

ENDING

Anthropological Association of Ireland Conference 2020
26 & 27 November
Hosted by Dublin City University
on Zoom
anthropologyireland.org

Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

ENDING

It's over. The feeling is inescapable, even if the 'it' in question is an unknown unknown. Time's up, the hashtag ordains. But who or what is out of time? Europe? American Empire? Liberal democracy? Globalisation? Capitalism itself? Men (Chu 2019)? A liveable planet? Even... Madonna??? Done with. We seem to be living through an era of multiple endings, including JLo's badonkadonk (Allan 2016:2), as all sorts of interconnected phenomena collapse, [apparently all at once](#).

As a penultimate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the suffering of both social and corporeal bodies at their end — both seemingly gasping for air — as well as the unfair and invidious distribution of ultimate fates: #ICantBreathe. And the pandemic creates atmospheres of foreboding. For even if a coronavirus vaccine is found and the pandemic is halted, we then face the prospect of gathering ourselves together, pulling up our bootstraps, saying a prayer, and watching 'the seventh mass extinction' on the Discovery Channel. The end of history (Fukuyama 1992) turns out to be a rather unhappy occasion.

But does the very enormity of this apocalyptic concatenation reflect "history" at all? Or is it rather the projected narcissistic mood of a discipline uniquely obsessed with its own demise? In fact, the sense of an ending has recurred as a topic of reflexive anthropological thought over and over again, without end, for decades. Wasn't anthropology always already the study of 'A World on the Wane' (Levi-Strauss 1961)? It has been over a quarter century now since Nancy Scheper-Hughes declared flatly 'the end of anthropology' in the pages of *The New York Times* (Scheper-Hughes 1995). By 2010, that notion had become hackneyed and overplayed, but nevertheless worthy of yet another set of reflections on... 'the end of anthropology' (Jebens 2013). Rather like a person at middle age regarding his own hairline whilst looking out at our collective global crises, anthropology's concern with its own diminishing prospects may account for the doom that its 'darker' iterations (Ortner 2016) seem to find everywhere in the world today. Is anthropology but a millenarian cult which, having vanquished ancestor worship, detects in the imponderable signs and symbols of ethnographic reportage only portents of risk, emergency, crisis, apocalypse, new world order?

But rather than join a shrieking chorus of voices — sirens — proclaiming not only a new epoch, but perhaps the end of the epochal itself (Lyotard 1979), let us instead modestly come back to Ireland in 2020 and ask: *What is ending and how is it doing so?*

In November 2020, the Anthropological Association of Ireland invites anthropological reflections on 'ending' as the theme for its annual conference. 'Ending' embraces both the epochal and the epic, the intimate and the ephemeral, the temporal and the spatial, the corporeal and the chronological. It may do so through forensic diagnosis of the status quo in careful empirical analysis and reporting — that is, through rich ethnography, as when the devastating effects of hegemonic neoliberal policy are documented: bad schools, decaying public infrastructure, increasing inequality, decreasing life expectancy, narrowing imagination and creativity, more boring sex. Or it may do so with rigorous or fanciful theoretical speculation, as it has done at least since the 'postmodern' went in and out of vogue. Here we may say that 'ending' evokes temporality and narrative, and the conventional and authoritative ways in which they are joined — in the denouement of the novel, for example, or in the rhetoric of finality that accompanies government commissions of inquiry into political scandals or historic wrongs, or in national-cultural histories meant to seal within narrative (and thereby to end interpretive openness) certain visions of the past and its victims (Kohli 2021). But 'ending' also suggests a process *endured*, an on-going-ness; not only finality, but also duration. What is it like to *live* at 'the ending' of something? What is it like to end something? Are we at the beginning of the end? Or the mid-term? Answers will vary depending on the proclivities of one's circumstances, otherwise known as 'culture.' Contingencies such as those characteristic of religious orders founded in the expectation of an end they have now been waiting over 2,000 years for (Brown 2015). Those sirens you thought you heard are *their* heralds. Contingencies such as those that greet the end of liberal democracy as the opportunity to complete some unfinished business, viz. the material actualisation of the nation as one, a dream to be executed through the violence that divides citizen from Other (Appadurai 2019). There are other *contingencies*, nothing is inevitable; in the immortal words of Leo Varadkar on the eve of lockdown, 'No fate but what we make.' The anthropologist's job is to show how this line from *Terminator 2* symbolises 'neoliberal responsabilisation,' and that it is a *social construction*.

Allan, J. A. (2016) *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus*. Regina: University of Regina Press.

Appadurai, A. (2019) "A Syndrome of Aspirational Hatred Is Pervading India," *The Wire*, 10 December. <https://thewire.in/politics/unnao-citizenship-bill-violence-india>

Brown, P. (2015) *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.

Chu, A. L. (2019) *Females*. London: Verso.

Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

Kohli, P. (2021) *Memories in Service of the Hindu Nation: Compiling an Ethnography on the Partition in Modi's India*, Ph.D. thesis, Dept. of Anthropology, Maynooth.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1961) *A World on the Wane*, trans. John Russell. London: Hutchinson.

Scheper-Hughes, N. (1995) "The End of Anthropology." *The New York Times*, May 7.

*Please send proposed paper abstracts of 500 words to AnthropologicalAssocIreland@gmail.com by **15 October**. Panels may be proposed. Such proposals should include a 500 word abstract for the panel, as well for each paper.*

Conference participants are invited to submit paper proposals on the general theme as described above (“Ending”) or on one of the following two sub-themes that the AAI views as having special anthropological interest and for which the AAI will organise plenary sessions.

Dublin in Ruins

In the capital of the Republic, a sense of loss is palpable, as cherished social institutions are demolished, replaced by no-frills hotels and “co-living” dormitories. Public health restrictions post-COVID have eviscerated every social institution, but perhaps with the most devastation visited upon creative communities of performers and cultural producers, or communities that already enjoyed only a precarious recognition by the mainstream, and were already being displaced — killed — by the forces of neoliberal high tech capital. But in this respect, Dublin is far from unique; we invite comparative cases of cities on life support. But beyond ‘comparison,’ there are indeed material interconnections between, for example, the death of San Francisco (Mattern 2019), and Dublin — a double suicide executed through the corporate high tech capital that straddles them both. Looking out from ‘Silicon Docks,’ now almost entirely owned by Google corporation, one might glimpse the European headquarters of Facebook (and remember its transformative role in contemporary politics, aka the end of democracy) or AirBnB (and think of the distorted property markets it has created, aka the end of affordable urban housing). If the character of Dublin is increasingly bland, corporate, indistinctive, indeed, non-placey, it is not only because abstract social forces may flatten all public and private space with the aesthetics of AirBnB and VSCO girls, but because those forces are concretely manifested in the form of US corporations yielding enormous power over cities and states. The ruination of cities can be precisely indexed by the ease with which you can rest your rear end. Dublin is notable for its lack of not only public spaces constructed for dwelling, but literally for its lack of anywhere to sit down. This includes facilities for relieving oneself, and during lockdown, the absence of an infrastructure serving the bottoms of the body became iconic of the neglect the capital has shown toward its citizens in general, even as glistening new office buildings sprouted up once again in the special enterprise zone of the Docklands. We invite analyses that intersect critiques of political economy, urban geography, metropolitan cultures, design, housing activism, and more, to document the ruination of Dublin, and sister cities the world over whose lifeworlds have been disrupted by sharing economies, bidding wars over corporate headquarters, lack of funding for public transport, the dominance of RuPaul’s Drag Race on gay culture, and the fact that there is nowhere for people to s(h)it.

Outside Zoom, that is, actually outside (in the rain): Presentations at or from: Silicon Docks, Glasnevin Cemetery, Phoenix Park, the former toilet beneath College Green.

Ending Ethnography, Ending the University

Government mandates appear to make the future prospect of ethnographic fieldwork in its conventional modality — often involving relations of close proximity and trust between anthropologists and their research participants — impossible (or perhaps merely illicit). When a major international funder such as the Wenner-Gren Foundation advises PhD students that it simply can't fund 'traditional' fieldwork proposals now, what indeed has become of the research style that so distinctly says 'anthropology'? Will anthropologists even be able to conduct fieldwork in the future? How? And what does this mean for the writing of ethnographic texts? If postmodernism ushered in a crisis in representation, revealing 'ethnography' to be a genre of literary production, the current calamity reminds us that ethnography was never only a semiotic construct, but also something like the signifying remains of empirical research projects binding people into qualitatively specific spatial relationships (proximity and/or distance) and distinctively characteristic social relationships ('intimacy' and/or 'agonism').

But if COVID-19 requires us to imagine disciplinary demise yet again, the longer trendlines regarding the production of knowledge in general are looking frayed, with badly split ends. The university is no longer a haven of erudition and enlightenment in an ignorant and backward world. We no longer look out from the Ivory Tower (redoubt of privilege and the luxurious freedoms of imagination it affords), but rather down at it, in order to assess the property value underneath, and to guess which billionaire will get her name on the rock climbing studio that replaces it. If privilege is what academics use to enjoy, because after all, they had been born to the manor, arriving under the college sally port with the right colour of skin, talking only in received pronunciation, belonging to the right sex — precarity is their condition at the end of the university, which *coincidentally* coincides with significant gains for scholars who don't in fact share this complexion — when it sees the value it produces not in the forms of knowledge it engenders, but rather in the brand it can synergise with contemporary corporations and the families that run them.

Perhaps the university managers know more than they seem to. And that's because there is an epistemological ending in sight as well, one that dissolves the foundations of knowledge into a quicksand that sucks even facts, even ontology itself, into it. If universities were social institutions that branded claims about the world with the authority of the truth, today they are rather seen as something like daycare for zoomers (students) and/or millennials (TAs). On contract and teaching several more classes than the tenured Professor down the hall, you thought you were writing about the nature of the nation. But you were merely babysitting.

*Outside Zoom, that is, actually outside (in India, or the US, or Kuwait): presentations from students *in the field right now* about what COVID did to their fieldwork.*

ENDING:

AAI Conference 2020

Organizer in Chief: Kayla Rush

“Scientific Committee”: Thomas Strong, James Cuffe, Fiona Murphy, Kayla Rush, Pranav Kohli

Conference Dates: November 26 & 27, 2020

Deadline for Proposals: October 15, 2020

Conference Fees: The conference is free, except for academics with permanent positions, who will pay a 30 euro fee that includes membership in the Anthropological Association of Ireland.

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