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[rh]Crisis chasing and the crisis of expertise

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[ti]Comment: Crisis chasing and the crisis of expertise

[ab]A comment on Heath Cabot's "The Business of Anthropology and the European Refugee Regime," *American Ethnologist* 46, no. 3 (2019): TK.

[dc]Cabot's article is a healthy cold shower for anthropology's overheated and often self-congratulatory engagement with activism. It may well be true that anthropology has sometimes reneged on its oft-stated rejection of its colonial legacy. But if we fatalistically accept that such backsliding is inevitable, we cede the action to others less willing to examine and learn from their own failures.

Although she does not identify it explicitly, Cabot offers us something much subtler than a simple critique: the model of a discipline whose commitment to ceaseless self-criticism could reorient some of its powerful interlocutors—if only those movers and shakers could escape the self-fulfilling Cartesian and colonial logics in which their political advisers, mostly economists and political scientists, enmesh their thinking. Moreover, even if some of the crisis chasers whom Cabot accuses of not

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speaking either the host country's or the migrants' languages are anthropologists, such ignorance, as she shows, is a far greater problem in those other disciplines. It allows practitioners to ignore the messy realities that shape many of the migrants' plights and actions. Some anthropologists, to be sure, have interacted with the lawyers and politicians who manage those realities; Cabot herself has done excellent work in this area. Powerful players, however, often do resist levels of intimacy that would enable a genuinely ethnographic alternative to the formal interview.

As her frequent use of the word "may" suggests, Cabot recognizes that her complaints risk overgeneralizing. The major problem, as she eventually admits, perhaps has less to do with anthropology itself than with the conditions of knowledge production it shares with powerful forces that seek to restrict its impact. In the US, those pressures are somewhat less constricting than in much of Europe, where the new General Data Protection Regulation (which governs the "protection" of personal data) threatens ethnographic practice and where the subordination of PhD students' work to large projects threatens to cramp initiative and independence. But these pressures exist today wherever there are universities. In Chinese academia, where audit culture reigns supreme, the future of productively critical discourse looks particularly bleak. So the crisis chasing that Cabot describes is actually part of a larger dynamic, in which anthropology's ethical commitments offer some of the few remaining avenues to a more humane world.

At stake, I suggest, is a crisis of a very different sort than the crises about which Cabot writes here. This crisis concerns the future of expertise. Such a claim may sound paradoxical in the present context. It is currently fashionable to castigate “experts,” and Cabot exposes some of the quick and dirty techniques that often pass, wrongly, for expertise; these techniques include universalizing English, the reductionism of form models, mechanistic jargon, and simplistic diagrams. Attacking genuine expertise, by contrast, can play into the hands of neoliberal populists who use “simplicity” as an excuse for suppressing the complex nature of social reality, and whose ruthless use of audit culture serves the cynically dual purpose of subjecting critical experts to a repressive evaluation regime while at the same time making them look ridiculous by forcing them to scramble in pursuit of “productivity.”

Cabot does not simplify; on the contrary, she complicates the ethical obligations of the profession, resisting the temptation of easy answers. While this has indeed led her to excessive “may-saying,” she makes the real challenge clear: in an imperfect world, a discipline that admits its own imperfections may be a better model—here I use the word “may” advisedly—for the future of politics, a future marked by honesty and recognition. If this means making an exceptionalist case for anthropology, I, for one, am prepared to take my chances on doing exactly that—but always in the spirit of Cabot’s exhortation to keep the self-critique front and center.

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