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Anthropology's Ontological Anxiety and the Concept of Tradition

Michael Lambek *University of Toronto*

> "...one cannot think for oneself if one thinks entirely by oneself"
>
> —Alasdair MacIntyre (1988:396)

Following anthropology's epistemological and ethical anxieties, frequently collapsed under the epithet of a "crisis of representation," in which we worried both whether we could describe others' social realities and whether we ought to do so, looms another I portentously refer to as the ontological anxiety.[1] Does anthropology have a future? Will it continue to exist? Does the centre hold? I thought both the epistemological and ethical anxieties were somewhat exaggerated, but chewing over the issues they raised undoubtedly produced some healthy gastric juices.[2] What of the ontological question? I argue that it is somewhat misplaced; what is under threat and how seriously to take it depends on how we define the context and ourselves. Such clarification may, in turn, suggest dangers rather different from those that excite the people who worry about our imminent demise.

The ontological question is limited both insofar as it presupposes a particular view of the world embedded in the material and political constraints of contemporary academic life in which disciplines are treated as so many competing, essentialized entities and insofar as it assumes the loss of an ethnographic object. On the first point, one cannot have read Handler's *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture* (1988) without facing the very existence of such ontological questions with some skepticism. Anthropologists' worry about their collective survival is part of a process of self-objectification, akin to nationalist politics. To be sure, this objectification stems largely from the material conditions of our social reproduction—government and university bureaucracies and budgets—but it is also grounded in what Handler referred to as a logic of possessive individualism, a logic characteristic of capitalist modernity (cf. Macpherson 1964). Under this logic, entities are conceived as individuated beings on the order of natural species; they are bounded, homogenous, and continuous—but also perpetually insecure

and threatened by what they conceive of as pollution and death.

A second way the question has been phrased concerns the loss of the ethnographic object. Loss of what once appeared to be autonomous polities, authentic cultural practices, or organic social formations, loss, in sum, of humanity's, and hence anthropology's, aura (in the situated sense of the original art object described by Benjamin [1968]), has proven critical in the minds of some. There is some truth here, though its degree and how to phrase it will surely continue to be contested. Not for nothing did Achebe (1986) call his novel *Things Fall Apart*. Where relatively autonomous ways of life were not entirely obliterated, as indeed the Igbo were not, this "falling apart" has been seen, in various modalities and with various original attempts at what we symptomatically once referred to as revitalization and subsequently as resistance, to characterize the modern condition. People everywhere have come to interpret the evidently post-lapsarian human state less as the opposition of culture to nature that Lévi-Strauss ascertained in so much Amerindian thought (1964-71), than as the opposition of culture to super-culture or local to global.

The post-lapsarian world is, in effect, post-Copernican. "Things fall apart," the poem goes, "the centre does not hold." So places and societies or cultures are no longer centres to themselves,[3] no longer innocent of wider systems in which they are but particles, of distant suns around which they now understand themselves to revolve. In the pre-Copernican world, to the extent that it ever existed, such societies were able to imagine themselves without having to draw from their imagination of us, or our imagination of them. These imaginings were—and I say this without either epistemological or ethical shame—anthropology's most precious objects, even if also our deepest fantasies.

The couplet with which all American textbooks once began about the relation of the universal to the particular has been displaced today by that of global to local. But the syllogism global:local :: universal:particular will take more than one volume of some future *Mythologiques* to work out. Our future mythographer may also wonder why we so often wrote about both the pre- and post-Copernican phases as though intermediary levels of connection and relation were irrelevant. And, if of Malinowskian bent, why people could write smugly and without any evident sense of contradiction about both the supposed immediate novelty of the global and the ostensible blindness or complicity of our intellectual predecessors towards or with it.

However, the two conversely positioned criticisms of this view of object loss—directed, from the one side, against the myth of pristine origins, against the very idea of originally autonomous and unselfconscious societies, and from the other side, against the idea that culture and cultural analysis are somehow no longer relevant or that new centres no longer get produced—seem solid enough to me that I will move on to a characterization of anthropology that begins elsewhere than with its ethnographic object. I want instead to describe anthropology as a form of intellectual practice and locus of intellectual debate in which talking and arguing about certain kinds of questions, framed in certain kinds of ways within the broader context of Western thought, have been central. How might an historical ethnography of such debate—located in specific practices of reading, writing, teaching, and just plain talk about ideas—reframe or respond to the ontological question? Perhaps the question becomes whether anthropology too will "fall apart," its fragments drawn into a world of global and postcolonial theory.

Anthropology understood in this sense is a long, continuously unfolding conversation characterized by having placed certain ultimately irresolvable issues on the table: uniformity and difference, biology and culture, class and culture, structure and history, structure and agency, power and status, body and person, and so on. It is an inherently untidy conversation and in that untidiness lies one of its strengths.

* * *

In order to address anthropology's self-descriptions and the ways in which the conversation is regulated and specific interventions are granted authority, I begin with Alasdair MacIntyre's fascinating, but ultimately unsatisfactory, polemic, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990). This turn to a philosopher's account is not as far off the mark as it might seem since one of MacIntyre's subjects is the Ninth Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica in which he refers frequently to Robertson Smith, Tylor and Frazer, as well as to the critique of their work offered by Franz Steiner, and to the historical ethnography of Valeri and Sahlins.

MacIntyre labels his "three rival versions of moral enquiry" Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition. Encyclopaedia, drawn from the project of the early editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica represents the confident Enlightenment, specifically here the "Second" (19th Century) Scottish Enlightenment, view of the world. Robertson-Smith is offered as an exemplar of the period and perspective. The position is one we could call objectivist (Bernstein 1988); it views anthropology as a section within the vast enterprise of comparative natural science, an enterprise in which reason is understood as "impersonal, impartial, disinterested, uniting, and universal" (MacIntyre

1990:59). Genealogy refers to the sceptical tradition from Nietzsche and Foucault, which argues that knowledge is always compromised by power. The position is one we could call postmodern. Tradition refers to an approach stemming from Aristotle, in which for MacIntyre, Aquinas is the central figure. Here reason can only be elaborated within moral communities. This is a position I would call hermeneutic and practical. One of the ways MacIntyre distinguishes the three versions is with respect to the temporality of their respective narratives:

> the encyclopaedists' narrative reduces the past to a mere prologue to the rational present, while the genealogist struggles in the construction of his or her narrative against the past, including that of the past which is perceived as hidden within the alleged rationality of the present. The Thomists' narrative, by contrast with both of these, treats the past neither as mere prologue nor as something to be struggled against, but as that from which we have to learn if we are to identify and move towards our *telos* more adequately and that we have to put to the question if we are to know which questions we ourselves should next formulate and attempt to answer, both theoretically and practically." [1990:79]

MacIntyre argues that although the encyclopaedists have been decisively defeated, fragments at least of all three approaches are presently to be found in the academy. I think most anthropologists would acquiesce; in fact, one could say that MacIntyre's "three rival versions" lucidly describe the alternatives within anthropology, providing ideal types for the main positions within contemporary debate.

The answer to the ontological question looks very different from each of these epistemological standpoints. It also varies depending on which version we use to characterize anthropology as an intellectual practice. Thus from the standpoint of a genealogist who sees what anthropologists do as a form of Encyclopaedia, anthropology has long since joined God in the realm of the Dead. If anthropological work is characterized as genealogical, then from the encylopaedist's standpoint it is equally dead, fallen apart in a failure of epistemic nerve and surfeit of postmodernist irony.

It is striking that pronouncements about the state of the field often do take one of these forms; in effect, MacIntyre's triad is reduced to two. The debate boils down to objectivism versus postmodernism as if these were the only two alternatives (Lambek 1991b). This is a mistake because if Tradition is the most discreet alternative, it has been and remained the most significant. It most accurately characterizes anthropological practice over the long run and it can, in a sense, encompass the other two. However, as the last point indicates, my view of tradition is somewhat broader than MacIntyre's.

While agreeing with MacIntyre on the significance of Tradition, I part company with him as to how to characterize it. In fact, the word *tradition* is the source of some confusion in MacIntyre's account. MacIntyre sets up Tradition as a rival version of moral enquiry and a rival conception of rationality. But the other alternatives must be seen as some kind of traditions in their own right. Thus the genealogical tradition could be said to run from Nietzsche to Derrida. What distinguishes the "Tradition" that MacIntyre posits as one of the three rivals is precisely that it explicitly values and draws from the sort of "tradition" out of which it, and all forms of intellectual enquiry and debate must, by its own account, arise and flourish.

Phrased another way, we could ask MacIntyre, Tradition, Genealogy and Encyclopaedia are three rival versions of *what*? What is a "version" if not some kind of tradition? How could enquiry be carried out in the absence of tradition? MacIntyre might respond that these are the very grounds on which he challenges Genealogy and Encyclopedia, but this means only that what they say may be misleading with respect to what they do. If this were the case, the rivals are less different from each other than they claim to be and than he claims on their behalf.

It is a curious feature of MacIntyre's argument that although Tradition is the mode of inquiry that he champions, it is the least specified, or rather that Tradition varies between being seen as a general mode of enquiry and being characterized by bearing a specific content. His heroes are Aquinas and certain neo-Thomists but he has no problem in bringing Steiner, Sahlins and Valeri in on the side of Tradition against Encyclopaedia and he alludes there to precolonial Hawaiian tradition as well. He cannot really justify why he picks a Roman Catholic rather than an Islamic form of Aristotelianism. There is reason to suggest that the Islamic tradition of moral enquiry has survived a good deal better than the Thomist one. Why then should those who recognize the superiority of Tradition over Encyclopaedia or Genealogy not convert en masse to Islam? Why waste time bemoaning the passing of Tradition in Christianity when one can celebrate its presence in Islam? Indeed, the Islamic version would have the advantage that it is less hierarchical than the Church and possibly less burdened by extraneous intellectual problems like that of the Trinity. Aquinas's celebrated virtues of faith, hope, and charity find their parallels within Islam. But why, for that matter, opt for a theistic version of Tradition at all?

I apologize if I sound facetious. I suspect MacIntyre would say that Tradition is good in and of itself and that one ought to work within one's own tradition, if one is so lucky as to acquire one through accidents of birth and upbringing, before either trespassing on others or converting. MacIntyre's ideal "postliberal university of constrained disagreements" (1990:234) presumably subsists in a pluralist (hence liberal?) world containing equivalent universities engaged in pursuing other traditions.

In idealizing the Thomistic tradition, MacIntyre conveniently downplays the power of the Church. Leaving aside the heavy hand of the Inquisition, et cetera, it would be interesting to see his response to the work of Asad (1993) who shows the discipline entailed in this kind of tradition. Asad examines Medieval Christianity, but he has notably referred to Islam as a tradition (1986). Islamic discipline is beautifully explored in the work of his student Charles Hirschkind (2006) and also in that of Saba Mahmood (2005). The perspective in this work is not the Genealogical suspicion of power but rather the way in which tradition is reproduced and enlarged through disciplinary forms of ethical practice and the cultivation of particular dispositions. This work is particularly interesting insofar as it collapses simple oppositions between power and morality and shows the value and pleasure of disciplinary practices (which in the urban Egyptian context are largely voluntarily assumed).

It would be quite another matter to advocate turning Western universities in this direction. Both Thomism and Islam entail strong forms of discipline that sit uncomfortably with anthropology's profession in the liberal academy and with cultural relativism. But although our disciplinary practices may be less rigorous, exclusionary or totalizing, we still do speak tellingly of academic *disciplines* and training does entail the inculcation of certain forms of intellectual disposition. There is more to becoming an anthropologist than the hurdles of qualifying exams and dissertation. I will indulge in a personal illustration. When I first began teaching I found it difficult to intervene in seminars or ask questions in colloquia. I have become much readier to do so over the years. On reflection this is not simply the result of an increase in power and status, though that is certainly a factor. Nor, as students sometimes assume, does it have to do with being particularly intelligent. Rather, one learns to speak in such situations. One does not only come to acquire the knowledge of what to say; one becomes disposed toward having something to say.

As a disciplinary tradition, anthropology's future is seriously challenged neither by radical postmodern skepticism or critiques from positions of postcoloniality, cultural studies, political economy or sheer bloody-mindedness, nor by the collapse of either objectivist epistemology or the loss of the encyclopaedist's object. What would challenge the tradition would be the weakening of the means of its reproduction, the forms and loci for training in the craft of anthropology, for cultivating the dispositions to look, think and argue anthropologically. Such training includes learning to read our predecessors, and not only critically but with enthusiasm and respect. What would hurt anthropology would be constraints on an open tradition of enquiry in which teaching and learning are appreciated as moral practice, characterized by a judicious balance of intellectual openness and loyalty, allegiance (MacIntyre 1988:366) without constraint, respect for predecessors, and sensuous pleasure in argument and ideas.[4]

* * *

In his masterly exposition of the rival versions of moral enquiry MacIntyre also seems to suggest that their incommensurability is a source of some confusion, a point that, again, I would qualify. I do not find incommensurability either as troublesome or as unusual as MacIntyre seems to. This is perhaps in part symptomatic of the difference between the philosopher and the ethnographer and for two reasons. First, the philosopher seeks to clarify arguments while the ethnographer records the messiness of life. Second, the philosopher values consistency and agreement whereas the incommensurability of cultural difference is not only the anthropologist's bread and butter but also something that we celebrate.

For MacIntyre, the fragmentation of contemporary thought, composed of inconsistent principles and "too many half-convictions and too few settled coherent convictions, too many partly formulated alternatives and too few opportunities to evaluate them systematically" (1988:397) is evidence of the incoherence and anomie of post-Enlightenment modernity. While no doubt there is some truth to this, MacIntyre assumes a rather unreal historical alternative. I would argue that any tradition inevitably embraces and is perhaps rooted in incommensurabilities—without them there would be no reason to carry on conversing—and further, that identification with and within tradition can operate according to a segmentary rather than an objectifying logic. Hence I would place a good deal less emphasis on constraint and homogenization than does MacIntyre. Moreover, no tradition exists in a vacuum; its practitioners or adherents inevitably encounter other traditions, based on incommensurable concepts, and they will, in their practices, inevitably import or engage some. Indeed, as I concluded in *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte* (1993), incommensurability is intrinsic to culture and language. And movement between alter-

natives is as much a part of practical reasoning as judgments produced within a single tradition.

Here it is important to understand, as both Gadamer (1975) and MacIntyre do (and contrary to strong forms of relativism), that incommensurability does not preclude dialogue. Indeed, it invites or demands it, though such dialogue may look rather undisciplined from the perspective of a philosopher or theologian. If we examine the history of our discipline we see how MacIntyre's three positions intertwine in practice. Evans-Pritchard has objectivist pretensions at one moment, deconstructionist at another, and hermeneutic at a third. The discrepancies are only so striking in Evans-Prichard because he wrote brilliantly in each mode.

This juxtaposition is not only a matter of a historical succession of alternate voices. Much as I observed incommensurable traditions conjoined in the day-to-day practice of local experts in Mayotte, I can see that anthropological practice easily incorporates genealogical and encyclopaedic moves and gestures. I lean to a hermeneutic position, yet I have found myself contributing to more than one encyclopaedia, including, of all things, an article on taboo (2002), the very subject whose deconstruction by Franz Steiner (1999) is seen by MacIntyre as decisive in the defeat of the encyclopaedist position! I often enjoy a deconstructive genealogical interlude as well. I suspect that most anthropologists are the same—flexible bodies/flexible minds. But of course it does not take great flexibility of mind to be inconsistent; it is, as I have suggested, a human characteristic (and not simply a product of the collapse of Medieval traditions of enquiry) and that is why we have to look at the pragmatics of thinking as well as at the structure of thought.

MacIntyre depicts us living amidst the flotsam left in the wake of (Catholic) tradition, a portrait that echoes nostalgia over the disappearance of the pristine ethnographic object. And curiously it places the same demands of interpretation as does any ethnography: has the author struck the right balance between difference and uniformity, between exoticism and banalization?

In sum, the various lines of my critique converge on the same point, namely that MacIntyre's conception of tradition is too narrow. Here it is useful to bring in a quick comparison with Gadamer (1975). Gadamer's narrative is not that of the loss or fragmentation of tradition. For Gadamer, it is the human inevitability of being located in tradition that is central. Tradition is understood as a condition for understanding, not simply as an object of historical knowledge, nor as the means for developing knowledge, but as part of one's being. Tradition becomes "the community of understanding that the participants in a dialogue share through language" (Bernasconi 1999). Without necessarily embracing all of this we can see how we might consider anthropology as a relatively open tradition of this sort.[5]

This brings up one final balancing act that is a necessary part of anthropological practice. Reflecting on anthropological engagements with broader realms of theory, one can distinguish two polar ideal types: endogamous, even incestuous bodies of anthropology that attempt to construct or draw exclusively upon what is conceived as a specifically indigenous body of anthropological theory; and those cargo cultists, otherwise known as intellectual snobs, who find theory enlightening only when it comes from regions originally external to anthropology and more or less drops from the sky. I am weary and wary both of the proponents of insularity, who hold a kind of primordialist (and generally quadripartite) position with respect to the discipline, and of those perpetual reformers who automatically devalue that which is perceived to originate within anthropology. (What other discipline could support a long-running, popular, and in fact generally very good journal entitled not *Anthropological Critique*, but *Critique of Anthropology*?) If anthropology is to continue to flourish as an intellectual tradition it needs to strike a judicious citational balance between incest and auto-immunity, and to avoid the tones of moral self-righteousness with which both these positions are not infrequently burdened. The aim is to chart a path that embraces innovation without self-rejection. Perhaps exogamy is precisely the word I am looking for here, since exogamy, remembering Lévi-Strauss's formulation (1969), implies communication between equivalent parties, whether the intellectual exchange is envisioned as dual or generalized, symmetric or asymmetric, simple or complex.

Michael Lambek, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, 19 Russell Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2S2, Canada. E-mail: lambek@utsc.utoronto.ca.

Notes

1 This paper was originally written for and presented at a panel in honour of Aram A. Yengoyan organized by Michael Peletz and myself on 18 November 2000 at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, and never subsequently submitted for publication. It stands at arm's length from the other papers in this section insofar as it is a reflection produced at a period midway between the call for papers and the period on which we are asked to reflect. I have added or updated a few references, added a further sentence about the relevance of MacIntyre's categories for anthropology and removed most of the remarks referring specifically to Yengoyan, although the sentiments behind them remain constant. My thanks to

Aram Yengoyan for inspiration, Michael Peletz for co-producing the original occasion, fellow students of Aram's for their papers and remarks at the time, and to Andy and Harriet Lyons for reassurance that the paper was still worth publishing over a decade later. My research has been supported by SSHRC and the Canada Research Chairs fund. I would not have thought to submit this were it not for the period of reflection enabled by the Rockefeller Foundation at Bellagio.

2 The "crisis of representation" was itself best represented in Clifford and Marcus (1986), albeit found in many other works as well. My own response and that of several other Canadians, including Marcia Calkowski, Rosemary Coombe, David Howes, among others, can be found in Lambek 1991a. I ended my lengthy ethnography of 1993 with the phrase, "In conclusion, inconclusion." That about sums up the extent of the threat of so-called "post-modernism."

3 The phrase is Maurice Bloch's (1998).

4 This is precisely the sort of teaching, reading and talking epitomized for me by my own teacher, Aram Yengoyan.

5 Subsequent to writing this essay I have come to see Anthropology as a tradition characterized by the articulation of all three of what MacIntyre considered "rival," and hence presumably mutually exclusive, "versions of enquiry." Good anthropology moves judiciously among encyclopaedic, genealogical, and interpretive positions (Lambek In press).

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