Afterword: The *Sites* of Universalities: Ethnographic Engagements with/of Sciences

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Contextualizing Universalities

How do we do an ethnography of universalities? Is it possible to reconcile local specificities with universalities through/in ethnography? That is the question the authors in this special issue ask and engage with. If ethnography is about specificities and specific locations, about contexts, how can we imagine an ethnography of 'universals'? The question sounds simplistic at the first glance, but it becomes more complex as we address it in relation to the articles in this special issue. The topic is of importance since it reinforces the tension between universal truth claims and relative interpretations of the world through scientific reasoning. It has been exacerbated by media technologies. Political authorities who either have both feet firmly on the ground of scientific majority's opinion or question it for their own benefit face resistance from globally networked communities. The old debate between mostly Marxist-positioned empiricism and postmodern relativism is taking a new turn in these digital times.

It is clear from the ethnographic accounts in this special issue that universality works differently in different locations. As the introduction demonstrates, the narrative of a seamless and coherent reading of universality as a whole has its limitations. This special issue allows a useful reading of universality beyond dogma. The articles lay emphasis on the importance of universality as an aspirational greater horizon, following Paulin Houtondji (2017). By combining the works of Veena Das (2007), Anand Pandian (2008) and Marilyn Strathern (1992) in the introduction, the authors design an epistemic that aims to accumulate the fractals and fragments of particular positions through their ethnographic engagements. In that way, following Dörte Bemme (2019), the authors wish to contribute to an aggregated vision of a world that is allowed to be incomplete but that strives for universalism.

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Claudia Lang and Sonali Sathaye's article investigates the alleged universality of psychology through ethnography. They show that psychological universality works in its context by looking at the experiments and questioning the 'boxed universality' embedded in the development of psychotherapy chatbots in Bangalore, India, and the Wysa algorithm. Julia Vorhölter pushes these insights in her article on Ugandan psychotherapy, focusing on a science that considers research and therapy as two different sides of a discipline that meanders between social and natural scientific epistemics on the one hand and the culturally embedded application of treatment on the other. The quest for a Ugandan framework of psychotherapy that is in harmony with a universalist concept but acknowledges local specificities shows how universality falls into pieces when it gets down to the local. Julia Vorhölter discusses this phenomenon especially against the background of the decolonization of knowledge and the establishment of North American concepts of mental health. In Hanna Nieber's article on Astrophysics in Africa, readers observe the interlocutors from the field engaging with the possibility of universality as a welcoming tool to deal with global inequalities of knowledge production. Her piece invites us to think about the political possibilities of universality for astrophysicists organized in the "Forum on Astronomy in Africa" in order to become involved in the 'range of perception or experience' that is created by horizoning 'geometries of global connectivities'.

Desiree Kumpf shows how camera traps serve science through interconnectedness and thus create a notion of universality on the level of media technology. Conservation science aims to create reliable data in local environments, but the camera traps are media technologies at best, trapping wolves and ghosts alike and thus destabilizing universalist claims. Kumpf demonstrates how sensing technologies and concepts of interconnectedness are introduced as narratives to counteract the ongoing destabilization of universalist claims through illusion-prone technologies such as digital data and digital camera traps. Becka Hynek studies Covid sceptics in the Czech Republic through the lenses of alternative knowledge and embodied skepticism. Their personal experience of Covid does not correspond to the claims made by scientific authorities. Dissatisfaction with politics and a global pandemic coincides with culturally embedded concepts of rationalism that generally understand science as a mode of skeptical reasoning. Any claim to scientific universality erodes even faster in a simulation-based world with a diversified social media space. Understanding themselves as the true rationally spirited, Czech Covid skeptics fall prey to the depth of illusions caused by computer-simulated knowledge production and align their insights with alternative theories to those of the political class.

Hanna Werner comes across similar frictions of authority and scientific claims by investigating environmentalism in contemporary India. While science was always one of the cornerstones of modern India, in a Hindu nationalist framework, scientific claims feed hegemonic power structures and disparage local practices that might present alternative knowledge with reference to universalist claims that are tightly connected to a Hindu vision of India. Werner argues that science and environmentalism

need to be reconciled in contemporary India: a grammar is needed to bring together ecological, political, and social demands. Samiksha Bhan's contribution looks at the case of biology, specifically trying to understand how the detailed gathering of genomic databases in India is decentralizing nationalist interpretations of genomics and fostering fragmentations of population, even questioning *universalist* genomics. Research undertaken in India is fostering, in her opinion, an anticipatory universality, universality as a promise to be realized in some kind of future, but that cannot be found or attained in the heap of fragmentary data.

In short, the authors of this special issue are dealing with very different actors and actants in their ethnographies, evoking various concepts of universality and notions of science. But all their research shows that context matters: local specifics are usually brought into harmony with universal claims of science. Furthermore, and unfortunately still not well enough understood, their work points to the impact of how media technologies, from interconnections to simulations, shape the concept of universalism and its fragmentations.

The *Sites* of Universalities in/of Sciences

As a whole, this special issue offers insights into the multidimensionality of what science and scientific practice mean today. Since the figurations of science that each article displays are so various, one might ask what science and scientific practice mean in our times. Is there still a coherent concept of science, such as that suggested by Laura Nader (1996) as a three-cornered constellation? Nader writes:

> Science may refer to a body of knowledge distinguishable from other knowledge by specific methods of validation. It may define a self-conscious attitude toward knowledge and knowing that embodies curiosity with empiricism. In Western society, science also connotes an institutional setting, a set of concerns ruled by the notion of ordered rationality, a group of people united by a common competence. Science is systematized knowledge, a mode of inquiry, a habit of thought that is privileged and idealized. Much about science is taken for granted – its bounded and autonomous nature, its homogeneity, its Westernism, its messianic spirit. (Nader 1996:1)

This special issue goes beyond Nader's definition. The authors find the self-fashioned claim of science as universality to have fallen into pieces. They also give voice to various actors, from scientists to programmers and psychotherapists to environmental activists and Covid skeptics, who strive for universality while exposing the fragile nature of scientific knowledge when it leaves the realms of mathematical descriptions and algorithmic tools to enter the chaotic and cosmogenic realities of what is the subject of ethnographic fields.

Feminist STS scholars like Banu Subramaniam have demonstrated that even the most 'universal' of theories, such as the Darwinian theory of evolution, have been based on pre-established assumptions that produced particular stereotypes about gender and race (Subramaniam 2014). Historians of science have discussed in detail the particular ways in which universal theories like evolution have been received differently in different *places* and *sites*, showing that there is no 'universal' reception or reading of these 'universal' sciences and theories (Livingstone 2014). However, this special issue goes one step further. The authors question science beyond "objectivity" (Daston and Galison 2010) by shaking the epistemic ground through situating knowledge as bound to the concept of universality. They follow a strain of reasoning established by anthropologists such as Jane Bennett, who in her seminal work on 'vibrant matter' shows that even at the atomic level of physics, universalisms fall apart (Bennett 2009). New materialist insights on the constant exchange and diffraction of agents, which are not pre-established entities but emerge out of dynamisms framed through the concept of intra-action (Barad 2007), also support the results gathered in this special issue from a philosophical perspective.

Bringing the articles into dialogue, it becomes clear that each contribution can be understood as a symptom of a wider paradigm shift in humanities and the social sciences that acts against both monistic and dualist principles when it comes to understanding 'what is going on'. This is even more the case, since the authors are deeply committed to the decolonial and critical impetus of re-thinking anthropology today.[1] In this way, they are sensibly dragging the rococo debates around science and objectivity out of the dowdy battlefields of the 1990's 'science wars'.

If there isn't a universal way of receiving a theory, what is *universal* about these sciences? The special issue looks for the possibilities of thinking about universalities beyond a binary reading. Following the tradition of STS, but not merely looking at scientific laboratories, the articles in the special issue talk about the lives of universality beyond 'universality in science as a given' (Latour 1983:167). The contributors in the special issue show how 'universal' identities offer the possibilities to think about questions around equality, freedom, belonging, dignity, and care. They attempt to reach their goal by introducing new perspectives on the ethnography of universalisms and universalities. The collection of studies in this special issue illuminate the problems emerging out of anthropology and ethnography as method and mode of writing by analyzing relational personhood, distributed agency, and the interdependence of subjects and objects. They therefore contribute to the critique of western epistemology by questioning holistic and reductionist approaches. These ethnographic investigations reach the central question: can there be a conjugation of universalities within the sciences?

In addition, readers of this special issue will find new perspectives on the established conceptual terms of the discipline, such as parts, whole(s) and relational conceptions.

1 For a recent discussion on decolonizing anthropology, see Gupta and Stoolman (2022), Baviskar (2023).

Not only universality, but especially the term 'fragment' is put into a new *perspective* on the science in/of/as world, and on what has been erased since the origins of science: its imperial and colonial contexts. How do we rethink the problems created by *universitas* in times where universality falls into pieces from its media apriori (Dippel and Warnke 2022) to its everyday practices (Thomas 2021)?. That is the current task of anthropology as a discipline. This special issue carefully addresses these concerns.

Towards Ethnographies of Universalities

The epistemic problems of how to re-think humans' attempts to universalize and fragment and of how to describe different ways of aggregating universality can be considered a core epistemic challenge of anthropology when engaging with the articles in this special issue. In that way, the authors are taking a thread of discussion that is fundamental to the discipline. In the American tradition, the work of Franz Boas or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis had already introduced universalist concepts and, based on initially German anthropological traditions, developed an anthropology of the diversity of human experiences through culture and language while acknowledging a universal concept of humanity based on biological and linguistic commons.[2] The approaches of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead to a cybernetic vision of how societies function can be read as a figuration of universality and fragments and as a mode of aggregation that allows us to understand the horizons and limitations of universalist conceptions.

In the French tradition too, Emile Durkheim's work on community and religion can be read as attempts to overcome these tensions. The discipline, together with its subjects, is double-bound from its beginnings, because humans and their way of being cannot be framed in law-based concepts such as physics or chemistry. The Indian social anthropologist Kamala Ganesh argues that anthropology's aims for universality arise from different faculties of the 'university' (an institution that claims by its name to have a holistic authority when it comes to knowledge about the world) that is itself aggregated by fragments of *humanitas* and the sciences (Ganesh 2022).[3] From philosophy to biology, from philology to physics, anthropology has to draw on all disciplines and deal with everything in this cosmos in relation to humans, but much more than ever human. Once anthropologists enter empirical fields, they start to observe fragmentations, partly because of the subject-centeredness of the ethnographic method. By understanding singularities through ethnography, the concept of universality in anthropology is liable to be plural.

2 For a history of German anthropological traditions, see Barth, Gingrich, Parkin, and Silverman (2005).

3 For a discussion on how anthropology as a discipline straddles the world of sciences and humanities, see Ganesh (2022). Also see Marks (2009).

It is at this point that our initial question begins to be answered by the special issue's ensemble of contributions: by combining ethnographic material with the concepts of Dörte Bemme (human aggregates beyond the dichotomy between universality and particularity), Paulin Hountondji (universality as the value of a horizon) Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò (locality as potential) and Veena Das (assembled fragments of observation as illustrations of the *impossibility* of imagined wholes), this special issue allows us to push new epistemic currents into one of the core debates of anthropology as a discipline assembled from the fragments of an imagined whole. And it does so by circumventing elegantly monist and dualist positions, as it gets by without the creation of a seamless horizon (Pandian 2008, Strathern 1992).

The 149th volume of the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie/Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology* in its 125th year of existence therefore contributes to a new, broken horizon, one that provides insights into the world during a paradigm shift that the humanities and social sciences are witnessing, not always modestly. Hence, this special issue reaches far by shifting perspectives on the multitudes of universality and aggregations of knowledge in science. Even the anthropological reader who does not engage with science as a research topic can become enraptured by the content. It might help readers to re-think the deployments of universality, singularity, particularity, perspective and fragments in their own fields. By engaging with the theme of 'universality in the sciences', therefore, this special issue is also an exercise in engaging with 'universality in anthropology'. The articles in this special issue will attract specialist readers in anthropology and STS, as well as draw novices in the discipline to think about methods in anthropology.

The contributors in this special issue carefully engage with existing scholarship to offer new directions in which to think and imagine the complexities and fragmentations of 'universalities' in and of science. More importantly, these articles should be seen as an invitation to do more ethnographic work on the everyday lives of universality in science. Philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers's book *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* (2018) invites us to imagine science differently and explores the possibility of a slow and democratic science. Taking Stengers's call as a metaphor, and following the rich literature that this special issue has produced, we suggest that '*another universality is possible*', one on which the idea of universality can be seen as conjuncture of conjugations connecting parts and wholes. Here universality becomes a tool to deal with global inequality in knowledge production, and to think about freedom, hope and care, universality as a multitude of singularities, as a series of complexities that provide a sense of belongingness in many worlds. In this regard, the articles in this carefully curated special issue represent not only a welcome addition, but a much-needed intervention in thinking about universalities in sciences through a variety of ethnographic experiences and engagements.

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