The Humanism of Postmodernist Anthropology and the Post-Structuralist Challenges of Posthumanism

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It is apparent now, a quarter of a century after the seminal works of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), that postmodernism and its effects in anthropology have been quite different from those of postmodernism more generally. I argue this by discussion of one of the "posts" unconsidered at that time, but which is currently of growing influence, posthumanism. Postmodernism in the larger sense is often seen as including authors such as Derrida and Foucault, as Andrew Lyons indicates in the Introduction. I see these authors more precisely as post-structuralists and as critics of humanism. In anthropology, however, the genealogy from interpretive and symbolic anthropology to Marcus, Fischer, Tyler et al. was fundamentally humanist. The meaning of humanism is contested but for my purposes here has moved on from the classic emphasis on ways of thought that attach prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters; more important are arguments for the coherence and agency of the person, and anthropocentrism.

Postmodernism can be separated into post-structuralist and humanist strains, with most anthropologists in the latter camp. Post-structuralism in the forms developed by Derrida, Foucault, Althusser, Latour, Deleuze and Guattari, and Haraway suspects or brackets the coherence of the individual. People are instead seen as intersections of relations, contexts or actor-networks. Postmodern heirs to the interpretive anthropologists, on the other hand, appear to be very humanist in the anthropocentric and subject-based manner, although in ways that reject Eurocentric assumptions about Man in the classic tradition and its grand narratives of Enlightenment and so on. There were only two passing mentions of post-structuralism, one in each of *Writing Culture* and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Anthropological postmodernism has had limited influence on posthumanist social theory, much less so than post-structuralism.

In encouraging representative practices that acknowledge polyvocality, postmodernists tend to assume the separateness of the speakers of the voices, and attribute moral value to delivering those voices and perspectives rather than privileging the authorial voice of the Western ethnographer. Anthropocentrism is clearly still operant here, whereas the post-structuralist position tends to the position that we perform our parts through chains of relations about which we have only dim awareness. Or perhaps more precisely, we are enacting performances only contingently animating this particular body and situation. Most postmodern anthropologists have in practice at least followed the path of those postmodernists who believe that "giving attention to either the marginal and excluded or to the new social movements" is not incompatible with the critique of metanarratives or the questioning of traditional assumptions about the subject (Rosenau 1992:57). Anthropological postmodernism tends to resemble postmodern architecture, which Lash (1990) argued was much more humanist than its modernist predecessors in promoting (if rarely achieving) the anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism and anthropometrism largely rejected by modernist architects.

Postmodern anthropologists tend to listen to narratives and to encourage disparate voices, but most particularly they emphasize the reflexivity of their research and that of their discipline. Their stance resembles postcolonialism, which also finds it difficult to reject anthropocentrism inasmuch as it demands equal space for non-Western subjects as resisting and transformative agents and knowers. Postmodern ethnographies tend to follow Geertz in seeing people as suspended in webs of significance. Even if they attempt to deconstruct culture as they do so, meanings and voices remain central, and the key issues revolved around writing and representation. Nature, production and material culture were sidelined from the analysis, to a much greater extent than in earlier realist ethnographies (Knauft 1996:23). Even fighting roosters are metaphors rather than *actants*, the term which Latour (2008) uses in his Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to refer to anything that makes a difference in an action or a controversy, human or non-human. Many of the methodological prescriptions at the core of ANT echo anthropological practice. In anthropology's traditional domain of the study of small-scale, non-Western societies, we did not have to carve out a division of labour with other researchers but could follow the lives of the people we studied wherever they led. Holism encouraged us to consider the associations between humans and non-humans (pigs, ancestors, ghosts, medicine, poison, totems, reindeer and forests) in ways that sociologists were not inclined to do as they sought to demonstrate the importance of "the social" in relation to distinct domains of nature and the economy. This local holism, however, was only made possible by the artificial bounding of societies or cultures (Leach 1964). To build on its advantages, anthropology needs to follow associations beyond our comfort zones, as anthropologists of science have done in the last two decades or so. Instead, the postmodern revolution

has encouraged a separation between those in our profession that pay attention to material relations and non-humans and those who study culture. As Ingold (2000:2) commented, there

> must be something wrong...with a social or cultural anthropology that cannot countenance the fact that human beings are biological organisms that have evolved...But there must be something equally wrong with a biological anthropology that denies anything but a proximate role for agency, intentionality or imagination in the direction of human affairs.

Important strengths that the discipline once had, and which are very much in demand in interdisciplinary research in science studies and posthumanism, are undermined by the postmodernist–materialist, science–anti-science divides that have permeated anthropology in the last 25 years. The splits between the four fields might be less threatening, and our much-mooted complementarities taken better advantage of, if we could encourage a less anthropocentric and humanistic perspective within social and cultural anthropology, and more engagement in social theory by biological anthropologists. If English professors can find esoteric debates in biology stimulating fodder for re-visioning their practice, surely anthropologists can benefit from greater conversation with our colleagues down the hall.

I have never been a postmodernist in the anthropological sense, although I have worked with a variety of post-structuralist ideas. It was too far from my training and my trajectory. Being trained in a social anthropological tradition, moving from Leach, transactionalism and ethnomethodology to Althusserian Marxism and later a wide variety of political economy approaches, experimental writing and interpretivism seemed less relevant for my general concern with social relations rather than with culture. My research issues, squatter settlements, Hong Kong-run factories and social change in reform China, and most recently the impact of mad cow disease in Canada, drew me to political economy. My reading concentrated more and more outside of anthropology, as urban anthropology and economic anthropology experienced relative declines after the exciting heydays of the 1960s and 1970s, and eventually to science studies and posthumanism.

Posthumanists have, in recent decades, criticized the social sciences for their exclusive focus on the human, a category that cannot be understand except by reference to the non-human (Wolfe 2010). The humanist attitude concerns most fundamentally the humanity–animality dichotomy. The "human" is "achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (Wolfe 2010:xv). Posthumanism should not be confused with transhumanism or cyborg anthropology: technological enhancements and transformations of the "natural" human can be seen as consistent with, or actually intensifying, the rational humanist emphasis on the perfectability of the individual. Instead, it suggests that humans have always relied on "prosthetic" extensions of the self, most fundamentally language and culture, as well as more obvious technological prosthetic elaborations of human capabilities. What we see as fundamentally human is thoroughly dependent on non-human elements to operate. Posthumanism "allows us to pay proper attention, with Maturana and Varela, to the material, embodied, and evolutionary nature of intelligence and cognition, in which language, for example, is no longer seen (as it is in philosophical humanism) as a well-nigh-magical property that ontologically separates *Homo sapiens* from every other living creature" (Wolfe 2010:120).

Along these lines, Eduardo Kohn has proposed moving beyond anthropology to develop an "anthropology of life" which would situate "all-too-human worlds within a larger series of processes and relationships that exceed the human" (2007:6). Achieving this ambitious aim of multi-species ethnographies would be "insurmountable if we remain confined within our multiculturalist and dualistic framework"; instead we should look to a "multinaturalist framework in which culture—and, by extension, the human—ceases to be the most salient marker of difference" (Kohn 2007:18). Only 10% of our cells contain the human genome, the other 90% consist of the "genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such," on many of which our lives depend (Haraway 2008:3). Our lives, societies, and cultures are inseparable from non-human life, yet the core of cultural and social anthropology in many ways has less to say about these issues than our predecessors before the postmodern turn.

The dangers of neglect of important issues resulting from an anthropocentric perspective became clear in a recent project where Josephine Smart and I explored the movement of non-human life across borders (Smart and Smart In press). These issues are remarkably almost absent from mainstream border studies, by which we refer to work that addresses both borders and the interdisciplinary literature on borders. For centuries, borders have been profoundly influenced by efforts to exclude or control the movement of animals, diseases and plants across state territorial limits. Contemporary borders are being restructured in response to new practices and ideas of

biosecurity. Outside of the specialization of border research, large numbers of studies provide evidence of the structuring and restructuring of borders by issues such as animal plagues, human plagues and pandemics, invasive species and transborder conservation efforts. An anthropocentric focus resulted in these crucial processes being obscured in the social science of the border, which concentrates on border disputes, identity issues, securitization, trade liberalization or restrictions and so on. Humanism attributes agency to people so that human choices and practices are the central focus for border studies. But the auto-mobility, self-replication and transformational features of non-human life challenge these assumptions (Bennett 2010; Blue and Rock 2010; Latour 2008). Following the controversies and the networks where they lead facilitates new questions in a field, and may help revitalize a discipline, particularly one where the science–cultural studies divide and the split between the four fields has done so much damage and undermined so much potential. Looking forward and sideways, though, may also facilitate looking back to the classic ethnographies critiqued by postmodernism. Singh (2011) finds resources for thinking about the contribution of relations between humans, animals and the divine in structuring ways of becoming human.

In conclusion, I have suggested that one of the consequences of the quarter-century-old postmodern turn in anthropology has been to reduce our discipline's centrality in some important debates because of the distinctive humanist strain adopted. I am not suggesting that anthropologists, including those who were at the forefront of the movement, have not made important contributions in the development of posthumanism, but that where they have done so they have usually become more post-structuralist and more materialist than "classic" postmodern anthropology. The anthropology of science is the best example. Posthumanism is, of course, only one thread in the complex tapestry of interdisciplinary social theory. However, I believe that anthropology has tended to become less central to many of the strands and fields despite the widespread need for the skills and perspectives that we richly possess. The reflexive turn and the separation between those who aspire to "science" and those who aspire to "social theory" are at least a part of the reduced importance of anthropology compared to, for example, geography.

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