What is “National” in National Anthropological Associations?
An Interview with Zdeněk Uherek and Juraj Podoba (Jakub Grygar)

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Jakub Grygar: In science today, great emphasis globally is put on the internationalization of professional production and on the development of knowledge that goes beyond the borders of nation states. This emphasis has many forms: from the evaluation of the professional production of scientists according to the number of foreign publications, through the widening of the editorial boards of scientific journals with foreign experts all the way to taking into account the involvement of foreign researchers in upcoming projects when grant agencies consider their support. In this situation, what do you see as the benefits of the existence of national anthropological associations, such as CASA and SASA? What is the reason for their existence in a situation...
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where more Czech and Slovak anthropologists are members of a similar organization, the international EASA?

Juraj Podoba: I think it is an improperly defined problem: the existence of a European organization, or in general international scientific and professional organizations, and the existence of national organizations are complementary, rather than being redundant. Moreover, membership in the EASA is something completely different than (active) membership in an organization resolved to develop a specific (social) scientific discipline – in this case, social anthropology – in an academic milieu, where it was previously not represented, and where even today it scarcely promotes itself – quoting Peter Skalník – “in a hostile environment.” Also, the mention of a massive representation of Czech and Slovak members in EASA is rather a matter of embarrassment, for the motivation to join is more often decorative and prestige related, rather than in fact meaning anything in terms of scientific and professional work within the field and its development in the domestic milieu, even from an international perspective. SASA is a civic association. It is this status that determines the logic of its role and the meaning of its existence. Like other civic associations, it brings together the people involved – in this case, people with an interest in social anthropology and qualitative social science research in general – in order to respond to their own interests and common goals. What this means, however, depends on how they define the goals, interests, work, the way the organization functions, etc. The organization’s role depends on the decision of the members of the civic association. In other words, the Association will be what we make it.

Zdeněk Uherek: Membership in EASA really opens up a wider scope for activity than the SASA or CASA. I have been a member of EASA since 1990. I joined right after its first conference in Coimbra, thanks to the offer of Václav Hubinger, and through regular participation in their conferences I have been able to meet people with whom I would otherwise barely have come into contact and participate in panels which have moved me forward in many ways. There is a huge difference between reading the work of one’s contemporaries and being able to see and talk to them. If an anthropologist is professionally engaged in their field, it should be his/her duty to be in at least one such global or European organization and to regularly attend conferences. In the event that one teaches and goes to the panels which relate to the subjects one lectures on, every two years one obtains a renewed impulse of ideas of how to work with the subject, what to read and how to think about it. It cannot then happen, as is still customary in the Czech Republic, that teachers under the name of one subject present diametrically different things at two schools and that they teach misguided or outdated things. Each teacher should have to try to present at such conferences. One can in this way come closer to world renown, but equally, if only those who will speak immediately after you remain at the lecture, at least one can see that nobody cares about the theme one
works on, or how one conceptualizes it, or that it is perceived as unimportant. An unpleasant experience that lasts fifteen minutes can save a person years of work, or on the contrary, on the same basis once can find good examples or colleagues for an international project. CASA will probably never have such a role, or just a locally limited one, but again at EASA it will hardly be possible to find an adequately and appropriately sympathetic forum to address such issues as how to look at the situation at individual Czech schools, or the extent to which the Ministry or the appropriate council of the government can intervene in the results of requested projects and the like.

In my opinion, the Czech Association for Social Anthropology emerged for several reasons, some of which are no longer topical. The first, and perhaps it will sound trite, is that part of the ethnologists and anthropologists in the Czech Republic wanted to prove that such an organization could emerge at all. At first, it was not possible for a long time, then there was no time and energy. The establishment of the CASA demonstrates that social anthropology exists in this country and has an institutional base. Another reason, no less banal, is the visibility of the fact that there are any social anthropologists here. Although I am an advocate of the concept that social anthropology, cultural anthropology and ethnology are one discipline, many academics in the field disagree with me. Through the existence of CASA, ethnologists and anthropologists can declare themselves as specialists in the same field and as a group with the same interests. Through CASA, researchers who studied ethnology or anthropology and now work in departments with various names can be declared to be part of a certain field and community that subscribes to certain themes and methods. Under the conditions in the Czech Republic, where previously the only professional trade organization was the Ethnographic Society, is the founding of the CASA a symbolic act with a certain value. Other ethnologists have made an interesting step in the same direction. To my surprise, the Czech Ethnographic Society became a member of the World Council of Anthropological Associations this year. Given that before the founding of the CASA, we had negotiated with the Czech Ethnographic Society that we did constitute a section within this organization’s umbrella and that this step had not been met with consensual understanding on the grounds that we were a different field, I am more than astonished by this change (the Czech Republic is therefore represented in the WCAA by two organizations, which is a unique precedent in the world).

Another reason that is probably more up to date is a professional discussion at the local level. The various workplaces in Bohemia know about each other, but mutual professional communication, which is often not sufficient even on the basis of individual departments, is sluggish. What the EASA does for Europe, the CASA should do for the Czech Republic: students should come into contact with specialists from other institutions, and debate should flow across the boundaries between individual departments; the CASA should reflect on ethical issues and
receive stimuli, regardless of whether they be from students, pensioners, the unemployed or department heads. Granted, this is happening only partially, but still it is better than nothing, above and beyond the conference, which performs at the regional, Central European level a role similar to the EASA conference at the European level. Moreover, at this point, the CASA is a member of the WCAA, which connects our local anthropological association with the world and gives all members of the CASA the opportunity to write and respond to stimuli from around the world. Graduates may also use this opportunity, even though they are not subsidized professionals who will travel to European and world congresses. An added bonus is the journal, about which I am genuinely happy and which is profiling itself more clearly as being truly Central European.

**Jakub Grygar:** So in the terms in which we are now talking about them, it seems that the CASA, and maybe even the SASA, are only emancipatory projects within the national academic community. Indeed, the EASA was established in 1989, whereas the SASA and CASA only in 2007 and 2008 respectively. It is as if through their national associations, the Czech and Slovak anthropologists want to tell their surroundings that they are here and that the name of social Czech or Slovak anthropology can no longer speak so easily to colleagues from other disciplines.

**Zdeněk Uherek:** Most of the local European anthropological associations were established before the foundation of the EASA, a fact which was due to the need for contacts at the national level that preceded the international level. After the creation of international institutions, they did not, however, disappear. The CASA had it backwards: the need to establish such an organization was there, regardless of the existence of the international association. The question is whether it really satisfies demand at the local level.

How could I verify this in contacts with other organizations? Each local anthropological association sets its goals slightly elsewhere. In one place they focus mainly on legislation, elsewhere the association stands on the line between professional associations and trade unions, somewhere else they focus on the representative presentation of their members, and somewhere else again on the network and conferences.

This year’s conference, the upcoming issues of the journal Cargo and the Gellner seminars perhaps suggest that the CASA could become an attractive place for anthropologists meeting with people from other disciplines and also with people of the wider Central European region. In addition to the attractiveness of cooperation with Slovakia, the interest of Polish contributors has pleasantly surprised me, not to mention also those from Germany, and other places overseas interested in contact or cooperation. Although the CASA acts primarily as a station for short stops, it may be possible to get new incentives from visitors which on the contrary have a longer-term impact.
Juraj Podoba: I have no reason to say that, in the recent or distant past, it was colleagues from other disciplines that spoke on behalf of Slovak anthropology. In the 1990s, although in many post-socialist countries it became fashionable to declare oneself a cultural anthropologist, the Slovak case, particularly amongst (some) philosophers, suggests almost the contrary. The period demand became a declared distance from anthropology, with just some Slovak folklorists during the intervening period declaratively claiming to be anthropologists. But, above all, these were situational, and largely decorative positions, essentially of the same type as career strategies widespread also in other social-science disciplines in post-communist Europe. These might be characterised as the holding of quite different epistemological positions and significantly different field orientations depending on the particular situation, or the character and quality of the academic milieu, in which a particular individual happens to be at the time.

However, in order to avoid excessive simplification and a particular focus only on our own discipline, it can be generally stated that in the practical operation of academic institutions in post-socialist Slovakia there position for qualitative social science research is an unfavourable one. On a first level, this research is discriminated against by the realia of grant schemes (in Slovakia, the situation in the funding of science has been much worse than in the Czech Republic) and the application of evaluation mechanisms. Also, we witness the negative consequences of “academic feudalism,” in particular for the development of newly-constituted social science fields or disciplines that focus on qualitative research so outside the current ideological debates in our public discourse, as well as outside the frames of national investigation and production (more often recycling) that some colleagues call “educational literature.” However, this is already a topic for a wider debate that goes beyond the framework of our interview.

The establishment of the SASA at the end of the last decade was more a pragmatic response to the above-defined situation in the milieu of academic institutions and to the overall atmosphere of the collapse of the totalitarian system. The attempt (so far quite successful) of the institutional entrenchment of social anthropology in a hostile or indifferent academic milieu should be supported by an (as yet not so successful) attempt to establish a civic association which would bring together people with an interest in the field and at the same time help it – metaphorically speaking – in its “pilgrimage to the (Slovak) world.” So in my recollections as a member of the Preparatory Committee of the SASA, what was paramount were pragmatic goals. In the context of the past two decades, I would rather leave out the word “only” with regard to emancipation. On the contrary, it seems to me that, at least in the case of younger colleagues who have completed long-term stays at quality Western European and American universities, and have adequate language skills, theoretical foundations and have built quality personal contacts, it is easier to assert themselves in the international rather than in the domestic professional context.
Jakub Grygar: What Juraj is now saying actually gets us to the topics that Zdeněk was earlier broaching when he spoke of the National Association as a space that should allow, or even encourage, dialogue, both within the discipline as well as between generations or across different disciplines. Personally, I think that the attractiveness of the CASA or SASA (or perhaps even their viability?) may be reflected precisely in what such a dialogue is about, or even in what the objects of our conflicts are. What topics in this respect have the CASA and SASA managed to open up and what are the reactions of the expert and the wider publics?

Zdeněk Uherek: If I were to build on the current topics of conferences and ideas that have appeared in the journal Cargo or at the Gellner seminars, I would note several themes that recently have probably resonated most frequently. First place in the ranking would likely belong to discussions of transformation processes. To be more specific, what is meant here is the particularly prevalent issue of the transformation from the early 90s to the present. In 2014 alone, two representatively attended conferences were held on the subject in Prague. Besides the CASA conference entitled Transition 2.0? Anthropology of the world (s) in reform, there was also the conference of the Institute of Ethnology, in cooperation with the University of Poznan, the University of Banská Bystrica and the Central European University in Budapest, entitled Rethinking Anthropologies in Central Europe for Global Imaginaries. The study of social change has long been a key anthropological topic and, although in both cases the theme of transformation referred in particular to transition in Central and Eastern Europe, it was nice that local anthropologists did not appear only as learned aboriginals and that the topic of transformation was not understood simply in a localized sense. The theme of Central and Eastern European transformation is a good communication bridge between local anthropological communities and the anthropological public beyond Central and Eastern Europe. I myself frequently make use of this communication bridge. On the other hand, I do not see my role as that of guiding colleagues from other parts of the world through transforming my native landscape. As an anthropologist, I feel the need to comment on various native landscapes and global problems, and if we get stuck only in our own transformation issues, then we would probably devalue their role. The stimuli to do so are frequently also external. I often observe that, on arrival at Western universities, anthropology students from the Czech Republic who previously were focused on a range of differentiated topics suddenly begin to return to the processing of “Czech” themes, and I can imagine why: they are asked by their teachers and fellow students. Of course, their answers on these matters are convincingly well-informed, but I do not think that this is enough for their professional advancement.

Other frequent topics were medical anthropology and visual anthropology, which in the Czech milieu are still so little explored, as well as ecological studies, with a long-term interest also being shown in the subjects of migration, gender
studies and marginalized groups. All these topics are interdisciplinary, and the interested parties from other disciplines also discussed these issues at anthropological meetings. This gives anthropological encounters an additional dynamic. Some topics on the contrary are disappearing, such as culture as a truly difficult concept to grasp. Equally, in comparison with ten years earlier, there is less talk about ethnicity, and in Bohemia territorial studies are largely disappearing. Specialized meetings today are not even usually organised on such classic themes as family, linguistic anthropology and political anthropology, although in this context the anthropology of religion is fairing rather better. There are good academicians in these areas here, but they do not advertise themselves. In summary, we might say that anthropology is evolving and it is good. All scientific branches are developing and usually such that they deepen the understanding of their domains, become more specific about their topics and come to ask more sophisticated questions. Sometimes I feel that anthropologists have a tendency to jump from topic to topic. This is how fashion designers work and not scientists: sustainability today, borders tomorrow, methodological nationalism the day after tomorrow, then again identity, remittances... Developments in the subjects addressed should have a certain logic. I would like to believe that this is an internal development of the field and not merely a wandering.

Juraj Podoba: I can only support Zdeněk’s arguments; although I fear that in this case this is principally a result of generational vision problem. Many younger colleagues run up against precisely this model of existence in academic space he criticized; and the criticism is a very valid one. And yet we have the good fortune that Slovak ethnology and its nascent anthropology are contaminated by the fashionable wave of post-modernism, especially that of American anthropology of two-three decades ago, to a minimum extent. The majority of elder colleagues from the milieu of ethnological workplaces, but not only the older ones, have also been recycling professional issues very viably for 30-40 years, which, from the perspective of epistemology and the theory and methodology of the ethnological/anthropological disciplines, is comparable to something like the timespan of the period between the late 19th century and the 1950s. Furthermore, a special problem is present in the social sciences of Central European countries that my colleague was tactfully silent about, and that is that a large part of the publication production occurs outside the epistemological and theoretical-methodological definitions of the various scientific disciplines. Or, to put it more broadly – outside social theory. What I refer to here are the texts frequently dealing with questions of national history and science, and that cheaply popularize the level of trading in “folk culture;” these publications range from nonfiction and publications of an essayistic sort, to those of a fictional character. In this context, it becomes more difficult for the predominant model for producing specialized publications to act as an impulse for productive intra-disciplinary or interdisciplinary discussion.
that would move the discipline forward, particularly in relation to the international scientific context.

Again, this is a much broader problem, which goes beyond the scope of this interview. I want to say that these questions cannot be efficiently solved by professional associations and civic associations of the type of the CASA / SASA. They can only, within their means, help to articulate such conflicts and engender dialogue. It is, however, much easier for them to act in a situation when within the academic community there is an interest in critical debate and a certain academic culture of discussion. In the Slovak academic milieu – and now I am referring not at all only to Ethnology and Anthropology – there has been a long term lack of interest in such a debate. This is a reflection of the real atmosphere in academic workplaces in Slovakia, where people who have their office within the same building, even on the same corridor, do not have/want to have even an elementary knowledge of what their counterparts are actually dealing with. During the past quarter century, I have repeatedly attempted to create a space for such collegial discussion forums; the first time in the early 1990s, as an editor at Ethnographic Information, in the so-called Discussions on our Science in that periodical. And I certainly was not alone: there have been several such attempts over the past 25 years. However, the efforts made in this direction have always ended up lost ... in apathy and indolence, often in conjunction with a half-education, specialized-idiotism and arrogance that probably best express the atmosphere of most social-science workplaces in our country, and at the same time are one of the welcomed preconditions of a successful academic career. Finally, critical analytical essays and methodological studies have often been published in highly specialized journals and unrated anthologies. This indicates that across generations and social science disciplines there were authors who consider the current state and future direction of their own field, and of the social sciences in general, as still dominated by a majoritarian interest to maintain the status quo. In the milieu of many academic workplaces, a different attitude is sanctioned often only under the spectre of unpleasant career consequences.

To allow or encourage an intra- and interdisciplinary dialogue was undoubtedly one of the planned targets of the SASA at its inception, but it can only be fulfilled when a generation of anthropologists and other social scientists appears with a focus on qualitative social research and social theory who have a genuine, but also an active interest in such a dialogue. When this happens will it be possible to make a positive difference.

Jakub Grygar: The last topic that I would like to broach concerns the ethics of anthropological practice. Over time, I am more and more inclined to think that, considering the invasive nature of anthropological research and the implications for the investigated terrain and research participants that our publication practice causes, the
topic of research ethics should not be discussed in the last chapters of textbooks of social-science research, but right on their first pages. While anthropology students are usually aware that the ethical context of their research is something they should pay attention to, at the same time they often approach it as actually something somewhat secondary for their own research. Besides its Code of Ethics, the AAA has a functional permanent ethics panel, the EASA is working with a Code of Ethics, and the CASA has a considerably elaborated code of ethics and ethical guidelines for the Czech situation, even if their depth cannot compare with, for instance, the documents of British sociologists (BSA). I wonder what your experience with the reception and enactment of the emphases of these documents is. Do they serve as a decorative ornament, which is a bit of a “must have”, or do their existence contribute to the transformation of Czech and Slovak anthropologists’ actual research and publishing practice? Do you have any experience with this?

Zdeněk Uhřík: Many will certainly oppose me, but in the area of ethics great shifts have occurred in the past twenty-five years. When David Scheffel wrote the article *Anthropological Ethics in Central Europe* in the *Národopisný věstník* [Ethnographic Journal] in 1992, a number of scholars did not even bother with anonymizing their sources, nor with how field data was created or whether an actor wants to be published. This did not concern only information about magical practices, with which Scheffel’s text primarily deals, but also photo documentation, audio-documents and other records. Currently, every aspiring researcher has adequate training to know how to proceed in the field and how to behave in relation to data. It is of course another question as to whether this is followed in practice.

The question of the ethics of conduct with regard to the researched subject is one faced by all fields of the life sciences and human society. They all seek a balance, of how to act in creating as little hardship as possible while still getting data. In finding this balance, anthropology suffers more than other branches, because anthropologists do not believe that the data acquired has sufficient value to offset the damage their collection and publication can cause. As has been shown many times in history, this concern is often quite well-founded. The conduct of anthropologists when striving for maximum adherence to ethical principles is extreme, and can lead to data becoming not comparable and not verifiable; data unanchored in time and space lose their value. Work of this type provides an opportunity to actors from the non-anthropological world, who are not bound by any ethics whatsoever, to work with information that is distorted, but concrete in a way that can damage subjects more by being subjected to the representation through the tabloid press. To not publish one’s knowledge is also unethical, as it provides a scope for distorted information. Another problem is the danger of being overly biased towards the researched actors. For the reader, the anthropologist thus runs the risk of becoming an unreliable and biased activist. Ultimately, anthropologists

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*Cargo* (2014), Vol. 12, No. 1 - 2

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The best strategy is to capitalize on a realistic interpretation, although this does not bring theatrical effects. Unfortunately, any shifts in the field of research ethics usually come after scandals where the limits of existing ethics are shown. The scandals around the research by Napoleon Chagnon and James Neel show that extreme approaches evoke extreme reactions, and it is good to avoid them in all directions. To be a source of high-quality, educated and in all respects correct information for the examined groups and for the sponsor of the research generally implies that none of the players will feel damaged.

Moreover, the ethics of scientific work does not concern merely the protection of the person of the informant. Scandals with plagiarism are a global phenomenon; and, while in the Czech Republic plagiarism is not punished very much by employers, at least the careers of the plagiarists, if nothing else, do suffer. But, as far as spreading unsubstantiated information, delusions which do not have permanent relevance, improper conduct of polemics with colleagues in professional journals and misrepresentation of research results are concerned, these are really still not a concern for many graduates of anthropological disciplines here. These areas are hard to punish and discrediting those involved often takes place desperately slowly. Scientists take their example from the world of journalism, and not fully educated sponsors of research do not see a big difference between journalism and scientific work. Success, in my opinion, will not come from tightening the screws in ethical codes, but in consistent decision-making in the organs which grant the relevant certificates, select articles to be published and grant scientific degrees. We must weigh for whom we write a positive assessment or give a positive review; the future quality of the discipline depends on it.

Juraj Podoba: The question of the ethics of anthropological practice, or more generally of qualitative social-science research that works with specific individuals and small social groups, where the examined social facts cannot hide behind anonymous statistical data, is undoubtedly a relevant and current, or even acute problem of the contemporary social sciences. It is, however, too banal. What is certainly not trivial is the problem tabled by Jakub of the interest of practicing anthropologists and ethnographers in this seemingly trivial problem. Again, we will only agree with Zdeněk that a certain shift has certainly occurred over the past quarter-century. The audience of social anthropology courses at the faculty where I work are taught about this issue as early as during the first semester of their bachelor’s degree and must also apply the standards of the ethics of anthropological research during their field research and when writing their theses.

Another question is what specifically the standards of anthropological practice should look like in terms of mandatory codes of ethics. Within the SASA, this has been discussed often enough in the recent past, but we have not adopted a code of ethics. My personal opinion is – and certainly many will not concur with it – that it is not necessary to rush through with the adoption of such a document, as
it is very important to consider in detail its various aspects to come up with thoroughly thought-out specific formulations, so as not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Again, I would reinforce Zdeněk's view of the practical projection of ethical principles into academic reality with which we are confronted every day. I am very concerned that from time to time a manifesto-declared ethical fundamentalism goes hand-in-hand with a generally accepted conflict deeply rooted in the social-sciences academic milieu: in assessing the manuscripts of monographs, and studies and articles intended for scientific journals, in deciding on granting academic degrees, within commissions accepting candidates for PhDs or for posts at academic institutions, and so on. Therefore, I would also rather argue with a standardization of the criteria in this area, and methods for enforcing compliance with them. At the risk of being repetitive, we repeat that again we are moving beyond the scope of non-state non-profit voluntary professional associations, such as the Slovak Association of Social Anthropology.

Undoubtedly, there is a perceptible desire to have a prestigious organization in our discipline, covering the entire discipline and acting as a dignified representative of social anthropology not just to the professional public, but also to the wider public: one which would have a fundamental influence in ethical issues. Of course, I understand this desire well. However, to build a professional organization with such a generally accepted authority requires the hard, systematic and purposeful work of several generations, in which everyone with an interest in working in the field must be involved: from scientific personalities with international renown to doctoral candidates and students. There is no other way.

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