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## CONFERENCE REPORT

### **Breaking the Rules? Power, Participation, Transgression**

15th Congress of SIEF hosted by the University of Helsinki, Finland,  
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The title of this year's SIEF Congress was *Breaking the Rules? Power, Participation, Transgression*. Yes, indeed, some previously established rules were broken. Compared to the previous Congresses, SIEF2021 was different in many ways. In 2017, when the first applications to host SIEF2021 in Helsinki were sent, no one could have predicted what the situation would be in June 2021. COVID-19 caused a worldwide pandemic in the spring of 2020, closing the borders and 'locking' people in their homes. In the autumn of 2020, it became clear that the summer 2021 Congress had to be moved online, as most social events were during the pandemic. This changed the plans and the way of participation. Instead of Helsinki, we travelled to a digital, virtual Congress space from 19 to 24 June 2021.

During the various events of the Congress, we visited each other in our offices, as well as in our kitchens, living rooms, gardens and balconies. The Whova app, through which the Congress was technically held, allowed us to chat about both official and unofficial matters. For example, we could share pictures of our pets, mascots, flowers, meals and drinks. During the breaks, or sometimes even while listening to a session, we were able to do many non-academic everyday tasks: cooking, laundry or walking the dog. On one of the Congress days, a strong thunderstorm interrupted the internet connection in some parts of Finland, so one of the workshop convenors was forced to drive around in her car to find an internet connection and get back online. Experiences like this made SIEF21 unforgettable and turned participation in unexpected directions.

Although the conference was held in a virtual space, we had the opportunity to experience a piece of Helsinki each day and enjoy the rich cultural programme of the host country. Every morning, we were able to participate in a virtual bike tour in Helsinki, which was a memorable start to a conference day. We saw places and sights we would have seen if we had actually visited Helsinki. We also had a reception at the National Museum of Finland, where we were invited to take a virtual tour of the recently opened exhibition titled 'Otherland', which shows an era when Finland did not yet exist as a nation. During the evening programmes, we enjoyed many varied local music per-

formances. On the opening day of the conference, there was an opportunity to attend the event ‘Towards New Forms of Engagement – Celebrating 100 Years of Finnish Ethnology’ sponsored by the University of Eastern Finland. The celebration comprised a roundtable discussion outlining the fundamental methodological and theoretical changes in Finnish ethnological studies, starting from ‘ethnos’- or demos-based research and Finno-Ugrian studies and extending to several subsequent methods and objectives.

The online format of the Congress of course had both advantages and disadvantages. Participation from home made attendance possible for researchers who could not afford to travel, or who were unable to travel for other reasons such as environmental concerns. Perhaps this is why this year’s Congress gathered approximately 1,200 participants, which is, in fact, the highest number of participants at the SIEF Congresses so far. Considering all the positive aspects of the online SIEF21 Congress, it might be advisable to organise the congress in a hybrid format in the future, even though it would cost twice as much for the organisers.

On the other hand, the virtual nature of the Congress also had many negative sides. The chats and coffee rooms were mainly attended by people who already knew each other, and thus the online sphere offered much fewer opportunities to get to know new colleagues, strengthen one’s networks or engage in spontaneous encounters. One of the authors of this report had a funny experience trying to attend the welcome drink session on the first day. The host immediately greeted the participants and asked each a question on a given topic. Depending on the answer, people were assigned to different breakout rooms. The participant in question probably answered ‘incorrectly’ by choosing the topic ‘what is the weather like?’, because he was put in an empty chat room. After waiting for other “prisoners” with bad answers, still alone with no one to share a virtual drink with, and not even being able to return to the main room, this participant ended up attending an event that was not very social. Nevertheless, there were many more (positive) reasons to congratulate the SIEF Congress organisers, IT team and volunteers for their dedicated work.

### **Panels**

At the SIEF 2021 Congress, there were about 110 panels (with 205 slots), divided into eight sessions over four days, while the working group meetings, the opening ceremony with its additional events (welcome drink, opening keynote, etc.) and the celebration took place the previous weekend. Having 205 panel slots (papers and/or roundtables or workshops) within eight sessions seemed an impossible mission schedule-wise, with many participants presenting two papers (accepted with co-authors only) or presenting a paper

and convening another panel. Eight sessions for 205 panel slots (each lasting for 105 minutes) meant that one could only attend a maximum of 14 hours of panel sessions and would miss the rest of the panel sessions – equalling 21,511 hours. Of course, we encounter the same dilemma at ‘offline’ conferences, but the earlier Congresses included a larger number than eight sessions in total. Nonetheless, online panels undoubtedly have two advantages: stepping in and out of panels and listening to paper presentations in different panels within one session was much easier in an online mode. The video recordings of the panels also provided access to the papers and conversations afterwards and gave us a chance to watch panels we had missed in real time. The recordings start with a few minutes of empty content with the IT support person usually waiting for the convenor and participants. Sometimes they used the screen as a mirror: to fix their hair or show a grimace. Apart from this humorous aspect, the IT support team deserves a huge praise for their patience and helpfulness. Many panels would probably have been suspended for technical reasons without their support.

In a chat on Whova, a participant asked how to properly end an online meeting. That is a good question. You click ‘leave’ on your screen and suddenly you sit alone, again, wherever you have been physically sitting during the online meeting. What about when the Congress you had been looking forward to for so long is over? No carrying the luggage to the train station or airport, no feeling of emptiness as you sit on the plane waiting to take off. Just one click and the Zoom screen and the speaker’s voice are gone. Was I there? *Where* was I?

The thematic framework of the Congress was reflected in the topics of the panels and papers in various ways. Participants addressed the concepts of rules, power, transgression and participation from different angles in terms of (sub)disciplinary orientation, temporal and spatial focus, methodological approach and more. We will mention here only some of the topics brought forward under the aforementioned themes: there were contributions dealing with the relationship between power and minor social groups or indigeneous peoples; others focused on the natural environment, humor as transgression, rearranging the rules in the military experience, bodies that break the rules or, for example, new religious movements (viewed as re-enchantment) in the Visegrád countries during and after the socialist regimes. However, it is not surprising that the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic inspired many panels and papers. Directly or indirectly, one-fifth of the panels and papers were related to it. Some dealt with its online folklore (e.g. memes, stories, conspiracy theories, jokes), while others focused on its social and cultural impact, its effect on research topics or methodological shifts. If brought together and edited, some of these contributions could form a long-lasting elementary database

and a useful compendium for future pandemic-related and pandemic-affected studies.

### **Keynotes**

The main themes of the SIEF Congress were also reflected in the five keynotes. The guest lecturers approached them from different theoretical and epistemological grounds. Kathrine Borland (Ohio State University) combines the method of environmental anthropology with oral history and participant observation. Based on her empirical research, she outlined the phenomenon of slow activism in relation to the social and environmental changes of a valley situated in Southern Ohio and the corresponding local efforts to make it green again. Borland introduced the diverse lifeworlds and contexts and revealed that despite people's diverse perspectives, they can share overlapping areas of interest that allow them to cooperate on the same issue. In addition, she discussed slow activism in relation to activist scholarship in order to show that research can take a variety of forms depending on the contextual situation within which a researcher operates.

Ellen Hertz (University of Neuchâtel) introduced a wide range of aspects we should consider when thinking about rules, focusing on the social aspect of creating and breaking rules. Rules are – on the one hand – a basic aspect of what makes us human, but – on the other hand – they also construct a frame for our potentialities and channel our limits by creating social differences. This ambivalent kind of law provides us with opposite perspectives: for example, how we can consider transgression as social interest in certain circumstances. She introduced two kinds of legal rules: hard law (compellable) and soft law (non-compellable). She emphasised that there is no transmission between them, but both have their roles in constructing and reconstructing our social reality.

In her keynote lecture, Susan Keitumetse (University of Botswana) called for more exchange and discussion with the local communities in the cultural heritage processes concerning African nature reserves. International agreements such as the UNESCO Conventions are important, but they do not recognise local human aspects. A new way of thinking means breaking the rules: archeology and history as approaches would be replaced by the living cultures of communities and local participation. According to Keitumetse, the sustainable conservation of the African landscape means reconnecting people to the landscape, considering the forgotten local knowledge and giving power to the vulnerable. It would put local people's emotions and identities against money and tourism. (Could not the same humanistic point of view be also considered in other, including European, countries?)

Sanna Valkonen (Sami Research at the University of Lapland) brought forward the question of how the Sami ways of knowledge and its ontological premises can be considered and taken seriously within the practices of Sami research. Using some research projects as examples, she showed how collaborative work between academic research and art can overcome persisting boundaries, integrate different kinds of knowledge and break existing rules of scientific, artistic and indigenous approaches.

In the closing keynote, Molly Andrews (University of East London) highlighted the biographical, narrative and long-term perspectives of scholarly research. Addressing numerous rules or conventions such as the binary categories of outsider and insider, and researcher and research participant, as well as notions of disciplinary boundaries and the narrative structure of scholarship itself, Andrews also challenged us to rethink existing methodological and epistemological 'rules' of our disciplines.

### **Other Congress events**

The interwoven relationships between rules, their everyday (non-)implementations and authorities were also reconceptualised by Ahmad Moradi, the winner of the biennial SIEF Young Scholar Prize. His article 'The Basij of Neighbourhood: Techniques of Government and Local Sociality in Bandar Abbas' brings forward the complexities of neighbourhood politics and ethnographically rethinks concepts such as power and community. The lecture he gave at the Congress was based on this award-winning paper.

For the Young Scholars Working Group (YSWG), it was a challenge to continue the popular 'mentoring programme' started at the last Congress, which connects advanced scholars with students and early career scholars working in similar fields. In cooperation with the SIEF Board, the YSWG launched three new events that were better suited to the online environment. In the first one, titled 'How to Get Published', the editors of *Ethnologia Europaea* (Alexandra Schwell and Laura Stark), *Cultural Analysis* (Sophie Elpers and Karen Miller), *Ethnologia Fennica* (Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto) and *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* (Patrick Laviolette) shared, besides practical information, a lot of useful advice and answered some individual questions in Zoom breakout rooms. In the 'Writing Grants for the Wenner-Gren Foundation' event, Danilyn Rutherford, the president of this key supporter of anthropology and ethnology, held a workshop to introduce the foundation's processes of funding, project proposals, etc. Furthermore, she shared many practical pieces of advice and encouraged the participants to consider applying. The final event of the mentoring programme was a roundtable discussion on applied career options for ethnologists and folklorists. The discussants Clíona O'Carroll

(University of Cork), Håkan Jönsson (Lund University), Eyjólfur Eyjólfsson (Folk Music Centre in Sigluförður) and Laura Hirvi (Finland Institute in Germany) stressed that only learning the skills associated with research work is usually not enough to earn a living. They suggested acquiring skills in other areas such as law, IT, economy or tourism, which can broaden one's perspectives and improve one's chances in the labour market. All three mentoring programmes welcomed not only early career scholars but more experienced or senior scholars too, and consequently aimed at breaking some of the generation-based rules as well.

In addition to the panels, keynotes and workshops, the Congress offered six film roundtables. Each roundtable had its own theme – Belonging and/as Otherness, Body and Senses as Subject/Resistance, Countering Ascriptions, Mediating Empowerment, Showing the Invisible and Environment and Activism – with 6–8 documentary films or experimental video installations per topic. The roundtable participants mainly included the filmmakers and artists. Perhaps the tight Congress programme reduced interest in participating in these discussions, since the films were supposed to be viewed in advance. In any case, these appealing audiovisual works would deserve a wider audience, and hopefully many of the Congress participants took the opportunity to watch them later. In many cases, the films were part of a longer ethnographic research project, introduced by the authors in the roundtables. Publishing research results in this form requires a certain level of expertise in the audiovisual field. Therefore, in addition to contextualising the films, the roundtable discussions sometimes turned into more professional conversations about crafting sounds or how to harmonise form and content, for example.

Another part of the programme were the poster sessions. And how do poster sessions work virtually? Very well if you ask the participants and presenters. A total of nine posters were selected for both sessions, with topics ranging from cultural stereotypes of the evil grandmother to female baldness, the gendered norms of last names and 1920s planetariums. The theme of the conference connected all these presentations together. A virtually organised poster session can work even better than the traditional version. Everyone was given ten minutes to present their research, and there was enough time for joint discussion and questions. The discussion was very lively and fruitful, and dealt with both the topics presented and questions concerning the making of a good poster. In the case of posters, the visuality of the work is important (for once, less text is better). What is important is that such a visual summary of one's research can offer new ways to perceive it for oneself and others. Therefore, we encourage everyone to try at least once to make a poster of his or her research.

As usual, the General Assembly of SIEF was also held during the Congress, with an agenda of strategic planning, funding and choosing the host for the next Congress, besides the election of the new Board. As Nevena Škrbić Alempijević's term was coming to an end, SIEF elected Sophie Elpers, who has very successfully served the Board in recent years, as the new president. The General Assembly also decided that the next SIEF Congress 2023 will take place in Brno, the historical town in the Czech Republic.

The closing event, 'Baking the Rules', moderated by Roger Norum, took food as an entrée. Sarah Green, who began with an introduction-response, and the discussants Stina Aletta Aikio, Eeva Berglund, Håkan Jönsson and George E. Marcus 'cooked' a thought-provoking discussion, reflecting upon all the key themes of the Congress and merging them with personal, activist, artistic and scholarly experiences, fundamental questions of our time and contemplations on food, eating and food production. The conversational nature of this event, which aimed at creating a relaxed yet intellectually stimulating atmosphere of a dinner table discussion, reminded us of the live conferences and congresses. Notwithstanding, the online Congress provided the same variety of excellent scholarly papers, presentations, posters, films and programmes as the offline predecessors did. Even though this year's SIEF Congress managed to sustain the spirit of the pre-pandemic academic gatherings, the authors of this report wish the future SIEF Congresses could take place in a non-digital environment again. To say the least, we hope to meet each other in another form than Zoom, in Brno.

Every academic event has far-reaching, often unexpectable consequences as it resonates in the participants' future scholarly works, research approaches and connections. Yet these events also form a complex texture of personal memories. When the authors of this report talked about what went through their minds after the Congress, they noticed how differently they experienced those six days. Ana often thinks of cats and birds, which Marie Sandberg and Regina Bendix mentioned when they were roundtable discussants presenting their personal experiences of the pandemic. She keeps thinking of these not only as glimpses of the everyday lives of the prominent scholars but as examples of the complex cohabitation of humans and non-human species, which she sees as one of the most exciting directions for further ethnographic research. Eija also often has a bird in her mind when she thinks about the Congress. After several intense days on Zoom, the last session she attended was 'Finnished Zooming into Silence'. It was an experiment of a quiet and still online space, where the participants were all silent. However, the cameras and microphones were supposed to be on. As Eija was sitting on her balcony during the session, a blackbird appeared on the roof and began to sing loudly.

Nature had taken over. Johanna enjoyed attending her first scientific conference. Although the networking was not as successful as she would have liked due to the online conference, it was nice to see that other researchers were interested in her research and that similar research topics are being explored worldwide. László similarly missed the atmosphere of the offline academic gatherings, but the recordings allowed him to listen to more panels than he could have imagined in pre-pandemic times.

## **AUTHORS**

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