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Anthropology and anthropologists in times of crisis

We know relatively little about the human dynamics of crises, partially because it is so difficult to plan research on them. While crisis situations cause great distress for those affected (particularly those who are most vulnerable), they do offer unique opportunities to study people and society. I speak from experience. In 2006, I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, when the province was hit by multiple volcanic eruptions, a major earthquake and a minor tsunami. This concatenation of catastrophic events severely interrupted my research agenda but also gave me unexpected new perspectives and ways to connect with people. At the time, I actively blogged about my experience. As the world is being hit by coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in 2020, it is more than a full-time job just to keep up with what other anthropologists are writing and doing in response.

The types of reaction I notice among colleagues are similar to those in society at large. One group tries to work as much as possible in a 'business-as-usual' mode. The pre-crisis way of doing things is simulated as best as one can, even if only virtually. Plenty of academic proposals are circulated for special issues, edited volumes and future conferences (related to the crisis or not). Such actions are understandable because sticking to the 'reality' one knows gives people structure in times of uncertainty. Etymologically, the word 'crisis' refers to a decisive or turning point. This perspective is taken to heart by another group, who uses the exceptional circumstances and systemic disruptions to reflect critically on the current state of affairs, be it in academia or more generally, and to share their visions of a different (not necessarily 'better') post-coronavirus world. Historical analysis shows that this is not the first crisis situation out of which new ideas and projects arise. It is equally true that people quickly want to return to the 'normal' *modus operandi* once a crisis is over.

In times of crisis, the reliance on information and communication technologies is both a blessing and a curse, making it difficult to see the forest for the trees. Useful ideas on how to tackle the situation get lost between a zillion of opinions, memes and fake news. Being aware of our own positionality and making others aware of theirs is a necessary first step when addressing problems on a global scale (with not every-*body* being equally affected). Medical experts alone can never solve the multiple issues surrounding the coronavirus crisis, but neither can we. Anthropological knowledge and methodologies can certainly contribute but complex crises can only be confronted successfully by boundary-crossing, transdisciplinary and multi-sectoral actions. 'United we stand' is not an empty slogan but a much needed strategy of solidarity, on all levels. Our disciplinary relevance, for other sciences and for society, is measured by the efforts

we collectively undertake to reach out, much more widely and more creatively. The traditional inward-looking scholarly channels – academic publications and conferences – are clearly insufficient in this regard.

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