

A CONVERSATION ABOUT A WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES NETWORK

WAN Collective

The World Anthropologies Network (WAN) collective¹ is in the process of creating a self-organizing world anthropologies network that will constitute a dialogic space for discussing anthropology in relation to a multiplicity of world-making processes and events. The network should contribute to a plural landscape of world anthropologies less shaped by metropolitan hegemonies and opened to the heteroglossic potential of unfolding globalization processes. Eventually, the network should move towards planetary modes of inquiry while enabling plural, place-centred political/theoretical visions and concerns, without imposing uniform agendas or styles. Necessarily multilingual, and organized and effected virtually as well as through concrete (and hopefully intentionally unorthodox) events, the network will also aim at producing alternative research and funding practices, emphasizing collective research agendas and authorship, while remaining sensitive to place-based particularities. In sum, the network can be described as contributing to the project of *other anthropologies and anthropology otherwise*.

Some questions that inspire our projects are: how do we rethink - and re-make anthropologies at a planetary level *in an open-ended way*, despite their historical origin in European modernity and modernity's connections with colonialism, capitalism and globalisation? How might a 'world anthropologies' be characterized in contrast to the current panorama of 'national anthropological traditions' in which some 'traditions' have more paradigmatic weight- and hence more power and implied authority - than others?

In approaching these questions we consider that differences in the historical, cultural and economic conditions of knowledge-production matter in the shaping of anthropological theories and practices (and, indeed, of anthropologists). Thus an immediate goal for world anthropologies is to make visible the mechanisms by which 'central' anthropologies - around the world, and in the world centres - subordinate 'peripheral' ones (also around the world and in the world centres)². Yet as important, and perhaps less obvious, WAN should eventually work to make visible those *different knowledges* that central anthropologies (just as normalising 'expert knowledges' anywhere) ignore, disqualify or subordinate. Last but not least, WAN works against or at the very least in tension with - the normalizing tendencies of anthropologies, whether central or peripheral.

Inspired by and in conjunction with, non-academic intellectuals, on addressing these questions we draw on the potential of our discipline's capacity for critical inquiry, couple action and thought, reason and passion, in the hope of affecting the structure of feelings of dominant anthropological institutions - or at least unsettling unquestioned assumptions.

General statement

This proposal stems from:

- (a) The analytical recognition that, rather than leading to the dismantling of canonical anthropologies, most critiques of the discipline have resulted -unwittingly - in the reinvigoration of central anthropological practices worldwide. While these criticisms have questioned central epistemological/political practices, they have not impinged on the institutionalization of the discipline itself. As a result the anthropology produced in dominant centers has rarely paid enough attention to theoretical arguments produced in other parts of the world. In that sense, it might be regarded as maintaining a 'rhetorical space' without making actual room for other ideas, theories, activities³. Moreover, dialogues between 'central' academics and 'peripheral' intellectuals have often contributed to the subalternization of the latter. The example of *testimonio* is eloquent in this respect⁴. Profusely incorporated into central academic theorization, *testimonio* is still not taken as a form of knowledge *in its own right*, obviously not on a par with novel theories about it. Thus, and despite significant criticism, there is a continuing sense that anthropology in the dominant centres is still produced by 'us' about 'them' -while simultaneously producing an impression of being global. A dynamic exists that assimilates the margins into the normative frameworks of the 'centres', and tends to exclude- and occlude- 'peripheral' practices, research agendas and theoretical-political concerns.⁵
- (b) A consequence of this situation is that dominant modes of anthropological knowledge and their institutions (most notably academic patterns in the United States) currently exert a standardizing influence on other anthropologies, their institutions, discourses and disciplinary practices. Indicative of this trend is the participation of a larger number of foreign anthropologists at the annual AAA meetings, submission to American journals and, above all, the growing centripetal force of the American anthropological discursive universe on subalternised anthropologies.⁶ As with any political situation, this is a complex relationship, for as subalternised anthropologies are increasingly pulled towards the discursive orbit of dominant approaches, they also increase their tendency to resist epistemologically and practically the assimilationist tendencies that would render them invisible.
- (c) The recognition that a critique that would pit a geographically located 'periphery' against an - also geographically located - 'center' could potentially mean a symmetrical reversal of the epistemological privilege created through the modern/colonial difference. Indeed, while the organizational and epistemological constraints faced by metropolitan anthropologies means that they represent an allegiance to a western episteme, this allegiance is not essentially localized. Thus, we are not targeting specific geographic centres. Rather, our critique aims at making visible the institutionalization of knowledge production (wherever they may be) that hamper critical liberating debates in academic locales⁷. We want to break the silent hegemony inscribed by modern regimes of knowledge production and open up alternative venues for *different kinds of knowledge* and their conditions of possibility *in their own right*.
- (d) WAN assumes that the boundary between academic and non-academic spheres does not result from ontological exteriorities/interiorities, but is an effect of the disciplining of 'knowledge' itself. Academia is only one among many sites of knowledge production and being an academic is one among many possible modes of being an intellectual. This feature is central to our argument and should constitute a crucial property of the World Anthropologies Network.

En-redarse. The World Anthropologies Network as process, method, and content

As academic intellectuals with a desire and a vocation for multiple forms of knowledge, we wish to engender a process aimed at affecting - or at least making visible - the hegemonic tendencies that tend to organize the practice within central and peripheral academic anthropologies as well as the relationship between them. The World Anthropologies Network aims at processually (and thus constantly) unsettling the simple and unquestioned hierarchy-laden social organization and reproduction of dominant anthropologies. This dynamic should bring other forms of anthropological knowledge and their institutions to the fore, without however positioning them as privileged alternatives. Eventually we purport a process through which knowledge results from interaction between academic and non-academic intellectuals.

We propose to facilitate the creation of a flexible structure, a network,⁸ to foster dialogues and exchanges (on the above set of observations, and others) among a number of anthropologies broadly understood. Our long-term aim is to develop a self-organizing world network for anthropological research and action that at the same time aims at continuously questioning seemingly dominant (academic and non-academic) forms of knowledge - as well as trends to become such.

We envision the world anthropologies network as a consciously de-centered, self-organizing process with emergent properties of its own. Obviously, we cannot anticipate these as they will depend on the dynamics set in motion. Our goal is to produce a structure-generating processual network, which should result in an articulation of heterogeneous anthropologies in terms of some shared interests, complementarities, and -why not- conflicts. The network should set in motion historically situated, political-theoretical conversations and actions about culture-nature, global-local concerns, and the political economy of resources broadly understood.

The first nodes of the WAN will function as catalysts for both, triggering strategies of localization (building greater internal strength and consistency at each site), as well as interweaving dynamically and productively the diversified interests and collective dialogues that connect the sites. This process should articulate the network, while being articulated by it. In turn, it should also effect some de-stratifying function in relation to established power-knowledge networks, while avoiding becoming a hierarchy of any sort.

The *form itself* adopted by the network is of crucial importance. We want to emphasize that rather than a method, a set of contents, or an objective, we consider the network - la *red* -itself to be a fusion of these three aspects. La *red* should be a venue for the constant interlocking of place-based nodal points, be these theoretical, political, communicational - or institutional - in such a way that their stability, while existing, is constantly exposed to other possible forms and therefore never taken as unique or pre-eminent. We think of this processual method-objective as *en-redarse*, (from the Spanish, to 'self-entangle' repeatedly) - a permanent act of connecting and thus articulating the network that constantly re-generates it and nourishes the forms of knowledge and politics interlocked and/or produced through it.

Our purpose for *enredarnos* is manifold. First, and rather obviously, we wish to avoid replicating the static organisational styles available at present.' (These structures have a part to play indeed, yet our objective is qualitatively different.) Second, we want to provide a pliable reflexive structure with the capacity for being constantly reformulated, for constantly considering centrifugal demands and incorporating them into its many nodes of articulation. Hence, we shall not deal with the normative question ('how anthropology, or a transnational anthropology, ought to be') even if the exercise will be informed by theoretical, ethical and political concerns.

The network's overall agenda should include broad sets of research questions in socio-cultural anthropologies, but it is expected that at some point it will tackle biological, historical, and linguistic concerns and developments - again, constructing more historically informed links among these subfields that still inform much anthropological practice worldwide and, indeed, problematising these divisions and imagining other connections. Theories, politics and representations of biology/nature, of the past and of language should be as important to the world anthropologies we envision as research on the cultural politics of globalisation, identities and social movements. These agendas will be transformed and redefined as other heterogenous sites are articulated into the network, thus bringing other dynamics into it; as other contexts, elements and environments are brought into play; and as discussions of politics of the boundary move research and intellectual lines into other configurations. Issues of training of students, practising anthropologists, public anthropologies, militant anthropologies, dissident anthropologies, ethics, activism and the like, will in all likelihood be broached at some point as part of the theoretical-political agenda of the network. Finally, we expect that this process will question at some point even the idea of an "anthropology" network and open up the structure to other inquiring systems about culture and cultural politics, whether in academic settings or outside them.

Notes

1. The WAN collective consists of Eduardo Archetti (University of Oslo), Eeva Berglund (independent researcher), Marisod de la Cadena (UC-Davis), Arturo Escobar (UNC-Chapel Hill), Penelope Harvey (Manchester University), Susana Narotzky (Universitat de Barcelona), Eduardo Restrepo (ICANH-Colombia; UNC-Chapel Hill), Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (Universidade de Brasilia), Sandy Toussaint, (University of Western Australia) and the participants in the WAN Seminars (Pall 2002) at UNC-Chapel Hill and the University of Brasilia.

2. The distinction between 'centre' and 'periphery' is complex, and it is not intended to be a seamlessly geographic one. Similarly we do not purport any kind of simple identity between 'peripheral' and 'subalternised' or 'central' and 'dominant'. We are concerned with the dynamic by which hegemony is established among anthropologies worldwide, thus producing the tendency for a singular anthropology, the dynamic for domination and subalternisation, and creating centres in peripheries, and peripheries in centres.

3. Code (1995), in a discussion on theories of knowledge, explores how 'rhetorical spaces' discourage social action.

4. Testimonio is a Latin American genre that became popular from the 1970s and has been used in efforts to denounce violations of human rights usually committed by military regimes or paramilitary forces. It implied the collaboration of an academic intellectual (usually European or North American) and a grassroots organiser. The most popular in the genre is the one produced by Rigoberta Menchu and Elizabeth Burgos Debray.

5 There have been, of course, expressions of concern with this situation in anthropology and other disciplines. The Gulbenkian report on the status of the social sciences, headed by Immanuel Wallerstein (Gulbenkian Commission 1996), already pointed at the need to revamp the knowledge production structures and practices of the social sciences in order to take account of the novel social orders on the rise. This report has been widely disseminated in some parts of the world, including Latin America, although much less so in the United States. At the meetings of the American Anthropological Association, sessions on the current status of anthropology occasionally hint at a similar predicament (see Nash 2002).

6 We do not intend to overlook the many differences within the United States or to suggest that such usage implies a normative construct. Indeed, one of our concerns is to explore concepts of 'difference' within anthropology and among anthropologists, and in the constructions of 'western' nation states.

7 This may be a difference between the project that WAN wants to be and previous criticisms from among Third World anthropologists. See, for example, discussions about 'indigenous anthropology' (Pahim and Helmer 1982), 'anthropologies of the South' (Krotz 1997) and 'peripheral anthropologies' (Cardoso de Oliveira 2000).

8 We borrow from an assortment of network theories, including actor network theory and theories of complexity and self-organization. While the proposal could have been written without reference to these theories, we want to acknowledge their utility in breaking away from ontologizing modes of thinking that reify categories and freeze up the ways of imagining the world.

9. We do not wish to construct a 'transnational' umbrella organization, nor a network of national organizations. Something like this already exists with the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, which functions relatively well for Europe and Latin America.

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