

Publications

Any Area but Europe: American Anthropology and European Studies

by Gerald Creed

In anthropology, as in other disciplines, research on eastern Europe has expanded dramatically since 1989. However, the status of European studies within American anthropology has not risen accordingly, and in fact remains somewhat devalued. Some colleagues dispute my assessment with examples of prominent anthropologists who work(ed) in Europe and major disciplinary trends pioneered there. Clearly, the marginalization I detect is more relative than absolute, but I find it nearly undeniable when it comes to hiring. Despite a purported decline in the significance of area specializations within the discipline, departments almost never search for anthropologists of Europe while other area specialties are commonly requested. I recall one job advertisement that actually invited applicants specializing in “any area but Europe!” The hiring differential has tremendous negative multiplier effects depressing the influence of Europe in the discipline now and in the future. In the short space allotted here I would like to point to a few causes of this relative marginalization and offer some suggestions to redress it.

First, as is well known, the professionalization of anthropology had its roots in the study of “non-western” (read non-European) cultures, beginning with colonized populations such as Native Americans and Africans. Europe was not foundational to the discipline, even in France and Britain—the two European countries with the greatest influence on American anthropology. Some cultural scholars in Europe did look within their own countries, but this contributed to their continued distinction from Anglo-American anthropology in fields such as folklore or ethnography. In American anthropology the study of Europe came to the fore only after World War II along with a growing interest in peasants. This breakthrough, however, conceptually bound the area too closely to peasant and community studies. When these concerns and approaches fell out of favor (with a vengeance), European studies as a whole suffered unfairly. By contrast, the anthropology of the United States, which was previously more marginal to the discipline, but closely associated with urban research, experienced an explosion as urban concerns took center stage in the last decade.

Of course, the Europe anthropologists entered after World War II was already politically divided and fieldwork was restricted to western countries (Yugoslavia being the major exception). By the 1970s when anthropologists gained access further east, communist practices had significantly reshaped these societies in ways that separated the interests of researchers there from their counterparts in western Europe. With no unified pre-war experience and little overlap between research agendas in east and west, a united anthropology of Europe could hardly develop. This east/west chasm prevented the rising interest in eastern Europe from lifting the anthropology of Europe generally. The development of political-economic perspectives in anthropology provided an opportunity to redress some of these limitations. The importance of history in this approach gave anthropologists of Europe a decided advantage and allowed for a rapprochement between east and west as the relevant time frame was pushed back before communism. Within political-economic circles, then, the anthropology of Europe experienced an increase in status in the early 1980s.

Even this promising foundation, however, could not survive the subsequent coalescence of intellectual trends aggressively challenging Eurocentrism. In the laudable effort to effectively redress past European hegemony and bring multi-cultural perspectives to the study of humanity, many anthropologists have questioned all things European, and the anthropology of Europe is in danger of being discarded with the proverbial bath water. All disciplines have been affected by this critique, but anthropology has been especially receptive/responsive for various reasons. As mentioned, Europe was not a keystone of the discipline, while the critique is often launched by or for people who have constituted the bedrock of anthropological interest. Furthermore, Eurocentrism is just a variant of ethnocentrism, the eradication of which has always been a *raison d'être* of anthropological research. Add the unfortunate (if often unintentional) connection between early anthropology and colonial interests, and there is much to atone for—and a laudable eagerness to do so. One response has been to turn inward and focus on our own societies. This has promoted U.S. research within American anthropology and has done the same for Europe among European anthropologists. It is essential to recognize, then, that increasing attention to Europe by anthropologist in Europe is the outcome of the same disciplinary forces marginalizing Europe in America anthropology.

This marginality is exacerbated by the minor position of anthropology in European area studies. Due to factors listed above, the study of Europe as an area coalesced in the U.S. without much input from anthropology, and the residue of exclusion persists today, even as other disciplines adopt ethnographic methods. Too often anthropological studies are cited for local color or evidential support while their broader arguments are neglected as too narrowly based. Again, this is a relative deprivation, based on comparisons with African studies or Latin American studies where anthropological perspectives and interests were formative and continue to exercise significant influence over the kinds of questions and approaches that define the profile of area studies.

What then can be done? As anthropologists we must be more mindful that our professional reputations depend on the position of Europe within the discipline and focus on elevating it. We must also work across the continuing east/west divide to insure that recent interest in eastern Europe, especially burgeoning work in Russia, expands the prospects of European anthropology generally and does not simply dissipate as these countries take up more stable positions in a new Europe. To do so we must emphasize points of convergence across the continent that integrate distinct regional concerns. Thematic foci along the Council's network model are one possibility. This exercise will also help us speak more pointedly to major theoretical and topical concerns in anthropology, which is crucial to breaking the cycle of insulation. Other scholars of Europe can help by engaging anthropology more extensively in their own teaching and research. If the study of Europe is to advance in the eyes of anthropologists, they must see other social scientists working in Europe treating anthropological research seriously.

Finally, and most importantly, European studies must incorporate the critical perspectives on Eurocentrism so resonant within anthropology, especially recent post-colonial studies. The "idea of Europe" can provide the basis for a revitalized specialization grounded in a geographical place but no longer bounded by it. The consequences of European ideas and models outside of Europe should be part of European studies, not antithetical to it. For example, the renowned anthropologist of Indonesia Ann Stoler has focused much of her attention on European officials living and working there during

colonialism. Her conclusions tell us as much about Europe as Indonesia. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent book, *Provincializing Europe*, examines the impact that categories of modern European social science had on thinking about India and its neighbors. By its own description the book is not an exercise in Europe bashing, but rather a project examining how such thought may be revitalized for and from the margins. Such research(ers) should be included within European area studies. This will not only help the cause of Europe within anthropology but also sustain the value of European area studies in the view of scholars, foundations, and policy makers who believe geographically defined interests are less relevant in a global world. The idea of Europe is bigger and more significant than the continent itself and we should not limit ourselves to the latter.