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Making Sense of Public Encounters. The Afterlives of Ethnography

Didier Fassin (ed.): *If Truth Be Told. The Politics of Public Ethnography*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2017. 358 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6977-6.

If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography pro-

vides an in-depth view on ethnographers' work from the standpoint of encountering their various publics. By means of ethnographic research grounded on critical approach, anthropologists seek to offer new knowledge and perspectives to communicate to the wider society. As a result, anthropological research provides certain understanding based on empirical and theoretical work – *a conception of truth*, as Fassin formulates in his introduction to the book – a conception that may be discussed and utilized to add another truth to the already existing ones. Ethnographic studies strive towards changes in our thinking by providing new viewpoints, or by complicating over-simplified ideas related to people's practices and thinking, for example. The desire to have impact on society and the commitment to social change require that research results are made public also outside academic spheres.

The articles in the volume scrutinize the dissemination of ethnographic knowledge, and examine how this work is received and utilized after the research results are published. The book ponders the question "What happens afterwards?" The authors, anthropologists whose expertise varies from

history of science to political science and legal anthropology, provide the reader with multiple, skilfully crafted answers to the question. They analyse the impact of publicizing their studies as a part of the whole research process: the book underscores that ethnographic work is not finished when published. Publishing the analysis based on fieldwork as a book, or to communicate the research results in some other format, such as a presentation or a film, is not the end of the work, but the beginning of a new phase. Didier Fassin, the editor of the collection, refers to this phase as an “afterlife” of ethnographies.

The ethnographic accounts in *If Truth Be Told* are careful analyses of the afterlife of the contributors’ studies. They are based on the authors’ experiences on communicating their research results to and with diverse audiences: journalists, policy-makers, legal authorities as well as non-governmental organizations, activists, and other scientists. Collaborating with different agents in society and publicly communicating ethnographers’ intellectual production may be considered an integral part of public anthropology. However, as the articles show, the relations between the collaborators and those who utilize the published knowledge are not easy to pre-

dict or control. On the contrary, they raise diverse issues that are grounded on the fact that the afterlife of any study depends on its reception by publics.

Publishing one’s work elicits various and often contradicting reactions among the public, ranging from interest from unexpected audiences to close collaborations and working as a mediator between those studied and the audiences. In some cases, the encounters may take the form of a struggle, in which the researcher endeavours to be heard, or to prevent the results being misinterpreted or misapplied to meet the end-users pre-set purposes or validate ready-made decisions. Ethnographers may also find themselves in situations, where the scientific validity of one’s research results is questioned or even denied in the on-going science wars or in rivalries about what kind of knowledge scientists should provide policymakers with. As the analyses of the afterlives of ethnographies also reveal, sometimes it is not just the results of the research but the researcher herself, who has to cope with severe attacks targeted at herself and her professionalism as a scholar. These challenges can put researchers in difficult situations, where they must cope with multiple roles given

by those utilizing the knowledge: a researcher may act as a thought-provoker, translator, intermediary, witness, or as an original author whose writings are utilized in various ways not originally intended by oneself.

The book is divided into three parts that explore the strategies, engagements, and tensions related to the publicization of ethnographic knowledge. It encourages ethnographers to understand the afterlife of their research as a part of the research process. The volume underlines that what happens afterwards should also be studied and analysed in order to advance the dissemination of knowledge and to tackle the problems related to encountering diverse publics. During publicization, the control over one’s research findings shifts from the researcher to the public, which causes challenges in communicating the original research results and may also cause frustration when preventing misinterpretations seems impossible. Despite the challenges caused by this change in power and the fact that public reception of one’s work is always more or less unpredictable, researchers may also learn to control the afterlife of their work on some level, at least. This is made possible by collaborating with various publics, which enables one to better understand the

motives and practices of those “others” who utilize the knowledge. For this purpose, the book offers the reader a rich array of empirical accounts to study and learn from.

This collection could be recommended to all students and scholars who conduct ethnographic research – the questions related to the utilization of ethnographic knowledge and researchers’ responsibilities to wider society and to the people they study and work with concern all. Above all, it is vital that scholars are aware of the afterlife of their work in order to be able to advance the social impact of their work and of social sciences more broadly. Due to the collection’s focus on “the afterlife of ethnographic accounts,” it does not explain the practices and methodologies of research in detail and thus may be most beneficial for those readers who already are to some extent familiar with ethnographic approach and its methods. Yet, for non-academic publics, such as journalists or policy-makers who collaborate with ethnographers, the book and its individual articles may serve as a significant tool to learn what could be gained via utilizing knowledge grounded on critical, empirical work produced by public anthropologists.