Problematising Boundaries and 'Hierarchies of Knowledge' within European Anthropologies

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ABSTRACT

Is European anthropology the product of a colonialist plot to gain intellectual hegemony? Was the epistemic posture of its main representatives in the past one of crypto-imperialism aimed at – and based upon – power, in the attempt to climb up the 'hierarchy of knowledge' and subjugate from its peak minor traditions of study? How can we think about the genealogy of Euro-anthropology (and its future progress) without necessarily capitulating to these narratives of powerism and to the grip of the radical post-colonial discourse, which has been growing mainstream of late? This piece seeks to briefly but piercingly address these pressing issues, while at the same time proposing a few viable routes around the resulting methodological *impasses*. It also represents the prolegomena to a longer and more substantial critique, which will be published later.

KEYWORDS

cultural hegemony, disciplinary canons, Euro-anthropologies, post-colonialism, powerism

In this Forum contribution, I reflect upon some analyses and observations offered in several of the contributions to the themed section 'Boundary Re-works in European Anthropology'. I have read with much interest the different articles and commentaries included in this issue,¹ with their valuable insights and reflections on peripheries, hierarchies, discipline, disciplines and interdisciplinarity, all wrapped up in the excellent introduction by Francisco Martínez.² One of the *leitmotifs* underlying several of the contributions in this issue is that one factor seems to have influenced and actually shaped the debates on the history of anthropology in general and that of European anthropology in particular more than others: power, and of a specific kind, more precisely intellectually colonial (and even colonialist) power and its main epistemological result, a hierarchy of knowledge. I think there are problems with this discourse.

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We shall gloss over unfortunate formulations like 'cultural imperialism of Anglo-Saxon anthropologists', which appears in one of the articles and is also echoed in another piece, following a critique developed in a review of the first conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (Vale de Almeida 1991). Such criticism rests implicitly on the concepts of cultural appropriation and acculturation, which are themselves rather problematic, and that following Marshall Sahlins we might consider today discredited (see, *inter alia*, Sahlins 1993, 2000a, 2000b). Thus the ungenerous attribution to 'Anglo-Saxon' anthropologists of a will to intellectually subjugate their colleagues from the peripheries. This attribution, or rather accusation, is particularly reprehensible, in my opinion, insofar as it seems to be aimed especially at deceased ones, who cannot any longer defend themselves from the blame of being 'cultural imperialists'.³

These formulations and claims also underlie the argument of alleged 'unidirectional flows of knowledge' from 'centres' to 'peripheries' in European anthropology. This argument is easy to disprove (it is sufficient to look at the list of references in whichever article of this issue). In some cases, we might see that there is today more flowing from the peripheries to the centre than the other way around, although this also depends on what we mean by 'centres' and 'peripheries'. After all, there are also centres of the peripheries, peripheries of the centres, and peripheries of peripheries, making generalisations problematic.

In any case, books and articles in European anthropology are filled with references to less-known traditions of studies in less-known languages from smaller countries, and at any rate it is mostly scholars from the peripheries that migrate towards the centres, bringing along their own heritages and wisdoms and languages, whereas scholars from the centres tend to remain where they are (though there are exceptions to the trend, of course). As observed by Thomas H. Erikson (2019), some of the apparently peripheral conditions can be a blessing in disguise (see also Martínez 2019b). True, in this way centres are also reinforced, but the case can be made that stronger centres also make for stronger peripheries, and anyway this also depends on the prestige associated with working in the centres, a symbolic capital particularly attractive to scholars from the peripheries in search of recognition. The institutional framework should also not be overlooked: there is an evident 'brain drain' characterising academic and scientific migration patterns in the EU, but this is a big topic that

cannot be tackled here. At any rate, the knowledge produced by the many representatives of the peripheries in the centres is, so to say, creolised and much more hybrid, plural and pluralist than some of us are willing to admit.

Many of the previously mentioned arguments are not new, and some of them are in fact addressed in some of the articles in this themed section. The introductory article of this issue intelligently discusses the many shortcomings of the current state of affairs in European anthropology. For instance, its being fractured, blurred, hybrid, unsettling and unsettled. This unsettledness is evidently one of the current features, and in a manner of speaking an exciting one to look at. However, we should be careful in considering it the only one – or the most explicatory one for that matter. Over the last 150 years a vast body of work, which substantiates and materialises the idea of ‘knowledge production’, has been churned out in the cohorts of anthropology and European anthropology. Since I consider ‘presentism’ one of the sins of postmodernism, the reader will excuse my emphasising that all progression cannot but proceed from the past. We sit on the shoulders of our disciplinary ancestors and predecessors as much as we struggle to run forward and perhaps away from them. The different ethnological and anthropological traditions that existed or exist are not necessarily contested and problematic. Their boundaries are not necessarily blurred or unsettled. That aforementioned body of work is there to constantly remind us that stratification and continuity can be as powerful and momentous as transformations and ruptures, but also to encourage us to try and make an intelligent work of boundaries, not abolish boundary-making (which sounds more or less like trying to abolish bad weather).

Disciplinary, methodological, epistemological, geographical and linguistic boundaries are inevitable. Their effects can be discussed of course, mitigated maybe, but yet are inevitable. In my view, no fruitful discussion can happen without accepting the inevitability and universality of inclusion/exclusion patterns in all spheres of social life. The evidence for such inevitability and universality is in fact overwhelming: boundary-making is a profoundly embodied and functional experiential dimension that we perform in all fields of human action as individuals and groups. Choices must therefore always, in any case (and in any discipline, and language), be made. Refuting this is but an exercise in utopian thinking that would blind and paralyse our critical and analytical endeavour. We should instead work to imagine ways to make such patterns and boundaries better and more just, not

hard-headedly fighting against them in the manner of Don Quixote, engaging in impossible tasks in impossible ways on the basis of impossible assumptions. Such work would contribute to make our discipline stronger and better-defined.

This is of course not an argument against multi-disciplinarity or methodological experimentation, for in order to have multiple methods and disciplines and make them interact with one another, one must have methods and disciplines first. This work starts with the recognition of the importance of certain traditions over 'others' – which does not, however, entail the unrecognition of the 'others'. It is an easy argument to say that certain geographical or national traditions have been disadvantaged. This is most definitely true, but it is also a rather facile historical observation. Less easy is to find an equivalent of, say, James Frazer, Bronisław Malinowski or Claude Lévi-Strauss in the peripheral traditions, from, say, Southern, Eastern or Southern-Eastern Europe. Cultural hegemony and intellectual colonialism will be evoked, systems and dispositifs of power mobilised, and yet we are still waiting to be presented with the various Godots. Consequentially, since the loot has not been retrieved and the body not recovered, the main suspects have been found guilty of the worst moral crime: having been born in countries with a colonial past and therefore engaging, knowingly or not, in nothing less than 'cultural imperialism', as has been said. *Ergo* the rhetorical question: was, say, Michel Foucault a 'cultural imperialist' because of being born French?

It is perhaps my cultural provincialism that prevents me from knowing about the equivalents of *The Golden Bough* or *Argonauts of Western Pacific* being published elsewhere than in England, during the green days of modern social anthropology. I would truly love to be disproven, but in a convincing way, and not by means of a self-reinforcing hypothesis gravitating around a circular argument: proof of cultural hegemony is the lack or silencing of alternative traditions and the lack or silencing of alternative traditions is proof of cultural hegemony. In truth, I do not want to be *told* about 'cultural imperialism' of some national disciplinary traditions. I want to be *convinced* by being *shown* who has contributed more and better than, say, James Frazer, Bronisław Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Margaret Mead and Mary Douglas to social anthropology, who has contributed more and better than, say, Hermann Bausinger, Jeremy Boissevain, Ina-Maria Greverus and Robert Hertz to European anthropology (the latter were not, *soit dit en passant*, 'Anglo-Saxon imperialists', and not even British for that matter). If these hidden and neglected major

scholars and traditions did/do exist, I would be delighted to admit my supreme ignorance and hang my head in shame. If not, we must learn to live with that, while at the same time insisting that if on the one hand all local or national anthropological traditions deserve equal respect, they cannot be considered and in fact are not equally relevant or impactful in the history of the discipline, whatever the historical reasons for this.

The awareness of the diversity of our disciplinary traditions does not necessarily imply a horizontal field or community of practitioners, as institutional and academic hierarchies exist not only between, but also within countries, as Chris Gregory (2015) reminds us. Hence the problem of horizontality, for the recognition of a greater historical significance establishes a hierarchy. Now, a different position in the hierarchy of knowledge does not necessarily mean an undeserved position in the hierarchy of knowledge. The paradigm of horizontality is therefore mobilised as the definitive one, and as such explicitly called upon in more than one of the articles in the present issue. The horizontality paradigm should therefore be able to prove why and how a different canon for the discipline could be established, or even why not having a canon altogether (i.e. the ultimate horizontality) would be preferable. And here comes yet another unresolved problem, which will be raised time and again in the longer continuation and development of this piece, where also the problem of disciplinary canons will be discussed.

It is indeed difficult to think of a less 'horizontal' academic environment than the European one, with all the tensions and differences and unbalances that vein and traverse it. We might want to think of the geo-symbolic, geographical, geopolitical, academic and historical pairs that populate the articles of this issue: North/South, East/West, post-socialist/non-socialist, small country/big country, small event/big conference, centre/periphery, and all the possible graduations and intersections between the different denominators of said binaries, some of which are indeed convincingly described and discussed in these articles. This is precisely why I claim that simplistic dichotomies like colonisers/colonised crumble to dust not only by refining arguments and augmenting complexity, but also, and especially, when closer scrutiny is applied: Franz Boas was a German in America, Bronisław Malinowski a Pole (born Austro-Hungarian) in England, Claude Lévi-Strauss a Belgian Jew in France (a victim of Vichy's racial laws, and a refugee during the war, before becoming the anthropologist *par excellence*), and Edward Said a Palestinian American

who lived and worked his entire life in some of the most important Western universities. Who are the intellectual colonisers and who the colonised here? And what about the paradigmatic example of Germany, historically far from representing the ideal-type of the colonial nation in the age of colonies, but turning aggressively imperialist during Nazism and WWII and therefore being today associated with the colonialist gang?

As is also well pointed out in one of the articles and known to those who have worked somewhere in a German-speaking setting, anthropology and ethnology made in Germany have traditionally developed a set of specific and original approaches, which have partly fed on non-German scholarship, but partly stemmed from within it, remaining relatively rather insular. In fact, learning German and citing its extremely vast and rich literature has remained an exercise that most non-German-speaking anthropologists have traditionally been reluctant to undertake. None of these approaches, it can easily be said, has become 'hegemonic' or 'canonical' outside of Germany – although the huge influence of, say, Wilhelm Mannhardt on James Frazer, Johann Gottfried Herder on Franz Boas, and Boas on US-American cultural anthropology can never be stressed enough. This partial epistemological insularity is well known to those who desire to be considered for tenure in Germany. Brković, in this issue, notes that 'one needs to be very visible in the German-language conversations in socio-cultural anthropology, in addition to having "international experience" to be considered for a permanent position'. The same can be said about the kin-disciplines *Europäische Ethnologie* and *Volkskunde*.

Two lessons can be learnt from the example of Germany. (1) Some national traditions do not seek to become 'canonical' (or 'hegemonic'), climbing up the European hierarchy of knowledge. They seem to prefer to run on parallel tracks, maintaining a dialogue with both national and international *milieux* without losing sight – and actually taking pride in – their specificities. (2) Nonetheless, nobody would dare to consider anthropology in the German-speaking sphere as 'peripheral' (a brief glimpse at the number of anthropologists and folklorists currently working in German-speaking countries would suffice to immediately silence possible objections). And yet the same kind of considerations that in the case of Germany show the strengths of their national tradition (a partial scientific insularity, a certain academic protectionism, the non-dismissal of the national language, and a partial resistance to passively accepting the rule of the 'international

standards') would be used, within the radical post-colonial discourse, as evidence of 'cultural subalternity'.

The example of the German-speaking countries is indeed relevant because it shows how anthropologies are shaped by their national contexts and the particular trajectories of certain schools of thought and methodological currents. As observed by Martínez, 'Our ideas, collaborations and trajectories might be transnational and interdisciplinary, but our practices do not necessarily appear as post-national, post-ethnic or post-tradition' (2019a: 128); maybe, my answer would be, it is because they are not.

There are indeed other approaches and proposals for articulating and outlining the boundaries of a disciplinary tradition that is most definitely still in the making, as rightly noted by Martínez in the introduction to this issue. For instance, Evthymios Papataxiarchis (2015) proclaims himself 'in favour of a European union of anthropological localities', encouraging a disciplinary territorialisation that makes for a strong argument in a politically and linguistically fragmented sub-continent such as ours. Some openly claim that the discipline is in crisis (Estalella and Criado 2019, and many others in fact). While I do recognise the appeal of the former proposal, I am very sceptical of the latter. Federations might not have necessarily been successful in contemporary Europe, but a sense of coherency, relevance and legacy is important in any discipline. And yet the flaw, in my opinion, lies elsewhere, namely in an argument, which is put forward in most of the articles in this issue and in some of the other papers previously cited, lamenting the 'lack of a (shared) history of anthropology in Europe'. I would disagree on this, too. Firstly, because the history of anthropology *in* Europe also forms a very substantial part of the history of the discipline in general: Fredrik Barth, Mary Douglas, James Frazer and Claude Lévi-Strauss, say, belong to the history of anthropology as much as and actually more than to the history of European anthropology. Similarly, when it comes to the anthropology *of* Europe, the relevance of figures like Ina-Maria Greverus, Robert Hertz, Ernesto de Martino and Hermann Bausinger can hardly be underestimated. There seems indeed to be, in my opinion, a solid axis of foundational figures and works in the discipline, and not all of them wrote in English or were 'Anglo-Saxon imperialists' – far from it.

European anthropology might not be about trying to discover some exceptional or unique European cultural feature, let alone any 'essence' of being European, which is something we willingly leave to

the philosophers. It is rather about trying to understand socio-cultural and historical constellations in their complexity as they emerged in Europe, without trivialising them or reducing them to the concurrent functioning of a few portmanteaux concepts. In this respect, European anthropology also has the histori(ographi)cal responsibility of accounting for and recording the many relative, contextual and specific cultural and social configurations that have taken shape in this troubled subcontinent of ours.

This could be done, I maintain, by uniting forces in the critical multidisciplinary fashion that Regina Bendix calls for in her contribution to this Forum. Joining forces with both the kin and closer disciplines (sociology, political science and folkloristics) as well as with older and more stratified ones (history and philosophy) is an effort worth taking – if not realisable at least conceivable – towards a multidisciplinary and holistic science of the European modes of existence that have manifested themselves diachronically. This might be perhaps less an argument for European anthropology as we know it and more one for a 'Federation of Anthropologies of European Cultures', which would also benefit from the distinction of their traditions into currents and canons – why not? Respect, understanding, study, consideration and acknowledgement of/for these different traditions and currents and canons should be the necessary first step towards this aim.

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Notes

1. I like to think of this commentary as a tentative critique de la critique, while I will leave it to a future, more substantial paper to develop many of the arguments that will be evoked here. I would like to thank Francisco Martínez for having invited me to write this commentary and for having commented upon it.
2. Martínez (2019a) has indeed shown an exceptional eagerness in reflecting upon/with/in/about European anthropology (and by synecdoche, I dare to say, about Europe).
3. I will leave it to my future *réprise* to articulate the intellectual and ideological bases of such formulations and claims.

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