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Tales of the Unexpected: Doing Everyday Life, Doing Fieldwork, Doing Anthropology and Sociology

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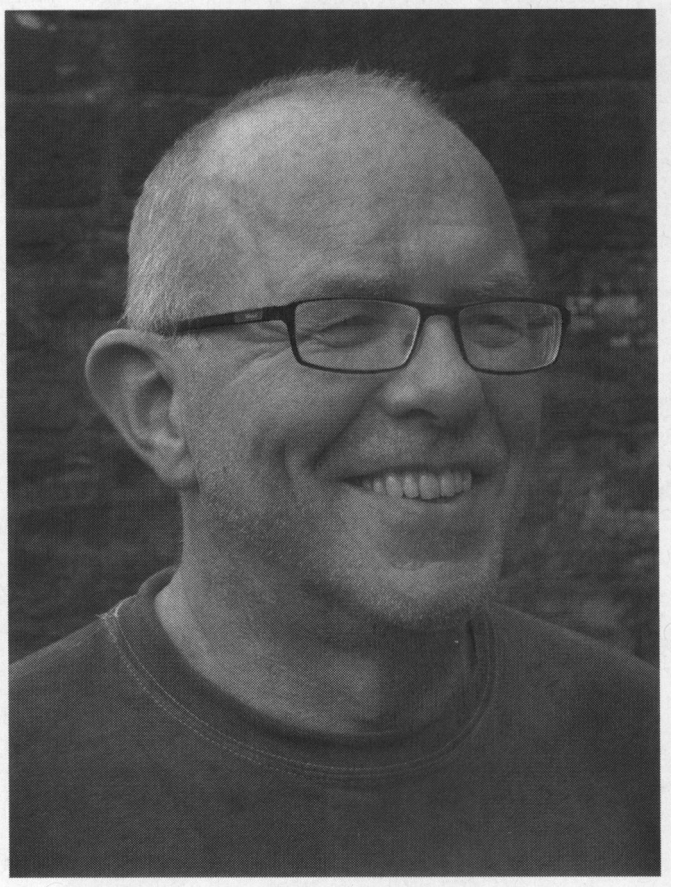
Abstract: This article is a developed version of my keynote address to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Social and Cultural Anthropologists held at the University of Edmonton in May 2012. I examine the somewhat neglected, but nonetheless central, role of unexpectedness in everyday life, in order to think about how we might better deal with the unpredictable contingencies of life, theoretically and during field research. More specifically, I discuss some of the sources of uncertainty in human experience, and the role of culture as a means of suppressing uncertainty, in order to examine why 'the unexpected' is relatively neglected in anthropology and sociology. Following this I consider the analytical consequences of this neglect and—more tentatively—how we might set about remedying the situation.

Keywords: fieldwork, everyday life, uncertainty, contingency, unpredictability, normality, Denmark

Résumé : Cet article est une version élaborée de mon discours liminaire prononcé devant le congrès annuel de la société canadienne d'anthropologie, tenu à Edmonton en mai 2012. J'y examine le rôle quelque peu négligé, encore que central, de l'inattendu dans la vie quotidienne, de manière à réfléchir à comment nous pourrions mieux gérer les éventualités imprévisibles de la vie, au plan théorique et dans le cadre de recherches de terrain. Plus spécifiquement, je discute de certaines des sources d'incertitude dans l'expérience humaine, et du rôle de la culture comme moyen de supprimer l'incertitude, pour interroger pourquoi « l'imprévu » est relativement négligé en anthropologie et en sociologie. Après quoi, je considère les conséquences analytiques de ce désintérêt et – de manière plus spéculative – des approches possibles pour remédier à la situation.

Mots-clés : recherche de terrain, vie quotidienne, incertitude, éventualités, imprévisibilité, normalité, Danemark



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The only thing in human experience that we can confidently expect, apart from death—because, looking at the broad sweep of human history, taxes are by no means inevitable—is that the unexpected will happen. It will happen often, and often consequentially. Given this, it is somewhat surprising that anthropology, and the social sciences more generally, do not appear easily to accommodate the unexpected. In this article, which derives from my keynote address to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Social and Cultural Anthropologists held at the University of Edmonton in May 2012.[1] I shall look at the somewhat neglected, but nonetheless central, role of unexpectedness in everyday life, in order to think about how we might better deal with the unpredictable contingencies of life, theoretically and during field research.

Before moving on, however, it is probably necessary to enter a modest disciplinary disclaimer, in order to explain something that may irritate some readers of a journal that is, after all, called *Anthropologica*. For three reasons, I shall not confine my discussion to anthropology: I am explicitly concerned with anthropology *and* sociology. First, although I trained as a social anthropologist at Belfast and Cambridge, I have always worked in interdisciplinary contexts, and very soon came to see myself as a sociologist as well as an anthropologist, and the relationship between the disciplines with respect to theory and method as one in which more is shared than not (Jenkins 2002:15-38; 2008a:3-16). Second, anthropologists and sociologists seem to experience similar difficulties incorporating the unexpected, and doing so matters as much, and for the same reasons, to each discipline. Third, the fact that many anthropologists and sociologists—who have been socialized in an institutionalized world that, current enthusiastic lip-service to interdisciplinarity notwithstanding, has generally favoured competitive disciplinarity—seem to forget that they are fleas on the same intellectual beast, is not sufficient reason to encourage intellectual amnesia.

On receiving the (unexpected) invitation to present a keynote on this topic, my modest intentions were to look at the role of the unexpected in everyday experience and in fieldwork, to use this as an excuse for a few entertaining "fieldwork stories," of the kind that we can all tell, before ending up with some more practical suggestions about how better to accommodate the unexpected contingencies of life during research. However, although I had written about the role of identification in the establishment of a working, everyday sense of predictability (2008b:124-31), and about everyday paradoxes of identification (2012), I had not really thought about the place of "the unexpected" in everyday life, and in anthropological and sociological understandings of it. As a result, I found myself eventually heading off in directions other than the one in which I had expected to go.

So, while I shall still say something about everyday life and fieldwork I now have several other matters to explore: why is "the unexpected" *relatively* neglected in anthropology and sociology? What are the analytical consequences of this relative neglect? And how might we set about remedying this situation? I shall begin, however, by looking at the place of the unexpected in everyday life and human experience.

The Unexpected

For better or worse, unexpected events and things are ubiquitous. "The unexpected" is a long-established theme in art and music, and an established—probably indispensable—plot device in fiction: in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, for example, Magwitch looms out of the fog and Pip's life is set on a new course. Some novels, such as Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* from 1974, push the idea further, to make the intrinsic uncertainty and unpredictability of life the whole point of the story. The artistic popularity of this theme derives from its plausibility: it's simply how life is. It's certainly how politics is. British ex-prime minister Harold Macmillan's much-quoted response to a journalist's inquiry about what was most likely to shipwreck governmental policy—"Events, dear boy, events"—may be apocryphal, but it captures this nicely. One of the reasons why this possibly fictional utterance is so often quoted is doubtless because it strikes a chord: the central role of the unexpected in human life is a recognizable cultural theme.

Given that this is "how life is," what are the sources of "events," the reasons that "something happens"? First, each of us is a potent source of the unexpected for ourselves: our emotions are not necessarily in our control and will surprise us; we respond to events in ways that we would not have predicted; illness does not announce itself well in advance; death often comes as a surprise. Second, other humans are likely to prove an even greater source of unexpectedness: not only are all the factors that I have just described at play, but they are amplified by virtue of the multitudes of other people with whom we have to contend. In addition, there is the problem of "other minds," which means that we can never know with certainty what someone else is thinking, not even those who are close to us. We have probably all at some time experienced someone whom we felt we knew very well do something that we would never have imagined they would do, or *could* do. So, other people are even greater strangers to us than

we ourselves are. Next, other animals are stranger again, as any hunter knows. Domestic animals may have known patterns of behaviour—they may, indeed, be bred to produce them—but even they are not necessarily predictable. When it comes to the movements of wild game, on which one's survival may depend, the unexpected is all that is certain. Finally, the wider non-sentient environment of plants, weather, geology, ocean currents and so on, is a complex and chaotic system in which, even with sophisticated modern technology, unexpected events are probably the dominant reality.

So far, so unremarkable: everything in the world is a potential source of unexpected stuff. What the above paragraph really tells us, however, is that uncertainty is a product of the relationship between what we expect, on the basis of what we know—or, rather, what we think we know—and "events," the stuff that "happens." Thus, unexpectedness is not an intrinsic quality of events; it is, rather, an *ex post facto* characterization of events in context, once they have started to happen. This does not, however, mean that unexpectedness is always and necessarily utterly unexpected; witness US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld's oft-quoted remarks, made on February 12, 2002, about "known knowns," "known unknowns,"and "unknown unknowns."[2]

There is, therefore, something of a paradox here. On the one hand, the unexpected is definitively just that: unexpected. On the other hand, however, our experience and other knowledge tell us that events are not completely random: some people, some animals and some aspects of the environment are more predictable than others, and some others can be expected to be characterized by unexpectedness. That day will follow night will follow day, and so on, is, for example, vastly more predictable than which horse will win the Kentucky Derby.

In the midst of this world of perpetual latent unexpectedness, humans value predictability; or, rather, since we cannot help but *do* prediction, we value predictability and do not value uncertainty. Prediction is inevitable because language and the human capacity for reflexive self-consciousness allow us to imagine a future and reflect on a remembered past; because we are able to imagine a future, we attempt to predict it—generally on the basis of our memory of past experience—and/or control it, in a number of ways. Prediction and control are, in fact, inherent in language. Words simplify the world at the same time as they categorize and give meaning to it, and this simplification includes propositions about what or how things are, and what or how they might be expected to be in the future. Stereotyping, for example, is a specific kind of linguistic simplification; whether in the service of cognitive efficiency or serving some other purpose, stereotypes create for us expectations of others, on the basis of a small number of criteria and cues. More complex cognitive and linguistic constructs are also forward-looking. These include models of cosmology and environmental cycles; rules for *what* to do (for example in marriage, trading, sex, warfare or religion); recipes for *how* to make and do things (for example in house building, ritual or hunting); representations of *where* it is possible to go (maps or directions of one kind or another); and probabilistic mathematical procedures. Language also permits individual and collective planning and explicit goal-direction: the creation of complex, and in their intentions predictive, schemes for action, whether in the short-, medium- or long-term.

Language aside, although not independent of it, a host of material technologies have been specifically developed to help us to look into the future: from a piece of seaweed nailed to a door jamb in order to predict the weather, to long-range radar and satellite tracking designed to do exactly the same, the possibilities appear to be endless. In addition, technologies create environments that shape interaction, thus enhancing the predictability of everyday life: tracks, roads and highways, for example, manage travel and interaction between travellers, while buildings have a way of communicating to strangers how they should be used. Technology comes to the aid of predictability in other ways, too. Clothes, hair styles and cosmetics are, for example, used to (over)communicate gender identity in the interests of more predictable interaction between men and women (imagine how unpredictable, awkward and uncomfortable everyday life would be if it was difficult to tell the two apart). More generally, the "presentation of self," made sociologically famous by Erving Goffman (1959), employs resources in addition to technology and language, specifically a non-verbal bodily repertoire of gesture and expression, in order to facilitate interaction that is relaxed rather than fraught, predictable rather than uncertain and unexpected.

At which point a word about habit is probably necessary: habit is as central to everyday human experience as the cultivation of a working sense of predictability (Berger and Luckmann 1967:70-72). The two are closely related, along a continuum from self-conscious and reflexive prediction to utterly taken-for-granted habit. Habit and our sense of predictability—a background of expectation based on past experience—enable us to do things without thinking, freeing up cognitive space and interactional time for the things that we do need to think about, and for innovation: in Berger and Luckmann's terms, social construction would be impossible without a solid—and predictable—underpinning of habitual behaviour.

Moving on, the institutionalisation of the random and the unexpected is also an aspect of the social construction of the "predictability of the world." The best general discussion of this—perhaps the only systematic discussion of its kind—is provided by Aubert (1982:137-67).[3] In a chapter about "Chance in social affairs" he looks at a range of topics, from the use of lotteries and other forms of randomization to select candidates for various positions and offices, to various ways to theorize chance, ranging from probabilistic statistics to folk theories of luck and fate. While Aubert is correct to insist that predictability is not completely unchallenged as an existential value, the irony is that using the principle of chance to manage some aspects of life is actually to build it into a predictable social environment, to domesticate or "tame" it (cf. Hacking 1990). In this respect it is instructive to observe that different peoples deal with this complex of issues in different ways, for different reasons. In an environment that can be characterised by high levels of chronic and acute unexpectedness, as in the Arctic, people are taught techniques to cope with it (Briggs 1991). In affluent North America, however, the public valorization of the positive virtues of optimism may make negative outcomes unexpected by definition, and thus difficult to deal with (Cerulo 2006).

Finally, the argument that some sense of predictability is central to—perhaps even necessary for—everyday life is only reinforced if we consider how well, even under quite extreme circumstances, many humans are able to handle disappointment, the disjuncture between what they expect to happen and what actually happens. Festinger's notion of cognitive dissonance (Festinger *et al.* 1956) suggests that humans can be extremely good at constructing new narratives *ex post facto* in order to explain unexpected events, even if they fly in the face of high expectations, and fit them into their existing frames of interpretation. The narrative is rewritten to accommodate the unexpected and restore a sense of ordered predictability.

The above paragraphs are not intended to be encyclopaedic; even so, they satisfactorily make the point that human beings, in many different ways, reduce unexpectedness by constructing a human world that they experience as more or less predictable and taken-for-granted. In this sense, predictability is a matter of perception, not an "objective" state of affairs; if this is so, unexpectedness also lies in the eye of the beholder. More to the point, just as rules necessarily result in deviance (Becker 1963:1-18; Durkheim 1964:65-75), predictability necessarily produces the unexpected. It is the human capacity to imagine the future, and therefore to attempt to predict it, that creates unexpectedness.

All of which leads me to suggest that, although the entire cultural repertoire may not be an "instrument for the obliteration of time," to quote Lévi-Strauss on music and myth (1970:16), culture is certainly a means for the suppression of the unexpected. Culture, as a compendium of the "normal," creates an illusion that humans are in charge of their everyday lives; that there are things that people can do to influence the world; that we can expect tomorrow to be much the same as today; and that we know who's who and what's what. And the illusion is a good one. In fact, in important respects it isn't a complete illusion: some humans, at least, are in at least partial charge of their own destinies; there are things that we can to do to influence the world, even if the law of unintended (and unexpected) consequences is nearly as universal as Sod's Law (whatever can go wrong will go wrong...and everything can); tomorrow is often much the same as today; and much of the time, in most situations, identification processes allow us to live in a world in which we believe we know who's who and what's what.

Even so, the unexpected can be relied upon. What's more, attempts to suppress uncertainty and the unexpected may make the situation existentially worse. The illusion of predictability fosters a sense of false security that may render the unexpected more difficult to cope with. Attempts to manage uncertainty—through the use of probabilistic statistics, risk assessments, procedural protocols, fail-safe technologies, and so on—may actually render the unexpected more likely (or, rather, more unexpected) and thus more difficult to deal with (Jenkins, Steffen and Jessen 2005). As these examples suggest, it is not just that culture is a means for suppressing the unexpected. Its suppression—or actually something more radical—is at the heart of modernity: science, bio-medicine, statistics, economics, bureaucracy, and the planning and policy-making of governments, are all definitely modern devices. Among other things, modernity can be viewed as the attempted elimination of uncertainty and the unexpected, via statistical probability's "taming of chance" (Hacking 1990). Allowing for the specifics of modernity, however, the cultural suppression of the unexpected appears to be a generic feature of human experience. If nothing else, the complexities of everyday life would be difficult, if not actually impossible, to navigate, if we perpetually had to be on our guard against ambush by the unexpected.

The discussion so far, taken together with a small amount of reflection on our own experience and on history, converges on the proposition that "unexpectedness" is not in fact completely random. Accepting that proposition, I'd like to propose a very crude distinction between what I am going to call "ordinary *chronic* unexpectedness"

and "extraordinary *acute* unexpectedness." Chronic unexpectedness crops up regularly during our everyday dealings with ourselves, other humans, the environment and other animals, as discussed above. Inasmuch as it is routine, it is only to some extent random, and its presence is often taken somewhat for granted. In the run-of-the-mill *courte durée* it is neither strange nor startling (although depending on its nature and impact it may be difficult enough to deal with). Acute unexpectedness, on the other hand, characterizes environmental catastrophes, rapid social change, precipitate social mobility, culture contact, the suspension of normal civility during conflict and so on. It is exceptional, although if it persists it may eventually become normalized as the stuff of (a new) everyday life. The unexpected may, therefore, be "normal," or not, easier or more difficult to suppress or to cope with. This is a distinction that is well understood in actuarial reasoning and by insurance companies: "Acts of God"—a charmingly anachronistic expression—are not catered for. Finally, it should be emphasized that the chronic and the unexpected are two ends of a continuum: there is no sharp break between the two.

The Neglect of the Unexpected

In my opening remarks, I said that "the unexpected" is relatively neglected in anthropology and sociology. But to what extent do we actually neglect the unexpected? The answer is, of course, not completely. There are, for example, considerable bodies of work about health and illness, living with poverty, witchcraft, cognitive mapping of the environment, hunting strategies, and many other substantive areas which deal with uncertainty and responses to it.[4] Inspired by the pioneering work of Mary Douglas (1986, 1992:3-54) and Ulrich Beck (1992), there is also the relatively recent development of an anthropology and sociology of risk. In most, if not all cases, however, this work is primarily concerned with how humans attempt to estimate and minimise risk and uncertainty; in other words, they are case studies of the attempted suppression, or domestication, of the unexpected.

There have also been various "postmodern" or "poststructural" takes on the fluidity and flux of human experience. To pluck from the intellectual hat two names that spring to mind immediately, I have in mind the arguments of people such as Lyotard (1984) and Seidman (1991). While postmodernism—if it is admissible to generalize in this way about such a diverse array of points of view—was useful in its day, not least in dramatizing the chasm between ossified social theory and human experience, approaches such as these have, ironically, remained marooned by their own complex abstraction and seeming lack of enthusiasm for empirical research, castaways far removed from the messy business of everyday life.

I am not alone in believing that anthropology and sociology have not made a particularly good fist of dealing with that "messy business." In his 1999 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Alejandro Portes addressed some of these issues. He identified a long-standing "contrarian" thread within sociology that focuses on "the unrecognized, unintended and emergent consequences of goal-oriented activity"—the paradoxes of social structure—which undermine myths about the social world that are founded on linear models of purposive goal-oriented action and its intended (i.e., predicted) consequences. In doing so, Portes (2000) nonetheless made the point that, despite the respectability of an intellectual genealogy that reaches back to Merton's discussion of the unanticipated consequences of action (1936) and before, this is not what most sociologists do. It isn't what most anthropologists do, either. Nor is it all there is to be said about the unexpected, which is not just a matter of unintended consequences or the paradoxes of "social structure" (whatever that might actually be: Jenkins 2010).

Portes ascribed the sociological neglect of this key area of human experience to, first, the nature of sociological training and the continued powerful presence in that training of scientific models, and, second, the real presence of linear continuities and patterns in research data (i.e., the fact that much in the social world is to some degree predictable). Both of these have considerable resonance outside sociology. In the first place, scientific thinking pervades all of the social science disciplines, despite many protestations to the contrary (not least from anthropologists). We look for regular, "normal" patterns and try to explain or interpret them, in order to provide an account of whatever it is that we are interested in that has some general predictive power. That we look for patterns to explain is, of course, understandable, because, in the second place, as already discussed, that there are patterns and a degree of predictability in the human world is not a complete illusion.

One stubbornly persistent problem here that exacerbates the first issue that Portes refers to is the anthropological and sociological tendency to, in Bourdieu's terms, slip from the "model of reality" to the "reality of the model." We mistake our descriptive and explanatory models for the reality that they are representing (1977:29, 1990:39). Bourdieu himself, despite his own strictures against this epistemological elision, regularly succumbed to its temptations, not least in terms of the "synoptic illusion" created by model-building; particular good examples

can be found in his use of diagrams to represent complex data (1977:97-109, 1990:10-11).

There are other reasons for the anthropological and sociological neglect of the unexpected in addition to the two discussed by Portes. An obvious third is simply that we are obliged to attend to what our informants tell us, and to take it seriously. However, a great deal of the time they present us with normalized models of their worlds, which suppress the unexpected and emphasize what is seen as the generally predictable. These models may be what Bourdieu calls "official representations" (1977:16-30), the accounts offered by key informants such as ritual specialists, politicians, advocates, activists, officials, and journalists, but all informants, by virtue of the suppression of unexpectedness that is part of everyday life have at least some predisposition to talk to us in these terms. It is how they think about, and live in, their world. No less significant, our interrogative practices, particularly the necessary evil that is the interview, may encourage the production of normalized models: in inviting people to reflect upon their lives and the lives of others, we may be encouraging them to produce accounts that suppress the unexpected.

Fourth, apropos synopsis, there may be something specific to say about anthropology, in particular about the continuing, even if recently diminishing, influence of the traditions of methodological holism (and, indeed, structural functionalism). We are predisposed to look for "more than the sum of the parts"; this is a double-edged analytical approach. On the one hand, the quest for connections between things is a great strength of anthropology: there is something about human collectivity that *is* "more than the sum of the parts," and it is vital that we struggle with the difficulties inherent in comprehending that and getting it across to our students and other readers (Jenkins 2002:39-62, 73-76). On the other hand, however, holism is also a fertile source of over-tidy normalized models of messy reality.

In the fifth place, fieldwork may be part of the problem here, as well. While preparing this piece, I have reviewed my field notes from Denmark (1996-7 and short fieldwork trips subsequently). At the beginning, in the initial throes of culture contact, everything up to and including the kitchen sink was enthusiastically noted. Much of what I was encountering was unexpected; a great deal was, it turned out, irrelevant. Gradually, however, over the months, as I became more familiar with the water in which I was swimming, and as my engagement shifted from the less discriminating to the more particular, the field notes change and unexpected "kitchen sinks" gradually became less common. In short, and in a process that should be familiar to all ethnographers, I was becoming, to a degree, socialized into local normality. This process can, perhaps, be likened to a shift from "extraordinary acute unexpectedness" to taken-for-granted "ordinary chronic unexpectedness."

Lastly, we are not just anthropologists or sociologists; we are also ordinary, culturally formed human beings, with something other than a detached academic interest in what is going on around us and in what we ourselves are doing. We are able to live our everyday lives relatively untroubled by perpetual ontological insecurity—to borrow a concept from R.D. Laing that was later also used by Giddens (1984)—in part because of the routine suppression of unexpectedness into which we have been socialized. It is what we do in our everyday lives, so why should we not do it in our professional practice?

Analytical Consequences of Neglecting the Unexpected

To address that last question, there are actually very good reasons why, as professional anthropologists or sociologists, we should not suppress or ignore the place of the unexpected in everyday life. Doing so has deleterious intellectual consequences of which I shall address only two here. A third—the over-ordered and -structured model of collectivity to which such neglect arguably gives rise—is too complex a matter to discuss here, although I shall not be able to ignore it altogether; there are likely to be others.

First, because we do not accord proper significance to the "ordinary chronic unexpectedness" of everyday life, we do its routine complexity a disservice and fail to capture the skill and fluidity with which most people, most of the time, deal with the unexpected. Interactionist sociology has a long history of attempting to take this into account, but even Goffman tended to focus on patterns—routines and interaction rituals—rather than improvization (which isn't to say that he completely ignored improvization: e.g., 1967:19-23). While Bourdieu subsequently talked about the "necessary improvization that defines excellence" in practice (1977:8), the pity is that he then reinvented improvization as the less-than-conscious acting out of the "structured and structuring dispositions" that are embodied in the *habitus*.

Without installing the unexpected, and improvization, at analytical centre stage—alongside an appreciation of the human appetite for predictability and control, and an understanding of culture as a portfolio of the "normal and expected"—our model of the ordinary everyday human world is doomed to be altogether too tidy and too organized, and our image of human beings too

habit-, routine- or rule-governed: simultaneously too well behaved and not well enough; over-socialized (Wrong 1961) and under-skilled. If we fail to grasp the importance of "the unexpected" our understanding of everyday life will not just be impoverished, it will be wrong.

Second, because we neglect the unexpected we routinely work with an impoverished understanding of social change. The key point here is that alongside other explanations of social change—as, for example, the unfolding of *longue durée* social processes, the expected product of goal-oriented strategizing, or the unintended consequences of actions oriented towards other ends—we need to understand better the role of contingency,[5] of random events, of the unexpected. This is not a new point: Raymond Firth said something very similar nearly 60 years ago, in his 1953 Royal Anthropological Institute presidential lecture. Criticizing Radcliffe-Browne's notion of social organization as a system of roles, Firth argued that the notion of "role" can

> imply a too mechanical view of social action. It does not make allowance for action to meet contingency, for adaptation to the highly variant circumstances and problems of social life. Organization is concerned with roles, but not with these alone; it also involves that more spontaneous, decisive activity which does not follow simply from role-playing. [1954: 9]

He went on to say that,

> in order to understand both change in structure and change in detail we must look to a closer study of the setting and results of individual choice and decision, as they affect activity and social relations. In other words, we must look to analysis of social organization to help in the understanding of social change. [17]

Firth's argument for a shift of focus from structure to organization has long since become part of the axiomatic intellectual worldview of social anthropology. His remarks about contingency have yet to sink in.

Apropos contingency, "extraordinary acute unexpectedness" is not only a consequence of social change; it may also cause it. Examples are close at hand, historically: 11th September 2001 was a very precise fault line in global life, a point at which the completely unexpected happened, after which a great deal was not the same, for many people, in many respects. Of course this moment of unexpectedness was located in antecedents—in the *longue durée*, in short-to medium-term goal-oriented strategies, and in the unexpected consequences of other policies—but its defining quality *was* perhaps its unexpectedness. And in fact, one of the defining characteristics of "terrorism" more generally is precisely the exploitation of unexpectedness. Something that comes right out of left-field has particular qualities—not least a numinous halo that almost smacks of wonder or the supernatural—and responses are to some extent shaped by that: knee-jerk immediacy, confusion, affront, massive investment in extra control procedures, and, in this case, the demonization of the source of the unexpected outrage. In a world increasingly dominated by rational attempts to exercise predictable control, spectacular random contingency can produce its own shock and awe.

Factoring contingency into our understanding of change may help us to appreciate the perspectives of all sides caught up in change: one group's planned strategy may be experienced by another group as random contingency. Conquerors and colonists, for example, are generally following a plan, but it is *their* plan; for the local indigenous peoples, however, the arrival of the new folk, hell bent on domination, is very likely to be a random contingency of the worst kind, extraordinary acute unexpectedness on a catastrophic scale.

Finally, acknowledging contingency creates analytical space for the non-social, and allows a move away from the historical-structural explanations of Marxist political economy, or the Durkheimian insistence that social facts should be explained by other social facts; away from purely endogenous explanations to explanations that permit the inclusion of the exogenous, however we define that. Not least, such an acknowledgment allows us to recognize that some environments are characterized by more unexpectedness than others. In this respect, there is inspiration to be found in Braudel's brief acknowledgment of the role of climate change in the history of the Mediterranean and Western Europe (1981:49-51), Fagan's series of books dealing with "how climate changed civilization" (1999, 2000, 2004, 2008), and Foster's (2012) recent discussion of climate and culture change in America before 1600. Given the present state of world, recognizing that the environment is a source of game-changing, and unexpected, contingency could hardly be more important.

To locate contemporary climate change debates within this discussion, the first point to make is that, *climate* aside, there is long-standing perception of the *weather* as random and contingent and, indeed, there is considerable truth in this. That weather is a matter of "ordinary chronic unexpectedness" may go some way to helping us to understand apathy about or resistance to arguments about the need to do something about climate change. Since the unexpected is a chronic feature of ordinary weather, the potential "extraordinary acute unexpectedness" of climate change is elusive. In passing, it may be noted that this discussion is analogous with the

debate among palaeontologists and biologists about how evolution really works: about the relationship between chance and contingency (Eldredge 1995; Gould 1990) and genetically driven competitive selection and convergence (Dawkins 2006a, 2006b), and the increasing recognition of chance, contingency, competition and convergence in a new and complex evolutionary synthesis (Pigliucci and Müller 2010). It seems to me that a similar synthesis may be necessary in order to understand social and cultural change.

Remedying the Neglect of the Unexpected and Contingency

I shall try to avoid the temptation to over-reach myself with grand proposals and schemes. In this spirit, it is important to emphasize that I do not claim that the argument so far is revolutionary. It isn't, in at least four respects. First, in one way or another many anthropologists and sociologists are, of course, aware of the importance of contingency; if this were not true then CASCA would never have organized a conference on the theme of "the unexpected," and I would not have been invited to address the issue. Second, as I have insisted throughout, there is pattern and a degree of predictability in the human world and we have to continue to attend to it; not all is random and unexpected. Third, acknowledging the unexpected and the role of contingency does not mean that we need to junk the accumulated conventional wisdoms of anthropology and sociology. What I am suggesting is at most an addition to what we know and what we do, not a radical alternative. In this respect, finally, much of what I am about to suggest in fact means revisiting stuff that appears to have slipped off our disciplinary radar screens—for whatever reasons, not least theoretical fashion and faddishness—but which still has great value. What might this mean in practice? I shall begin by looking at ethnography and field research.

Part of the problem with respect to fieldwork is that the attempt to document the unexpectedness of life is likely to encounter powerful mundane factors pushing in the other direction. Squeezed by the pressures of modern university life, such as teaching loads and understandable anxieties about doctoral completion rates and reputational protection, by decreasing levels in real terms of research funding, and by increasing demands for policy-relevance, practicality and impact, field research has become typically shorter and more driven by pre-existing agendas, and graduate training more formalized and more prescriptive. On top of these institutional constraints, our research subjects have in many cases become increasingly expectant with respect to outcomes and value, and increasingly influential over what we do; and why shouldn't they?

Given this context, it is not only that the space—actually the time—to revel in, and explore, the unexpected is less than it used to be, but that manageable predictability with respect to process and product has become the watchword, rather than exploration and creativity. Fieldwork is increasingly closed-ended rather than open-ended. And, as if this were not enough, there is a further source of difficulty of which we must take account. Earlier in this article, reflecting on my Danish field notes, I discussed briefly the normalizing tendency that may simply be integral to the fieldwork process of learning a culturally strange social setting and environment; we have to resist our own tendencies to focus on pattern and "normal life" as well as external pressures.

Despite these discouraging realities, it is worth considering what we might be able to do to push back against the contemporary current (and our own human nature). In the first place, one of the joys of doing field research is that, in the field, we do still have some autonomy. We should take advantage of this—and if this seems simplistic and obvious I make no apologies—to keep reminding ourselves, and our graduate students that, as well as looking for patterns and core "shared stuff," we should be no less receptive to odd events, unexpected happenings, random outliers, alternative understandings, deviance and so on, and be prepared to treat them as empirically and analytically central, rather than peripheral exceptions to the rule(s). Reflexivity, an attempt at constant monitoring of what we are doing and not doing, is vital, although this is only ever likely to be a worthy work in progress, a working towards reflexivity.

As part of these good intentions we should be alert for discourses and practices explicitly concerned with uncertainty and the unexpected. We should pay close attention to the relationship between what people say they regularly do—what they expect themselves to do—and what they actually do, and between what they expect other people to do and what those others actually do (Holy and Stuchlik 1983:5-44). We should, therefore, treat "official accounts" as normative rather than descriptive. Because it gives unrivalled access to the everyday life, participant observation ethnography is probably the best research method if we want to observe the differences between what people say they do and what they actually do. However, participant observation is not the only way to do this: if they are available we should also pay attention to quantitative data—albeit critical and sceptical attention—because, particularly in the medium- to long-term, they may present the best picture of what actually happens

and thus may show up departures from the normatively expected. Leach's *Pul Eliya* (1961) is a classic example of what I am suggesting here. Finally we should return, where we can, to approaches such as the Manchester School's "situational" or "extended case analysis," with their emphasis on practice, on what people do as well as what they say.

Moving on from the pragmatics of field research to theory and analysis, one of the most fundamental questions is: what are we to do about our all-too-tidy, somewhat linear and generally under-theorized (in the sense of taken-for-granted) models of collective life? Does talking vaguely about "society" or "culture" really help, or is it part of the problem? Should we, for example, move away altogether from notions of structure or system, with all their connotations of orderliness? I think we should, but I am very aware that this is a minority opinion (Jenkins 2010). Can models of collectivity that are rooted in topographic thinking offer a useful alternative? Among the possibilities that come to mind here are Simmel's "dyads" and "triads," social network analysis, and uses of complexity theories to discuss emergent properties of interaction. Do we need to revisit Barth's generative "models of social organization" (1966), part of his theoretical project that has been—almost systematically—overlooked? How is it that a degree of collective order emerges out of the contingent hurly-burly of everyday life? How can we become more comfortable with the notion that human everyday life may be as paradoxical as it is consistent, as chaotic as it is coherent, and as uncertain as it is predictable; in other words, absolutely full of the unexpected?

Bearing these questions in mind, and to return briefly to a point made earlier, our models of social change also require some attention; we need, for example, to accommodate the "non-cultural" and the "non-social" as part of our explanatory or interpretive models. However, to raise something that has not been discussed so far, anthropology and sociology also need to deal better with creativity. Change often takes place not because something different has "just happened," but because something new, often a technology, has actually been created: think, for example, of writing or stirrups, the printing press or the internal combustion engine. So far, however, creativity has had very low visibility in either anthropology or sociology, although there are some signs that this has been recognized and is being addressed (Cashman et al. 2011; Hallam and Ingold 2007). As part of reworking our approach to social change, we might also want to move from theoretically determined *explanations* of social change to a more evidence-driven acceptance of historical narrative *accounts*.

Lest I be misunderstood on this point, I am absolutely not suggesting that we can manage without theory (although I must confess to occasionally thinking that I could manage without most theorists). We cannot do without theory and to retreat into some kind of crude empiricist bunker is not an option. My point, in this respect, is actually three points. First, it is regrettable that theory has become the tail that wags the empirical research dog, rather than the disciplined servant of empirical inquiry; a return to the theories of the middle-range advocated by Merton (1957:85-117) might be a way out of this particular vale of tears. Second, abstract theory values logic, coherence and consistency, and thus tends to smooth out the mess of everyday reality into representations of social reality that bear little relationship to human experience. Finally, history—whether it be the *longue durée* or what happened ten years ago—matters when it comes to understanding the contemporary human world. Taken together, these propositions amount to a suggestion that we need to forge new relationships with both history and theory.

Setting my suggestions about method and theory alongside each other, this is in part a plea for us to row back from the "cultural turn" that seems to have dominated anthropology since the 1980s, back to a more sociological anthropology (although the irony that sociology has also suffered its own cultural seizure is not lost on me). To emphasize meanings and representations amounts to entering into a conspiracy with culture, which is, after all—if my argument is accepted—the suppressor of the unexpected.

The Unexpected during Everyday Fieldwork: Denmark

One point that isn't made often enough about ethnographic fieldwork is that in addition to being a way of "getting at" the everyday lives of others, it is an everyday life activity in its own right. Fieldwork acquires its own routines and rituals, and we make sense of it, in part, using all of the normalizing strategies that language and culture put at our disposal. There generally comes a point when "the field" begins to appear to us as more or less predictable. This is, of course, something of an illusion, dependent on the absence of unexpected contingencies and "events" (as, indeed, it is in anyone's everyday life). I shall close by very briefly discussing some examples of how analytically significant the unexpected proved to be during my fieldwork in Skive, a small town in mid-Jutland, Denmark, during the mid-1990s and subsequently (Jenkins 2006, 2012).

The first example deals with the relationship between official models and social change; the interplay between

long-term antecedents, explicit plans, and unintended consequences; how an instance of "extraordinary acute unexpectedness" became institutionalized; and how the hapless fieldworker was led astray by normal expectations. Skive has a long history of trade union activism and left-of-centre politics. The local trade unions had held a parade through the town and a meeting in the park every May Day for many decades, although this had declined in size and importance recently. On May 1st 1997 there was competition, in the shape of a plan by local shopkeepers to organize a special late shopping evening—"Skive by Night"—with bargains, events and other attractions to bring shoppers into the town. Everybody I spoke to—and there were no exceptions, regardless of their politics or local position—assured me that the shopping evening would fail: who would possibly want to go shopping on Thursday evening until ten at night? It was also seen as something of a provocation.

So I sensibly elected to spend all day with the trade unionists: from a breakfast meeting in the local theatre, to an end-of-day session at one of the union's offices, at which the municipal archivist gave a talk with slides on the history of labour activism in the town. The march and open-air meeting attracted a few hundred people. Just before ten in the evening I walked back into town, to discover the tail end of what had clearly been a hugely successful evening. The town centre had been thronged with thousands of people, many from some distance away. I had missed not only the most important part of the day, but also something that local people had not expected, and that *they* regarded as extraordinary. Such is fieldwork! By 2009, the trade unions had stopped marching through town altogether, although there is still a small meeting in the park. Skive by Night, however, is now a thriving bi-annual affair—a date in November has been added, to plug in to the Christmas market—and continues to attract large crowds. The extraordinary has been rapidly, and profitably, institutionalized, and shopping is more important than solidarity and struggle, in a telling image of how Denmark has changed, and is changing: consumerism matters more than socialism. It is a also a telling example of the role of creativity, in this case on the part of the shopkeepers' organization, in the promotion of change locally (although it is also true that if the town had not been somehow "ready" for this change it would not have been so successful).

My second illustration deals again with the relationship between official models and what people actually do in practice, but also with the role of paradox in everyday life, in this case what I came to call "everyday paradoxes of identification." Embracing the centrality of paradox to everyday life—even its normality, if I dare to use the word—turned out to be the only way that I could make sense of much of my data. For example:

- a well-established public rhetoric about Danish cultural and social homogeneity sits uneasily alongside historical and regional diversity, long-standing social class differences, and gathering consumerism;
- individuality and "rugged individualism" are strongly valued and asserted, but everyday social norms rooted in normative egalitarianism are powerful, if not completely coercive;
- Jutland is simultaneously centre and periphery within Danish historical and cultural narratives, a place of backward obscurity *and* the wellspring of Danish values and the 19th-century social movement of "popular enlightenment";
- Denmark is typically a constructive member of the European Union, in terms of the observance of rules and regulations, but it has long been a hotbed of popular scepticism about the EU project;
- although many Danes resist, or even resent, being described as nationalist, the national flag, Dannebrog, whether in official or popular use, is everywhere one looks, and outspoken pride in the nation is taken-for-granted and unremarkable;
- enthusiastic popular monarchism co-exists with popular social democracy, in the non-party sense, which values and sustains relative equality and meritocracy;
- the Danish monarchy works its popular enchantment via the negotiation of paradoxes: simultaneously sacredly special and profanely ordinary, keeping their distance while mingling with the people, being from somewhere nationally yet coming from nowhere locally;
- Denmark is a secular society with few equals, yet most "ethnic Danes" belong to the national Church and the teaching of Christianity within its public schools is increasingly, and vigorously, state-sponsored; and, last but not least,
- despite decades of shrill political and journalistic tub-thumping about the "immigrant problem"—and about Islam, in particular—inter-ethnic relations are generally non-conflictual, although they may be distant: the paradox is that political rhetoric is the real, most pressing and most dangerous problem.

This suggests that, for the fieldworker and citizenry alike, chronic divergences between what people say and what they do, between the expected "official models" and the unexpected, are routine and "normal" and that humans are actually pretty good at coping with them. Paradox and the non-remarkable management of minor and not so

minor cognitive dissonance seem to be central to everyday life.

My last example is concerned with the field researcher's role as a potential source of the unexpected. In the summer of 1998 I curated an exhibition in Skive Museum presenting results of my research. The theme that I chose was the ways in which the Danes use Dannebrog, their national flag: from the state and the royal house, to family celebrations, to marking special offers in shops (see Jenkins 2007). The typical response to the exhibition, in the book recording visitors' comments and in conversations, was something along the lines of "Do we really do this? So much? I hadn't noticed before." We should, therefore, remember that, in addition to the well-known anthropological job of rendering the culturally exotic and unfamiliar understandable to external audiences, another element of the core mission of anthropology and sociology, certainly in the 21st century, addresses our research subjects and requires us to defamiliarize the familiar, to re-frame the axiomatically accepted and the taken-for-granted as something that can also be seen as strange and unexpected. Which is just one more way in which unexpectedness is at the heart of what we do, as anthropologists and as everyday humans.

These three snippets from the field researcher's notebook suggest that chronic or acute unexpectedness are ubiquitous. They also suggest that as fieldworkers we are more than up to the job of dealing with the situation, and indeed do so already; this is not, after all, rocket science. It also suggests, however, that we need to acknowledge more explicitly—or even just at all—that everyday life and social change are emergent products of the complex interplay, in the short- and the long-term, of the predicted and the unpredicted, the predictable and the altogether unpredictable.

If culture is a means of suppressing the chronic unexpectedness of human life, of creating a sense of predictability that prevents us from succumbing to abject ontological insecurity, then the hustle and bustle of everyday life is the theatre in which we deal with "ordinary" unpredictability, contingency and paradox, and respond to more precipitate "events." This complex reality deserves more attention than anthropologists and sociologists have given it: we need to find a way to foreground the chronic and acute unexpectedness of everyday life, on the one hand, while keeping a firm hold on its pattern and comfortable sense of predictability, on the other. This is not, however, a job for practitioners of abstract social theory, because it will be the empirical detail that counts.

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Notes

1 I am grateful to Professor Lisa Philips and the organising team, for dreaming up a conference on such an audacious theme—the unexpected—and then inviting me to address it.
2 Perhaps the most sensible thing that he ever said.
3 We could all, of course, come up with our candidates, but, for my money, Vilhelm Aubert, a Norwegian, is the greatest "undiscovered" sociologist of all time; the collection of his essays that I have cited includes another essay on a topic—"Predictability in life and science"—that has a bearing on the theme under discussion in this article.
4 I hope that the reader will forgive me if I resist the temptation to disfigure the text at this point with the extensive bibliographic references that would be required in order to do justice to the bodies of work in question without being invidiously—and certainly unfairly—selective.
5 "Contingency" is a complex word, according the dictionary: as well as denoting something the occurrence of which is uncertain, or which depends on an uncertain future event, it may also, apparently, refer to a future event that is regarded as likely to happen. I am only using the word in its sense of uncertainty.

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