

Has the EASA Lost its Way?

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On 14 January 1989, twenty-two mid-career anthropologists from twelve Western European countries assembled in Castel Gandolfo, outside Rome. We were there to consider the establishment of a European Association of Social Anthropologists. We were an ad hoc, informal network. And yet it was immediately apparent that we all recognised a need for closer co-operation in teaching and research, and for a professional body to represent social anthropologists in Europe. We were also reacting against the ultra-relativist “post-modernist” turn in American anthropology.

Within two days the preliminary decisions had been taken. A European Association of Social Anthropologists was established. It would hold conferences, organize postgraduate courses, set up a register of anthropologists, publish a newsletter and operate as a professional association. The first conference was scheduled to take place in Coimbra in the summer of 1990.

And then, in November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. Sydel Silverman, president of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, immediately offered to subsidise attendance at the Coimbra meetings by anthropologists from the former Eastern Bloc countries. That first conference was a thrilling occasion. Over a thousand western social anthropologists were joined for the first time by young colleagues from beyond the Berlin Wall. We engaged in large and resonant debates about theory – about structuralism, and sociobiology, and postmodernism; about gender and identity; about multi-culturalism; and about post-colonial and post-socialist societies. Four books were published, drawing on plenary conference panels.

The current situation of the EASA is strikingly different. Today there are few large theoretical issues that engage a large swathe of social anthropologists. I don't think that many of us spend much time reading the latest papers published in the *American Anthropologist*, the *American Ethnologist* or the *JRAI*. How often

do anthropologists talk about ideas when they get together? And what ideas do they have in common?

If we don't argue much about ideas, unfortunately, we do argue a lot about politics, and in particular about global events. Like the leadership of the AAA, the executive of the EASA has become embroiled in the thickets of identity politics. The President pronounces on human rights and international crises. When Putin invaded Ukraine, the President announced her support for Russia on our website. (This was swiftly qualified after an outcry from the members.) Now there is a campaign to exclude any Israeli members from our meetings. Plenary meetings at recent conferences are more like political rallies than a forum for professional debate. Topics for sessions and round tables are often selected by political criteria. But this is whistling in the wind. Nobody outside a divided membership plays the slightest attention to the views of the EASA executive on world events.

The executive proposes to set up an EASA committee on human rights. The idea seems to be to police research and discipline members. There is a debate to be had about the very notion of universal human rights and its relationship to cultural diversity. This is a question on which anthropologists might well have something useful, or at least interesting to say. I would welcome a serious discussion. However, I am dismayed by the assumption that an unelected committee, none of whose members has published a substantive discussion of these matters, can sit in judgment.

Activist campaigns led by the executive are divisive. They leave many members dispirited, alienated from the association. Resources, time and energy that should be devoted to the development of European social anthropology are wasted. We used to organise summer schools for graduate students. Our conferences produced internationally influential publications. Members of the executive were leaders in the field. No longer. The EASA executive now operates – or pretends to – as a pressure group.

Candidates for recent executive elections present themselves on a platform of combating precarious employment for anthropologists. This faction has dominated the executive for the past six years. What effect have they had on securing the employment of anthropologists in European universities? Obviously, no effect at all.

And yet it is true that anthropology, like the humanities and social sciences in general, is in a precarious position in European universities. What can be done? We must foster professional debate, make our conferences vibrant centres for intellectual exchange, promote our publications, cooperate across national boundaries to raise grants for research, inspire our graduate students. Perhaps above all, we must recognise that the future of the EASA and of European anthropology

depends very largely on our contribution to interdisciplinary developments in the human sciences.

We should not allow ourselves to be divided by shouting matches about international events. Members should never be dragooned into declaring adherence to any ideological dogma. I hope that the new EASA executive will bring our members together, and that the 2026 conference in Poznan renews the mission launched by that first EASA conference, in Coimbra.

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