WORKSHOP REPORT

Early Career Anthropologists: Vocation and Occupation

Karolina S. Follis and Christian R. Rogler

> *[D]octoral graduates … are making agonizing personal risk/benefit calculations about how long to chance it in a system in which they have already invested a large portion of their young adult life but whose promises of return in the form of full-time work are – at the moment – dubious.*
> Ruth Barcan, 2014

In 2004, Susan Brin Hyatt reported from a roundtable session organized by the American Anthropological Association 'a dispiriting picture of academic life in the early years of the 21st century,' due to, amongst other things, 'the casualization of the academic workforce' (Hyatt 2004: 25–26). Less than a decade later, Joëlle Fanghanel notes that the 'increased casualization of academic staff [has] significantly affected the evolution of academic work and working patterns' (2012: 5). Casualization takes different forms in different academic contexts, from the 'adjunctification' of teaching in the U.S.A. to precarious grant-funded postdoc positions common in Europe and the U.K. and the efforts to introduce other forms of temporary academic employment in New Zealand (Shore and Davidson 2014) and Australia (Barcan 2014). Seeking to contribute to these and other current discussions on the future of research and higher education in the era of privatisation and funding cuts, Hana Cervinkova and Karolina Follis convened the panel *Anthropology as a Vocation and Occupation,* held on 3 August 2014 at the 13th Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in Tallinn, Estonia.[1]

The goals of the panel, as stated in the Conference Programme, were as follows. '(1) On behalf of EASA, we seek to understand how our members who fall in the early career category view their current career prospects; (2) Drawing on current debates on the future of research and higher education under conditions of austerity, digitalization and casualization of academic labour, we seek to stimulate an exchange that would examine those international concerns from a perspective specific to European anthropology; (3) We hope to learn whether EASA itself has a role to play assisting early career anthropologists as they navigate both the available and the yet-to-be-created (or discovered) opportunities for anthropologists in Europe today' (EASA 2014: 98).

The overall findings were that in the current academic environment early career anthropologists, understood for our purposes as advanced PhD Students, postdocs and junior lecturers, are facing a set of external conditions which imperil the pursuit of anthropology as a vocation and an occupation. Of such factors, most frequently mentioned were (a) the uncertainty and precarity of employment at institutions of higher learning and research institutes; (b) the pressure to secure research funding in a highly competitive environment as a condition of continuing employment; (c) constraints resulting from the demand that EU and nationally funded research be policy relevant and adhere to non-anthropological norms of knowledge production; (d) lack of preparedness for careers outside of academia.

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In view of these and other challenges on the path to establish a career in anthropology, the participants and the audience argued that EASA as an organisation representing professional anthropologists in Europe does have a role to play in supporting early career scholars in the discipline. The discussion generated some concrete suggestions as well as more general points of concern and contention. Below we offer a more detailed account of specific positions on these issues that emerged in the course of the discussion, as well as a list of suggestions for the EASA Executive Committee.

Key themes

Uncertainty and precarity of employment

While the hiring practices in academia vary widely across Europe, there was a consensus in the room that younger scholars face a prolonged period of uncertainty of employment and frequently several international moves before they may be able to secure a permanent job – no matter how well they do their work. As one discussant put it: 'From postdoc to postdoc to postdoc is not a threat – it's the best that can happen to you!' In some countries (Poland and Italy were mentioned as examples) the path to a career at a university may be well established for "insiders" who have worked their way through the ranks in a department since their student years, but it remains obscure or obstructed for beginners from the outside.

Elsewhere (U.K., Ireland) the competition is open in principle but opportunities are scarce in relation to the large number of qualified candidates. As a result, the most common path for new PhDs in Europe is a succession of postdoctoral positions funded from research grants or individual fellowships. These positions vary in length, from short-term opportunities of several months to one year, to three or even six-year positions. At best, they are seen as desirable opportunities to develop research experience and build up a publication record. At worst, a succession of postdocs traps early career anthropologists in a repetitive cycle of time-consuming applications to secure the next position, interfering with research productivity and other aspects of professional and personal life (developing teaching experience, building an intellectual community, family, relationships and social life). Breaks in paid employment are common and the resulting financial stress undermines the commitment to academic anthropology. As one participant put it, 'yes, a career is possible but at what price?'

The panel acknowledged the view of some university administrators that uncertainty combined with intense competition is what leads to excellence. One of the panellists quoted the following statement of the Vice Rector for Research and Career Development of the University of Vienna: 'Uncertainty is also something like the motor of success of sciences, on a general level as well as on the level of the careers of single academics. Because uncertainty stimulates top performance'.[2] However, the panellists and the audience disputed this position. There are hidden biases and forms of discrimination in the current system that lead to the exclusion of certain voices and approaches from contemporary academic anthropology. For example, those with caring responsibilities may not be able to embrace uncertainty and international mobility, which more often than not discriminates against female anthropologists. Participants noted also that fierce competition leads to an individualistic and career-oriented approach to research while undermining collegiality and collaborative initiatives in anthropology.

Pressure to secure research funding

[2] See http://derstandard.at/1397522040137/Unsicherheit-stachelt-zu-Hoechstleistungen-an (accessed 21 January 2015).

Several participants shared their experiences of applying for EU and national research funding and of participating in funded projects. A systemic issue pointed out by the panel was that grant applicants need entrepreneurial and administrative skills. Many anthropologists are reluctant entrepreneurs and grant administrators, seeing their strengths instead in research, writing and pedagogy. This understanding of anthropological vocation puts them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis colleagues who more eagerly embrace project-management roles.

There was considerable disagreement whether EASA as an organisation ought to sponsor more grant-writing training and workshops (in addition to those already offered by academic institutions and funders). On the one hand, it was proposed that it may be useful to promote grant-writing discussions specifically centred on anthropology (for example with EASA members who were successful in securing funding). On the other, it was noted that additional workshops, rather than addressing the issue, only perpetuate the problem of further individualisation and hyper-competition.

Policy relevance

A recurrent and shared frustration was the poor fit of anthropological theories and methods with funders' demand for research that is policy relevant, economically profitable, or beneficial to society in other measurable ways. Several participants noted that prevailing definitions of 'policy relevance' are difficult to reconcile with the methods and theories of anthropology.[3] Participants shared anecdotal evidence of proposal reviewers' rejection of non-quantitative approaches and reluctance to support long-term fieldwork, particularly in locations perceived as remote. The problem was partially traced to the poor representation of anthropology as a discipline on many national and international grant review panels. In the words and experience of one discussant, anthropological research was considered by reviewers who were not anthropologists as 'too long, too far, and too few [i.e. relying on non-representative samples]'. As a counterpoint to this view, a senior audience member pointed out that anthropology as a discipline has done quite well in terms of the European Research Council success rates, possibly owing to significant anthropological voices among the reviewers.

Following on from this exchange, panellists and audience members discussed strategies for successful grant-writing and for job and fellowship applications. How to represent one's research to an interdisciplinary audience? Which conversations across disciplinary boundaries are useful and which less so? What are the limits of interdisciplinarity? When does strategizing turn into complicity with epistemologically objectionable projects? How can anthropologists produce knowledge ethically (vocation), while gaining remunerated work (occupation) within the constraints of prevailing funding guidelines?

Lack of preparedness for careers outside academia

While to our knowledge nearly all panellists and audience members were on the academic career track, the panel explored also the theme of anthropological careers alternative to academia, sometimes referred to as *alt-ac*.[4] This theme was strongly connected to the difficult academic job market on the one hand, and to the question of the policy relevance of anthropology on the other. Participants argued that if there were more anthropologists in

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[3] At the same time participants brought up their desire to practice 'engaged' and 'public' anthropology, while noting the ambiguity of these terms.

[4] See for example the Media Commons project #alt-academy http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/alt-ac/ (accessed 21 January 2015).

exposed public positions, the discipline of anthropology as a whole would benefit, particularly due to increased public understanding of its methods, goals and contributions.

It was noted that undergraduate training in anthropology has enjoyed some good press recently (for example in the Irish Independent, where Anthropology was listed as no. 2 on a list of Top 50 Jobs of the future).[5] Yet in spite of some breathless excitement with 'the study of people', anthropology PhDs rarely feel equipped for the job market outside academia. It was noted that senior anthropologists who mentor the next generation have very limited knowledge of opportunities beyond teaching and research, and consequently little ability (and possibly interest) to advise on alternative careers. This was seen as a space for an intervention by EASA, for example through facilitating alt-ac networking and promoting the visibility of anthropologists in senior public roles.

One senior audience member suggested that current and future academia will have ever more porous boundaries, with researchers crossing over from universities to consultancies, applied research and back. This view was disputed, with others bringing up the observation that the choice of an academic or a non-academic career is a zero-sum game in an increasingly competitive academic job market. Exploring non-academic opportunities usually necessitates putting academic pursuits at least partially on hold. This creates CV gaps and concomitantly reduces one's academic output, which forecloses the route back into academia.

Conclusion: suggestions for the EASA Executive

Based on the discussion outlined above, we present the following recommendations which were presented to the EASA Executive Committee:

Immediate term

- Recognize the pastoral role of the organization towards the membership and embrace an ethic of care towards early career anthropologists.
- Establish a permanent Task Force within the EASA Executive to represent, advocate for and carry out initiatives on behalf of early career anthropologists.
- Within the next year, or at the next EASA conference at the latest, sponsor a cross-generational workshop for senior and junior anthropologists to discuss cross-generational responsibilities, mentoring practices and other forms of promoting anthropology as a vocation and occupation in the altered academic climate.
- At the next EASA conference, organize a plenary featuring anthropologists with advanced degrees who successfully entered non-academic careers, for example journalism, business, NGOs, international organizations and public policy.
- Promote and facilitate grant-writing workshops, not to duplicate existing formats for training in grant writing, but to showcase funded anthropological research and to facilitate peer-to-peer support of grant-writing in anthropology.

Long term

- EASA ought to make use of existing lobbying mechanisms at the EU level, via the European Alliance for Social Sciences and Humanities and the Initiative for Science in Europe to oppose continuing privatization of higher education; argue against rigid metrics as criteria of academic excellence; argue against discriminatory practices in

[5] See http://www.independent.ie/business/irish/are-you-ready-here-are-the-top-50-jobs-of-the-future-30378090.html (accessed 21 January 2015).

research funding, particularly discrimination against female academics who become mothers, or have other care responsibilities.
- Embrace and promote links with anthropologists outside of academia with a view towards extending the reach of networking available to early career anthropologists.
- Open up a debate, through newsletter columns, online discussion and conference meet-ups on the methods and tasks of 'engaged' or 'public' anthropology; showcase the interventions of anthropologists as public intellectuals. This could include strategies to make our work more visible to those outside the academia, as suggested by one senior anthropologist.
- Initiate reflection on the relative merits of mobility *versus* rootedness and emplacement of anthropological careers in academia.

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2373 words