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Francisco Martínez

The Process of Discovery as an Anthropological Problematic

Looking back at the work of Ina-Maria Greverus, one finds a seminal polyhedric endeavour and an interest in the kind of knowledge that is capable of extending beyond all particular disciplines. For instance, she was a pioneer in noticing the increasingly hybrid way of practicing anthropology and the multilocality of fieldwork, acknowledging the body as an ethnographic device and promoting the *coming home* of the discipline (Greverus 1990, 2002; Greverus et al. 2002). Thus, she captured the sense of movement and multiple placing that characterises contemporary living and tried to incorporate this knowledge into her theorisations of the process of identity construction (Greverus 1976, 1979, 1997).

And yet, after being invited to revisit her work and connect it to my own research, I have to admit that I especially enjoyed reading her reflections on the context of discovery, reminding us that it is not always clear when fieldwork begins and ends, and claiming for an anthropology open to unexpected encounters, juxtapositions, and research questions to be followed. I believe that Greverus contributed to re-examine and redefine what counts as ethnography as method, in a way advancing current changes that point at a shift in what is considered an anthropological mode of inquiry and an epistemic partner (Holmes and Marcus 2004; Estalella and Sánchez Criado 2018).

This commentary sets up to reflect further on these issues by discussing an aspect of the ethnographic process that is not always visible or written in our papers, probably due to pressures for scientific detachment as a marker of professionalism (Okely 1992; Amit 2000). Those who have gone through the haptic experience of fieldwork might agree with me that one of the intrinsic yet extraordinary characteristics of doing ethnography is the heightened sense of discovery felt during the process, coming to see something that has been out of sight and realising that ‘this is what it is about’ (Rivoal and Salazar 2013). As anthropologists, we are trained to look for something meaningful out there, to *find* the dramatically illuminating

‘Geertzian moment’ (see Geertz 1973), however what often happens is that the hints enabling us to go forward in our knowledge about a theme are not to be found but rather encountered on the way, thrown by the field, faced in semideliberate detours, not by following straight lines.

Reflecting on the experience of serendipity (the discovery of something useful while on the hunt for something else), Horace Walpole (1960 [1754]) contended that chance was as important as sagacity. More recent authors argue for the possibility to cultivate ‘accidental wisdom’ (Boym 2017; Calhoun 2004; Laviolette 2013; Van Andel 1994) and even propose how to design our rituals and environments for facilitating serendipity (Woods 2014). Other new studies have noted a changing relation between discoveries and methodological creativity, related to particular ways of being open, experimental, and public (Back and Puwar 2012; Estalella and Sánchez Criado 2018; Fabietti 2009; Hazan and Hertzog 2009; Lury and Wakeford 2012).

Still the possibility to directly engineer accidental findings might be seen as suspiciously dystopian, yet the study of how we access certain information or alter our perspective on a given question remains an anthropological problematic – despite the concern from insurance companies, ethical committees and funding institutions (Martínez and Laviolette 2016). Here we are talking about the process, risks, and conditions of possibility whereby a research finding might eventually give rise to anthropological theory. For some of my colleagues this condition or context in which the concepts that move forward our research emerge might be changing due to technological, multiscale, accelerated time experience, or ecological reasons, yet for some others it remains based on the same intersubjective relations, training, instinctive suspicion and capacity to be attentive to the emergent as always (see, for instance, Green and Laviolette 2015a, 2015b; Martínez et al. 2016).

This appears as a topic for further research, along with how the fieldwork stage in which the magic of serendipity touches us conditions the development of our work. In my case, I had my research epiphany when I was finishing my fieldwork, with a great part of my material gathered but being unable to articulate a coherent argumentative line and see the total picture of my analysis of the fate of the Soviet legacy in Estonia (Martínez 2018). In a way, Luule, my mother-in-law, made serendipity happen to me, without being aware, however, that she was helping me while having dinner at her home.

My Mother-in-Law

‘You in Spain are willing to vote for a Communist Party because you have never experienced what communism is for real’, Luule once told me while watching the news in 2015. At the time, I was in another room having dinner, yet she repeated the comment to make sure I came to see the news. The TV was reporting on a meeting organised in Madrid by the new left-wing party Podemos, which gathered momentum after the Indignados protests for the regeneration of public institutions in Spain. So there I was, standing in front of the TV and under the gaze of Luule, doubting what to answer while also knowing that my mother-in-law would assess my reaction.

People of my age are leading Podemos, and I feel sympathy for this political party. They are questioning with a fresh discourse the functionality of the political system that had been established in the Spanish Transición, even though I sense some vertigo because they are willing to change too many things at once. Most importantly, I am aware that my Estonian mother-in-law would not be pleased to have a ‘communist’ in her family. Luule’s comment highlighted how communism remains so politically infected in Estonia today. It also shows a common pattern of interfamilial and intergenerational communication of the past. Furthermore, it brings to the fore one of the main themes of my research: generational change and the enduring power of the absent presence of the past: communism was not simply invoked through leftovers but also as a ghost, and to be a communist in Spain could also imply to be somehow related to those who killed her grandparents in the forties.

In Spain, the shift of the political paradigm has been preceded by a generational change: only when those born in the late 1970s – right after Franco’s death – have accessed the front row of Spanish politics could the values and status quo of the transition be criticised and eventually adjusted. In Estonia, members of a similar generation – the ‘Children of Freedom’ – have yet to make room for themselves. Another striking example of the particularities of postsocialist change is the way Luule refers to the old days – not divided in *раньше* and *сейчас* (before and now), as in other post-Soviet countries but as ‘the Russian’ and ‘the Estonian’ time. Without being aware of it, she agrees with L. P. Hartley’s (1953) and David Lowenthal’s (1985) maxim of the past being a foreign country due to how pastness speaks to us in the present.

For Luule, I am the Spanish partner of her daughter, the one who does not speak Estonian but, instead, Russian. Already in our first ‘family’ dinner, she asked – half jokingly, half serious – about my opinion of Russia. Luule’s spontaneous comments not only illustrate the postsocialist way of approaching the Soviet past (as an unnatural experience) but also touch upon the discrediting of socialist ideas and things in Estonia as well as the paradoxical instrumentalisation of the communist experience and Soviet exposure – as symbolic capital. At the end of my research my mother-in-law became a key informant, making evident with her comments how the past can be positively or negatively highlighted generationally, emphasising the indexing character of legacies and the pushing persistence of what has been officially forgotten.

This vignette shows how complicated it was for me to manage matters of confidentiality and definition of the field, sometimes too familiar to be approached with ease (Riles 2001). I was surrounded by the topic of research – having breakfast with it, asking favours from it. Further, when anthropologists do fieldwork ‘at home’, the accountability to those we have studied is more pressing. Another challenge has been to make sure that those ‘at home’ do not feel exploited, so I had to be delicate in matters of representation, ethics, the in-group knowledge to be shared and what I could give in return. This experience has also been part of the challenge of conducting fieldwork at home, describing and enacting relations simultaneously, which requires an exercise of unlearning, double vision and a dismantled identity (Okely 1996). Hence, the exercise of researching in a context of hyper-familiarity requires a more organic form of openness and attentiveness to the emergent as well as keeping those mechanisms of reflexivity continually activated.

Anthropologist Michael Jackson (1995) notes how certain factors within the setting where the ethnographer carries out fieldwork turn out to be unexpectedly crucial, making the process of research an experiential participation in itself. As Jackson remarks, knowledge is also implicit, incorporated, embodied and, therefore, refined through intersubjective dynamics. We are shaped by relationships we enter into, as social beings and as ethnographers. The final revision of my book was done with me living under the same roof as Luule, as I had a child and spent the first months of recovery with my wife’s parents, we formed what Luule calls ‘a multiculti’ family. These months living together indeed provided more knowledge about generational differences in Estonia, as, for instance, matters of taste, consumption, ideals

as well as about the force of the family as a community of memory and the mutuality of being, participating in one another's existence without keeping track of give-and-take (Sahlins 2013).

In short, ethnographic fieldwork continues to make anthropology distinct from other disciplines, yet from this vignette we can infer that anthropological knowledge is not simply out there awaiting discovery, and we can also question the traditional notion of immersion, which implies that the field exists as an independently bounded set of relationships and activities.

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