

The Anthropology of Britain Network Decennial Symposium



Celebrating 10 Years of the AOB

University of Exeter

4th September 2014

Byrne House, Streatham Campus, St German's Road, Exeter EX4 4PJ

9.00 – 9.30 Welcome and Arrivals

9.30 -11.15 Session One: Whose Anthropology, Whose Britain?

Chair: Jeanette Edwards

9.30 – 9.50 “Anthropologies of Britons? Reflections on Connective Tissues”

Cathrine Degnen (Newcastle) and Katharine Tyler (Exeter)

9.50 – 10.10 “After Scotland: Relocating the British Subject and the Ethnographic Tradition”

Alexander Thomas T. Smith (Warwick)

10.10-10.30 “Collective Identification, Citizenship, and Belonging in the UK: The Anthropology of Britain and Migration Studies” Laura Jeffery (Edinburgh)

10.30 – 11.00 Discussants: Pnina Werbner & Judith Okely

11.00 – 11.15 Q&A

11-15 – 11.30 Tea Break

11.30 – 1.15 Session Two: Post-industrial Lives and Social Class

Chair: Nigel Rapport

11.30 – 11.50 “Social Class and the Cultural Turn: The Anthropology and Sociology of Britain in the Context of Global Cultural Politics” Gillian Evans (Manchester)

11.50 – 12.10 “An Ethnographic Analysis of “Apathy” on a Post-industrial Council Estate” Insa Koch (LSE)

12.10- 12.30 “Having the Upper Hand: Emerging Moral and Domestic Economies in North Manchester” Katherine Smith (Manchester)

12.30 – 1.00 Discussants: Jeanette Edwards & Pnina Werbner

1.00- 1.15 Q&A

1.15 – 2.15 Lunch

2.15 – 5.00 Session Three: More Than-Human Worlds

Chair: Judith Okely

2.15 – 3.05 “Anthropocene East Anglia” Richard Irvine (Cambridge)

3.05- 3.25 “Foxhunting as Secular Sacrifice?” Samantha Hurn (Exeter)

3.25 – 3.45 “Birds in Their Place: Developing More-Than-Human Anthropology in Britain” Andrew Whitehouse (Aberdeen)

3.45 -4.00 Discussant: Nigel Rapport

4.00-4.15 Q&A

4.15 – 4.30 Tea Break

4.30 -5.30 Speed Research Session

Chair: Katharine Tyler; Reflections on the session: Jeanette Edwards

5.30 – 6.30 Round Table Reflections: Jeanette Edwards, Judith Okely, Nigel Rapport, Pnina Werbner;

Chairs: Cathrine Degnen & Katharine Tyler



With thanks to the ASA and the University of Exeter for their support of this event.

Front piece image credit: <http://www.prelovac.com/vladimir/change-is-good-but-sometimes-need-a-little-push>

Detailed Programme and Paper Abstracts

9.00 – 9.30 Welcome and arrivals

9.30 -11.15 Session One: Whose Anthropology, Whose Britain?

Chair: Jeanette Edwards

9.30 – 9.50 “Anthropologies of Britons? Reflections on Connective Tissues”

Cathrine Degnen (Newcastle) and Katharine Tyler (Exeter)

In this paper we attempt to address what might be meant by ‘the anthropology of Britain’. We do not take the idea of an ‘anthropology of Britain’ for granted, but reflect upon some of the ways in which the anthropology of Britain as an idea, a theoretical concept and a practice might usefully be deployed. To think through some of the questions and issues that arise from this endeavour, we draw ethnographically upon our shared experiences of convening the AOB network, and our individual experiences of teaching and research.

9.50 – 10.10 “After Scotland: Relocating the British Subject and the Ethnographic Tradition”

Alexander Thomas T. Smith (Warwick)

Fifteen years have passed since the Scottish Parliament re-opened following the successful referenda on devolution held across the United Kingdom in the early years of the Blair Government. On 18 September 2014, however, Scotland will hold a new referendum, this time on whether or not to stay within the UK. The cultural, economic and political consequences of a vote for independence promise to be profound, for all the constituent countries of the Union. But even if a ‘No’ vote is recorded on the question of Scottish independence, the political debate over Scotland’s constitutional future will likely have a far-reaching impact on how anthropologists, sociologists and their publics think about the making of local, regional and national identities in a future Britain.

Because of the political uncertainties the debate over Scottish independence throws up for the United Kingdom as a whole, it is reasonable to ask if it is any longer appropriate or even plausible to name the subject of the anthropological research we undertake as ‘Britain’. It would be ironic if, at the very moment anthropologists of Britain succeeded in establishing the anthropological credentials of Britain, it ceased to make sense empirically, as an ethnographic subject, a field site or even a place to be conjured (‘sighted’) by the anthropological imagination. Anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists working in the ethnographic tradition might also consider what political work naming our research subjects ‘British’ performs in the context of wider identity struggles over being Scottish, English, Irish, Welsh or even Cornish or Cockney.

This paper draws on the current debate over whether Scotland's future is best served by staying within, or outwith, the United Kingdom. Returning to the themes of an influential 1990s book by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, I will argue that the challenge now confronting anthropologists of Britain is one of 'relocation work'. Not only must we attend to our own location/s in an associational entanglement of institutional, social and other relations. We must also anticipate the work of *relocation*: how our focus on one (macro?) marker of identity (Britain) inevitably empowers some claims over others in a contest that will produce political effects. At a time when varied, sometimes-conflicting identities – some ancient, some not so old, some new – appear to be in the ascendant, we need to think through the consequences of this *privileging* of our ethnographic subjects as British for anthropology, for ourselves as anthropologists of Britain, and for the publics we seek to serve.

10.10-10.30 “Collective Identification, Citizenship, and Belonging in the UK: The Anthropology of Britain and Migration Studies”

Laura Jeffery (Edinburgh)

This paper illustrates how the anthropology of Britain – in conversation with socio-legal studies and human geography – has been at the forefront of developments in migration studies and refugee studies, particularly in relation to studies of human encounters with institutions, bureaucracy, and citizenship, and ethnographies of processes of identification, belonging, and home. Drawing on my research with displaced Chagos islanders and the dispersed Chagossian community in Crawley (West Sussex), Manchester, and London, this paper will illustrate the contributions made by anthropologists of Britain working within migration and refugee studies. Firstly, our understanding of the characteristics of life and work in the UK is enhanced through the comparisons between the UK and elsewhere drawn by migrants and refugees, who often reveal a tension between desires for a high 'quality of life' in terms of having time to spend with one's family and to enjoy leisure activities (characteristics often associated with 'homelands' elsewhere) and a high 'standard of living' in terms of having enough income to manage a high cost of living (characteristics often associated with the UK). Secondly, in conversation with socio-legal studies, research with migrants and refugees highlights the myriad challenges faced by disadvantaged people – including non-migrants – in attempting to access a range of state resources: visas, residence, citizenship, benefits, housing, healthcare, education, and employment. Thirdly, drawing on human geography and a mobilities approach more generally, research on migrant remittances and refugee dispersal across the UK helps us to understand collective identification across international borders and between British cities, particularly in relation to flows of products with shared meaning, the transmission of cultural heritage, and the increasing use of digital social media.

10.30 – 11.00 Discussants: Pnina Werbner & Judith Okely

11.00 – 11.15 Q&A

11-15 – 11.30 Tea break

11.30 – 1.15 Session Two: Post-industrial Lives and Social Class

Chair: Nigel Rapport

11.30 – 11.50 “Social Class and the Cultural Turn: The Anthropology and Sociology of Britain in the Context of Global Cultural Politics”

Gillian Evans (Manchester)

Comparing and contrasting the anthropology and sociology of social class in Britain, and via an analysis of the difference between Bourdieu's anthropological work in Algeria and his more sociological work on France, this paper draws on recent research on the Anthropology of Britain, to critique the cultural turn in the sociology of social class, and especially the recent BBC Class Survey. The mobilisation of a politics of culture, in place of a class politics in Britain, is also analysed in the context of a global moment in which claims to cultural authenticity are replacing or being developed alongside the more conventional challenges to global capitalism of a socialist politics of the working class.

11.50 – 12.10 “An Ethnographic Analysis of “Apathy” on a Post-industrial Council Estate”

Insa Koch (LSE)

Declining rates of electoral participation, dwindling membership rates for political parties and public polls that chart the public's loss of trust in politicians have all been taken as evidence of an epidemic of apathy in Britain today. In this paper, I challenge this notion of “apathy” by drawing upon fieldwork on a post-industrial council estate in England. I pursue two lines of inquiry. First, I consider how received portrayals of apathy diverge from vernacular uses of the term. I show that for the residents on the estate, apathy is not equated with a withdrawal from electoral participation. Rather, residents more commonly use the term to refer to a failure of individuals to become involved in their local estate community. Second, I analyse how residents relate to formal politics. I suggest that many residents do not consider withdrawal from formal politics as indicative of a lack of political commitment. On the contrary, in a situation where the world of formal politics has become constructed as a threat to the local estate community, withdrawal constitutes both a reasonable and a socially desirable response. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on how the preceding ethnographic analysis points towards an alternative view of politics that residents subscribe to on the estate: this is a view which equates a viable politics not with participation in formal electoral processes but rather with a commitment to an ethics of community support and care. Overall, in offering a bottom-up challenge of “apathy”, this paper not only develops a counter-narrative to received portrayals of political disengagement in Britain, but also contributes in a broader sense to the anthropology of politics and democracy. In so doing, the paper speaks directly to the workshop's aim of identifying the distinct contributions of an anthropology of Britain and placing these in dialogue with both anthropology and related disciplines.

12.10- 12.30 “Having the Upper Hand: Emerging Moral and Domestic Economies in North Manchester”

Katherine Smith (Manchester)

This paper tracks and documents the ‘social life’ of welfare reform in Harpurhey, North Manchester, England. It addresses the new levels of poverty and anxieties about the future amongst residents in Harpurhey. Considering ‘welfare’ is premised on the idea that some need and depend on the help of others, this paper begins by questioning the distortion in social discourse and political representations of benefits claimants and the long-term unemployed but deemed fit to work, when people and society mirror back a confining, demeaning or contemptible picture of them, and it explores the local transmission and transformation of moral reasoning and knowledge of the lived experiences of these discourses and representations which are being constituted and reinforced through policy, as ‘unfair’. Specifically, this paper explores new demands and challenges imposed on interpersonal relationships through the experience of new benefits sanctions, and the emerging informal economies amongst three families in Harpurhey. The borrowing and lending of money within the family and between neighbours is raising new questions about a person’s own sense of entitlement to make comment on and judgment about the decisions, behaviours and actions of the borrower; judgments beyond the loan itself. This paper argues that the social life of welfare reform is flying in the face of the economic rationality inherent in welfare policy, and raises new questions about the local sense of fairness and being a ‘fair person’.

12.30 – 1.00 Discussants: Jeanette Edwards & Pnina Werbner

1.00- 1.15 Q&A

1.15 – 2.15 Lunch

2.15 – 5.00 Session Three: More Than-Human Worlds

Chair: Judith Okely

2.15 – 3.05 “Anthropocene East Anglia”

Richard Irvine (Cambridge)

As we find ourselves in a geological epoch of our own making, it becomes necessary to reconsider the temporal scale of anthropological enquiry; the effect of human behaviour is shown as a mark in deep time. In this paper, I consider the importance of thinking about long-term environmental change for the understanding of human life. I focus on two key questions that the emergent concept of the Anthropocene raises for anthropology: how might our ethnographies engage with the geological realities of the landforms under our feet? And what kind of understanding of time is required in order to grasp how those landforms are changing?

Taking the point of view that the Anthropology of Britain (placed within the proper context of the broader comparative project of Anthropology) can make an essential contribution to our understanding of the Anthropocene, in this paper I discuss ethnographic evidence from East Anglia, exploring the interaction between humans, land, and water. First, I explore the way in which human geological agency has transformed the landscape. I then go on to argue that while the scale of such changes can only be understood against the backdrop of geological time, social life in the region nevertheless demonstrates "temporal lock-in", which I define as an increasing fixation with the landscape of a single point in history. The consequence of such temporal lock-in is that long term environmental variability becomes, literally, unthinkable; yet surface-level certainties of the present are called into question when the timescale of deep history is brought into view.

3.05- 3.25 "Foxhunting as Secular Sacrifice?"

Samantha Hurn (Exeter)

This paper considers the complex relationships between the humans and other-than-human beings involved in mounted foxhunting in rural west Wales. The widespread condemnation of foxhunting is significant in what Bulliet terms 'post-domesticity' where the vast majority of people are alienated from the 'natural' world and processes of agricultural production. This post-domestic separation of consumers from producers and humans from animals has led to an increase in protest against traditional blood sports, culminating in legislation which makes it a criminal offense to pursue a wild mammal with dogs (hounds) in the United Kingdom. In the minds of many, it is, to quote Oscar Wilde, "the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable." Yet thousands of animals get killed by humans in the U.K. every day, for example behind the closed doors of abattoirs, in biomedical research facilities and in veterinary surgeries. Obviously these various forms of animal death raise different issues in terms of their social acceptability. For many it is the ritualisation that makes foxhunting so objectionable. However, in this paper I argue that it is the ritualisation which transforms some examples of hunting into sacrifice. In other ethnographic contexts where humans engage in subsistence hunting the pre- and post-hunt rituals are taken as evidence of a respectful relationship between hunter and hunted, and as a means for the human hunter to both propitiate the spirit of their quarry and to ameliorate the guilt associated with taking life. As a result of sustained immersion within a rural farming community in Wales I argue that in the context of the hunting I observed and participated in during fieldwork spanning over ten years, a similar ethos lies at the heart of the mounted foxhunting ritual.

3.25 – 3.45 "Birds in Their Place: Developing More-Than-Human Anthropology in Britain"

Andrew Whitehouse (Aberdeen)

Research conducted as part of the *Listening to Birds* project has explored the significance of bird sounds to British people's sensing of place. For many people, a place gains an important part of its character through its sounds, and those made by birds are integral to this process. Changes in the birds that people hear can elicit a sense of unease or alienation, even when those sounds had only been in the background of people's experience. In exploring the experiential and semiotic field of listening to birds, I draw on recent developments in 'more-than-human anthropology', as well as on other studies of birds and

place in Britain. My argument centres on the ways in which people, birds and other living beings make places as meshworks, in the sense used by Tim Ingold. The symbolic meanings that both places and other species have emerge not from cultural representations that are independent of their being in the world but, following Eduardo Kohn, are built up from indexical groundings that develop through our interactions with our world and the other species therein. Such an approach is suggestive of how we might reconsider both 'anthropology' and 'Britain'.

I move on to further examine the wider context of recent developments in the ways that non-humans are incorporated into the social sciences. Where once other forms of life were either consigned to the sphere of nature or constructed through particular cultural lenses, more-than-human anthropology attempts to draw species into the social by employing more symmetrical approaches to consider the entanglement of human and non-human lives. A more-than-human anthropology thus has significant implications for the boundary of the discipline, the possibilities for how anthropology is conducted and presented and its relations with other disciplines. In this paper, I consider some of the ways that research in Britain has been contributing to these developments as well as discussing why work in Britain – as a well-documented nation of 'nature lovers' and as central to the development of biology and ecology – could potentially be important in driving further advances.

3.45 -4.00 Discussant: Nigel Rapport

4.00-4.15 Q&A

4.15 – 4.30 Tea break

4.30 -5.30 Speed Research Session -- Each participant will have an allotted time to describe their research interests to the Symposium workshop participants in order to facilitate networking with fellow AOB members.

Chair: Katharine Tyler

Maren Klotz (4.30-4.35)

Ana Carolina Barreto Balthazar (4.35-40)

Vita Peacock (4.40-4.45)

Roxana Morosanu (4.45-4.50)

Frances Thirlway (4.50-4.55)

Christine McCourt (4.55-5.00)

Helen Cornish (5.00-5.05)

Melanie Griffiths (5.05-5.10)

5.10 – 5.30 Reflections on speed research session: Jeanette Edwards

5.30 – 6.30 Round table on the day: Jeanette Edwards, Judith Okely, Nigel Rapport, Prina Werbner

Chairs: Cathrine Degnen & Katharine Tyler