

Intervention @ #otheranthropolitics, Volos 15/4/2019

## ‘Knowledge brokers in cooperative networks: becoming actors in the production of hope’

Today I will talk about my ongoing research on processes of knowledge transfer taking place in translocal networks of –let’s call them generally- cooperative or commoning initiatives, specifically transfers to Greece from abroad. I’ll describe my field shortly and I will share some questions I am posing. I have no final answers, of course, I don’t even have final questions, but I thought I’d throw these thoughts at you and we’ll see what happens. Criticism and suggestions are more than welcome.

So, in a few words, in recent years we’ve seen the emergence of initiatives worldwide that are guided or inspired by the principles of the commons and cooperativism. Principles like the focus on locality, self-organization, democratic decision-making, open access to knowledge, etc. At the same time, the experience acquired and the knowledge or know-how produced by such initiatives is often regarded as exemplary and possibly useful for other communities in different parts of the world (both in practical and political terms, or, in other words, for local needs and for broader political change, or in other other words, short- and long-term), and so this knowledge is therefore transposed or replicated toward different places.

This sort of knowledge transfer is sometimes realized by groups or communities themselves, who identify a need or a problem or a shortage, then seek a solution or come across an idea and try to adjust and adopt it, or first the idea comes their way and they think ‘hey, we could use this’ and so on. And some other times the process is initiated and maintained by different types of experts –most often activists, researchers, researching activists or activist researchers- who play the role of intermediaries, ‘cultural translators’ or as I have concluded I would call them, ‘knowledge brokers’. The meanings invested in the concept of broker in anthropology have changed through time, but there is no point to go through them today. With regard to the distinction between grassroots initiatives on the one hand and brokered-by-experts on the other I am over-simplifying, but I am doing it for the sake of brevity. In *every* network of relations and knowledge exchange there are various types of mediation, but the difference I am emphasizing concerns two things, among others: who initiates the process and who supports it. My case, meaning my experience and my research, is the latter, brokered-by-experts initiatives. In the specific cases I’ve followed, these actors in the described ecosystem have different agendas (e.g. focusing locally or aiming for wider political change) and they show varied degrees and types of involvement and expertise (from providing technical know-how and support to working as liaisons between people, or from 100% voluntary to 100% professional).

I will give you some info on the context of my research, to make it more concrete. Around two years ago I started collaborating with NetHood, a Zurich-based NPO, co-founded by Panayotis Antoniadis who some of you know. Antoniadis works as such a

broker himself, and views NetHood as a ‘bridge institution’ as he calls it, between research and action, between institutions and communities, between the digital and the physical space, etc. NetHood is also a partner of Heteropolitics. It is through Antoniadis that I know Alexandros who became a member of my PhD committee and, if I am not mistaken, it is his collaboration with Sarantaporo.gr CN that played a decisive role in the CN being included as a field of study for Heteropolitics. So see, brokering par excellence. It is also thanks to Antoniadis, in large part, that I am conducting a PhD research, since NetHood supported me financially for two years. The implications of our collaboration on my thesis are multiple, but most of them are out of today’s topic.

NetHood maintains various activities and collaborations in Greece and abroad (both formal and informal projects) and these projects were my entry point to study how translocal knowledge transfer occurs inside the ‘ecosystem of cooperativism or commoning’. The deal was that I would contribute to NetHood’s projects as an anthropologist, mainly by producing ethnographic accounts of events and, at the same time, I would be gathering ethnographic material for my PhD research. The work for NetHood was about facilitating processes of knowledge transfer, about how to learn from so-called ‘success stories’ or ‘best practices’, how to present them and make ensuing knowledge available in such a way (often systematized in the form of a methodology) as to make it more intelligible and appealing to potentially interested groups or communities. For my research I have three case studies: NetHood itself, netCommons.eu research project on wireless community networks in which Sarantaporo.gr was also a partner and Co-Hab action-research initiative on cohousing I will further describe below.

While working with NetHood, little by little, the brokers themselves and their agency became my field of study, not only because I had privileged access to the interactions they (and myself) participated in, but also because I came to consider their role to be central in processes of selecting, translating and transposing knowledge, and consequently in the form that different initiatives would take.

Later, during fieldwork (or work), I decided to focus on the relation of knowledge brokers with hope and the creation of vision for political change, as I came to realize that, as a broker myself inside networks of ‘experts’ brokering knowledge, the function of mediating was primarily about creating or sustaining visions for alternative futures that would justify and give meaning to actions today.

To showcase this, I will cite the example of Co-Hab, an informal action-research group that aims to promote cohousing in Athens, which was co-created by Antoniadis and some architects and which I am a member of. The concept of cooperative housing and collective ownership does not exist in Greece, while in countries like Switzerland or Germany, for instance, it is a widespread and institutionally established practice. So, through international workshops, public talks and an ongoing participatory design workshop in Athens, Co-Hab has been trying to disseminate the idea of cohousing and to explore the possibility of its implementation in Athens, by activating the imaginary in order to envision new ways of co-living in the city, to quote Co-Hab’s words which are basically my words. So, in this case it wasn’t a community or a movement that collectively expressed the need to seek out relevant knowledge, but a group of ‘experts’

who are not themselves in need of housing, but think that cooperative housing could be a meaningful solution for many people's housing problems in Athens and it could contribute to a wider transformation regarding the way we think and act in relation to public space, common space and politics in general.

And now, as promised, a few open questions:

- Regarding expertise: How is the idea of who is an expert formed in such an ecosystem? Is an architect an expert on cohousing just because architects design houses? I have often felt expertise-less regarding cohousing, even though I am part of the team of 'experts' and I propagate related ideas.

- When knowledge transfer occurs in the context of an institutionally funded research project, does the regulatory framework and the formal constraints that it poses condition the form and content of produced knowledge?

- How are conceptions of present and future time perceived and configured in order to create a commonly accepted narrative? E.g. the bureaucratic time of a European project does not coincide with the social rhythm in villages of the Sarantaporo region and the urgency of people looking for a home does not seem compatible with Co-Hab members' goal for a wider transformation of the conception and practice of common life in the city.

Also, for research no experience is lost, it constitutes knowledge for the future, we learn from it. Researchers have the luxury to view the outcome of initiatives like this, but communities often do not. I believe that researchers are increasingly aware of this. Among Heteropolitics' goals we find "the production of knowledge together with the people under study and the bridging of the distance between 'expert' and 'non-expert'". Anthropology moves along these lines in recent decades, actors like NetHood also share these values.

What does this mean with regard to political vision? Is there a process of convergence or negotiation between divergent visions and goals? If the brokers are in charge of bridging the distance, is this effort reorienting knowledge in a way that congruence is achieved?

- Lastly, if we think that knowledge *brokers themselves hope* that political subjectivities with certain characteristics will emerge, either subjectivities that are there but remain latent and just need access to knowledge of possibility in order to reveal themselves, or subjectivities that will be gradually shaped through socio-economic and political developments and access to alternative imaginaries, and following Hirokazu Miyazaki's ideas, can we view hope as a method that mobilizes the imagination and reorients knowledge in order to create collective visions of future realities that we decide to strive for and that, in turn, give us hope?