A Debate on Ethnographic Determination: Lisbon EASA 2020

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The Debate’s Conjuncture
An Introduction

Abstract: The present collection of papers reflects a forum debate entitled ‘Doubt and Determination’ that took place at the Lisbon EASA2020 conference. The original question that set off our debate concerned the nature of the ethnographic gesture – that is, the decision to engage intensively with a particular form of life in order to situate it within a more common world. We distinguished two analytical moments in the ethnographic gesture (‘going out there’ and ‘returning’) and how they combined two contradictory dispositions: (i) the indeterminacy and underdetermination of the actual events one experiences and (ii) the need to measure some things by relation to other things in order to determine a ‘field’ and write an ethnography. Of course, there will never be a seamless fit between the ambiguity of uncertainty and the disambiguation of determination. Therefore, by its very character as a practice situated historically, ethnography will ever remain incomplete.

Keywords: determination, doubt, entanglement, ethnography, participant observation

The present collection of papers reflects a debate entitled ‘Doubt and Determination’ that took place at the Lisbon EASA20 (online) conference. The two colleagues I first invited (Stephan Palmié, University of Chicago and Anne-Christine Taylor, CNRS, Paris) are experienced ethnographers with a long record of publications. Like myself, they are today looking back over their research careers and revisiting the principles that made possible their ethnographic engagements. Ashley Lebner (Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada), our invited debater, is a colleague whose relation to ethnography, although she is younger, is nonetheless equally intense. I asked her to launch the debate in light of the sort of concerns that a more recent generation of anthropologists might evince.

The ensuing debate (even though carried at a distance) was vivid, which shows that we were touching on challenging questions. For some, the apparent remoteness of the examples presented (a Miami ghost, an indigenous people in Amazonia, an ex-migrant in northern Portugal, neo-Pentecostal converts in north Brazil), plus the fact that some of the examples of the research we cite were decades’ old, meant we were somehow avoiding the central issues of our day. The
answer to that, however, has been decisively given long ago by the likes of Boas, Rivers and Mauss: it is the intensity and depth of the analysis that matters, not the particular example chosen. Experience shows that students planning their doctoral projects and ethnographically untrained colleagues are prone to believe that what matters in research is the specific topic addressed, if it is a ‘relevant’ topic. This, however, plays into the hands of the neoliberal-minded politicians who conceived the present subject-directed system of academic research funding. Instead of allowing academics to produce their own agendas, they believe that they know better what is ‘relevant’ – a while ago it was migrants, earlier on it was terrorists or science studies, now it is pandemics, and so it goes, in this presentist, media-driven carousel. To the contrary, well-tried fieldworkers and experienced teachers of our discipline have all learnt that, in the middle term, let alone the long term, what really matters for anthropology to make a relevant contribution is the intensity of the attention dedicated to the chosen ethnographic case, and practically any case will do.

The Ethnographic Gesture and the Passing Canon

The original question that set off our debate concerned the nature of the ethnographic gesture – that is, the decision to engage intensively with a particular form of life in order to situate it within a more common world. It cannot fail to be noticed that practically all ‘fieldwork’ situations involve an actual change of company; that is, a search for personal encounters that differ from those of one’s daily routines. For Rivers, Seligman or Malinowski, who conceived this methodology at the turn of the twentieth century, this involved going to a place one felt not to be one’s own. By the late 1920s, however, it became apparent to the better informed practitioners that the nature of this ‘dislocation’ had little to do with the ethnographer’s own sociopolitical identity (who one ‘is’ in contemporary social and political terms). Rather, the ‘move to the field’ that ethnographic work requires is primarily analytical, involving the situating (determining) of a chosen form of life by comparison to earlier anthropological determination of other forms of life.

When, in 1923, Nels Andersen published in Chicago one of the earliest masterpieces of ethnography – *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* – he did so from the point of view of one who had spent most of his own life as a homeless vagrant. It is a sad fact that, today, such a relevant and influential instance should only very rarely be placed beside Malinowski’s Melanesian work of the same period. Many misapprehensions concerning the ethnographic tradition might have thus been allayed. In fact, already back then, even when it looked outwardly like the relation between the ethnographer and the people studied was one of imperial distance, it often did not turn out to be the case – as is plainly evident in Monica Wilson’s brilliant *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contact with Europeans*
on the Pondo of South Africa published in 1936. On closer look, one discovers that Wilson’s relation to the Xhosa people was one of profound, multi-generational engagement; theirs was a language she had learnt to speak during her earliest childhood (see Morrow 2016). It is also very interesting to observe that neither of these classical masterpieces were ‘community-style’ monographs in any significant way, being more comparable to present-day examples, such as Grohmann’s study of homelessness in England (2020) or Alpa Sha’s study of Maoist guerrillas in India (2018).

The more famous examples of Malinowski’s students who were integral members of the people they studied, such as Jomo Kenyatta or Feng Xiaotung, were followed after the Second World War by a long list of classical examples, such as M. N. Srinivas, T. N. Madan and many more (remember Madan’s 1966 fascinating appendix discussing this very issue?). Only a wilful disregard of the ethnographic past can lead one to ignore that the complexity of personal relations evinced, for example, in Stephan Palmié’s study of Miami Afro-Cuban religion in the 1980s or my own presence in the Alto Minho in the late 1970s had a long line of predecessors.

The kind of presentist impatience with the ethnographic tradition that some have manifested of late (see Rees 2018) is nothing new to our discipline (see Copans 1971), in fact, it would seem to be a recurrent effect of promotion anxiety. There are two problems with that: first, we would in this way lose the opportunity of learning from one of the richest sources of evidence concerning human forms of life that has ever been invented; second, our very own ethnographic efforts would simply make no sense without this past (and this is the case even when we reject the ‘ethnography’ label). What I have argued elsewhere for anthropology in general applies equally to ethnography: it exists as an identifiable pursuit only to the extent that there is an implicit past to its statements. However misunderstood the word may be, the best way of referring to this historical aspect is as a ‘canon’. We need not worry about the implicit implication of power in the word, since any assumption that we can bypass the work of the conjunctural infrastructures of ideological domination that surround us is nothing but wilful blindness. That we cannot see them in our case, but we see them so clearly in the case of our predecessors, is precisely why social science was conceived.

Note, however: ethnography’s canon is a passing canon, in the sense that Donald Davidson uses when he speaks of ‘passing theory’ (2005: 101); that is, we inevitably face a canon but that canon is constantly being shifted and recreated. The question is, it has a strange way of enduring: the fact that an antecedent’s formulations are ignored or forgotten does not mean that they do not remain present as silent witnesses, ready to raise their hand when one least expects – like Andersen’s hobo ethnography. To fancy that we can simply wipe the slate clean because we call what we do by some newfangled word (remember the This-and-that Studies fashion in the 1980s?) is nothing but a kind of prejudice.
And, of course, chronocentrism (that is, presentism as a form of prejudice) is just another form of ethnocentrism.

No one can afford to ignore the impact that ethnography has had in the world we inhabit today. The recent impact of science and technology studies is a case in point, but earlier examples might even turn out to have been more relevant in the long run. For example, the impact that the work of Malinowski had on Quine’s philosophical thinking or on Freudian psychoanalysis, the impact that Lévy-Bruhl had on Husserl’s change of mind in his maturity, the impact that Evans-Pritchard had in thinkers like Winch or Polanyi, the influence of Mauss’ reading of the *potlatch*, Turner’s Ndembu ritual marginality and American counter-culture, the impact of Lévi-Strauss on Derrida’s and Merleau-Ponty’s work, etc. But, if through some sort of neoliberal distortion, you still think that these are not sufficiently ‘relevant’, think of whether Franz Fanon’s books could have been written without earlier anthropological inspiration, think of the role that Gluckman’s example of the bridge in Zululand had in fighting apartheid . . . think of the role Morgan’s ethnography played in the communist tradition.

For our EASA debate, we chose to focus on how ethnography is carried out in practical terms. In order to do that, we distinguished two analytical moments in the ethnographic gesture (‘going out there’ and ‘returning’) and how they combined two contradictory dispositions: (i) the indeterminacy and underdetermination of the actual events one experiences and (ii) the need to measure some things by relation to other things in order to determine a ‘field’ and write an ethnography (this is always the case, whether it is about mushroom picking (Tsing 2015) or the circulation of hormones (Sanabria 2016)). Of course, there will never be a seamless fit between the ambiguity of uncertainty and the disambiguation of determination. Therefore, by its very nature as a historically situated practice, ethnography will ever remain incomplete.

In their own ways, each of the four papers in this collection addresses this process. The first, by Stephan Palmié, reflects on his work among Cuban migrants in Miami, focusing on how presence and uncertainty meet each other by relation to the ethnographer’s own encounters in the field. His paper exemplifies Pelkmans comment that ‘Lived doubt points also . . . to the question “what to do?” Questions of being, of truth and of action should always be seen in relation to each other’ (2013: 2). The second, by Anne-Christine Taylor, reports on her work among the Achuar people of Ecuador, focusing more on issues of determination. She shows how ethnographic curiosity (and world building) meets up with the curiosity of local people who, like the ethnographer, are also busily working at constructing our common ever-globalising world. They too live in uncertainty, juggling with doubt. My own paper deals with the question of collective engagement in ethnography and how the local experiences of community crossed with a broader political engagement that included the ethnographer himself. Finally, reacting to our inputs and dialoguing with one of Brazil’s greatest writers, Ashley
Lebner offers a paper showing how ethnography is always an unfinished product – an attempt at measuring in the face of uncertainty. To follow her Brazilian suggestion, the devil lurks in ethnography.

The debate after the forum made us aware that there are some serious misapprehensions going around concerning the history of anthropology’s critique of Durkheimian sociocentrism. As it happens, this proneness to confuse sociocentrism with the intensive study of a form of life turns out not to be recent: already in the 1980s, Peter Loizos and I felt the need to defend ourselves in the pages of *Critique of Anthropology* against the prejudice born of ignorance concerning the so-called ‘community-study model’ (see Pina-Cabral 1987).

**Conjunctures and Ecumenical Ethnocentrism**

Due to the pandemic, EASA’s conference in 2020 turned out to be a strange experiment and I feel we should briefly reflect on that here, as it relates to the topic of our debate. For the first time in thirty years (the first conference had been held in Portugal in 1990), EASA’s members had to meet online. At first, the local committee struggled to accept this decision, but soon it became obvious that we had no alternative. As it happens, and largely due to the accomplishments of NomadIT, the conference was a resounding success – in terms of both the number and diversity of participants and the quality of the debates. This highlighted the fact that we are at a peculiar global conjuncture that calls for an anthropological response. If, however, we look back at the anthropological record, we can find other moments in the past that were characterised by similar feelings of crisis. In 1964, facing the vivid conflicts that marked the then postcolonial conjuncture, Ernesto de Martino reflected on how anthropology should respond to such moments. His lifelong political engagement, combined with his ethnography-driven sensitivity to the situation of oppression experienced in southern Italy, fed into a sharp critique of the imperialist dramas of his time. Still, he warned us against succumbing to ‘an insidious Western apocalypse characterised by a reduced . . . familiarity of the world, the shipwreck of intersubjectivity, the dangerous loss of the hope of basing a common future on liberty and human dignity, and not least, the risk of alienation that is inevitably carried by the fetishization of technique’ (2016 [1964]: 71).

Against this, he proposed anthropologists should adopt what he called a critical ethnocentrism; that is, ‘a unifying ethos that, in a deliberate manner, continuously drives the sciences of the human towards the humanity that we are, here and now, in this our historical conjuncture’ (2016 [1964]: 69, 68)—thus, he develops an ecumenical understanding of ethnocentrism. By conjuncture, he meant the dynamic condition of presence, where certain factors combine spatio-temporally to create particular effects, for example, specifiable configurations of power. De Martino, therefore, calls us to place ourselves within our work, as we
are members of the conjunctures within which we find ourselves. In any case, we cannot help but do our work under the intellectual conditions of possibility that the horizon of such conjunctures affords us.

Now that practically everyone we study anywhere can read what we write about them, our central question has shifted. Ethnographers are newly reminded that our fundamental situation as living persons is entanglement (see Barad 2007). As suggested vividly in Anne-Christine Taylor’s paper, ethnography has ‘returned’ and, in returning, it has become part of its own field as a second order intervention. Ethnography’s central problem, today, is no longer that ‘they’ make no sense, as it was for Lévy-Bruhl or Evans-Pritchard in the early 1930s. As I argue in my own paper, our first moment is always already a second moment. I mean that to contemplate the possibility that each one of us was the absolute initiator of his or her own ethnographic encounter is an individualist (atomistic and ahistoricist) fallacy. It is erroneous to suppose that the ethnographic encounter with difference is binary and neat. As we start fieldwork, and at every moment after that, each one of us is already a bearer of an internal plurality that breaks the ethnographic conceit – that is, the heuristic device of proposing an identifiable ‘field’.

At all moments of our experience as persons, the presence of each one of us is both singular and plural. As Husserl put it in his response to Lévy-Bruhl, ‘Saying “I” and “we”, [persons] find themselves as members of families, associations, [socialities], as living “together”, exerting an influence on and suffering from their world – the world that has sense and reality for them, through their intentional life, their experiencing, thinking, [and] valuing’ (Husserl 2008 [1935]: 2). Ethnography’s task, therefore, is inevitably to find paths of meaning within entanglement – to exercise determination in the face of recurrent uncertainty, both on the part of the ethnographers and on the part of their interlocutors. However, in order for the ethnographer to make sense of the sense that her interlocutors make of the world, she has to have been already within meaning – thus, to go back to Stephan’s example, the ethnographer evokes the metaperson (Tomás), who then comes to inhabit the ethnographer as a constitutive ‘other’.

No assumption that the ethnographic encounter is symmetrical can cover the pluralist nature of one’s engagement in a holistically constituted world. The issue here is that there is no neat (all-or-nothing) solution – a point Ashley Lebner develops in her contribution to our debate. An ethnographer’s world starts where ‘they’ are but does not end there, for the history of ethnography functions as an infrastructure for the ethnographer’s vision (see Carey and Pedersen 2017). In fact, history is there and it is present, particularly when it is not directly attended to. The history of anthropology provides the ethnographer with an ethos of ever-broader ecumenical embracement. This means that ethnographers are bound to redraw the very framework of their analytical dispositions as their ethnography evolves.

Recently, I found in a drama series about the LA Police Department a scene that exemplifies vividly what I mean by relation to the condition of today’s ethnographers – a good number of whom, like my generation of Iberian ethnog-
raphers back in the 1970s, feel deeply immersed in the very complexity of the processes of ecumenical embracement that shape their fields. I have in mind many of the recent debates that have surrounded the casting into doubt of the imperial ‘we’ as traditionally used in ethnography (see Chua and Mathur 2018).

In this scene, a younger police officer is attempting to shift the blame of a small error of judgment she committed onto a criminal called Stokes that she was capturing. She states her case: ‘I am a good cop, and it was Stokes who turned out to be a bad guy. There is us and there is them, you know that! . . . Why can’t we just get past this?’ The older officer replies: ‘I guess because I am just on the wrong side of that us and them equation.’ She counters: ‘You don’t need to be!’ But he moves away saying: ‘No, I need to be.’ Much like him there, the point I mean to put across is that, in today’s world, ethnographers too ‘need to be’ beyond the ‘us and them equation’. Yes, he was a good cop; but no, he could never stop being part of ‘them’.

We return to de Martino’s suggestion that we adopt ecumenical ethnocentrism: by it, he means that ethnography starts from the ethnographer’s evolving conjuncture and always moves by relation to it. Ethnographic evidence is based on personal experiences and on relations that are indeterminate and, because they involve emergence, are also ultimately underdetermined. Thus, ethnographers start from noise. There is no anterior silence to the ethnographic encounter – to the contrary, ethnography always has already started. This is the case both in terms of the ethnographer’s own encounter with alterity (it has been repeatedly observed that many ethnographers of note were children of migrants, diplomats or missionaries) and in terms of the field itself, for there is always an ethnographic historicity to each context we might choose to study. Ethnographers start from noise because they are thrown into the field in the same sense that Heidegger tells us that, on becoming a person, we are thrown into the world (see Withy 2011). Their task is to reduce that noise by analysing, comparing and narrating. They seek to bend the world in which they are immersed in such ways as to encompass the worlds of others whose ‘new’ company they have sought.

Therefore, uncertainty (that is, that very idea of noise) is a condition of possibility of ethnography. According to Pelkmans (2013: 4), we should distinguish between uncertainty (which ‘cannot be wilfully employed’) and the ethnographic doubts that are then analytically formulated in terms of it. This generic role of uncertainty is true of ethnography but not specific to it, as it derives from a very general aspect of our condition as persons. As Davidson famously put it, ‘one cannot have a general stock of beliefs of the sort necessary for having any beliefs at all without being subject to surprises that involve beliefs about the correctness of one’s own beliefs’ (2005: 104). This is the seedbed of ethnography, where the scientist seeks to measure this, determine that, resituate that other thing. In ethnography, therefore, expressed doubt is already the door to determination. Pelkmans again: ‘Instead of being the opposite of belief, doubt is often implicated in it’ (2013: 4). Measuring the world – that is, determining how aspects of the world
one encounters have become objects in the shared participatory world of the new company one has sought out – is how ethnography is accomplished.

**Determination and the Field**

There are, therefore, two contradictory trends in ethnography: in one direction, there is the readiness to explore ‘the surprises involving having beliefs about the correctness of one’s own beliefs’ (Davidson 2005: 104); but then there is the other direction, triangulation, the need to determine how one’s beliefs meet up with the beliefs of others by relation to the common world which lays between us and them (after all, that is why we ‘go out there’). As Stephan Palmié notes in his paper: ‘the observer does not singularly discover a world “out there” but aims to “invent” it along with those with whom she shares a common world waiting to be jointly transformed by both of them’. This is what we aimed at when we chose ‘ethnographic determination’ as the main theme of this debate.

‘Determination’ as commonly used in social science parlance carries two general families of meaning: one, as an act of setting of boundaries, of tracing the relative positioning of things; the other, as the setting of purposes, the capacity to persist in a decision, to establish a set status, of concluding. Common to both is the original verb ‘to determine’, which refers to the setting of limits (terms) and thus to an act of the will, a decision or resolution. For our present purposes, however, it is relevant to remember that what brings together these families of meanings is the setting of fixed relative positions, both in terms of how things are positioned in the world and how we are positioned by relation to each other and the world. To determine, thus, is related to measurement, to the establishing of durable and public positions and, in that way, to worlding (see Pina-Cabral 2017). However, this means that determination can never be complete and definite, precisely because it involves spacetime: one can set limits, terms, but one cannot stop entanglement and the ensuing erosion of set terms. Thus, as Stephan Palmié is known to remind us, the ethnographer can only suppress noise at his own peril. To provide an example: this is, I think, the lesson to learn from Evans-Pritchard’s successive accounts of the Nuer. As time went on, the initial structurally noiseless model revealed itself to be unsatisfactory and he started providing us with increasingly open-ended accounts.

In this sense, therefore, determination never wrenches itself free from inde-terminacy and underdetermination. The word itself contains in its formation a logocentric trap, as Derrida would claim (see 1967). As in the case of the pair intersubjectivity/subjectivity (see Pina-Cabral 2017), the apparent derivation of the first term from the second turns out to be a false lead. Furthermore, there is no symmetry in the pair. The latter term, while being apparently formative of the earlier term, is asymmetrically positioned by relation to it in that subjectivity is the product of intersubjectivity and is constantly positioned within it.
Similarly, the anteriority of indeterminacy by relation to determination has to be quite clearly established, in spite of how the words we use are formed (see Pina-Cabral 2020). If there is ethnographic determination in ethnographic writing (as demonstrably there is, for one is inevitably setting something down in writing or in some audiovisual medium – thus objectifying it), then all ethnography will ever be incomplete and time-bound. Ethnography will always be an act of recurrent de-ethnocentrification (see Pitt-Rivers 1992). Thus, ‘after ethnography’ there can only be ethnography by any other name.

To conclude, for ethnography to be carried out, the setting up of the ethnographic conceit (the ‘us and them equation’) appears to be an important methodological step (a ‘reduction’ in the Husserlian sense), but it is one which must be reflexively overcome all the time, both because we can never get rid of our historical inherence (our conjunctural condition, à la de Martino) and because we are inevitably within an ecumenical process of worlding. The entertaining of suspicion concerning the naturalising of an ‘ethnos’, contrary to what some may think,3 is not a new insight in ethnography, as it has been an intrinsic aspect of our trade since the 1920s, as Nels Andersen’s writing reminds us. Thus, it seems important to stress the technical role (or, if one prefers, ‘infrastructural’, as Carey and Pedersen (2017) felicitously propose) that characterises ethnography. The great game of science and technology has now irremediably changed our planet – there is no way out of it. Ethnography as a scientific enterprise involves a technical conceit, but it is an aspect of life’s history. As Grohmann puts it in her monograph on homelessness in England, ‘What is for certain is that while I was attempting to declare the field upon Bristol, Bristol had unmistakably decided to declare life upon me’ (2020: 64).

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Notes

1. The 2014 TV series Bosch, based on the books of Michael Connelly.
2. This is the origin of a third family of meanings (more formal – legal, canonical, philosophical) to do with coming to a resolution, a decision, a confirmation or ordaining.

3. My own critique of the notion of *ethnos* has nothing to do with Rees’s proposal (2018) that we should ‘radically depart from the human’, first because anthropology, if it is to exist at all, has to concern itself with the human condition and second because it can only be practised by persons who have achieved propositional thinking and that is something that only occurs to humans. The notion that before the seventeenth century there was no universalist notion of the human is definitional, but particularly it is deeply ethnocentric for, among other things, it forgets the long history of the Chinese and Indian philosophical traditions.

References


**Un débat sur la détermination ethnographique : Lisbonne EASA2020**

La sélection d’articles présentée ici représente un forum de discussion intitulé « Doute et Détermination » qui a eu lieu lors de la conférence EASA2020 à Lisbonne. La question initiale qui a déclenché notre débat concernait la nature du geste ethnographique – c’est-à-dire la décision de s’engager intensivement dans une forme de vie particulière afin de la situer dans un monde plus commun. Nous avons distingué deux moments analytiques dans le geste ethnographique (aller et revenir) et comment ils combinaient deux dispositions contradictoires : i) l’indétermination et la sous-détermination des événements réels que l’on vit ; ii) le besoin de mesurer certaines choses par rapport à d’autres, afin de déterminer un « champ » et d’écrire une ethnographie. Bien entendu, il n’y aura jamais de correspondance parfaite entre l’ambiguïté de l’incertitude et la désambiguïsation de la détermination. En conséquence, à travers son caractère de pratique située historiquement, l’ethnographie restera toujours incomplète.

**Mots clés :** détermination, doute, enchevêtrement, ethnographie, observation participante