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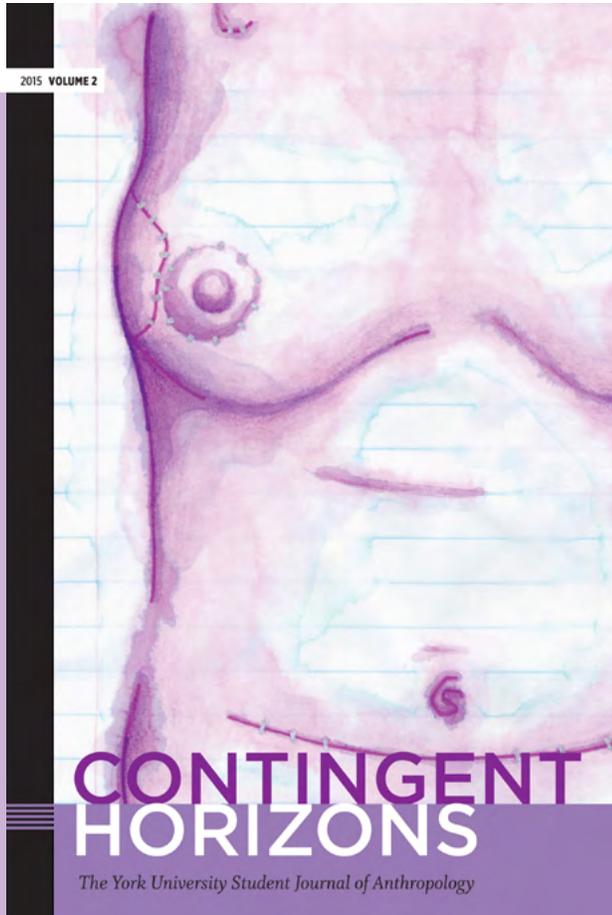
Book Reviews

On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece by Heath Cabot

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The Ecology of Others by Philippe Descola

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Cabot, Heath. *On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2014. 257 pages.

reviewed by Julien Cossette MASTERS STUDENT, YORK UNIVERSITY

This review begins where Heath Cabot's *On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece*, ends: among hunger striking migrants in Athens' Syntagma Square. For approximately three weeks at the end of 2014, a few hundred Syrians occupied the square across from the national parliament, appealing to a sense of shared humanity in their demands for rights and acceptable life conditions. This protest was marked by their lucid recognition that the current socio-political and economic situation in Greece offered them nothing but an unpredictable present and future. Significantly, this action shared the form and many of the demands — transnational mobility, protection, well-being — of the hunger strikes and other acts of resistance narrated in the last pages of Cabot's monograph.

As I write this review in early April 2015, the Greek government — now led by the newly elected left-wing political party SYRIZA — is considering its options in regards to its loans from the International Monetary Fund. The country is on the cusp of a potentially transformative moment, one which might have uncertain effects on Greeks and migrants alike. As Cabot aptly intimates, multiple facets of Greece's social, political, legal, and economic landscapes are “moving target[s]” (2014:16). Recent events and ongoing processes, I argue, are not only a testament to the timeliness of her compelling and engaging new book. Rather, they highlight as well the necessity of further research inspired by her lead.

Based on a rich multi-year fieldwork, *On the Doorstep of Europe* is thoroughly engaging and full of fascinating stories, vignettes, and anecdotes. This work draws insights from multiple sites of witnessing and participation, and weaves a number of ethnographic — and I would add poetic — threads that stem from the author's volunteer work with an asylum-related NGO office in Athens. Cabot consequently offers a vivid ethnographic account of the political asylum regime in Greece, crucially exploring the encounters between a variety of actors: asylum seekers; NGO lawyers, advocates, and aid workers; police officers; state adjudicators; and other bureaucrats. She charts how these actors negotiate and reinterpret the political and material constraints, as well as the moral and ethical difficulties, of this legal process — and its attendant ramifications — in a European context. To this end, her attention is also turned to the inseparability of the bureaucracy of the asylum procedure from what she calls “mythopoesis,” the wealth of epistemic practices that strive “to make sense of radical uncertainty, unpredictability, and even absurdity” (2014:9).

The metaphor of *the tragedy* informs the analysis and the organizing structure of the book, which is creatively divided into three “acts”: “Governance,” “Judgment,” and “Citizenship.” In part through its judiciously distributed references to Aeschylus' play *Eumenides*, the book puts forward an evocative analytical device to make sense of what grows out of the encounters between NGO workers, asylum seekers, and other actors. Cabot draws on Butler's analysis of *Antigone* to emphasize some critical elements of the

genre of tragedy: the dangerous threat posed to the normative order of things by the ostracized hero and the transformative moment of the trial. Such instances of judgement — violent, yet potentially creative and cathartic moments that follow from ruptures — stand as core elements of Cabot's ethnographic work. These are "generative," she argues, "producing multilayered and dialogical ethical engagements" (2014:106) through which NGO workers and asylum seekers try to find ways to handle the moral-ethical dilemmas they face at various levels: "individual ethics, community politics, and national and supranational governance, contest, and collaboration" (2014:222). Such moments of judgement may emerge from "trouble cases," which Cabot evokes as forms of disruptions to "law's normative and regulatory properties: through 'crises' in the fabric of law, legal and socio-political orders become open to" (2014:19) re-articulation and reformulation. Importantly, her analysis highlights the concurrent emergence, in these situations, of new openings, thresholds, and transformative possibilities that challenge existing categories and forms. Suitably, then, the third and final act of her book is not one of closings, but of openings. Cabot ends by cultivating an attention to potentialities and shifts-in-the-making that alter the conduct of civic life. In the midst of exclusion and violence, these new forms of inclusion deeply matters for those involved.

In the first act, "Governance," Cabot considers how governance emerges through the multidirectional entanglements of people, practices, and objects. She presents a thorough examination of the asylum crisis in Greece, noting how it is marked by systemic issues with border management, accusations of inadequate conditions of reception, racist and xenophobic violence, imprisonment and violent policing, and a slow adjudication process that results in backlogged cases and applications in a state of limbo, among others. Cabot resists, however, a facile and over-encompassing analytical finger-pointing at the financial crisis. Instead she highlights other elements at play, including Greece's geographic location and its marginal positioning in the moral-political landscape of Europe. In her discussion of the charged dilemma NGOs face between investing primarily in advocacy or in immediate legal work, she further points to the double-edged characteristic of critiques, emphasizing how they encourage change while simultaneously reinscribing the country's political and moral marginalization.

Cabot also importantly focuses on documents as technologies of governance that acquire a life of their own and exert their own social, legal, and political effects. With the goal of accounting for the varied states of limbo in which migrants are thrown, she attempts to track, with difficulty, the seemingly arbitrary delivery and unpredictable movement of pink cards. In theory, she explains, the pink card grants asylum seekers temporary stay in the country and minimal assistance while their application is in process. In practice, however, Cabot demonstrates how different actors seek to strategically interpret and reinterpret its meanings — as well as the limbo it tends to represent — for their own needs, sometimes imbuing the legal document with hope.

"Judgement," the second act of *On the Doorstep of Europe*, elaborates on moral and ethical questions around recognition, eligibility, and support that emerge from the asylum process and NGO assistance. With sensitive attention to the consequences of decision-making, Cabot emphasizes her interlocutors' dialogical attempts to comprehend shifting and flexible legal processes and to negotiate eligibility for citizenship and limited non-governmental services. These decisions, she argues, reflect first and foremost "the sociabilities

and sensibilities of NGO encounters” (2014:110). Referring to the law as a theatrical stage, she focuses on Brenneis’ notion of “social aesthetics,” noting how practices of recognition and eligibility determination are influenced by the performances of her participants as both actors and audiences. In other words, cases are co-produced, shaped through the interactions of various participants, and marked by tensions that revolve around issues such as legal literacy, knowledge and epistemologies, legibility, agency, storytelling, and discourses of victimhood. Cabot also highlights the creativity of these engagements which, she states, “may produce a surplus of ethical and affective labor that opens up unpredictable possibilities for reflection, action, and sociality” (2014:74) even as tensions may be left unresolved. Ultimately, she highlights how “law does not simply produce but shapes and (re)configures social realities” (2014:147), noting its instability and elasticity in the face of borderline cases that blur the lines and open gaps to be strategically used.

As mentioned earlier, Cabot’s third act, “Citizenship,” points to sites of new openings and possibilities where notions of city and nation are being reconceptualized and articulated anew. She follows alternative stories — some highly visible, others from the margins of recognisability — that importantly illustrate the formation of new imaginaries and the finding of hope — or something close to it — in difficult circumstances. Highlighting the instability of notions of citizenship and the fallacy of a “monolithic image of Greekness” (2014:175), she dwells on emergent radical possibilities and solidarities that are materializing in this Athens-in-transformation. The author also emphasizes the increasing presence of migrants who are striving for a transparent and accountable asylum process by actually rearticulating “regimes of laws and rights” (2014:199). They have been claiming their status as “citizens of Athens” (2014:197) at a historical moment that is marked by growing civic unrest and claims for political voice in the Greek public sphere.

To conclude, *On the Doorstep of Europe* stands as a strong piece of ethnographic writing. Sprinkled with poetic elements that metaphorically reference Greek tragedy, the book offers an engaging reading experience that may well succeed in inspiring “active emotional and intellectual engagement,” as Cabot (2014:x) modestly hopes. It is bound to become an influential book for scholars working with undocumented migrant populations in Greece, and her resistance to an analytical attachment to the metanarrative of the Greek debt crisis is particularly laudable in this regard. Deeply ethnographic, her insights are also transferrable to other research sites and contexts, for example: asylum process and migration; political violence; NGO ethical and moral dilemmas; technologies of governance; and creative “survival”. I would also suggest that readers interested in ethnographies of law and bureaucracy will find Cabot’s work on the performative encounters and social aesthetics of legal processes insightful. Beyond the content of the book, the student of anthropology may be inspired by the author’s use of the ethnographic form, particular in terms of her methodology and what she has to say about ethnography and fieldwork, as shared through short reflections and passing thoughts. For example, she highlights how life histories, whether collected in the context of determining NGO eligibility or for ethnographic purposes, are always co-produced — implicitly or explicitly — by all of the actors involved (2014:116–117). While *On the Doorstep of Europe* is currently available solely in expensive hardcover and e-book formats, the prompt publication of a paperback edition would valuably facilitate the accessibility of this must-read work to an even greater sphere of scholars.

Descola, Philippe. *The Ecology of Others*. Translated by Geneviève Godbout and Benjamin P. Luley. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press. 2013. 91 pages.

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Many anthropologists are aware that a long-standing controversial debate exists between nature and culture theorists centered on whether or not belief systems about one's environment are attributable to physical or social influences. This debate continues to be fuelled by academics and institutions that position nature and culture as dichotomous terms firmly positioned on opposite ends of the theoretical spectrum. Physical, or natural, scientists often accept a universal definition of *nature*, whereas social scientists have diverse definitions of *culture* and explanations of how cultures interact with nature. As such, the modern understanding of the relationship between nature and humanity tends to be ambiguous, leading to contrasting views of humans as either nature's conqueror or nature's saviour (Ugglå 2010).

In *The Ecology of Others*, French anthropologist Philippe Descola discusses what he has come to call the "anthropology of nature" through his analysis of the traditional dualistic view of nature and culture as distinct phenomena. He insists that the complex relationship between humankind and nature cannot be understood by having such a firm divide between the natural and cultural divisions of anthropology, or the natural and social sciences in general, and that the most important academic question for the present century is how to understand the relationship between culture, or humans, and nature, or non-humans. *The Ecology of Others* is derived from Descola's 2007 lecture for agronomy scientists in Paris who were concerned about being unable to address or understand the social issues their research was uncovering. In 2013, a revised version of this lecture was published by Prickly Paradigm Press (PPP) at the request of Executive Publisher, and American anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins. This was the ideal publishing venue for Descola to express his critical views on the nature versus culture debate as PPP aims to give serious authors free rein to express their views on various academic and world issues (PPP 2010).

In this brief but well-articulated, book Descola summarizes the history of the nature versus culture debate in anthropology and discusses the need for increased academic interconnectedness between natural science and social science. In the latter half of the nineteenth-century natural and social sciences were clearly delineated in theory, methodology, and practice. Descola surmises that this delineation was beneficial for standardizing knowledge and methodology, but did not facilitate a holistic understanding of situations where natural and social science phenomena were combined.

The Clam Debate: materialism versus mentalism

Descola begins, in the first of the book's three main sections, by stating that "a good way to understand the status of a scientific problem is to study controversies" (2013:7). One such controversy in anthropology is the Clam Debate of the 1970s between French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and American anthropologist Marvin Harris. This debate between the two scholars began over a reference to clams mentioned in the Gildersleeve Lecture Lévi-Strauss gave in 1972, at Barnard College in New York. The French anthropologist compared similar details in *Bella Bella* and *Chilcotin* myths from British Columbia to

prove that how societies select and integrate significant aspects of their habitat into their myths stems from universal mental structures — or natural causes. Harris refuted this claim and instead viewed the similarities in the myths as materialistic, the result of adaptive functions for practical utility — or cultural causes.

Anthropological dualism: nature versus culture

In the second section of the book, Descola explains how this debate continues today with many anthropologists still viewing nature and culture as distinct phenomena. Latour (2007) states that it is often believed that culture is the realm of social or cultural anthropology and nature is the realm of physical or biological anthropology. Descola explains that these dualistic views “continue to form the two poles of an epistemological continuum along which everyone endeavouring to better understand the relationships between humans and non-humans must be positioned” (2013:29). At one end of the continuum are natural scientists who study and explain nature in the singular, and at the other end of the continuum are social scientists who study and explain cultures in the plural (Latour 2007).

To each his own nature: dualism or universalism

In the final section, Descola encourages readers to think about why this divide exists in anthropology considering that ethnographers who study the same ethnic groups often produce comparable reports regardless of their theoretical inclinations. Descola then explores if anthropology needs a dualistic or universal definition to explain the relationship between humans (culture) and non-humans (nature). A universal definition seems to be an idealistic suggestion due to the pluralistic character of anthropology and the breadth of what the field studies. It would also fail to account for diverse societal explanations about the natural world and how humans interact in it, which allows a society to articulate how their members uniquely behave and adapt to their environments (Moran 2008). Bennett argues,

[i]f Culture — that is, Man — is seen as the despoiler, the destroyer, Nature is revered as pristine, and the preservationist position emerges. If Man is seen as the measure and master of all things, then the incorporational process is seen as “progress” and Nature is viewed as a “resource.” [1993:8]

Separating nature and culture into distinct fields of study around scientific universalism and cultural relativism does not allow for a holistic and context-specific understanding of the relationship between humans (culture) and non-humans (nature). However, accepting a universal definition of how cultures interact with and adapt to nature is equally prohibitive to understanding how diverse cultures, or societies, interact with diverse environments.

Review: a simplistic overview of a complex debate

Because of its brevity, *The Ecology of Others* provides a simplistic overview of a complex issue and long-standing debate in anthropology. With only 91 pages, Descola fails to elaborate on many of the concepts, history, and ideas that he discusses. He explains in his

foreword that as his original lecture was not written for anthropologists he was unconcerned with discussing such a controversial subject because he knew that the “audience was mainly unaware of the intricacies of the anthropological and philosophical debates about the place of Humankind in Nature” (2013:ii). Unfortunately, the target audience for this book may be aware of these intricacies and a book this brief is unlikely to encourage most readers to definitively make up their minds about the place of humankind in nature, though it may be a thought-provoking catalyst to explore the literature in this area further.

Descola declares that natural science is frequently accepted as the archetype of valid knowledge, but he does not delve deeply into how this belief negates the value of interdisciplinary research which combines research in natural science with social science to address lived experiences and social interactions with nature among diverse cultures. Understanding how cultures identify and form relationships with their natural environments is increasingly important in contemporary times as environments are rapidly being altered by human changes. Kopina and Shoreman-Ouimet (2013) emphasize that many of the environmental issues we deal with today, such as climate change and pollution, have universal impacts, but how diverse cultures perceive, react, and adapt to these issues is not universal. Addressing these universal environmental issues will require collaboration between natural and social scientists to ask how we can, as an international community, holistically address global environmental issues combining widely accepted universal scientific views of nature with the diversity and realities of cultural views. The nature versus culture divide is a controversial debate, but Descola’s proposed mitigation strategy for addressing the problem through a paradigm shift from dualistic to monistic views on nature and culture may be even more controversial among anthropologists today.

Descola explains the nature versus culture debate from both ends of the spectrum in an engaging, narrative tone, and he is correct in stating that the biggest question of the current century will be how to understand the diverse and complex relationships between humans and nature. However, he focuses primarily on the views of historical figures in anthropology and does not focus on insights from contemporary researchers who are currently working on addressing this question from interdisciplinary perspectives. Such an interdisciplinary approach to this question is necessary, considering the world’s pressing and diverse environmental issues and the changing structure of societies. In 1900 only sixteen cities existed in the world; a century later, their number expanded to over five hundred (Moran 2008), and to support these rapidly growing cities humankind has been increasingly expanding into and altering natural spaces and extracting non-renewable natural resources. Globally, as we continue to address issues brought on by human changes, Descola argues that it will “become increasingly difficult to continue to believe that nature is a completely separate domain from social life” (2013:81).

Conclusion

Descola believes that all cultures are culturally conditioned to have some form of differentiation between humans and nature, or non-humans. Since cultural views and understanding of the non-human elements of their environment vary, different forms of knowledge regarding nature emerge. Even within cultures different forms of nature knowledge develop, such as the theoretical divide between science and spiritualists in Western society. Science is not always willing to take into account personal perceptions

and interactions with nature, and spiritualists are not always willing to believe empirical scientific data. Combining these two forms of knowledge could have immense benefit to holistically comprehending natural phenomena and developing a strong global ecological consciousness to combat environmental issues. Anthropology is ideally suited to be the field to spearhead holistic studies incorporating biological, cultural, and social aspects of the relationships between humans and non-humans if it can move past the opposing views on the continuum of “nature naturing” and “nature natured” (Descola 2013:85). However, developing a universal explanation that holistically explains human and nature interactions is not a feasible or relevant approach to moving past this dualistic view. As interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research opportunities continue to be developed, and accepted by, scholars and institutions, Descola’s vision of a new academic worldview, in which the relationships between humans and non-humans are analyzed and explained from diverse perspectives combining nature and culture, may not be as idealistic as it seems.

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