Position paper of the DFG network "Public Anthropology: Knowledge Practices and Social Interventions in the Ethnological Disciplines": *Public Anthropology – Challenges, Competencies, and Structural Requirements*

1. Preamble

Like the societies in which they work, the ethnological disciplines[1] face considerable challenges. Global crises such as climate change, pandemics, violent conflicts and ongoing processes of social disintegration require responses not only from governments and civil society, but also new forms of academic engagement. Right-wing populist attacks on social and cultural diversity, migration processes, and democratic institutions increasingly target the autonomy of research and teaching. At the same time, there is a growing need for academia to be publicly present in many political and civil society areas, analyzing, communicating, and actively co-shaping social processes. In this wider context, public anthropology is no longer considered a supplementary aspect of anthropological practice; rather, it is shifting towards the center of our disciplines' work.

With this position paper, the DFG network "Public Anthropology: Knowledge Practices and Social Interventions in the Ethnological Disciplines", aims to promote the stronger integration of public anthropological work within the two ethnological disciplines in Germany and beyond. First, the paper outlines the central tasks of public anthropology: addressing various publics, mediating between worlds of knowledge, and understanding anthropological and ethnographic research as part of social negotiation and design processes. The second part then highlights the specific competencies of anthropological and ethnographic knowledge production in the context of public anthropology, including the ability to contextualize, deal productively with ambivalences and facilitate understanding between different and/or conflicting perspectives. These competencies enable the analysis of complex social dynamics and the development of practical knowledge in collaborative settings.

Public anthropology also places specific demands on academic work. Anthropologists, as well as teaching, research, and funding institutions, must respond to these challenges by creating appropriate structural conditions. This position paper is therefore intended for colleagues at all career stages within the ethnological disciplines, as well as universities, funding institutions, and policymakers interested in sustainably establishing high-profile research and teaching in the social sciences and humanities. Sustainable structural support from these actors is essential for public anthropology, which has so far remained marginal at many institutes in Germany, to become an inherent part of anthropological practice and theory formation. In view of growing societal tensions and increasing political pressure on different, especially marginalized and vulnerable publics, the network considers it crucial

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[1] See information on authors below for the use of the terms "ethnological disciplines" and "ethnologists," or "anthropology" and "anthropologists," recognizing that the notion of "ethnological disciplines" is employed in this position paper in a sense specific to the German-speaking academic context: While non-European ethnology historically developed from the discipline of *Völkerkunde* ("ethnology of the peoples"), European ethnology emerged from *Volkskunde* ("folklore studies"). The two traditions have had little historical interaction.

to maintain critical spaces of thought and action where alternative knowledge and open-ended social negotiation processes remain possible in the long term.

2. Challenges and tasks for public anthropology

The numerous political, social, ecological, and economic crises of the contemporary world pose a challenge to social coexistence – both within societies and at a global level. In the context of these often overlapping and accelerating developments, anthropologists are called upon not only to high-light and criticize social inequalities and injustices through their academic work, but also to intervene actively in specific societal situations and contexts. At the same time, the growing threat to demo-cratic structures is changing the conditions under which anthropologists operate, as well as those of their civil society and government partners. Nevertheless (or precisely because of this), cooperation with these various actors opens up new possibilities: anthropologists can highlight and shape prac-tices in which new democratic forms of social coexistence are being imagined and brought into being.

Under these conditions, we recognize a dual role for anthropologists working in the public sphere. Firstly, they must bring anthropological and ethnographic knowledge into social negotiation pro-cesses, thereby contributing to the strengthening of democratic structures and the co-creation of alternative, ideally more just forms of coexistence. Secondly, anthropology has the task of producing knowledge that helps us understand complex social realities and makes possible the imagination and negotiation of alternative ways of living together in the first place. In view of current challenges, public anthropological work can thus play a generative role in shaping society. At the same time, going public is only one form of public anthropology: particularly in politically charged fields of re-search or when conducting research with vulnerable groups, it may be necessary for reasons of re-search ethics and security, to limit or consciously reduce one's own public engagement. Publicly rel-evant anthropological research must not be conducted at the expense of the people involved.

Public anthropology, like academic work in general, is thus never neutral. Public engagement requires a high degree of critical self-reflection, particularly concerning anthropologists' own involvement in institutional, political and economic power relations. Even a commitment to greater social justice and the empowerment of marginalized groups can unintentionally contribute to the reproduction of ex-isting power relations. Therefore, the challenge is to make anthropological and ethnographic knowledge accessible in such a way that it reveals diverse and differentiated perspectives, including contradictions and ambiguities, and opens up spaces in which societal futures can be negotiated. A public anthropology that takes this claim seriously cannot rely solely on short-term effectiveness, but must aim for long-term transformation processes. This requires an institutionally anchored under-standing of what it means to be effective in different public spheres – analytically, ethically, socially, and politically. Promoting this understanding is a central task for future anthropology.

3. Anthropological skills for public engagement

Anthropologists possess the skills required for all of these tasks. Their diverse research fields and years of empirical work across different regions of the world enable them to adopt a nuanced, often

comparative, perspective on social processes. They hold evidence-based knowledge of social orders, norms, conflicts, and the dynamics of social change, including authoritarian shifts and rising inequalities both within and between societies. This expertise is based on the empirical work of earlier anthropologists as well as ongoing research into contemporary social issues. It is sustained through detailed empirical observation, theoretical analysis, and continuous engagement with non-academic partners. Such knowledge allows anthropologists to illuminate and anticipate the potential consequences of societal developments.

Anthropological and ethnographic work involves deliberately shifting perspective when moving between different social and cultural contexts. Anthropologists often focus on marginalized groups, less visible social practices, and alternative logics of coexistence, thereby contributing to bring these perspectives into broader political debates. Through such analyses, they examine how social reality is experienced and shaped in diverse ways. They also seek to explain why particular social conditions take the forms they do and how these conditions have or gain political significance. In addition, many anthropologists develop strategies for building effective relationships even in contexts of extreme power imbalance and have the capacity to mediate between different interests. They engage in a wide range of collaborative and participatory research formats, recognizing that these require high levels of self-reflexivity and communication skills. They also understand how networks and dialogues can be structured in contexts of plural and heterogeneous social positions, and are aware of the specific spaces and conditions that such engagement demands.

Finally, anthropologists have learned how to address a wide range of audiences and, and they are experienced in co-curating various publics. Through ethnographic reflection and an understanding of complex power relations, anthropologists can develop formats and modes of public engagement that challenge established social narratives and envision alternative futures. Multimodal formats incorporating visual, performative, digital or narrative elements open up new ways of imparting knowledge and create spaces for resonance beyond traditional academic audiences. Anthropologists also know how to design such formats responsibly and how to use them to make complex content accessible and effective. In times of social upheaval and polarization, public anthropology thus offers the potential to build bridges between academic knowledge and practical action, different social groups and interests, and critical analysis and constructive participation.

4. Necessary structures for effective public anthropology

Fulfilling the social responsibility of public anthropological work requires more than methodological expertise and individual commitment. Above all, public anthropology requires social and material spaces that consciously encourage controversy, uncertainty and experimentation — spaces that allow academic, political, artistic and civil society logics to coexist and grow. Universities can create such spaces because they are geared to promote open and critical thinking, making them potentially ideal platforms for dialogical and participatory work. However, they are also spaces of power with structural exclusions, which may necessitate shifting public anthropological work to other contexts, such as cultural and educational institutions, digital spaces, and activist fields. The ability to traverse these spaces is one of the defining characteristics of public anthropology. To ensure that this practice

does not remain merely symbolic, however, institutional recognition is required from universities, funding institutions, and political actors, combined with active commitment to protecting, safeguarding, and raising the profile of all those involved, especially in sensitive and conflict-ridden fields.

This includes appropriate structural conditions, such as resources for translation work in multilingual contexts, honoraria for non-academic partners, legal protection for collaborative processes, and space for reflection and relationship building. Public anthropology is a distinct form of anthropological research and teaching that requires flexible funding policies and institutional openness. The special requirements of multimodal formats, such as sound, image, performance or digital media, must be recognized as legitimate forms of academic work and they should be incorporated into teaching with appropriate time slots and qualification opportunities. This also means critically questioning existing funding and evaluation criteria for early career researchers, as well as opening up new qualification paths beyond traditional academic careers. Through actively learning empathy, experimenting, and using participatory and non-extractive research methods, students can experience self-efficacy while still at university. They also acquire skills that are relevant far beyond academic research in social fields of action and work. For other early career researchers, such as doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers, this formative phase lays the foundation for an academic practice that will allow them to position themselves within complex public spheres and to understand research as a responsible form of knowledge production.

Last but not least, public anthropology relies on long-term, solidarity-oriented networks with state and civil society actors and across academic hierarchies. Building such relationships requires continuous communication, as well as an awareness of how and in what formats to speak, communicate and negotiate within and across different publics. Active networking with people working in other disciplines and genres is necessary to share experiences, experiment with new forms of knowledge production, and support one another. Questions regarding power-sensitive collaborative work in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary contexts must continually be asked. For example: who owns the data, knowledge or interpretive power in joint projects? How should open publication formats (open access, open source) be handled? And how can collaborative structures be made sustainable in the long term? These questions can only be answered if academic knowledge creation is recognized as a shared process of collective authorship. A forward-looking public anthropology must therefore also advocate institutionally for new forms of knowledge circulation to be recognized as a legitimate part of anthropological practice, secured by appropriate legal, material, and ethical frameworks.

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empirical cultural studies. For the sake of simplicity, in this position paper we use the terms "ethnology" or "ethnological" and "anthropologists" or "anthropological" interchangeably to refer to all these disciplinary traditions, without fundamentally questioning the specificity and different genealogies of the ethnological disciplines in the German-speaking context.

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Further Reading:

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