

## Teaching public anthropology

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### Abstract:

Utilising George Stocking's distinction between empire-building and nation-building anthropologies, Mihăilescu situates the status of anthropology in Romania in the predominant national ideologies in the countries of Southeast Europe. He acknowledges the precarious position of the discipline in the national context and points to the fundamental question anthropology should be preoccupied with: "anthropology, what for?". He then advocates for a kind of public-friendly anthropology that can increase its community outreach by blending the anthropological gaze with the needs of the general public to produce an informed and broader demand of the discipline in the public space.

**Keywords:** teaching, public anthropology, ethnology, public space, power asymmetry

### Anthropology's national heritages

From its very beginning, anthropology was present across Europe under different names (physical/biological anthropology, social/cultural/structural anthropology, folklore, ethnography, ethnology, the German couple of *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde*, etc.) and, before obtaining its autonomy, was institutionalized in different ways (included in history, philology, philosophy or geography faculties or research centres). It was also taught, starting with the beginning of the 20th century, in different ways and under different institutional circumstances and academic traditions (Dracklé et al., 2003). An approximate geography of the discipline would show a concentration of anthropology's incidence in the West (more precisely in old (empire)-states), and a prevalence of folklore and ethnography in the East (more precisely in the so-called "young nations"). What prevailed in the East was what the international conference of European "folk ethnographers" held in 1955 in Arnhem suggested to call "national ethnologies" – see Hofer, 1968). Central European countries were also focused on "national ethnology" but developed also some kind of "non-colonial anthropology". Strangely enough, an institutional divide still persists throughout Europe, between the elder SIEF (International Society for Ethnology and Folklore), established in 1964, and the younger EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists), founded in 1989.

This does not imply a clear-cut opposition between "West" and "East". It does not mean that "ethnography" and/or "ethnology" were not present in Western countries: Societies of Ethnology, for instance, were founded in France (1838), United States (1842), Great Britain (1843) and Germany (1851), with shifting and frequently confusing aims and contents. The same was true for Central European countries: ethnographic/ethnological societies were organized in Poland (1895), Czechoslovakia (1893), and Hungary (1889). Some type of anthropology was nonetheless present in Central and Eastern Europe. "Social and cultural anthropology was lectured within ethnography and ethnology curricula in many countries for a long time or in special courses in the 1970s and '80s (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania), and anthropological texts were also translated" (Sárkány, 2002: 558). In Romania, for instance, the erudite anatomist Francis Reiner founded the Institute of Anthropology in 1939 as museum and research centre of physical anthropology. It is in this same institute that Vasile Caramelia organized a small department of cultural anthropology in the 1970th, also giving a course and organizing short collective anthropological fieldworks at the Faculty of Philosophy in Bucharest; it was a total exception, but it nevertheless offered some young scholars the possibility to draw on anthropology in their later career. In several central European countries, dominant national ethnology coexisted with sui generis non-colonial anthropology, as was the case, for instance, of a bunch of Africanists doing fieldwork before and even during communism (Skalník, 2016).

But was it about the same discipline that these different labels were all about? In this respect, Antoaneta Olteanu is stating that "in Romania there is no specific individuality of cultural anthropology as a study subject. In some

respect, its objectives were fulfilled by research in the field of folklore and ethnography. That is why we can talk, in this respect, about anthropology at home” (Olteanu 2008). In his turn, Gheorghiu Geană is reflecting in a much more convincing way about the Romanian experience in doing anthropology at home (Geană, 1999). But were “national ethnology” and/or the Romanian Monographic School, practicing collective in-depth community fieldwork, anthropology “at home”, i.e. anthropology essentially the same as the Western one, with the only difference that it was practiced “at home”? Or were these different disciplines, or at least significantly different approaches? To phrase it in Čarna Brković’s less polarised way: how is it possible that, depending on sociohistorical and geopolitical points of view, practices, and relationships, ethno-anthropological sciences could be both the same and different? (Brković, 2018).

It was – and still is – a heated debate, and there are different approaches to handle it. Nevertheless, I think that the most appropriate one is the political approach proposed by Stoking through the difference between empire-building anthropology and nation-building anthropology (Stocking, 1982). Paul Rabinow is right when stating that “the social sciences have been linked – and will continue to be linked – in multiple ways with policy and politics for as long as they have been (or are) in existence” (Rabinow, 2011:115). As any other social science, anthropology, both engaged and academic was – and still is – embedded in a political project, and has to answer to the same up-stream question: anthropology, what for? Epistemologies as well as methodologies are, at least to some extent, down-stream consequences of this inaugural positioning. In the case of young nations’ ethnography, folk studies, national ethnology, whatever their institutional name may be, what was at stake was indeed nation-building. This was true even in post-imperial, republican Turkey, where “the discipline was conceived more as a nation-building device than a scientific endeavour” (Özbudun, 2011: 112). Their aim was mainly the same: documenting the past of the nation in order to legitimate its continuity and unity, i.e. its political claims at nation-state building and autonomy. In order to achieve this aim, their methodology was also very similar: doing empirical research (fieldwork) mainly in their own village or neighbourhood; the sample of their (more or less) local findings was then presented as “national”. Was this “back-and-forth fieldwork” or “extended stay”? (see Brković and Hodges, 2015). In fact, this distinction is rather confusing in this case, given the fact that most “national ethnologists” or “nation-building anthropologists” were doing empirical research (fieldwork) in their own village or neighbourhoods; even when doing their investigation in some more remote communities, they were still “at home” and could stay, go away and return whenever they pleased. Being “at home”, also meant that there was not the case of any kind of othering of their subjects; on the contrary, being committed to the nation-building process, these academics were in fact identifying themselves with the co-nationals they were observing, the relation between observer and observed being rather similar to a love story. No wonder that nothing similar to the culpability of empire-building anthropology was developed in these cases – and that no consistent initiative of post-national self-critique, similar to the post-colonial one, took ground in the South-Eastern European (SEE) region (Todorova, 1997).

Last but not least, another aspect SEE national ethnologies have in common is that none of them were systematically interested in what it might have in common with any other, for the simple reason that all of them had the same aim: to frame national specificities out of such possible regional similarities. And it is worth adding that even recent collective critical reviews of “national ethnologies” of the region usually miss an integrated (i.e. comparative) critique, rather placing national ethnologies side by side in successive chapters dedicated to one national ethnology/anthropology after the other. A side effect is thus the fact that most of the national researchers in SEE managed to find out a lot about Western anthropologies and anthropologists but know almost nothing about neighbouring ethnologies and ethnologists.

### **Anthropology is coming to the SEE. The Romanian case**

As noticed by Mihaly Sharkany, in Central and Eastern Europe “most university departments and research institutions that bear the name social or cultural anthropological were established after 1990” (Sárkány, 2002: 558). Even in countries like Hungary, where Western kind of anthropology had some tradition, it was only after the fall of communism that cultural anthropological departments were established at the universities of Budapest (1990) and Miskolc (1993) and the specialisation in cultural anthropology was possible at the University of Pécs (Sárkány, 2002). And even capitalist Greece saw the first entries of undergraduates in anthropology after 1990 (Tsantirooulos, 2014). Anyhow, it was a new wave of anthropology, a post-colonial, post-modern and deconstructivist one, bringing a fresh approach on social problems. First of all, it helped a highly needed and desirable deconstruction of national-communist myths. For the professional ethnologists, it also meant imposing in a way from outside a post-national critique they were not able to achieve from inside: in a paradoxical way, the new anthropological approach was de-nationalizing while colonizing the social discourse. In countries with

stronger anthropological tradition, this situation determined established anthropologists to express their discontent with what they perceived as asymmetrical and patronizing power relations with Western anthropologists. The exchange of articles between Michał Bukowski and Chris Hann (Buchowski 2004, 2005; Hann 2005) is already a kind of paradigmatic frame of these mushrooming polemics.

In the case of Romania, where no professional anthropologists really existed in 1990 and all to-be anthropologists were trained in the West, no such critique was formulated against Western anthropology as being “patronizing”. But on the other hand, this newcomer Western-rooted anthropology soon entered into conflict with the established national ethnology.

Being compromised to some extent by their contribution to the legitimation of national communist propaganda, folk studies stepped back from the main academic scene just after the fall of communism but recovered a decade later under the new brand of ethnology, and its new association: The Romanian Association of Ethnological Sciences (ASER) was launched in 2005. During all this time, even if losing power, the field preserved its institutions and people. Some former folklorists converted to anthropology, but most of the scholars regrouped around the Romanian Academy, which sustains both their knowledge production and legitimacy as promoters of the “real traditions” of the nation – an increasing state and public demand due to growing nationalist cum populist attitudes in recent Romania.

On the other side, lacking an autochthonous model and having to build itself from scratch, post-communist socio-cultural anthropology had to assume the Western status and brand, and to professionalize according to this model. Even if a national association (The Society of Social and Cultural Anthropology – SASC) was founded in 1990, anthropology was lacking both people and institutions. Only a few anthropologists took some academic positions in the universities with anthropological departments, MA programs or just some anthropology courses; most of them are currently abroad or in a lasting state of projectariat (Baker 2012).

De facto, the two disciplines barely communicate; each one has its own conferences, publications, and publics, as can be seen from Table 1, below:

**Table 1:** Comparison between SASC and ASER

	No. of Members	Average age	Affiliation	Publications in Romanian.	Publications in foreign language/ Romanian	Publications in foreign language.
<b>SASC</b>	96	36	Universities, Doc and post-doc.	36%	23%	41%
<b>ASER</b>	107	56	Folklore centers, Museums, Colleges.	84%	10%	6%

De jure, there are some attempts to officially bridge (or melt...) the two disciplines by mixed teaching: see, for instance, the ecumenical MA program in Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology and Folklore at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest, but also the classes in different branches of anthropology offered by different curricula of ethnology, folk studies and/or cultural studies departments. Nevertheless, “trans-border” cooperation does exist, but mainly on personal bases.

Whatever their affiliation and regardless the fact that they are doing fieldwork in Romania, younger scholars have to look for their legitimacy mainly abroad: according to the fetish criteria of evaluation imposed by the Ministry of Education, to achieve the satisfactory standard of professionalism, one needs to publish in ISI-ranked publications and conferences (Romanian Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research 2016). In 2012 anthropologist Liviu Chelcea would notice a development which is increasingly valid today: “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 [in Romania]. 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” (Chelcea, 2012). This strange research policy is by all means part of the Western “audit culture”, but the way it is underscoring national journals and conferences was by no means exported or imposed by the West; it is rather a version of what Alexander Kiossev calls “self-colonizing” (Kiossev, 1999).

## Teaching Anthropology in Romania

All in all, while a good number of Western-trained anthropologists returned to Romania and helped make anthropological discourse fashionable to some extent in the last years, there is not yet a real strategy and demand for anthropology in Romania, neither a labour market, nor a proper public: anthropology doesn't work and anthropologists don't find work. In this context, the main question is still the same generic one: anthropology, what for? Why, what, for whom and how should anthropology be taught in this case?

### **Why?**

Leaving apart the individual anthropological career projects (I'm teaching/learning anthropology because I love anthropology), there is no country project in which anthropology is or could be involved and anthropology is not embedded in any kind of political project. Neither is it the object of a curricula strategy. In fact, wherever anthropology has entered university, it was due to personal offer and lobby of some scholars, and not as an academic demand. Everywhere, these newly founded anthropological units were undermined with more or less success by ethno-nationalist groups of power. Nevertheless, anthropology in Romania has not been the subject of a state policy of eradication, as was recently the case in Poland (see Goździak and Main, 2018). It is precisely in this context that teaching anthropology matters, being also a civic stake: its intrinsic gaze also offers political power that helps undermine nation-centric representations and attitudes in academia and society.

### **What?**

While producing a tremendous convergence, globalization also brought with it corresponding "glocal" differences. In this context, even if limited to the national space, studying and teaching anthropology about one's own society means addressing glocal realities. As such, this new "anthropology at home" is no more nation-building or nation-centred, but cosmopolitan in its essence: in order to understand what is going on in one's own society, an anthropologist also has to look around the world. This glocal-centred approach also helps de-marginalise anthropologies on the periphery and helps bring them on the common stage of an anthropological oikumene, as more and more anthropologists are pleading for starting with the 1990th (e.g. Krotz, 1997; Restrepo and Escobar 2005; Ribeiro and Escobar, 2006), or, in the case of Europe, "to go beyond the prevalent divisive discourse toward a trans-national ethnology/anthropology of Europe", as advocated by Jasna Čapo (2015: 55).

### **For Whom?**

For a captive audience of students wanting to embrace an anthropological career, of course. But there is only little demand for what Burawoy would call, in his division of labour, a "professional" anthropology (Burawoy, 2005: 9). This is the reason why only the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Bucharest managed to keep both a BA and a MA program in anthropology. Anyhow, all these anthropology enthusiasts are choosing to complete their studies abroad.

For whom else? For BA students in other social disciplines and for an open audience of MA students coming from a diversity of humanities and social sciences (philology, architecture, journalism, economy, communication studies, marketing etc.) but also from corporate or NGO milieus, and who are attracted to anthropology without any intention of changing their profession or job. For most of them it is not mere curiosity, but a kind of personal need to look at their field of interest and professional practice from a more comprehensive point of view – and they perceive anthropology as being a promising and enlightening choice in this respect. These two years of "anthropologisation" help them indeed, not only in changing their own "world view", but also in challenging canonical approaches in their basic social and professional milieu: by no means are they full-fledged anthropologists, but they may approach and deal with social problems around them in an anthropologically-minded way.

Last but not least, teaching anthropology may be directed to a general audience, indirectly thanks to former MA students, as well as directly, through self-organized public events (public conferences, articles, books, counselling etc.).

### **How?**

By anthropology's *voie royale* of translation, i.e. translating one's own and others' field work interpretations into the supposed "universal" language of the anthropological "professional knowledge", when addressing the to-be-professional public of the anthropological career-seeking students, or into largely comprehensive discourses, when addressing the public at large. In a way or another, this is what anthropology always did. It was the case not only in the "exotic" contexts of empire-building anthropology, but in nation-building contexts too. It is still translation what a Romanian ethnologist like Ernest Bernea, for instance, did when, based on his empirical

fieldwork research in Romania, he presented to his Romanian cultivated audience the way Romanian peasants were representing space, time and causality (Bernea, 1985): “The fact is that most anthropology has been “engaged” and “public” in intention – and thus, in a general sense, applied – whether or not that intended public saw it as legitimate and authoritative and whether or not the anthropologist’s job description called for application” (Field and Fox, 2007).

I take for granted that after decades of post and post-post-colonial self-critique, anthropologists are well aware of what textualisation of an oral society may imply and of the multiple ways one can get trapped in translation. But sometimes, as in this case, translation is just translation, i.e. an honest effort of mutual comprehensiveness between an expert and the general public or different segments of it.

### **Why Teach Public Anthropology?**

In a society like Romania, where anthropology has a meagre audience, teaching public anthropology could prove to be a worthy strategy. But what does “public anthropology” really mean? What I intend in this case by “public anthropology” is not the equivalent of “public sociology” (Burawoy, 2005, Kalleberg, 2005). Neither is it akin with the “hard” version of “public anthropology” as “anthropology of a critical nature” “wishing to pursue this approach to improving the human condition” (Maide and Beck, 2015: 1). In a way, but for different reasons, it is closer to Robert Borofsky’s “softer” approach of public anthropology as focused “on conversations with broad audiences about broad concerns” (Borofsky, 2007). In fact, public anthropology covers a large and confusing spectrum of meanings and usages. But, as resumed by Alan Jeffrey Field, “aside from the potential abuse of the term ‘public anthropology’, I think it is a useful trope for one important reason: it calls attention to the fact that there is a division between public and academic perceptions. The fusion of ‘public’ and ‘anthropology’ into a common trope underscores a very real need for the general public to embrace anthropological ways of thinking, and conversely, for anthropology to embrace the general public as a worthwhile audience” (Fields, 2001).

How could this kind of public-friendly anthropology be used and useful in teaching anthropology in general? My personal experience in this respect would suggest at least four substantial ways:

1. Teaching students to address current social issues (and, in this case, starting anthropology not with its history, but by addressing present issues through the anthropological looking-glasses and by grassroot fieldworks).
2. Involving students in anthropology in non-anthropological research projects and the other way around.
3. Spreading such anthropological interpretation to a larger public by informed graduates in their professional milieu.
4. Informing the public or distinct segments of it by directly addressing them in extra-university communication (which also means a multi-layered translation).

In the particular present context of Romania (but I assume that not only in its case), this public-oriented anthropology aims to bring anthropology to a broader audience also in order to bring the public closer to anthropology, and thus to help producing an informed and broader demand of anthropology in the public space. All in all, this means to work for the future of anthropology in this given context.

Is this context an asymmetrical one? Of course it is, but asymmetrical power relations are the very milieu we all live in: social sciences are marginal to “hard” sciences, anthropology is marginal to more powerful social sciences such as history or sociology, anthropology at the periphery is indeed less powerful than metropolitan anthropology, some universities are marginal to other universities and all of them are dominated by bureaucratic audit culture. Unlike Buchowski’s legitimate complaints, the “stigmatized brother” syndrome (Buchowski, 2006) is not my concern: it is their problem. The only real stake and means of fighting back such unfair power relations is to be personally and institutionally committed to good and fair anthropology.

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