

FABRICATING DATA, UNDERMINING TRUST, OR: WHY WE OMITTED WORK FROM OUR DIGITAL ARCHIVE

Editorial by the Joint Editors-in-Chief

Marie Sandberg, University of Copenhagen
Monique Scheer, University of Tübingen

In a world increasingly haunted by fake news, email scams and trolls on the internet deliberately emotionalizing debate and making unfounded attacks, trust is perhaps more endangered than ever. Trust is an essential feeling in social life. Without it, relations towards anyone, from our politicians to our teachers and doctors, not to mention among long-time neighbours as well as new arrivals in town, cannot work. This is also true for academia, where a certain amount of control for safeguarding scientific reliability and rigor is the mechanism for establishing trust in the quality of data. The humanities and social sciences have long relied on source criticism and methodological reflexivity in order to ensure transparency and scientific reliability. These research ethics still count, and were joined some decades ago by the double-blind peer-review system, which today serves as the prime guarantor of research quality. But even this system has its flaws, and so it has recently become common at European universities to provide whistle-blowers with a place to go without fear of being revealed: named persons, ombudspersons and ethics committees.

Yet, as scholars of ethnology, anthropology and folklore, we are also very aware of the fact that trust cannot be built only by establishing procedures or following the right protocol. Gathering our data is a multi-modal matter which involves discursive and

material as well as bodily and sensory dimensions – tacit knowledge or embodied experience often being as important as what is explicitly stated. Furthermore, we have an ethical obligation to protect our interlocutors by not revealing their identities and, at the same time, we hope that this guarantee of anonymity will allow them to trust us enough to speak openly about their lives, allowing us access to high-quality data. Assessing ethnological and anthropological scientific work, therefore, entails trusting that the ethnographers were present in the field, that their fieldnotes record experiences and conversations they actually had, that their interview transcripts are real. This trust – and with it, a scholar's reputation – is built not only through the quality and reliability of previously published work, but also their performances on and off the stage during conferences, meetings and in research cooperation. Merits can be quantified and measured, but there is indeed a human factor to the reliability of scholarly work. If scholarly work gets misrepresented, is badly conducted or simply turns out to be made up, trust is directly, and painfully, violated.

This issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* addresses these dark considerations by publishing a research article written by Peter Jan Margry on the scientific misconduct of the former Amsterdam Free University (VU) professor of political anthropology, Mart Bax.

An internationally renowned scholar, Bax specialized in the analysis of religious regimes based on fieldwork in Ireland, the Netherlands and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 2013, a university commission initiated by the VU concluded that throughout his whole research career, Bax invented field sites, source material, informants and research problems (see Margry in this issue). Since he claimed to be protecting informants by using pseudonyms and inventing geographical names for his field sites, it took a long time for the scientific community to realize that he was simply making things up.

On the occasion of migrating all the back issues and articles published in *Ethnologia Europaea* over the last 50 years in order to make them open access through our new publisher, the Open Library of Humanities, we asked Margry to write something about Bax's fraudulence. Margry's own research on religious rituals had led him to a deeper engagement with Bax's work, which increasingly mystified him. Based on his own investigations and later the close readings of the VU commission's report, Margry unfolds step by step the puzzle and shock of the Bax affair.

Journals have a responsibility to retract publications when it has come to light that they were based on fabricated data. As a consequence of the conclusions made by the VU commission, we as editors have decided not to upload to our new digital platform the seven publications Bax published in *Ethnologia Europaea*. We hereby explicitly state that the following publications in the printed journal should be considered retracted:

Vol. 18 (1988): Return to Mission Status? Religious Reality and Priestly Perception in Catholic Dutch Brabant, 73–79.

Vol. 20 (1990): The Seers of Medjugorje: Professionalization and Management Problems in a Yugoslav Pilgrimage Center, 166–176.

Vol. 22 (1992): The Saints of Gomila: Ritual and Violence in a Yugoslav Peasant Community, 17–33.

Vol. 22 (1992): How the Mountain Became Sacred: The Politics of Sacralization in a Former Yugoslav Community, 115–127.

Vol. 26 (1996): "Killing the Dead" in Surmanci: About the Local Sources of "the War" in Bosnia, 17–27.

Vol. 27 (1997): Civilization and Decivilization in Bosnia: A Case-study from a Mountain Community in Hercegovina, 163–177.

Vol. 30 (2000): Holy Mary and Medjugorje's Rocketeers: The Local Logic of an Ethnic Cleansing Process in Bosnia, 45–59.

The title of Margry's article in this issue indicates the perhaps most important aspect of this case: *On Scholarly Misconduct and Fraud, and What We Can Learn from It*. The broader discussion is indeed how we can remain vigilant and yet avoid destroying trust. Such a case must not turn us all into suspicious colleagues chasing possible scams. Can we, in spite of such cases, continue to build trust, ensure transparency and enhance the validity and robustness of research results in the humanities and qualitative social sciences, even though those results cannot be repeated for verification, as the laboratory science paradigm would suggest is necessary? In our fields we know better than most that there is no simple matter-of-fact world out there; verification of facts is a complex matter, and inventing more efficient protocols for the purpose of chasing down fake research will never fully safeguard against it. Instead, we agree with scholars like Bruno Latour, who believe that our energies and resources are better invested in focusing instead on "matters of concern"¹ that can help change the world into a better place for everyone.

In addition to Margry's article, the open section of this issue includes a contribution by Torgeir Rinke Bangstad, entitled *Beyond Presentism – Heritage and the Temporality of Things*, a theoretically informed article considering the

significance of materiality for the production of temporal orders in heritage practices. Going beyond a semiotic approach, the article explores what can be achieved when we look at the performativity of objects, using the example of museum practices in Norway.

The themed section of this issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* has been put together by our guest editors, Sophie Elpers and Michaela Fenske. It is titled *Shared Spaces: Multispecies Approaches in the Museum* and takes an innovative approach to analysing the co-presence of animals, plants and humans in exhibits of various kinds (see their introduction for more details).

We believe that these exciting articles show, once again, the vibrancy of our field, its engagement with new theoretical approaches, and the great potential of our methods. We hope that they help to remind us that, even as we must regret that some have misused ethnographic ethics to hide their dishonesty, we must not despair. As the excellent work of our colleagues shows, the benefits far outweigh the risks.

Note

- 1 Bruno Latour 2004: Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30(2) (Winter): 225–248, <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>.