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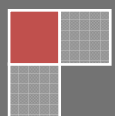
# A View from Below

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**Easa 1: A View 'From Below'**

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though its chair, Michael Herzfeld, is fully alive to the problems implicit in its name, some AAA members see the danger of a possible erosion of anthropology's global range. One of the latest units to be formed is an Association for the Anthropology of the United States and Canada; regional specialists in this area say they are feeling 'marginalized', which is a sure way of winning sympathy from anthropologists. □

Jonathan Benthall

## 'EASA 1' TAKES OFF FROM COIMBRA: THE FIRST EUROPEAN CONFERENCE

When the newly-founded European Association of Social Anthropologists drew up its plans, two years ago, for a first European Conference, expectations were of less than a hundred participants meeting to cross nationally distinctive approaches to questions of classic concern: 'Conceptualizing Society', 'Constructing Genders', 'Making History', and 'Understanding Ritual' – the subject in a nutshell, some might say. As it turned out, the oldest and most beautiful of Portuguese university towns, Coimbra, was awash with 450 'professional strangers' clutching their conference folders with details of a further fourteen workshops and round-tables. Was it worth it for the university, celebrating its seventh centenary, to marshal all its goodwill, fine style and generosity to accommodate this inaugural jamboree?

In my view, it was. I found it a revelation, and at times a pure joy-ride, to compare different ways of handling data – a Spanish student of *Fiestas* (Josepa Cuco) used the Hegelian notion of 'civil society', forgotten in the U.K. just when we subjects of increasingly authoritarian 'state' government could do with remembering it; a French advocate of the existence of a 'third sex' (Bernard d'Anglure) derived enormous comparative insight from the simple anti-rule that it is the 'instabilities' of any 'social structure' that make 'it' work; these were only two of the refreshingly different styles of reading data that stimulated me when some of the programmatic and theoretic plenary statements had left me wishing to be transported into one of Coimbra's *art nouveau* coffee-houses. (There are advantages in holding conferences in small, rather than capital cities.) Why is it that proven ethnographers fall, at some stage, into promoting themselves out of excellence into rampages

### EASA 1: A VIEW 'FROM BELOW'

While attending the First Conference of the newly-founded European Association of Social Anthropologists, held at Coimbra, Portugal, in early September, I was asked to write of my impressions as a Portuguese anthropologist. I write thus as a native of sorts, an 'Other' of the European anthropological mainstream perhaps, and within the multiple frames of the other within.

As informant, Other, Portuguese

1. Cf. Williams, Drid and Brenda Farnell, 1990. *The Laban Script: a beginning text on movement-writing for non-dancers*. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies, Canberra. ISBN 0 85575 225 4. Also the same authors accompanying *The Laban Script: Workbook*.
2. Cf. 'AIDS on the planet: the plural voices of anthropology', A.T. June 1990.
3. Collins Harvill, 1988.
4. See his 'Ritual kinship, ritual incorporation and the denial of death', *Man* (n.s.)vol. 23, 1988,

275ff., and 'Thanatophobic Man', A.T., April 1989. See also Bloch, M. and S. Guggenheim, *Compadrazgo*, baptism, and the symbolism of a second birth, *Man* (n.s.), vol.16, 1981, 376ff.

5. Invited session 'Psychoanalytic anthropology fifty years after Freud: options and prospects', AAA Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, 1989. And cf. G. Herdt and R.J.Stoller, *Intimate Communications: Erotics and the Study of Culture* (Columbia U.P., 1990).

of Radio-Four style common-sense as soon as the word 'theory' is allowed? 'People with a reputation,' I heard myself think, 'should read before they talk; be it their postgraduates' work, or the history of the discipline, or, better still, both.' Theor-rhoea, however, was limited to a few stars from the metropolitan countries.

'How', I was asked before I went, 'will the other Europeans take to the metropolitan hegemony in the subject, expressed not least in the name of the association of 'Anthropologues Sociaux'? The answer I found reassuringly pragmatic. The classics of British and French ethnography, and of structural-functional and structuralist modes of analysis, are read and criticized universally, either in recent translations or, far better for the future, in the original, thought-moulding languages. It is true that museum-based anthropology and the study of material culture, strong fields in some of the Continental countries, were conspicuous by their absence. Yet recent advances in situational or negotiation analysis appear to have been pan-European from the start. The countries in which anthropology grows at its fastest, Spain and Germany, were 'represented', if that had to be the word, by scholars and indeed undergraduates who do not carry chips on their shoulders: whether *Volkerkunde*, *Folkloristika* or *Etnologia*, 'if it's S.A. or A.S. that 'they' call what 'we' all do, who cares', so long as no-one thumps their own national canons.

Well, where are the problems then? Two were raised at the final general assembly, where, oddly, contributions to each alternated at the speed of a well-oiled two-stroke engine. A delegation of women anthropologists demanded to see greater prominence, at future conferences, for issues of gender, class, and race; and to ensure this

(sic) demanded the presence of at least two biological females on the next programme committee of five. A vote on the latter demand was pressed and proved inconclusive; though a postal ballot to amend the constitution to what has been the case all along may yet be initiated.

Interspersed with this debate, some anthropologists from Southern Europe questioned the limitation on conference languages. Papers had been delivered in English and French only; and questions from the floor had tended to acknowledge this duopoly. A vote was not pressed for, which leaves me to make an alternative proposal. Speakers at all sessions, plenary or otherwise, of the next EASA Conference could make it a point of honour, as much as a point of salutary self-discipline, to provide one-page hand-out summaries of their argument in two or three other languages. This is not difficult for any academic in Europe to organize off their own bat; and will, into the bargain, make us think what it is we want to say to each other.

Much was said at Coimbra that could fuse compatible expertise nourished in very different academic contexts, and discussions were lively and stimulating especially at the workshops. A feat of organization had been achieved already in commissioning four volumes of proceedings based on the four plenary sessions. Each member of the programme committee received warm applause, and Adam Kuper, the Association's founder, an undivided standing ovation. All differences of strategy and heritage allowed for, I felt lucky to be working in Europe: able to learn from others in the one continent that has what it takes, from Vico on, to advance, self-critically, the comparative 'new science' of culture. □

Gerhard Baumann

anthropologist, I was stunned by the almost complete absence of colleagues from Portugal. Being adverse by nature to academic corridor politics, I cannot say whether they had not been invited or whether they refused to attend. If, as I suspect, the right answer is a mixture of the two, it is a sad one to note. Strong participation of national professionals seems to me essential, and not merely decent or

polite, in any country where EASA Conferences are convened. Portugal, small as it is, has three departments of anthropology, as well as other institutions teaching the subject, and an estimated total of some 100 professionals. The Portuguese Anthropological Association has a membership of twice the size. Yet it must be said that in the Portuguese anthropological milieu, there is a lack of co-operation and a

fear of debate which might be related to broader cultural strands: an individualism bordering on anarchy, due to a historical lack of democratic forums.

As an anthropologist, the ambiguous Portuguese presence inevitably led me to reflect on the asymmetrical knowledge-power structures that underlie the practice of social science. Much has been said and written on the intrinsically Western nature of the anthropological enterprise, as well as on the emergence of Third World anthropological practices. Even in these debates, however, Europe is still widely perceived as a singular unit, with its internal differences blurred or neglected. These differences are clear when it comes to the production of knowledge, its acquisition, and its transmission: the centrally privileged *loci* are, in most European contexts, Britain and France. Most Portuguese anthropologists have, in fact, been raised in or on these central factories, and still depend on them for books, prestige, research funds, and – conferences.

As an anthropologist from Portugal, or more generally from the 'periphery', I was struck not merely by the eurocentrism of many of our theoretical constructions, but by their Northern-Euro-centrism. This became evident by means of what might be called the 'context effect': there I was, a one-time student of history at Coimbra, who had escaped its stifling academic life-style to

take up anthropology at Lisbon some ten years ago; surrounded again by its local culture and aware of the intricacies of Portuguese everyday life; yet listening to crystalline theories of social life which continue to echo the use of the Mediterranean or 'the South' as a repository of the exotic and the bizarre. Our buffet-style conference dinner at Sao Marcos Palace was an ironic example. While non-Portuguese initiands proceeded to pile 'those little quiches' on top of their cod and egg, and made polite comments about 'interesting Portuguese eating habits', the Portuguese looked on in horror and bemusement. Some explained to their newly-met colleagues that *pasteis de nata* are cream custard pies, eaten for dessert, though always arranged alongside the main-course buffet.

After dinner, I had a sudden inspiration: why doesn't EASA sponsor a massive flow of Southern European anthropologists to do fieldwork in Britain and France? Perhaps a different vantage point might be found, and we Southerners might eventually have to build new theoretical frameworks to understand *these* societies and cultures. The idea, shared over lunch next day, received sympathetic laughter at best: 'It's great; it's radical; it's provocative, but it's out of the question, isn't it?' The power to reverse one-way flows, to make new fashions, and to support them, still lies with the centres.

Facetiousness or provocation apart, we are all aware of a 'core-periphery' effect in European anthropology; authoritative knowledge is produced largely in specific centres, and even when it emanates from the peripheries, it needs legitimization by the centres in turn. Southern Europe has been seen for too long as a repository of backwardness, and Eastern Europe, now within vision of the centres, may fare similarly. Theses and books on Portugal, for instance, seldom acknowledge local authorship, whether anthropological, historical, geographical or otherwise. This in a country that has a university celebrating its seventh centenary this year, Coimbra.

I do not for a moment deny the intrinsic value of this conference, particularly the growing attempt to incorporate History (with a capital H) as well as the local production of history when studying Southern European cultures. Yet there is an increasing need to incorporate local scholars, be it as a massive presence at EASA conferences, as acknowledged authorities of reference in all work on the 'peripheries', or as colleagues who can correct the one-way flow system which stifles theoretical development. Until this happens, it will remain ironic to speak of 'a' European Anthropology – ironic as it is for most Portuguese, facing the Atlantic, to speak of 'a' unified Europe that goes beyond Community subsidies. □

Miguel Vale de Almeida

## EASA 1: AN AMERICAN'S VIEW

The first day of this successful conference was divided between papers on conceptualizing societies given by six Big Men (including Marilyn Strathern who has achieved that status) and a session on constructing gender. The second day was again divided into invited papers under the general headings of 'Making History' and 'Understanding Ritual', but it was the third day many participants found the most exciting. This day was filled with numerous sessions convened by different participants and reflected the enormous variety of interests within the conference. I shall focus on a few impressions.

First, having worked in recent years in Britain, I feel there are good possibilities for British anthropology to be substantially invigorated by greater interaction with the rest of Europe.

At the conference a certain hierarchy was apparent. Ernest Gellner gave the inaugural lecture in his usual provocative style, dropping such wonderful phrases as 'hysterical hermeneutics'. In this talk he welcomed the Eastern Europeans who had been able to come. He expressed an excited anticipation of their future work now that they could learn from the West. At another point in the conference a participant called Portugal a 'primitive country'. A session on the third day was designed to confront this issue directly. It was called 'The anthropology of the periphery – peripheral

anthropology' (convenors Theodore Paradellis and Alexandra Bakalakis of the University of the Aegean at Mytilene) and dealt with the problem of countries at the 'edge' of Europe. This issue emerged again at the general meeting as a discussion of what languages should be used at future conferences and how the conference committee could ensure an even or 'fair' representation of presented papers among the various countries of Europe.

The central issue at stake here is power and access to information. Consider the difficulties of the lecturers at the University of the Aegean (as an example) in trying to teach anthropology to students who can only speak – and more importantly – can only read Greek. The difficulties (not to mention the irony considering the traditional role of Classical Greek) in trying to explain anthropology without the use of English, French, or German texts are huge. This also reflects the controlling influence the countries of these languages have on the theories and direction of anthropology.

What made the EASA conference exciting was that it encouraged participants to move beyond language barriers. The majority of papers were in French or English, but I personally tried to struggle with a Spanish paper I particularly wanted to hear. In a cafe, I found myself trying to speak a combination of bad Portuguese and French

to people who were also responding in Spanish. Issues of gender were much in evidence at the conference, but it was during the general meeting that arguments about the prominence of gender issues and the representation of women at future conferences brought home the cultural diversity of the conference participants. Opinions differed so widely that one almost expected crevasses to appear between participants. The Scandinavian women presented a strong stand (although they later backed away from it) for the enforced equality of women on the future conference planning committee. The point was made that in the two days of invited papers, excepting the gender session, all but two of the 18 invited participants were men. Only one of the six gender papers was given by a man. What was not mentioned was that in the non-gender sessions all but two of the papers were from northern Europe (Norway, Britain, Holland, France). The exceptions were Joao Pina-Cabral from Portugal and Michael Herzfeld from the USA. The point was also made that the male-dominated session on the first day was held in a large auditorium while the gender session occurred in a much smaller room. This comment was greeted with annoyance and sniggers, but taken broadly it was a very important observation. The reason the male dominated session was held in the