

Book Review: The Anthropology of Epidemics by Ann H. Kelly, Frédéric Keck and Christos Lynteris

In The Anthropology of Epidemics, editors Ann H. Kelly, Frédéric Keck and Christos Lynteris curate a collection that provides insight into how ethnographic studies of epidemics might challenge the central assumptions of not only anthropology, but social theory writ large. The volume offers a rich exploration into how, and to what end, ethnographic attention to epidemics can extend social theory today, writes [Sophia Goodfriend](#).

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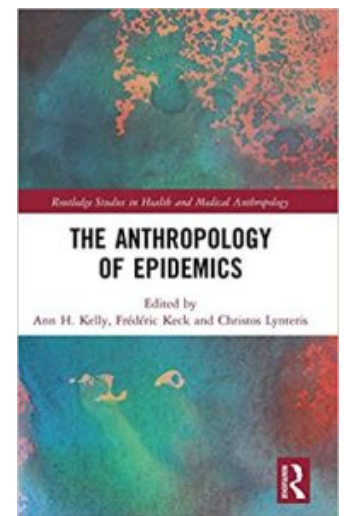
Ann H. Kelly, [Frédéric Keck](#) and Christos Lynteris' edited volume, [The Anthropology of Epidemics](#), was published in the fall of 2019. This was, of course, before global movement drew largely to a halt, before the majority of the earth's human population was shut indoors and before words like 'virus' and 'pandemic' proliferated in academic, popular and political discourses alike. Today, when mass media's preferred genre is live updates on unending crisis and no amount of sovereign power seems capable of eradicating the COVID-19 pandemic, this curated collection is far more than timely. Together the chapters—which span a rich array of sites, material histories and pathogenic routes—provide insight into how ethnographic studies of epidemics might challenge the central assumptions of not only anthropology, but social theory writ large.

By framing epidemics as a capacious ethnographic object, the editors curate a comprehensive intervention into social scientific studies of disease outbreak and transmission. The semantic origin of epidemic, as readers are reminded in the introduction, derives from the Greek *epidēmios*, meaning 'within the country, among the people, prevalent (of a disease)'. Until the nineteenth century, pandemic and epidemic were often used interchangeably. Today however, 'pandemic' is a label reserved for diseases whose scale is global and unprecedented. Epidemics can transmute into pandemics, yet they also retain a more general meaning, denoting diseases and conditions whose origin can be viral (such as Ebola or HIV/AIDS) or non-viral (such as diabetes) alike.

Ethnographic studies of epidemics, as Keck et al argue in the introduction, therefore shed light onto three increasingly popular domains of anthropological thinking: interspecies entanglements; studies of infrastructure and materiality; and techniques of epidemic containment and control or counter-epidemic intervention. The chapters, traversing from twentieth-century colonial public health initiatives in Madagascar to contemporary migration patterns among Vietnamese youth, are linked by these three thematic threads. 'Rather than being yet another collection of disease ethnographies', the editors write, 'this volume aspires to bring epidemics to the forefront of anthropological debate'.

The question of biomedicine's relevance to anthropology has, [to paraphrase the anthropologist Lawrence Cohen](#), long plagued the sub-discipline of medical anthropology. Historically, its practitioners have been split along the lines of theoretical versus applied medical anthropology—with the latter devoted to the pragmatic language of policy, while the former are committed to the larger philosophical stakes of their interventions. The theoretical camp is blamed for dismissing the value of human life in favour of theoretical abstractions, while the applied camp is accused of uncritical collusion with institutions of power.

The Anthropology of Epidemics, however, marks a necessary move away from such disciplinary divides. As the past few months have demonstrated, and as Vinh-Kim Nguyen notes in his contribution to the volume, epidemics are moments of both 'biological and social crisis'. The very word 'crisis', [derived from the Greek *krisis*](#) or the point in the course of a disease where the patient either lives or dies, denotes moments when entire worlds are either obliterated or reconstituted. Whether construed as eventful and sudden, like the 2014 Ebola outbreak, or slow and intractable, like the destruction wrought by HIV/AIDS, epidemics illuminate urgent ethical and moral questions. Today, as COVID-19's elusive routes are upending, dissolving and reconstituting social, political and economic life as we know it, the volume requests readers conceptualise of anthropology in times of epidemics anew.





Hannah Brown's contribution, for example, rejects the assumption that ethnographic theories cannot retain philosophical and social nuance when applied to epidemiological contexts. Brown's work during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone underscores how ethnographic attention to the complexities of social worlds directly informs biomedical practices. 'Anthropologists implicitly work with a model of complexity', Brown writes, 'that assumes there are things that remain beyond what anthropologists can capture with ethnographic methods' (123). This notion of an ethnographic limit in investigations of culture has, since the 1990s, bled into biomedical models of intervention and prevention. Anthropologists working in tandem with global health initiatives are thus not necessarily bound by the pragmatics of Western biomedical practices and its espoused hegemony. Instead, they might reveal the limits of public health interventions by foregrounding the oftentimes messy and lived realities of a social landscape.

Like Brown, Nguyen draws from his experience working with global health organisations in Guinea at the height of the Ebola crisis to enunciate the epistemic value of such collaboration. Anthropologists asked to mitigate local 'resistance' to biomedical intervention found surprising forms of social solidarity and cultural patterns of exchange. The spatial and temporal scales deployed by molecular epidemiology to understand disease outbreak and transmission, as well as the effects of ongoing public health campaigns, complicate ethnographic assumptions; Nguyen thus revises the very political-economic and cultural terms through which Western Africa is often understood. Rather than functioning as the agents of Western biomedicine, ethnographers in such contexts can refine how their own discipline understands structures of power and meaning in a given context.

The provocation that anthropology might benefit from such alliances should, of course, be apprehended alongside cognisance of the discipline's historical constitution. As a gentle reminder, ethnography emerged as a scientific method in its own right as European botanists and zoologists voyaged to distant imperial holdings and became curious about the 'natives'. The mutually constitutive histories of Western science and imperialism gave form to ethnography, [a 'field-science' that took the 'disappearing culture of the primitives' as its object of inquiry](#). It was a method predicated upon the epistemic certainty of (white, Western European) Man's domination over nature.

Yet as Lynteris's contribution demonstrates, historical claims to such certainty should not be taken at their word. Bringing a multi-species ethnographic lens to photographs produced in the wake of the 1911 bubonic plague outbreak in Manchuria, on the Russian-Chinese frontier, Lynteris shows how the very production of ethnographic certainties was stymied by the limits of scientific knowledge. Captured by a team of Chinese scientists during a Chinese-Russian expedition, the photographs were meant to demonstrate the 'containment' of disease and 'purification' of the territory, abetting Chinese claims to sovereignty over the landscape and its inhabitants (91). Yet the scientists failed to identify the zoonotic link of plague transmission: marmots. These afflicted animals haunt the album's visual field, fostering a vision of 'epistemological uncertainty' precisely where scientific knowledge was meant to be shored up (98).

As anthropology's disciplinary boundaries grow increasingly amorphous, the editors might have enunciated the epistemological stakes that critical studies of epidemics provide in more general terms. Indeed, many contributors move beyond classical ethnographic methods—participant observation within a geographically bounded site—by bringing an ethnographic lens to a range of settings, archives and methods. The analytical threads of interspecies relationships, material infrastructures and disease interventions that frame the volume scale up to fundamental questions regarding ontology, forms of sovereignty and techniques of governance. As such, *The Anthropology of Epidemics* offers a rich exploration into how, and to what end, ethnographic attention to epidemics can extend social theory today.

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