Peoples in Flux: Anthropology in and of Europe

Introduction

If anthropology is the study of humanity, in all its differences and similarities across time and space, surely Europeans—across regions, classes, and nationalities—constitute a proper domain for anthropological research. The anthropology of Europe builds on an extensive body of knowledge that numerous scholars, representing various disciplines, have produced through the ages.

Anthropologists have expanded understanding of Europe as a sociocultural construct, by focusing on the lived experiences of ordinary people who respond to, resist, and create the realities within which they live, and ultimately help to reproduce. Some Europeanists frame their work regionally, e.g., Mediterranean Europe; geographically, e.g., north Atlantic Europe; politically, e.g., Eurasia; or geopolitically, e.g., post-socialist Europe. Across these territories anthropologists have examined such topics as rural life, kinship, and gender. Some focus on class, urbanization, identity, or war, while others examine heritage preservation, tourism, religion, and festivals. Globalization, and particularly neoliberalism, has guided contemporary ethnographic research toward such topics as multiculturalism, environmentalism, and human rights (Goddard, Llobera and Shore 1996; Kockel, Craith, and Frykman 2012).

Anthropologists have recorded Europeans’ hitherto undocumented histories, exposed the human injuries of trade and political atrocities, and demonstrated people’s resilience, creativity, and the cultural logics through which they adapt to global transformations (Wolf 1982). Ethnographies have generally focused on peoples in Europe—peasants, indigenous minorities, migrants, middle-class urbanites, refugees, pilgrims, asylum seekers and, increasingly, policy makers and their practices (Arensberg 1963; Dubisch 1995). Recent scholars have considered Europeanization—the reorganization of boundaries, borders, and identities that constitute the ‘new Europe’ (Green 2005; Parman 1998). Equally critical is the distinction of “Europe” the continent, from the “European Union” (EU), a political and economic conglomerate of 28 states-offering for research a new set of supranational processes, policies, and practices (Bellier and Wilson 2000).

The three overarching transformations that have mobilized European anthropology are decolonization, the fall of communism, and most recently the Eurozone debt crisis. Concomitant with such global shifts are corollary societal and national crises that ordinary citizens have
learned to endure, some more resourcefully than others. In this essay, and through illustrative ethnographies, I highlight three principles that inform anthropology in and of Europe: (1) relationships between global transformations and anthropological inquiry; (2) intersections of global political economic forces and local cultural practices; and (3) a focus on research participants as active agents who respond resourcefully and meaningfully to currents of change.

**Decolonization and the European Turn**

Early ethnographers of Europe studied rural communities, mountainous groups, and fishing villages, which they perceived as most similar to the nonwestern communities that anthropologists had studied under colonial rule. As colonialism dissolved, anthropologists’ customary field sites became less accessible and their residents more hesitant to discuss their lives with white foreigners. In response, ethnographers began to target rural field sites in the Mediterranean, including Spain, Greece, Italy, and Portugal.

Early anthropologists exoticized the Mediterranean when they compared its communities to those of Asia and Africa, while differentiating these from the societies of northwestern Europe (Herzfeld 1987). Erroneously perceiving these communities as isolated, autonomous, and bounded cultural entities, such studies tended to view peasants and pastoralists ahistorically and as the ‘primitives of Europe.’ Furthermore, treatment of the Mediterranean as a culture area neglected substantial variation across villages and societies, and between rural and urban communities.

Julian Pitt-Rivers’ study of Grazalema, Andalusia, a mountain village in southern Spain (1971), and John Campbell’s ethnography of the Sarakatsani, transhumant shepherds in Epirus, Greece (1964) illustrate the typical post WWII ethnographic monograph. These anthropologists proposed a gender-linked social structure and value system based on honor and shame. A man’s honor derived from his position as a respected household head that controlled the sexuality and fertility of his wife and daughters; a woman upheld the moral code of shame by preserving her household, modesty, and chastity (Peristiani 1965).

Early monographs hardly mentioned the extent to which globalization, modernization, and urbanization had already shaped local communities, particularly those on the margins of urban centers (Boissenvain and Friedl 1975). As theoretical attention to the interdependence between state policies and agrarian communities increased (see Harding 1984), so did our understanding of “local culture,” including gender roles and practices as collective patterns of behavior and thought that individuals negotiate and assert to meet their daily needs.

Women anthropologists tended to write more nuanced ethnographies, pointing out the complementarity of gender roles. Men and women negotiated the status of each gender within domestic and extradomestic spheres. Sally Cole (1991), for example, argued that the women of
the Portuguese coastal community, Vila Cha, defined themselves as productive workers and home managers, in partnership with their husbands. Renee Hirschon (1998) [1989] introduces us to the grit and resourcefulness of refugees from Asia Minor, victims of the war between Greece and Turkey that ended in 1923 with the exchange of populations. More than one million Orthodox Christians, including Roma, entered Greece, many of them settling in the port city of Piraeus (Kozaitis 1997). In this urban, working class community, men and women held asymmetrical but interdependent roles. 

Inspired by rapid urbanization in the mid-twentieth century, more anthropologists turned their attention to life in European cities (Kenny and Kertzer 1983). Migrating families from the hinterlands and immigrants from war-torn regions settled in already congested urban neighborhoods. Varied phenotypes, languages, dialects, and manners contributed to new, urban cultural hierarchies. Thomas Belmonte (2005) [1979] provides a rich account of impoverished Neapolitans, casualties of industrialization and particularly technological advances in agriculture. The residents of an urban neighborhood in Naples, Italy struggled to make ends meet, while investing unconditionally in relationships with family and friends. Life-course transitions and rites of passage solidified a community rooted in tradition. Women ran their households, worked for meager wages, and joined men in the informal economy to feed their children. Belmonte situates his analysis of class and gender in historical antecedents and structural conditions that constrain the agency of these urbanites. 

McDonogh’s (1986) study in Barcelona combines a focus on kinship, a classic topic of anthropological inquiry, with an analysis of power, at the time a less familiar unit of anthropological analysis. McDonogh demonstrates that to understand power, one must study not only the powerless, but also those who wield power. Specifically, he shows how descendants of the old aristocracy aligned with members of the new, industrial bourgeoisie to maintain their elite status (see also Yanagisako 2002). 

Europeanists’ increasing attention to urban middle classes reflects at once their historical role in shaping local and national realities, and their current struggle to maintain social and symbolic capital under a neoliberal, market labor regime (Molé 2012). Emanuela Guano’s analysis of Genoa’s downwardly-mobile middle-class following Italy’s industrial decline highlights citizens’ creativity in earning a living while revitalizing their city from the bottom up. Through such forms of immaterial labor as walking tour guides, artisans, antique dealers, multicultural festival organizers and participants, these urbanites are transforming Genoa into a consumable city of aesthetic and sensual goods and services (n.d). 

The monographs above demonstrate that current anthropology in, and of, Mediterranean Europe depicts a historically constructed and culturally diverse region. Citizens across societies are as much subjects of global economic and political forces as they are agents of local social and cultural constructions.
Socialists in Postsocialism

The collapse of communism in 1989, and the establishment by new governments of free-market-oriented capitalist economies produced unprecedented and rapid changes in the cultural practices, values, and emotions of people across Central and Eastern Europe. Ethnographers have helped dispel misconceptions about the presumed homogeneity and inferiority of the region. Ethnographic analyses of local, Postsocialist lifeways and meanings, e.g., of property, as embedded in global economic processes and controlled by relations of power, have advanced a critical edge in Postsocialist anthropology (Verdery 1998:180).

Anthropologists have documented how preexisting civic cultures in the socialist world provided organizational and psychological support during Postsocialist turbulence. Eastern Europeans had created social organization, not only through labor-based identities, but also through informal systems of support, including kinship and friendship networks, civic activities, women’s leagues, professional associations, religious affiliations, and sports teams (Buchowski 2001). Based on her research in Sarajevo, Fran Markowitz describes vibrant social communities, and citizens who viewed the postwar city “as an inclusive human habitat and a symbol of resilience” in which they celebrated life as Sarajlije that transcended different religious and ethnic affiliations against the still disturbing backdrop of a new EU governance (2010: 31-31).

Exposing a darker side of post-Socialist societies, David Kideckel (2008) describes Romanians (coal miners and chemical workers) facing chronic unemployment and declining living standards and physical and mental health. Uncertainty and alienation permeated family dynamics, gender roles, social relations, and sexual relationships. Fear of a future imagined as even bleaker than the present colored their worldview of these former members of labor’s elite. Jennifer Patico’s (2008) study of teachers in St. Petersburg showed how these professionals reflected on their declining salaries and socioeconomic status, given that others they understood to be less educated and “cultured” were faring much better in the new economy. The radical socioeconomic shift caused the teachers to question their own value in society and to be hypercritical of state officials, new elites, and the rich parents of their students. Eventually, as crisis conditions calmed, the teachers developed interpretations, sensibilities and practices that can be understood as adaptive to the new conditions of the market, the state, and their society. Patico suggests that these also should be read as indications of the gradual naturalization and legitimation of new power arrangements.

Detrimental effects of Soviet restructuring included people’s ruptured perceptions of self and society, the breakdown of traditional social networks, the deterioration of infrastructure, and the loss of professional identities. In her ethnography of post-socialist Moscow in the late 1990s, Olga Shevchenko (2009) writes of “the piecemeal patchwork of social change” that citizens experience in daily life. She notes how citizens responded pragmatically to the “perpetual crisis” by integrating old and new cultural categories toward a future.
Global calamities, and the crises they generate in local communities, mobilize citizens to think and act creatively and resourcefully by drawing on cultural attributes of the past in restructuring the present. Cultivation of interpersonal relationships was a counterbalance to the rigid state socialist system of Yugoslavia that permeated public life in Sarajevo. While most working class Romanians managed to ‘get by,’ some adapted by emigrating to Western Europe, while others started a small family business. Within a few years the mood of Patico’s teachers in St. Petersburg shifted from critique to adaptation and acceptance. The Muscovites studied by Shevchenko also developed new norms, patterns of behavior, and values as self-possessed, albeit still ambivalent, Postsocialists.

**European Integration and its Discontented**

To understand Europeanization, we must consider both the power of the EU’s interstate elites and the daily lives of its ordinary people—citizens, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers across member states. Key features of the new Europe include: (1) multiculturalism, specifically in relation to race, ethnicity, religion, and language; (2) articulations and marketing of historical and cultural heritage; (3) the rights and denial of citizenship; (4) absorption and accommodation of immigrants from the global south who claim their due place among the descendants of their colonizers; and (5) violations of human, civil, and cultural rights.

Jacqueline Brown (2005) introduces us to the descendants of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans in England’s postcolonial port city, Liverpool—a central location for British slave trading. These people trace their roots to the mid-nineteenth century, when colonial West African seamen intermarried with English and Irish women. While they situate their identity within the black diaspora, they are avid consumers and producers of contemporary English culture. Today’s Liverpool-born Blacks, or LBBs, with white mothers, are proud of their seafaring ancestry, and they have developed a multi-layered identity, history, and community.

France has long been a destination for immigrants from former African colonies, most prominently Algerians. Paul Silverstein (2004) examines the “transpolitical space” of Algeria and France from the former French colony to the integration of post-colonial immigrants whose Muslim identities and ethnic markers challenge the secular universalism of the French state. Immigrant Algerians’ postcolonial experience varies by generation. Those of late 19th and early 20th centuries sought to recreate their village social structure, and gender and age hierarchies, to reinstate cultural continuity. The second generation became cultural brokers between their parents and social institutions, while they fought for immigrant political rights. The children and younger siblings of the second generation, along with new immigrant students and activists fleeing the civil war that began in 1992 form a third generation. Silverstein’s notion of “transpolitics” is embodied in the interaction of three generations that constitute a Franco-Maghrebi transnational community.
Intersections of painful historical legacies and racialized identities constitute the “cosmopolitan anxieties” that Ruth Mandel captures in her ethnography of Turkish immigrants and their descendants in post WWII Germany. They have been caught between a Nazi past and the influx of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union who compete for citizenship rights and privileges. Mainstream Germans stereotype the Muslim Turks as biologically inferior, while viewing ethnic Germans also as outsiders who represent a “decay of the German heritage.” Mandel observes a “benign multiculturalism,” a tolerance for exotic others who are economically useful to Germany, while she acknowledges the agency among Turkish Germans who define and assert their diasporic and transnational space in Europe (Mandel 2008: 319; 323).

Miriam Ticktin (2011) documents the politics of humanitarianism in France that affect undocumented immigrants, most of them from former French colonies. A 1998 immigration policy provided legal status and medical treatment to undocumented immigrants suffering from serious illnesses. Agencies had to confirm the right to legal residency based on claims of suffering. Refugees and undocumented immigrants claimed illness in increasing rates in order to obtain legal status, raising skepticism among state officials and administrators, who then set limits on illness-based permits. Officials eventually gave most favorable treatment to women whose husbands had rejected them, and who were at risk of losing their right to work, and custody of their children. Actual and potential victims of human trafficking also were favored.

Heath Cabot (2014) depicts the intricacies of Greece’s asylum system: a conglomeration of policy makers, social workers, lawyers, government officials, interpreters, and administrators who engage locally with asylum seekers. Migrants from countries including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Somalia arrive in Greece by land or sea in search of safety, security, and legitimacy. Conditions of reception, including ad hoc decisions and arbitrary rules, institutional politics, and bureaucratic inefficiencies leave asylum seekers vulnerable to exploitation and neglect. Case workers and attorneys struggle to serve displaced individuals and families within the constraints that law, the state, and the Athens Refugee Service (ARS), an Athen-based NGO, impose. Cabot shows that institutional inefficiency and contingency sabotaged aid workers’ attempts to grant legal and humanitarian rights to asylum seekers. Particularly troublesome was service providers’ efforts to decipher the criteria and meanings of categories and hierarchies of aid seekers.

Throughout Europe, nationalism, cultural heritage, and profit conspire to also disrupt local life of ordinary citizens in the best interests of the powerful. Michael Herzfeld (2009) exposes neoliberal “restructuring” of Rome, and the debilitating consequences for Monti, a working class neighborhood near the Coliseum. Supported by neoliberal elites, including politicians, mafia bosses, and church officials, gentrification displaced small shopkeepers, artisans, and other workers. The demand for housing in the historic district of the Eternal City led to the eviction of already vulnerable residents. Preservation of local architecture as a world
heritage site resulted in the destruction of residents’ homes and the disintegration of close-knit kinship relationships and community life.

Europe recaptured the attention of the world after the Eurozone collapse in 2009, and the ensuing precarious consequences on the European south, including Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain. Media discourses have redesignated Mediterranean Europe as the continent’s economic and political periphery, different and “less than” Europe’s core countries. Greece in particular has become the poster problem child of the European project. However, the Greek crisis is understood best within the broader context of (1) European modernity, within which the Greek state has been embedded since its establishment in 1830; (2) a global recession; and (3) European elites’ miscalculated inclusion of Greece in the Eurozone in 2000.

New crises trigger recollections of past catastrophes transmitted through the generations as embodied social memory. Daniel Knight’s (2015) informants in Trikala, a small town in Central Greece, referenced historical catastrophes, such as the Ottoman and German occupations, to describe their experience of the current financial crisis. By referencing historical catastrophes, e.g., the Great Famine of 1941-43, Trikalinoi expressed their fears about the threat of hunger looming in 2010. The sense of collective victimhood and reliance on existing cultural resources, e.g., public commensality, eased locals’ experience of crisis. Expressions of resilience to crippling austerity also came through their deployment of slogans and graffiti inspired by irony, humor, satire, and critique of political figures.

My own ethnographic research among Thessalonikians examines the lived experience of crisis—an abrupt social disintegration that middle-class men and women between 18-80 years of age faced at the height of the Eurozone collapse in 2011-12. My research participants articulated eloquently the causes of the crisis: financial pressures from predatory international lenders, unregulated spending by Greek government officials, and a society steeped in a hybrid system of neoliberal policies and historically embedded clientelist practices. Less clear to them were the potential consequences of a “Grexit” from the Eurozone, which many viewed as an expulsion from a life of civility, integrity, and cosmopolitanism.

An emergent, collective liminality permeated discourse, actions, and relationships. My interlocutors oscillated between states of grief, despair, rage, guilt, uncertainty, hope, and resilience. Elders were resigned to having lived their life, but lamented their inability to support the newly unemployed younger generations, while middle-aged adults agonized about their children’s uncertain and precarious future. Young adults spoke of a ‘betrayal’ by their social institutions—a state that had ‘burned them;’ a market that had ‘rejected’ them; an educational system that had ‘lied’ to them; and a parental home that they had outgrown.

A longitudinal look at Thessaloniki’s formerly privileged, materialistic youth indicates a mass shift toward social responsibility, solidarity, and volunteerism. The moral shift to a ‘shared
ideology of togetherness,’ volunteers argue today, stems from the ‘dysphoria’ to which their political system subjects them. As one research participant put it in 2014, “The former mentality dissolved/destroyed us, and we now turn to volunteerism and to collective actions as a change of attitude.” Neoliberalism led to material displacement of Greek youth, while it has also inspired, if not demand of them, the spirit and will to act as self-conscious, and newly conscientious, “ethical citizens” (Muehlebach 2012). Mentality of crisis translates into recovery patterns on the ground—acting on behalf of all citizens for a more productive economy and a more civil society.

Conclusion

Forces of industrialization, modernization, and globalization have generated an uneven distribution of material and cultural resources among European states, societies, and communities. Favored are individuals, families, and groups with inherited access to technology, wealth, and power, and Europeans in the north Atlantic states. Central and southeastern Europeans, along with indigenous minorities, and new immigrants and refugees struggle to make a living, even as elites enhance their own lifestyles. European integration has fueled critical ethnographic analyses of public policies, identity politics, issues of citizenship, and of heritage. Restructurings of the European Union, culminating with the Eurozone debt crisis, have fueled studies of a region more complex and fluid than ever. The current instability within the Eurozone threatens to destabilize member states, and ultimately to change the European landscape and, correspondingly, the anthropological research agenda. Constant is ethnography’s focus on the present, lived experiences of Europe’s peoples in flux, understood as much through their official and mnemonic past(s), as through their structurally enforced and culturally constructed future(s).
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