Coincidences as connections: “Reading across” disciplines while “reading from” anthropology

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What makes our projects “anthropological”? What is that anthropological twist that we bring and what does it add to any given empirical or substantive field? These are the key questions that the editors of *Focaal* asked me to consider; intrinsically compelling, they hooked me into adding my own contribution to this Forum topic. The questions intrigue me because I see myself both as a keen advocate of certain ways of doing interdisciplinarity, and as deeply grounded in the history, practice, and thinking of my own discipline of anthropology. I start my reflection from the interdisciplinary end, via the theme of serendipity; somehow, these are linked.

I begin with coincidences, which have been surprising me with their frequency in recent years, and which take the following readerly form: reflecting on some issue—maybe even daydreaming—I open a book, often at random, and my eyes fall on a passage that somehow speaks precisely to the theme I have been turning over in my mind. Now, I am not particularly inclined toward magical or mystical explanations, so I have found this repeated experience—of books opening themselves up to me and guiding me toward novel insights and new connections—uncanny.

What can this be about? Partly, I think, it is a matter of the mastery that comes with age and experience; I have been “doing” anthropology since my student days at Macalester College in 1973. Between teaching, assessing student work, reading colleagues’ drafts, editing, peer review-

ing, and reading for pleasure, for my own research and for my general anthropological knowledge, I seem to read reams and reams of anthropology of one sort or another. As a result, I have by now a sense of the lay of the anthropological land, and perhaps with this “map” it is easier to identify the relevance to my concerns of seemingly irrelevant debates or of supposedly alien subject matters, and to perceive connections between disparate domains, in a manner that is as much intuitive as analytical.

There is also the fact that, in the last few years, I have ventured outward from this anthropological landscape: both in my research and in my life outside the academy. The territory on which I roam is larger, but as a meaning-making creature, I seek to find—to make—connections with what I already know, and in some sense, to read new material anthropologically. For my research on the League of Nations, I have been reading the work of historians, critical legal scholars, political philosophers, and international relations theorists, but also novelists and biographers. Outside the academy, I have become very involved over the past two years in a choir and in the past few months, a theatre production: activities organized through Théâtre Spirale, an alternative theater in Geneva, where I live much of the time. On the one hand, these creative activities have prompted me to familiarize myself with the works that we are re-interpreting and performing—Angela Carter’s feminist rewritings of European fairy tales in

The Bloody Chamber; Franca Rame's feminist reinterpretation of Medea in her and Dario Fo's *Tutta Casa, Letto e Chiesa* (English translation: *Female Parts*); and Ariel Ramirez's *La Misa Criolla*, a choral mass composed in the early 1960s, inspired by liberation theology and Latin American popular tunes. Reading these short stories and dramatic monologues, and listening to, memorizing and singing this choral work, reinforce in my mind the power of other languages for describing, illuminating, and challenging the world. On the other hand, my engagements with song and theater have led me to reflect on links between the aims and processes of these creative projects and my feminist and anthropological investigations.

Here is an example of what I mean by uncanny connections between texts. This summer, I began reading *Rule of Experts* by the political scientist Timothy Mitchell (2002)—a book that many in anthropological circles have been talking about and citing with enthusiasm. The book interests me as a study of modernization as carried out in one country, in the context of one project (planning for and building the Aswan Dam in Egypt). I am fascinated not only with the subject but with Mitchell's writerly decisions. This is due not least to my current research, as I am constantly thinking about how to tell a historically related story: a story of the creation and everyday working practices of a newly created international organization, the League of Nations, through looking at one of its administrative units, the Minorities Section, engaged in "supervision" of state/minority relations in the post-Ottoman southern Balkans. *Rule of Experts* interests me, moreover, for its innovative conceptualization and unconventional analytical structure, informed by an awareness of other disciplinary conversations and trans-disciplinary debates, including the rethinking of the dynamic social relations between humans, non-humans, and objects.

Two chapters into *Rule of Experts*, after the wonderful chapter, "Can the Mosquito Speak?" I decide to start reading a novel by Anne Michaels. I bought it a few months previously because I

had found the author's first book, *Fugitive Pieces*, so haunting. Knowing nothing of the book's subject, I open *The Winter Vault*, to find a scene of devastation: the dismantling of a monumental Pharaonic Temple at Abu Simbel in southern Egypt, and the daunting task of lifting it, block by block, to higher ground before the waters of the newly created Lake Nasser swelled around it, submerged it, and destroyed it. On the third page, Michaels fast-forwards to the scene, four-and-a-half years later, when the British engineer stands with "the Ministers of Culture, the fifty ambassadors, his fellow engineers and seventeen hundred laborers to gape at their achievement" (2009: 5). The novel tells the story of the diverse preparations—unprecedented feats of civil planning as well as of engineering, involving the movement of whole populations—before the Nile valley is flooded. Later, she adds a second story that echoes the first: of the damming of the St. Lawrence Seaway and the relocation of entire towns, houses fork-lifted one by one to higher ground. She describes the crowds of displaced inhabitants watching as the floodgates open, the water slowly swirls in and their houses, Main Streets, churches, and cemeteries are submerged. Finishing this novel, I start another: *Housekeeping*, by Marilynne Robinson (1980), bought on the strength of a bookseller's enthusiastic recommendation. Early in this novel, too, set in a small town in the American northwest, I read about the annual springtime flooding of the lake: the predictable arrival of cold muddy waters filling cellars, climbing cellar stairs into sitting rooms, soaking rugs, and seeping into sofas while residents take refuge upstairs. Like Mitchell's mosquitoes, all the hardier after the Aswan Dam created new spots of stagnant water in which to breed, the waters mark nature's evasion—might we say, subversion?—of human attempts at control.

My story of novels speaking to socio-historical-political analysis is meant to signal a way of "reading across" disciplines and domains that I have always done naturally—simply because I am an intellectually greedy person of widely varying passions, who arrived to the study of anthro-

pology by means of multiple detours through literature, music, history, philosophy, and religion. Amazingly, when I joined University of Sussex faculty in 1991, I discovered that this way of reading—in my case, a rather haphazard means to indulge my curiosity about the insights that different sorts of writers might bring to the "same" topic—echoed closely the Sussex curricular structure and its pedagogic philosophy. Undergraduates studied two courses per term: one in their chosen discipline and a second "school contextual course" that explored a specific theme through a range of texts from a variety of disciplines.

In my interdisciplinary School of Cultural and Community Studies—disciplinary departments did not, at that time, exist at Sussex, and each faculty member was administratively and physically located in an interdisciplinary school—first-year students launched their university career with a fall course in "Critical Readings." It was meant to introduce them to the practice of interdisciplinarity as well as of reading critically. I was assigned to teach an option on this course, and decided to focus on death. In seminar groups of ten to twelve students, we read a book per week—by Philippe Ariès, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, Susan Sontag, Jessica Mitford, Primo Levi, Sister Helen Prejean, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, among others. I asked the students to think about the diverse ways that our writers approached and wrote about the "same" subject. They kept a "death journal" for reflections on their readings, and I encouraged them to make connections across readings, and between readings and their own life experiences. Not surprisingly, the course attracted those who had some personal reason to explore the topic, and this often emerged in seminar discussions or, with the shyer students, in the journals. I taught the course over a number of years; rather than morbid, most students found it liberating and the issues it raised vast. More than a few confessed to me, at the end of the term, that they had been so stimulated by the readings and cross-readings that they wished they could "major in death."

Anthropological encounters and the messiness of the actual

Writing of "second projects" among mid-career anthropologists, George Marcus identifies two distinctive elements: first, they arise out of "undisguised passion, identification or some clear personal connection" rather than a given repertoire of study within a disciplinary research program. Second, "these projects, while familiarly beginning with ethnographic foci conceived within the site-specific *mise-en-scène* of traditional anthropological research, demand elaboration and expansion by ethnographic means into other realms and literal places" (Marcus 1998: 239–40). My League of Nations research began with an ethnographic conundrum. I had carried out fieldwork in the mid-1980s in the northern Greek town of Sohos (Cowan 1990), whose inhabitants, while fiercely proclaiming their Greekness, remained attached to a range of everyday practices—joking, nicknaming, storytelling, place-naming, some forms of song and dance—expressed in or conceptually associated with Bulgarian (*Vulgarika*, but "not the real *Vulgarika*", according to them) and Turkish (Cowan 1997). In the context of a highly nationalistic public domain, Sohoians' native language had long been a source of stigma and suspicion. Sohoians are, of course, a specific case within the larger category of the so-called Slavic speakers who live in the Macedonian region. Since the early twentieth century struggle for control of Macedonian territory by armed groups supporting competing national projects, the complicated position of such "ambiguous" persons within narratives of national identity has given rise to trauma and silences, accommodations and new identifications. In the 1940s and again, since the late 1980s, it has played a role in struggles for recognition and minority rights.

The confrontation of a consolidating Greek national hegemony with local traditions, class distinctions and multilingual practices, as well as the specific histories of engagements of persons from each community with the wider world (for instance, in patterns of labor migration),

has produced multiple Macedonian subjectivities among the Slavic-speakers. Returning to these issues in the mid-1990s, a decade after my first fieldwork, I knew that these processes of subjectification had to be understood historically. As an anthropologist, I tried to grasp these by starting locally, in terms of the historical specificities of Sohos. Very quickly, I bumped up against the impasses of nationalist histories and the silences they produce around inconvenient facts. Sohoians had consistently stressed to me that they had always been Greek, their Slavic language notwithstanding. This was not in itself implausible, because such Greekness would have been grounded in religious affiliation: attachment to the Ecumenical Patriarchate Orthodox Church, Greek-dominated by the late nineteenth century. But it was too neat: surely a large town like Sohos, with a majority *Vulgarika*-speaking population, would have been hotly contested by Bulgarian, Greek, and possibly other nationalist bands in the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Macedonian Struggle. When pressed, Sohoians usually admitted that “a few families” had “turned Bulgarian” but these had “departed.” Names of the departed and dates of departure were left vague.

When I consulted historical accounts of the town and region written by Greek historians, both professional and amateur, I found no mention of the existence of “Bulgarians” (those who supported the Bulgarian Exarchate church or Bulgarian national side) in Sohos or of any departures. A conversation in the spring of 1996 with a young Greek historian friend of mine proved a turning point. He smiled, recognizing my problem, and then suggested that I might look in the League of Nations Archives in Geneva for traces of such persons. Some might have opted, he explained, to emigrate to Bulgaria and take Bulgarian citizenship in the early 1920s, under the auspices of the Greco-Bulgarian Voluntary and Reciprocal Emigration (Cowan 2008; Ladas 1932).

A month later, I visited the League of Nations Archives. Eventually, I did find a record noting sixteen household applications for emigration from Sohos in the Greco-Bulgarian em-

igration files—but within the first few days, I could see that the archives held a bigger story. Dossiers filed under the rubric “Bulgarian minorities” bulged with many sorts of documents. There were debates about the “racial nationality” of the “Bulgarian minorities,” about what their language “really” was, unsolicited reports by British military and civilian charity workers on the conditions in refugee camps across the Bulgarian border, petitions and the memoranda they generated, discussions on bureaucratic procedure in relation to petitions.

These bundles of fragile papers testified to an intense and long-standing preoccupation on the part of a Western European elite with “subject nationalities” in the Ottoman and Hapsburg empires. Liberal Europeans had long encouraged these populations to think of themselves as nations, to revolt against their imperial masters and to aspire to their own national states. But following World War I, the newly constituted “international community” belatedly realized that the nationality principle was an impossible dream. The map of the “New Europe” drawn up at Versailles may have given 60–75 million people “their own” national state, but it left 25 million in somebody else’s. The Allies devised a set of minorities treaties, guaranteeing equal civil and political rights for members of “racial, religious and linguistic minorities,” and certain special rights, which fifteen countries, initially, were compelled to sign as the price of international recognition. The League of Nations was charged to “supervise” states in their fulfillment of those treaties (Cowan 2007a).

Examined through anthropological eyes, the boxes of bureaucratic files—unearthed at reader’s request from storage vaults in the bowels of the Palais des Nations and transported on trolleys to the Archives Reading Room—are buried treasure. These files are a repository of multiple conversations, contestations, and regulatory efforts around the themes of nationality and nation, race and minority, generated in a critical moment of transition from a world of empires to one of nation-states. After a week or two of browsing through the boxes, I reformulated my research questions. In a post-World War I con-

text in which post-Ottoman national states in the southern Balkans had been compelled to define, regulate, and manage their internal diversity according to liberal principles of equality, how did the newly institutionalized international body participate and intervene in this process? The international engagement with the minority state's treatment of its "minorities" occurred through the League's "supervision" of the minorities treaties. I decided to investigate this engagement by focusing on the activities of the Minorities Section of the League Secretariat, which was responsible for the everyday work of minority supervision.

Embarking on the study of an interwar international institution, I was straying onto the terrain of historians (especially diplomatic and legal historians), international relations scholars, and critical legal scholars. "What's anthropological about my work" became clearer to me as I began to talk about my research with friends and new acquaintances from these disciplines. "Are you researching the minorities, or the states?" a young historian asked me. Others asked if I was researching "just Bulgarian minorities" or "the whole League minority system". At a recent conference on anthropological approaches to justice, a fellow anthropologist challenged me more robustly: shouldn't I leave historical topics to the historians, who are much better trained than an anthropologist? And, more than once, I was pressed to explain why I was spending (read: wasting) my time researching one of the biggest failures of the twentieth century. Although my answers were often inarticulate, the questions were useful: they forced me to consider whether there was any added value whatsoever in my entry, as anthropologist, into domains so thoroughly mastered by those from other disciplines.

Through these questions, I also became more conscious of the implicitly anthropological nature of the project. Rather than studying one or another of these social groups, categories, or institutions, I was exploring encounters that occurred in the context of Minorities Section activities. Letters, memoranda, minutes, and reports were themselves the media—and

material evidence—of encounters between League officials, state diplomatic corps, minorities, and their spokespersons and a residual category of self-proclaimed experts, transnational and internationalist organizations and generally "concerned world citizens." Some encounters were face-to-face, but many unfolded by means of paper. In either case, more often than not they involved a Babel of codes and languages. Yet the League of Nations remained a site where language was policed: where the language of a petition might be deemed too "violent" to merit a response (Cowan 2003).

At the center of many encounters was a material object: a letter or, in League parlance, a petition. Although inscribed by human hands, I came to see the petition as having a kind of agency of its own. The petition made claims and articulated demands; it instigated encounters between strangers. It generated reactions, readings, and commentaries. It traveled—not only from the petitioner's home (in Sofia or Chicago) to Geneva, but often to other sites as well. The petition appeared in European newspapers; it was cited in political speeches; it was passed—by hand, by post—to international organizations and to immigrant compatriots in the North American diaspora. It had a career.

The League minority petition procedure created, in Bourdieu's terms, a novel political field with multiple actors of varying provenance, differently positioned, with widely differing—indeed, frequently antithetical—aims. I wanted to know: How did each actor use the procedure for her or his purposes?

I was reminded of the anthropological character of my framing when I presented a paper to my colleagues in the Sussex International Relations Department seminar a few years ago. Several of the more senior faculty reacted with impatience to my preoccupation with negotiations around petitions within the Secretariat. They scolded me for failing to talk about capitalist forces and imperialist structures of power, as if it were these big processes that determined the fate of minorities and new states. As I learned at the post-seminar drinks in the bar, however, the graduate students and some younger faculty

had reacted rather differently. They were fascinated by my focus on micro-practices in an international institution, and with a project grounded in the empirical evidence of archival files, rather than in an argument based on theories of global capitalist transformation. This was a key moment for me in realizing the extent to which anthropologists remain empirically grounded—in the best sense. My League research has made me even more convinced that it is in attending to what actually happens (variably interpreted though this may be), rather than relying on abstract models of social processes, that anthropological work adds value: the messiness of the actual offering a correction to overly theoretical and often ungrounded explanations.

Whereas any social scientist would probably notice the intriguingly Foucauldian language of surveillance adopted in the technical terms of the supervisory framework, anthropologists are inclined to temper Foucauldian over-totalization and distorting reliance on discourse by paying attention to agency and meaning. In reading through these archival documents, I have tried imaginatively to reconstruct the micro-practices through which meanings of terms like minority, nationality, nation, race, protection, and rights were forged as petitioners' claims were addressed, dismissed, or passed along sideways to other bureaucrats or state agents.

An anthropologist brings, as well, an ear for language, metaphor, and codes. My first analysis of Minorities Section practice on petitions was prompted by noticing how often section officials marked them with red pencil, underlining phrases that they believed constituted "violent" language and that therefore failed to meet the "conditions of receivability" for petitions (Cowan 2003). An anthropologist is also alert to nuances of negotiation and contestation, within a conviction of the importance of the minutiae of individual cases. Looking at many specific instances of petitions, and ascertaining patterns, generated surprises. It caused me to return, for instance, to the question of "failure": the very starting point of most studies of the League of Nations. It prompted me to ask: failure at what? Failure for whom? (Cowan 2007b).

The evaluation that the League of Nations had "failed" was not altogether wrong, but it was much too crude; it obscured insights and foreclosed interesting questions.

I finish by noting the direction of my engagement—outward—as I have explored a topic on somebody else's turf; appropriating that topic for myself (though also reshaping it), I have, at the same time, expanded my own and my discipline's turf. (Anthropology is unquestionably an imperializing discipline.) In the first part of this article, I argued for "reading across" texts in order to grasp a topic from many angles, and I have continued to do this in my study of the League of Nations minority treaty supervision. But I am also consciously "reading from" a distinctively anthropological base: I read those legal, political, and bureaucratic texts through the prism of anthropological ways of seeing, and query them through anthropological pre-occupations.

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