

1. The Politics of (Post-)Truth: Knowledge-Making in Fragmented Worlds of Mis/Trust (Workshop)

Heike Drotbohm, Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

Olaf Zenker, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg

AG "Political and Legal Anthropology"

A spectre is haunting modernity at large – the spectre of “post-truth” and “alternative facts”. Knowledge formations have always been politically challenged and enriched by dissenting voices pointing towards unfitting facts and divergent interpretations, occasionally leading to paradigmatic revolutions. In recent decades, modern science as the sole provider of certain knowledge has also been profoundly offended from within by post-positivist and post-modern provocations, assembling projects within philosophy, cultural studies, feminism, science and technology studies (STS) and anthropology. What makes our contemporary moment different is, arguably, that such forms of profound scepticisms have now entered the political mainstream of many societies. As many observers have noted, the material and infrastructural standards of evidence-making and expertise-building seem to have profoundly changed within many sectors of society. In this process, the very possibility of knowledge as sufficiently reliable and integrative despite all contestations has been severely challenged. Against this backdrop, this workshop invites contributors to empirically engage and theoretically reflect upon the politics of (post-)truth regarding three interrelated questions: first, which political processes do underpin the making, and safe-guarding, of concrete knowledge formations under conditions of increasingly fragmented and mutually mistrusting epistemic communities? Second, which political modalities are enabled, and undermined, by such epistemic mis/trust? And, third, what political role(s) can anthropological knowledge-making play under such conditions? We welcome contributions especially from epistemic communities in which the mutual constituency between knowledge and (mis)trust is most prevalent, such as law and justice, science, public services as well as the governance of health, migration or aid.

Keynote by Dr. Rosana Pinheiro-Machado, University College Dublin

Anthropology and the ambivalence of epistemic comfort: the politics of misinformation in authoritarian Brazil

When dealing with post-truth and ‘alternative facts’, the public sphere tends to prioritise the understanding of top-down perspectives to account for the phenomena, highlighting the [transnational] politics of funding and constituencies’

political manipulation. Anthropological scholarship, in turn, has focused on translation, reception, transformation, and meanings attributed to 'fake news' within particular cosmological systems. Alternative facts provide individual and community reassurance, reaffirming and exacerbating beliefs, belonging, and prejudice in a process I call the ambivalence of epistemic comfort. In my talk, I will analyse contemporary case studies on the spread of fake news in Brazil. By looking at disparate layers of power – from social media infrastructure to influencers to ordinary people – I focus on symbolic and concrete consequences of anti-vax and anti-rights fake news on indigenous people and low-income people. I will explore key ethnographers' dilemmas in the field to discuss the anthropological responsibility of, on the one hand, unveiling the local reasoning behind fake news and, on the other hand, denouncing harmful consequences that might deconstruct such regimes of truth. Finally, I discuss the need of new modes local and public authorities in acting as mediators between manipulated information and its everyday consequences on powerless people.

Plausible Security

Thomas G. Kirsch, University of Konstanz

There is hardly any other sphere of secular social life, where the production of knowledge is as difficult and contested as in the field of security. The truth value of statements about security (about what it is and how it can be attained) is not only limited by the fact that those who are allegedly threatening it are usually assumed to do so in secret; truth about this complex issue is also limited because security lends itself to being instrumentalised for political purposes or economic gains. Taking South Africa as the ethnographic example, the paper examines how people's efforts in gaining knowledge about ways to protect themselves from crime are undermined by mistrust against those who claim to dispose of such knowledge: state agencies are believed to play down what is happening on the ground because they would face a legitimacy crisis should the actual rates and dangers of crime become known; private security are assumed to exaggerate the crime situation in order for them to make a profit from people's fearful attempts to protect themselves. I argue that that the hitherto undertheorized concept of 'plausibility' can help us understand the knowledge practices arising from this (and similar) fraught constellation(s).

Bad Facts, Good Facts: Knowledge, Power, and the Winnerless Truth Olympics

Yusuf Serunkuma, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg

How does one read the classics of Ibn Khaldun (*The Muqaddimah*), Hayden White (*Metahistory*), Edward Said (*Orientalism*), Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*) or Noam Chomsky (*Manufacturing Consent*) in the so-called present of Trumpism or post-truths? Across disciplines, and geographies, how does one think about processes of historical narrativity, emplotment, ethnography and media on the one hand, and power (and a neoliberal world order) on the other? Against these questions, I argue that since knowledge is inherently produced in a temporal space of contact and competition, involving processes of centering and decentering, what is often centered as 'sufficiently reliable and integrative [knowledge] despite all contestations' has tended to be the positions of power arising from almost hegemonic control over the medias of publication and dissemination. What we are witnessing in our present, especially with the rise of popular culture (including specifically the Internet), is a democratic, fierce, almost anarchic contest of centering and decentering but without a clear winner.

Mistrust, Ignorance, and Imagination – Contested Knowledge Production in the Argentine Justice System

Ingo Rohrer, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

In times of alternative facts and post-truth, the justice system with its claim to rationality, verifiable methods, and stringent processes positions itself as an institution in which positive truths and incontrovertible bodies of knowledge are still produced. In my paper I draw on ethnographic fieldwork in the criminal justice system in Argentina to show that despite such claims the justice system itself can be understood as characterized by profound skepticism and mistrust. Mistrust is not only directed against defendants and witnesses whose testimonies are doubted, but also against legal professionals who are suspected of using dishonest means in the legal competition. Whenever fields of non-knowledge emerge in the proceedings which cannot be overcome by rational means, the legal professional suspect lies, collusion, and manipulation. They react with imaginative thinking and ad-hoc conclusions to these fields of non-knowledge and establish veritable social imaginaries in which implicit criticism of the power relations within the justice system is expressed. The interplay of mistrust, ignorance, and imagination in the justice system thus produces a realpolitik of constant doubt with far reaching consequences for the functioning of the justice system. I will discuss in my paper whether this realpolitik has to be framed only in negative terms.

Studying pseudolaw communities as an anthropologist

Anna Löbbert, University of Oxford

In the last decades, countries across the globe have seen the rise of so-called sovereigntist movements. Using the German “Reichsbürger” movement as a case study, I undertook one year of fieldwork to investigate far-right groups that view the state as factually non-existent based on an understanding of law that is entirely different from mainstream legal discourse. I analysed how people enter these groups and what makes law an attractive medium for conspiracy theorizing. As Zenker (2021) notes, “the postliberalisms of right populism and anthropology seemingly coalesce and are increasingly difficult to distinguish.” Sovereigntists challenge the state in pursuit of an agenda that most anthropologists intuitively understand as harmful. However, it is difficult to analyse what it is that makes that challenge problematic, when the anthropological literature largely concentrates on more plausible postliberal critiques. I use this drastic example to reflect on the values that guide anthropological knowledge making and based on which researchers may choose to extend or withhold solidarity from research participants. Lastly, I consider cases where the question of whether sovereigntists engage in forms of “postliberalism” that are (un)worthy of support is less clear cut. These include Black sovereigntist communities in the US and indigenous sovereigntist communities in Australia.

On the politics and poetics of scientific models

Judith Bovensiepen, University of Kent

Mathijs Pelkmans, London School of Economics and Political Science

Scientific models have become a ubiquitous feature in so many aspects of our lives. As new data science gains influence, they inform policy and public opinion. Financial brokers are guided in their decisions by algorithms that calculate stock price trajectories in real time; governments were guided in their lockdown decisions by projections of COVID cases; international agreements to tackle climate change rely on complex calculations of a 2^o world. At the heart of scientific models are complex algorithms that calculate scenarios with different levels of certainty. Presumably this is also what contributes to their authority, but as Weaver (2018) observed - the ‘algorithmic fabric has a human weft’. Trust and mistrust towards scientific models affect their efficacy in public policy. Can we thus say that scientific models are performative (cf. Callon 1998)? This paper will address this question discussing the political life of scientific models predicting the economic viability of oil and gas in Timor-Leste. Comparing contemporary and

historical examples from the Portuguese colonial period, it explores the complex entanglements of scientific models in national and international politics, therefore illustrating how these models perform, shape and format the futures they are supposed to predict.

The Truth of Politics. On the Epistemicization of the Protests against the German Corona Policy

Ehler Voss, Universität Bremen

The diagnosis of an epistemicization of the political, according to which political questions in Western democracies would increasingly be negotiated as questions of knowledge, is confirmed also in the debate about the state imposed measures to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2. This tendency would suggest the possibility of objective decision-making through science and a lack of alternatives in political actions that obscured the values behind the decisions. Accordingly, proponents and opponents of the measures accuse each other of being guided by false knowledge, i.e., of being unscientific and thus incapable of participating in a reasonable discourse, which leads, on the one hand, to excluding the other side from discourse and, on the other hand, to accusing the other side of strategically hiding their own political goals behind factual discussions and thus impeding or even obstructing democratic decision-making. Based on anthropological fieldwork among critics and supporters of the measures in Germany, this presentation attempts to reconstruct the epistemic and political practices as well as the mutual misrepresentations in this controversy, thereby suggesting at the same time a mediating role that anthropology can play in these and similar controversies.

To winnow truth from falsehood: fraudulent asylum claims or illegal expulsions at the border? -The case of the Migrant Protection Protocols

Sara Bellezza, Freie Universität Berlin

The Trump administration implemented several immigration policies during its term of office that were based on and created "alternative facts" about migration. In the context of this post-truth political environment, I draw on ethnographic engagement with one of those policies, the so-called Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). Declaring that persons seeking protection in the U.S. were doing so "wrongfully" by issuing "fraudulent asylum claims," the policy expelled and forced asylum-seekers to stay in Mexico throughout their asylum procedure. Several lawsuits challenged the policy over a period of three years. Through an ethnographic analysis of the legal activism before and during selected court cases

around MPP, I examine the different types of evidence that are used in the court procedures to create “truth,” or to adhere to truths around the application of immigration law. Distinct epistemic communities, ranging from state representatives to legal professionals and subaltern communities of people on the move, negotiate in this legal arena two significant knowledge formations around migration: clustering facts and legal reasoning to support the right to mobility or conversely the nation-state’s right to control entry to its territory. Building upon legal anthropology, I attend to the internal logics of the law and it’s appropriation from below