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ISA GUEST LECTURE

AWKWARD ALIGNMENTS ON THE POLITICS AND PRACTICE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE-MAKING

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Anthropological knowledge is increasingly contested, both from within and outside the discipline: on the one hand, anthropologists aiming at decolonizing anthropology mistrust past and present disciplinary knowledge-making due to its own colonial entanglements. On the other hand, populist and neo-traditionalist movements show distrust to academic knowledge in general and to post-positivist anthropological critique in particular. The paper argues that anthropology's own role in dealing with the current post-liberal challenge through producing mis/trust contributes to this dual problem: whereas anthropologists seek to establish trust with "likeable" subalterns in collaborative approaches, mistrust dominates in research with so-called "repugnant" or "unlikeable others". Whereas anthropologists often position themselves mistrustfully in the latter case, they trustfully take sides in the former – typically without making explicit and justifying their own normative positioning underlying this disjuncture. This problematic inconsistency is usually not reflected on and pushed aside which further intensifies prevailing distrust in anthropological knowledge-making beyond the academy. This paper takes this ethical-epistemological dilemma as the starting point for a publicly engaged anthropology and suggests exploring "awkward alignments" as a modality for staying with the trouble and reflexively navigating it, thereby carving out a politically perspectivised place for evidence-based research in our "post-truth" era.



Olaf Zenker is Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg. Focusing on South Africa, Northern Ireland and Germany, his research has dealt with politico-legal issues such as justice, social inequality, land reform, plural normative orders, modern statehood and bureaucracy, the rule of law, conflict and identity formations as well as socio-linguistics and anthropological ethico-onto-epistemologies. His latest publications include *Beyond Expropriation Without Compensation: Law, Land Reform and Redistributive Justice in South Africa* (CUP 2024, co-edited with Cheryl Walker and Zsa-Zsa Boggenpoel) and *Collaborations and Contestations in Publicly Engaged Anthropologies* (Public Anthropologist 2023, co-edited with Asta Vonderau).

