4th Biennial Conference of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology (CASA)

AMBIGUITY

A1 Arguing the Case of Ambiguity in Anthropological Research on Outlaw and Socially Excluded Groups in Public Debate

Convenors: Tereza Kuldová and Michal Tošner

Anthropologists working on socially excluded populations and outlaw groups, such as for instance the outlaw motorcycle clubs, face challenges when attempting to convey research results that contradict the one-dimensional spectacular narratives present in popular discourses; i.e. political and mediated discourses where such groups tend to be criminalized based on group membership, turned into internal and transnational security threats, or alternatively represented as 'pure victims' and thus denied any agency or responsibility. In cases when research results contradict popular wisdom, researchers may be accused of having been 'duped' or 'mislead' by the informants – something that already Howard Becker captured in his notion of 'hierarchies of credibility'. The fact that the actual social terrain is far more ambiguous than the popular notions would suggest, presents a particular challenge for anthropologists working with subjects labelled by the mainstream as 'deviant', 'criminal', or 'culturally inferior'. Research results may even become politically contentious, as questions about these various Others within one's own society become the most affective for the population at large (as we have seen recently in refugee debates across Europe, where the love for the 'pure victim' very quickly turned into the hate of 'the criminal/culturally inferior Other' and where any balanced public debate became almost an impossibility). Anthropologists working in such contexts find themselves at the core of a heated debate, and may turn into public intellectuals even against their will. The panel invites papers dealing with anthropological research on aforementioned ambiguous subjects and its implications for public (Robert Borofsky) and engaged anthropology (Thomas H. Eriksen).

Friday, September 30, 2016

Room A (Nr. 111) 11:30 AM – 1 PM

Chair: Michal Tošner

Doing Anthropology of Outlaw Bikers, Representing Ambiguous and Controversial Groups

Tereza Kuldova

Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, University of Oslo
Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Vienna

Transnational outlaw motorcycle clubs, or so called 1-percenters, such as the iconic Hells Angels MC, Bandidos MC, Outlaws MC, and Pagans MC, are by governments and law enforcement worldwide considered as organized crime groups and a security threat, since mid-80s on the radar of Interpol and Europol. Research on outlaw motorcycle clubs, especially within Europe, has been marginal and limited to

the field of criminology and security studies, concerned with strategies of policing. Outlaw bikers are typically represented as purely criminal, violent and deviant. However, anthropological research reveals not only that they are far more complex, multi-faceted and often ambiguous organizations that are not primarily organized around crime, but also that these clubs, against their self-cultivated outlaw and deviant image, are far better integrated into mainstream society than police and spectacular media narratives would suggest. Grounded in ethnographic research on outlaw bikers in central and northern Europe, the paper will counter some of the dominant narratives about these groups by focusing on the lived experiences of being a part of these transnational brotherhoods, as well as their fight for 'biker rights' and protection of their legal businesses vis-à-vis persistent criminalization of individuals based on membership. The task here is not to deny the crimes committed by members of these organizations, which they themselves do not deny, but to gain a better understanding of the outlaw biker subculture, far more ambiguous when perceived from within. However, an ambiguous narrative becomes in itself politically contentious, something that is an obstacle in doing anthropology of these groups, which, unlike other marginalized groups, are not easy to sympathize with.

Ambiguities of victimization in "Gadžistan"

Pertra L. Burzová, Petr Kupka, Lubomír Lupták, Laco Toušek and Václav Walach

Department of Anthropology, University of West Bohemia

In the proposed paper we present the first findings and critical reflection of our research on victimization in socially excluded localities in the Czech Republic. Here, we concentrate on the ambiguities included in the definitions of crime within the context of repressive political-economic regime of inequalities based on race, class, gender and space. Following critical anthropologists dealing with crime, deviance and victimization we not only discuss the ways in which dominating definitions of crime seek to determine the lives of the dispossessed, but also the mechanisms of management of "social garbage" or "dangerous classes" delegated to a web of predatory political and economic actors and the uneasy and ambiguous interpretations of crime and victimizations by the inhabitants of sociospatially – and racially – excluded areas.

Contradictions of survival under a settler colonial regime: Palestinian labor in West Bank Settlements

Ethan Morton-Jerome

Anthropology Department, University of Arkansas

On July 19, 2015, the Israeli National Labor Court ruled in favor of an Israeli company, Yamit, declaring that Palestinians employed in Yamit's factory in the Nitzanei Shalom settlement industrial zone (located in the West Bank adjacent to the "Green Line") would be subject to Jordanian law. The Palestinian workers had sued the company to demand use of Israeli law even though application of Israeli law in the West Bank would be a step towards Israeli annexation of land in the West Bank. The suit was a pragmatic one for the Palestinian workers; they would benefit in the short-term if Israeli law were enforced. Yamit was interested in profits and benefited through the exploitation of Palestinian labor; as such, Jordanian labor law better suited Yamit's purposes. For both sides, nationalist sentiments were not a significant factor; rather, economic and short-term interests prevailed.

This is one illustration of the many apparent contradictions that I came across in my two years of ethnographic fieldwork on Palestinian labor on West Bank settlements. I frequently encountered choices and behaviors by both Palestinian employees and Israeli employers that did not follow the nationalist imperatives of either community but rather revealed resistance, contradictions, and inconsistencies. This topic becomes all the more politically contentious because both sides use the issue of Palestinian labor on the settlements in order to bolster their own nationalist claims. By moving beyond the limitations of a nation-state paradigm my research acknowledges and engages the complexities and ambiguities of life under military occupation.

Room A (Nr. 111) 3:30 - 5 PM

Chair: Tereza Kuldová

Ambivalent migration and ambivalences of migration: on anthropological engagement

Michal Tošner

Department of Sociology, University of Hradec Králové

This paper argues that ambiguity is the right term we need to use in order to address issues of immigration. In the last two years refugee/migration crises has become a highly topical issue in public debate and anthropological research in Central Eastern Europe. Migrants from Islamic countries in the Czech Republic represent a figure that abounds in ambiguities; firstly, as a refugee in need of assistance, deserving asylum, secondly, as a member of undeclared invasion, a migrant danger, terrorist, an enemy, a refugee.
While the government aims at "securitization", the right-wing populists take advantage of this situation and call for the closing of borders and use of military force against migrants. Consequently, European societies move away from the will to understand diversity and will to inclusion towards exclusionary conservatism of national identity, race, culture or religion. In this context, the anthropologist emerges as an "expert" obligated to enter into a public debate and finds himself in a deadlock, where the social space is split into two camps, where hegemony is perceived as malfunctioned and contrasted against "the people". Anthropologists are then labelled as "dangerous neomarxists", as ideologues vis-à-vis the "common sense treat of Islamization". Anthropologists become perceived as part of the hegemony, together with the European institutions, the government, media, multiculturalists, NGOs and so on, and thus a threat, as those who aim to destroy "our country". As such they are treated as internal enemy, as traitors, and as accomplices of "multicultural" elites that oppose the "people". Can the concept of ambiguity shed light on these debates in any productive way?

Visualising Homelessness? On Inherent Ambiguity of Visual Representations of Urban Poverty

Hana Daňková, Petr Gibas, Petr Vašát

Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences

As visibility of homeless people is being discussed in urban research, visual methods of research are being used to inquire the topic. Photovoice is one of them. Originally coming from the field of health education and often associated with participatory needs assessment, it is used as a productive tool which enables people to document and reflect their own strengths and concerns and to communicate these effectively to the wider public. Based on a photovoice research with homeless persons in Prague and Pilsen, two cities in the Czech Republic, we discuss ambiguities inherent to Photovoice, rooted in the opaqueness and expressivity of visual representations. In our paper, we draw on the formal-analytical and hermeneutic approaches. The pictures taken by homeless people show their mobility, daily activities, and the ways in which they use and inhabit public space. By means of their visual immediacy, they can challenge the dominant visual representation of visible homelessness and thus problematize the generally accepted image of homeless to be sleeping rough male. While photovoice has been used to do so by applied and engaged research practitioners, we use our data to discuss the potential pitfalls and problems of such an approach stemming from what we argue is an inherent ambiguity of visual representations obtained by means of photovoice. We show that although the photographs seem to provide unambiguous and straightforward visual information, they are in fact expressive and opaque, open to multiple readings and interpretation. We argue that while having a potential to disrupt general imaginaries, these images must be very carefully used and contextualized, which requires us – researchers and practitioners – to adopt a fundamentally self-reflexive, theoretically and ethically solid position as well as to conscientiously consider the ways in which we engage with and employ the photovoice results.

The Memory of Roma Workers: Performativity of Ethnographic Research and its Ambiguity

Petr Kubala

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University

The contribution is based on a qualitative research (participant observation, interviews) conducted from August 2014 to April 2015. The investigation focused on the research team of the project *O Leperiben -*

Memory of Roma Workers. More specifically, the main emphasis was placed on the team preparing the exhibition *Khatar san* based on the stories of Roma workers who migrated from Slovakia to Ostrava and Brno after the Second World War. My presentation will discuss the exhibition and the process of its creation, including the issues of performativity of the project, its ambiguity, engagement, and possible political consequences. Through the concept of performativity of social sciences, I analyse how the Roma people « were created » and their lifestories established, what kind of attributes were associated with them, and what kind of meaning do these attributes evoke in the confrontation with "imagined audience" and general public. In the end, the question of scientific reflexivity and public engagement in the realm of "interventionist research" will be addressed.