

2008

Plenary Session: The Uses of Diversity

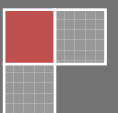
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First of all I would like to thank the Board of EASA for inviting me to convene this plenary session. It has not been an easy task. Many of you may have noticed the contradiction between what was announced early in the Conference website and the present layout. As a matter of fact, neither Gustavo Lins Ribeiro nor Saba Mahmood could join us, due to professional and personal reasons. Inviting four speakers was at the onset a strategy to avoid complications with last minute cancelations but unfortunately it wasn't waterproof... Still, I would like to thank Verena Stolcke and Wiktor Stoczkowski for their participation and would also like to refer to Gustavo's and Saba's contributions.

Verena Stolcke, from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, will be talking on "Making a difference: mestizos are not born but made". She will show how the coming into being of mestizos in the formation of Spanish-american colonial society is a revealing example of the treacherous character of notions of "mixture". For her, all fashionable proposals to overcome social exclusion by means of cultural mestizaje, etc. in fact seem to presuppose the existence of pure cultures.

Wiktor Stoczkowski, from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales will talk on "The UNESCO doctrine of cultural and genetic diversity of humankind, from the aftermath of the Second World War until today". His purpose is to reconstruct the post-war creation and subsequent transformations of the UNESCO doctrine of genetic and cultural diversity of humans. His analysis is aimed at a better understanding of interactions between the UNESCO doxa and the vernacular and/or scholarly representations of human diversity in a moment when the idea of genetic diversity of humans has been anew legitimized, and cultural unification lost its positive connotation.

Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, from the University of Brasília will be joining us via Skype and will address the topic of "Cultural diversity: cosmopolitics and a global fraternal discourse" He sees cultural diversity as a global discourse of elites engaged in global governance;

his discussion will focus on the relationships between diversity and globalization. He holds that the struggles to control the semantic field of discourses on universal/particular values are related to their illocutionary force.

Saba Mahmood, from the University of California – Berkeley was to talk about the historical tensions that animate the relationship between secular feminism and religious traditions that are perceived to be the "other" of Western civilization, focusing on an analysis of the new genre of Muslim women's autobiographical accounts of patriarchal abuse that has garnered considerable popular and academic attention since the events of September 11, 2001; although her paper was initially announced on the Conference website, her fieldwork in Egypt has made it impossible for her to show up in Ljubljana.

All the plenary members have addressed the problematic of diversity as something that has gained ascendancy among the central values of western societies. Both cultural and biological diversity have been extolled as an enriching legacy, or a precondition for unity: a unity which emerges from diversity. The notion of human and cultural diversity has been instrumental in imagining processes of supranational and international integration or 'unification' taking place on the level of global capitalism with its advanced diversification of products and consumers. The growing consensus that cultural diversity is an important asset has found its way into several documents, in particular those formulated by UNESCO such as the declaration "Our Creative Diversity" (1995) and the "Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity" (2001). An early document of this kind was "The Declaration of European Identity" from 1973 which proposed the notion of the European identity as the diversity of its cultures.

Anthropologists have been facing diversity since the beginning of social/cultural anthropology. It is not only on the supranational level that the notion of diversity has been instrumental, but also on the national level. Yet the nation-statist mind-set still assumes that unity and homogeneity is preferable to diversity and difference, cultural monism to cultural plurality. The notion of diversity also draws some of its present meaning from visions of natural diversity, often overlapping ecological, regional and

cultural diversities. At a higher level, diversity is also increasingly used as a rhetorical device in discourses on migration, ethnic pluralism, gender and sexuality, disability and so forth. Anthropologists should be able to analyze the tension between social and political calls for diversity and social and political calls for unity. Individual choices and rights often collide with calls for group recognition and definitions of what constitutes the units that, together, provide a 'diverse' environment.

Problematizing “diversity” is, of course, a rather daring and dangerous game, especially in contemporary Euro-American societies. Anxieties generated by the accelerating and expanding cultural variety of migrant communities, regional autonomies, gender and sexual identities and so on, have set the ground for a neo-conservative discourse that presents itself as provocative, new and anti-politically correct. Claims for recognition and identity pluralism as part of new ways of widening and deepening a politics of equality – claims that were central in the last decades of the 20th century – are challenged by this discourse and by practices of disengagement by the State. Simultaneously, social scientists, among which anthropologists, cannot (and should not) evade a critique of the shallow and consumerist uses of “culture”, “identity”, and “diversity”. It seems that instead of fighting against neo-conservative criticism and subscribing to a vague and rather essentializing “multiculturalist speak”, we should overcome this false dichotomy and produce an empirically based critique of both. It is not my role here – nor that of the plenary – to suggest policy for anthropologists regarding “diversity” (not to mention the fact that there should not be A policy...). But we have to be aware of how much of the issue of “diversity” owes to anthropological propositions of the past and its popular uses in the present.

On the other hand, common perceptions of “diversity” seem to go hand in hand with forms of relativism that elide universalism. The consequence is that “universalism” (not a bit less problematic than “diversity”, of course) is left for the above mentioned neo-conservative discourse against so-called politically correct pro-diversity positions. We also need to overcome this dichotomization and think about universalism. Our discussions of diversity in this Conference will no doubt help us progress in this area.

Also, a concentration on cultural diversity may lead to a reification of culture as the locus of specificity (that which gives content to a “diverse” culture) and to the reproduction of old forms of culturalism that elide questions of power in social relationships, the construction of meaning and the practices of sociality. Too often “diversity” seems to apply to ethnic, regional or sexual groups, but certainly not to social classes, political and ideological groups or the “neutral centers” that in each polity or social formation brand the margins as the conveyors of “diversity”.

When I ask my students what they think anthropology is they very seldom reply nowadays that it is “the science of man” (or, unfortunately in just a few cases, “the science of humankind”). Most of them nowadays will say “the science of human diversity”, or of “cultural diversity”, and will show to be the fiercest defenders of all forms of relativism. I know what they mean, as I’m sure you do, and that they mean well. But probably it is time to start teaching them that what we do is the “science of human possibilities” – both culturally specific and universal, both diverse and communicative, both “good” and “bad”. Instead of teaching them diversity as both fact and value, maybe we should make an effort to teach them *Diversification* as a *property* of social relations.