Thinking through the Anthropology of Experts

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a synthetic overview of the major opportunities and impasses of an emergent anthropology of experts and expertise. In the wake of the boom in anthropological science and technology studies since the 1980s, the anthropology of experts has become one of the most vibrant and promising enterprises in social-cultural anthropology today. And, yet, I argue that the theorisation and ethnography of experts and cultures of expertise remains underdeveloped in some crucial respects. The body of the article defines expertise as a relation of epistemic jurisdiction and explores the sociological and epistemological dilemmas emerging from research, that poises one expert (the anthropologist) in the situation of trying to absorb another regime of expertise into his/her own. With due appreciation for what the anthropology of experts has achieved thus far, I close with a manifesto designed to prompt a reassessment of where this research enterprise should go from here. I urge that we treat experts not solely as rational(ist) creatures of expertise but rather as desiring, relating, doubting, anxious, contentious, affective—in other words as human-subjects.

KEYWORDS: Anthropology of experts, epistemology, ethnography, expertise, reflexivity

Experts on experts

Over the past two decades, anthropological research on experts and cultures of expertise has blossomed from the margins of the field into a vibrant area of concern. Although it would be fair to say that anthropology always exhibited some appreciation for the expertise of its research subjects, especially in matters of ritual and material culture, it was only in the 1950s and 1960s that commentary on the social figure of 'the expert' began to appear routinely within ethnography, particularly, in the tradition of Evans-Pritchard, discussion of 'religious experts' and 'ritual experts' (see, e.g., Howell 1953:85; Knutsson 1963:507; Lewis 1963:112; Lienhardt 1962:85). But the motivating interest of this commentary typically remained religion or ritual rather than expertise per se. 'The expert' was a relatively transparent social designation, not one that seemed to admit or reward further anthropological theorisation.

In some respects this designative trend has continued even as studies focused on experts and expertise have become one of the, by my count, three flourishing enterprises of social-cultural-historical anthropology today. The other two are what might be called 'subjectivist anthropology', the vast anthropological energy exerted to chronicle and analyse the constitution of schemes of personhood, subjectivity and, above all, 'identity' (e.g., Daniel 1987; Hall and du Guy 1996; Jackson 1998; Kondo 1990; Moore 2007; Rapport 2003) and 'critical-historicist anthropology', with twin roots in the Marxian-Gramscian and Nietzschean-Foucauldian traditions and focusing on the sociopolitical configurations of modernity, especially late capitalism and

late liberalism (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Ferguson 2006; Harvey 2006; Ong 2006; Povinelli 2002; Stoler 2002). The surest sign of the coming of age of an 'anthropology of experts and expertise' has been the enormous explosion of interest around anthropological science and technology studies (S&TS) (e.g., Fischer 2003; Fortun 2001; Franklin and Roberts 2006; Gusterson 1996; Helmreich 2000; Knorr Cetina 1999; Latour 1988; Rabinow 1997; Sunder Rajan 2006) and in the increasing application of S&TS-derived analytics to other spheres of human social activity including work on professional networks and cultures, technocracy, public culture, intellectuals, bureaucracy and some kinds of organisations and social movements. Just like the other two, the anthropology of experts has broad ambitions, porous boundaries, and is home to a wide variety of different research problems and methods. What distinguishes it from its sibling enterprises is simply its centring of experts, their practices, institutions and knowledges, as the ethnographic core of anthropological concern.

Yet, even as experts have come to receive increasingly prominent billing in the ethnography of modernity (see Holston 1989; Mitchell 2002; Rabinow 1995; Shore and Wright 1997), the theorisation of exactly who or what counts as 'expert' continues to be underdeveloped, certainly not reaching the degree of technical interest and elaboration characteristic of other social-scientific fields like behavioural and cognitive psychology (Ericsson and Smith 1991) or even science studies itself (Collins and Evans 2002). Even if technical precision is not always an advantage when dealing with analytical categories meant to be highly elastic and inclusive, we need to move beyond signalling the presence of experts and towards grappling with what kinds of persons they are. In anthropology, what would be most helpful would be a theorisation of experts and expertise, which could speak meaningfully to and across the dominant phenomenological, praxiological and

semiological encampments of our discipline. Therefore, for the purpose of this article at least, I would suggest that we define an expert as an actor who has developed skills in, semiotic-epistemic competence for, and attentional concern with, some sphere of practical activity. By this definition a car mechanic or a street performer are clearly experts in their respective crafts although the qualitative and social dimensions of their expertise are very different (and valued differently) from those of more technocratic (and widely recognised) experts like doctors, lawyers or scientists. Indeed, by linking expertise to skill, competence, attention and practice, it becomes clear that there is no human being who is not 'expert' in some fashion, much as Gramsci wrote that all men are intellectuals even if not socially validated as such. Although the very openness of the definition may therefore appear to weaken its analytical capacity, I would argue that the way in which it highlights the tension between the experiential-performative and social-institutional poles of skilled knowing and doing actually gives us analytical traction in just the right place.

I would also note that when skilled knowing takes normative precedence over skilled doing in a given sphere of expert activity we should use the term 'intellectual' instead of expert (Boyer 2005:43-45). Much of the contemporary anthropology of experts actually centres then on 'intellectuals', in my definition, on knowledge specialists, and especially on those who operate as members of professional networks in organisational or institutional contexts.

And herein lies both an essential dilemma and opportunity of the anthropology of experts. Although most anthropological research involves dialogues with other kinds of experts, even knowledge specialists, the anthropology of experts highlights these dialogues in its research practice, creating the situation in which one kind of knowledge specialist, the anthropologist, analyses the ideas, conversations and practices of another. One immediately wonders: how can an anthropologist,

as an expert (in ethnographic representation and social-theoretical analysis) meaningfully engage the social experience of another culture of expertise without calling into question, at some level, precisely that expertise that is the ostensible locus of their social practice and 'culture'? Can different principles and regimes of expertise really coexist in anthropological representation and analysis? This creates, if not exactly a crisis for the anthropology of experts, then at least epistemic consequences that are worth considering at greater length.

Contingent jurisdictions, anxious analysts

In an important recent article on 'cultures of expertise', Doug Holmes and George Marcus have noted that anthropological engagements of other experts inevitably bring anthropological knowledge into disquieting, but also potentially productive, juxtaposition with a plurality of modes of 'para-ethnographic' knowledge that now exist outside the networks and institutions of academic anthropology.

They write:

> In our experience, ethnographers trained in the tradition of anthropology do not approach the study of formal institutions such as banks, bureaucracies, corporations, and state agencies with much confidence. These are realms in which the traditional informants of ethnography must be rethought as counterparts rather than 'others'—as both subjects and intellectual partners in inquiry. … Here we suggest a particular strategy for re-functioning ethnography around a research relation in which the ethnographer identifies a para-ethnographic dimension in such domains of expertise—the de facto and self-conscious critical faculty that operates in any expert domain as a way of dealing with contradiction, exception, facts that are fugitive, and that suggest a social realm not in alignment with the representations generated by the application of the reigning statistical mode of analysis. Making ethnography from the found para-ethnographic redefines the status of the subject or informant,

asks what different accounts one wants from such key figures in the fieldwork process, and indeed questions what the ethnography of experts means within a broad, multi-sited design of research (Holmes and Marcus 2005:236-237).

My first field research project with former East German professional intellectuals—schooled as they were in Marxism and informed as I was by German dialectical social theory and philosophy in graduate school—became entirely entangled in para-ethnography in the course of fieldwork. Many of my informants had been, as accredited professionals in a socialist party-state, well trained in the Marxian canon and had developed interpretations of post-socialist transition in eastern Germany that were strongly informed by dialectical conceptions of history (see Boyer 2005, 2007). To give just one example, while describing the politics of history in the post-unification media, one former East German journalist in her thirties explained to me:

> The only time I think being East German works negatively against you is when you express opinions that perhaps this bourgeois-democratic system does not represent the end of history. And, when you suggest that something may come after it. Because, like any system, it's going to come to an end sooner or later, maybe in fifty maybe in a hundred years and then one has to think about what will come after it and what kind of a society that should be. But that's completely taboo to talk about the end of this system because the moment they hear you say something like that they think, 'Oh, she wants the GDR back,' which isn't the point at all. The West Germans have no problem asking us how we could have lived in the GDR, but I don't think they've ever thought about how they would answer an outsider's question fifty years from now who would ask them, 'How could you have lived in the Federal Republic of Germany with its unemployment, with hunger, well not much hunger, but with homelessness definitely?' (Boyer 2000:474-475)

My interlocutors' faith in the dialectical potentials, tensions and actualisations

embodied in history became intimately familiar to me in the course of my field research and, in a sense, offered me at once both data and theory seemingly 'readymade' for my dissertation work. The symmetry was seductive and illusional—I not only found that my analytical intuitions grew into the testimony of my interlocutors but I also envisioned myself thereby to have largely evaded the challenges to anthropological analysis raised by the postcolonial critique (e.g., Asad 1973; Said 1979). How could one criticise me for imposing western analytical paradigms and categories upon my field area since my field area had, in fact, originated many of these paradigms and categories, and since, in fact, Marxian analytics saturated the discourse community I inhabited.

For this same reason, however, I was prone to fear that my own dialectical intuitions were adding nothing analytically 'new' to the native point of view. A dialectician studying other dialecticians did not seem quite capable of evoking the impression of critical theoretical distance of the kind that is often valued as an index of objectivity or sophistication. The space between frame and content, so to speak, seemed overly compressed. But this was also, to some extent, a matter of an anxious fetishisation of the locus of doubling itself (e.g., dialectical analytics of potentiality and actuality). In the empirical fullness of my fieldwork conversations, my interlocutors and I were analytically quite diverse in our engagements with one another. Potentiality and actuality were sometimes key categories in our dialogues but at other times they were not, especially when the problem of history was not on the table. Nevertheless, these 'found' dialectical knowledges and encounters with critical dialectical analytics eventually propelled my entire project towards an anthropology of dialectical knowledge itself (see Boyer 2005).

Other anthropologists of experts, I should note, have read into parallel situations in their own field research the threat of an epistemo-

logical end point for anthropology in the potential doubling, collapse and/or cancellation of analytical knowledge forms—for example, what happens to anthropological theory in the situation where the expert subject has already decided that theory has failed (e.g., Miyazaki and Riles 2005)? Is it fair or even possible to theorise the failure of theory?

While such arguments highlight certain provocative limit cases in the expert engagement of experts, the more salient and general underlying problem remains sociological, one of jurisdiction, which Andrew Abbott terms the 'defining relation' in professional life (1988:3; cf. Brint 1994; Freidson 2001). In other words, the relevant questions are: On what basis does the representative of one culture of expertise (the anthropologist) claim legitimate analytical jurisdiction over the members of another culture of expertise and how is this claim enacted? How can I document another expert culture without precisely re-framing their expert knowledge in the analytical categories of my own, thus absorbing them into my jurisdiction? This situation is further complicated by the recognition of para-ethnography (and 'para-theory' for that matter) as a broader social phenomenon in that the anthropologist also confronts the circumstance that, as academically un-accredited as it might be, both ethnographic and social-theoretical knowledge-making now abound outside of the disciplinary nexus of anthropology, in part through the success of earlier generations of anthropological popularisers. Think, for example, of the expanding appropriation of ethnographic research techniques and academic social-theoretical paradigms (especially culture theory) in the business world, in government and even in the military (Rohde 2007). What are we to make of these monstrous encounters with expert knowledge that is both ours and not ours, uncanny doubles in Freud's language 'that having been an assurance of immortality … becomes the uncanny harbinger of death' (Freud 1919)? What does it indicate about the

specificity and validity of our jurisdiction as anthropologists? Are anthropologists threatened with eventual superfluity under these circumstances?

To put it bluntly, the core dilemma emerging from the anthropology of experts and expertise is an unexpected confrontation with the contingency of jurisdiction, which often is construed as a situation of analytical doubling and which thus prompts fears of negation of the unique expertise so much at the core of the social figure of 'the expert'. What the dilemma of the anthropology of experts principally signals is not the encounter with something unprecedented, as much as with something intimately known but normally repressed, whose startling return from repression, of course appears both new and threatening. One might fairly argue, for example, that the jurisdictions of expertise, which constitute professions, are always 'constructed' and maintained at the level of practice. But professionalism, as ideology in Zizek's sense, dampens that reflexive recognition down to the extent that it is capable, making expert jurisdictions at once constitutionally 'real' and their anchorage in constituting social practices invisible. In these terms, ideology is not false consciousness; it is the repression of the social basis of consciousness in order to produce the sense of epistemic universality requisite for action (an insight which, I have argued, belonged to Marx's concept of 'ideology' as well) (see Zizek 1994; Marx 1971[1846]; Boyer 2005).

The anthropology of experts, as an intrinsically, if sometimes unwillingly, reflexive mode of inquiry, confronts the well-professionalised anthropological expert with his/her own epistemic contingency in ways that, as I have suggested, can be seriously unsettling, but also, as Holmes and Marcus's discussion of para-ethnography demonstrates, productive and promising. This confrontation is why anthropological research on experts has spurred serious consideration of the limits and necessary renewal of anthropological theory (Rabinow

1999), rising even into talk of epistemological dilemmas and crises. But we should understand this talk less as a description of an empirically verifiable crisis and more as symptomatic of a rich intellectual fantasyscape in which the thrilling, nauseating possible negation or superfluity of anthropological expertise is both feared and, at some level, enjoyed. After all, if psychoanalysis teaches us nothing else, it teaches that this condensation of anxiety and pleasure is the constitutive paradox of any object of desire (cf. Zizek 2006).

Epistemophagy and *Entente cordiale*

The anthropology of experts, precisely because it thrives on the anthropological engagement of professional intellectuals socially 'like us' in most respects other than their specific expert practices and knowledges, leaves its practitioners particularly susceptible to circulating in a paradox of desire. In other words, much like Doug Holmes's unsettling engagement with the cultural theory of Jean-Marie Le Pen (Holmes, 2000), one often finds the anthropology of expertise both fascinated and repulsed by the expertise of its subjects, not least because of our inability to feel entirely 'at home' in another epistemic jurisdiction.

Yet our ventures into other domains of expertise are also not, strictly speaking, innocent encounters in that they also reveal an important predatory tendency at large within intellectual professionalism more generally. Every intellectual profession ideologically imagines its expertise as occupying the centre of knowledge (even when individual experts have their doubts), and thus exploring and coordinating other epistemic jurisdictions are important professional work that confirms the universalist ambitions of one's own jurisdiction. Epistemophagy—the consumption and incorporation of external analytics—becomes a vital technique for shoring a profession's ideological centre against the oceanic flux of

knowledge specialisation and its concomitant interjurisdictional rivalries. Cultures of expertise thus routinely encroach upon one another, challenging jurisdictions, borrowing ideas and re-functioning them for new purposes and audiences. One sees this even in the oft-related, humourously innocent anecdote of the expert who has been waiting for the arrival of an anthropologist to study their culture of expertise and who then proceeds to dazzle his/her interlocutor with a cultural autoanalysis which, in the name of 'helping' the anthropologist, actually pulls the rug of expertise away and turns the tables of analytical power. In my own recent field research, for example, I met an assistant chief editor of a major German news organisation who explained that he was particularly keen to assist me in my research because 'we had a group of sociologists here a couple of years ago who performed an organisational analysis to chart our work. They produced a series of flowcharts, which were fine as far as they went. The problem was that their model was too abstract and I really couldn't recognise my experience of the work in it'. He nodded to me significantly, reassuringly, 'Teilnehmende-Beobachtung [Participant-observation] should be a much better methodology in this respect'. With such informed informants, one might wryly note, who needs analysts?

In such company, perhaps we can be forgiven for treading cautiously. The anthropology of experts exhibits a strong tendency towards—I cannot think of another word for it—*politeness*. It is not always friendly or affirmative, but there are certain questions that are just not asked. For example, I have not yet seen a study that seriously addressed the irrational halo of expert rationality, which took seriously the place of desire, fantasy and anxiety in the production of expert knowledge. It is rare enough even to find studies of cultures of expertise that follow experts outside their work lives and workspaces, that go home with them, to their children's playgrounds, to family gatherings, to bars, and so on (for a

counter-example, see Gusterson's resourceful ethnography of nuclear weapons scientists beyond their labs, 1996).

If interjurisdictional rivalry and epistemophagy always accompany the relationship of experts to each other, the more public face of inter-expert relations is a kind of supra-collegial *entente cordiale*, whose politics of respectful distance and reciprocal, professional knowledge sharing are further strengthened by environments of specialised work practices, by temporal intensity and by institutional restrictions that make it far more difficult to attain the kind of social intimacy with our research subjects that is the lifeblood of anthropological knowledge elsewhere. The ethnography of experts, especially in institutional settings, tends to operate through relatively short formal interviews and limited situational observation. Under these conditions, in Holmes and Marcus's terms, something like para-ethnography—a reliance upon inter-expert collaboration—is not just a virtuous opportunity, but rather also an anthropological necessity of the *entente*.

But like any political entente, the threat of force, of exclusion, of surveillance, of pursuit is never far away. Cultures of expertise are usually socially privileged, quasi-sovereign, often able to restrict ethnographic access, to monitor the acquisition and subsequent circulation of their expert knowledge, and even, if they are so inclined, to police ethnographic and theoretical content. They offer obstacles like intellectual property rights, offices of corporate communications and non-disclosure agreements that would-be ethnographers must navigate. And, even in the best access scenarios, the highly specialised tasksets, professional credentials and organisational hierarchies of many cultures of expertise close doors to even the best-prepared, most 'insider', ethnographers.

Given the difficulties of gaining access, it perhaps should be unsurprising that, once 'inside', the ethnography of experts has tended to encamp itself near the professional,

institutional and public dimensions of expert lives. As in all epistemic concentrations, the focusing of attention in these areas has been immensely rewarding and responsible for the growing significance of work on experts and expertise within anthropology. Nevertheless, I would argue that the focus on professional knowledges and practices has established significant blind spots and inattentions. And so, perhaps it is time to consider seriously where the anthropology of experts should go next.

Manifesto

Anthropological knowledge can thrive and has thrived under entente conditions. I am by no means criticising what anthropological research on experts and cultures of expertise has thus far achieved. But I do think that its future must lie beyond epistemophagous desires and beyond collegial discretion. To conclude this exercise in thinking through the anthropology of experts, I offer an argument for a richer representational and analytical practice in the form of a manifesto of five points.

1. Engage the non-professional! Discover more about those aspects of expert lives that are not directly defined by their work practice and explore the mundane proportions and disjunctures between expert and non-expert knowledges, practices and relations in the lives of our interlocutors. We should expect that this move will be resisted, by colleagues and informants alike, as inconsequential to the 'true object' of the study. Ideologies of expertise posit that the ontological centre of an expert's life is specialised knowledge and practice. As professional intellectuals ourselves, we should take seriously our own susceptibility to these ontological overtures. My feeling is that anthropological research with experts tends too often to stay within the

ideological radius of possibility, which contends that what is really important and interesting to know about a culture of expertise is the expertise, its procedures and instruments, themselves. Yet I would argue that this radius offers only a fairly thin slice of humanity. Expanding the research horizon of the anthropology of experts is, of course, easier advocated than accomplished for the pragmatic reasons noted above. But, in that case, inadequacies in ethnographic knowledge should not be papered over as embarrassments but rather lingered on as prismatic gaps through which the contingencies/limits/opportunities of the anthropology of experts are fully revealed.

2. Pay attention to process! One is not born an expert; the phenomenology of expertise (Boyer 2005:43-44) and the capacity to operate productively in a culture of expertise are acquired processually. Professionalism should be considered as a kind of habitus—if not bound by the overarching sense of functional determinism inherited from Bourdieu (1990), the study of professionalisation (expertisation) needs to be a more prominent feature of the anthropology of experts.

3. Operate reflexively! Although we should never lose sight of the significant dilemmas and impasses catalysed by the juxtaposition of two cultures of expertise in anthropological research on experts, neither should we generalise those impasses as epistemological crises or failures of the anthropological project. What we need is a better reflexive analysis of this situation, one that explores with more care the intersubjective and interjurisdictional dimensions of research on cultures of expertise and one that pays greater attention to the ways in which anthropological expertise may be seduced and repulsed in encounters with

kindred modes of expertise (including and especially those that have absorbed themes and techniques from our own ethnographic, social-theoretical jurisdictions).

4. Challenge the rational(ist) core! Work on experts and expertise tends to be strongly crypto-rationalist in its orientation, lingering on the logico-rational dimensions of expert practice and knowledge. These dimensions are surely important to anthropological research but even the most elaborate and technically precise modes of rationality possess a halo of sentiments, affects, intentions and aspirations, none of which should be reduced to secondary status in expert knowledge-making. We need to work harder to rediscover these and not least the paradoxes of desire—desire, for example, to refine one's aesthetics of expertise, to publicise, reproduce, immortalise one's work, to dominate or outflank one's opponents, to see one's expertise translated into social power, and so on—that inhabit and inform expert practices as well.

5. Humanise the expert! All the other four points amount to this one. The expert may occupy or perform a 'social role' as a particular kind of 'modern subject', but foremost s/he is enmeshed in all the complexities anthropology recognises human life to entail. This is not to say that human life has a single template or that we should aspire to humanism in a generic sense. My point is that the anthropology of experts needs to push harder in every direction to make experts not solely the creatures of expertise that the ideologies and institutions of intellectual professionalism encourage us to recognise and to make visible.

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