INTERVIEWS

Interview with Peter Schweitzer: "If You No Longer Allow for the Possibility of Alterity, You are Limiting Your Options of Analyzing the World(s)"

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Abstract

In this interview, Peter Schweitzer discusses his interest in Siberian studies and Arctic research and addresses the so-called "ontological turn" within recent anthropological debates. His earlier academic interests in the hunting and gathering societies of Chukotka and northeastern Siberia took him to the University of Alaska Fairbanks and led to his eventual cooperation with natural science scholars examining climate change in the Arctic region especially in Alaska. Schweitzer's current research project, "Configurations of Remoteness," analyzes the construction of the Baykal-Amur Mainline [BAM] as an example of the influence of (transportation) infrastructure on the ecological and social conditions of a region. The research focuses on the mobility and sociality of people living in areas affected by the BAM and questions the construction of *remoteness* by observing shifts in that mobility and sociality among builders of the BAM. Schweitzer also discusses the current anthropological interest in ontology and suggests that, along with the more-than-human perspective in some of the social sciences, this enables scholars to go beyond the deconstruction of the "other" to allow for "alterity" as a tool in analyzing the world or worlds. The notion of different worlds (and one culture) is more radical than conceiving of one world from different cultural perspectives. A broader approach to human-environment relations that incorporates alterity offers more fruitful tools for researchers, expanding their analytical possibilities.

Keywords: alterity; more-than-human perspective in anthropology; ontological turn; Siberian studies; actor-network theory; Baykal-Amur Mainline.

— Could you please tell us about your research background?

— I am currently a Professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. I am also a Professor Emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where I worked for 22 years between 1991 (when I started as an assistant professor) and 2003, which is when I retired from there. Now, I'm a Professor Emeritus, which means that I'm still connected to this Alaskan uni-

versity, but I am certainly more "Viennese" than "Alaskan" right now. I was born in Upper Austria and moved to Vienna after high school. After studying philosophy and political science, I was eventually educated at the same department in which I am now working again (leaving for Alaska a year after my Ph.D. graduation), so I am a kind of a returning migrant.

Initially, I was interested in the Near and Middle East; as a student, my anthropological interests focused on Turkey and Kurdistan. But then, at some point more than 30 years ago, it occurred to me that I knew Russian, which I had learned at high school. In 1985, I decided to focus on Siberia, both because I wanted to do something that would allow me to use my Russian language skills, and because I felt at the time that Siberia was completely neglected in Western scholarship. Many Soviet scholars were conducting research there, but Western anthropologists seemed less interested. At the time, I was interested in hunting and gathering societies, and I noted the absence of Siberian societies from these discussions. Some limited ethnographic information about Siberia was available in the English language, but none of it related to indigenous Siberian societies as hunting and gathering societies. Typically, western surveys of the status of hunting and gathering societies worldwide amounted to a short paragraph stating that Siberia had not been considered because there was too little available information. So, for me, while this interest in Siberia emanated from my linguistic skills, I also saw a need for it in Western scholarship because Siberia was a kind of blind spot. As a result, I spent the 1986–1987 academic year in Leningrad.

Of course, at that time being interested in Siberia as a Western scholar primarily meant sitting in libraries and archives, which was also my hosts' plan in Leningrad. Shortly after my arrival, however, I asked if I might visit Chukotka—more specifically, the Chukchi Peninsula. My local supervisor looked at me and said "No!" It was 1986, and access to remote areas of the country was highly regulated.

— But things were changing.

— Yes, although at that time, you had no way of knowing that the country was changing. During the academic year that I spent there, progress became visible to some degree. For example, a real high-water mark was Andrey Sakharov's release from exile at the end of 1986, when things really started to change. Everyday life in Leningrad in 1986 was still very "Soviet"—that is, there were very few public places that Soviet citizens and foreigners would frequent together. The signs of change were interpreted in different ways by the people around me, but no one could foresee that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was only five years away.

— Why, at the beginning, did you decide to go there?

— I wanted to learn about Siberia. Of course, I could have gone to libraries in Austria or Western Europe, but I decided that it would be best to go to Leningrad, the center of Siberian studies. While Austrian libraries had some books and articles about the anthropology of Siberia, libraries in Leningrad and Moscow had everything (or at least, all relevant Russian language materials). In addition, it was very important for me to bring my language skills to a higher level. I had first learned Russian at high school, and I took a few university courses in the mid-1980s, but I read very slowly at that point and couldn't really speak or converse freely. So, for me, that year made an enormous difference. In retrospect, it seems rather strange that I went there to understand Siberian societies but was instead offered a glimpse into Soviet and Russian society. Apart from reading books about Siberia, what I actually did there was a kind of year-long participant observation of an urban Soviet society. Even now, I still find it very interesting to try to understand Soviet and post-Soviet society. But officially, my task was always to understand something of the Chukchi and neighboring people.

— Have you managed to go back since the Soviet collapse?

— Yes, many times. After my return to Austria in 1987, I revisited the Soviet Union and Russia quite often. I was still working on my dissertation, so there were always reasons to go back. Up to 1991, when I moved to Alaska, I was there very often.

In 1990, I was finally able to go to Chukotka for fieldwork for the very first time. I had just defended my Ph.D., which was based on historical documents. In 1991, I took a position at the University of Alaska Fairbanks because they were suddenly looking for an expert on Siberia. Ten years before that, nobody (in the USA) had any experience of Siberia, and nobody needed it. Until 1991, it had been a total anthropological blind spot, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, fieldwork became possible there.

When I moved to Alaska, my first major piece of research was an oral history project with a colleague from St. Petersburg, called "Traveling between Continents." For this work, it was no longer necessary to depend on records from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Instead, to reconstruct the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we talked with people about what their parents and grandparents had told them in order to understand dimensions of indigenous history across the Bering Strait through oral history and personal narratives.

Then, about 15 years ago (in the early 2000s), a shift occurred. More and more natural scientists started coming up to me and saying "You are a social scientist, aren't you? We have so much work to do on climate change, and we need a social scientist's perspective on that." And I was among the first in Alaska to accept.

— So, following your topics of interest, first it was Siberia, then the Arctic, and then it was climate change?

— Part of Siberia is in the Arctic, but when I started to research Siberia, I had no notion of the "Arctic"—I approached it from the perspective of Russian studies. At a theoretical level, it was neither *Arctic* nor *Northern* but *Siberian* studies. For Russian readers, I should note here that I use "Siberia" in a Western sense, covering everything east of the Ural Mountains, including the Russian Far East.

In the 1990s, while I was in Fairbanks, Alaska, Arctic social science studies was only beginning to emerge, although Arctic (natural) science already existed as a field of study based on similar biophysical conditions. I soon became involved in the International Arctic Social Sciences Association (IASSA), which was newly founded in Fairbanks, Alaska. As its president from 2001 to 2004, I hosted one of its big conferences. We were trying to understand the similarities and differences between Arctic peoples, whether they lived in Chukotka or Alaska, or elsewhere.

Eventually, I became focused on what I would call the natural science-human science interface. I was involved primarily in a big interdisciplinary program called the "Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR)." Given the magnitude of the project (by the end, we were running a US$20 million program), I became a kind of research manager—in other words, there was no time to do research myself.

— … and then you returned to Austria?

— Yes, and I knew immediately that I wanted to start a new project on Siberia. The proposal was developed in collaboration with Olga Povoroznyuk[1] (who had worked in the BAM region before), Gertrude Saxinger,[2] Sig-

[1] Available at: http://core.univie.ac.at/team/olga-povoroznyuk/

[2] Available at: http://core.univie.ac.at/team/gertrude-saxinger/

rid Schiesser,[3] and Christoph Fink.[4] The project received substantial support from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), but it covered only a few selected case studies, conducted by the key team members in collaboration with local partners.

— Could you please describe the project in a little more detail?

— Its short title is "CoRe," which stands for "Configurations of Remoteness." In it, we explore the social agency of transportation infrastructure. As those working on the project are either anthropologists or geographers, it adopts a human-centered perspective. However, we also use heuristic tools to think beyond humans, such as ANT (actor-network theory) or Tim Ingold's ideas about meshworks and non-human actors [Ingold 2000; 2011]. We also incorporate the notion of "remoteness" as a theoretical argument to justify our regional focus on Siberia.

— What is that argument?

— The argument is that the effective power of (new) transportation infrastructure can be better detected under conditions of remoteness—that is, where there is relatively little transportation infrastructure. So, we assume that if you build something big (like the BAM) in such an environment, it changes everything. And we are talking about relatively new infrastructure; construction started in 1974, and it took until 2003 to open the last tunnel. So, you can still talk with people who were part of building the railroad. And it's an ongoing process, which is what further interests us.

Eventually, I became interested in human-environment relations, leading to engagements with built environments and infrastructure. If you construct a train track, you might not pay a lot of attention to it, but this train track regulates certain things such as how people move, and how animals cross from one side to the other. In other words, you create a lot of unintended consequences.

— By that do you mean social or natural unintended consequences, or do you distinguish between them?

— I think it's not that important to distinguish between them. A range of consequences for human behavior also apply to non-human agents—animals, plants, and so on.

Historical research about the BAM is quite developed, but there have also been some sociological and anthropological projects. For example, sociologists from the St. Petersburg "Tsentr nezavisimykh sotsiologicheskikh issledovaniy"[5] conducted interviews with BAM builders[6]—not in the BAM region but with those who had left and moved back to central regions such as St. Petersburg and Moscow. Likewise, we are interested in talking with people who are alive today, but we like to discuss history as much the present and future.

If you are dealing with a railroad, mobility is an obvious dimension of interest. Our approach to mobility is a mix of classical ethnographic qualitative methods, such as spending time in a place and talking with people. But in addition, we also used a quantitative tool. We developed a mobility questionnaire, which we tested in the field this summer, and now we're in the process of analyzing those data. Of course, for strictly statistical

[3] Available at: http://core.univie.ac.at/team/sigrid-schiesser/

[4] Available at: http://core.univie.ac.at/team/christoph-fink/

[5] Centre for Independent Social Research. Available at: https://cisr.ru/en/

[6] BAM-builders about BAM: The Past and Present of the Last Socialist Construction. Available at: https://cisr.ru/en/projects/bamovtsy-o-bame-proshloe-i-nastoyaschee-posledney-stroyki-sotsializma/

purposes, you would need a larger pool of respondents, but we still think we can learn a number of things from these questionnaires.

We're interested in people who dealt with the BAM historically or do so today, but we're also curious about people who have nothing to do with the BAM, or with indigenous people who live at a distance from it.

— Because they are still influenced by it?

— Exactly. The whole idea is to understand how far the influence of the BAM extends for different groups of people living in the area. One of our team members was in a small village last year that is located a little over 150 km from the BAM. But there is no train connection to that village, nor is there a road linking to the outside world; you need a helicopter to get there. Not surprisingly, people there do not see themselves as connected to the BAM because, in terms of mobility, there are other elements that are much more important to them.

— For sociality, would you just look at the relations between people living there, or maybe also between people and objects, people and organizations, people and the state?

— That is one of the big questions we left incomplete in the funding application [*laughs*]. I think it would probably be easiest to do it in terms of human-to-human relations. As to the questionnaire, those were our constraints to make it practical. But conceptually, we understand that if you talk about infrastructure and about the built environment, one of the fascinating aspects is its materiality. I find it's also a fascinating topic in that it helps to overcome certain limitations of pure social constructivism. Of course, it's because we're humans—masters of constructing our world and our illusions—that we really construct a lot of the world we inhabit through our minds or the interaction of minds. But there is also climate change, which for me is another dimension, or the materiality.

— As you've touched on the subject of materiality, do you think there is a boundary between nature and actual sociality, or are they so deeply interconnected that we can't hope to define where one ends and the other begins?

— I think we normally draw rather clear lines in sociology and anthropology, and in the social sciences in general. But I think some of these more recent approaches in the social sciences, including ontological approaches, are trying to challenge that. Some scholars do it by going to the forests of Amazonia [Kohn 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2015] in an attempt to understand people who think differently about the relations between nature and culture, and between society and nature. I think that even without going there, even in our own society, the problems with these distinctions are obvious. I think we can develop perspectives in the social sciences that enable us to see relations with objects and with other-than-human beings differently.

— Can we somehow relate this to the ideas of Karl Polanyi, who distinguishes between substantive and formal economics…

— I think part of the attraction of Polanyi was that he talked about non-capitalist forms of economic relations, and about the social embeddedness of economic relations. I also think you could take it further and say that his views are about human embeddedness.

— In nature?

— No, not necessarily, but economic relations are embedded not only in social relations but in wider configurations—human and non-human or more-than-human relations—as well. Even in our capitalist society, in

which—according to Polanyi—economic relations are dominant, we cannot free ourselves from dependence on "nature". Today, environmental degradation, climate change, peak oil, and many other things are constant reminders that the "natural environment" is not an externality but the very foundation of human economies.

— Did construction of the BAM have any unintended consequences for social relations or economic relations?

— The BAM started out as an idea, a plan, that changed several times before the construction of the "third BAM" commenced in the 1970s. By the time the BAM was completed and trains started to run, the world was very different from the one in which the plans had been drafted. The Soviet Union was in the process of disintegrating, meaning that the economic rationale for this project had almost disappeared. Shortly after the BAM was completed, there were a number of years in the 1990s, when there was hardly any use for it and there were even discussions of closing it down. But there are all these human communities that had been developed in order to build the BAM. Some of these settlements disappeared as planned, while others—which were supposed to be temporary ones—continued to exist. On every level, there were unintended consequences, because if you build something big, like a 1000 km-long railway in an area where there had been nothing before, there are obviously enormous impacts in terms of industrial development, ecological relations, mobility, etc. Some of them are unexpected, such as when we met people in Tynda—a railroad hub that connects the BAM to the AYaM [the Amur–Yakutsk Mainline] and toward the TransSib in the South—for whom driving their own car was much more remarkable than using one of several train options.

— That's really interesting. And what were the initial aims of the construction? These were economic aims, right?

— Clearly, it was primarily about getting the untapped natural (mostly non-renewable) resources out of Eastern Siberia. And they're still uncapped because of the low global market prices. So, it's a mixture of tough economic times, low global market prices, and the limited capacity of the railroad because it only has one track, and there are only few passenger trains going there. A lot of natural resources (particularly, gold, coal and forest) are being shipped from Yakutia to East Asian markets. That uses up part of the tracks, and there are lots of other minerals that could also be exploited, but are too expensive right now. So, it's clear that this is and has always been about getting access to these mineral resources.

— As you mentioned, you have talked with many people in the BAM region, so here comes the question of ontology. Is it one world and many perspectives, or are there many worlds?

— I was raised and educated in one world, and within a scholarly perspective positing one world with many perspectives. But that doesn't mean that the ontological approach isn't interesting. For some people, like Eduardo Kohn, the more-than-human perspective is the central element within the so-called "ontological turn" [Kohn 2013]. I think these two things are not necessarily tied to each other; you can have more-than-human perspectives looking at one world. That's probably the one thing that is most important for me in this CoRe project, that it is about the more-than-human perspective: things and other kinds of non-human entities and beings can change how we, as people, behave, and how we, as people, think. Even if they are not conscious actors, they can be seen as actants in one way or another.

— By actants, do you mean infrastructural objects, or are you referring to nature or animals?

— Yes to all of the above. Anything can be an actant, at least in the actor-network theory (ANT) sense [see, e.g., Latour 1996]; ideas are also very often actants. When there is a big pile of rock in front of you and you are building a railroad, it forces you to do something. It has a strong impact, and you need to build around it

or through it or over it. Of course, that is spoken from the Western ontological perspective. For example, in Iceland you have this concept that there are beings in the landscape, "hidden people" or elves, so when they build roads and houses, you need to make sure that these beings are not disturbed.

— And how could we apply this approach to understanding economic relations or markets—labor or product markets, for example?

— Supposedly, markets follow so-called market laws based on rational human behavior, but we all know that this is only part of the story. Obviously, supply and demand are important, but they are not the only things that determine human behavior in the market. Once you have acknowledged that—that there is more than supply and demand—then you have an open door for perspectives that acknowledge that human behavior are not limited to human ones.

— But that might relate to culture and institutions. Is there anything beyond them?

— …if you want to use "culture" here, then human–environmental relations need to be part of it. Culture may be human-centered, but it is not limited to humans. Whether you go to a forest or whether you take a walk at a city park on a Sunday morning, these are cultural activities that involve a host of environmental relations. Economic or market behavior is not just determined by cultural aspects but by a number of non-human dimensions as well. Experience is important. When you live in the vast expanses of remote Siberia or in the American Midwest, you might develop a particular kind of relating to the environment you inhabit. Without advocating any kind of environmental determinism, it is obvious that a place like Tokyo provides different affordances to human and non-human actants alike. I think it is critical to acknowledge how the experience of and the materiality of the world you are living in contribute to shaping your behavior.

— Then I have one last question for you. The ontology debate is a really hot topic, and, in some sense, it seems a nice framework that one can apply, just to broaden one's ideas. But how would an anthropologist or a sociologist do that? What tools could they use?

— I am probably not the best person to talk to about this because I don't think that an ontological approach is the solution, nor do I think I have a particular way of applying it. I put this whole debate at the center of our seminar[7] more because of my own curiosity; what I'm really applying is the more-than-human perspective. You can take certain assumptions from the ontological approach and try to apply them to your case studies, wherever it is located, and it will fit some projects better than others. I think the most important thing is that you are open to the possibility of alterity. That has been a topic for the last 20 or 30 years, deconstructing being the other. But if you deconstruct otherness, then it is easy to take the opposite tack, denying anyone the possibility of radical alterity, when you construct someone like you. It's a form of ethnocentrism if you think "Okay, we are all living in the same world, and we all think the same way." Recent decades have demonstrated that certain constructions of otherness are nothing more than fantasies of the West about the other. The deconstruction of the other is important, but in that sense, an "ontological turn" is a necessary corrective to avoid going too far in that direction. If you no longer allow for the possibility of alterity then you are also limiting your options of analyzing the world, or worlds. I am not necessarily a big defender of the ontological approach, but I find it interesting—and, at times, polarizing. There are many schools of thought, and I have no intention of claiming that this one will be our salvation. But it is also premature to dismiss it as nonsense. As new perspectives emerge in the social sciences, they expand our ability to understand what is happening around us.

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