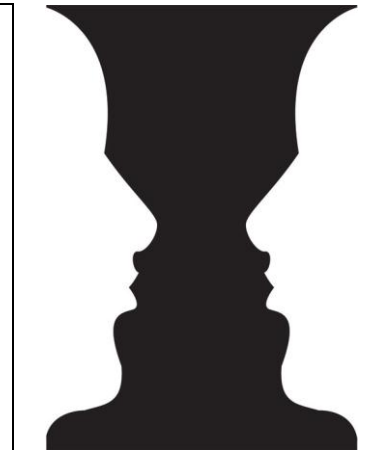

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Matthew Engelke (ed.) *The Objects of Evidence. Anthropological approaches to the production of knowledge*, 2009, Willey-VCH, Anthropological Approaches to the Production of Knowledge, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute Special Issue Book Series

Book review

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Frequently, ethnographies and anthropological articles open with vignettes or anecdotes that convey a sense of being *there* on the author's part and transpose the reader to transiently witness that experience. Following this initial rendition of vivid characters and intriguing situations, there is an exercise in showing that first hunches were subsequently central to the anthropologists' understanding. They seek to persuade the reader that they got it right! However, this faith in *metonymy* to explain the human condition sometimes makes anthropology a less convincing in the eyes (and minds) of people trained in other disciplines. How is it that everything going on during fieldwork might be potential evidence?

In addition to being formative, anecdotes and stories from the field are the most engaging topics in formal and informal talks between anthropologists due to their indexical potential to suggest belonging to the anthropological community. However, it is difficult to keep stories and arguments apart, because stories do not make sense for themselves, they are not self-sufficient, but rather open avenues to discuss always partially answered questions like what and how do anthropologists know? Ultimately, what do anthropologists mean by knowledge? And how do they accommodate experiments in representation, render reliable accounts and construct persuasive arguments?

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The Objects of Evidence is an inspiring book that furnishes readers of all stages in their (anthropological) careers with plenty of questions. Its greatest merit is that it refrains from providing recipes on the production of anthropological knowledge, being a useful reading for those concerned with how to marshal evidence of or for something, oscillating between the so-called subjective and objective stances. The book gathers several articles that address knowledge production in anthropology, based on talks previously given at a seminar called the Objects of evidence and held in 2005. The editor of the book, Matthew Engelke, frames the contributions with a pertinent examination of evidence in anthropology.

In setting the grounds for discussion, Engelke first defines evidence and then develops a consistent argument about the importance of patterns in anthropological knowledge-making. Calling the *pattern argument* part of the 'epistemological subconscious' (of anthropology), these models are considered reasonably stable pieces of evidence on which one assesses the reliability of anthropological accounts. According to Engelke's review, patterns are recognizable at an intersubjective level, referring to people that perceive things in common, agree upon, share these perceptions that become publicly intelligible. Appealing to them, patterns allow anthropologists to substitute the unrepeatable nature of fieldwork experiences. Apart from this elaboration of patterns in the anthropological enterprise, Engelke introduces other key issues (scale; quantity and quality; certainty; and intention) that are helpful for understanding the methodological and epistemological aspects of the objects of evidence, being a diligent editor in interweaving these topics with brief teasers from each chapter of the book. The subtopic of scale is particularly important because it has the potential to stir debate about what and how anthropologists carry out their investigations, connecting vignettes and anecdotes to abstract more general theoretical formulations. How do anthropologists go about abstracting from their own experience? How do they formulate judgments about the validity of others' claims?

The articles in this collection are as provocative as they are diverse, and Engelke does a sound job in presenting, discussing and integrating all the articles in his introductory chapter. Some chapters are explicitly pronouncing the need to open up to other varieties of knowledge-making in anthropology, especially when interdisciplinary collaboration is involved. These chapters suggest a refashioning of evidentiary protocols in situations that engage practitioners with different disciplinary backgrounds. Thus, the book provides different starting-points to explore issues of scale, certainty and intention, and several chapters specifically address what collaboration across disciplines entails with regard to the relationship between anthropological practice and other evidentiary protocols, like those of psychology (Stafford), law (Good) and medicine (Ecks). In his chapter about the import of cultural variables into the psychology of numeracy, Stafford provides an example of a failed collaboration between psychologists and anthropologists, taking this opportunity to delve into an analysis of the difference between the scales at which claims are made in the two disciplines. He argues that there is an inherent need to negotiate and make concessions in interdisciplinary work.

Good discusses how cultural evidence is mobilized in courts of law to ponder upon an important impersonation of today's anthropologist: that in which she is called for to

act as experts of culture in trials. Culture is already borrowed to domains radically different than anthropology, but the conundrum here lies in the fact that anthropologists insist on details whereas court decisions would rather be based on “underlying principles”. Ultimately the effectiveness of anthropologist-as-expert is shaped within the institutional arrangements of courts and their mechanisms of doing justice.

Another contribution that challenges disciplinary boundaries belongs to Ecks’ formulation of an evidence-based medical anthropology inspired by current evidence-based medicine practices. The case study does this through showing the differences between general practitioners and psychiatrists from Calcutta in conceiving, assessing and offering treatment for depression. The first ones are readier to prescribe depression treatments to patient and argue for an increasing rate of depression connected to changing and complicated social changes in contemporary India. On the other hand, psychiatrists are more reticent in diagnosing their patients with depression because they say they lack proper statistics in a context of rapid changes in the domain, making it difficult to keep track and trust their diagnoses.

The other contributions are more substantial in how they directly address the role played by sight in the construction and mobilization of evidence in particular cultural contexts. Vision and observation are important in formulating truth claims and they represent the core topic of two chapters in this book. As Bloch’s chapter shows, the act of seeing with somebody’s own eyes is thought to be accurate because it does not presuppose language mediation. However powerful it might seem, “bare” eye-witnessing is insufficient to prove something, not even with the support of an allegedly unquestionable representational device as photography. Pinney’s analysis shows that authentication plays an important part in how representational devices (photographs) were considered by the Indian colonial state: they changed their status from being considered a “cure” and transformed into being taken as dauntingly poisonous.

Apart from being neat examples of metonymy’s power of signification and representation in anthropological work, the chapters document the similar effects of metonymy in people’s everyday life struggles. More specifically, the situations presented evolve around a *part* that stands for something wider and more complex: after metonymy effaces an initial claim, people strive to bolster objectivity by mustering a host of objects. To illustrate this point, Chari’s chapter is particularly stimulating because it puts forward the idea of the unstable nature of evidence in an inspiring analysis of subjectivities built upon personal life histories that constitute core arguments in the political struggles of post-Apartheid activism from South Africa.

More to the point of recursivity and the temporality of evidentiary protocols is Holbraad’s chapter on *pruebas* (proofs) that practitioners invoke to denote their relationship with deities. This ethnographic case is a means that Holbraad uses to rethink the job of anthropological analysis. As such, the task would not be to either explain or to interpret *pruebas* in Cuba, but rather to parallel their logic of production and ontological transformation with the anthropological undertaking.

In a similar vein, Keane’s provoking chapter puts forward a means to study spirituality that evades an approach to religious practices as evidence of inner states, because of a tendency to reproduce authoritarian representations of those doing the

assessment. On the contrary, he is interested in the linguistic language forms that practitioners themselves take to be marked or unusual in some respect.

At times tiring due to the pretentious writing style of some authors, the contributions are nevertheless a rewarding experience because they provide the means to thinking about how to convey fieldwork situations into evidence in anthropological knowledge-making. Most of the chapters constitute convincing arguments to open up disciplinary boundaries to the gain of the anthropological engagement.

And just in case you are still struggling with a creeping question “If anthropology is neither art, nor science, then what is evidence needed for?”, most contributions to this book do a good job at offering seminal propositions to divert from this constraining dualism. The suggestions go beyond choosing between either of the sides (art of science), while the entire collection can be easily taken as part of a wider move towards specifying the anthropological enterprise through a departure from the already vexing positivist-interpretative debate.

An interesting approach to questions of evidence that the book lacks, having matched the collection’s penchant to interdisciplinary collaboration, is one formulated from the perspective of the anthropology of science and technology or even science and technology studies. This could have been a welcome combination given the central theme of the book: the role of seeing within the construction of evidentiary protocols. There is a consistent body of STS scholarship that addresses the particularities of the shared, relational, and instrumental character of seeing and documents the production of various visual practices that represent the primary means through which evidence is constituted in the “hard/natural sciences”.