A Distributed and Collective Ethnography of Academic Training in Latin American Anthropologies

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On behalf of the Latin American Working Group of the WAN Collective

This is to propose an ethnographic research project on the institutional practices of disciplinary training in Latin American anthropologies. This study is a crucial component towards the further materialization of a larger project, the World Anthropologies Network (WAN). More specifically, it will contribute to WAN’s efforts towards the implementation of alternative pre-doctoral and doctoral programs in the region.

Created five years ago by a group made up largely of Latin American anthropologists (in the United States, Colombia, Peru, and Brazil) the WAN is a transnational community of argumentation about the heterogeneity of anthropologies worldwide, and the geopolitics of knowledge implicated in their production. In a nutshell, WAN wants to historicize and make visible the mechanisms by which some anthropologies achieve hegemony and silence others, that therefore come to see themselves as subordinate. The visibility of mechanisms of both hegemony and subordination should enable more egalitarian conditions of intellectual dialogues among anthropologies worldwide.

The WAN has held a series of activities. We have produced two programmatic collective texts, the first one in the Journal of Social Anthropology 11(2) 2003, the last piece was published in the Anthropology Newsletter (November 2005). In 2003 we held an international conference with the support of the Wenner Gren Foundation; resulting from this event we published a volume co-edited by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar, World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power (Oxford: Berg, 2006). A version in Spanish and Portuguese is currently in print.

We have also held a series of events. Last year RAM/WAN held two events in Latin America. Our first meeting took place in Rosario, Argentina (in the context of the Bi-Annual Congress of

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1 The Latin American working group of the WAN (World Anthropologies Network) is constituted by Roberto Almanza (Universidad del Magdalena), Gabriel Alvarez (Universidad de Brasilia), Claudia Briones, (Universidad de Buenos Aires), Andrés Barragán (UC-Davis), Marisol de la Cadena (UC-Davis), Carlos Luis del Cairo (Universidad Javeriana), Alejandro Castillejo (Universidad de lo Andes, Colombia), María Rosa Catullo (Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina), Carlos I. Degregori (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos), Arturo Escobar (UNC-Chapel Hill), Cristobal Geneco (Universidad del Cauca), Alejandro Grimson (Universidad de Buenos Aires), Rosana Guber (Centro de Antropología Social del Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social, Argentina), Myriam Jimeno (Universidad Nacional de Colombia), Esteban Krotz (Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Mérida, México), Xochitl Leyva-Solano (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, México), Leonardo Montenegro (Universidad Javeriana, Colombia), Hortencia Muñoz Universidad de Etica, Filosofía, y Política Ruiz de Montoya) Ramon Pajuelo (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos), Mauricio Pardo (Universidad Central, Colombia), Alcida Rita Ramos (Universidade de Brasilia), Eduardo Restrepo (UNC-Chapel Hill), Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (Universidade de Brasilia) Esteban Rozo (Universidad Javeriana), Pablo Semán (Universidad Nacional de General San Martín, Argentina), Claudia Steiner (Universidad de los Andes, Colombia), Víctor Vich (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos).

2 For more on WAN see www.ram-wan.org
Anthropology) where RAM/WAN members Susana Narotzky and Gustavo Lins Ribeiro led a panel with the participation of anthropologists from Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and UK. In Colombia (in the context of the national Congress of Colombian Anthropology), RAM/WAN held a workshop (led by WAN/ RAM members Arturo Escobar, Eduardo Restrepo and Marisol de la Cadena). Our purpose in these events was to discuss the goals of the network with local anthropologists (NGO workers, students, faculty, independent researchers, and activists) and to incorporate them as participants in our conversations. In Colombia, we also collaborated in the creation of the first doctoral anthropology program in the country (at Universidad del Cauca, Popayan). To broadcast our activities we have created a functional webpage where we post documents, news, and syllabi. The webpage also houses our electronic journal which is now in its second issue (see www.ram-wan.org).

Related to the present proposal we have held graduate seminars in the US, Colombia, Peru and in Brazil to analyze the mechanisms through which Euro-American anthropology acquires its prominence and to discuss the conditions of production of alternative anthropological genealogies (see syllabi in www.ram-wan.org). We have also contributed conceptually to the implementation of a doctoral program in Popayán, Colombia, the first one in that country. We are in the beginning stages of a new collaboration with an emerging doctoral program in Buenos Aires Argentina. These experiences have inspired us to assume a major challenge: to inspire and influence alternative training programs in the region, both at the pre-doctoral and doctoral levels.

Training Matters: Our Theoretical-Political Concerns

As anthropologists trained in different academic traditions and locations, the Latin American working group within WAN wants to set off a process aimed at denaturalizing, and thus questioning, the uneven terms and conditions of world wide anthropological conversations. In order to engage a more egalitarian and pluralistic transnational community of anthropological argumentation, it is crucial to rethink and enrich the current conditions of training for future generations of anthropologists. Alternative modalities of doctoral trainings in anthropology would enable more productive, multidirectional dialogues and exchanges among anthropologists worldwide. It is our belief that alternative training models are a necessary and perhaps privileged means to foster diverse anthropologies in the future.

With the increasing globalization of anthropology as an academic discipline and the emergence of the Anglo-American tradition as its largest node (Ben Ari 1999, Ribeiro 2005, Vasco 2002), there is an increasing tendency to obliterate ‘provincial’ articulations of anthropology. Consequently, colleagues considered provincial are disavowed as agents in the transnational community of anthropological argumentation. From ‘asymmetric ignorance’
3 to the linguistic dominance of English, there is a wide spectrum of explicit and implicit mechanisms, that while allegedly ‘raising the standards to international level’ they produce the subalternization of local anthropologies. Incorporated into institutional training practices these mechanisms obliterate the singular articulations of local anthropology and replace them by normalized notions of ‘theory,’ ‘ethnography,’ ‘fieldwork’ and ‘writing.’ This homogenization reduces rather than enhances anthropological knowledge.

The preference for practices of training that flow mostly uni-directionally from North to South is a crucial component of the re/production of the hegemony of English speaking anthropology. The same attitude (and its frequent institutionalization) also often produces local anthropologists with subject

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3 By which we mean the practice that ignores local anthropological productions and simultaneously demands knowledge of canonical debates, authors, and genealogies. (Ribeiro and Escobar, 2006; Chakrabarty, 2000; Krotz, 1997).
positions and subjectivities that devalue “the provincial” and dislodge the source of hegemonic knowledge from its place-based origin. Moreover, the tendency of the discipline (provincial or not) is to imagine these practices as necessary to the academic legitimization of the training. Becoming an anthropologist is thus a process through which individuals do not only acquire knowledge but learn the specific grids of enunciation that discern and discriminate between hierarchies of anthropological knowledge and the subjectivities required for their production. Practices of training thus tend to inscribe difference as asymmetry. Despite the fact that in many cases local anthropological productions effect substantial transformations on hegemonic canons and favored practices—often times amounting to a veritable recreation of concepts and the production of different anthropologies (e.g., Jimeno (2003)—the hegemonic tendencies are real and perhaps increasing.

As the Latin American working group of WAN collective, we want to intervene upon these training practices by engaging programs with the vocation to produce diverse and empowered local anthropologies throughout the Americas.

A Distributed and Collective Ethnography of Anthropological Training

Collaborative, collective work is an important articulating criteria within WAN. In this case, the ethnography of training practices that we propose will be conducted in four countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Peru) by local members of WAN with the collaboration of their students. Following the collective spirit of WAN, members of the Latin American working group (not directly involved in the fieldwork) will participate in different stages of the research process via a virtual forum specifically designed for this purpose in our webpage. We do not see the non-fieldworkers as advisors. Participation at both levels—fieldworkers and non-fieldworkers—will serve to create a collective space to critically discuss ongoing results at different moments of the research process. This dynamic will result in a collective WAN authorship—a principle that disrupts the conventional individual-centered practices of recognition of intellectual work.

We work with the notion that even within each country, anthropology is multiple and complex; we want to grasp that complexity ethnographically. Thus, in each country we will choose anthropology departments that reflect a host of differences and hierarchies: we will do fieldwork in private and public universities, in programs located in the capital and in provincial cities, in historically prestigious departments and in minor, even marginalized, ones. Evidently we do not assume to find a rigid hierarchy formation across countries—on the contrary, the fieldwork should reveal the singular relations of knowledge production by which ‘national’ anthropologies generate their own configurations.

Our research questions include the mechanisms that constitute local definitions of “anthropology” and of anthropological concerns. How are decisions taken about what matters as anthropological research, and what is at stake through them? How do these decisions shape and are shaped by academic training practices? How do non-academic local politics figure in these decisions, and how do they interact with anthropological training, and with academic politics? Last but not least, how do ‘foreign’ models, habits, and ideals figure in all of the above?

Participating in classes, congresses, and other activities, we will gather fieldwork material about a series of domains directly or indirectly linked to training practices such as: a) teaching/learning techniques: courses, syllabi, curricula, evaluation practices. b) administrative processes: the structure of departments, the linkages with larger administrative structures, budget management, funding sources, and destiny; c) prestige mechanisms: curriculum vitae of the faculty, social background, places of training.
publications; prizes and other forms of recognition. d) disciplinary public events, their connection with the definition of the politics of academic prestige and definition of “anthropological” knowledge; e) anthropology job market: sources of jobs, channels of dissemination of information about positions, mechanisms of access to academic positions; f) non-market jobs for anthropologists: participation in social movements, mentoring of non-academic anthropologies, non-remunerated relations with NGOs, etc.

**Research Schedule**

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**Expected Results**

We will present results of our study in a series of public events in which we will participate as WAN. Our first and most immediate presentation will be a panel organized for the next LASA conference (in Montreal). As important, we will organize panels in national congresses of anthropology in at least the countries where we have conducted research; this participation will enrich the study itself and will help reflect publicly about the concerns that motivate this study, and will hopefully serve as an arena to imagine new conditions of training for the production of empowered local anthropologies.

Other results, which will be enriched with discussions in the aforementioned events, will be the publication of a special issue of our electronic journal, and of several articles in local journals of anthropology. Finally, we will publish a book, intended as a sequel to ed. Ribeiro and Escobar (2006). This book will be published simultaneously in English, Portuguese, and Spanish.
Budget and Participants

Researchers in charge of fieldwork in Argentina will be Alejandro Grimson and Rosana Guber; in Brazil, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Alcida Ramos; in Colombia, Eduardo Restrepo and Myriam Jimeno; in Peru, Carlos Iván Degregori and Hortencia Muñoz. Non-fieldworker participants are Arturo Escobar, Claudia Steiner, Marisol de la Cadena, Susana Narotzky, and Claudia Briones, Esteban Krotz, and Xochitl Leyva-Solano. We are all members of LASA, or will be by the time of research.

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*The salaries of the faculty researchers are not included in this chart—they figure as the local counterpart of this budget.

References cited


