



# Engaging Anthropology for the Future

## Workshop Invitation

AG Umweltethnologie of the DGSKA

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Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

Current public and media accounts of environmental issues tend to focus on a limited number of representations, most of them originating in the abstractions of the natural sciences or journalistic disaster narratives. Thereby, they systematically fail to convey the lived experiences, strategies, hopes, resiliences and challenges of people around the world that do not fit these narratives and aggregations. These latter stories, however, are precisely what ethnographic research has been instrumental in revealing through its thick description of different people's lifeworlds. Upholding the multiplicity and the 'otherwise' in particular people's ways of experiencing and confronting global challenges remains a mainstay in anthropology – an anthropology that increasingly understands itself as being in the world and part of civil society. This raises the question of how anthropology can make a critical contribution to possible futures in times of environmental change.

This workshop, organized by the AG Umweltethnologie of the DGSKA, seeks to explore the potentials and pitfalls of an engaged environmental anthropology. We invite participants to share empirical, theoretical and experimental ideas and experiences. We ask which forums and which forms of methodologies and representation can we explore to engage anthropology? In comparison to other forms of the discipline's public engagement, what difference does an engaged anthropology make? How does intersectionality play a part here? And does the multitude of alternatives presented by anthropologists pose an obstacle to defining and pursuing a common good?



## Engaging Anthropology for the Future

Environmental change poses the possibly biggest challenge to human and non-human life; yet, it is mainly reduced to and framed as climate change that has for a long time existed predominantly in the form of abstract models, global-scale graphics and scientific warnings. With hotter summers, decreased snowfall, protesting students in our very streets and with ever more tangible stories of other, even more severely affected communities, however, these changes are more and more becoming an everyday experience and public awareness of them increases. Environmental changes as the results of exploitative practices continue to effect climatic change as a globally ascertainable outcome; in turn, climatic developments leave a significant imprint on local environments. These reciprocal dynamics always play out in people's concrete everyday lives. Therefore, an analysis of human-environment relations also needs to take into account socio-economic hierarchies.

The current academic engagement and its frequent failure to represent climate change as part of the bigger picture, i.e. environmental changes which are made and experienced across the globe, have at least two far-reaching consequences: Firstly, Hulme (2011), for instance, has pointed to the danger that climate change approaches may easily portray climate as the single most important determinant of the future, sidelining human ingenuity, creativity and imagination. The danger here is that climate knowledge would foster a new breed of environmental determinism with large political leverage, where the 'science' frames the political universe and reduces human agency and projects to mere 'adaptation'. Secondly, two different political strategies become visible: an exclusive focus on climate change may distract from the fact that a great portion of undesirable environmental changes is indeed owed to capitalist decision-making on all levels. Or, environmental changes are 'kept out' of climate change in order to render them particular, 'local' and non-systemic. To put alternatives to models based on a limited number of past indicators with the claim to foretell the future, Hulme argues for 'putting society back into the future'.

Anthropology can help to make palatable how neither climate change nor environmental change are incomprehensible processes happening at an out-of-reach scale or place. Building on participant observation as its main epistemological premise, the goal of anthropological research is to engage with 'the other' and the 'otherwise' and foster a notion of shared existence (cf. Hage 2015; Haraway 2016). Thereby, anthropology works out whole realities or dimensions

of realities that were concealed even though they have always been constitutive elements of our world (ibid.). Engagement is thus a prerequisite and a methodological mainstay of the discipline, yet making the acquired and processed knowledge accessible and tangible for both the public 'in the field' and the public 'back home' has always proved challenging. Anthropology could be at the forefront of provincializing climate change (cf. Tsing 2005; Greschke and Tischler 2015), making visible the concealed lived realities to challenge hegemonic discourses and practices. Yet it faces certain obstacles in defining its route and gaining its place in the public realm.

For example, in tightly woven and eurocentric public discourses, new, alien, nuanced or even ambiguous (in)sights have a difficult standing. Traditionally, anthropology has tended to support the subaltern, which – for an engaged public anthropology – implies siding with marginal(ized), oppressed or unpopular views and positions. A further difficulty for the public voice of anthropology is based on its ethical standards. The aim of public anthropology is to expand the common scientific principle of 'doing no harm' to 'doing good' (cf. Baan 2017) and overcome 'dark anthropology' with its focus on depression and hopelessness (Ortner 2016). But this poses the question of how we can voice critique while at the same time highlighting creative, emancipatory alternatives? Also, making durable and generalized statements in the tradition of other sciences is hardly possible in relation to changing and multifaceted socio-cultural phenomena. Hence, is there a singular and homogeneous perspective of the 'good' to which anthropology could speak?

So what strategies does anthropology have to engage with the public and to partake in the making of civil society discourse and practice? Apparently, the textual, theoretical, and stylistic mannerisms of anthropological prose should not be abandoned (Kyriakides et al. 2017); yet anthropology should become more sensitive to political, public, and social issues, and more accessible and relevant through renewed ways of communicating (Stoller 2013). It is thus in becoming practically and socially meaningful and tangible, that anthropology becomes not only truly engaged, but also powerful (cf. Cervone 2007). This workshop seeks to inquire how anthropology may advance such an engagement.

## Workshop Outline

The aim of the workshop “Engaging Anthropology for the Future” is to explore different forms of engaged environmental anthropology and different ways of public engagement. We want to discuss the state of our sub-discipline in terms of current (theoretical) debates and of strategies for civil participation. The discussions will take place in the plenum and in small groups. Plenary discussions will include programmatic topics like “Doing good and creating alternatives – beyond dark anthropology”, as well as organisational and practical questions (see below). There will be five small working groups dedicated to the following topics:

### 1. Forums of Engaged Anthropology

Engaged anthropology seeks to make a contribution beyond the academic ivory tower. This is why strategies and forums with or in which anthropologists can share their findings are a relevant matter of discussion (Crate/Nuttall 2008; 2016). Examples for sites to engage environmental anthropology include educational activities, artistic adaptations or cooperative projects, committees, political bodies and organisations, activism, and the universities. Which forums are best suited (or ill-suited) for environmental anthropology to join? How can anthropology shape or even create new forums? Which kinds of cooperation should anthropologists strive for and which additional skills should they acquire?

### 2. Forms of Engaged Anthropology

When anthropology wishes to make a contribution beyond academic boundaries, it has to rethink its dominant methodologies and modes of representation. Are fieldwork based on taking notes and conducting interviews or human-centred written ethnography suitable means to make anthropological analysis and findings apt for public discussion? What if the addition of more experimental approaches to and representations of the field do not only do more justice to the researched topic and research subjects but also allows to bridge the gap between academia and public forums in which socio-ecological alternatives are discussed and strategies developed (cf. Stoller 2013)? What could these new and alternative methodologies and representations look like? What is their status in comparison to previous disciplinary conventions?

### 3. Applied, Public, and Engaged Anthropology

When talking about engaged anthropology, the question arises how it distinguishes from applied or public anthropology. Whereas for applied anthropologists the expansion of anthropological activity to

(political) practice is necessary to overcome anthropology’s standing as *l’art pour l’art*, the purpose and definition of public anthropology vary according to context. While it certainly engages with larger social issues beyond academic boundaries, the (political) objectives of its analyses may be more or less overt (cf. Kedia/Van Willigen 2005, Veteto/Lockyer 2015). Questions in this small group could include if anthropologists conceive of themselves as problem-solvers or critical observants and oppositional forces to hegemonic politics, and how an engaged anthropology would differ from public anthropology when it comes to bringing in an anthropological voice into public discourse.

### 4. Doing good and creating alternatives

Engaged anthropology not only depicts socio-ecological alternatives and their equal value to hegemonic practices, but furthermore seeks to establish the formers’ emancipatory potential. It is therefore necessary that anthropologists, in the face of dominant discourses, do not resign themselves in the sense of a “dark anthropology” (Ortner 2016), but on the contrary stand up for minoritarian views. This immediately raises the question of whether a common vision of “right” and “good” alternatives as correctives of hegemonic practices is at all possible. What if there are conflicting visions among anthropologists as regards the ‘right’ track towards the future? And despite all differences, can and should anthropologists agree on a shared socio-ecological vision of the future?

### 5. Intersecting Engaged Anthropology

For decades, anthropologists have been engaged in discussions around changes in human-environment relations, the effects of environmental degradation on (often vulnerable and marginalised) communities and the meaning of justice in access to and exploitation of natural resources (e.g. Peluso 1994, Peet/Watts 1997, Bakker 2004). These debates have recently taken up inspiration from activist or policy-oriented literature (e.g. Meyer & Pranay 2017, Gellers 2018, Oksanen, Dodsworth & O’Doherty 2018). Questions raised include the intersection of environmental injustice and other forms of social, economic, gender-based, ethnic or religious discrimination. What kind of knowledge can anthropology contribute to complement and diversify the activist approach and how? Which insights do we get from communities’ outlook on hazards, unexpected chances and the human-environment relation and how can anthropologists feed them into a larger debate about environmental if not ecological justice?

In addition to our key topic, we will also discuss in plenary sessions how to keep track of our discussions and develop continuities, which activities we expect from our AG in the future, whether we want to expand our visibility online (and who takes care of this?). Furthermore, we want to develop ideas for panels for the next DGSKA conference in the plenum. There will be a space where books, flyers and other material concerning new developments and debates in environmental anthropology can be presented. Additionally, we are planning a get-together on the evening before the workshop. We will come back to you with details by early August.

We will provide catering during the workshop but cannot offer funding for travel and accommodation. To attend, please send your contact details and a short description (2–3 sentences) of your research interest by July 15 to: **umweltethno@gmail.com**

At the moment, we plan to carry out the workshop in persona. In case of an ongoing Coronavirus pandemic and the respective precautions, we aim at moving the workshop to early 2021.

Looking forward to seeing you there,

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Maike Melles (Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt)  
Sandro Simon (University of Cologne)

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