

International Workshop

“The Politics of (Post-)Truth: Knowledge-Making in Fragmented Worlds of Mis/Trust”

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A spectre is haunting modernity at large – the spectre of “post-truth” and “alternative facts”. Knowledge formations have always been politically challenged and enriched by dissenting voices pointing towards unfitting facts and divergent interpretations, occasionally leading to paradigmatic revolutions. In recent decades, modern science as a key provider of certain knowledge has also been profoundly offended from within by post-positivist and post-modern provocations, assembling projects within philosophy, cultural studies, feminism, science and technology studies (STS) and anthropology. What makes our contemporary moment different is, arguably, that such forms of profound scepticisms have now entered the political mainstream of many societies. As many observers have noted, the material and infrastructural standards of evidence-making and expertise-building seem to have profoundly changed within many sectors of society. In this process, the very possibility of knowledge as sufficiently reliable and integrative despite all contestations has been severely challenged.

Although the examination of “other” knowledge domains has been one of the original or primary areas of interest since the discipline’s beginnings, all this involves particular repercussions for contemporary anthropological research. To begin with, the object of anthropological queries has shifted, as many do no longer concentrate their studies on people located on the periphery of imperial and capitalist systems, the so-called “savage slot” (Robbins 2013). Rather, the discipline went through a “dark turn”, as Sherry B. Ortner (2016) calls it, focusing on the harsh dimensions of social life, such as power, domination, inequality, and oppression (Ortner 2016: 47). Over time, this has also involved, among other challenges, conducting research in the lives of “those we do not necessarily like”, be they white supremacists, neo-nationalists, fundamentalists or fascists (Bangstad 2017, Faust & Pfeifer 2021, Ssorin-Chaikov 2021, Teitelbaum 2019). As heterogeneous as these groups may be, they all make use of the crisis of trust for nurturing feelings of scepticism, suspicion and doubt, and detaching values from any connection with the social (Pinheiro-Machado & Vargas-Maia 2023). The global Covid-19 pandemic further produced communities of doubt that base their collective grounds on the erosion of expert knowledge (Drażkiewicz 2023). In numerous other communities of knowledge, studying-up, across, or through (Gazit & Maoz-Shai 2010, Stryker & González 2014) may seem less challenging at first glance because it is deemed less politicized. However, anthropologists also encounter specific epistemic and ethical challenges when researching elitist collectivities such as lawyers, bureaucrats, finance brokers, security industries, foreign correspondents, or scientists in research laboratories, all of whom cultivate their own, at times opaque domains of knowledge and may have strong opinions, and often scepticisms, about our research approaches. Hence, fragmentations of mis/trust may also question our own positionalities in research settings, in which we as researchers are constantly engaged in a protracted contest on what counts as legitimate knowledge, and what not (Hale 2008).

These conundrums come particularly to the fore through recent developments within the discipline that simultaneously strife for a decentring of anthropological authority in the research process through a more collaborative research practice, on the one hand, and for becoming more publicly engaged beyond the academy, on the other. Collaborative and activist anthropology are often thought of, and aspired to, as neatly stitched together (Lamphere 2004, 2018; Rappaport 2008, 2016-2017). Yet, collaborative research always also works across (some) difference, requiring constant (re)negotiations about key conceptualizations, goals, means and modalities of mediation and representation (Lassiter 2005, 2008a, 2008b). In other words, collaborations are always variably conjoined with contestations in publicly engaged

anthropologies that have to find a balance between sympathetic closeness and empathetic distance; while engaged anthropology may, ideally, go together with collaborative ambitions, both may also be at loggerheads (Zenker & Vonderau 2023). This may lead to awkward questions about how to best unlearn our (relative) privileges as researchers: attempting to contribute to a “reversal of historical asymmetries may require from us that we not give up our own agency and determination to give the last word vis-à-vis disagreements among our interlocutors”, as Claudia Briones (2016-2017: 36) puts it.

These challenges with knowledge formations have become even more pronounced in light of a recent turn towards a (more) decolonial anthropology, since these current innovations require new proximities and pragmatics in handling mutual contestations. When we share our methodologies and epistemologies with the members of social movements, with activists and native anthropologists, they often question our conceptual categories and established tools of study (Bejarano et al. 2019, Cox 2015, Low & Merry 2010). At the same time, we need to handle contrasting values when being confronted with new postliberal hegemonies and power asymmetries articulated on the grounds of allegedly universalist assumptions, as in the field of human rights, protectionists interventions or Western feminisms. At any time, our empirically based criticism can be hijacked by populist forces in order to demote alternative, left-wing or less clearly positioned forces as “wokeism” - which in turn can call into question our basis of trust within the respective research settings. What are the grounds of our own “moral-political compartmentalization” in navigating these postliberal challenges (Zenker 2021)? Is it sufficient to delegate the contestations over values to the sphere of “the emic” for differentiating “harmful” from “innocent” or “benevolent” forms of postliberalism? To what an extent do contestations such as these require an explicit positioning also within the sphere of “the et(h)ic”? How to bring these two spheres into some kind of acceptable alignment?

Against this backdrop, this workshop – building on the discussions at a panel of the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology organized in 2023 – invites contributions reflecting on anthropological approaches to the politics of (post-)truth regarding two interrelated questions:

First, which political processes do underpin the making, and safe-guarding, of concrete knowledge formations under conditions of increasingly fragmented and mutually mistrusting epistemic communities? Which political modalities are enabled, undermined or muted, by such epistemic mis/trust?

Second, what political role(s) can anthropological knowledge-making play under such conditions? Which kinds of (ethical, epistemological, political) dilemmas occur along the research process, and how can these dilemmas best be handled?

We welcome empirically grounded and theoretically informed as well as reflexive contributions especially with regard to epistemic communities in which the mutual constitution between knowledge and (mis)trust is most prevalent, such as law and justice, science, public services as well as the governance of health, migration, welfare or aid. An explicit exploration of both of the above questions in their mutual interrelations would be most welcome.

Please send an abstract of approximately 500 words until 1 November 2023 to

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First paper drafts (5000 words) will be due 16 June 2024.

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