
Thematic Section

Human Nature, Human Identity: Anthropological Revisionings / La nature humaine et l'identité humaine revues par l'anthropologie

Part 1: "The Human" as the Issue of Anthropology

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Issue

What are our specifically human attributes, our capacities and liabilities? It is the proposition of this volume that the issue of what it is to be human be made central to our anthropological-disciplinary project.

In his early-modern formulation of "anthropology" as an Enlightenment science, Immanuel Kant imagined a venture that was at once ontological, epistemological and moral-cum-political. Scientifically, anthropology embodied a premise and a promise that a knowledge of humankind which transcended the limits of the merely customary, commonsensical and revelatory was an appropriate goal. Ethically, anthropology embodied an opposition to the ideology of an ancien regime which insisted on essential differences of nature and of worth between patrician and plebeian, man and woman, French and German, Christian and Jew; anthropological science might provide a way to a "cosmopolitan" peace among the community of humankind. Reacting "romantically" against such notions, Kant's pupil, Johann Herder, considered that there was no such thing to know as "humankind," only Germans and French and so on: humans differently ensconced in communities of blood and soil. According to George Stocking (1992:347, 361), the discipline of anthropology has been dialectically torn, throughout its modern history, between "the universalism of 'anthropos' and the diversitarianism of 'ethnos.'" Are human beings to be regarded as the same *in as much as* they all inhabit different cultural worlds or *over and against* their inhabiting such worlds? Do they become human within culture or does their humanity (consciousness, creativity, individuality, dignity) transcend cultural particularities? How, in Clifford Geertz's phrasing (1973:22), is one to square generic human rationality and a biological unity of humankind with the great natural variation of cultural forms?

Ernest Gellner, shortly before his death, took a customarily forthright stand on the matter: Even between "consenting adults," classifying human beings in terms

of bounded social or cultural domains was a misguided and dangerous practice (1993:3), while the ideology of relativism—cognitive or moral—was tragic nonsense (1995:8): we are all human, and we should not take more specific classifications seriously. In this introduction I would set the scene for a volume that aims to be equally forthright. It is appropriate scientifically, and necessary ethically, to claim “the human” as our central, disciplinary focus of enquiry: the human comprises a *complex singularity* which might be better known, whose lot might be bettered, and whose existence is the guarantor of communitarian (sociocultural) diversity. This might be phrased as a call for an explicitly Kantian anthropology. It comprises the ontological project of defining the human, its capacities and liabilities as universalities beyond the idioms of social, cultural and historical difference; it is the epistemological project of finding ways best to approach the human in its particular, individual irreducibility, to apprehend the objectivity of subjectivity; and, it is the moral-cum-political project of endeavouring to secure the human, to nurture the opportunities of individual expression above and beyond the contingencies of social, cultural and historical circumstance.

Context

It is arguable that globalism makes the singularity of the human ever more apparent (as well as more vehemently repressed). The phenomenology of the individual human actor on a global stage makes a communitarian rhetoric of historically determined and collectively limited identities more visible as ideology (Amit and Rapport 2002). The idea that selfhood is constituted by, and then forever tied to, particular cultural milieux, particular beliefs and practices, particular histories, habits and discourses—and the related claim that individuals who exit such collectively secured life-worlds must find themselves ontologically devastated, without social anchor or cognitive guarantee—is refuted by the growing evidence of individual lives whose home is movement and transition (Rapport and Dawson 1998). In Marc Augé’s terms (1995:20), the individual actor in transit through global spaces becomes the indispensable “anthropological concrete.” Traditional notions of societies identified with cultures conceived as complete wholes were always ideological conceptions—of anthropologists as much as the people studied. The experience of globalism helps us rid ourselves of them. For they rest on an organization of space which globalism overwhelms and puts in perspective. It is the likely case, Augé considers (1995:47), that no one has ever been unaware of the illusory nature of relativistic communitarian rhetorics. The image of a closed and self-suf-

ficient world of culture and society was never more than a useful image, a provisional myth, even for those who identified with it: a semi-fantasy of nativism and of Maussian theory alike. The global context of human practice, however, no longer makes it possible to talk in ontological terms of totalizing cultures, localized societies and representative individuals. How will anthropology respond to the death of exoticism and a grand divide between the West and the Rest?

In 1988 the inaugural debate of the newly formed Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) was held at Manchester University. The motion was “Social Anthropology is a Generalizing Science or it is Nothing.” In his Introduction to the later, published version of the debate, Tim Ingold opined that tensions between the general and the particular, between “science” and “humanism” were as old as anthropology itself and “vital to the constitution of the discipline” (GDAT 1989:1). They acquired a special urgency, however, in an era of globalism where anthropology has become increasingly conscious of its inevitable involvement with its subjects of study—the “interpenetration” of field and academy (Clifford 1986). They also acquired an urgency in an era of audit cultures where the gap between scholarly aspirations and material pressures may be experienced as increasingly wide. Hence the theme of the GDAT meeting.

Almost 20 years on, neither pressure showing any sign of easing, it is interesting to revisit the arguments of the main speakers. The motion was proposed by Keith Hart (seconded by Anthony Good) and opposed by Anthony Cohen (seconded by Judith Okely). Hart opened in Kantian vein by describing science and democracy as the two great and inextricably linked ideas that have driven modern history. His contention was that “our civilization desperately needs to reconstitute the original Enlightenment goal of progress through the systematic application of reason, in a world where nature and human society are understood to be dependent” (GDAT 1989:6). Anthropology had a significant role to play, moreover, in the formulation of a new human science whose *object of knowledge* remained the same as it was in the 17th-century-England of Newton and Locke—that “isolation hospital for science, technology and civil rights” (Veblen 1904:305)—even as the *methods of knowing* might evolve. The object of scientific knowledge was always the objectively real; its methodology had moved on from the purely positivistic to incorporate notions of history and reflexivity, uncertainty, vagueness and subjectivism. Anthropology’s role in this was to address “human nature *plus* culture *plus* society” as a single phenomenon of study. To distance the general from the particular was to “fracture

the dialectic on which all knowledge rests” (GDAT 1989:25): anthropological science must deploy its own methodologies towards an elucidation of the generally human in the guise of sociocultural particularity.

For his part, Anthony Cohen emphasized how anthropology’s mission concerned “the *irregularities* among people” (GDAT 1989:10). Compared with the complexities of ethnography—the complication and differentiation—was not generalization a dull and unambitious mode of discourse? Comfortable, but mindless and bland? If the essential self of the individual actor was frustratingly elusive, non-specifiable, then how much more absurd were general statements about collectivities? Societies and cultures ought to be painted as “barely generalizable aggregates of differences rather than fictive matrices of uniformity” (GDAT 1989:10). It was only a discreditable arrogance and insensitivity that would have us trumpet “the aspirations, sentiments and sensibilities of tribes, lineages, ethnic groups, sects, or other, even more general categories: pastoralists, hunters, indigenous peoples” (GDAT 1989:12). Interestingly, Cohen also referred back to 17th-century England: it was a matter of recognizing the truth of Hobbes’s postulate, he concluded, that societies and cultures were constructs of individuals (not the other way round) and that generalization must be approached with the very greatest skepticism and caution lest it dulled the sharpness of the originary particularity. (One must recognize the world of difference between positing the sociocultural as a web of significance collectively spun and as a collective fund of symbolic *materiel*, individually spun to particular significance.)

After a vote, the motion was defeated: Anthropology was *not* necessarily a generalizing science, the audience decided in 1988. What strikes me now, however, is the way that the arguments put forward by Hart and Cohen approach one another. The self is a complex composite, Cohen explains, and notions of synthetic fictions are to be discredited; the general statement is superficial or false: there is a human genius for individuality, idiosyncrasy and situationality. For Hart, meanwhile, “if our aim is to teach students to represent the uniqueness of individual experience, no version of academic Anthropology that I know seems an adequate means of helping them to do so” (GDAT 1989:7). Anthropology must practise as an eclectic anti-discipline, compassing the “artistic” and the “scientific,” so-called, if it is to pursue knowledge and assist in the carrying forward of that modern revolution which promised an end to bureaucratic oppression and to religious mysticism alike. The core of the Enlightenment quest for human rights must know what is “natural” in us all, as individual citizens of potentially global civil soci-

eties, as opposed to what is “merely conventional or arbitrary” (GDAT 1989:4).

I find myself in agreement with both Cohen and Hart. Experience is individual and of momentary creation (Cohen); a generalizing human science of nature plus culture plus society is necessary to approach the uniqueness of individual experience and to improve the individual lot in just, democratic societies of global reach (Hart). The paradoxical tension between general and particular is resolved in the recognition that in the individual particularity *is* the universally human. Human nature is individual nature. “Anthropology is a *chimera* or it is nothing,” was one intervention from the floor of the debate, from Ray Abrahams, that seems to me nicely to capture this paradox. Anthropology bestrides a dialectic in a chimeral fashion. It is a hybrid figure, a seeming contradiction-in-terms, of a fanciful kind. It would insist at the same time on doing justice to the intensity and idiosyncrasy and momentariness of experience *and* of holding fast to the singularity of the human condition wherein that experience arises. This is not a static compromise moreover—an averaging, discerning a middle way—but gaining insight, obtaining knowledge, by way of a constant moving between opposite poles, “truth, being alive, was not half-way between anything. It was only to be found by continuous excursions into either realm, and though proportion is the final secret, to espouse it at the outset is to ensure sterility” (Forster 1950:174). These words, appropriately enough given the above mention of artistry, come from the novelist E.M. Forster. Forster is considering how to give an account of “English society” or “English character,” which at the same time does justice to its contrariety and the individualities of which it is composed: how might one write holistically and at the same time retain a sense of openness? It is a conundrum which corresponds to our own: how to aspire to an objective account of the human condition and of sociocultural milieu—ultimately of global society—*without* reducing, abstracting or otherwise corrupting the detail that pertains to individual experience? Forster’s answer concerns narrational flow. The novelist arrives at a truth by juxtaposing descriptions of different people and distinct domains of knowledge, bringing them together *so that their differences connect*. Importantly, this connection does not take the form of an integration or a common denomination: finding a middle way between which compromises on the difference. Rather, separate people, social interactions and worldviews are kept separate, their integrity respected, while the writer undertakes an interpretive and imaginative metaphorical journey into the realms of each. Social life is not to be

appreciated by eliding difference, nor by occupying one side of a divide or another, nor by attempting to place oneself halfway between the two. Rather, the truth of social life is that it is “alive” and always a transition: it is to be found in, and to be described by way of, the writer’s movement between experiences and understandings of people and places (Rapport 2002).

It is the case, Forster concludes, that “preachers or scientists may generalise, but we know that no generality is possible about those whom we love; not one heaven awaits them, not even one oblivion” (1950:245-246). Forster’s conclusion is chimeral. His generalization (“we know that no generality is possible”) concerns a particularity that refutes the possibility of generalization. Subjective knowledge—knowledge of and about the individual subject—does not reduce to abstractions: and yet this itself might be the knowledge that the novelist has to convey: the generality of particularity. There is a lesson here for anthropological science. The writing of human truths may be a paradoxical, chimeral one. But one needs the pole of human generality—as ontology and as ethic. Methodologically, one moves between the human as complex singularity and as individual diversity without cessation, maintaining the dialectical tension between the two, arriving at a truth through the movement of one’s analysis.

Terminology

Georg Simmel gave the term “co-present dualism” to the kind of descriptive and analytical connectivity which E.M. Forster would advocate. “One of the deep-lying circuits of intellectual life,” Simmel propounded (1950:309), is where “an element presupposes a second element which yet, in turn, presupposes the first.” Such a dialectical unity has a mysteriousness about it: “one of the points where being and conceiving make their mysterious unity empirically felt.” Nevertheless, the dialectic is fundamental: constitutive of both things and relations; from the tension between the poles, and the flow of life between them, both structure and process are generated. Social life, Simmel advised, was to be appreciated as replete with constitutive, co-present dualisms, from “public and private,” to “rule and practice,” “antagonism and solidarity,” “liberty and constraint,” “invention and convention,” “rebelliousness and compliance” and “form and meaning.” “The general and the particular” and “the human and the individual” are basic to this list, I would aver: it is from the tension between *these* poles that the fundamentals of the human condition, and our possible apprehension of it, derive. To hope to approach the human condition is to keep the dialectic “alive,” “co-present,” in one’s descriptions and

analyses. “Only connect” (E.M. Forster); one contrives intellectually to occupy the general and the particular simultaneously.

There have been a number of calls in recent years for anthropologists to deploy a kind of dialectic in their disciplinary conceptualizations. By Marilyn Strathern (1990), it has been urged that there is sense only in recognizing the simultaneity of “nature-culture”: there can be no either/or for humans-as-cyborgs. By Tim Ingold (1998), it has been argued that “biology-culture” be appreciated as a kind of unity: the ontologies here are recursive, and human beings dwell in both, crafting both, simultaneously. For Robin Fox (2005), the “nature–nurture” antithesis must continue to be seen as fundamental to the anthropological project: a relationship whose synthetic processes remain unresolved. From Maurice Bloch (2005), there is the exhortation to “rehabilitat[e] ‘human nature,’” whose study represents anthropology’s “ultimate and central aim”; re-embrace the relevance of that 19th-century anthropological vision which sought to balance local proclivities against global capabilities, diffusion against evolution.

For some, in “human nature”—and, by extension, all conceptualization concerning the general nature of the human—we inherit a project compromised beyond redemption. It bespeaks an essentialist and reductionary history; “human nature,” it is claimed, is tied irredeemably to imperialist enterprises of Western science and politics, of Christianity and masculinity. Others might argue that its very unscrupulous usage makes the concept unavoidable, and necessary for anthropology to unpack, to witness and explain, if not to rehabilitate. It is moreover the case, as Donna Haraway has observed (1997:1), that “the invention and reinvention of nature [is] perhaps the most central arena of hope, oppression, and contestation for inhabitants of the planet earth in our times.” The nature of the human, in other words, is as much a rallying point of radical critique as of reaction; while no discursive notion can finally protect itself from “unscrupulous” usage. Yet again, it might be retorted, the “impurity” of the concept’s history amounts to a particular appropriateness: the character of “human nature” is a fitting accompaniment for a human condition equally “impure” in its confusing of objectivity and subjectivity, of the political, the theoretical and the personal, of knowledge and desire. Human life is complex and impure: a science that would approach the human might admit impurities as unavoidable, intrinsic to its own conceptualization.

At the outset, the editors of the present volume withhold judgment. Certainly, I suspect that the stance I might adopt as author of this introduction is not quite the same

as that of all those who contribute below. No matter. Consensus over terms is not the issue. What is at issue is the capacity and the need for anthropology to engage with questions of human generality: to relate the specifics of identity as illuminated by fieldwork and ethnography to the broadest notions of the human condition, however polemical, political, even gendered in ethos such a discursive and intellectual move might be. What the editors *have* asked is that their contributors take bold steps, make forthright claims: endeavour to show how the particularities of anthropological research can provide insights into the most general of human questions. In all cases, insight is to be gained not from focusing on one aspect of the dualism to the exclusion of the other, nor by collapsing the opposition in a synthesis, but by focusing on the tension between the general and particular and making continuous excursions between the two. Each case study has implications for an anthropological inscription of the human. The politics of “the human” figure in these treatments as much as the ontological and epistemological.

One does not intend a master trope or panacea, but the notion of “human nature” is workable for identifying a certain anthropological agenda: claiming a particular history and a future project of disciplinary import.

Structure

Part 1 of the volume, “The ‘Human’ as the Issue of Anthropology,” continues after this introduction with an article by Nigel Rapport, where the concept of the human is elaborated upon as a matter of universal capacities as well as a matter of global political-cum-moral inference. Is there a possibility for anthropology to provide both a science of humanity and a morality whose premises and insights go further than identity politics and the rhetorics of distinction? Part 2 of the volume, “The Human in Nature,” comprises two articles (by Michael Jackson and Katja Neves) which focus on different ways in which “nature” as a notion has been deployed as a conceptual and rhetorical figure: from scientific and poetic endeavours to know an environment, to political measures to save and celebrate it. Is there something particularly human in the awareness to which we can accede concerning our dwelling within nature? Part 3, “The Human in the Body,” comprises two articles (by Margaret Lock and Julie Park) which together focus on notions of human health and attitudes to disease and death. What light is thrown on the human body by the ways in which ability and disability are recognized and treated? A particular focus is on the ways in which new technologies (“post-genomic”) are appropriated in social and political contexts in order to make judgments

concerning “human nature” and appropriate human behaviour in the everyday. And in Part 4, “The Human in Culture,” two articles (by Regna Darnell and John Gray) explore the ways in which “culture” as a concept is given significance, first in the record of North-American anthropological endeavour in the academy, and second in the lives of Nepalese, Hindu householders. For both, “culture” is a mechanism by which the nature of the human is accorded a proper and known position in the nature of the universe. Might not social-scientific intellectual modelling and Hindu practice be compared as kinds of totemic endeavour: evidence of a universality to the ways human beings find it good to think?

The parts of the volume work in different ways to bring the human universal back into anthropological focus. The consciousness with which identity is approached every day in social life and the consciousness with which we have come to question our standing within nature and culture alike, *could* be interpreted as the triumph of Enlightenment rationality. Today it is not solely the social scientist who ponders whether one is human in as much as one inhabits different sociocultural worlds or over and against such inhabiting: it is the very nature of social and political, legal and constitutional engagement.

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