

Ethnography *in* Europe, or an anthropology *of* Europe?

What are the stakes of an anthropology of Europe?

Dace Dzenovska's sensitive and incisive ethnographic account of the routine affairs of a few immigration officials in Latvia has all the ostensible hallmarks of a classically anthropological encounter, subtly revealing the nuances of a remarkable sociality enfolded within the seemingly mundane contours of the everyday, in an out-of-the-way place. Within the disciplinary confines of a journal of social anthropology, that alone might conventionally suffice to qualify this article as a genuine achievement. I want to insist, however, that this article achieves something far greater. For, in this apparently remote and relatively non-descript place in the borderlands of Europe, Dzenovska discerns and interrogates the workings of a question of rather more monumental proportions. I call this the 'European' question.

From a place at the presumed margins of 'Europe', Dzenovska has the audacity to frame her ethnography in a manner that compels us to contemplate a constellation of interconnected questions: *Where* is Europe? *Who* is a European? What, indeed, is 'Europe'? These, it seems to me, are questions of deep consequence, which concern us all, in intimate ways.

The ethnographic scenario with which we are presented in Dzenovska's article – involving 'the bordering encounter' of 'a motley crew of post-Soviet subjects', some of whom 'got lucky' and have come to be counted among 'the new Europeans', others of whom have been relegated by 'the re-bordering of Europe' to a place just beyond the pale, on the outside, 'contiguous others' with aspirations to stake their claims to Europe, or indeed, to go 'deeper into Europe' – elegantly evokes this whole panoply of questions. Undoubtedly, these questions are partly framed here in terms of a beleaguered Latvian nationalist essentialism confronting its distinctly post-Soviet 'demographic challenge'. In a revealing moment of ethnographic complicity instigated by the Latvian border police official in conversation with the Latvian anthropologist, the immigration official can smugly proclaim, 'We know why we are doing what we are doing'. Nonetheless, there is no moment when Dzenovska's ethnography becomes reducible to any sort of Latvian parochialism. That is to say, even at its most apparently 'local', this scene is never reducible to any sort of culturalist essentialism, or any presumable (pseudo-) 'ontology' (to allude to what has become a perverse fashion in some anthropological circles). Rather, the distinctive variety of public sociality that Dzenovska so deftly illustrates here – whereby she and her interlocutors recognise one another across various lines of difference and inequality as 'normal people', 'people like us' – is an 'historically formed understanding' – profoundly post-Soviet, transnational, criss-crossed and scarred by various intersecting and overlapping historical borders.

In all these respects, this peculiar 'normalcy' that conjoins Dzenovska's motley crew is both European and not-European, and serves to expose the intrinsic instability and

artifice of precisely this distinction, even as it produces the most crucial fault line at stake in this bordering encounter. For, the divergent geopolitical fortunes of the various former ‘Soviet Socialist Republics’ vis-à-vis ‘Europe’ merely underscore the extent to which all of these denizens of ‘the Soviet past and the European present’ remained, in Dzenovska’s felicitous phrase, ‘fellow travellers across lines of power’ – even those who have ostensibly gotten ‘lucky’ and may now be counted as officially on the ‘inside’ of the European Union. Hence, we are invited here to contemplate the Latvian immigration police who do the mundane work of patrolling the putative border of the European Union, and yet, like so many of their Latvian and other ‘Eastern European’ compatriots – indeed, like the Georgian migrant whom they have apprehended and will deport – harbour the comparably mundane aspiration of migrating ‘deeper into Europe’ as ‘a tactic in pursuit of a “normal life”’. The amorphous buffer zone of the extended eastern European borderlands is thereby revealed to be always also a transit zone for the distributive and differential modulation of inequalities among heterogeneous categories of mobile or would-be mobile people – citizens, migrants, refugees and so forth, ‘contiguous others’ all. In the face of this proliferation of (re-)bordered identities and spaces, therefore, we are compelled to ask where exactly the ‘real’ Europe may truly be.

And yet, as Dzenovska astutely clarifies, the ‘historically formed understanding’ that was the basis for these post-Soviet subjects to recognise one another as ‘normal people’, as ‘people like us’, remained deeply invested in the reiteration and re-entrenchment of a ‘European’ boundary that could effectively preclude asylum-seekers and migrants from Africa, the Middle East and beyond. These latter mobile subjects – whatever their aspirations to a ‘normal life’ in Europe – were presumptively disqualified from this form of post-Soviet sociality, inflected as it was with a shared, historically conditioned sense of ‘normalcy’ derived from analogous ‘lifeworlds ... shaped by resonant fields of power’, but also reinvigorated by an expressly ‘European’ devotion to superintending the racialised boundary that cordons off ‘European’ prestige and prosperity from its obstreperous ‘outside’. Here, we are reminded that the politics of ‘European’-ness is not merely a geo-politics. Indeed, it is not even primarily a geo-politics. It is, above all else, a postcolonial racial formation.

Like any racial formation, the contemporary ‘European’ project and its incumbent politics of space and identity is intrinsically incoherent, contradictory and unstable. This is what is so intriguing and compelling about Dzenovska’s ethnography: it repeatedly exposes the instability of any claim to fix or verify where the borders of ‘Europe’ and the boundaries of ‘European’-ness may be. Dzenovska’s work, in other words, invites us to consider the enduring coloniality of the border-making and border-enforcing projects that have rendered the vast and amorphous region known as ‘Eastern Europe’ as the multifaceted object of numerous and varied colonising ambitions, from the west as well as the east. Indeed, an essential feature of European history has always been the subjugation of some Europeans by others. From this perspective, the so-called ‘post-socialist’ predicament of Eastern Europe must be rendered more rigorously apprehensible in terms of the postcolonial condition that otherwise is truly the defining feature of any notion of ‘Europe’ as such. Nonetheless, as Dzenovska has shown elsewhere for Latvia, postsocialist Eastern Europeans can now be found aspiring ‘to overcome their seemingly permanent “not-quite-European” position’ by striving ‘to identify with colonialism’ and reaffirming Europe’s (collective, defining) colonial legacy (2013: 411).

If, in light of centuries of European colonial violence and aggrandisement on a global scale, ‘Europe’ may be said to be a racial formation – which is to say, more precisely, a racial

formation of postcolonial whiteness – this plainly does not mean that all ‘Europeans’ are equally ‘white’ or ‘white’ in the same ways. Like the racial formation of whiteness itself, the homogenising character of a racial formation of ‘European’-ness (or European whiteness) is precisely devoted to obfuscating and suturing what are otherwise very profound and consequential differences and inequalities. ‘It is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false,’ as David Roediger explains, ‘it is that whiteness is nothing but oppressive and false.... Whiteness describes not a culture but precisely ... the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn’t and on whom one can hold back’ (1994: 13). As with whiteness, then, so we may posit of ‘European’-ness: it has historically acquired a spurious semblance of integrity or coherence solely on the basis of its presumptive derision for and subjugation of all that is produced as *non-European*. The constitutive contradictions and intrinsic antagonisms of ‘European’-ness are precisely what the homogenising racial formation of whiteness serves to superintend and re-code. And for those who inhabit the murky borderzones of ‘Europe’, the stakes are profound, indeed.

Finally, then, let us return to the larger question that frames my commentary: What are the stakes of an anthropology of Europe?

As I have argued elsewhere, with regard to the problem of an anthropology of the United States (De Genova 2007), there is unfortunately no end to the capacity for anthropology as a discipline to sustain and reanimate the impulse to exoticise and reify any multifarious variety of ethnographic ‘objects’ that can be located and circumscribed as inhabiting one or another space *in* Europe. In these ways, a forlorn and disoriented anthropology, still staggering in the protracted aftermath of decolonisation on a global scale and begrudgingly ‘repatriated’ to various imperial metropolitan locations within Europe (or North America), can readily go on reproducing itself in all the predictable and pitiful ways. My contention, however, is that no accumulation of ethnographies merely situated *in* Europe will ever suffice to constitute a genuine and critical anthropology *of* Europe. My proposition, furthermore, is that an anthropology *of* Europe can only be truly and adequately critical if it is prepared to unrelentingly posit ‘Europe’ itself as a problem. It is the finest achievement of Dace Dzenovska’s present article that it gracefully but incisively does precisely this.

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