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Reality, Realism and the Future
Year 2021 in European Social Anthropology Journals

Abstract: The world's ethos in 2021 grew increasingly realistic, focusing on constraints and practicalities, accounting for 'bitter necessities', and choosing defensiveness, preservation and stability over creation and exploration. The rise of realism in the world's public and private spheres presents a challenge to anthropology's ability to integrate a moral compass, empirical embeddedness and epistemological value in the discipline. This review of research published in some major peer-reviewed Anglophone European journals in 2021 seeks to vindicate the optimistic kind of moral realism by showing its inescapable entanglement in two of the most powerful items on anthropologists' agendas today, the ontological and the future-oriented.

Keywords: 'bare' power, calculative reason, developmentalist nation-state, materialist ontology, 'traditional' kinship

Reading side by side the Wikipedia list of the most significant events in 2021[1] and the crop of anthropology articles from the same year, the perception is that the world changes rapidly, but more so does our relationship with time. Popular memes of today – 'do you remember, there was such thing as COVID-19?' – register the realisation that we live in times when neither people nor temporalities seek to trade, exchange or negotiate. Instead, one form of time intends to erase the other out of existence (Ssorin-Chaikov 2021). Deterministic prophesies of yonder days are gone. History is no longer developing but unravelling, with a distinct possibility that humanity will not progress much past the quarter of the third millennium. Even market-driven neoliberalism, which seeks to 'liberat[e] individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2005: 2) and has been subject of a world of anthropological critique, may soon appear less of a TINA ('there is no alternative', a moniker coined by Margaret Thatcher) and more of a – possibly, nostalgic – memory in many parts of the world.

Likewise, the curators of *Social Anthropology* ponder the (im)possibilities of teleological thinking in two special issues honing in on utopia (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021) and liberalism (Fedirko et al 2021), respectively. Both are teleological projects that have a seed of disappointment, partiality and incompleteness at the very heart of their respective ideologies. Jan-Jonathan Bock (2021) chron-

icles how, in Rome, a grassroots-democratic Five Star Movement won elections on the promise to reshape civic culture, dialogise political representation and foster innovative types of participation. The utopian character of the Five Star project transpired when the more radical members of the Movement split from the newly elected officials the moment these ideals clashed with the political realities. Aaron Ansell exposes the unrealistic and reductive grammar of 'pure exchange' encoded in liberalism (2021: 421). Embraced by the progressivist officials of Brazil's Workers' Party government (2003–2016), 'pure exchange' in the party politics faded away or took unrecognisable forms in North-Eastern Brazilian backlands, where the habitual way of doing politics was elector–politician 'friendships'. Taras Fedirko (2021) ruminates on the unexpected complicities of the liberal project in Ukraine, where the anti-oligarchic media reformers, funded by the Western liberal movements and inspired by the Anglo-American ideals of good journalistic practice, aimed to promote liberalism in a non-liberal context of the oligarch-controlled media. In reality, they ended up both extending the reach of liberal politics in Ukraine and upholding the oligarchic patronage. Alpa Shah (2021) details how, in India, a once-popular progressivist leftist utopia is replaced by the conservative, right-wing and populist Hindutva imagination. Finally, Matei Candea (2021) questions both the realism of the liberalist position and its reality – have we, they or anyone ever been liberal? – exposing how the impossibility of liberal ideas is not just a matter of malpractice but rather of design inscribed in the very institutions, practices and forms of subjectivation that seek to orient towards them.

To offset the 'darkness' of these accounts (Ortner 2016; see discussion in Martin 2021) with some optimism for the future, the editors suggested highlighting 'new forms of collective mobilisation that challenge prevailing understandings of "the human", collective agency and chronotopical experiences' (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021: 5). The optimism is indeed found, not surprisingly, in the same idealism that has been shown to disappoint. Alex Ungprateeb Flynn (2021) describes how the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), a Marxist social movement in Brazil, succeeds by what can be seen as blunt idealistic optimism. They struggle to resolutely maintain a unified and increasingly massified front in pursuit of a distant and ambitious goal of creating a new society. The very distance of their objective justifies striving ever harder. A similar resolution guided, according to Tobias Kelly (2021), the ethics and labour of the British pacifist ambulance drivers during the Second World War. Working among the war supporters, they recognised their complicity in the ongoing violence but found strength in the possibility and the vision of 'human perfection'. Similarly, today's Argentinian unionists (Lazar 2021) are guided by the (im)possible, future-oriented moral ideals of love, passion and devotion – moulded, as the author shows, in the specific histories of mid-twentieth-century Peronism and Catholicism.

Utopia and liberalism vary depending on their spatial, temporal or cosmological organisation, reflecting the lingering romance of the ontological in anthro-

pology. Other ontological endeavours focus on the task of truly recognising the reality of different, and possibly unknowable, 'others'. A special collection in *Ethnos* (Lemons 2021) shows that, in this, anthropologists can be stimulated by the axiomatic reality and centrality of god(s) in theological studies. Two other special issues of *Ethnos* discuss the generally 'other-than-human' (Lien and Pálsson 2021) and the particular 'phytocommunicability and cross-species sociality' of plants (Schulthies 2021). Meanwhile, material objects continue 'to object' and to (dis)connect through infrastructures and assemblages, while also revealing their 'thingness', 'complexities', 'resistances' and 'inertias'. *History and Anthropology* presented a collection on 'contact tracing: the materiality of encounters' (Douglas and Ballard 2022). Separate articles also abound. Catherine Earl navigates the roads of the Vietnamese capital to alert the readers of *Social Anthropology* to the fact that the 'eddies of a river, traffic flows are abiotic actors – other-than-human physical phenomena' (2021: 1018). In *Social Analysis*, Gareth Paul Breen (2021) brings together Louis Dumont, Marilyn Strathern and the religious-ontological notion of 'oneness' in Taiwan to conclude that among the recent anthropological darlings of objects and relations, it is the reality of objects that we cannot do without. Relations are optional.

Some efforts to see and recognise reality among anthropologists, however, reflect a more sceptically realist ethos. Bjørn Enge Bertelsen explains how, in Mozambique, urban developers aim at 'reinventing humanity and human life as more adaptable to post-future horizons of always already collapsed ecologies' (2021: 87) – a post/trans-humanism with bitter realism at heart. Dependencies, vulnerabilities and the unevenness of infrastructural development that the pandemic started to lay bare in 2020 continue to expand and intensify. *Focaal* alerts to the world's stumbling shipping industry and the spatial and economic alienation of labour of seafarers in a special issue on 'container economies' (Leivestad and Markkula 2021). And Andrew Littlejohn, tracing 'the assemblage of the intangible', disagrees that the material loss can be 'generative, facilitating the formation of new values and attachments' (2021: 944). In post-Fukushima Japan, immaterial aspects of relationships 'disassemble' in tandem with the material.

In this light, one is wary that 'phytocommunicability and cross-species sociality' – living with/like plants – may be the only remaining way to arrange for kin-like intimacy these days, for too many opt out of having children among precarity, global crises and the thorns of 'elusive adulthood' (Durham and Solway 2017; Weiss 2021). 'Plants', say the realist pundits on the Internet, 'are the new pets, pets are the new children, and children are for the rich'. Optimism, on the other hand, readily emerges in relation to the older, modernist utopias and their political forms. A special issue of *Focaal* (Holbraad and Lamrani 2021) takes the cue from the Geertzian social-morphological thought and the early forms of organisation in Lenin's revolutionary politics (Humphrey 2021) to show that the 'revolutionary circle' remains a popular model of and for the world. Revealing that a circle's obvious boundary-ness can be a productive line of tension rather

than an obstacle, the authors show how circles inform the lives of contemporary Syrians (Al-Khalili 2021) and Nicaraguans (Cooper 2021), and hail back to the ancient Greek agoras, Ukrainian and Russian Cossack communities, Ethiopian quasi-daily gatherings and Constituent Assembly in revolutionary France (Holbraad and Lamrani 2021). Another old-time utopia found alive and well in many parts of the world is infrastructural modernisation. While the progressivists of a certain ilk look to live with, or like, plants, many people in rural Laos self-consciously choose to live in and stake their identities on the inorganic surroundings of concrete buildings (Stolz 2021). And so do the urban dwellers in Mozambique, who defy urban developers' intent to 'lessen' the humans, and to remove humans from the limelight when it comes to the layout and the functions of their cities (Bertelsen 2021). Like Laotians, Mozambicans confess their love for the new concrete, feeling neither ecological regret nor post-modern fascination at the sight of the ruination of old concrete structures (Archambault 2021).

All of this shows that the search for the ontological 'reality' or the 'future' is in itself never devoid of ethics. Some 'new' and keen materialist search and advocacy for things' 'agency' look passionately idealistic against many 'old' materialisms in which the world's materiality pointedly matter-of-factly deserves respect. And can we even hope to recognise others as real if we, for the sake of optimism, single out some forms of life as 'creative' or 'resistant', thus denying the creative potential – and hence, the freedom – to others (Robbins 2012)? In other words, should we focus on 'the ethics of possibility' at the expense of 'the ethics of probability' (Appadurai 2013, in Ortner 2016), and thus foreclose the fact that all agents necessarily integrate both ethics in the course of their lives?

In this review, I wish to vindicate moral realism and emphasise the connection between realism, future-making and anthropology's commitment to having a foot in reality. One way to do so is to acknowledge that introducing implicit idealism into our epistemology merely for the sake of optimism or to gain 'intellectual distance' from our fields is not a good idea. Another way is to look at how good anthropology always made it abundantly clear that people's relations with the necessities and constraints are ambiguous at least. Can we always identify if ways of dealing with trauma or exclusion that we observe are 'accepting' or 'resisting'; 'hopeful' or 'pessimistic'; 'creative' or 'routine'? Equally interesting and uncertain is the relation between the forms of realism and the reality that people may have. A case in point is the tale from Finland, where employees are told to manage their burnout by balancing self-care and workplace demands (Funahashi 2013). Both employers and employees see themselves as realists: the employees are driven to burnout by the ideology of 'work needs to be done', and the employers point out that 'work–life balance should be a priority'. As a result, employees are called to change what they understand as 'reality' – to change their form-of-life while also adding self-care work to their 'work' work. In this situation, whose realism and reality, theirs or their managers, counts as such?

The crop of 2021 anthropology productions can similarly be seen in this light. The practice of keeping belief in 'human perfection' on the part of the British pacifists (above), carried out despite acknowledgement of their complicity in the war effort and the hostility of the pro-war public, may not be 'new' (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021: 5) or 'creative' (Ortner 2016: 66), but it does reflect the possibility of optimistic realism in the very heart of moral idealism (or vice versa). The same applies to the plans of Brazilian Marxists (also above). After all, anthropology itself is, or can be, an inspiring idealistic utopia; a contradictory project which is in many ways unrealisable; or, as a colleague once said at the end of an exhausting day, 'just another kind of waged labour that we know how, and therefore happen to do'. Either in lives or words, these are not mutually exclusive.

I suggest that instead of condemning or practising the 'darkness', we might want to look at different ways to be realists, as well as at the human condition of difficulty in grasping what is, after all, 'really' real (Motta 2019). With this in mind, I overview European anthropology of 2021 in line with three prominent themes. First are the ways in which growing precarity and insecurity make for the comeback of such 'real' and therefore 'dependable' things as kinship, waged labour and the nation-state. Second is the rising trust in the realness – the objectivity – of mathematical and calculative reason, and the infopower that relies on them. These forms of realism connect the logic of quantification in the shipping container economies with the newer forms of truth-making and society-making in data science, and with the continuing human ambiguity about producing ignorance, secrets and uncertainty. Finally, anthropologists discuss what constitutes being grounded in reality. Some suggest that quantification claims to reality may be true, and our generally qualitative approach to history and society should be corrected. Others suggest revising the theories of social action and power because power, too, is increasingly 'real' – bare and visible – coinciding with a small number of high-profile individuals. Anthropologists' relations with these powerful actors invite reconsideration of empathy, sympathy and critique among the main tools of researchers' subjectivity. Tim Ingold (2021) invites more appreciation for amateur spirit in anthropology – a very realistic and yet optimistic proposition, in my opinion. Others, on a more pessimistic note, call attention to the power and disempowerment of those who quit the academic field.

Kinship, Nation-State and Other 'Real' Things in Life

The last 30 years, enthused by gender and feminist politics and bio-scientific advances in the field of procreation, have seen some radical dismantling of 'traditional' or 'biological' kinship in both lay and anthropological thought. More recently, pandemic isolation, the precariousness of employment, collapsing infrastructures and the ongoing erosion of liberalism brought back the idea that traditional or biological kinship is the primary site of mutual obligation that

allows people to survive. The special issue of *History and Anthropology* (Gingrich and Lutter 2021) recaptures the times when kin and family were unquestionable realities both in and out of anthropology, by overviewing kinship and gender forms in Europe and Asia from the eighth to the nineteenth centuries CE. *Focaal* (Leivestad and Markkula 2021) draws attention to how the rational-technocratic side of the world shipping trade depends on family and kinship connections and obligations. Kinning intimacies, moral codes, femininities and masculinities provide the shipping industry with unpaid labour, as well as excess meaning and resources (Bear 2015) that allow waged labour to appear modern, independent and default. In the 'battlegrounds of dependence' issue (Martin et al 2021), *Focaal* shows how container economies become both the metaphor and the arena for capital's prestidigitation, in which wage labour and unpaid labour are two forms of 'dependence' or connectedness that are differently categorised, separated, made visible or invisible – and turned to profit. Finally, *Focaal* moves from political economy to politics *per se* (if there is such a thing) in the issue of 'revolutionary circles'; like the economy, politics is shown to depend on the game of boundaries between the dependent and independent, intimate and technocratic. Caroline Humphrey (2021) reminds us that the success of the planned insurgence in Lenin's revolutionary '*kruzhoks*' was seen as relying less on the personal closeness of the circles' members, and more on the rationalised technologies of security and propaganda – leaflets, conspiracy, for example. Maïté Maskens (2021, *Social Anthropology* 'utopian' issue) echoes these concerns with an interesting reversal: in the politics of Brussels' immigration bureaucrats, 'real love' is what safeguards Belgium's economic stability, while the rational-economic marriage unions are suspected of parasitism and corruption.

Making and breaking the boundaries between modernity and tradition continue to matter in Zomia – the part of Asia that James Scott put on the world's intellectual map in 2009 for its allegedly strong anti-state ethos, and that made the international headlines in 2021 after the military *coup d'état* in Myanmar. Ying Diao (2021) opens to us the world of Myanmar political elites who construct their future as a combination of 'traditional' local beliefs and 'modernising' Christianity. In the agricultural regions of Northern Laos, the future is also being made better by the harmonious combination of the old and the new, or the old and the young (Lutz 2021). The region enjoys 'a still largely intact peasant natural economy, historically endowed intimacy with the modernising state and, not least, a precariously persistent "intergenerational contract" in which youthful mobility and parental stability remain ambiguously yet irreducibly intertwined', while the 'detriments of commodification, enclosure and dispossession' are noticeably absent (2021: 651). This optimistic account makes one think that at least in some parts of the world people are sure of their grasp on the future, albeit it may not be a future envisioned by the ideologues of either neoliberalism or Anthropocene. Hans Steinmüller, for whom 2021 was intensely productive, also addresses how

'old' relations and ideologies get revamped in the socio-economic and political transformation among the highland populations of Southeast Asia. He connects their cosmology and political ontology of 'limitless potency' to their historical mobility and reliance on swidden agriculture. More recently, military state-building, modern transportation, and new crops and agricultural technologies have effectively ended swidden cultivation in Myanmar, but 'limitless potency' flourished in the 'new economy of life, epitomised in the plantation, nourished in excessive feasting, and maintained by the kinship dynamics of capture and care' (2021: 686). Both accounts seem to consent that, speaking metaphorically, the modernised plantations of Zomia's future are sprouting from the swidden, kin-laboured fields of the past.

Another traditional/modern institution re-emerging as a 'bare' and undeservedly forgotten 'necessity' is the nation-state. Lipika Kamra (2021) shows that, despite knowing the violent side of the state, poor women in Maoist zones of Eastern India place their hopes for better lives and livelihoods on the state's developmental promise. In the eyes of many others, strong states have been vindicated as they supplied goods and vaccines, and ensured infrastructural stability following the recent spate of emergencies worldwide. In the (post)socialist spaces, however, the centrality of the state is built into the very fabric of material infrastructures (Kruglova 2019), so it is never too far from the most intimate and bodily concerns (Karaseva 2018). This concern and the vital role of the state in regulating everyday infrastructural lives became obvious to the dwellers of a small Serbian town following a string of thefts of infrastructural copper components and subsequent breakdowns of their heating supply (Jovanović 2021).

While the once unlikely re-emergence of the nation-state gets documented by ethnographers, the ideologies and practices of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalism are increasingly critiqued – not least on moral grounds. *Critique of Anthropology* (Rey et al 2021) focuses on the positionality paradoxes of cosmopolitanism by examining the lives and narratives of expatriate communities. The dwellers of these 'cosmopolitan enclaves' endorse the ideology of limitless expanse, which is often contradicted by their heavily gated living compounds. They may place a high value on warm relations with the 'locals' while also keeping their considerable – in comparison with the locals – social and financial privileges, and feeling guilty about being just a guest (Cosquer 2021). We can also detect the realist spirit of disappointment in these once idealistic visions. The global, an ideology of privilege, had been buttressed by the ideology of emancipation from localised bias and prejudice; but the ethnographies reveal how 'human equality' and other naive realist ideologies allow expatriates to maintain their own cultural bias while dismissing that of their hosts (Botelho 2021). Finally, Chiara Cacciotti (2021) suggests rethinking cosmopolitanism as a phenomenon of 'rootless' Western elites by offering a glimpse into a transformation of an 'immigrant' primary school in Rome into a 'cosmopolitan' enclave.

Infopower and the Power of Calculative Reason

In *Focaal*, world sea transportation emerges as a rational-technocratic quantification and compartmentalisation of the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who are divided and regulated by the standard units of measurement: ships, port capacities, timetables of delivery. Human lives are literally contained within the steel ships that are, in turn, units of circulation within the world trade systems. How the shipping industry manages complexity – and incidentally, organises human lives – through standardised units of measurement reflects anthropology's growing interest in cultures of calculation. In 2021, divination re-emerged as both a traditional anthropological interest and a convincingly contemporary field exploring how knowledge based on calculative reason produces/reflects particular ontologies. In a special issue of *Social Analysis*, William Matthews (2021b) explains how the 'intuitive authority' and 'inherent' persuasiveness of calculative reason in the six lines divination system in contemporary China make claim to the ultimate objectivity 'by relying on a predetermined system of correlates, . . . [that] creates the impression that the diviner is not the source of the divinatory result or its interpretation' (2021a: 1). Stéphanie Homola details the 'eight signs' divination system in Taiwan, which 'relies on classificatory and reductive mathematical procedures – involving congruence and combinatorial calculations – to logically unfold a deterministic and cyclical cosmos' (2021: 62). A contrasting case is found in ancient Greek literature, where prediction procedures assume that gods and spirits can lie, and therefore divination takes on a dialogical and diplomatic rather than calculative character (Almqvist 2021). These insights suggest the possibility of 'large-scale comparative questions concerning the wider socio-political and economic correlates', based on the foundational difference between 'divination based on "agentive ontology", which raises the possibility of deception by gods or spirits, and "calculatory ontology", which understands verdicts as calculations based on fixed principles' (Matthews 2021a: 1).

The official ideology of modernisation in China condemns calculative divination systems as a superstition. Nonetheless, the hold of calculative rationality on public imagination is such that diviners successfully withstand the pressure (Matthews 2021b). Modernisers are also keen to harness the 'self-evident' authority of mathematical realism to calculate – or divine? – social futures, producing new configurations in the historical landscapes of power. The special issue of *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* (*JRAI*) explores how the codes, oracles and operators in data science work to become both the source and the representation of new ways of grouping people into 'crowds', 'likenesses' and 'ontologies of association', among others. These forms are only partially recognised by the qualitative and more traditionally quantitative social sciences (Douglas-Jones et al 2021). A graver concern, however, is that data science increases these new and old groups and populations' vulnerability to influence and surveillance. In *Critique of Anthropology*, E. J. Gonzalez-Polledo and Silvia Posocco (2021) exam-

ine the digitalisation of the genetic materials in the field of forensics, combining the informational and biopolitical frameworks to show how people(s) are (post) archived in autonomous and mysterious ways through datasets and computational architectures that promise 'connectivity, prosperity, and wellbeing', but also 'elude public governance, oversight and citizens' scrutiny' (2021: 3). Utopian sensibilities abound in these efforts to displace traditional bureaucracies with the new bio-informational technologies and, as argued by many in the 'utopian' issue of *Social Anthropology*, they are always-already constituted by affordances, constraints and potential disappointment rather than a neat (or, in the spirit of calculation, net) improvement.

On the other hand, do we always know – or even need to know? Doubts and hesitations may become rare virtues amid the hegemony of the self-assured epistemic certainty of data science and other forms of calculative reason. In Matei Candea's (2021) discussion of the contradictions and (im)possibility of liberalism, some optimism springs from his observation that we still don't know much about liberalism *per se*. Instead, anthropologists prefer to study the political forms, entities and subjectivities that either supersede liberalism (such as neo-liberalism) or get excluded in the process of liberal politics. Otherwise, anthropologists have known for a while that people may have reasons to be wary of omniscience. Mélanie Gourarier (2021) doubts that truth-making and the 'need to know' are some irresistible, deep human drives and shows how not-knowing can actually be a value in the financial, emotional, symbolic and political economies of a paternity test in a New York DNA testing centre. Patrick McKearney reports that some workers of a British caretaking company hold opacity of mind beliefs about people with intellectual disabilities, which 'creates a more involved relationship that opens up the possibility of forms of status and intimacy otherwise closed to such people – thereby raising questions about the supposedly fundamental role that transparency and knowledge play in knowing others' (2021: 1). Scientists, in particular, have high stakes in, and strained relationship with, certainty and transparency. Sung-Joon Park (2021) observes how, in Northern Uganda, epidemiology scientists repeatedly insist that the sources of the 2000/01 Ebola epidemic in the country remain unknown. Finally, the question of the world's – and others' – opacity is connected to the theme of mistrust, which has been getting special attention lately. Anthropologists contextualise mistrust by connecting it to materiality, for instance, showing how mistrust in the Caucasus is born specifically from the perception of incompatibility or contradiction between the surface and the interiority of objects (Mühlfried 2021). And in Mozambique, violence and the social circulation of rumours make the very notion of trust elusive (Santos 2021).

The drive to epistemic certainty is further challenged by the exploration of – realist, but not necessarily pessimist – themes of unknowing, forgetting and silences. The political ecologies of Ebola in Uganda are affected by the fact that Ugandan epidemiologists, while refusing to ascertain the sources of the epi-

demic, also display some 'forms of silent knowing' about it (Park 2021). Meanwhile, *History and Anthropology* curators collected a whole issue on 'silences' (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021) as a particular heuristic to explore the ambiguity of human relationships with certainty, truth and communication. 'Silence' may signal or be a form of oppression and exclusion – the past haunting the present (Dragojlovic 2021) – but also a form of empathy, or a strategic defence against anxiety and painful thoughts (Samuels 2021). Silences, often indicating traumas and loss, are also a necessary part of any rhythmical pattern (and thus, ritual), presenting a primary way to overcome trauma (Weller 2021). Silences are traced through the histories of their emergence, and their embeddedness in the material and ontological realities (Dragojlovic and Samuels 2021). The theme of silences also appears in *Focaal*'s issue on revolutionary circles, where Al-Khalili (2021) challenges the seemingly inherent secrecy and seclusion of a 'circular' form. Finally, the connection between secrecy, history, materiality and infrastructure is explored in *JRAI* by Alexander Taylor (2021), who describes how, in the economies of data science, the secrecy and security of data often depend on the preservation of the old military bunkers where the data servers are physically stored. This story brings us back to the ironies of infrastructural realism. Just like the modern technologies of shipping depend on the traditional technologies of kinship, the new immaterial and globalised structures of infopower that promise to make humanity ultimately interconnected depend on the old, material and very localised infrastructures historically used to prepare for war.

On Power and Method

The ways in which new forms of infopower both inherit and disinherit historical forms of (in)equality, (in)visibility and exclusion question our methodologies of critique. On the one hand, *JRAI* editors point out that big data are a recognisable form of truth-making, and so 'personhood, relations, society, nature, the state, and value are all valuable tools with which to theorise the emergent phenomenon of "data" as we have described it' (Douglas-Jones et al 2021: 16). Gonzalez-Polledo and Posocco's (2021) study of digital genetic archives in England and Wales is not unlike Sarah Punathil's (2021) study of old-style bureaucratic archives in India. Punathil parses the process to expose 'the judicial and nonjudicial discourses and bureaucratic manoeuvring involved in the creation of an archival report, thereby unravelling the power relations, mediating processes, manipulations and bureaucratic performances that make commission reports problematic even today' (2021: 312). From this, we can see that deconstructing data science may be similar to deconstructing any archiving power.

Anthropologists, however, do not hurry to merely deconstruct the new forms of infopower and charm of calculative reason. Geoffrey Hughes and Anna-Maria Walter (2021) display some methodological techno-optimism on the pages of

Social Analysis, pointing out that the distributed character of some new forms of infopower partially resolves the problem of ethnographic authority by preventing anthropologists from usurping the narrative, and by inviting ethnographic interlocutors to be the auteurs in their own right. The editors of the special issue of *JRAI* on data science acknowledge that anthropology of data can challenge anthropological theory by 'open[ing] up new conceptual approaches for thinking with and about social worlds, as they are used, made, and done through data' (Douglas-Jones et al 2021: 20). In general, the rising influence of big data and STEM-based truth-making raises a question of how, and to what extent, anthropologists can incorporate quantification. Some likely routes include a more systemic approach to cultural and social processes. In the special issue of *Ethnos* on divination, David Zeitlyn (2021) suggests looking at an 'epidemiology' of beliefs and ontologies that 'gather around' divination. The 'epidemiology' implies contagion, spreading and scaling that may be more amenable to calculative logic. *History and Anthropology* presents a route to quantification by focusing on the moment of 'escalation' (special issue, Højer 2021) when quantitative acceleration leads to a simultaneous and interconnected qualitative shift in both structure and scale. This vision of history does not exclude contingency; instead, it invites focusing primarily on the number of similar events leading – escalating – to a moment of change, and the subsequent emergence of new structures, hegemonies, 'circles', pyramids, hierarchies, orders and regimes.

Another major critique of theory is mounted by *Critique of Anthropology* (Archer and Souleles 2021). The authors in this special issue argue that the noticeable 'baring' of power in our day and age calls for a reconsideration of anthropological approaches to power. Post-Foucault, the nature of power may remain obscure (if it is 'natural' at all – see Ssorin-Chaikov's (2012) discussion of anthropology's uneasy manoeuvring on the issue), but we need to acknowledge that the powerful politicians, celebrities, corporate moguls and science experts are now both more visible and less shy of their hold on power. The radicalisation of politics and the number of military *coups d'état* in 2021 made very real the power of the military, on which *Ethnos* also presents a collection (Mohr et al 2021). If power is no longer a primarily structural or amorphous 'aspect' or 'field', but rather a concrete, relational force mediated by milieu, then anthropologists need equally concrete ways of thinking about the mechanics of power production. This echoes Alpa Shah's (2021) suggestion to combine dialectics and the theory of praxis to elucidate how victory is claimed in conflict – in her case, how the 'imagination' of Hindu right-wingers prevails over other, competing 'imaginations'. This more concrete – one could say, more realist – understanding of the social process is not averse to the mechanical concreteness of social momentum described in the 'escalation' issue of *Ethnos* (2021), and the 'epidemiology' approach to beliefs described by Zeitlyn (2021) in the 'divination' issue of *Social Analysis*.

The predominant ways of theorising in 2021, however, remain uncontroversial. For instance, the confined spaces of container economies, the gated commu-

nities of expatriates, the ties of familial obligations, the revolutionary circles and the 'historical loops' experienced as 'traps, burdens or heritages' by the defenders of St Petersburg secular spaces in Russia (Kormina 2021: 574) could all be the inspiration behind the conceptual creativity – and moral realism – of Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2021). To the readers of *Social Analysis*, he offers the heuristic of 'entrapment' that points to the spatial connotations of enclosures but also to the relations of obligation, debt and dependence, as well as 'the haunting presences of predation and the uncanny that remain immanent to social process' (2021: 110). The epistemic affordances of entrapment, argues Jiménez, would enhance, and sometimes fruitfully replace, the imaginaries/metaphors/methods of relations, entanglements and assemblages. In *Social Anthropology*, Olga Povoroznyuk (2021) relies on the heuristic of 'ambiguous entanglements' to contrast the official and the public knowledge with the hidden and underrepresented memories and perspectives of the indigenous Evenki population about the big historical infrastructural project of the Baikal-Amur Mainline in Siberia. Zhen Ma (2021), in *Social Analysis*, uses interpretations of the Weberian kind to show the transfer of rationalities between business and religion. The newly found taste for risky, high-profit schemes and transactions among the local tea traders in Yunnan unexpectedly finds support and moral justification in some new religious and ritualistic indictments of the local variation of Theravada Buddhism. In *Critique of Anthropology*, Andrew Ong and Hans Steinmüller (2021) also point to the unexpected transitions of rationalities when they locate mercy and charity among the military. They object to the tendency to find utilitarian, control and self-legitimation motives behind 'any charitable, philanthropic, or welfare-state activities in the de facto states of insurgent armies', and argue that in the military Wa State of Myanmar, ethnographic attention is needed to the 'emerging social relations and subject positions – "our people", "the vulnerable", and "the poor"' (Ong and Steinmüller 2021: 65). Framing these relations and positions in the logic of care rather than that of governance presents a picture of a military state where 'public donations, development assistance, and independent philanthropy . . . each follow a different moral logic, respond to different needs, and connect different actors and recipients' (2021: 65).

The generally popular critique of technocracy corresponds with Tim Ingold's (2021) call for the 'praise of amateurs' in *Ethnos*. He argues that the capture of professionalism by corporate and managerial interests has been particularly devastating for anthropology, where 'wandering along with that which captures attention' (2021: 153) is the best, if not the only, way of bringing anything valuable to the table of social sciences. He is angered by the fact that passion and open-minded enthusiastic commitment to both general knowledge and the 'day-to-day knowing' are 'compromised by its professional rebranding as ethnography' (2021: 153). By the latter, Ingold means the increasingly narrowed specialisations and straight-jacket methodologies designed mostly to produce publishable results within given deadlines. Anyone who has been pressured by students in

an ethnographic methods class to 'show a life hack' or 'a shortcut' that many of them today identify as proof of professionalism would agree. And while Ingold insists that passionate amateurs make better anthropologists, another special issue of *Ethnos* (Mohr et al 2021) brings back the discussion on whether empathy is the best, if not the only, way to produce empirical groundedness in the anthropological endeavour. The issue curators offer a concept of 'ethnography of things military', and compare two ways of knowing, empathy and critique, in the study of militarisation, military power and the soldiering way of life – all of which account for a good share of the growing presence of the 'bare' and 'concrete' forms of power in the world. The consensus is that good anthropology is empathy regardless of how hard it may be for its practitioners to empathise with certain people, their moralities and worldviews. Empathy, however, is not synonymous with sympathy and neither does it exclude critique. In fact, a grounded critique of 'things military' is impossible without embodied and empathetic immersion in those things. This position corresponds with the moral position of optimistic realism, and also harks back to the morality of British pacifists who saved lives while also realising their complicity in war and other 'things military', as described by Tobias Kelly (2021), and with the approach of Joel Robbins (2012) to difference and comparison. Humanitarian dilemmas, if they are to be either explored or resolved, 'need to be put back into the diverse visions of the human' (Kelly 2021: 35), and those visions are only 'real' if the reality of these humans is empathetically acknowledged.

The question arises whether professional empathy in relation to others is in any way more ethical than other much-critiqued positionalities, for instance, participant observation. It remains obscure how empathy combines with knowledge in cases where assuming opacity of mind on the part of our interlocutors may be both more ethical and more socially productive (McKearney 2021, see above). Finally, we should also realistically consider how all these conflicting calls on anthropologists' lives and subjectivities are taking a toll on our morale. Lara McKenzie (2021) explores the variety of emotions and positions in the proliferating 'quit lit', or public declarations of departure from academia. The fact is, Tim Ingold's call to become amateur anthropologists is an increasing prospect for many, albeit in a far more sinister way than he intended. These quitting moments – the moments of escalation – testify to the enormously uneven distribution of power and precarity in academia, as well as the unevenness of our capacity to resist.

Conclusion

In 2021, anthropology continues the search for our own moral – and by extent, epistemological – way to reconcile the sobering realist critique, the empirically grounded and empathetic search for the ontological, and the active approach towards future-making. Realism may look like the part of the equation best

suited to be ditched. I argue that we cannot abjure realism. Apart from concomitant abjuring of certain forms of critique, this also means detaching ourselves from certain forms of fidelity to reality. Moral realism, especially in its optimistic forms, accounts for both 'probability' and 'possibility', experience-near and experience-distant, power and ethics in our lives. If anthropology is to sustain its spirit of comprehensiveness, it has to include a possibility of morally realist positions inside and outside its theorising.

Otherwise, theorising in anthropology remains rather as usual. Some conceptual creativity is always suggested, but underneath it lurks a more limited number of contested dualisms. It is still structure and agency, power and meaning, grammars and imaginaries, instrumentalism and intimacy, revealed and concealed, lives and words, tradition and modernity, boundaries drawn and crossed, for example. On the one hand, these bespeak a genuinely rich and distinctive tradition that also points to the general at the heart of anthropology. On the other hand, in the last 30 years, these well-established lines of anthropological enquiry were doubted for being too general to capture the 'complexity' of the world today. Now, we can begin asking, are many of them also too abstract to respond to what appears to be the increasing 'concreteness' of the world – the baring of power, the baring of our reliance on infrastructure, the rise of the epistemic and moral (self)righteousness in the world? Or, on the contrary, not abstract enough – not mathematical enough – to fit in with the increasingly digitalised world? And will introducing the technical, the biological and the quantifiable into our approaches be of any help?

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Acknowledgments

HSE University's Basic Research Programme funds allowed precious time for the pure joy of reading and surveying some of the last year anthropology's crop.

Note

1. Wikipedia '2021', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021 (accessed September 2022).

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La réalité, le réalisme et l'avenir: L'année 2021 dans les revues d'anthropologie sociale européenne

Résumé : En 2021 l'éthos mondial est devenu de plus en plus orienté vers le réalisme avec le souci d'identifier des contraints, nécessités et aspects pratiques. La défensive, la préservation et la stabilité ont été privilégiées. La création et l'exploration ont été mises à l'écart. La montée du réalisme à travers le monde a marqué la vie publique ainsi que les relations privées. Il est clair que cela représente un défi pour beaucoup d'anthropologues dans la mesure où cela bouscule les traditions. Le réalisme nécessite une prise de position quant à la nature de la discipline anthropologique. Il faut s'interroger sur sa capacité d'incorporer le sens moral dans le processus de recherches empiriques et les fondements épistémologiques. Cet article examine des recherches évaluées par les pairs dont les résultats ont été publiés dans les principales revues scientifiques en langue anglaise de l'année 2021. Il vise à exprimer le bienfondé

d'un réalisme optimiste à la croisée de deux priorités majeures pour des anthropologues d'aujourd'hui : l'ontologie et les études prospectives.