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# Anthropology

## Spotlight on ERC projects

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## Introduction

Anthropology is a dynamic discipline that is rooted in the social sciences with strong ties to the humanities and the natural sciences. With its focus on lived realities and fine-grained ethnographic and comparative methods, anthropology is poised to make a substantive contribution to crucial questions about society, counterbalancing the abstract and numerical knowledge of cultural, political and societal transformations.

Initially, anthropology has essentially been about doing 'field research' in remote places to record the material practices, ecological adaptation, marriage patterns, religious beliefs, and legal habits of 'exotic' cultures. However, contemporary anthropology has become much more than the study of 'traditional' societies. Today, cultures are regarded as informed and shaped by all sorts of global influences. It is this interaction between cultures that captures the focus of contemporary anthropologists.

To date, the European Research Council (ERC) has supported close to 200 projects in anthropology and its manifold branches such as palaeoanthropology and anthropological linguistics, and ethnographies of emerging fields of study such as powerful elites, social movements, and larger entities like transnational corporations and state bureaucracies.

This brochure has been published on the occasion of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) Inter-Congress, taking place from 4 to 9 May 2016 in Dubrovnik (Croatia).

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Set up in 2007, the ERC is the first pan-European funding body designed to support investigator-driven frontier research and to stimulate scientific excellence across Europe. It aims to support the best and most creative scientists to identify and explore new directions in any field of research (Physical Sciences and Engineering, Life Sciences and Social Sciences and Humanities) with no thematic priorities and the only evaluation criterion being excellence. In the last nine years, the ERC has awarded more than 6 000 long-term grants to individual researchers of any nationality and age who wish to carry out their research projects in Europe.

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## Addressing the crises of an 'overheated' world

*Different responses might be given to global challenges. For example, how should the vanishing of a glacier be tackled? Prof. Thomas Eriksen aims to understand the economic, environmental and cultural transitions the world is going through and the responses created by local communities in order to offer valuable advice to our policymakers and leaders.*

'Overheating' is a metaphor for our present world, where changes are occurring at an exponential speed: population increasing sevenfold in the last two centuries, connecting technologies multiplying and energy needs creating a large pollution challenge. The OVERHEATING project is an attempt to write a collective, anthropological history of the early 21st century, with a focus on accelerated change and local responses to it.

Prof. Eriksen and his team are retrieving data from five continents and conducting fieldwork in Europe, Australia, Peru, Sierra Leone, Canada, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. In every

place they have developed an ethnographic project involving poor and affluent people, activists and decision-makers, in order to produce comparable and compatible data on the local perception, impact and management of the global crises. One of these studies took place in Peru, where the team analysed the responses given by the local villagers to the vanishing of glaciers provoked by the raise of temperatures. They portrayed a wide amount of actions, ranging from the most traditional ones - such as gifts to a mountain god - to anti global warming campaigns promoted by international NGOs and governmental agencies.

Using a worldwide approach, OVERHEATING aims to offer policymakers a view from a local vantage point on the growth and emergence of the presently interconnected world and the ways in which its inherent contradictions are being perceived at a small scale. As a result, appropriate policies could be developed in order to address these challenges.

**Researcher:** Thomas Hylland Eriksen

**Host institution:** University of Oslo (Norway)

**ERC project:** The three crises of globalisation: An anthropological history of the early 21st century (OVERHEATING)

**ERC call:** Advanced Grant 2011

**ERC funding:** EUR 2.5 million for five years

**Project webpage:** <http://www.sv.uio.no/sai/english/research/projects/overheating/>





Melting Andean glaciers: view from water reservoir in Chivay (Peru), where water is precious and scarce.

## The past and present of slavery: a history in the making

*Slavery represents a dark and unclosed page in the history of mankind. Even if legally abolished by all countries of the world, its legacies shape the present in a plurality of ways and often overlap with the phenomena that scholars, activists and policy-makers target as new slaveries. Which are the consequences of slavery after its legal death? Should new forms of labor exploitation and human bondage also be read in this key? Or are they the result of recent economic, political and social transformations?*

Prof. Alice Bellagamba investigates the contemporary repercussion of historical slavery in a unique interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study that draws on historical documents, oral history and ethnographic research. From the 19th century up to our days, she reconstructs the end of historical slavery, the renegotiated relationships between freed slaves and their former masters, and the multiple pathways to social emancipation of former slaves and other socially marginal groups. This is not the history of how the beacon of freedom swept away the obscurity of slavery but of the changing contours and contents of both slavery and freedom, and of the kinds of unfreedom that developed in the wake of abolition.

Through her ERC project, Prof. Bellagamba intends to obtain a picture of what slavery meant for individuals and for society and how its legacies interact with contemporary inequality and exploitation. Through an approach that valorises the voices of the people involved, the project questions the meanings and experiences of slavery and freedom among peasants of southern Senegal, Guinea Bissau and Chad, female domestic workers of Senegal and Ghana, Tunisian black minorities, sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, people of slave ancestry in the rural and urban areas of Madagascar, workers of Mauritius private manufacturing sector, brick-kiln workers in Afghanistan and Pakistan, migrant agricultural labourers in Italy.

This analytically integrated study of the aftermath of slavery captures both a variety of concrete case-studies and the larger history of connections between different regions of the world. In each of the contexts examined so far, the legacies of slavery show up in the dynamic interlacement of old and new forms of social stratification, and in the capacity of status and class hierarchies to shift under changing historical circumstances.

**Researcher:** Alice Bellagamba

**Host institution:** University of Milano Bicocca (Italy)

**ERC project:** Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (SWAB)

**ERC call:** Starting Grant 2012

**ERC funding:** EUR 935 100 for five years

**Project website:** <http://www.shadowsofslavery.org/index.php>







NO MORE SLAVERY



Graffito on a private wall, Janjanbureh Island (Gambia, 2006)

## What is eating?

*Living creatures relate to their surroundings in all kinds of ways. One of these is by eating from them and excreting into them. But what is eating? Incorporating other creatures or absorbing nutrients? A need of individual bodies or a pleasure that table companions share? The ERC project EATINGBODIES has explored such questions by studying various forms of eating.*

Practices of eating are relevant to public health, justice, agriculture, sustainability. They help to shape daily lives and cultural traditions. With her team, Prof. Annemarie Mol has studied diverse eating practices and questioned current ways of understanding them. EATINGBODIES did not talk about eating as if it were a physical necessity first, to which a social meaning is added in a second moment ; instead, it investigated moments of eating in all their socio-semiotic-material complexity.

In this way, Prof. Mol and her team contrasted calorie counting with sensing satisfaction; traced what it is to taste in different

contexts; explored the connections of dependency in which eating situates all eaters; wondered what people do to avoid wasting their food. They put their ethnographic methods to use in a wide variety of settings, from restaurants to private kitchens, from research laboratories to clinics.

In addition to rich empirical stories, this research also offers inspiration to shift vested philosophical understandings of what it is to be human. Since the actors-who-eat have semi-permeable boundaries, they are sustained by partially incorporating their surroundings and devouring the objects that they know and value.

The EATINGBODIES team has produced an impressive body of academic work. Upon receiving her ERC grant, Prof. Mol was appointed to a professorship at the University of Amsterdam. In 2012 she won the Spinoza Prize, the highest Dutch award for scientific research, and was invited to join the Dutch Royal Academy of the Sciences.

**Researcher:** Annemarie Mol

**Host institution:** University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

**ERC project:** The Eating Body in Western Practice and Theory (EATINGBODIES)

**ERC call:** Advanced Grant 2009

**ERC funding:** EUR 1.8 million for five years

**Project webpage:** <http://whatiseating.com/about/>







## Experiences and perception of punishment: an insight into the life of prisoners

*Women and sex offenders have been relatively neglected in existing sociological studies on prisons, particularly in debates about the relative severity of penal systems. Still, Dr Ben Crewe finds the treatment of these two prisoner groups symptomatic of wider social sensibilities. These and other issues will be investigated in the frame of COMPEN, an extensive comparative analysis of different prisoner groups and penal jurisdictions.*

Most ethnographic studies of prisoners focus on one prison in one country. Based at the University of Cambridge, Dr Crewe aims to go further by comparing the experience of imprisonment across different prisoner groups and national contexts. Specifically, his aim is to interrogate the 'Nordic exceptionalism' thesis – that is, the claim that punishment in Nordic nations is less harsh than in other countries - through using a framework which builds on the concepts of the 'depth', 'weight', 'tightness' and 'breadth' of imprisonment. To achieve this, his team will conduct substantial fieldwork in England & Wales and Norway, including a longitudinal study of entry into and exit from each prison system, ethnographic studies of female prisoners and imprisoned sex offenders, and an exploration of 'deep-end custody' in each

country. Through the concept of 'penal consciousness', the team will explore interactions between the punitive intentions of the State and prisoners' understanding of purpose and legitimacy of their penalty. Moral and cultural factors, such as shame and guilt, will also be taken into consideration and studied in different contexts.

Another objective of the COMPEN project is to investigate the processes affecting punishment policy. Through what mechanisms does the political economy of a country – whether it is neo-liberal (England & Wales) or social-democratic (Norway) – determine penal policy? Which groups, discourses and assumptions shape penal policy in these two jurisdictions?

At the end of the project, the research team will provide a theoretical framework enabling a more nuanced analysis of the experience of imprisonment than those used in current studies of penal systems. With this tool at hand, Dr Crewe will challenge the assumption that prisons are uniform entities in which penal experiences are the same for all prisoners, and will seek to put the 'exceptionalism' thesis to a strong empirical test.

**Researcher:** Ben Crewe

**Host institution:** University of Cambridge (United Kingdom)

**ERC project:** Penal Policymaking and the prisoner experience: a comparative analysis (COMPEN)

**ERC call:** Consolidator Grant 2014

**ERC funding:** EUR 2 million for five years

**Researcher's webpage:** [http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/people/academic\\_research/ben\\_crewe/research/](http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/people/academic_research/ben_crewe/research/).







## What are the attitudes towards public goods in Central and Eastern Europe?

*How can people and institutions in former communist countries work together towards greater socio-political, economic and environmental sustainability? To help answer this question, Dr Natalia Letki draws attention to the relations among citizens and between citizens and the state as the key elements determining production and management of public goods.*

Central and Eastern European countries are challenging contexts to produce public goods. Half a century of communist rule and a difficult transition to democracy and market economy, have left a heavy legacy on citizens' values and behaviour.

Dr Letki has carried out a full-scale public opinion survey to analyse people's interactions with public institutions and with other citizens, as well as their attitudes towards public goods and services, such as healthcare and education, and common resources, such as the environment. The survey took place in fourteen post-communist countries, eleven European Union members and Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine, generating data from over 21 000 respondents in

1 050 different neighbourhoods. Dr Letki's team subsequently combined information from these interviews with a range of social and economic indicators applying to the respondents' respective neighbourhoods. This allows for detailed and contest-specific investigations of attitudes and behaviour. The result is a unique dataset that the team, with a multi-disciplinary approach, has used to perform an ongoing comparative analysis, the findings of which will be of great interest for policy advisers and policy makers.

This rich and complex dataset will be made publicly available and could be exploited by the academic community, beyond the scope of the ERC project, to generate new knowledge on the key determinants of democratic governance and democratic deepening in these new democracies.

Moreover, the ERC support has helped Dr Letki to establish a group of Polish researchers specialized in empirical social science and to set up an international network of scholars interested in public goods related behaviour.

**Researcher:** Natalia Letki

**Host institution:** University of Warsaw (Poland)

**ERC project:** Public Goods through Private Eyes. Exploring Citizens' Attitudes to Public Goods and the State in Central Eastern Europe (PGPE)

**ERC call:** Starting Grant 2009

**ERC funding:** EUR 1.7 million for five years

**Project webpage:** <http://www.is.uw.edu.pl/en/badania-i-konferencje/public-goods-through-private-eyes/>





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## Dealing with irregular migration in the 21st century

*The treatment of irregular migrants is a hotly debated issue not only in Europe but all over the world. In the face of increasing flows of migrants and refugees, many countries have adopted restrictive policies that often include the deportation of undocumented migrants to combat “illegal migration”. Dr Barak Kalir brings an anthropological perspective that could help explain how deportation policies are implemented and why their implementation mostly fails.*

The starting point of this research project is the disproportionality between the alleged “crime” of being an undocumented migrant and the sanction of deportation. But what determines the ways in which deportation is being implemented on the ground? What are the factors that prevent or expedite implementation?

Dr Kalir’s research team is carrying out extensive fieldwork to compare the implementation of deportation strategies in four democratic countries, all signatories to relevant international conventions: Greece and Spain, the first destinations for migrants seeking to enter the European Union; Israel and

Ecuador, both interesting case studies for their fundamentally different approach. According to the team, Israeli deportation policy is highly restrictive while Ecuador has one of the most progressive deportation regimes in the world which includes close partnership with civil society.

While current studies focus either on the laws and procedures of the host country or on the networks and survival strategies of irregular migrants, this project adds a different perspective. It explores the in-between actors who deal with undocumented migrants on the ground: on one hand, police agents, asylum service officers, local authorities, in charge of locating, detaining and deporting people; on the other hand, civil society organisations, human rights movements, religious organisations, which assist and at times also protect them.

This comparative study will provide findings of vital importance that could lead policy-makers and actors in the field to find alternative approaches in dealing with the realities of irregular migrants nowadays.

**Researcher:** Barak Kalir

**Host institution:** University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

**ERC project:** The Social Life of State Deportation Regimes: Implementation Practices in Israel, Spain, Greece and Ecuador (DEPORT REGIMES)

**ERC call:** Starting Grant 2013

**ERC funding:** EUR 1.5 million for five years

**Researcher’s webpage:** <http://www.uva.nl/over-de-uva/organisatie/medewerkers/content/k/a/b.kalir/b.kalir.html>







Fast-track registration of Syrian refugees in a stadium at Lesvos, Greece (September 2015)

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Jean-Pierre Bourguignon  
ERC President and Chair of its Scientific Council



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