



– Institute’s Colloquium –

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Rationality in Anthropology

The talk will focus on some challenges for sociocultural anthropology in a rapidly changing world. My particular concern is with the relationship between rationality and anthropology. This is a complex issue that has profound influence on both methodology of social sciences and, more importantly, ways in which we (as scholars, but also as members of the public) explain the behaviour of particular actors in a social arena. This can have relevance to patterns of behaviour in the political and social arena (for example, when voting), intercultural communication (increasingly relevant in the world of increased cultural hybridity, and especially with large movements of population), or in processes of setting up different economic or social policies. Debates about the use of rationality in social sciences have recently been re-ignited with discussions about the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology – despite the fact that many scholars, like Lezaun, point to a sense of ‘dépjà vu.’ Although the same author notes that it opens a possibility ‘to recast the question of politics – as both an object of study and a mode of engagement with the world’ (2014).

I would like to argue that this type of engagement has been an integral part of anthropology for almost eight decades – since the first formulations of ‘rational behaviour’ among ‘natives.’ Some of these questions (especially in relation to the concept of the so-called ‘primitive mentality’) were already formulated by the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in the first decades of the 20th century. In social and cultural anthropology, the issue of rationality is present at least since Evans-Pritchard’s groundbreaking study of the Azande (1937), and its subsequent criticism by Winch (1958). This criticism already widened the debate to a more general area of social sciences, but anthropology remained, with its ‘case studies’, a popular point of reference when discussing reason and rationality. However, several years ago, an eminent US anthropologist noted a conspicuous absence of the ‘R word’ (she meant rationality) from contemporary anthropological debates (Yanagisako 2009). As a matter of fact, Yanagisako claimed that the rational choice theory (RCT) ‘is actually quite complementary to anthropological theories of cultural production. Indeed, far from being the predatory, colonizing force it is commonly perceived to be – the monster that ate the social sciences and then went on to snack on the humanities – on close inspection, RCT is downright humble and restrained in its claims’ (2009:1).

Perhaps one of the reasons for the absence of rationality from contemporary anthropologists’ works could be attributed to their fear of slipping into the territory that ‘belongs’ to political scientists and economists. This despite the fact that one of the most prominent economists of the final decades of

the last century used examples from everyday life that could actually be very familiar to anthropologists (Becker 1962). One of the reasons for this uneasiness and fear could be that anthropologists tend to make connections between the concept of rationality and something that could be described as 'rational' or 'reasonable behaviour'. This would make them open to criticism of trying to prescribe certain models of worldview onto societies or cultures that they are studying. And this does not sit well in the world with multiple cultures and points of view. According to Jarvie, 'Anthropologists have to make the best of an unfortunate turn of events: many of the former subjects of anthropological study ("simpler societies") are now unavailable as subjects or even hostile to being treated as such'. Therefore, anthropologists 'no longer know what it is they do' (2015: 386). As it is frequently pointed out in the recent literature on 'world anthropologies', anthropology has never had a single point of origin – its multiplicity is one of the essential components of its history (Bošković 2008), Boskovic and Eriksen 2013). As the world is changing, different models of anthropological engagement are being explored and new questions are being asked. I believe that an inquiry into insights of anthropology's relationship with rationality could offer some answers to these questions.

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Everybody is welcome!