


to more fully embrace and benefit from the potential of ethnography as an ‘empathy bridge’ (Hochschild 2016), as Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco do in their insightful call for ‘nuance as a responsibility in times of democratic decline’.

Annie Wilkinson 
 Department of Anthropology
 University of California Irvine
 Irvine, CA 92697
 USA
 akwilkin@uci.edu

References

- Crenshaw, K. 1991. ‘Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color’, *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241.
- Ginsburg, F. D. 1989. *Contested lives: The abortion debate in an American community*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Goździak, E. M. and I. Main 2018. ‘Erasing Polish anthropology?’, *Anthropology News* 59: 235–40.
- Harding, S. F. 2001. *The book of Jerry Falwell: fundamentalist language and politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. 2016. *Strangers in their own land: anger and mourning on the American Right*. New York: New Press.
- Robbins, J. 2013. ‘Beyond the suffering subject: toward an anthropology of the good’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 447–62.
- Tallbear, K. 2014. ‘Standing with and speaking as faith: a feminist-indigenous approach to inquiry’, *Journal of Research Practice* 10: 17.
- Trouillot, M.-R. 1991. ‘Anthropology and the savage slot: the poetics and politics of otherness’, in R. Fox (ed.), *Recapturing anthropology: working in the present*, 17–44. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

OLAF ZENKER

Anthropology and the postliberal challenge

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fukuyama (1992) famously framed the victory of liberalism and its universal acceptance as ‘the end of history’. To the extent that this

sentiment has, of late, lost its grip on the popular imagination so that ‘the end of history’ has itself come to an end, we have been entering a postliberal world. This postliberal condition of Brexit, Trumpism and the expansion of right populisms throughout Euro-America and beyond has brought about a profound anthropological nervousness. How to explain this sense of disciplinary crisis? Why bother to proclaim that ‘how we respond to this challenge will define the future of our discipline’ (Bessire and Bond 2017: np)? In short: why do these postliberal projects seemingly go to the heart of the anthropological project itself?

In a recent article, Mazzarella (2019) unearths some of the reasons for this deep postliberal provocation. In line with the diagnostic proposed here of anthropology as a discipline of postliberal critique, he argues that ‘anthropology itself, methodologically if not always ideologically, tends towards a populist stance habitually aligning with the common sense of the common people’ (2019: 46). What makes the current right-populist provocation so hard to swallow for anthropology is thus the fact that this provocation seems both in alignment with anthropology’s own postliberal critique and in conflict with anthropology’s own ‘vague, generic liberalism’ (2019: 48). Right populism so profoundly challenges anthropology because it seems to use many of anthropology’s own arguments; the postliberalisms of right populism and anthropology seemingly coalesce and are increasingly difficult to distinguish. Or, rather, anthropology might have, for too long, not invested enough energy and care in sufficiently distinguishing its own brand of postliberalism from potentially harmful other variants.

That anthropology could afford to do so is arguably due to two common forms of de facto duplicity. First, preferably studying ‘good’ subaltern groupings (people who anthropologists ‘overtly liked and favoured politically’ (Don Kalb, this issue)), it has been relatively easy to advocate, and engage in, a morally and politically unproblematic collaborative anthropology of scholar–informant solidarity (see Lassiter 2005, but also Teitelbaum 2019), making it unnecessary to explicitly spell out, and defend, the values underpinning the postliberal project of both scholars and informants. Second, moral–political compartmentalisation might also have played some role: in extending the horizons of tolerance within research contexts sufficiently kept apart from those of the observing anthropologists, the latter might have been in the position to advocate an extensive tolerance for convictions and practices, the practical consequences of which they did not have to bear themselves.

Despite its multifaceted critiques of liberalism, anthropology, ironically, might thus have been too complacent in taking hegemonic liberalism for granted. In so doing, anthropology has arguably not felt the need to put sufficient emphasis on taking a more explicit stance towards its own values (whether liberal or not) in setting itself apart from other harmful forms of postliberal critique. Put boldly: anthropological critique of liberalism, if taken at face value and understood literally, often seems too extensive in offering no means to exclude potentially harmful forms of postliberalism – unless hegemonic liberalism is taken for granted as an ideological back-up that can be simultaneously despised and relied on to do this job instead. Now that this is decreasingly a viable option, the postliberal condition affords us with a new opening, in which anthropology is challenged to navigate its way in-between postliberal critique and postliberal provocation.

Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Mury Scalco (this issue) rightly emphasise the continued need for anthropology to professionally offer nuance and complexity within our anti-essentialist endeavour to render also ‘unlikable others’ intelligible as fellow human beings. Yet, as Susan Harding points out (also this issue), engaging with ‘populism’ also highlights the need for a self-conscious meta-analysis: based on which premises, and in which analytical terms, are we actually apprehending the other *as other*? We need to remind ourselves that to

empathise with research participants during fieldwork is not the same as to *sympathise* with them (Jackson 1998). Temporarily bracketing one's own values and convictions in the attempt to understand the perspectives of others does not require intellectual and moral subordination. In other words: not all research participants deserve our collaboration and support (*pace* Teitelbaum 2019) – but *on what grounds* are we actually justifying such decisions? Are we justifying these decisions at all? Being increasingly forced to take cognisance of this need for more explicit – and ideally: recursive – theorising and value-based positioning (Zenker 2016), of establishing meaningful and justifiable differences *within* postliberalism that make a desirable difference, is arguably a crucial affordance of our contemporary postliberal moment.

Olaf Zenker 

Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology

Martin Luther University Halle Wittenberg

Halle

Germany

olaf.zenker@ethnologie.uni-halle.de

References

- Bessire, L. and D. Bond 2017. 'Introduction: the rise of Trumpism', Hot Spots, *Fieldsights*, 18 January (<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/introduction-the-rise-of-trumpism>) Accessed 23 March 2021.
- Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Free Press.
- Jackson, M. 1998. *Minima ethnographica: intersubjectivity and the anthropological project*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lassiter, L. E. 2005. 'Collaborative ethnography and public anthropology', *Current Anthropology* 46: 83–106.
- Mazzarella, W. 2019. 'The anthropology of populism: beyond the liberal settlement', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48: 45–60.
- Teitelbaum, B. R. 2019. 'Collaborating with the radical right: scholar-informant solidarity and the case for an immoral anthropology', *Current Anthropology* 60: 414–35.
- Zenker, O. 2016. 'Anthropology on trial: exploring the laws of anthropological expertise', *International Journal of Law in Context* 12: 293–311.