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Experimental anthropology in the making: a conversation with Andreas Roepstorff

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By Des Fitzgerald

Andreas Roepstorff is Professor in Anthropology at Aarhus University in Denmark, where he is also Director of the Interacting Minds Centre. Since the early 2000s, he has pursued an intensely interdisciplinary and collaborative research-programme at the intersections of anthropology, science and technology studies, and cognitive neuroscience – while also using his ethnographic training to reflect back on this his own methods. Often cited as one of the early figures in what is today called ‘neuroanthropology,’ Andreas’s major research interests circle around forms of cooperation and communication, intersubjectivity and embodiment, ethnographies of knowledge and knowledge-translation, and experimental anthropology. Among his most important publications for social scientists are [‘Enculturing through patterned practices’](#) (with Jörg Niewöhner and Stefan Beck), [‘Neuroanthropology or simply anthropology’](#) (with Chris Frith) and [‘Transforming subjects into objectivity: an ethnography of knowledge in a brain-imaging laboratory.’](#) As part of the series on [‘The Collaborative Turn,’](#) Des Fitzgerald sat down with Andreas Roepstorff, for a conversation about disciplinarity and collaboration, in Aarhus, Denmark, in late 2014. This is an edited account of their conversation.

Becoming an experimental anthropologist

AR: When I was a student at Aarhus, I really liked biology and I really liked anthropology. I liked all of it. But I had an internal problem with...how on earth should I create an identity, and a kind of field around myself, and turn it into something? I had really created problems for myself. And then one day there was this sign on a white board at the university, where someone from the medical faculty needed someone to run a research project, as a research student in neuroscience. I had absolutely no training in neuroscience, but, um [laughs] I’d read a bit about it in my book, and I went off to talk to him, and said I was a potential student. And well, he needed to spend the money, so he just kind of hired me – he said, “That’s fine. [Laughs a lot]. There’s no one else. It’s yours.”

DF: So one of the things that interests me is how we reconstruct memories about these kinds of moments. Like, you must have passed a million white boards...

AR: No, I actually remember it as a very... It was like being completely broke, and suddenly you find 100 pounds on the street, and that just saves you. I remember even today what white board it was on, and it felt really like a lifesaver. I could certainly see that here would be a way to... kind of get a break and try to do some research and try to figure what I was doing there.

It was very classical electrophysiology, hippocampus stuff. So I started the morning by chopping the head off a rat and then dissected out the brain, and dissected out the hippocampus. We cut it into small slices and put them it on a woman's stocking, on a surface between water and air. Then you pull out small electrodes and insert them into the cells, and then you can record intracellularly from these hippocampus or electrophysiology cells... I was in a complete mess as to what I should do. I was 23 or 22. And I just absolutely had no idea how on earth I should make it through university. Not that I doubted I could get a degree, but...what trajectory would be possible for me? It was really desperate. And this project felt like: "here is an opportunity to try something out." But then the first half year was a disaster because I was really bad at the experimentation. The cells died for me and I didn't have the patience to do it. I was the only young person there and it was just....

DF: It's a real skill, that work.

AR: Yeah. I had this English professor who, in many ways, was extremely open-minded – just letting me come in off the street, and being supportive of all the strange things that I took an interest in. But, also, he just needed someone to do his electrophysiology. But then after a while, once we started getting some data, and the more analytical work, and the understanding, and learning the skills of it, it worked really easily.^[1] By the end of that year, I had the work done for a Masters in biology, although I was still an undergraduate student.

But I also had a very strong intuition that I needed to do something that would involve me being skilled in both biology and anthropology. And I could see how it could be done suddenly, because I had kind of done the biology [having enrolled as an anthropology student]. But then it took me the next couple of years convincing the university to allow me to do it because it was very much against the rules. At some point I basically just wrote to the university, and said "well why don't you just let me have those two degrees..." [laughs]. It was existentially extremely frustrating. I had a couple of years where – it's ridiculous now, but it wasn't at the time

—every year on the 1st of July, you had to post the entrance application to the university. I was, like, circling around that place from six in the morning till noon on the same day, trying to figure out if maybe should I do another degree...today it's kind of funny, but it wasn't at the time. So, in a sense that kind of, um, I wouldn't call it a commitment... it felt like that was how I had to train myself in a way.

Lithuania

AR: In ways I don't remember, I got a scholarship to go to Lithuania, of all places. I got something like, whatever, maybe 20 pounds a month to go. And I got in touch with the World Wide Foundation for nature, the WWF, who had a project on nature conservation on the border between Russia and Lithuania. I thought, "okay, yes, I can do a fieldwork exercise here..." In a way, and in spite of the fact that I was doing these two studies, things had fallen into place: you had basically eight years to complete a five year programme [in the Danish university system]. I thought: I'll just spend all the money I get from the state to get myself what felt like the right education. I took, like, a half a year of intensive Russian. Then I went to Lithuania, to study nature protection on the border between Lithuania and Russia.

And what I then discovered, when I was there, was that whenever I talked about nature protection... basically it was about nationality. The whole landscape was basically about protecting the national landscape and nothing else. That would have been 1992. The whole issue of national identity was extremely personal and around me, and basically... we ended up traveling around Lithuania and discussing Lithuanian history. At some point my master's thesis in anthropology became a historical analysis of Lithuanian national identity: I needed to understand the historical moments that led up to the narratives being as powerful as they were then, in that kind of Benedict Anderson tradition...[\[ii\]](#)

In the process I really discovered my own nationalism. What was so easy to deconstruct, this fervent attempt at recreating identity, and being concerned about history and objects of language, et cetera, I could see that actually the *exact* processes had taken place in Denmark about a hundred and fifty years earlier. And I was in a way the product, you could say the end result, of such a long process of nation building. And in a very particular way – I mean, I'm joking – but, for a while, when I looked at Danish maps, I could become really angry that the border [between Denmark and Germany] was where it was, and not at the natural border which is a further south. [Laughing] I could understand that sentiment of what it was like to have it engrained in you. And I think that was a critical

moment. Danes are inherently extremely nationalist by their upbringing. But it took me to go to Lithuania, to almost act like a mirror, and then seeing those processes, I recognized and what I deconstructed in them was deeply in *myself*... and then you have to deconstruct it.

Greenland

AR: So I thought that studying knowledge was maybe not the worst thing to do. I ended up in a project where I was sent to Greenland to look at Halibut – the project was about what biologists know about fish, and what Greenland fishermen know about fish. I did that for the next couple of years.[\[iii\]](#)

DF: Halibut.

AR: You know...Greenland halibut. The place I went to, that's what they did. They fished halibut. But it was cool – we got on ice sledges, going in and fishing; it was very exotic in that sense. And I teamed up with a biologist as well, in a way trying out how you do translations between scientific knowledge and local knowledge, and what would it mean there. Then someone at my department gave me some Science and Technology Studies literature, and I just loved it immediately. It was just, I could see that it gave me the tools that were necessary to do this work. When I read the Callon article on the scallops[\[iv\]](#), it was just, “okay, yeah, this this is what I'm doing. I'm ready to do it. I know the biology. I can get a perspective on it. I can reconstruct it.” That made me kind of a self-made STS person. The two most influential texts were *We Have Never Been Modern*[\[v\]](#) – reading that was like being hit by lightning – then the Callon text was also incredibly useful. But those two articles – I was, like, reading it, and it was just internalized immediately.

So anyway I was doing arctic anthropology and I'm sure that could also have been, uh, another career. But just like I couldn't see myself becoming an Eastern Europeanist or a neurophysiologist, doing arctic anthropology was, um, I really liked it, but it just didn't feel right. And I didn't have the PhD. Really, it was a bit of a mess. And then there was a call from a Danish research council, where they had a special program on cognition and consciousness. I thought: “I don't have a PhD but I have two masters' degrees and I have worked as a researcher.” So I wrote an application for an individual research project, to do an ethnographic investigation of this new field of brain-imaging basically. I thought, you know, studying these knowledge processes had worked really well for me in Greenland. I can do the same just in this new field of neuroimaging.

London

AR: So I spent some time at the Functional Imaging Laboratory, at University College London [aka the FiL [\[vi\]](#)]. I was very much in an anthropological position, but you could say the question of communication, et cetera, that I was interested in was *also* something that Chris Frith [\[vii\]](#), the neuroscientist, was interested in – and it became already then a bit of collaboration. They invited me onto a study where I would interview people about their experiences and things like that. I never got to do any analysis or any design or anything. My main contribution was that, just before I left, I had to make a report back to them. They had a traditional Friday meeting and they wanted me to tell them something, and that was when I did an analysis of the FiL as a house [\[viii\]](#). It started as a tongue-in-cheek kind of ‘Do you actually know where you are? What’s involved in it?’ That... was interesting because I was surprised by how much it was an eye opener to the people there. Several of the young Research Fellows, were like, ‘what is this?’ and some of the Principal Researchers came over after and said: ‘that was really interesting. Did you know we’re all Catholic?’ [laughs].... I didn’t really know if this work I had done was serious or not serious, but it was what I could come up with. I came back to Denmark again. At that time people here were setting up a neuroimaging center. They were applying for a Centre of Excellence grant. And they asked if I would join them rather than study them.

DF: Was that purely because there weren’t so many people locally with experience...

AR: There was no one, there was no one locally... There was this one guy who did stuff on pain. But I think the person who was heading up the application kind of saw something in me that he wanted in his group. They thought maybe I could create links to London and bring smart people over. But I was not an imager. I had never done a study. And I didn’t know how to do analysis et cetera. I wasn’t sure if the that the grant was going to be landed, and we were going to have a third child, I think. I was almost...there was another group of people who wanted to hire me to write the Danish history of the natural sciences and do the biology part of it. I was so close to becoming a historian of science. That would have been interesting and it could have gone that way as well. I still didn’t have a PhD and I was not a PHD student. In fact, I have never been a PHD student. Anyway they got the grant and actually at first, the grant evaluators said, “Well, you don’t have anyone to do cognitive research, we will cut your grant by that amount of money and you have to skip it. No one is qualified to do it.” The people who had written the grant said “okay,” and then they came back to me and said: “we’ll just do it

anyway. We'll just hire you on a lower budget, because we think this is important," which of course it was. And this was a *really* critical moment where in spite of qualifications etc. things fell into place. And then I thought, "I'd better get this PhD done." So I convinced the people in anthropology that I could hand in a thesis without having been a student, which was 'ethnography of knowledge' – combing stuff on Greenland Halibut and stuff on brain-imaging laboratories.[\[ix\]](#)

Home

DF: The tension in your account is never between history and biology... it doesn't sound like the tension for you was thinking, "how do I analyze, say, the history of the Lithuanian state through nature conservation?" The tension was: "how I can convince various structures that this is a reasonable thing to do?"

AR: I think that's probably very true.

DF: Because that's an unusual perspective.

AR: But you know there is positive personal story to it which is really trivial: my father is a protein chemist, my mother is a sociologist. They divorced when I was 18.

DF: Um, that's not trivial. It seems, uh... pertinent.

AR [Laughs]: It might be. I don't know... it would a very obvious place to find that those mental dispositions which would be in me, in a way. To some degree overcoming my parents' divorce could be seen as a motor. And also coming to terms with myself. Because for a while I thought I had to do one or do the other. And I realized, actually I don't. I'm just perfectly happy being just there and being able to speak in a relatively fluently – if not an expert – way across these fields. And thinking across them just seems to come very easily [...] I remember it as a very definite choice, to say that, "for this to work I needed more than a major in one and a minor in the other." Because I thought, with that, I'm just not going to be able to contribute or to understand things basically. In that sense it was a very Protestant, kind of... I just have to work my way through what it takes to get the disciplinary training.

And it's actually an *advantage* that they don't link up. I don't want to have bad interdisciplinarity. I want good biology, and I want good anthropology. And then whatever comes out of that comes out of that. That was a very conscious choice. I *believe* in disciplines. And I believe in disciplines as a

point of reference, as something that you discuss within and along. I think this is absolutely critical. And the kind of formal training you get in a discipline is necessary. And there I didn't cut any corners. Even after I shifted from chemistry and biotechnology to biology, I thought, "there's just not enough math in this." You know, I took mathematics at a higher level because I thought I would need the math at some point, and I was just at some point really stressed by it. I remember going up the hill in Aarhus to take math classes, and half way up realizing, "actually, you know, I don't need to do this. [Laughs] It's not something anyone asks of me." And halfway up I turned around and went down and never went to those math classes again. It was a very physical realization.

DF: Metaphors of travel are so present in your account, and ideas about borders, and about movement... I'm trying to fashion a question that isn't cheesy, which is something about the ways in which travel both literally and figuratively is very central to your intellectual work.

AR: I think that is true, but the really interesting twist that I basically work at the university where I was taught, and at the institute where I was taught. I live if not in the house, then on the property I grew up in. My kids go to the same school that I went to. I'm *extremely* locally bound.

DF: I remember you saying to me one time that there were real virtues to being away from the centre.

AR: That was my feeling going to London. Obviously, for the mainstream stuff London was much, much better. I *can* regret that I didn't go to a central place of learning earlier in my studies. That would have given me a discipline that I'm sure would have been extremely useful. But I also thought that the competition... it was, like, a good place to be when you were very formative, and a good place to be if you get head-hunted to do what you would like to do. But in the middle, it seems to provide very little space for maneuvering. And also to be not very amenable to the work that I could see myself doing – which is, you can say, exploratory or traveling or whatever. In that sense, very concretely, I was given opportunities here in Aarhus that would never have happened in a central place. You just don't let people without a PHD go in and, you know, you don't let them do cognitive science without a psychology degree. It's just not a sensible way to spend your money. You don't walk in the door without a degree and get to do neurophysiology, right? It's just not... [laughs]. But you can say that all of these factors created the possibility for me to get some unusual experiences that arose before I was actually prepared to do, them or skilled to do them, or ready to do them. Which must somehow be formative of the way I work, I think.

DF: When I write about these things, I often use this metaphor of dwelling

at the margins. And actually I think you're right that there's something about dwelling... like, it's easier to dwell at the margins when you *literally* are at the margins.

AR: It is. And you can say it's very much dwelling in the sense that basically I'm just at home.

Anthropologies of collaboration

AR: There's something about the way we construe the participant observation role which makes collaboration very difficult to do. I think, at the end of the day, the anthropological position is inherently extremely arrogant. And arrogance is not the best starting point for collaboration. People see through it at some point [...] You need to be able to do something useful as well. This is not something people have a lot of training in. But it's really a challenge and that means a re-configuration, I think George Marcus is the one that sees this better than everyone else[x]. That this kind of mutual engagement where you are kind co-producing and co- investigating and exploring what it mean to have different stakes in something that has to be a joint product. I think as as someone who has re-defined the discipline, I think he is basically second to none. He keeps coming up with metaphors that become licenses to work in novel ways.

For example his work on multi-sited fieldwork, which was not about the multi-sitedness but about following whatever seems relevant. He just gave a completely different perspective on what you can do. And how he thinks about collaboratories in a similar way just redefines what it means to do ethnography... He's here in Aarhus quite regularly. He's very curious, and thinks along and thinks with it and does stuff. A lot of people, for instance would like to position me as a cognitive anthropologist. And I'm definitely not a cognitive anthropologist. I can't identify with it. I think it's dominated by people who take old- fashioned ideas in cognitive psychology – and they miss out on what anthropology is about, and has been about. Similarly, I don't see myself as a neuroanthropologist either. I think what I do is just anthropology[xi]. Or, if anything, it might be experimental anthropology.

Interdisciplinarity and Fragility

DF: In some ways you are a terrible interviewee for this. Because what we're trying to think about is collaboration and the problematics of collaboration. And people like me, we struggle with that as a question, and

as an ethic, and as a way to go about things. And you *don't*, I think. Or, it's not that you don't struggle with it, but it's almost like 'collaboration' is an inappropriate register in which interpret what you do, because you're never like 'I'm the anthropologist,' when you collaborate with these guys, or 'I'm the biologist' when you collaborate with *these* guys. It's much more fluid and much more natural.

AR: It is and that's probably the trick. In that sense, it's not like, "and now I go in to do a translation." To some extent, it's almost like externalizing processes that are ongoing in myself. I haven't thought about it in that way before. It just doesn't feel like, "and now I have to combine this." It just seems like the most obvious thing in the world. But also, partly, I'm extremely bad at writing about these things. You might have noticed. I mean I probably *could* write about it... but it would be so much labor, whereas collaboration itself just doesn't feel like *work*. And these connections, or patterns – it's the most obvious thing in the world. [...] It's a bit like building with Lego: "yes, this seems to be a right configuration for this particular place and context and situation." Which on the one hand is very nice, because I'm quite convinced that this is the way it works. But it's also extremely specific to the moment.

In one way, I'm in a very fragile position, because I'm not sure I could compete myself into a position at another good university. It works now, because I'm kind of in a relatively secure base here, but I doubt I could compete in a pure anthropology department, or in brain-imaging. I believe I can be very useful to most academic institutions, but I would not be the first candidate for an ordinary position. That worried me for a while, and should something happen here, it could become worrying again. Because, you know, "Who is this guy? What is his profile? What has he actually done?" For a while I worried a lot about it. I knew I was as good as an anthropologist as the people who get the jobs, but I wouldn't get it because of the biology part. Of course I worried for a while. But I just didn't seem to have any choice to do otherwise. In that sense, I think there has always been a very strong dedication or conviction, that what I was exploring was the right thing. It was just difficult to figure out how on earth should I place it *vis-à-vis* the institution." Still I will say today, objectively speaking, it's a potentially very fragile situation.

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- [iii] Roepstorff, A. (2003) 'Clashing Cosmologies. Contrasting Knowledges in the Greenlandic Fishery' in A. Roepstorff, N. Bubandt and K. Kull (eds.) *Imagining Nature. Practices of Cosmology and Identity*. London: Aarhus University Press g, pp.117-42
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- [v] Latour, B. (1993) *We have never been modern*. Boston, MA: Harvard UP.
- [vi] Now part of the Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging – a major international site for neuroimaging research. See <http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/>
- [vii] Chris Frith is a prominent British neuroscientists, most famous for his work on social cognition. In addition to his emeritus position at UCL, Chris Frith is also now a visiting professor in Aarhus. See <http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/Frith/>
- [viii] Roepstorff, A. (2002) 'Transforming subjects into objectivity. An ethnography of knowledge in a brain imaging laboratory.' *Folk* 44: 145-170. Available at <http://www.pet.au.dk/~andreas/pages/Files/folk.pdf>
- [ix] Roespstorff, (2003) *Facts, Styles and Traditions: Studies in the Ethnography of Knowledge*. Aarhus University, PhD Thesis: Afd. f. Etnografi og Socialantropologi
- [x] See e.g. Marcus, G (ed.). (2000) *Para-Sites: A Casebook against Cynical reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [xi] Roepstorff, A. and CD Frith. (2012). 'Neuroanthropology or simply anthropology? Going experimental as method, as object of study, and as research aesthetic.' *Anthropological Theory* 12 (1) 101-111.

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