Anthropology Has a Village Problem

A View from Somewhere

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On a morning stroll during my fieldwork in early November 2008, I bumped into Hikmet, a villager in the Zvijezda highlands in central Bosnia. Hikmet was eager to talk about the US presidential elections. Barack Obama had just been elected and the news was reverberating across the world. At one point during our conversation, Hikmet asked me, 'Do you think the election of Barack Obama will change anything for Muslims like us here?'. The question opened up a series of complex entanglements and speculations. In his question, Hikmet was referring as much to the Muslim world as to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in particular to the village where he lived. Hikmet had obviously been thinking about this question since the early morning, when he had found out about Obama's victory.

Hikmet was not the only one who was asking this question; I encountered it over and over again. In June 2009, for example, Barack Obama delivered a speech at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, in which he promised a new dawn for relations between the US and the Muslim world after the long years of the Bush administration and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The speech was brought to my attention one June afternoon by Hikmet's uncle, who had spent several years in Iraq in the 1980s as a construction worker, and for whom watching the US-led invasion of Iraq on TV was as devastating as his own experiences of the Bosnian war in the 1990s. For other villagers, the question prompted various speculations as to how the aftermath of 9/11 would have unfolded if Obama had been president at the time. Later in summer 2009, when I was visiting a nearby village, I was drawn into a conversation between three generations of male *hajj* pilgrims from the village, who speculated as to whether Barack Obama would be

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allowed to enter the holy city of Mecca given that his middle name is Hussein, which for them indicated his Muslim background. As time went by, the question posed by Hikmet slowly *intertwined* itself with other stories, experiences, events and processes exchanged in the course of everyday life.

Reflecting on the collection of papers on the theme of 'The Village', published in Etnofoor's previous issue, (Schut and Mulder 2019) I would like to consider the notion of *intertwinements*, and its derivatives, such as entanglements, meshworks and knots, as outlined so eloquently by Thandeka Cochrane in her contribution. I shall offer some brief reflections on the conception of the village as a 'zone of entanglement' (Cochrane 2019). As the contributors to that issue suggest, the village can be seen as a space 'through which people, things, humans and non-humans, ideas and concepts flow' (Cochrane), and where the effects of the Anthropocene (Smits and Ibáñez Martín 2019), conservation initiatives (Oakley 2019), neoliberal capitalism (Thiemann 2019) and global health research (Aellah and Okoth 2019) unfold and are negotiated. In turn, rather than simply praising this marvellous collection, I would like to take it a step further. In what follows, I reflect more broadly on how it holds up a critical looking glass to the geographies of imagination in the production of anthropological theory in our contemporary moment.

Over the years of my fieldwork in various village settings and locations, I have been surprised by two things. First, by how profoundly and intimately my village friends and interlocutors were at home in discussions about the global political economy, geopolitics, history, environmental concerns, and urban life in both nearby and far-flung cities. These matters were as important for my interlocutors as the fact that they lived in the village, where they engaged in caring for the houses, trees and fields that had been bequeathed to them by their parents and grandparents (Henig 2020). Second, and more importantly, I was surprised by my own surprise. Let me begin with the latter. Why was I so surprised in the first place? The answer, I suggest, lies in anthropology's own disciplinary tradition and training. As Thandeka Cochrane argues, anthropology has a 'village problem'. In contemporary anthropological debates, the village represents nearly everything anthropologists want to distance themselves from. However, as Cochrane writes, 'It is perhaps not so much the "village" that is still stuck in "tradition", but rather the village that has become emblematic of anthropology's tradition – a tradition that we want to distance ourselves from' (2019: 90).

The village, often depicted as timeless and static, came to be associated with the critique of studies of 'bounded communities' (Berdahl 1999) and localised cultures (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Since the early 1990s, one of the key tropes of the anthropological imagination has been the study of global flows, transformations and processes, and their complex interactions across multiple scales and settings (Trouillot 2003). This shift inevitably brought about reconsiderations of what constitutes the 'field' and 'object' of study, and the very notion of ethnographic fieldwork. To capture these epistemological and methodological shifts in the discipline, George Marcus (1995) coined the phrase 'multi-sited ethnography'. In light of these developments, it is not difficult to see why the village – which, in the discipline's imagination, embodies 'single-sited ethnography' – came to represent some-

thing anthropologists ought to distance themselves from. Some of the papers in the Etnofoor collection critically reflect on these developments, while all of them demonstrate that this could not be further from the truth. Reading the collection, however, I felt that there is one more thing that we ought to add to this story of the withdrawal of the village from anthropology's gaze, something that needs to be addressed.

When thinking about the village, I have personally found it helpful over the years to revisit Edwin Ardener's brilliant essay on remote areas (1989). The essay, written in light of the debates on doing anthropology 'at home' (Jackson 1987), can also be read as a counterpoint to the dismissal of the village as a site of anthropological research. The decline of 'village studies' has something to do with our discipline's love-hate relationship with the notion of 'remoteness', to which our canon clung for a long time. Remoteness, along with otherness, difference and exoticism, belong to the discipline's vocabulary of the 'savage slot' (Trouillot 2003). Since the advent of multi-sited ethnography, it was not only the single-sited and static image of fieldwork, but also remoteness, that became in the discipline's imagination the nemesis to its engagement with global and increasingly planetary concerns. Put differently, the village, vis-à-vis multi-sited imagery, became the antithesis to a fieldwork site from where anthropologists could effectively engage with the contemporary world. Such an understanding is, however, rather a caricature of the older literature, and as the contributors to the Etnofoor volume show, also of contemporary anthropological fieldwork in the village. These essays remind us how important it is to move beyond such a simplistic notion of remoteness and associations of the village with the savage slot tradition, which continue to foster this kind of 'surprise about surprise' that I experienced a decade ago. So what can we take away from this reminder?

All of the papers in the collection persuasively show that the village is first and foremost 'a topological space' (Ardener 1987: 214) made of manifold intertwinements consisting of flows, junctures and entanglements, just like any other field site. As Matei Candea writes about his 'village fieldwork' in Corsica, the village of Crucetta was an arbitrary location made up of multiplicity and heterogeneity – of people, things and processes overlapping in one geographical space – which offered Candea 'a contingent window into complexity' (2007: 179). My own fieldwork, introduced earlier, echoes Candea's point. My village friends felt *remote* from the gaze of the state and they expressed these feelings by talking about being abandoned by the state, about living on the margins of the state, and being vulnerable to, yet firmly entangled in, wider geopolitical games that they felt were often beyond their control. But they had never felt isolated, remote or like self-contained units cut-off from national or world affairs, historical events and global flows. This brings me to my first point. My village friends were comfortably at home in the world. Yet it was the topological space of the village through which they made sense, in a historical and political way, of the world at large. Or, as Candea put it, the village, understood as an arbitrary location, 'is space which cuts through meaning' (2007: 180), for both its inhabitants as well as for the anthropologist. Writing about the East German border village of Kella, situated at the frontline of the Cold War, Daphne Berdahl characterised the village, where for many villagers the world ended, in a similar way, as a nexus of 'the effects

of long-term and extralocal processes […] manifested and refracted in a multiplicity of small-scale processes, local practices and individual actions' (1999: 13).

Reading through the collection, I was again reminded of Berdahl's words, and how productive a village perspective can be in terms of engaging with the multiplicity of overlapping and intertwining flows and processes enmeshed in various village locations. Put differently, this collection opens many windows into the complexity of the world we live in. So why has the village fallen from grace in the eyes of the discipline? How did it happen that while the village continues to be entangled in planetary processes and concerns, it became disentangled from disciplinary practice and conversations? I wonder whether it has something to do with the significance of *place* in the production of anthropological theory.

In his reflections on the significance of place in post-WWII anthropological theory, Arjun Appadurai (1986) argued that a view from *somewhere* continues to be *the* practice of generating anthropological knowledge and theory. However, looking through the discipline's rich archive, we can see how this also meant that researching 'somewhere' rather than 'somewhere else' created what we might call 'the prestige zones of anthropological theory', while other locations became peripheral (ibid.: 357). As Appadurai put it clearly, 'there is a tendency for places to become showcases for specific issues over time' (ibid.: 358). Probing into which 'somewheres' actually reflect something significant about '*the* somewhere', or alternatively, whether 'they reveal a relatively arbitrary imposition of the whims of anthropological fashion' (ibid.), is therefore a vital exercise. As the paper by Fenna Smits and Rebecca Ibáñez Martín (2019) makes very clear, there is, for example, a significant absence of the village in the debates on innovative responses to the Anthropocene. Yet the Anthropocene, as our shared condition of life on the planet, takes place *everywhere* in our contemporary moment. How is the village intertwined in these processes and what can we learn from it? The Anthropocene inevitably transgresses traditional boundaries, and dissolves many hierarchies in the discipline. In this era, as this collection persuasively shows, the village, like any other arbitrary location, offers not only a window onto the complexity of these entanglements, but also, and perhaps more importantly, onto our own future.

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