consequence, a critical spirit, methodological reflection and theoretical-oriented research increased. And still the question about folklore remains. It is the field that was most disqualified as unscientific. But is it less scientific than studies about rituals, taboo, totemism or witchcraft? If one has a further look at current research on folklore, it can be observed that one of its main fields is narratology and oral communication. For instance, research presented by scholars like Albrecht Lehmann (2007) regarding the analysis of consciousness shows the high level of reflection that has been achieved in this field.

Conclusion

As noted by several contributors to this theme issue, in recent years there have been several attempts to build bridges across and use EASA as a transnational platform connecting different anthropologies in a horizontal and multi-centred way. It is to be hoped that the new generation of anthropologists will be able to take more profit from the diverse

land reclamations in different fields of the humanities and social sciences than the generation before. The articles in this issue show that there are new endeavours towards opening the field. If this is the case, it would be desirable to carry out a plural debate on the criteria for what is scientific in social anthropology, dealing for example with the question of whether it is the inductive or the deductive procedure that brings our discipline ahead, the characteristics of theoretical concepts and so on. An open epistemological debate on the principles of our research will contribute to limiting any hegemonic attempts.

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