Review Forum / Regards croises sur un livre

Holger Jebens and Karl-Heinz Kohl, Eds. *The End of Anthropology?* Oxon, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2011, 262 pages.

Is There Hope for Anthropology?

Todd Sanders
University of Toronto

Anthropology will soon be closed for business. So, at least, have said Romantics, Anthony Giddens, and a host of anthropological greats—Mead, Lévi-Strauss, Worsley, Sahlins, Geertz among others—who have variously ventured into disciplinary divination. Such prognostications have come in many forms. Some hinge on the idea that anthropology's object of study, the traditional Other in faraway lands, is vanishing or is already gone. Without this object, the reasoning goes, anthropology has nothing left to do. Others prophecise the discipline's demise based on the ethical, epistemological and political critiques levelled against the discipline from the mid-1980s. In this vision anthropology's theories, concepts, methods and ethical positions are bankrupt, and utterly irrelevant to today's fast-moving, postcolonial, global and globalizing world. Here, too, the discipline's end is nigh, due this time to our changing world and to the novel forms of academic autocannibalism that characterize it.

Jebens' and Kohl's (2011) *The End of Anthropology?* provides a powerful riposte to such pessimisms—the title's interrogative form is a giveaway—through an engaging set of reflections on the state of anthropology today and its future promise. While contributors are not uniformly optimistic, nor do all agree on what anthropology is, what it should do, where it should go, or how it should get there, none is prepared to administer anthropology's Last Rites. There is plenty of hope among these anthropologists about anthropology's future. Indeed, as Jebens' chapter suggests, the fact that anthropologists have long spun gloomy tales of anthropology's imminent demise is itself grounds for hope, not hopelessness, about our end.

This book contains not just one end but many possible ends, and in different senses. These include both *demise* and *goal*, as Crapanzano discusses in his splendid chapter: as in "the demise of anthropology" and also "the goal of anthropology." As it happens, for most contributors these twin "ends" are tightly intertwined: the reason anthropology is not nearing its end is precisely due to its promising disciplinary ends (Comaroff, Spyer, Kuper, Godelier). Others agree, adding that anthropologists must actively merge and market their discipline to ensure its survival in our rapidly-changing world (Gingrich, Hannerz). A few contributors, conversely, imply that the relation between anthropology's ends and end is less straightforward, and are more vexed by external forces that shape the discipline (Howell, Crapanzano). For these (relative) pessimists, these are troubling times for anthropology.

But make no mistake. This is a book of hope, underscored by Kohl's introduction and the editors' decision to sandwich the few less celebratory contributions between the many anthropological optimisms. And insofar as it is, the volume successfully captures and conveys a sense of optimism that many, perhaps most anthropologists share today about their discipline, a sense that (to borrow Godelier's chapter title) "In today's world, anthropology is more important than ever." To ensure the discipline's longevity, we just have to keep doing anthropology, and doing it well; we must consolidate and communicate more effectively our ideas and practices to the world-at-large. Vive l'anthropologie!

The book as a whole is a delightful reminder of the range of positions, possibilities and promise our discipline holds. There are good reasons to be optimistic—even enthusiastic!—about many of anthropology's new and old ends and the profound insights they offer (see also Moore and Sanders 2006). Yet there are also good reasons to ask whether such optimism and enthusiasm will translate into recognition outside the discipline and ensure anthropology's future. My fear, I must confess, is that they may not, that the end of anthropology and anthropology's ends are not as tightly linked as some might hope. I wonder, then, whether the volume's grounds for hope about anthropology's future may in fact miss the mark, while its grounds for despair, buried in the book's inner sanctum, may show the greatest promise for assuring the discipline's longevity.

If Spyer, Comaroff, Kuper and Godelier are enthusiastic about anthropology's promise, implicitly or explicitly suggesting it will all but guarantee the discipline's future, other optimists call for more concerted interventions. Gingrich, for instance, suggests we are witnessing the end of one anthropology —national traditions—and the rise of another, characterised by "a transnational and global phase of critical research"

(p. 155). This transition, which has historical, institutional and epistemological aspects to it, "has already set in or is about to happen" (p. 163). It will liberate us from provincialism, national employment and funding constraints, and usher in a global anthropology of international cooperation and inter-disciplinary collaboration. To thrive in this new global era, anthropologists must actively consolidate and communicate better what we do, and how best to do it: our anthropological "supermarkets and shops today should advise customers that the good products we have are valuable objects of interest and that their users should carefully read the anthropologist's instructions and then pay the asking price" (p. 170).

Hannerz similarly points to our need to consolidate and communicate anthropology's promise in today's neoliberal world. While anthropologists know the value of anthropology, he says, many others do not, imagining it as a pith helmet-wearing, anachronistic, pathetic, useless, waste of money. When these publics are vast and powerful—ministry officials, taxpayers, academic administrators, and so on—image matters. Hannerz worries that such pervasive negative imagery, combined with neoliberal logics, talk of the demise of disciplines and of the superiority of transdisciplinarity, can enable "politicians and administrators to do away with the autonomy of those clusters of intellectual activity that seem least profitable" (p. 183). His solution? Anthropology must "cultivate a strong brand" ... one that "should attract outsiders: customers, visitors, members of the public" (p. 184). And the brand? "Diversity is our Business." Anthropology, after all, is primarily about diversity (p. 187); and "[w]hen the services of anthropologists are sought outside academia—be it by Microsoft, development NGOs, or the Pentagon – it also appears that it is mostly understandings of diversity that are in demand..." (p. 188). To avert anthropology's end, we must clearly articulate and market anthropology's ends.

One curious feature of these diverse optimisms is the patent or latent suggestion that, by merely articulating and doing good anthropology, with and without rebranding, anthropologists can virtually guarantee their discipline's future. This approach begins at home, and looks outward: an anthropology inside-out, we might say. Yet for a discipline long preoccupied with "the wider context," power relations, inequalities and structural constraints, such über-rational, hyper-agentive positions are puzzling. More productive for the task at hand, perhaps, might be an anthropology outside-in: one that recognizes that the locus of disciplinary reproduction lies as much without as within anthropology; that today's global marketplace of ideas and practices is anything but "free"; and that, on this tilted, global playing field, where positivism, quantification and evidence-based everything reign supreme, anthropology and anthropological knowledge are woefully low forms of life. This is, to be sure, uncomfortable, uncertain and at times depressing ground, where anthropology is a weak voice and rarely sets the terms of engagement. But to ponder anthropology's possible end is inevitably to tread on such ground, as this volume's less optimistic contributors effectively do.

For Crapanzano, anthropology has vast potential to muster radical critiques of the world, a potential that derives from its "straddling positions": those betwixt-and-between locations from which our disciplinary knowledge practices proceed. Such positions however are being threatened by "the insistent parochialism of the anthropologies of the centre" (p. 118). By this he means American anthropology and its few associated foreigners, its proclivity to imagine itself as *the* cutting-edge, and to silence Others including other anthropologies in the bargain. Contra Gingrich and Hannerz, to insist on a singular Anthropology is for Crapanzano a counterproductive act of power. In addition to American hegemony and parochialism, other threats to anthropology's straddling positions include "the deadening effects of ... institutionalisation" (p. 113) and anthropology's "coming home." Crapanzano sketches an array of possible pathways into the future, including turning the anthropological canon on university structures, funding and other institutions that profoundly shape the discipline; and attending to how anthropological "research circulates and is made use of outside the discipline, the university and the scholarly community at large" (p. 124).

For Signe Howell, perhaps the most pessimistic of the lot, anthropology still has plenty to offer. The problem is, she says, its offerings become fewer each day. The anthropology we once knew and loved is fast becoming a simulacrum. Unlike the longstanding anthropological tradition of sustained fieldwork, participant observation, vernacular language use and open-ended research among Others in unknown, distant lands, today's anthropology is increasingly marked by narrowly-focussed projects, short fieldwork, shallow methods, little or no use of local languages and frequently happens "at home." With this shift, Howell argues, we lose the unique contribution to knowledge of other life-worlds that anthropology once offered. While internal factors have contributed to this shift, external factors are also key: particularly new funding structures that stress "relevant and useful" projects and "discourage self-initiated, long-term individual research in favour of team-work, preferably inter-disciplinary, the research aims of which are largely dictated by the grant-givers" (p. 145). In considering anthropology's future, then, Howell dwells less on disciplinary consolidation, rebranding and introspection than on the global political economy that delineates, constrains and moulds anthropology.

It is perhaps misleading to imply, as I have, that some of the volume's contributors are "inside-out," others "outside-in," since plainly the discipline's "inside" is constituted by and through its "outside" and always has been. Anthropology could scarcely exist in any form without universities and the disciplines, regulations and administrations, bureaucrats, Research Ethics Boards (REBs), funding bodies and the rest. My inside/outside is a convenient shorthand only; my concern less with locus than with focus. And it is here that the volume's "pessimists" provide grounds for hope about anthropology's future: they train our sights on those things commonly considered "outside" the discipline that, truth be told, have long

constituted its core. For anthropology's future very much depends on what unfolds in such arenas, and the extent to which anthropologists working in them can and cannot act and make themselves heard.

While some of the book's optimists do indeed gesture in such directions—global marketplaces for anthropological ideas and practices within and outside the academy, interdisciplinary collaborations and the like—it is not clear that their free market metaphors provide adequate theoretical purchase for the task at hand. Would anyone buy a new brand of anthropology that did not already conform to popular expectations of the discipline? Would other disciplines readily adopt anthropology's instructions on, say, "ethnography," "diversity," or "culture"? Can anthropology ever participate in interdisciplinary collaborations on equal terms? Or are we destined to become mere "culture experts" on uneven ground, peddling cultural diversity to other disciplines and a world that wants nothing else from us? Free market metaphors all too easily erase such vital questions, questions that could be, should be, and in fact already have been asked. Marilyn Strathern (2004), for one, has suggested that marketing anthropologists as culture experts within interdisciplinary collaborations is a certain recipe for hastening anthropology's demise. Whether she is right or wrong, or perhaps a bit of both, the point is that such arenas are essential to anthropology's long-term viability. Theoretically and practically we must enter them eyes wide open, and not assume the very things that require exploration, demonstration and at times contestation. The same goes for other such arenas.

Let's go local. Here in Canada, the 1998 Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) set the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, which Canadian university REBs were obliged to implement. Unfortunately the TCPS was premised on an epistemology foreign to many social sciences and humanities, anthropology included. At issue were not different ethical principles, but—given divergent epistemologies and research practices—how best to ensure those principles. On one REB I witnessed anthropologists sometimes being asked in the name of ethics to act unethically. Some, for example, were pressured to obtain written informed consent from interlocutors, where such written consent risked coercion or endangerment, even though the ethical principle at stake was simply *informed consent*. Such audit procedures threaten to reshape anthropological practice, or to render it "ethically criminal." None too happy with the state of affairs, Canadian social scientists and humanities scholars have resisted and taken action, individually and in concert, where and when possible. At the University of Toronto, for example, Professor Gavin Smith penned a document for the social science and humanities REB on "participant observation" and its ethical entailments, a document that has usefully guided the REB's thinking and practice ever since. Collectively, social scientists and humanities scholars from across Canada produced a razor-sharp response document to the TCPS. Their efforts were not wasted. In 2010, the government published TCPS 2, revised ethics guidelines that include many enlightened clarifications, alterations and turnabouts, key among them a brand new, mostly compelling chapter on "qualitative research" that explains to REBs and the varied disciplines that staff them what cognate social scientists do, how we do it, and how to navigate the ethical issues surrounding our research. Grounds for hope, it appears, in the midst of challenging, frequently-lost yet essential battles.

As this journal's readers will know, one recent skirmish over the future of anthropology—more precisely, over the future of Canadian critical medical anthropology—concerns funding. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) will no longer fund medical anthropologists, who, because they study health, must now turn to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). For some medical anthropologists of the mixed-method, hypothesis-testing persuasion who always already haunted CIHR's corridors, this matters little. But for critical social science and humanities health researchers, CIHR's institutionalised, positivist sensibilities and disinterest in critical, ethnographic research portend the end. "We face the possible extermination of one of the most vibrant, high demand and policy-relevant health disciplines," says a group of Canadian medical anthropologists (Graham et al. 2010:6). Sensibly enough, I think, they have chosen not to crow amongst themselves about medical anthropology's merits but to engage directly with the powers that be: organising meetings and workshops with CIHR and SSHRC officials, and by calling for further discussions, public clarifications and reassessments of funders' priorities, assessment criteria and peer review processes. The undertaking is fraught and precarious, to be sure, the outcome unknown. Yet because they are looking and pushing in all the right places, there is hope.

And what of the rest of anthropology, and its future? Is there hope? Without question. Just that it's not always found where one might imagine.

References

Graham, Janice, and Naomi Adelson, Sylvie Fortin, Gilles Bibeau, Margaret Lock, Sandra Hyde, Mary Ellen MacDonald, Ignace Olazabal, Peter Stephenson, James Waldram
2010 The End of Medical Anthropology? Cleaving "Health" From the Funding Priorities of SSHRC: Will CIHR Fund Social Scientists in Canada? Culture 4(2):5-6.

Jebens, Holger, and Karl-Heinz Kohl, eds.
2011 The End of Anthropology? Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishing.

Moore, Henrietta L., and Todd Sanders, eds.
2006 Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology. Malden: Blackwell.

Strathern, Marilyn
2004 Laudable Aims and Problematic Consequences, Or: the "Flow" of Knowledge Is Not Neutral. Economy and Society 33(4):550-61.