

# Forum Introduction

## Anthropological Boundaries at Work

Francisco Martínez

This Forum sets out to contribute to the understanding of anthropologists' identification with their discipline, the homogeneity of anthropologists as an academic group, and how our disciplinary boundaries are constructed and embodied. It provides different angles on the academic demarcations influencing how anthropology is practiced in Europe. Four colleagues explore different ways of questioning the boundaries of our discipline, opening up spaces for remaking anthropology (what can be said and done, and by whom).

In relation to practices of authority, authorisation and disciplinary jurisdiction, boundaries are key knowledge-making devices. They have effects in bringing particular relations to the fore (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Moreover, and despite being contingent social constructs, boundaries are real in their consequences and require continuous work of maintenance. They equally require defence and policing, altering along the relationship with other disciplines and methodologies.

And yet demarcations are not enough to form a discipline. We thus reflect on how definitions of what counts as anthropological knowledge are embedded in specific frames of value, enacting their own notion of significance, and therefore to be considered as contingent and performative (Lury and Wakeford 2012; Strathern 2000, 2006). These discussions come to update, complement and in some cases correct past calls for interdisciplinarity, seen as an institutional solution to all kinds of research problems (Barry et al. 2008; Strathern 2007).

As described by Regina Bendix in this Forum section, we are asked to dedicate a lot of time to raising funding for research, to designing interdisciplinary formats, and to disciplinary quality control, often at the expense of being in the field or having a voice beyond academia. Also, the demands of the grant-writing process force anthropologists into a position of 'translating their idiom, distorting their paradigms, and misrepresenting the logic of their procedures' to align with the goals of the funding agencies, affecting along the way how qualitative outputs are measured (Bendix et al. 2017: 7).

Willing to contribute to actual debates about inter/cross/trans-disciplinary research, Bendix notes how innovative answers to social

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problems arise precisely at methodological crossroads that cannot be easily appropriated by any established discipline. It is precisely the existing differences between disciplines that makes collaboration relevant and gives it the potential to produce novel knowledge. She reminds us, however, that disciplinary proficiency and familiarity generates trust in others who have chosen the same field, as if it were a home that gives a sense of comfort, identity reassurance, and the experience of slow time.

Contributing to this debate, Jon Mitchell and Noel Dyck foregrounded that the novelty in regards to cross-border disciplinary engagements is the extent to which they are required and prescribed, instrumentalising ethnography and eventually shifting ‘the epistemological balance of the discipline from induction to prescription, and with that threaten[ing] to make normative a discipline that by its very nature is rooted in pluri-normativity’ (Mitchell and Dyck 2014: 235).

Transnational research infrastructures have also acquired an extremely prominent status in academia, contributing to re-work the boundaries of European anthropologies, and in some cases widening the distance between our idea of the discipline and its practitioners. For instance, in cases such as the European Research Council (ERC) grants, this is happening because of the quality of the research they endorse and produce, as well as other factors such as their representational power.

These transformations point at a shift in the relation between ethnography and what is considered an anthropological mode of inquiry, having complex ethical consequences and establishing more dialogic forms of knowledge production and application, as noted by Liene Ozoliņa in her Forum contribution. She also highlights the relevance of theorising from the periphery, proposing alternative notions of valid knowledge, and reflecting on how our research mutates through the process of field craft.

Anthropology indicates particular modes of knowledge-making and engagement with the world that these days are being applied beyond the traditional walls of the discipline. As noted by Thomas Gieryn (1999), boundary-work is part of the academic ‘credibility contest’ for the purpose of establishing epistemic authority. The determination of who belongs within the community of practitioners and who lacks authority in a discipline entails classifying, categorising and creating typification systems. However, and as Gieryn also points out, demarcations are not merely an analytical problem; they are a practical one: there are boundaries that should not be crossed under the threat of being punished.

Moreover, and as Alessandro Testa reminds us in this Forum discussion, disciplinary boundaries are still placed and located, and the negotiation around them might not always show power struggles. Klaus Schriewer disagrees with Alessandro, however. By discussing differences, similarities and complementarities within anthropological traditions in Europe as well as the interconnections between folklore, European ethnology and the anthropology of Europe, Klaus criticises the boundary-work done to export social anthropology over the existing Western traditions.

Other scholars engaging in a similar exercise have noted how the very term ‘European’ might have essentialist connotations and raise questions of inclusion and exclusion of certain countries and peoples too (Jiménez 2019; Nic Craith 2015; Pussetti 2019; Siniscalchi 2015). Moreover, European anthropology does not imply a spatial fixity, but is rather the outcome of diverse forms of cross-border exchanges (Lavolette et al. 2019), with questioned genealogies and ‘constitutive contradictions’ (De Genova 2014).

Still, organisations such as the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) or the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) are the best instruments we have to build and practise European anthropologies and ethnologies. And still we find European anthropology a useful concept, even if we can hardly agree about what a European tradition of doing anthropology would be. Indeed, different attempts at articulating what European anthropology could be ended up as an incidental, non-committal gesture (see Brković’s article in this issue). Hence, let us assume European anthropology as multiple, undefinable and useful precisely because of its being-in-the-making qualities (Martínez 2019).

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