

# Special section. Facing fieldwork

MAARTEN ONNEWEER AND  
LOTTE PELCKMANS

## Guest editorial

This special section of *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* originates in a symposium organised in December 2003 at Leiden University by the ethnological debating club WDO.<sup>1</sup> As students of cultural anthropology and development sociology at this university, we were ‘facing fieldwork’, both retrospectively, in the task of making sense of our – relatively short – field research required for the Leiden MA thesis, and prospectively as future PhD students hoping for an extended stay.

Our choice of topic arose from the perception that the epistemological premises of anthropological fieldwork have become contested. The scale, geography and representation of the anthropological endeavour have been criticised and few unambiguous alternatives are at hand.<sup>2</sup> To us, it sometimes felt as if we were relating to a field-site that might not even be there, for as soon as we entered it, the next critique emerging from post-modernist anthropology threatened to take it away. Of course, what was partly at stake was the neophyte anthropologist’s fragile research ontology. Yet our predicament seems also to refer to the general nature of, and access to, anthropological knowledge. How should we attempt to grasp the shifting and perhaps unsettled paradigms of our discipline while doing fieldwork?

The WDO-board therefore organised the symposium around the question whether fieldwork practice has lost its classical theoretical bearings and, if so, what alternatives could or should be considered now that ‘globalization’ has persuaded a number of scholars that a change of scope is needed. Our hypothesis was confirmed by the positive response to our invitation by some of the keynote speakers. Jean Comaroff explained that in an article with John Comaroff on the subject of scale they explicitly addressed

- 1 WDO – the origin of the abbreviation is unknown, but it is usually translated as *Waar Dromers Ontwaken* (‘Where dreamers awake’) – is an inter-faculty debating club established in 1928 and managed to the present day by undergraduate (mostly anthropology) students at Leiden University. The symposium ‘Facing fieldwork. Challenges for anthropology in a globalising world’ took place on 11–12 December 2003 to celebrate WDO’s 75th anniversary, and brought together as keynote speakers (in order of appearance) Jos Platenkamp, Rajni Paliwala, Kirsten Hastrup, Hans van den Breemer, Albert Trouwborst and Jean Comaroff. The event would never have been possible without the inspiration and work of our fellow-members on the WDO-board: Erik Alblas, Nina Adriaanse, Martin van Vliet, Marnix Walters and Liesje Withofs. We are greatly indebted to Peter Pels for his help and support throughout the process of writing this editorial. We also want to thank Martijn Wienia for comments on an earlier version. Further information on the symposium can be found at [www.wdo.leidenuniv.nl/](http://www.wdo.leidenuniv.nl/).
- 2 See, for instance, Gupta and Ferguson 1992 and 1997; Clifford and Marcus 1986; and Clifford 1988.

the question ‘how the variegated issues of globalisation altered our methodological orientations’ and ‘how those orientations and strategies should change in proportion to transformations in the social and cultural geographies of the world inhabited by our “natives”’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003:147). During the symposium she added that this emphasis on ‘spatialisation’ was a way to grasp the expanding sizes of the scales at which – in contrast to classical anthropology – practitioners of anthropology ‘can look at [globalisation] as a concrete, produced, localised phenomenon’.

Although Kirsten Hastrup doubted that anthropology had lost its theoretical bearings, she agreed during the plenary discussion that the blurring of boundaries and the flux of people, ideas and images have made the definition of the field problematic. As can be seen from her contribution to this special section, her emphasis on a ‘topographic turn’ echoes the ‘spatialisation’ suggested by Jean Comaroff, although Hastrup emphasises the materiality of the field rather than its expanding scale. Both therefore suggest that we need to bring new epistemological categories to bear on our notion of the field, categories that are more true to the distinctive geography of the ‘globalising world’ we addressed in the symposium’s title. However, we ask ourselves, are these categories related to global developments or to paradigmatic changes in anthropology?

We pose this question because the occasion for the symposium – WDO’s seventy-fifth anniversary – also called for reflection on its ancestral heritage. One of the many WDO ‘ancestors’ present at the symposium, Albert Trouwborst, a member of WDO in the 1950s, discussed changes in fieldwork practice since the time he and his contemporaries first worked under constraints established earlier by the Dutch colonial state. A lively discussion ensued between different generations of anthropologists about the political alliances of anthropologists in past and present, but whatever the differences with the past, Platenkamp’s lecture<sup>3</sup> made clear that present fieldwork practice can be similarly constrained, since in his case the position of the fieldworker was circumscribed, scrutinised and dominated by the Laotian state.

Rajni Palriwala’s lecture approached the researcher’s position and experience in the field from another angle: a comparison between fieldwork at home (India) and in a western country (the Netherlands). Her critical reflections on anthropology ‘in reverse’ bring out the other-than-statal constraints on the position, methods and knowledge of the fieldworker: the public social relationships in a Rajasthan village versus the individualistic, compartmentalised organisation of Dutch society. Yet while she emphasises that such different kinds of relationships frame the anthropological method, she concludes that many of the things she would do to create rapport remained the same. These questions of experience and method – how to attain appropriate research skills when faced with fieldwork in a globalising world – provided one of the most interesting themes for neophyte fieldworkers like ourselves. To the best of our knowledge it is not an issue that has received much attention in the recent anthropological literature. The question of how to respond to new demands from our informants is one of these issues. Hans van den Breemer, reflecting on almost twenty years of supervising the research of Leiden anthropology students in Senegal, noted that student fieldwork training has changed dramatically over time, owing to more intensified local competition for resources – and therefore for the assets represented by ‘rich’ Dutch anthropology

3 ‘*Structural analysis and the dynamics of political change: the case of Laos.*’

students – in the field. The contributions to this section by Katharina Schramm and Jarich Oosten address the changes made to our position by the demands of the people we study as well, raising serious questions about the ways in which this affects our authority and mode of producing knowledge, both in the field and outside.<sup>4</sup> It seems to call for an increasing need for epistemological justifications on our part.

During the concluding plenary discussion, Patricia Spyer<sup>5</sup> asked what were the gains and losses to anthropological fieldwork of the changes engendered by globalisation. In retrospect, we feel that the emergence of different, more ‘modern’ or ‘global’ research topics (as compared with the traditional focus on localised ‘other cultures’ and traditions) is beneficial. In addition, we have gained better insights into the broader contexts in and by which ethnography is produced, and into the social relationships that emerge in the field and constrain our modes of knowledge production. On the other hand, these changes also seem to have led to a fragmentation of our research topics, and to increasing difficulties in relating such fragments to each other at the different scales we encounter in any place we visit. If this enriches our epistemological awareness of and during fieldwork, it also threatens with a loss of certainty about our position, about the authority of our knowledge and about the value of the desire to capture social reality by conducting fieldwork. We hope that the readers of *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* will find some of the steps towards a more epistemologically sophisticated, but also more reassuring way of ‘facing fieldwork’ – of training ourselves to be skilled and methodical as well as open to experience – in the essays printed in this special section.

## References

- Clifford, J. 1988. *The predicament of culture. Twentieth-century ethnography, literature and art*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clifford, J. and G. E. Marcus (eds.) 1986. *Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Comaroff, J. and J. Comaroff. 2003. ‘Ethnography on an awkward scale. Post-colonial anthropology and the violence of abstraction’, *Ethnography* 4, 147–79.
- Gupta, A. and J. Ferguson. 1992. ‘Beyond “culture”. Space, identity and the politics of difference’, *Cultural Anthropology* 7, 6–23.
1997. *Anthropological locations, boundaries and grounds of a field science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- 4 Schramm’s paper was presented at the Young Scholars’ Forum of the Copenhagen EASA conference in 2002 and submitted to *Social Anthropology* separately. We are happy to be able to include it in this special section. Oosten chaired a session of the symposium, and later wrote the essay for this special section on our request.
- 5 Chair of the Leiden Department at the time of the symposium.