

ETHNOGRAPHY AT ITS EDGES

Anthropology with a philosophical sensibility

Eraldo Souza dos Santos

Panthéon-Sorbonne University

Correspondence: eraldo.souza-dos-santos@etu.univ-paris1.fr

Philosophy on Fieldwork: Case Studies in Anthropological Analysis (Routledge, 2023), brings together as editors a philosopher, Thomas Schwarz Wentzer, and an anthropologist, Nils Bubandt, both from Aarhus University, in an exercise in thinking about how philosophy can be generative in anthropological analysis. Across 26 chapters, anthropologists explore the thought of one, *and only one*, philosopher in and through their fieldwork. In the editors' words, "We (...) asked all authors to frame their analysis monogamously, as if they inhabited an imaginary world in which only one philosopher mattered" (p. 4). These chapters are conceived as "concrete analytical 'master classes'" introducing readers to a philosopher's life and thought as well as exemplifying how philosophy can be used in anthropological research and offering useful lists of suggested readings (p. 2). Many of such master classes finely show not only the limitations, but also the ethnocentric, racist, and sexist underpinnings of the philosophies under discussion. The book is thereby intended to be a useful tool for students and teachers of both anthropology and philosophy.

Thanks to its focus on individual philosophers, it is said to be especially helpful for beginning anthropologists in the face of the fact that “the combination of strong ethnographic loyalty and theoretical eclecticism in contemporary anthropology entails a set of didactical difficulties which have increasingly become the student’s own problem” (p. 6). The varied, rich chapters of the handbook enable the readers in this regard to gain “a peek into the anthropological cabinet of philosophically informed analysis that all experienced anthropologists have accumulated” (p. 8). The handbook can thereby help anthropologists, beginners or otherwise, who do not have a background in philosophy to build or broaden their philosophical repertoire. It can notably also contribute to showing philosophers, beginners or otherwise, how the reality of fieldwork illuminates or problematizes old-fashioned, established philosophical ideas. Despite its merits, however, the editorial project behind the handbook can be not only didactically counterproductive, but can also contribute to reproducing the same power dynamics in the formation of the disciplinary canons that contemporary anthropologists and philosophers have actively denounced.

One philosopher per chapter, please

The editors’ “one-philosopher-per-chapter-please” requirement (p. xi) is arguably reductive, even on didactical grounds. It can, despite the editors’ intentions (p. 9), lead to the idea that philosophical concepts and frameworks are to be applied or tested on the field, and not potential theoretical tools. It can also serve to entrench the idea – common, indeed, among philosophers, as the editors suggest (p. 6) – that a determined philosopher can and should orient all our reflections about a certain topic or question, and that researchers should mainly dedicate their scholarship to the in-depth study of one, and only one, philosopher, even if their ultimate aim is to reveal, as many contributors in the

handbook do, the limitations of the philosophical frameworks at stake. The idea of “philosophical monogamy” can easily invite this conclusion. Believing that ethnographic fieldwork can be oriented by just one major philosopher is especially dangerous for students entering the field, as it can lead to early specialization in one philosopher or philosophical tradition to the detriment of the formation of a more extensive repertoire.

“Philosophical over-embellishment in anthropological analysis,” as in works in which “a poorly understood use of the concepts of one philosopher” is “‘saved’ with a quick ‘voice-over’ by another philosopher” (p. 9), is the main preoccupation of the editors, who argue that “too much philosophical gadgetry that restricts rather than promotes the imagination may drown out analytical quality in anthropology” (p. 9). To be sure, this is a problematic way of approaching philosophy in anthropological analysis and in the classroom. But “eclecticism” or “theoretical promiscuity” is not, as the editors argue (p. 5), a problem, per se; indeed – and most importantly from an analytical point of view – it is often required in the face of the theoretical questions a researcher faces, and it is key for students to be open to approaching their fieldwork having in mind the possibility (or probability) that their favorite philosophical approach may not help them understand it.

But the proposed “one-philosopher-per-chapter-please” approach is reductive in a more alarming way. Given the fact that most of the handbook’s chapters focus on the work of white, male, and Western philosophers, the idea of applying their ideas to anthropological fieldwork can easily lead to the reproduction of the colonial, patriarchal, and racial dynamics still underlying the practice of anthropology and philosophy in the present. As a didactical tool, the book can hence serve to further entrench prejudices surrounding what anthropology and philosophy consist of and, especially, who counts as a philosopher. To be sure, the editors – as well as at least some of the contributors – were

aware of this. I reproduce here in full the passage of the handbook's introduction in which the editors approach this issue, as it will be the focus of the discussion that follows:

“(…) we are acutely aware that our selection of philosophers could be read as portraying a certain intellectual chauvinism that appears to limit itself to a group of philosophers that is predominantly but not exclusively white and male. A mere five of the philosophers in the chapters that follow are not white or Western, although many of the philosophers in the remaining 21 chapters have a mixed and often troubled background that is at the heart of their philosophy. In spite of our best efforts to achieve a better gender balance, we also have to acknowledge that 21 of the philosophers that the chapters in this book bring on fieldwork are male, while only five are female. This selection seems to condone a mainly male, mainly white, mainly Western, and mainly dead hagiography of philosophy that works against contemporary attempts to decolonize and queer both philosophy and anthropological theory (Allen & Jobson, 2016; Haraway, 1997; McGranahan & Rizvi, 2017; Smith, 2012; van Noorden, 2017). There is no getting around that our curation of philosophers has a range of colonial, gender, and social biases, and there is no holy ground from which to defend these biases. A selection of mainly Western and male philosophers does reflect a colonial and patriarchal heritage and there are clearly historical power trajectories behind the history of why some people have become influential philosophers while others have not. Indeed, these are genealogies that many of the contributors we contacted, both those who ended up writing a chapter in the book and those who did not, were discommoded by and pointed out to us. Let us therefore restate the obvious: The table of content (sic.) of *Philosophy on Fieldwork* does not claim to represent a natural canon of

the great thinkers that one must know. It is a result of a stochastic process between whom we could think of and who interested the anthropologists we approached enough to write a chapter about. Just to mention a few examples, our ambition to recruit chapters on bell hooks, Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray, Edith Stein, and Martha Nussbaum stranded on a variety of practical and personal issues. Our plan to commission chapters on Bruno Latour, Emmanuel Levinas, Jürgen Habermas, Henri Bergson, and Emmanuel Tarde stranded for similar reasons” (pp. 13-14).

The scope of the handbook was, in this regard, limited by the fact that the editors – white, male scholars based in a European institution – “could” only “think of” and “approach” anthropologists (most of them white, male scholars holding professorships in Global North universities) who were mostly “interested” or “interested enough” in white, male, and Western philosophers, especially when confronted with the “one-philosopher-per-chapter-please” requirement. (It is notable, in this regard, that aside from three scholars, based in Australia, Brazil, and South Africa, all contributors are based either in Europe or in North America). This is indicative of the training of the invited contributors, most of whom were educated at institutions in which European or North American philosophical traditions were or are still influential. This is telling, too, about the kind of philosophical frameworks that orient a considerable amount of empirical research in the discipline.

Aside from the exception of Yanomami leader and shaman Davi Kopenawa (Chapter 20), all philosophers chosen by the editors and contributors are part of what Western departments of philosophy currently *accept* as philosophy, even in the cases in which the authors in question do not belong to the Western tradition, such as Confucius (Chapter 9) and Ibn Rushd/Averroës (Chapter 17). Even authors like “bell hooks, Donna

Haraway, Luce Irigaray, Edith Stein, and Martha Nussbaum” or Aimé Césaire (Chapter 8) are now entering the canon in many departments of philosophy across the world, as professorships in the fields of feminist philosophy and philosophy of gender and race gain more ground. All in all, the focus of the handbook – and of what it might have been, as the authors point out in the passage above – offers us a portrait of what *academic philosophy* is and is currently becoming. In this regard, the handbook reproduces the canon and current academic processes of canonization instead of more deeply challenging, as the references in the introduction to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (whose name is misspelled, pp. 10, 11, and 25) suggest, *who* can count as a philosopher and *what* can count as philosophy both from a philosophical and an anthropological point of view.

But despite these editorial shortcomings, the handbook offers throughout its chapters a more critical, productive perspective on how philosophy can shed light or contribute to fieldwork. Beyond the “one-philosopher-per-chapter-please” requirement, the chapters show that it is possible to conduct fieldwork – in and beyond anthropology – with a *philosophical sensibility*.

Philosophical sensibilities

In their recent work, Lisa Herzog, Matthew Longo, and Bernardo Zacka have invited political theorists to theorize with a more “ethnographic sensibility” (Herzog and Zacka, 2019; Longo and Zacka, 2019). Although they have conducted extensive fieldwork in workplaces (Herzog, 2018), among street bureaucrats (Zacka, 2017), and across the multiple sites where the US-Mexican border is actively produced and reproduced (Longo, 2017), they do not argue that all political theorists should go to the field. They should, however, take seriously the ethnographic research conducted by others.

In a similar fashion, I argue that what is at stake in the productive dialogue between anthropology and philosophy is a specific kind of *sensibility*. I propose in this sense that instead of focusing on a pedagogical project centered on specific philosophers (as the handbook's introduction and editorial project invite us to do), we should direct our efforts to consider how engagement with philosophy can be generative for those who engage, or are being trained to engage, in fieldwork. To be sure, there is nothing inherently problematic with works that directly engage with canonical philosophers. Zacka (2017), for example, compellingly mobilizes Pierre Hadot's and Michel Foucault's considerations on spiritual exercises in Ancient Greece to analyze the moral struggles that are typical of everyday work life for frontline social and welfare workers. In philosophy, Lisa Guenther (2013) draws on the phenomenological tradition (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Martin Heidegger, among others) to critically describe the lived experience of solitary confinement.

But beyond direct engagement with specific philosophers, I also have in mind here works that raise philosophical questions in view of the reality in the field. For example, Faisal Devji (2005), a historian of political thought, has sought to show that Al-Qaeda and other strands of militant Islam can only be properly understood through *ethical* instead of political categories (choice, duty, obligation, etc.). In anthropology, Viveiros de Castro's (2017) work similarly draws on key categories for both anthropology and philosophical anthropology, such as culture and nature, to shed light on the particularities of Amerindian perspectivism. And to come back to the so-called "classics" of the discipline, Pierre Clastres's (1990) reflections on "societies against the state" strongly relied, although not always through direct engagement, on the European philosophical tradition (see Moyn, 2004). The same can be said of other French anthropologists, such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Claude Lévi-Strauss (see Keck 2004 and 2008).

To have a philosophical sensibility cannot, therefore, be reduced to engagement with specific philosophers or philosophical traditions and frameworks. Instead, reading and engaging with philosophy can potentially broaden our theoretical *imagination* and *perception* in the field – as having an anthropological sensibility can expand our philosophical imagination and open new avenues of philosophical inquiry. The various chapters of the handbook are helpful and inspiring from this point of view, despite the “one-philosopher-per-chapter-please” imperative.

In his chapter about Kopenawa, Renzo Taddei shows, for example, how “unfamiliar ideas” – ideas that sound “known and strange at the same time” (p. 353) – can be the starting point for a fruitful discussion about the relationship between academic and non-academic philosophy as well as between philosophical reflection and anthropological fieldwork. Kopenawa does not, Taddei points out, “fit easily in any of the Western types – like that of a philosopher, as in this book” (p. 363). He is not an author or a thinker in the Yanomami cosmology, but “the medium through which the spirits of the forest philosophize” (p. 369).

Kopenawa argues that “Amazonian shamans have been working for quite some time to mitigate climate change in ways that non-indigenous persons (scientists included) *cannot see*” (p. 353); “what science can perceive, through technical means, is just what shamans were not capable of mitigating” (p. 354). What is at stake hence is an *epistemological* problem: non-indigenous epistemic frameworks, especially the ones oriented toward a technical apprehension of the world, make the work of Amazonian shamans – and the environmental problems they actively combat on the ground – *invisible*. But how to *see* otherwise? Taddei emphasizes that his previous experience in the field conducting research on the production of knowledge about the planet’s atmosphere “made me particularly *sensitive*” to Kopenawa’s critique of modern science,

including anthropology (p. 354, emphasis mine). Taddei would later discover that such a critique is part of a broader philosophical project, entailing an ontology as well as a “philosophy of language, a theory of perception, and a theory of the self” (p. 358). Kopenawa’s project emphasizes “the need for deconstruction and reconstruction of the way people think about perception and reality – as a precondition for being able to think anew about the environment” (p. 359). Here, Taddei’s anthropological sensibility is the starting point for the reconstruction of a neglected environmental philosophy. Kopenawa’s own philosophical sensibility contributes, in turn, to pushing the boundaries of what both the anthropology and the philosophy of science (can) consist of.

In his chapter on charismatics and peyotists (Chapter 22), Thomas Csordas invites us to decolonize Lévi-Strauss by “rereading *The Savage Mind*,” via Merleau-Ponty, “with a phenomenological sensibility” (p. 395). The “savage mind that animates language” (p. 395), in Merleau-Ponty’s words, would not be a characteristic of “primitive” thought – but the most “primordial” element to the very existence of human language. Merleau-Ponty’s “phenomenological sensibility grounded in embodiment” (p. 402) helps Csordas grasp “the musical sensibility underlying all linguistic expression” (p. 401) and thereby shed light on how the Native American Church as well the Catholic Charismatic Revival movement respectively practice peyote medical chanting and singing in tongues in praise of God. Beyond the mere application of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to fieldwork, Csordas argues,

The challenge for anthropology is to continue to develop a phenomenology grounded in embodiment that can not only elucidate the intimate experiential immediacy of fine-grained cultural phenomena as in the example I have discussed

here, but can also extend our understanding of their broader consequences for human freedom (p. 402).

Alan Klima shows, in his critical approach to Bataille's masculinist ideas of excess and eroticism (Chapter 5), that the French thinker's work *troubles* our usual conceptions of what counts as "proper objects" of anthropological inquiry. In Klima's words, Bataille's "method of taunting transgression and flagrant violation, (...) or any other similar abomination created by Bataille, would be incredibly challenging for an anthropologist to adopt" (p. 85). In his investigation about practices of mindful meditation in stress-reduction courses, Klima explores in this sense "how Bataille both possibly can, and possibly cannot, apply to anthropology" (p. 85) and "how Bataille-like expressions on the level of form, particularly transgressive and anti-systematic form, can apply to academic anthropology" (p. 98). The question can be raised, he adds:

"Because we can ask, what (...) would a 'proper' object be, especially given that if it feels proper, then almost by definition it is not. If there is no shock to our sensibilities, then there is no shock. If you get that, then you see what a gamble one has to take to undertake a Bataille-like approach" (p. 98).

In her "critical application" (p. 383) of Julia Kristeva's reflections on abjection (Chapter 21), Megan Warin reconceptualizes the lived experience of anorexia as a form of hunger: the "hunger to be empty" (p. 383), "empty and clean," often "pure" (p. 375). Working with people with a diagnosis of anorexia in Australia, Canada, and Scotland, Warin emphasizes that her fieldwork provoked in her at the same time "horror and

fascination” (p. 373). Similarly, abjection in Kristeva’s philosophy points toward at once to something repulsive and an object of desire, as desire “indicates movement away from some things and towards others” (p. 374). Kristeva helps Warin in this regard to not only understand her relationship with her informants, but also her informants’ relationship with food. This leads Warin to conceptualize the latter’s experience with anorexia in a new way: disgust and desire are used “to engage in a form of self-making” and empowerment (p. 375). This also leads her to see the “long-standing cultural fascination in the West with the spectacle of thinness, of both a horror and fascination with the limits of what a body can do” (p. 378) as part of the same dynamics of desire that Kristeva characterizes in her philosophy of abjection. Warin also exemplifies how philosophy with an anthropological sensibility can concretely take shape: Kristeva’s conception of abjection is indebted to Mary Douglas’s anthropological work on “dirt” and “classification” (p. 382). Although Kristeva plays a key role in Warin’s ethnographic approach to anorexia, it does not impede her from noting that Kristeva “refers to ‘primitives’ as those people who have a lot in common with European children, poets and psychotics” and that she subscribes to ethnocentric conceptions of human development (p. 387). Despite this, Warin argues, abjection is “like any theoretical concept, a useful abstract tool,” one that allows us to make sense of embodied existence (p. 387).

My intention in presenting these examples is to illustrate how a philosophical sensibility can concretely (dis)orient fieldwork and how anthropological fieldwork can fruitfully (dis)orient philosophical reflection. This iterative (pp. 5, 7), dynamic process can actively contribute to the decolonization of both fields by always pushing the boundaries of who counts as an anthropologist or a philosopher and what counts as an “object” of anthropological and philosophical inquiry.

Philosophy on fieldwork

Despite important reservations concerning the editorial approach behind the introduction and the editorial process, *Philosophy on Fieldwork* can be a helpful teaching tool. The chapters can serve as generative readings in undergraduate introductory courses on anthropological theory and fieldwork as well as courses on theory and epistemology of the social sciences more generally. In graduate seminars, both in anthropology and philosophy, the chapters can also be the starting point for productive discussions on interdisciplinary methodological approaches to fieldwork. Beyond the classroom, the handbook is an equally inspiring read: readers gain from chapter to chapter a deep understanding of the extent to which philosophy and anthropology only tend to lose by ignoring each other. The book successfully helps thereby to establish “a bridge between philosophical and anthropological thinking-practice that [leads] to a place neither could have imagined or visited on their own” (p. xi).

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