EDITORIAL

Interview with Martin Holbraad on Becoming Editor of *Social Analysis*

How did it come about that you became editor of Social Analysis?

It was Bruce Kapferer and his legendary powers of persuasion! Bruce set the journal up in 1979 with the intention, as he explained to me recently, of taking forward the anthropological agenda of the Manchester School: socio-political analysis based on the detailed ethnography of practice aiming to intervene critically in the big issues of the day. Since that time, the journal has grown a lot, but without losing its somewhat homespun quality, which is one of the things I most like about it. In fact, one of the best moves Bruce made, after eventually shifting the center of gravity of the journal away from Australia and joining forces with you guys at Berghahn, was to pass the editorship to my predecessors—a dynamic editorial team based at Bergen in Norway, comprising Bjørn Bertelsen, Ørnulf Gulbrandsen, Knut Rio, and Olaf Smedal, along with their editorial assistant Nora Haukali. They really took the journal to the next level, giving it a position in what I like to think of as the ‘cosmology’ of anthropology journals (others might see it as a market, of course) and helping to renew the journal’s intellectual profile. So, when Bruce came to me in 2016 to suggest I could take the editorial steeple, I jumped at the opportunity. I love the idea of taking a journal that does great work on a relatively small canvas and helping it grow in a way that establishes it as a reference point in the firmament of anthropology at large.

You talk about the ‘intellectual profile’ of Social Analysis. How do you see that?

This is of course the most interesting question, although its importance can also be overstated. The starting point, I guess, is that journals tend for obvious reasons to reflect the intellectual profile of their editors. In its original conception, I think, the journal did reflect Bruce’s own rather unique (although very ‘Manchester’) combination of, on the one hand, ‘symbolic anthropology’

approaches, as they used to be called, focusing on things like myth, ritual, and cosmology, and, on the other hand, a critical and politically charged concern with questions of ‘political economy’, thinking, often on a large scale, about world-systemic economic forces, emergent political formations, the role of the state in its historical trajectories, and so on. A lot of the emphasis then, I believe, was on exploring the critical purchase of anthropological research on political as well as socio-cultural questions—egalitarianism, hierarchy, racism, state and corporate power, and so on.

I feel very comfortable in that space myself, with long-standing research on ritual and cosmology in Cuba, where I do my ethnography, as well as more recent work in political anthropology, focusing on the socio-cultural constitution of revolution as a political form. However, the way I see *Social Analysis* is not so much as a platform for particular kinds of themes or topics, or indeed theoretical approaches, but rather as a home for articles and special issues that set out deliberately to display the versatility of anthropological research. In that sense, the operative word in our title, for me, is ‘analysis’. My ambition for the journal is to make it a prime vehicle for articles that explore and experiment with the potentials of analysis as an anthropological activity. I don’t mean so much articles that set out to address these questions theoretically or methodologically, although I wouldn’t exclude such articles out of hand either. I mean primarily articles that display a spirit of analytical exploration by dealing in innovative ways with their empirical materials, showing in the action of their analytical treatment new ways in which anthropological thinking can develop. That’s what I find most exciting in anthropology. While of course all good journals in our discipline have a stake in this, my ambition is to make *Social Analysis* a home for this kind of analytical experimentation, par excellence.

You said earlier that the importance of a journal’s intellectual profile can be overstated. What did you mean by that?

Well, I do think it’s very important for a journal to have a distinctive profile, and, as I say, I’m particularly excited about developing this for *Social Analysis*. But ultimately, for me, the bottom line is to publish stuff that’s just really *good*. I’ll be frank: right now I don’t think we are short of journals and articles in anthropology. I think, if anything, we probably publish too much in academia, and anthropology is no exception. We know the reasons for this—publish or perish, the PhD industry, not to mention sheer careerism. But in such a context, I think people who take on the role of editors need above all to ensure the sheer *quality* of what they put out. For me, that’s ultimately what comes first. So as I go about continuing to build the journal’s standing within the discipline, quality is my starting point, and analytical exploration and experimentation are what I seek to encourage and foster, in that order.

So how do you go about doing that? If I'm a scholar who's invested in this kind of work, why should I send my work to Social Analysis when there are so many other great journals out there?

Obviously, the fact that there are so many great places to publish is itself great! I guess the relatively small scale of *Social Analysis* (in comparison to 'big' journals like *Current Anthropology*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *JRAI*, *American Ethnologist*) does have the advantage that we are very quick, responsive, and, as it were, personalized in our interactions with authors. Before, I used the term 'homespun', and I like that—I think it's valuable.

Now, generally, as I explain in the detailed advice I give prospective contributors on our website (www.berghahnjournals.com/social-analysis), I am quite trigger-happy with desk rejections. If a submission is either not properly ready or just not well-enough executed, I will reject it. And this is because I want to focus my (finite) energy on articles I think can really make it to publication and whose authors have taken the trouble to actually *show* that in their first submission. I really give lots of attention to those submissions, and I do enjoy that process of turning good articles into world-class ones immensely (to the best of my ability, of course). So if you do send your work to *Social Analysis*, you get the full rigor of peer review fast, and you get a lot of attention from the editor. Plus, you get to be part of a community of scholars whose work shares in that outlook of exploration and experimentation I was talking about earlier. It's all about making anthropology exciting!

OK, so tell us more concretely some of the things you are doing at present as part of raising the profile of Social Analysis. What's new?

Many things! When I took over as editor last year, the first thing I did was to enlarge and further internationalize the journal's editorial board, who have agreed not just to give overall guidance, but also to be active in peer-reviewing article submissions, as well as special issue proposals and manuscripts. In fact, one of the reasons why a high-profile and active editorial board is so important for us is that we also need their help with raising the profile of the journal as a home for individual article submissions, alongside our special issues. I say this because I think it's fair to say that until now, in the minds of your average anthropologist, *Social Analysis* has been associated above all with its incredibly active special issue series. I'm extremely proud of this and have in fact now consolidated it with an annual call for special issue proposals (in fact, we have one going on right now at <http://ht.ly/GEdS30fFeZO>), as well as a brand-new book series with Berghahn, our Studies in Social Analysis (www.berghahn-books.com/series/studies-in-social-analysis), in which special issues as well as other book-length projects associated with the journal are published as books.

However, I think that it's very important for us to also continue building our profile as a forum for world-class stand-alone articles, published in our 'ordinary' issues. That's why I'm focusing so much energy on making the article submissions that I accept as good as they can possibly get. The better stuff you publish, I think, the better stuff you get submitted, so it's a virtuous cycle.

What about other things, such as debate features, comments, and book reviews?

I'm always interested in these kinds of items, but I also want to approach them in a targeted way. We have so much online-style commentary now in anthropology, and all that can of course be really good, but I don't think journals necessarily need to emulate it in order to make a contribution. Also, I know from my own experience how time-consuming these shorter items are for people to produce, so I think one should distract colleagues with them only if there's a very good reason to do so. The best reason I've found thus far, for the journal, are the short texts I've solicited from various colleagues, asking them to explain what they understand by the term 'analysis' in anthropology. This is based on a panel for the AAA's 2017 annual meeting and will appear as a featured collection of short think pieces in the first issue of 2018.

As for book reviews, I have taken the rather drastic decision to end them. For a journal such as ours, I think that book reviews are frankly more trouble than they are worth. Instead, as of the end of 2018, once the reviews that are still in the pipeline are all published, we'll be starting our First Book Symposium feature, where a single book written by a first-time author will be debated by experts in the field. This will be much like *Hau's* fantastic book symposia, but specifically targeted to people's first books.

Plenty happening then! But from what you say about online writing and its aesthetics, you sound like a bit of a technophobe. Are you?

Yes, I probably am, a bit. While I do believe rather fervently that good, valuable work is as much about form as it is about content, I do not believe that it's about format, and it sometimes feels that a lot of people's energy these days is consumed with playing around with formats, driven by online technology. It can all be very superficial. Having said that, I have put a lot of energy into building up a 'presence' for the journal on social media—I think many of our authors quite rightly expect that kind of exposure. But I very much doubt we'd be able to do this without the work put into it by Alonso Zamora, our super-able editorial assistant, whose all-around work for the journal is invaluable. He's doing fieldwork in Guatemala right now for his PhD on time, power, and politics among the K'iche, but somehow still manages to tweet for *Social Analysis* almost every day!

On top of that, we are now in conversation with Berghahn, who are as supportive a publisher as one could wish for, about establishing online pre-publication of individual articles, which many other journals now do, and which of course makes perfect sense from the point of view of the authors, too. In general, this whole conversation about where academic publishing might be going, and not least the question of access and how to make that work for journals such as ours, is one of the things I find myself thinking about a lot these days. But I guess that's obvious, as well as exciting. Although, as I say, not nearly as exciting as anthropology can be!

— *Interview with Berghahn staff, 25 November 2017*