

Fieldwork After Ethnos
UC Irvine Center for Ethnography
December 6, 2013

Part I “Executive” Summary (Full notes follow)

On Thursday December 6th, a team from UC San Diego headed north to Irvine to check out the “Fieldwork After Ethnos” conference. As advertised, Tobias Rees (McGill) LINK gave a thoughtful paper exploring the forms assumed by fieldwork researchers are no longer interested primarily in ethnoi, the territorially imagined societies and cultures at the center of classical traditions of ethnography.

For those interested, you can find more details notes here, but I thought I would summarize some key points too.

So what characterizes fieldwork “after ethnos”?

- Interest in space (territory with culture, how people live ‘elsewhere’) → interest in time (events, emergence, assemblage)
- Fieldwork produces data → Fieldwork produces questions (so research happens ‘after’ to address surprises/questions that emerged in the field)
- Emphasis on surprises as a characteristic of fieldwork that produces knowledge
- Framework is emergent, cannot be explained based on already existing paradigm
- Cutting fieldwork loose from ethnography to open up new possibilities for research in anthropology

Basically, this is the difference between going to study the *effects* of neoliberalism on culture in Russian cities vs. going to Russian cities to question neoliberalism itself (as in Steven Collier’s Post Soviet Social) LINK. Or, the difference between doing an ethnography of geeks and an ethnography of open source software (as in Chris Kelty’s Two Bits).

Other people mentioned as doing this kind of work included Joe Dumit, Stephan Helmreich, Cori Hayden. At this point, I think the STS people in the room are kind of wondering what the big deal is here – isn’t this just what we are already doing?

Part way through the discussion, it finally comes out that almost no one in the room, including those presenting, currently have homes in anthropology departments though we all “like the anthropology community.” So, as ethnographic methods continue to permeate all kinds of disciplines, do these interventions need to take place in anthropology? Or are we content with supportive homes found elsewhere?

But not everyone agrees... does this position perhaps start with a rather limited (and classical) understanding of ethnography today? Ethnography is arguably better defined as the study of practices than of bound systems. But, in any case, not *all* anthropology should be ‘after ethnos.’

The day ends with the suggestion that we do a better job documenting what we mean by ethnos. The Greek definition even includes 'swarm,' meaning we could have an ethnos of bees! If ethnos does not have to be defined by current associations with race, class, gender etc., then maybe the solution is to reconfigure ethnos rather than divorcing it from fieldwork.

Part II. The Details

George Marcus Intro:

These themes immediately understood, but not sufficiently thought through in anthropology. What's distinctive about method about anthro research today is how it comes in to being. Commonalities of method: not so much ethnography, as fieldwork here. First projects, initiating self as professional researchers, as formative process. Everyone must begin. Introduce projects with fieldsite in mind (is different from comm and many STS people). After initiated, question of what the field is not same. Condition of fieldwork in professional anthro. Movement between first work (grad training must do fieldwork) and later.

- Fieldwork without Ethnos
- Idea that surprise is a characteristic of fieldwork, more than rhetorical trope, is a mode of production of knowledge.
- Operating within temporality of the emergent; frameworks created cannot be authoritative according to already established paradigm

Tobias Rees Paper:

Context of series of workshops:

Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary (with Paul Rabinow and George Marcus). What came after writing culture? Linear story up until writing culture, but what came after is open question. His claim: anthro has moved after ethnos. Is pretty radical. No longer interested in society or culture, but something else: difference in time. Are new things emerging today? That outgrow established ways of thinking and knowing? So what is fieldwork after ethnos? Surprise vs. emerge in society to get at underlying ideas. DOL between fieldwork and actual research that might come after fieldwork happens. Fieldwork/Time in Motreal. Fieldwork produces questions, research to answer later/elsewhere maybe archives/libraries. People not making this distinction, not doing research = third workshop. Fieldwork/knowledge as possible next. Final will be fieldwork/truth. Does athnro produce truth? Political/knowledge truth? Refusal to speak in name of truth.

Paper: Fieldwork/Research

3 articles about computers – not something athro traditional talked about.

I. Intro

Since late 1990s A after E – territorially imagined society and their cultures, that are not yet modern. As classical anthro, space, how people live elsewhere. After = time. Unforeseen, emergence, in fieldwork. Before, anthro = ethnography/ethnology. Cori Hayden, Chris Kelty, Stefan Helreich, Joe Dumit, work cannot be understood like that. Artificial life, bio prospecting, bits, brain scans etc. Need new tools. Accidentally cut loose A and E. So how method for difference in space can be used to look at time?

Key feature: space → time. What kind of time? Is no longer linear? What mean by difference? Wasn't classical anthro also looking at this? Is it beyond society and culture? (in Malinowski terms).

If fieldwork no longer get at something underlying, then what? Is it the end of centrality of fieldwork? Enter labs, clinics, offices closer to STS, feminism, Cultural Studies. New sites into fields previously thought beyond the discipline.

Liberated fieldwork form ethnography. Itself an intellectual practice. But lacks language for what means to do this. Workshop: inventory. Collier and Kelty answer separates fieldwork/ethnography/research.

II. Collier's work:

Fieldwork cannot be addressed as such. Russia. Soviet social city building. How defined this? (ie. Central regulated everything like heat). Testing sites for possibility of social cities. How to study this now? What arrival of neoliberal reforms mean. Presumed end of these cities, destroyed the social and free electricity, hot water. Found difference not prepared for. Reforms neoliberal – centralized power to local government and citizens as sovereign consumers. But, did not map in conventional way. Heat assumed basic need to be provided by state. Is surprised. So how to make sense: are neoliberal or not? Differently neoliberal, Russian variant? New questions: what IS neoliberalism?

Cuts loose fieldwork/ethnos and rethinks athro research is/could be.

- Turns to neoliberalism as such (away from ethnography, but not fieldwork).
- Fieldwork as orientation to site and problems would not see otherwise.
- But not ethnography:
 - Thematic – leads away study of Russian culture specific variant city/capitalism. To neoliberalism as such
 - Fieldwork integral, but not site of research. Not info necessary to address questions generated. Not the data. (ethnography would be fieldwork understood as research). Method to generate surprise that generates possibility for research. Research clarifies surprises, and work clarifies what gives rise to these surprises.

1. Reconstruction: rethinking what know about neoliberalism; reconstitute field so neoliberalism is sight of inquiry, not its premise. (ie. Study of effects of neoliberalism).

2. Foucault – refuses modernity as episteme. But practices and institutions constitutive of modern knowledge. Collier what were problems give rise to ideas called neoliberal?

So Collier's book is an anthropology of thinking.

III. Chris Kelty's Book Two Bits

Stories of Geeks and Hackers. How fieldwork with them, leads him elsewhere to study of free software. Shifts object of study from geeks, people/place to free software and the internet. The field led me away, turned toward cultural significance of free software. Late 1990s, free software emerging. Openness. Public. As key concepts. SO get fieldwork enabled history of free software.

New generation of projects has outgrown ethnography. Revolve around difference in time like Collier. But he is research after ethnography. But Kelty leaves ethnos, but not ethnography. Fieldwork not generation of data. But thought provoking encounters. Emerging forms of life.

IV. Challenges of differentiation

1. Felix Renon? Ringold? (Cambridge) response to Collier

- How not an ethnography? Why abandon? Why would an anthropologist do this? Doesn't it distinguish discipline?
- Not impact on people, consequences neoliberalism. Instead, history of the present. Careful but historical of a form of thought.
- Collier has antiquated understanding of ethnography. Need not abandon. Is understanding of practices. Not closed system. Is reductive take because ignores 'context' ie. Society and politics. Can this even be called anthropology?

At stake: very question of what anthropology is. If not the cultural and the social. Cannot ground in universals: society, culture, politics etc. (ie. Impose our version of culture on people that not think about themselves that way). What can anthropology become?

Kelty and Collier break open new space for anthropology to flourish, space not grounded in ethnos.

Discussion – Steven Collier (Post-Soviet Social) Comments

Not so worried about being an anthropologist. Project with Andy Laykoff.

Very connected to questions, but why raised within anthropology? Institutional reasons.

Tobias – insisting anthropology can be something else.

1999 paper for AAAs. Methods discussion completely revolves around ethnography.

How conception of what ethnos is makes studying only with ethnography make sense.

And that no longer does.

What means to raise question of method beyond fieldwork. Or, think of it as a moment, or part of methodology that includes many more steps. Grounded reasons for doing (not just what anthro does), but why it is a good technique for the problems you want to address. And acknowledge when fieldwork is the wrong tool for the job.

Fieldwork as space for surprise is not a new idea. Entire program of economic anthropology, that it is not a universal phenomenon. Fieldwork to encounter this difference. So not surprises per se, but difference with respect to time, emergence of something new. *Practice* oriented to reconfiguring what is at stake in certain problems. That stakes are different from what everyone says they are. Conditioning of surprise: priors take in to the field, that structure practice of fieldwork. Needs to be part of our story about method. What happens *before* fieldwork.

Was prepared for the surprise, but didn't know what surprise would be. How put in position to be surprised.

- Broader intellectual orientation
 - Disciplines/heritages. His book 1990s, books about modern rational society. French Modern. Brasilia book. Broader social science orientation.
 - These books about great planning experiences. Soviet Union was missing. Did know what the questions where (emerging neoliberalism)
- Site/Case selection
 - From problems to where to study them. Needs to be major part of anthro method discussions.
 - Where you can see relationships, rather than average or typical site. More than one city – not satisfied single place was ok. Wanted to know if it was strange.
- Problem space / background of expectation that provokes reflection and intervention.
 - Background against which observations are made.
 - 1990s macro-econ reform/ “structural adjustment”
 - Is thrown back on own concepts, results in research after fieldwork.

Discussion – Chris Kelty (Two-bits)

STS program in 1990s, method orientation was fieldwork or archival. Historian or something else (usually anthropologist. Not satisfied with the menu.

Don't have enough discussion about design of research and design of inquiry. Site selection and whether fieldwork is a good idea. Question of problem space. Stronger logic and design to project.

Tobias is formalizing lots of thoughts has been having. The two books as cases – that they are really different books. What allows us to compare them? Is Q of anthro after ethnos. Ethnos as point of comparison that organizes anthro in the first place. If do not have ethnos, then how do we compare?

Two bits as A after E

- It's not. Was interested in affinity of geeks. How to characterize as ethnos. Not anthro of geeks, because affinity was cultural significance of free software to their kinship. Did not want to accept conventional defs of ethnos, society, culture. Because conventions (race, class, gender, beliefs, kinship etc...) not include technologies and things they make. Still sort of within ethnos. But cares about ethnos of geeks.
- Gabriella Coleman Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking. Is more traditional. Would bring anthro back to its origins. But is still about culture of liberalism.
- Geeks knew this. New ethnos could make for themselves. Public Sphere (vs. Stevens Neoliberalism). How these concepts are transformed in the street. Built into technologies and traces.
- All disciplines: being there, fieldwork as closer to 'the real'. What is distinctive about anthro fieldwork? Be better analyst of social and cultural.
- Epistemological encounter: with unfamiliar is second part of fieldwork (being there generates authority). Encounter with other kinds of things, not just ethnos. Classifically to encounter, was different people (in race, culture etc. from the west). But now is about development, to become an anthropologist. His was epistemological, because was interesting in knowledges. (mine as material encounter – that life is stuck with all the plastic).

Open Questions

- Tobias – is surprise novel? Usually is derailment by how different culture is (which becomes your project). After ethnos, no re-railment. Emergent event is not yet stable. Need to transform noise in to surprise. Accidents and contingencies become meaningful because of what you did before you got there.
- How to be sure will be surprised in limited time? Chris – also allow for answer to be in the fieldwork. Can fieldwork fail? Book about not making it.
- Lack of the programmatic in anthropology? Openness as mode of experience. Can it be turned in to something programmatic? Referential/Objectivity; model theoretic; tangential (explain movements/trajectories/changes in social world, account of transformation). From Fuabian book. Surprise not unique to anthropology, but looks for the opening.
- That anthro departments are conservative. Should we hold on to the word anthropology? That Cultural Anthro rejected these papers, no merits there. Need to create own spaces for these conversations. Institutional location problem.
- (only 3 students in the room are actually in anthro departments).
- Intellectual project vs. departments of anthropology. Not all anthro should become after ethnos. So what are we studying? Reconfigure back into more traditional forms. Culture vs. Ehtnos.
- Anthropologists don't have to justify the method!!! And they have authority through their discipline.
- How do you write grants to be surprised? NSF, for example, demands clear research questions. How to teach students in art of being surprised?

- Kelty book – fieldwork as surprise generating practice. What does your topic offer/not. Thinking about thinking. Won't ground research in universals.
- Do care about classical ethnography. Don't want to reform anthro. Wants to open up a recognizable space for anthropology after ethnos. Where is not settled. New possibilities for community. Classical = description and comparison of peoples.
- Contemporary power of ethnos – not sell it short! It has been deeply re-empowered in contemporary anthro by being more than ethnographic function.
- Can link back to anthropology through nature/culture. This is anthropology too! Let concepts go, they come back transformed. Expose anthro in fieldwork so it can become something else.
- Document what we mean by ethnos! Do not gloss the term here. Greek definition includes 'swarm' can have an ethnos of bees! Does not have to be what we associate know with race, class, gender etc. as its defining characteristics.