

Ethics as Ideals of Practice

Workshop at the University of Konstanz, 14–15 November 2013

CONFERENCE REPORT

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The often unexpected outcomes of globalization call for a new engagement with the subject of ethics, state Aiwa Ong and James Collier in their introduction to the volume *Global Assemblages*. This holds even more truth in view of the fact that ethical considerations have been crucial movers in building new transnational institutions as, for example, in the field of medical research and pharmaceutical industry, international aid, and business and finance. But ethics also plays a pivotal role in the mundane contexts of everyday life and are often perceived to be of existential importance for those who engage with them.

In the workshop of *Ethics as Ideals of Practice*, held at the University of Konstanz on the 14th and 15th November 2013, anthropologists debated on 'ordinary ethics' (Lambek), their implications for ethical personhood, and how they translate into everyday practice. The workshop was attended by participants from Canada (Michael Lambek, Marie-Nathalie LeBlanc), the Netherlands (Rijk van Dijk), the United Kingdom (David Parkin), and Germany (Astrid Bochow, Hansjörg Dilger, Thomas G. Kirsch). Michael Lambek opened the workshop with a keynote lecture on 'The Continuous and Discontinuous Person: Reflections on ethics from spirit mediums to modern legal subjects'.

By doing so, MICHAEL LAMBEK invited us to reflect on constructions of personhood in anthropological literature and Western philosophy which sets two different ideal types of personhood against each other: On the one hand, the 'forensic continuous person' that is legally accountable for his or her acts and commonly associated with people from the global North; on the other hand, the 'mimetic and discontinuous person' that is commonly assumed to be involved in practices such as spirit possession in the global South. The quintessence of his argument was that continuous and discontinuous personhoods presuppose each other.

Taking recourse to this interest in 'ordinary ethics' and the question of ethical personhood, participants of the workshop presented and discussed a broad range of ethnographic cases in which ethical considerations are important for people with regard to their everyday life as well as with regard to their social identities. MARIE-NATALIE LEBLANC spoke about evangelization campaigns by faith-based organization in Cote D'Ivoire, exploring how children not only become objects of these campaigns but are also constructed as moral subjects in this process. In a similar vein, HANSJÖRG DILGER explored religious education in Tanzania, giving evidence to the role of schools in promoting ideas of charity while at the same time employing an almost 'anti-religious' ethics of rational personhood, for instance when silencing spirit possessions among pupils. DAVID PARKIN spoke about the 'loud', i.e. publicly voiced, ethics of medical doctors in Tanzania in contrast to the 'quiet' morality of traditional healers. Other case studies examined the paradoxical relationship between ethics as such and what happens to them in everyday life. THOMAS G. KIRSCH presented the case of civic crime prevention in South Africa where the ethics of volunteers sometimes is at odds with the interests of those who are helped. ASTRID BOCHOW argued that many elite women in Botswana make ethical choices in their marriage and forego having children in order not to be infected by HIV/AIDS through their partners – a decision which conflicts with local understandings of ethical personhood that highlights the necessity to have children. Last but not least, RIJK VAN DIJK discussed how Ghanaian hair-salon owners in Botswana balance ethical/moral considerations in everyday economic affairs, struggling to come to situated assessments of what is permissible in legitimate in the context of local moralities.