

Anthropology's Variable Ends and Who Gets to Decide Her Fate

Regna Darnell
University of Western Ontario

"The end of anthropology" is a conundrum already familiar to most practicing anthropologists. In a recent lecture on the kind of anthropology I do not think should survive, I talked about creativity, spirituality and the limits of objectivist science. One of the questions at the end was, "yes, but don't you think anthropology is moribund too?" I thought I had just explained why I don't think so, but that calling my position anthropology was unintelligible re-opened my thinking about whether we need to change our brand or whether we better continue to think of ourselves as heroic voices in the wilderness maintaining our traditional lofty values of cross-cultural appreciation and curiosity against the barbarisms of global neoliberalism. Ulf Hannerz envisions an anthropological brand that resonates with neoliberal "logics" and locates our expertise around human diversity. Fair enough—that's one of the things we do and certainly less rigid than the exaggerated stereotype of our disciplinary demise.

Complaining about the current state of affairs, from Plato on the foibles of the youth of his day to First Nations elders haranguing today's upcoming generation, is a long established rhetorical strategy both to ensure cross-generational transmission of knowledge and to inspire youth to seek change. It is hopeful rather than despairing, in a way that permeates this set of papers. Critique is targeted toward strengthening a discipline the authors clearly love and simultaneously want to retool relative to a rapidly changing world. Even the strongest negativities are articulated in terms of anthropological methodologies. Adam Kuper, for example, explores marriage of close kin among anthropologists and other good Victorians using the time-honoured techniques of a science he dismisses as based on the "illusion" of "the primitive." His subjects are not primitive and his anthropological kinship analysis allows for critique and replication. The evolutionary baggage of primitiveness has not invalidated the contemporary project.

My overwhelming impression of these papers is how un-North American they are. The volume was published in the United Kingdom (UK). Its authors hail from Vienna, Paris, Stockholm, Oslo, Frankfurt, London (UK), Marburg, and Leiden—plus three Americans. Although several authors offer lip service to emergent anthropologies outside Europe and North America, none are included in this conversation. Canadians are also absent, presumably invisible within the hegemony of Anglo-American anthropology; yet, we too have a national tradition and do things differently in response to local and national constraints and potentialities (Harrison and Darnell, eds. 2006). Andre Gingrich is most outspoken about the need for anthropology to transcend nationalist ideologies, but acknowledges the need to build on the institutional and intellectual parameters of existing national traditions.

Maurice Godelier is perhaps most insistent that our discipline, appropriately retooled in line with its traditional strengths, is more important than ever to the fate of contemporary global society. Given that all contributors have a stake in reproducing the discipline of socio-cultural anthropology because they are its senior practitioners, the real question, I think, is "what kind of anthropology will we reproduce?" Here, each author defends their position with considerable passion.

Signe Howell perhaps reflects the secret worries of many when she laments the movement of the newly emergent anthropology away from traditional long-term participant-observation fieldwork in some native language of a place away from home. She fears dissolution of the characteristic anthropological perspective arising from removal of the exotic elsewhere, with its concomitant defamiliarizing exoticism of the everyday at home. What Karl-Heinz Kohl calls "classic anthropology" seems to many contributors a necessary counterbalance and corrective to studies of the anthropologist's own culture. Several authors highlight "listening" as the anthropological method par excellence. For Patricia Spyer, the "privileging of everyday nitti-grittiness" (p.65) facilitates taking the standpoint of members of a culture rather than imposing that of the anthropologist or the mainstream society in which her/his training is grounded.

For John Comaroff, the dawning paradigm shift in anthropology is epistemological. Whereas classic anthropological relativism has eclipsed macro-level forces operating on the discipline, "intractable realism" (p.87) and "fractal empiricism" (p.90) promise robust explorations of the (cultural-)local in terms more metaphorical than explanatory. Whether in relation to ethics or epistemology, several papers turn to what Boas called "the native point of view" as a counter narrative to what anthropologists claim to know. Howell characterizes anthropology as "empirical philosophy" (p. 151), a hypothetical discipline ranging over time as well as space to draw alternative cultural answers to universal human questions into dialogue with one another.

Gingrich, Hannerz and Maurice Godelier all seek alternatives to a monolithic and static anthropology mired in its own past in a multi-perspectival internationalism that ideally walks alongside the transnational flows of globalization. Godelier argues that anthropology (and history, though surely not academic history as I have largely known it) alone offer comparative insight into what alternatives might look like. Sadly, the epistemological and pragmatic alternatives that we can articulate now are all products in one sense or another of a Western Enlightenment thought that cross-cultural encounter has at least served to bring to our attention as ethnocentric. The "subversive" and "intellectually rebellious streak" in the anthropological persona (Hannerz, p.175) gives us an edge over other social science disciplines in formulating effective resistance to one-size-fits-all neoliberalism. The pluralism inherent in our cross-cultural lens predisposes anthropologists to internationalism and expansion of the potential boundaries of conversation. We are accustomed to moving between

analyzing the conditions of power that reproduce inequality and suspending that inequality in search of different presuppositions and forms of reasoning than those to which we have grown all too accustomed.

For all the optimism of this collection, virtually every author offers a challenge to action. The structures of power do not operate in anthropology's favour; funding for the kind of research we want to do is hard to justify in an audit economy focused on those who hold power rather than those whose exclusion from it is deemed to be their own fault. We indeed know how to listen to others and find them little different from ourselves in final analysis, but we are less practiced at making our case in the corridors of power. The internationalism foreshadowed by the mutually reinforcing conclusions of these anthropologists promises to break down parochial and isolationist versions of nationalism and national traditions. The future is in the hands of readers who imagine and go forward to create a revitalized anthropology.

References

- Harrison, Julia, and Regna Darnell, eds.
2006 *Historicizing Canadian Anthropology*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Jebens, Holger, and Kohl, Karl-Heinz
2011 *The End of Anthropology? Wantage*: Sean Kingston Publishing.

The End of Anthropology—Not!

Gavin Smith
University of Toronto

Todd Sanders has done a wonderful job of capturing not just the major issues addressed in this edited book, but also the flavour of the collection as a whole. As he notes, and as many of the contributors also point out, there have been many pieces over the past years addressing this issue. Peter Worsley handed me a dog-eared mimeographed copy of his piece "The end of anthropology" once, when I thought of doing my doctorate at Manchester (in an attempt I think either to persuade me to choose a discipline that didn't include fieldwork, or to get me to go back to Canada, a place he identified with radicalism, having taught in Quebec during the height of the FLQ). But I haven't read any of the others, though I expect they all make the obvious (and less obvious) play on words.¹ So sure was eye—sorry I meant "I"—that the book would be loaded with these word-plays as I opened it that the old conundrum "How long is a piece of string?" kept popping into my head for some reason—reminding me of course that a piece of string has two ends and when you bring them together you can tie the ends into knots, no sorry knots. As Mike Myers would say: "The end of anthropology—Not!"

John Comaroff notes that anthropology is not the only discipline worrying about its own end and possible ends (he

mentions economics and sociology) but in doing so he made me think about a short, rather fatuous article, that had caused way more ripples than all the writing about the end of anthropology could possibly do. This was Fukuyama's "The end of history" of course. And once there, I realized that when one speaks of the end of history it is unlikely that one is speaking of the end of the profession. Just as anthropologists tend to be as possessive of "their own" fieldsite as a child holding on to a toy in a playground, so historians are a bit touchy about "history" and this is because there's lots of it all about, and all kinds of people seem to think they can do it, have access to it, even make it. So you sometimes hear them speaking of "guild history" which I think means the stuff the professionals do.

And this is of course what our authors here are talking about. They are not talking about the end of anthropology as in "the end of history"; they are talking about the end (double meaning) of the profession (double meaning) of anthropology (any meaning). Perhaps rather like the guild historians they are nervous that, should all the departments close, "other people" might get in on the act. And in fact a number of the contributors do speak of this—usually in quite complementary terms: good journalism for example, and economists who seek to embrace culture in their analyses.

But surely this *is* what makes these kinds of books—despite the astuteness and sensitivity of the authors—well, *embarrassing*. And especially so for a discipline that makes something of a thing about looking outwards and being critical of various "centricisms." A number of authors say what "anthropology" means *to them*—and I must say that some of this did sound rather like the kid in the playground insisting on why the toy he was clinging to was so especially and idiosyncratically his or hers. But they were reluctant to say what "anthropology" actually is. In fact many of them celebrated the impossibility of doing so.

And yet I think this was a bit of a blind. There was in fact something they were all talking about in unison. It was the profession of people like themselves. It had various ends in the sense of goals and its end could take various threatening forms, but there is no doubt that in both cases what was being spoken of was a profession, mostly in the guild sense of the word, but also in the professing sense too. In fact the essays tend to disguise anxieties about the former by seeming to speak of what it is to do the latter.²

Todd shrewdly notes that some saw threats of a possible ending (or at least diminishing) arising from factors internal to the discipline, while others stressed the need to make the discipline attractive to those outside the discipline. Citizens? Consumers? The objects of study? Like him I am dismayed by the easy slide a couple of the authors make into the language of market consumption: how could anthropology be better sold, or branded? And I think he makes a very incisive point when he notes that shaping a body of intellectual enquiry around the likes and dislikes of consumers is unlikely to enhance the value of the discipline, either as a humanity or as a science. He identifies the real worm in the bud—mostly missed by