American Anthropology and the Central/East European Post-socialist Anthropologies: Immutable Mobiles and Mutable Immobiles?

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The problem raised by the organizers of this panel is the circulation of American anthropological knowledge. What role does American anthropology play in the local economies of anthropological knowledge? Below I will also offer some elements about post-socialist contexts. Rephrasing the questions that organizers raised, I ask if American anthropology runs the risk of being an ‘immutable mobile’ in its global circulation, i.e. it circulates a lot, but it does not interact with local anthropological knowledge. Are ‘native’ Central and East European anthropologies, on the other hand, ‘mutable immobiles’, exposed to hyper-mutability of a colonial kind, and not circulating elsewhere? My answer is the usual anthropological answer: “it’s more complicated.” The answer is both yes and no.

While there are significant differences between American and local anthropologies, such as those mentioned by Katherine Verdery in her presentation, there are also similarities. The ethos of American and CEE anthropologies has been different for a good number of years, but, at least for the Boasian moment, they shared common genealogies with the German cultural, geographic, philological and hermeneutic sciences of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. While it is true that Franglus is more comparative because they had many colonies to compare, the Germans have their own colonial history, as well as liberal, non-national-building and non-empire building anthropology in Australia, Papua New Guinea, Africa, Amazon, North America. The humanist, liberal, non-evolutionary, non-empire building and non-nation building tradition of 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century
scholars like Herder, Georg Forster or Alexander von Humboldt, stand in stark contrast to their European evolutionist contemporaries and to the post-1900s nation-building anthropologists (Bunzl and Penny 2003:2). Moreover, German language and social sciences were in the late 19th century “the international academic lingua franca” (Gingrich 2005: 62), as one can notice from the frequent references to German scholars in the work of Boas, Durkheim or Malinowski. There are also common roots of German philological and interpretative sciences for American anthropology and social sciences prior to WW II and national traditions in CEE. The cultural particularism encouraged by the German tradition as a reaction to the universalism of the first Enlightenment was common to both American and CEE anthropological traditions at the turn or 19th century.

Another similarity between the American anthropology and post-socialist anthropologies is the current explosion of the Malinowskian fieldwork project into a variety of ethnographic strategies. The reflexive turn of the 1980s and its aftermath revealed the multiplicity of positions, routes and subjectivities which constitute the experience of fieldwork.

Post-socialist ethnographic practice underwent a parallel turn. Folkloric and sociological fieldwork dominated, indeed, the local emerging anthropological field the 1990s, but this is less true for the 2000s. It is also true that most East European anthropologists practice anthropology at home, which, by American financing standards is unacceptable. NSF for instance, as we all know, does not finance fieldwork carried out in the US. But there are many recent developments, which have radically weakened the hegemony of folklore studies, opening many other fieldwork trajectories. Many local anthropologists, some trained in Western universities, other trained in
East or Central European ones accompanied the East to West migration of Poles, Romanians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Gypsies. Europe is, in a way, ‘anthropologised’ by Central and East Europeans who carry out fieldwork in Ireland, Italy, Spain, France or Germany. Then there are also CEE anthropologists who carry out fieldwork in neighboring countries. There are Romanian anthropologists who carry fieldwork in Bulgaria or Serbia among Romanian minorities there, or Hungarian anthropologists who study the Hungarian minority in Romanian or poor neighborhoods in Bucharest. Successful CEE anthropologists, trained in US universities, carried out anthropology at home and produced valuable works, widely recognized in the US anthropology. Alexei Yurchak of UC Berkeley is one example. Compared with American anthropologists, Central East Europeans have an inversed geographic fieldwork career. Many local anthropologists start by studying their own society in the first part of their career and later on move on to study another society. US anthropologists generally start by studying abroad and only in the second part of their career do they study in the US. Then, there are also Central and East Europeans whose first main fieldwork is abroad, via PhD programs from UK, Canada or US. I have colleagues in Romania who study fashion in Iran, cigar industry in Cuba, family firms in Italy, land-tenure in Ghana, fake clothing in Turkey, politics in Moldova, or ethnicity in Georgia, pharmaceutics in the US or marriages and intimacy in Japan. At this pace, the moment when Central East Europeans will study not Native American reservations or NYC or other ‘marked’ places, but regular US suburbs, might arrive soon.

Therefore, I think that the organizers of the panel are right to speak of ‘hybrid actors’ at the encounter between Western and non-Western anthropologies. These multiple ethnographic trajectories, however, are not imperialistic. Some are dependent on American and/or Western
anthropologies; others, on the contrary, are rather independent of vis-a-vis Western anthropology and dependent upon the changing fabric and dynamics of post-socialist societies.

Audit/evaluation culture, along with the “explosion” of fieldwork, is another similarity between American, post-socialist and probably other local anthropologies. Laszlo Kurti, a Hungarian anthropologist, reports that in CEE “being cited, or having a recognition of one’s work by others may have serious repercussions in terms of academic advancement, hiring or scholarliness as defined in various national settings. This is even more serious as the impact factor or citation index are fast becoming the standard of measurement of scholarly work in most countries by now.” (2008: 33) In Romania, through the 2009-2012 neo-liberal reforms in higher education, being cited in an ISI (Web of Science) indexed journal adds more points to one’s overall promotion chances than writing a book or even writing an article in a mainstream ISI journal. The first time when I ever heard of ISI indexed journals was not while I carried out my doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, but only after I returned to Romania in 2004, where it was quickly becoming the new gold standard. Books published in Romania are taken into account, according to the existing legislation, only if they are too be found in 12 university libraries from the “civilized world”, i.e. member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (i.e. European Union, Russia, US, Canada). Such dogmatisms do not spring from American anthropology, not even from the US at all. In Romania, the promoter of this reform was a Romanian-born, French-trained chemist, who prior to turning to domestic politics held research positions in Germany. Post-socialist breeds of anthropology share in that respect the same problem of voice as French, German or third- and fourth- tier universities from the US. The
culprit is not the American academic environment per se; rather, its origins and most extreme forms are to be found in the British audit system and assessment exercises.

It would also be mistaken to think that American anthropology is equally influential throughout the world, so as to gain imperial status. Many studies indicate that the scale of globalization is actually regional. Globalization occurs at a smaller geographical scale, covering the Americas for the US, European Union for the most powerful European economies and Asia for Japan. Post-socialist, Western-dependent anthropologies are far from homogeneous. In Europe, should there be any form of domination, it is British anthropology is the most visible, as witnessed by the occasional attacks of British-trained and British-dependent anthropologists on American anthropologists working in post-socialist societies. There is a hostile admiration of Europeans towards American anthropologists, but it seems to me that there is also resentment, encouraged probably by the intra-European financing research structures.

One could get a sense of this from the simultaneous coverage by the same anthropologist in the February 2011 issue of the UK based journal *Anthropology Today* of the 2010 conventions of European Association for Social Anthropology (about 1000 participants) and the American Anthropological Association (about 6000). The author, Hayder Al-Mohammad, writing about the European convention, concludes that “this conference was successful in the way it facilitated in-depth presentation and discussion of cutting-edge research of this kind [about nature]. That such conferences take place across European borders and in a variety of European settings is a bonus.” (2011a:25) The AAA convention report, on the other hand is experienced like a Kafkaesque experiment: “Perhaps I have become too irritable with the anthro-babble most of us now speak. I
decided that, like Josef K. in Kafka’s *The Trial*, I would go through every door. The more panels I went to, the better the odds of coming across simple, interesting, well-constructed papers. […] 

As I opened the door on to my fourth panel, I heard a presenter informing his audience that ‘…the city is a *becoming*…’ I shut the door quickly and hard – for a moment or two I thought about locking it. A panel or two later a 15-minute paper managed to mention the following names in the opening salvo: Derrida, Agamben, Deleuze, the double-act Hardt and Negri, Zizek, and I think I heard a Badiou somewhere in there. I got up and left.” (2011b: 26)

Such divides are also felt in the Romanian anthropological conventions which I attend. There is, for instance, a process of chain migration of PhD students to UK universities, especially UCL. Much of their sensibilities usually ignore and sometimes look down upon American theoretizations of post-socialism in anthropology. Central European University’s department of Anthropology, a kind of regional clearing-house for graduate studies in Eastern Europe has only a modest regional focus, although the vast majority of students are Central and East Europeans.

Anthropology has for long constructed itself as a project of cultural translation. For non-Western academics, anthropology is a process of reverse and double translation. ‘Native’ anthropologists need to translate into Western academic and cultural categories and sensibilities their own individual and societal categories. Only then have they access to other non-Western local idioms. From this standpoint, for me at least, reading the works of American anthropologists based on fieldwork carried out in Romania was immensely helpful. I began reading anthropology in Bucharest as a social science major undergraduate, back in the 1990s. Across the entire post-socialist world, that was a period when, to quote Steven Sampson, “all things are possible,
nothing is certain.” During the ‘post-socialist period’, because of the sudden political and economic collapse, many social structures became weaker or collapsed altogether and agency gained a heightened role. Reading American ethnographies of Romania, especially the freshly translated book, *National Ideology under Socialism* and later *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next* by Katherine Verdery, helped me develop both a cognitive framework of and a critical distance for metropolitan historical processes, structures and cultural categories. That, in turn, helped me have access to transformations underway in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria or Albania.

Therefore, coming back to the way I rephrased the points raised by organizers of the panel is American anthropology a “immutable mobile?” Immutable, yes, mobile, less so. Are local anthropologies “mutable immobiles?” Mutable yes, but not necessarily gravitating towards American anthropology. Immobile less so.
References

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