

WORLD ANTHROPOLOGY

Comment

Three Points about Current German Anthropology

Birgit Meyer

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, the Netherlands; B.Meyer@uu.nl

Born and raised in Germany, I still write this comment as a relative outsider to German anthropology. When, way back in the mid-1980s, I compared the programs of study in anthropology at German and Dutch universities, my choice was quickly made. Apart from intriguing approaches offered by the Bielefeld School and the scholars working around Fritz Kramer in Berlin and elsewhere, the overall German field struck me as somewhat old-fashioned. Eager to study anthropology both in relation to contemporary social and cultural transformations in Africa and from a critical angle problematizing the epistemic underpinnings of the discipline, in 1985 I enrolled at the University of Amsterdam. I studied with my back turned to Germany, but, over the past 15 years, I have engaged in frequent communication with colleagues in anthropology—especially Africanists—in Bayreuth, Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Leipzig, and Mainz. The analysis of developments in anthropology in Germany since the 1970s by Thomas Bierschenk, Matthias Krings, and Carola Lentz is very much to the point. Helping me to order my quite fragmented impressions (at least so far), it will prove to be even more useful for scholars who typically know much less about the specific features of anthropology in Germany, aptly characterized by the authors as “world anthropology with an accent.” In light of my current encounters with the German scene, I would like to make three points.

First, I wonder whether the process of internationalization through which German anthropologists embraced Anglophone (and, I would add, Dutch, Flemish, and French) approaches and concepts should be framed as slowly catching up, as suggested by the authors. Against the backdrop of my initial, admittedly ill-founded impression of German anthropology, I recognize the remarkable transition they want to highlight. However, I think that the image of a big jump forward evoked by “a slow catch-up” and the discourse of development attributes too much directionality to Anglophone anthropology and exaggerates its role as a pacesetter, while it casts German anthropologists as those lagging behind and only eventually catching up. I doubt that this temporalizing view does justice to the recent shifts in practices of

knowledge production in Germany described in the article, and I am even less convinced that they are right in ascribing a lead role to Anglophone anthropology (something that in and of itself underwent considerable fragmentation in the period described). Also, recognition that the work of scholars such as Fritz Kramer and Karl-Heinz Kohl to some extent prefigured the *Writing Culture* debate of the 1980s questions the adequacy of the choice of catch-up as a key trope.

Second, I would like to turn to a distinctive feature of German anthropology: its complicated relation to the discipline formerly called *Volkskunde* (folklore studies) and now often awkwardly and euphemistically referred to as *Europäische Ethnologie* (European ethnology), while, it should be remembered, the usual name for anthropology in Germany is *Ethnologie*. The authors convey a somewhat ambivalent stance (one that, according to my experience, is widely shared) with regard to the characteristic German separation of these fields. As they explain, this distinction does not hold for anthropology in the United States and Scandinavia (and I would add the Netherlands), where conducting research “at home” or somewhere in Europe has long been accepted as legitimate. Grappling with this typical German feature, the authors stress that anthropology ought to have an affinity with “the periphery” and that it should invest in foreign languages and gain specific expertise in area studies, which are strong and thriving in German academia. Yet, I note a somewhat condescending stance when they characterize research conducted in Europe as “a retreat into ‘anthropology at home,’” something that may “ultimately give epistemological priority to the global centers.”

While I very much agree with the authors that it should be a key concern of anthropology to question this epistemological priority, I do not agree with their suggestion that conducting anthropology “at home” would potentially work against this concern. In my view, insisting on the separation between these fields and exempting Europe (perhaps even exceptionalizing Europe) as a region for anthropological research make no sense in our increasingly diversified world with its mobile inhabitants. Many anthropologists conduct research in several regions or study people in Europe who migrated from various regions. With this in mind, any distinction between *Europäische Ethnologie* and *Ethnologie* strikes me as questionable and as one that perpetuates institutional arrangements arising from path-dependent

structures of knowledge production. I sense a tension here between affirming the existence of these structures and articulating a vision of the “future of anthropology as a symmetrical social science.”

This brings me to my third point. I very much agree with the authors that “anthropology is well positioned to be an instance of self-observation of global society.” Compared to a discipline such as sociology and similar generalizing disciplines with high aspirations to make universally valid statements, anthropology has an intrinsic alertness to the particular. This comes along with a critical interrogation of the theoretical and ontological premises that underpin the production of knowledge about our increasingly deeply entangled and instantly connected world. As the authors point out, in the German setting, anthropologists engage increasingly in multidisciplinary and transcultural or transregional research collaborations that aim to transcend the binary polarization usually framed as the West and the rest, which still informs a great deal of thinking in the social and cultural sciences. As I know from my own experiences with the German scene, various major institutional players (including the German research council) seriously invest in the

development of incentives to materialize new forms of transcultural and transregional cooperation between researchers and institutions in the Global South and North. The aim here, one also outlined by the authors, is to engage in alternative epistemic practices that challenge the supremacy of systematic, presumably general disciplines over the study of areas located outside the West and to push toward more symmetrical arrangements for knowledge production. Against the backdrop of these laudable endeavors, I find it all the more important to incorporate the anthropological study of European societies. In my view, the really important and daunting project concerns the critical input of anthropology into the fundamental rethinking of the structures of knowledge production in the 21st century. At stake is a process of opening up the social and cultural sciences to the world that moves further than mere internationalization, something that de facto usually means Anglophonization. In this regard, the German setting, with its new institutional arrangements that challenge hegemonies of knowledge production and enable new epistemic practices via transregional and transdisciplinary research, offers fascinating incentives that certainly deserve much broader international recognition and debate.