World Anthropologies

Course Description

This seminar is intended as a space of research and reflection on anthropology as a world-wide practice that has been shaped by identifiable historical processes. The goal of the seminar is to investigate the conditions for an epistemologically and political diverse set of world anthropologies.

One of anthropology’s strongest aporias has been its claim to be a universal discipline in spite of its Western foundations. In an age of heightened globalization, and despite sporadic debates, anthropologists in metropolitan centers have failed to discuss consistently the current nature of their practice in relation to its mutations on a global scale. This is perhaps a result of the growing international hegemony of U.S. anthropology, and its tendency to confound its own internal crisis with a global one. Our seminar seeks to elicit a conversation about the diversity of regional or national anthropologies and their relation to a contested, power-laden, disciplinary discourse. We will examine the conditions for the articulation of a diversified anthropology that is more aware of the social, epistemological, and political conditions of its own production.

While hegemonic anthropologies have tried to keep apace of the rapid and deep transformations associated with globalization, they have done so without significantly questioning — let alone modifying — their own positioning and practices as self-constituted dominant centers of knowledge production. In short, they escape neither the social predicament of global capitalism nor their location within a Western epistemological configuration --including what Trouillot (1991) has called “the savage slot.” Our seminar is thus situated at the apparent disjuncture between the production of anthropological knowledge in dominant centers and anthropological practice worldwide. Beginning with an examination of the history of anthropology as a modern project, it moves beyond anthropology’s relation to colonialism to consider some of the epistemological, professional, and institutional practices that have shaped the field, with an eye at enabling a different set of practices.

The goals of the seminar are thus twofold: a) to examine critically the historical dissemination of anthropology —as a changing set of Western discourses and practices— within and across national power fields, and the processes through which this dissemination has taken place; b) to contribute to imagining the conditions for a plural landscape of world anthropologies that is both less shaped by metropolitan hegemonies and more open to the heteroglossic potential of unfolding globalization processes.
Course requirements

As a research seminar, students are expected to develop a substantial research paper and to participate actively in class discussions. Paper topics will be discussed early in the semester. Students are also expected to do two oral presentations during the semester. We will also conduct several collective exercises during the semester, including: discussion of web pages and program structure of various anthropology graduate programs; a “hands-on” tour of library shelves with holdings on anthropology; and, possibly, electronic exchanges with some of the authors who will be participating at the Wenner-Gren Symposium on World Anthropologies. We will also maintain an active link with students taking a similar seminar at the University of Brasilia taught by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, Wenner-Gren Symposium co-organizer.

Reading List

I. Triggers: Why “world anthropologies” now?


II. Anthropological knowledge as a modern project


III. Anthropology and the Geopolitics of knowledge


IV. Anthropology and the Geopolitics of knowledge (contd.)


V. The Colonial encounter and its critics


VI. Visualizing Anglo-American anthropology


VII. National Anthropologies/international anthropology


VIII. Native/indigenous/vernacular/ anthropologies


IX. The feminist critique of fallogocentric anthropology


X. Beyond “anthropology”: towards world anthropologies


XI-XIV. Discussion, paper presentations, WAN project.