

Social/Cultural Anthropology

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The history of anthropology is constantly being retrieved by anthropologists in classes and in textbooks, usually with an emphasis on leading scholars and influential theories, and often with a bias to champion a particular theoretical perspective. I imagine that a scientific foundation such as the Wenner-Gren Foundation must be more reserved in taking sides and favoring positions. Their concerns will naturally focus not on theories but on debates, not on established findings but on issues and efforts, not on the singular persons but on gross numbers of people in the discipline and the costs of alternative research engagements. This may provide a perspective that helps us understand the intellectual history and present flux of anthropology better than does our usual focus on great names. It is also a perspective more like that we ourselves adopt when we study others, rather than ourselves. As we honor the Wenner-Gren Foundation for its manifold contributions to our field over the last fifty years, let us try to benefit from adopting this perspective on the history and practice of social and cultural anthropology. This means looking at numbers; at definitions of our object of study and what we accept as data and as explanations; at our internal and international segmentation into traditions and factions; at the form and contexts of communication among us, and the discourses that have thereby been facilitated over these fifty years.

A time frame of fifty years reaches back before the death of Malinowski and even of Boas, when The Nuer had just been published and the great war that transformed our world was still undecided. What distinguished our field then, as the young Paul Fejos sat down to his new desk and started looking for ways to further a whole discipline? John W. Dodds, in his portrait of Fejos, tells how in a moment of extravagance he declared that "by the expenditure of \$200,000 in the right place at the right time the whole direction of development in the field of anthropology could be changed." Was this a realistic assessment; and did it become the Foundation's program? The answer to both questions seems to be no; and I shall argue that the reasons for this are still with us, most fundamentally in the wide scope of anthropology's subject matter and the absence of any reigning paradigm or defining method in our discipline. These features continue to determine our intellectual history and present state – as the Wenner-Gren Foundation seems in practice to have understood in choosing its gentler and more appropriate ways to support our collective endeavor.

A first point I wish to establish is that with changing numbers of anthropologists, these features of our discipline produce changing problems and effects. It is striking how many of the personal essays that preface the Annual Review of Anthropology volumes dwell on the small scale of anthropology in the early years, and how deeply that has changed. Fifty years ago, membership in the American Anthropological Association stood at around seven hundred; today it has passed ten thousand. Certainly a staggering growth – but not different from that experienced by the other social sciences or the natural sciences. Indeed, then as now, cultural and social anthropology has been numerically concentrated in North America, so compared to the more truly international sciences, it is still a rather small and parochial discipline. And yet its practitioners feel that because of its numbers it is coming apart, no longer sustained by a shared discourse

and a shared set of terms. Why should that be so?

I would suggest that cultural/social anthropologists never truly shared a discourse or a set of terms. Fifty years ago, Alfred Kroeber and Lloyd Warner, Margaret Mead and Robert Redfield, Melville Herskovits and Edward Sapir were already worlds apart. The handful of people we now recognize as the great practitioners of British social anthropology were outnumbered in their own country, not to speak of the rest of Europe, by scholars working in deeply opposed traditions of anthropology; and these other traditions are still entrenched in some parts of the world today. As late as 1951, George Peter Murdock wrote his extraordinary review article in which he lambasted British anthropologists in general and E.E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* in particular for its inadequacies, concluding that it was not anthropology at all, but "comparative sociology." Whereas Evans-Pritchard seems to have remained unmoved by this, Raymond Firth in his diplomatic and balanced answer was simply delighted with such a label. Clearly, there were very deep differences in how the object of anthropology was conceived and what represented an exemplary study.

In other words, I think we distort the past when we represent it as if anthropology was once one – it was always indignantly and confusingly divided. But because of the extraordinarily small numbers of anthropologists, this was noticed in a different way and had very different consequences. Scholars were still known to each other and visible, and they formed a community of sorts in providing ethnographic data to each other, as well as communicating even in their incompatible attempts at formulating generalizations and theoretical platforms. The simple fact that the social and cultural forms of the world were so under-reported meant that one culled materials from the most unlikely sources: travelers, missionaries, and unacceptable colleagues included. And the fact that scholarship was ultimately driven by a wish to generalize – about Man (as one called it then), or Culture, or Society or Evolution – meant that, then as now, neither regional specialization nor theory-based "schools" could provide the basis for stable and grounded subdisciplines. The work of the Wenner-Gren Foundation in enhancing the international arena for shared discourse, through *Current Anthropology* and perhaps most fruitfully through the Burg Wartenstein conferences, has helped to hold anthropology together – albeit in this fractious way – despite our enlarged numbers, and it may have been a major factor in the convergence that has taken place between British and American anthropology.

I would further suggest that anthropology's audacious generalist ambition still continues to drive us together, and to desperation, as available literature, journals and the number of scholars doubles every ten to fifteen years. It produces an unresolvable tension in every teaching department's wish to give students a grounding in the "four fields," and world ethnography, *and* some degree of professional command of a practicable sector of the study of culture and society. And the problem is exacerbated by the absence of any shared paradigm: we cannot divide up the field among ourselves because what others do cannot be trusted to articulate with my work in my field of activity, while the grandiose vision of generalist insight into the human condition remains.

The scope of cultural and social anthropology's generalist ambition must remain unstated to be believable. It appears to embrace the subject matter of all the other social sciences for all societies other than our own, plus whatever does not seem properly accounted for in Western society as well; the psychology of all people other than the

Western middle class; the histories of all peoples outside of the European tradition; and so on. Were not the other social scientists so innocently ethnocentric, they would laugh at us for our ambition; while Orientalists, who have a notion of what is involved from their own immersion in the philology or history of some particular part of Asia, see it and are outraged.

Indeed, the explosion of information over these fifty years has been exacerbated by a persistent *expansion* of scope and ambition. No longer can anyone identify anthropology with the study of primitive tribes. During the first ten years of the Foundation, sixty percent of its research grants were allotted to work in the Americas, and most projects were conceived in the format of an account of tribal culture. But a few anthropologists had already started branching out into observing life in a variety of different contexts, adding the study of the traditional complex civilizations, the cities, places of work and service, and total institutions to our agenda. The reports on completed grants in sociocultural anthropology that appear in Wenner-Gren's most recent Biennial Report (1988-1989) reflect the broadening of the enterprise. All geographical regions and most substantive topics are represented.

If lacking a common paradigm and a set of thematic foci that can subdivide our discipline in orderly fashion, does not cultural and social anthropology at least have a certain unity of method? Many scientific subdisciplines seem to be defined mainly by their particular method, and the "anthropological method" of participant observation seems to have established its centrality for the work of anthropologists over these fifty years. The trouble is, whereas methods often determine the kinds of data one can obtain in many fields, from X-ray spectrography to small-group research, it has become increasingly clear that such is not the case with participant observation.

Let me review the uses of "participant observation" in anthropology and how it has progressively affected our conceptions of data and of the object of anthropological study. It is better that we do not focus on Malinowski's brilliant and intuitive use of the method's potential, but rather observe the more commonplace understandings that were expounded in textbooks and lectures and brought into the field by Ph.D. candidates. The dominant view for a long time was that you needed to be a participant of sorts to be able to observe. On the one hand, people distort the data that anthropologists need (conceived as behavioral custom and practice) if they are asked as informants to report it themselves. What is more, in a foreign culture you will not know what to ask, and you will need to see the culture/society enacted in the lived context to discover its functionally connected parts.

However, not even this much was granted by all field anthropologists; and as for those who do embrace it, their actual practice of participation in the field situation has no doubt varied profoundly among different times, places and persons. Some seem to have reduced it to the acknowledged need simply to make ourselves acceptable as persons to the locals, so they would tolerate our intrusion into their life and accept us as persons worth talking to. Other colleagues rejected participant observation outright as a source of data because of its nonreplicability, and sought instead to develop greater rigor in eliciting procedures, thereby avoiding the subjectivity that would be introduced by a reliance on strictly personal social skills and the occurrence of fortuitous events. Even the most dedicated practitioners of the method, trained as British social

anthropologists and demanding a minimum of eighteen months' immersion in one locality, continued to observe the objectivist canon of using their raw data from participant observation (and probably a great deal of eliciting!) to produce normalized descriptions of customs, conventions, rights and duties, and shared ideas.

But the human exposure resulting from a degree of participant observation led all but the most insensitive to know more than they could give an account of in such language. While some tried to accommodate their further insights by giving contextualized examples or extended case documents, others started confronting the nature of the data themselves: the fact that the interaction promoted through long-term participation produces not only "observations" but also conceptualizations and insights that are clearly a *joint* creation of the anthropologist and his/her local partners in interaction.

The sophisticated debate on reflexivity that has developed over the last twenty years is thus a response to this experience of participant observation; but it has served to undermine rather than strengthen any common view on method by questioning the very nature of our data more deeply than many have been prepared to accept. Granted, positions have been overstated and therefore have evoked unnecessary irritation and even private anger among some, who see their own and anthropology's claim to any form of academic authority being threatened. Yet there can be no doubt that certain kinds of claims to objectivity will no longer be accepted in large sectors of the anthropological community. My sense is that much of this will never be reversed, and more epistemological renovation will follow; we must learn to live with a new indeterminacy of our data. The loss in terms of traditional ideals of exactness and objectivity is balanced by a sense that the very indeterminacy reflects a basic property of our object of study, in that it arises from how human beings indeed construct their reality. It further allows us to capture and tell more things about people, through the expanded use of case materials embedded in local contexts and more sensitively shaped by complex local premises.

Justifications for such a stand have been fetched from ideas developed in the humanities rather than the social sciences. The call is increasingly for interpretation rather than explanation, for sensitivity and subtlety rather than stringency. Thus, as so often in anthropology, ideas are brought in from other disciplines and questionably fitted to our perplexities and our needs – they have not grown out of the analysis of our own data and theories. As before, anthropology proves to be a very permeable discipline, recurrently invaded by concepts and questions from other branches of scholarship, rather than one that produces its own epistemology. I shall return later to some reasons why this may be generally true, and some of its consequences.

The idea that human behavior shows the kind of indeterminacy that requires interpretation – rather than etic labelling, description and explanation – has a number of possible implications that have not yet emerged fully, and that will probably divide anthropologists further in the years to come. The interpretive idea, briefly, is that people's lives must be grasped by the exploration of their own concepts, priorities and values – the cultural equipment which they themselves perceive "with." Only thus does their reality become approachable, because those are indeed the materials by which they themselves construct it. It follows from this view of how people construct meaning that nothing – truly no observation – is simply what it appears (to me) to be: all events, if

they are noticed by people at all, are interpreted by means of local cultural concepts and will derive their significance and consequences in some part from those interpretations, which can never be observationally transparent even to the most informed anthropologist or the most hard-headed enumerator. Thus the untranscendable indeterminacy that becomes such a significant component in much of our data. No matter how skilled, and how knowledgeable in the culture the ideal anthropologist becomes, hers will still remain only one possible interpretation – not a final, decisive one. At the same time, this view seems to locate our object of study and analysis firmly within the realm of culture.

But this fundamental twist has implications for our most basic concepts that may not yet have been fully digested. It would seem unexceptionable that as people construct their realities, using their cultural concepts, what they are producing is likewise interpretations of the world, which they make in small circles of companionship or as living and feeling particular-persons-in-particular-contexts. But each of these interpretations will be no more definitive and final than that of the hypothetical most-informed anthropologist. If that is so, what becomes of "culture" as the object of anthropological study? It no longer seems adequate to distinguish the units of observation (people) from the object of analysis (culture): the meanings, the realities in which people live, are constructed through their own interpretations and do not reside in the concepts, values and codes that they (to a degree) share. Of course, people use these concepts, and codes, models and images, to communicate their interpretations between themselves and even to construct them; but no two persons' interpretations will be identical, nor will any person's acts and expressions be fully predicated by the codes she or he employs.

If this is the case, where should anthropology's object of study be located? Will those who have seen it as "culture" let it remain in concepts, codes and symbols, and contend that what we are doing is some kind of comprehensive semiotics? Or will they wish to explore the processes whereby people interpret, and thereby do "the work of culture," and create their indeterminate realities, and act in them? If so, we are back to making people, their behavior and understandings, the object of anthropological study – in which case we shall have to use "participation" much more radically as a method than most interpretivists had imagined; and we shall also have to rethink a number of received assumptions about "culture."

Anthropology has always been unclear on its object and has usually opted for having it both ways, both people and culture, both "Man" and "His Works." The difference is only slowly becoming focused. Concerned students have long had a tendency to complain that "real people" and "important human issues" were lost in anthropological studies and jargon, while most fully trained anthropologists had difficulties seeing it that way. Perhaps more teachers can soon start addressing their students' misgivings.

Where do we pursue the debates that might clarify these and other issues, and perhaps even produce a convergence of views rather than further fragmentation? Some suitable arenas are available, but anthropologists seem to be reluctant to make much use of them.

Firstly, there are the large departments that have emerged with the growing numbers of students and teachers, particularly in the United States. But rather than seize the occasion for sharp intellectual confrontation that a large department could offer, such

provocation is generally avoided. Some departments are composed heavily of anthropologists of one persuasion. In most cases a policy of hiring "one of each" is followed, collecting a wide range of incompatible perspectives but expecting each person to make a collegial adjustment of silence between peers, combined with a freedom to teach one's own position to students. This is asking too much of students: they cannot produce a synthesis, or resolution, where their teachers fail to do so. As a result, small coteries of professors and students are formed and the department becomes an arena for factional politics, but not intellectual debate. Likewise in the publication of books: we address a third party and only obliquely our intellectual opponents in our texts; and referees are chosen, with a sense of fairness, among those who share our basic viewpoint.

Journals could be expected to provide a better forum for debate, but the policy of acceptance and peer review has increasingly conformed to the moment's fragmented landscape, rather than tried to transcend it. I also sense an increasingly detailed editorial hand, so that articles are standardized by the canons of the particular perspective and genre to which they belong, thereby insulating typical positions from each other rather than allowing them to engage in innovative overtures or bridging. With smaller numbers of anthropologists, such policies were perhaps neither as practicable nor as effective, suggesting that there may be a need to counteract further deterioration.

Again, the Wenner-Gren Foundation seems to have sensed and responded to the problem, and has supported *Current Anthropology* in its experiment with a radically different editorial policy. Whatever its weaknesses, *Current Anthropology* has certainly accommodated far broader theoretical debates than any other of our journals; and it has also afforded international access for a number of non-American scholars, without American factional affiliation and often confused by the trenches between established positions in American academia.

Finally, there are the international meetings of various kinds, which Wenner-Gren has also promoted so judiciously. Quite apart from the broader disciplinary fellowship that is thereby furthered, there is no denying that the presence of foreign scholars also promotes constructive discourse among American scholars who do not, or do not wish to, interact in more local settings. Efforts to internationalize anthropology further are justified on a number of counts, most of all by the importance of increasing the diversity of cultural backgrounds within our discipline. The special program of Developing Countries Training Fellowships pursued by the Foundation since 1980 may in due time be seen as its most important single contribution.

Was the international orientation of anthropology perhaps stronger when its numbers were dramatically smaller? The great scholars of the earliest generations certainly had an impressive command of the whole international corpus; but there was parochialism then as now, and a cultural Eurocentricity of scholarship perhaps even more debilitating than today. What I do fear is that with our ever-growing numbers and the present patterns of publishing and debate, the average anthropologist's view of the total field may be deteriorating in terms of critical scholarship, and in that sense becoming parochialized. Such quantities of books are published, most of them conceived within narrow and particular parameters, that one is overwhelmed and relies on rumor, stereotype and word-of-mouth to critique the more distant scholarly figures, rather than carefully scrutinizing their major works. In this way, opposing and alternative positions are trivialized by each of us, and the discipline's discourses suffer.

In the mass of publication from America – voluminous compared to that from the rest of the world – a sense of the diversity of anthropology's many tasks may sometimes be lost. In the rhetorical device of "the other," for example, overwhelmingly articulated from an American point of view, it starts to look as if the discipline's responsibility were to interpret a stranger world to the American middle class. The old view of "ours" as but one of a multitude of covalent cultures is lost. One of the many virtues of diversity is that it strengthens the collective capacity for memory, which often seems to be a weak link in anthropology.

The development of our discipline thus seems presently to be hampered by features of our organization of arenas and discourses; and the Wenner-Gren Foundation has responded in a number of ways to empower us to do the work of anthropology better. Are there other means by which these many connected tendencies could be countered, despite our growing numbers?

Let us approach the question by reflecting on what it is, and what it once was, that made anthropology attractive to its recruits. If the tasks we do now do not reflect those deep motives and interests, something is amiss. In an "Overview" by Elizabeth Colson in the 1989 Annual Review, where she voices many concerns that I find compatible to mine, she recalls the anticipations of a student entering anthropology fifty years ago: against the background of the savagery accompanying Western civilization, of Nazism and war, was the view of other cultures as rich and valid lifeways, with anthropology providing a critique of many Western values and combating prejudice by encouraging tolerance of differences. Different in their particulars, the same sentiments still motivate our students today. But how effective have we been in addressing their concerns? Anthropology's answers are at best muted; and the more celebrated and prestigious the work, the less it appears to be relevant to such issues.

I would argue that the task of the anthropological tradition should above all be to critique and inform that original drive so it becomes a discipline with intellectual force: in other words, to direct and empower it. This would mean to redirect anthropology's thought and theory so that it more incisively addresses major conditions and events in the world today. There was apparently a brief and heady period during the Second World War when some anthropologists used their knowledge to play a role in what they could feel was a fateful struggle to defend precious values and make a better world. When that ended so abruptly, I would submit it was not only because of faulty government policies but also because the response of anthropologists was philosophically and methodologically inadequate; we honestly did not have so much to contribute, beyond very good intentions. Surely, this should have been taken as a greater challenge, then and now: practical action in the world provides an even more significant test of theory than does our debate with colleagues. Instead, activism among anthropologists has mostly been separated from professional ambitions, and it has been judged and pursued in terms of the morality of our intentions with little assessment of the discipline's intellectual force and adequacy, and the theoretical lessons that it could draw.

In that way, many opportunities have been lost or poorly utilized. An exception is the theme of gender, where anthropological knowledge has contributed to the articulation of public debate and action, which in turn have had an impact on anthropological theory. In contrast, the involvement of many American anthropologists in anti-war activism had

little recognizable effect on theoretical anthropological thinking. And on most issues, the discipline has been amazingly silent. Poverty received a brief interlude of theoretical attention and was thereupon forgotten, while the sector of humanity whose lives are destroyed by it only grows and grows. Development issues are often spoken of as if all fault lies with governments and agencies, and anthropology would have the answers if only we were allowed to take charge – a view that seldom requires us to specify what those answers might be. Others dismiss the problem by invoking our respect for other lifeways, though they would hardly uphold the view that all conditions of life that are experienced by various populations in the world today are fair, benign, or indeed desired by those who must live them. Either way, very little serious work is being done to reconceptualize the issues and options, and to develop the anthropological knowledge that could answer the challenge. A few dedicated members of our profession have slowly managed to mobilize support for a higher level of activity concerning minorities, indigenous rights and cultural survival, but again, the level of theoretical reflection and creativity has been low.

On such issues also, Wenner-Gren has tried to assist, but we have failed to respond. For example, the largest single conference the foundation ever conducted was that on "Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth" in 1955. If that effort had spawned more theoretically creative work during the intervening thirty-five years, anthropology might now have arrived at a point where it had a more substantive contribution to make in the present crisis of the environment. But, as folk wisdom has it, you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink. The Foundation's policy has been to create suitable occasions and arenas and to respond to the scholarly initiatives made by individual researchers, but wisely not to try to induce creativity by an active research agenda of its own. Contrary to Fejos's ambitious initial judgment, such attempts would probably have failed: anthropology as constituted has clearly been far too swayed by the general intellectual currents of Western academia to respond distinctively and take its independent course. It is sobering to observe how readily the brightest minds in our discipline rethink anthropology in response to a new fashion among some parochial European philosophers – parochial in the sense of not being grounded in the facts of global cultural variation – while we fail to respond to most of the challenges that arise from our own object of study.

The main reason for this may be the extreme scope of that object, and our present theoretical inability to prevent our work on it from becoming mired in its own ever richer and more subtle detail. We cannot help being impressed with what other disciplines provide, because they are frequently the fruits of a more highly refined scholarship than ours. Yet their answers will not fit our questions.

If we could develop more determined models and theories, the research of larger groups of anthropologists would obtain a more coordinated thrust. If we had and used suitable arenas to pursue a more open, direct and challenging discourse, we might be able to generate a stronger convergence of theory. If we would focus more on developing theory suited for action in the world around us, we might reach a better agreement on the nature of our data and find a basis on which to appreciate and coordinate our theoretical diversity. And if our numbers change so that more of the world, and particularly more of the Third World, is more strongly represented, that may reduce scholasticism and fragmentation and redesign our priorities. Meanwhile, we shall

clearly need all the patience, help and stimulus that an alert Wenner-Gren Foundation can give us.

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