SPECIAL ISSUE

REPOSITIONING ENGAGED ANTHROPOLOGY

Critical Reflexivity and Overcoming Dichotomies

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Abstract

This special issue aims to shed light on and recognize the full potential of engaged anthropology and its place in academia and beyond. It argues for an inclusive approach to be both theoretically enriching and methodologically grounded in diverse practices and forms. The introduction addresses common confusions and obstacles distracting engaged anthropology from its core premises and potentials. As the Interface Commission of the Swiss Anthropological Association (SEG), we seek to deepen the conversation about how engagement bolsters the discipline to stay relevant and robust, and embark on new paths of theoretical reflection. By "repositioning" engaged anthropology at the heart of contemporary anthropology, we seek to overcome unproductive dichotomies on engagements and practices by embracing critical reflexivity in the process of knowledge production and social action.

Keywords: *engaged anthropology, dichotomies, critical reflexivity, Switzerland*

What is engaged anthropology? Learning from contemporary practices in Switzerland

This special issue is about engaged anthropology. It is the first of its kind in TSANTSA as part of a broader effort by the Interface Commission of the Swiss Anthropological Association to reflect on and boost the theme of engagement in Switzerland. The Interface Commission aims to nourish dialogue within and between academia and societal actors, and has initiated organizing courses, workshops, and conferences surrounding this theme. These activities are a response to a growing interest from scholars, practitioners, and students to find collegial fora and spaces that are so far deemed insufficient within currently prevailing institutional arrangements and programs in academia. With this special issue, the aim is to nurture further reflection about the multiple facets of anthropological engagement and their effects on society and the anthropological practice itself. We thus start by posing the question, what do we mean by the term and what distinguishes it as a distinct form of anthropology? These concerns are not only a matter of definitional differences, but matters of recognizing diverse practices. Most anthropologists in Switzerland are active outside the

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institutional corridors of academia. Yet, their activities and contributions towards both society and the discipline still need to be systematically recognized within and across disciplines. Even if different forms of engagement often fill a lot in anthropologists' lives and are variably reflected in their CVs, their valuation do not necessarily translate in performance sheets and for more equitable career mobility. We here seek to interrogate the multiple ways anthropologists creatively deploy anthropological perspectives in diverse non-academic contexts. What do their specific engagements and experiences tell us about engaged anthropological research and challenges in Switzerland, and by extension, of anthropology more broadly? What can be learned from these engagement practices that encompass both local and global issues? Through case studies ranging from co-creating with refugees, dancing to address racism, tackling culture and environmental issues with change-makers, to collaborating on interventions with international organizations and other partnerships, the contributions illustrate how engagement is at the very heart of what many anthropologists do. Importantly, these practices defy sharp divides between the "pure" or "academic" and its implicit "other," whether labeled as "applied" or simply "non-academic." A step back to revisit definitions is thus warranted.

Redefining engaged anthropology

Literature offers multiple definitions of "engaged anthropology" (Low and Merry 2010). For some, engagement is about adopting a pragmatic "everyday" approach to contribute to "useful" problem-solving in diverse applied contexts. Other conceptions underline the practice of engagement from a critical value-driven and transformative sense of action research and a "desire for relevance" (Besteman and Haugerud 2013) addressing global challenges such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and peace. Besteman, for example, qualifies "engaged anthropology," in opposition to the "messaging" of public anthropology as:

> *… collaborative, critical, reflexive, practical (in that it is oriented toward the achievement of shared goals), and* values-driven *or associated with value judgments… It seeks to be transformative (of knowledge, representations, material context, the status quo) and often self-consciously strives to* work against the power differential *rather than reinforcing it.* (2013, 3, emphasis in roman added)

Certain authors place the question of collaboration and partnership at the heart of an engaged approach (Smith 1999; Lassiter 2005; Besteman 2013; Sillitoe 2015). Some advocate for a "militant anthropology" (Scheper-Hughes 1995) or an "activist anthropology" (Kirsch 2002; Lyon-Callo and Hyatt 2003; Hale 2006), while others again speak about a "publicly engaged anthropology" (Bringa and Bendixsen 2016) and call for more "public presence" of anthropological debates in the public sphere (Eriksen 2006).

Engaged anthropology may thus encompass highly diverse practices such as advocacy, activism, collaborative projects on representation, memory, history, and knowledge as well as applied work based on joint partnerships and projects. Attention to its multiple forms and

meanings is crucial. As Low and Merry (2010) noted within the context of engaged anthropology in the United States, engagement may mean sharing and support, teaching and public education, social critique, collaboration, advocacy, and activism.

What is defined as "engaged" clearly varies in the literature, often conflating advocacy with applied positionalities. However, what appears clear is a shared concern for more responsive and relevant anthropology that acknowledges how theory-building as "commitment to engaging with issues that concern a wide audience, remains as possible and as vital today as it has always been" (Martin and Flynn 2015, 14). As Warren (2006, 222–223) reflected:

> *[F]or those who value engagement, it is time to come to new understandings of what makes good anthropology… [it is] in developing a new self-consciousness about how we do it, and identifying new issues, powerful questions, and innovative framings through which to assert the salience of our well-honed approaches to real-world issues… to keep alive the pluralism… central to our intellectual project in the face of institutional insecurities about the academy's future in our society.*

Rather than a zero-sum game, there is room for far more critical reflexivity emancipating the discipline from unproductive divisions and fragmentation. As the contributors in this Special Issue demonstrate, different forms of engagement open up new vistas and promising theoretical-cum-conceptual horizons.

Rather than abandoning the concept due to such heterogeneity of meanings, we seek to embrace diverse understandings and practices as a source of epistemological innovation both in terms of empirical questioning and theory-building. This approach to engaged anthropology underscores collaboration and reflexivity, a willingness to be involved in complex social realities that can reveal lines of contention, and a moral orientation toward social transformation.

This may seem counterintuitive as engagement is at times thought to result in positions and epistemological closures constrained by political or organizational imperatives[1]. Purism is, of course, not an academic monopoly. While stereotypical images of the anthropologist-cum-activist bound to speak the language of political ideology or the anthropologist-cum-bureaucrat silenced by organizational dogma may form part of the landscape, such images do little justice to the potentially challenging and reflexively informed practices of anthropological engagement. Critical engagement is not merely one of "taking sides" but involves navigating within complexity of political processes. This is, of course, also true for other academic perspectives – most clearly evident in countries subject to authoritarian practices.

[1] The tendency of calls for cemented forms of engagement "in support of" a given cause lingers along similar lines of wishing to provide anthropological answers, or to sign up to a given answer.

Challenging dichotomies

Our starting point for this volume is to question the divide between multiple forms of creative engagement and practices within and beyond academia. We argue for an expansive definition of anthropology with more room for engaged practice, also in teaching programs. This includes the recognition of how many anthropologists within and outside academia engage in multiple, and often invisible, forms of engagement. This is not meant to say that such forms of engagement are rejected by mainstream academia *per se*. Most anthropologists working in academia engage with their interlocutors in one way or another and whose participation in the process of knowledge production form part of the outcomes and the relationships at play in particular social contexts. This may manifest through individual forms of support, friendship, and other expressions of relatedness, to systematic forms of engagement with organizations and movements. Yet, the analytical labor and creative outputs of an engaged anthropology often remain undervalued in various social contexts of engagement, including semantically categorized labor as "community service" and "outreach," (Scheper-Hughes 2009, 2) compared to "core" academic work and activities. To counter such divides, we seek to revalorize and build recognition of engagement as a distinct reflexive process at the heart of multiple anthropologies.

Can we move from a situation where what increasingly counts, in contemporary neoliberal metrics, is the number of peer-reviewed articles to one where public writings and reflexive societal engagements are also valued? Can we, for example, move our discipline to value not only 10-minute academic talks at prestigious anthropological conferences, but also recognize the significance of contributions to co-produced knowledge production and diverse stakeholder dialogues? This also concerns whether to mainly write for a narrow academic audience or translate ideas into accessible texts to challenge the politics of knowledge as well as unequal power relationships on multiple levels. Revisiting what we might think of as "hierarchies of significance" concern real questions and choices about whether to publish in high-ranking academic journals or seek open access outlets, publishing in local languages and taking up alternative means of communication in an effort to reach concerned stakeholders.

The search for a meaningful engagement is also reflected in a strong call from students to be trained in the practice and get prepared to face dilemmas of engagement rather than limiting training shaped by "pure" academic trajectories and associated ideal types of *homo academicus*. Changing landscapes require new approaches that move beyond unproductive dichotomies and divides between "academic" and "engaged" anthropology that may still prevail and continue to shape the conversation (Martin and Flynn 2015). We argue that this prevents a clear and reflexive positionality concerned not only with textual production but also societal involvement and relational connection.

Even as a growing body of literature emphasizes the benefits of engagement, a series of dichotomies, in part shaped by funding and hiring practices, hinder a more recognized and productive role and contribution of engaged anthropology (Abram and Pink 2015). We join Kirsch (2018) in aiming to destabilize "this prevailing dichotomy," suggesting it in the plural – as dichotomies maintaining a problematic divide between the pure and productive aca-

demic analysis with the practice of doing engaged, yet analytically poor, inquiry. Engagement is far too often perceived as an ideological straitjacket (leading to intellectually compromised activity), limiting the scope for independent and critical analysis (Hastrup et al. 1990, 301). Engagement may thus be misrecognized as embarking upon unreflexive "doing" or "dependent" application of existing ideas with a specific problem-orientation or agenda too close to interlocutors instead of the independent open-ended "thinking" and generalizable scholarship of "pure" academia.

Most anthropologists would object against such implicit dichotomies and essentialisms; whether that of academic *per se* reduced to disengaged and publicly irrelevant[2], or vice versa, engagement as politically relevant, yet analytically impotent. Still, such dichotomies persist in different shades and forms (Martin and Flynn 2015). From distinctions between the anthropology of development and that of development anthropology (Escobar 1991) to the implicit understanding with wording such as *applied* anthropology, one side is concerned with thinking and the making of ideas, while the other is about doing and applying. One side offers critical independent analysis, while the other involves "getting your hands dirty" through engagement with societal issues, agendas, and political processes.

The undoing or transformation of such outmoded dichotomies requires additional efforts to move beyond the idea of a contradiction between engagement and being academic, between being useful and analytical, between activism and research. It is therefore imperative to challenge the implicit analytical hierarchy and epistemological othering of "engaged" anthropology and in turn, harvest the full potential of engagement in both theoretical and practical terms.

Repositioning engaged anthropology

First, we suggest that engaged anthropology offers a sobering reality check on power relations and the possibility for multiple positionalities beyond that of academic observation from a perceived neutral distance. On the one hand, if funding and political ties may constrain engaged anthropology, critical epistemology has long demonstrated that even academic analysis is situated in a field of power relations. Imbalances and inequalities are not only part and parcel of the world we study, but also shape our academic institutions, dramatically illustrated, for example, by how neoliberalism deepens the artificial divide between individual intellectual performance and the collective nature of knowledge production (Donskis et al. 2019). On the other hand, the engaged anthropology proposed here prompts a more reflexive and processual take on distance, no longer as given, but as the result of a critical process of what we might call analytical distanciation.

Secondly, the idea of engaging with topics of social inequality and racism is often conflated with occupying a distinct positionality against such inequalities and racialized prac-

[2] Obviously, standing up for academic independence is in many places itself a matter of engagement and risk, challenging attempts to discard academic analysis as non-engaged. Even a cursory gaze to the conditions of academic freedoms in many places in the world raises the stakes of merely maintaining academic independence.

tices. It is time to render engagements plural rather than a somewhat caricatured position of anthropologists on the frontlines. Engaged conversations are frequently not *per se* about adopting a given stance or taking sides in political battlefields, but rather about engaging with multiple and situated positionalities and values. While this is arguably a shared starting point for most anthropology, what engaged anthropology brings to the table is a readiness to converse critically and engage reflexively with interlocutors and the wider public. In doing so, it simultaneously raises existential and practical questions about both the *why* (the purpose) and the *how* (the modes and modalities) of our discipline in relation to world engagements.

Thirdly, we challenge the idea that engagement leads to the loss of criticality. A typical association being made is how engaged representations suffer from ideological veils compared to an otherwise nonpartisan or independent analysis. If certain forms of activism may run this risk, the comfort zone of armchair anthropology outside the engaged contact zone, is perhaps even more vulnerable to the loss of criticality. The idea of distance as a fixed objective safe ground is elusive. Pre-given notions of neutral distance not only obscure the ideological basis of science, but even more fundamentally ignore the situated nature of distanciality.

Fourth, if navigating complex terrains is part of all anthropological fieldwork, we argue for a new engaged reflexivity no longer just about textual voice, but equally so about societal and political reflexivity in terms of enabling different positionalities, conversations and relationships with our interlocutors. By explicit reflexive attention to the conditions of (maintaining) criticality, there is no contradiction between engaged proximity and productive analysis. We thus suggest abandoning scripted notions pertaining to "disengaged" and "engaged" anthropology, and take engagement as a reflexive process in all spheres of anthropological research and activity. Engagement prompts a reflexivity beyond the textual voice in writing as it is about positionality in particular and broader social relations, within and outside academia. This means a departure from engagement as a sidekick or an add-on towards systematically instituting it as part and parcel of anthropological work.

Finally, we argue that engagement brings new terrains of empirical, theoretical, and conceptual relevance, just as it is about recognizing that we have different practice opportunities within these hierarchies, boundaries, and forms of expression.

New terrains of co-creative expressions and relationships

Engaged anthropology potentially breaks with the archetype of the lone (male) ethnographer and the observed other. Engagement entails the co-construction of shared spaces and collective process, where more participatory practices and relationships can flourish. It enables multiple forms of co-creation with partners from individuals to organizations replacing the individual anthropologist working alone with collective forms of knowledge production situated in wider fields of practice that generate transformation. This reinforces connections *with* rather than separation from those in the field of inquiry. More than observing subjects only for the sake of theory-making (Smith 1999; Lassister 2005), it is about part-

nerships and positioning oneself next to or alongside the people one works with, shaping policy debates, informing, and building awareness-raising (Nagengast and Vélez-Ibañez 2004; Hale 2006). Engagement is more than just about making anthropology public or – of speaking about it, but rather about nurturing dialogic conversations (Bakhtin 1981). This not only concerns speech and action, but also writing manifestations. Engagement entails writing with, rather than just about as illustrated by work with UN Special Rapporteurs and activists (Larsen et al. 2020), migrants (Jeffery et al. 2019) and many others. Engagement may allow for the amplification of voices less heard, contributing to more participatory knowledge co-creations even leading to co-authorships (Tibet and Deeq 2019). These approaches often necessitate ontological and epistemological shifts where different forms of knowing and being in the world are acknowledged as integral to science-making (Mignolo and Escobar 2010; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012; Santos 2018). It also entails a multimodal approach to knowledge creation; ranging from journal articles, alternative writing approaches, presentations at public forums, to new exhibition spaces, staged performances or films shared at screening events. In today's digital realm, anthropologists also adapt to – and adopt – recent technological developments. Looking at the complexity of digitalisation, e-tools, and the algorithms of Artificial Intelligence through the lense of the digital humanities offer new terrains of anthropological engagement.

Written words in text are no longer the only imperative to the making and communication of anthropology. The expansion of anthropology going beyond written forms of engagement remains work in progress with new terrains of tactile, sensorial, and mobile dimensions of being and understanding the world.

Multiple facets of anthropological engagement

This special issue intends to make some of the multiple facets of anthropological engagement in and from Switzerland visible through a variety of examples that explore the transformative potentials of our discipline with new forms and norms of scholarship and practice. Indeed, if engagement in anthropology is not new, we seek to broaden, enrich, and complexify the understanding of how anthropological know-how may be mobilized to act within and for society, and what this means in terms of diverse languages, forms of expression, and knowledge production.

Tibet and Deeq use "affective multimodalities" to define their engagement and knowledge co-creation processes with unaccompanied asylum seekers from various backgrounds. Building on Homi Bhabha's theory on "third space," Tibet and Deeq argue that these multimodalities and the many conversations they had with unaccompanied asylum seekers led to the creation and emergence of a third space, through the sharing of their hopes and imaginaries of border crossings. The relations of trust they created with the unaccompanied asylum seekers allowed them to co-narrate a powerful and intimate account of their experiences, resist institutional divisions and conceptual routines while exploring new modalities of anthropological knowledge making.

Museums have long been a privileged place to think about and put into practice various forms of anthropological engagement, whether through participatory or collaborative approaches or through community engagements (Kreps 2020). They have also been a privileged place for theorizing how representation, identity formation, and power relations work. Revisiting their participative experience with Naro San artists from Botswana creating the exhibition *Kuru. L'art d'un monde en mutation* held in 2019 at the Botanical Garden of Neuchâtel, Baracchini, Gaille, and Mulhauser propose a reflection on the dialogical dynamics at stake and on the challenges and the limits of the strategies of representations of Self and the Other. Revisiting the different stages of the curatorial process, they show the importance of working on and making sense of this dialogical dimension in order to overcome the prejudice of inauthenticity that often conditions the reception of contemporary Indigenous arts in Europe, to bring the public to recognize the specificity of these expressions without confining them to their differences.

Vionnet uses dance as an epistemological tool to generate anthropological knowledge. Through a multimodal contribution encompassing video and writing at the intersection of art and anthropology, the author claims that engaged anthropology and dance enable more inclusive knowledge production. Drawing on fieldwork within dance communities in Switzerland, Vionnet considers dance as an entry point to create encounters that reach beyond language alone. Through a thought-provoking autoethnography in anthropological dance research, the author describes the many collaborations in which she engaged artists in Switzerland and beyond. In doing so, she demonstrates the challenges of co-creation, intercultural communication, and phenomenological engagement.

Naef and Brichler offer a joint contribution by an independent filmmaker trained in anthropology and an anthropologist involved in the art and cultural scene of Geneva providing an ethnographic description of the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Geneva Art Worlds (Becker 1982). The first part of the article is based on a research project supported by the city of Geneva and undertaken by *EnQuêtes, Plateforme d'anthropologie*, an associative structure run by one of the authors aiming to propose action-research projects in anthropology. The second part synthesizes the results of a round-table debate organized by the authors in the context of the Interface Commission's Virtual Conference, held in March 2021. The main objective of the debate was to give a voice to artists and cultural actors in Geneva who were severely impacted by the pandemic.

This special issue also gives voice to anthropologists involved in the national and international sphere alongside local and global NGOs, international cooperation initiatives, and activism. This piece is based on a round-table discussion during the Interface Commission in March 2021 moderated by Peter Larsen and contributions by co-authors who address the advantages and dilemmas of anthropological engagement in the field of international governance, including humanitarian work, diplomacy, international organizations, the Swiss federal government, NGOs and multinationals. Bleeker stresses the role of rigorous, scientific, responsible, and emancipatory anthropology linking experiences with AIDS prevention, memory, and transitional justice. Käser mobilizes feminist anthropology to critically inform art and peace mediation efforts, while Leemann employs anthropology to investigate land-grabbing in Cambodia. Riva weaves together global virtual teaching, medical anthro-

pology, and capacity building as a field of future forming research and transformational pedagogy, while Schapira seeks to bridge academia and activism in Latin America. Back in Switzerland, Schulz and Hertz write as "public intellectuals" in favor of the Swiss Responsible Business Initiative.

In an interview for TSANTSA, Alex Aebi shares his views as a researcher and an engaged citizen on the role of interdisciplinarity and engagement in Swiss academia. Looking back on his career as a biologist, beekeeper, and anthropologist, he reflects on engagement as a necessity and a responsibility. His work on synthetic pesticides in Switzerland reveals both the reticence and mistrust against so-called "activist" postures within the universities as well as the opportunities that such engagement opens up for. Finally, to round off the special issue, Bacalzo reviews the recent EASA volume "Why the world needs anthropologists" (Podjed et al. 2021) situating engagement in a broader context.

Concluding remarks

If engagement is at times presented as a choice, anthropological critique has long unpacked and brought to light the invisibilized legacies of government-driven, colonial, and even militarized forms of anthropological scientific practice, including the ubiquity of neoliberal rationality that normalizes the *homo oeconomicus* in our social life and even pervades the production of knowledge. It is precisely in such murky waters that the need for critical reflexive engagement becomes crystal clear. The question is not whether to engage or not, but with whom, under what conditions and with what consequences. We thus argue for a far more rigorous reflexive engagement, which does not shy away from other forms of positionality and forms of expression, but grounds such practice in reflexivity about its conditions and consequences. A critical reflexive engagement builds on ethical and political positioning. It allows for the production of knowledge within co-creative processes valuing engagement while tactfully deploying analytical distance. It entails navigating in complex landscapes. It dares to explore with the arsenal of anthropological knowledge the boundaries of education and mentoring culture. As engaged anthropologists we hope to enkindle a passion for society (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016).

In this year of the 100th anniversary of Paolo Freire, we are inspired to build critical consciousness, unveil forces behind inequalities in society, and stimulate social action. Following Freire's example (1994), the educational dimension is central to our work, not merely the idea of transmitting skills, but that of expanding possibilities for engaged reflection, action, and new forms of relationships. Lastly, we do not take democratic freedom and economic privilege enjoyed by the institutions of anthropology in Switzerland for granted. Rather, we see an opportunity for our institutions to become even better at promoting diversity and inclusion. Practices of engagement offer a foothold for anthropology to stay relevant and inspirational well beyond academic circles. A politically reflexive and engaged anthropology does not shy away from action to unsettle the inhumane, ecologically destructive, divisive, and oppressive hegemonies.

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