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Beyond political anthropology : studying and challenging power in the 21st century

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Rubrique "Penser les catégories, réfléchir les pratiques théoriques"

Dossier sous la direction de Riccardo Ciavolella, Sabrina Melenotte, Gianfranco Rebutini et Éric Wittersheim.

Introduction :

Au-delà de l'anthropologie politique / Beyond Political Anthropology. Introduction

Contributeurs :

Veena Das | Concepts of the Political

John Gledhill | Reflections on the Scope and Practice of Political Anthropology

Margaret Jolly | Power and the Politics of Anthropology

Silvia Posocco | Field-defying Political Anthropologies

Introduction

There are moments, in any individual lifetime, generation, or history of a civilisation, when it feels like we need different words to describe the changing world, and when old terms need new meanings.

A translation of wor(l)ds: not only from one language to another, but also from the old world that is dying to the new one that has yet to come. This is how Gramsci famously defined both a “translation” and a “crisis”. And it fits perfectly to describe our worlds today: the need to cross this middle passage to a new shore, to go beyond the economic crisis, beyond traditional representative institutions and current global governmentality, beyond the ecological collapse, and surely, beyond the Covid 19 pandemic which – like other health crisis which have affected (differently) more or less “lucky” regions of the world –, works like a detector of symptoms: it reveals and deepens all the other crises, but not always explains their roots and causes. This is where lie the very aims of the social sciences and the humanities (including researches debating with “natural” science, literature and arts): to offer a “radical” thinking, in its etymological meaning of going back to the root-causes; and to offer inspirations, but also practical tools, to imagine and build “that” beyond. But how is this possible, when these social sciences and

humanities are themselves considered to be in crisis?

This is also, more modestly, the situation of a reality that is presumed to lie behind and to be named by the expression “political anthropology”. The two words that constitute it – “anthropology” and “political” – refers to realities that urgently need our reconsideration: the place of the human in the world and in relation to all its creatures; and politics as a way to build that commune place and negotiate collectively that relation, through consensus or dissensus. When people (researchers, journalists, but especially students and new adepts) engage in some project related to political anthropology, they consider it as an extraordinary tool to grasp and interpret, from a situated or theoretical point of view, the different and nested crisis we are living. But at the same time, we feel increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of political anthropology as a disciplinary branch – with all the consequences of this conception that go

“against” our ways to conceive the practice of political anthropology: a narrowing specialized knowledge, against the need for a wider approach to the human condition and its possibilities; a knowledge with Eurocentric roots, and for long dominated by Western, male anthropologists, etc. We have the feeling that we have long been in the “post-” era (post-colonial or de-colonial, for example), even more if we think at some non-Western anthropological traditions. But the very term “post” still confesses our difficulty to formulate new paradigms and thoughts that go beyond the “old world” and make the leap towards the new one. We still need to find, elaborate and expand on new meanings of our work beyond its limits, barriers, and frontiers, whether national, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, social, racial, “natural”, etc., with all the methodological, but also epistemological implications of that.

For that reason, we suggested to start from the beginning, and to ask simply “what do you mean by *political anthropology*?” (see below) to some of the most influential and innovative scholars and intellectuals in the field (from our point of view): Veena Das, John Gledhill, Margaret Jolly and Silvia Posocco. We took the risk to ask them simple, basic questions, and even to be provocative with the *naiveté* of taking for granted that something called “political anthropology” could really exist. They all reacted refusing the idea that a tribe of experts of a 20th century disciplinary branch could survive unchanged or even be meaningful in our century; and this was only the starting point for eliciting incredibly rich replies, full of insights arising from political anthropology and going beyond it, defining it both as an individual experience and its future as a whole. We have been struck by the fact that, despite the differences in personal trajectories or theoretical and cultural backgrounds, all the four interviewed anthropologists share some common points about “political anthropology”: the need to definitively overcome disciplinary separations, developing a concept of politics that goes well beyond any Eurocentric, philosophical or juridical idea of institution or authority to think it from and among “people(s)”; the need to completely integrate all the critical turns of the last decades, and even to return to the founding texts and concepts of the discipline to seriously discuss them; the need to overcome any boundary between traditional “area studies” while reinforcing and opting for a rooted, situated and inductive perspective of anthropological thinking; and the necessity to think to “science” as inevitably embodied in the personal trajectory of the anthropologist and in the social, cultural and political contexts of people met on the field; inextricably relate knowledge to the experience of alterity and to an existential commitment with the world (militant, intellectual, artistic, emotional, etc.) which is, ultimately, a *political* way of doing anthropology.

The Indian anthropologist Veena Das (Johns Hopkins University) opens this series of four interviews with a warning about the pitfalls of producing knowledge that evacuates contemporary political (and colonial) issues. She is surprised by the resurgence, particularly in economics and security studies, of the now canonical division between stateless (or segmentary) societies and societies with centralized authorities, without taking into account the numerous criticisms addressed to whom have been considered a long time as the “founding fathers” of political anthropology. Das highlights the problematic use of these old categories, through a specific case study she refutes by showing the major epistemological and political consequences of such reinterpretations: in order to explain contemporary conflicts in Africa, these analyses argue that ethnic groups are based on stronger kinship and that segmentary lineage societies would be more prone to conflict than those without segmentary lineage structures, totally evacuating the role of the (colonial) state in this violence. Thus, Das invites us both to take a salutary critical look at the foundations of the discipline and to “descend into the ordinary” in order to privilege empirical observation over the use of erroneous hypotheses.

John Gledhill (University of Manchester) is undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in political anthropology, both for its ethnographic researchers on resistance and social movements in Latin America (especially Brazil and Mexico) and for his contribution to a critical theory of politics in a globalized world. Emeritus Professor at the University of Manchester, one of the centers of birth and development of Political Anthropology, he has immensely contributed to the renewal of the discipline and the critical reflection on its trajectory and evolutions, notably with some of the most important books for students and scholars. His contribution in this issue traces back the transformations of political anthropology in the last decades through its personal itinerary, by highlighting the new directions overcoming colonial legacies, and integrating critical perspectives and intellectual commitment with social movements.

A leading figure of Australian academia, and a world expert on Oceania, Margaret Jolly (Australian National University) has, along her 50-year long career, seen her discipline evolve from a mere interest for the “anthropology of women” to an intellectual field where gender studies and postcolonial approaches have reshaped the very meaning of “political anthropology”, and even anthropology itself. Margaret Jolly has done much more than just witnessing this evolution, both through her writings and through her strong investment in teaching at the Research School of Pacific Studies and the Gender Institute, which she convened for many years in Canberra. Her testimony, mixing historical insights and personal anecdotes, appears

like a journey through the contemporary world, that of a woman that has always been an engaged researcher and citizen.

For her own part, Silvia Posocco (Birkbeck, University of London) already belongs to that generation of anthropologists for whom the critique of biases of -centrism has been integrated for a long time. Her experience as a researcher in particularly difficult and/or engaging fieldwork allows her to consider a return without concessions to the very foundations of what it means to do politicised political anthropology and to the politics of anthropology. This is certainly a collective adventure before a personal one. Posocco gives us a fascinating account of the intellectual and human collaborations that have shaped her rich anthropological production on seemingly different themes such as political violence, genocide, reproductive work and queer kinship, bio- and necropolitical racism and the decolonisation of sexualities, but all of which have in common her attention for the “counter-, cross- and dis-identificatory passions of field-*defying* scholarly work”.

After reading the responses of our guests, we could say that, if our core question “what do you mean by *political anthropology*?” was a *naïve* one, it is now clear that it can sometimes be worthy to be naïve. To conclude, in order to give readers the opportunity to appreciate the debate we wanted to foster, we transcribe below the questions we asked to these four anthropologists. Nevertheless, we gave contributors a large *marge de manœuvre* in building up their replies; and they even take (and claim) much more freedom. We are immensely grateful to them for this “indiscipline”.

1/ Definition:

“What is political anthropology for you? How do you understand both anthropology and politics (or the political): what is politics (or the political) and what does anthropology mean to you?”

2/ Legacies:

“Does your research in political anthropology voluntarily relate to, or at the contrary, break with one or (m)any disciplinary traditions (as places for teaching, working and carrying out fieldwork)?”

3/ Contexts and fields:

“How does the specific (political and disciplinary) context of your fieldwork shape your own approach of the political anthropology you are conducting?”

4/ Role:

“What do you think is the role of the political anthropologist both in the public and intellectual debate? Which are the “solicitations of the present” (authoritarian regimes, repressions, revolts or revolutions, riots, social mobilizations and protests, etc.) that make political anthropology important for our contemporary societies? How does the present affect or disrupt research, methodologies, engagements, interpretations and theories? How do you position yourself in relation to commitment and political transformations ? Do you find it necessary or inevitable a dialogue with social movements? If so, why and what for?”